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Rousseau, the Ancients, and Anger

However much we may want to insist on the ultimate consistency of Rousseau's thought, it is often useful to begin with some conceptual duality: man and citizen, transparency and obstruction, antiquity and modernity. I would like to add another pair of opposites to this list, in the hope of shedding fresh light on Rousseau's relationship to the Ancients. This is the seemingly contradictory appeal to two Roman writers: Juvenal and Seneca. That is, to the angry satirist of social ills from whom Rousseau took his motto, *vitam impendere vero*; and to the Stoic philosopher whose denunciation of anger as a most serious illness of the soul is cited with approval at the beginning of *Émile*. Surely we are meant to take notice of the contrast between the attack on the corruption of a society in which no one is willing "to risk his life for the truth," a quotation drawn from the bitter satires of Juvenal's first book (4: 10), and the self-therapy recommended in the epigraph to *Émile*, taken from Seneca's *De ira*: "The ills which ail us are curable; we were born to be upright, and nature itself, should we wish to be improved, will help us" (2: 13).¹ Is anger an appropriate, indeed morally justified response to the world as it is? Or is it the sign of a moral weakness we should strive to remedy, regardless of the situation in which we find ourselves? Of course, the opposition between these two views may not be absolute. While the first book of Juvenal's satires offers a perfect illustration of the angry attitudes Seneca had criticized fifty years earlier (and thus a critique of Stoicism [Anderson 127–96]), the poet's later satires are more sympathetic to the philosopher's position.² Conversely, *Émile*'s therapy of desire, to borrow the title of Martha Nussbaum's recent book *The Therapy of Desire*,³ arises from angry dissatisfaction with education in the *Ancien Régime*. Still, we should not dismiss the problem too quickly, for it is by holding on to such apparent contradictions that we are led to understand what Rousseau is trying to say.

Anger can be defined as a reaction of passionate displeasure to injury, directed at the agent who has caused that injury. Yet, as we shall see, even such an apparently basic emotion needs to be understood within a history of literary, political, and religious as well as psychological ideas. This is clear from the obvious fact that what is perceived as an injury (physical, social, or psychological) will vary from culture to culture, and within cultures will depend to some extent on one's status, class, or gender.⁴ So will the appropriate means of redress. It is especially useful to ask what

state of mind would be considered, in a particular context, as the opposite of anger, or the sign of anger being overcome or avoided. With these questions in mind, I will first consider the “Senecan” discussion of anger in *Émile*, and then Rousseau’s more complicated “Juvenalian” rehabilitation of anger, with a particular focus on the *Letter to D’Alembert* and the *Rêveries*.

According to Seneca, anger can and should be entirely extirpated from the soul, since, like other passions, it is essentially a false judgment about the world. By means of a kind of philosophical therapy, anger can be replaced by a serene appreciation of the universal and impersonal reason governing the universe. The prospect of such a cure has often been thought chimerical — Francis Bacon, for example, calling it a mere “bravery” of the Stoics. The answer, Rousseau believes, is to raise children in such a way that, instead of having to master their anger, they never feel anger at all. In *Émile*, Rousseau acknowledges that infants have “a disposition to fury, spite, and anger” when their needs are not met, but the reason is purely physiological: infants’ heads are proportionately larger and their nerves more extended than those of adults. On the psychological level, things are different. “As long as children find resistance only in things and never in wills, they will become neither rebellious nor irascible and will preserve their health better” (66). Thus the cure for anger is simple: eliminate from the child’s experience any sense of intentional actions other than his own. When his desires must be thwarted, let it be by an impersonal necessity and not by the will of another person. Note that the problem of true or false judgment is irrelevant here. All that matters is that you believe yourself to be resisted by impersonal force, and we know how *Émile*’s environment is controlled by the tutor to give this impression. But even adults who know better can train themselves to view the world in impersonal terms. Thus, in the *Rêveries of the Solitary Walker*, Rousseau, nearing the end of his life and haunted by signs of a universal conspiracy to defame him (First Walk 5, Second Walk 21), decides to stop railing at his enemies and to treat other people as “strangers.” By resigning himself to what he will henceforth consider to be a purely impersonal fate, he will cure himself of all “irascible passions” (Seventh Walk 90).

Yet, Rousseau does not really advocate as an ideal a human being who is incapable of feeling anger at all. The passage I cited from *Émile* is preceded by an anecdote about a child Rousseau (or more precisely, the narrator) says he saw slapped by his nurse for being one of those “difficult criers.” Rousseau observes that “he immediately kept quiet.” But far from praising such docility, Rousseau comments:

I believed he was intimidated. I said to myself, “This will be a servile soul from which one will get nothing except by severity.” I was mistaken.

The unfortunate was suffocating with anger; he lost his breath; I saw him become violet. A moment after came sharp screams; all the signs of the resentment, fury, and despair of this age were in his accents. I fear he would expire in his agitation. If I had doubted that the sentiment of the just and the unjust were innate in the heart of man, this example alone would have convinced me. I am sure that a live ember fallen by chance on this child's hand would have made less of an impression than this blow, rather light but given in the manifest intention of offending him. (65–66)

We need to ask: manifest to whom? Is there something inherent in the action that leads the infant to read intention into it? Whatever Rousseau may say, some act of judgment seems to be implied. Even *Émile* will at some point have to distinguish intention from its absence, for otherwise the very notion of justice becomes irrelevant. Furthermore, if to accept a blow without complaint is proof of “servility,” what does this say about Stoic self-therapy, which presents itself as a philosophy for noble souls? It is interesting in this connection to observe that Rousseau later portrays *Émile*'s beloved Sophie as legitimately angry. In this, Rousseau departs from the tradition of treating women's anger, like that of servants or impotent old men, as an occasion for laughter. Sophie gets angry when *Émile* fails to appear at her house one day as promised, but she is mollified when she discovers his absence was caused by a pressing obligation to help someone in need (440–41). Here, anger is dissolved through an appreciation, not of the dictates of necessity, but of the demands of justice. For Rousseau, our sense of justice emerges most forcefully from our experience of injustice, a truth he dramatizes in the famous story of *Émile* and the bean garden.⁵ Anyone incapable of such an experience, that is, anyone so weak that he (or she) cannot feel wronged, cannot serve the cause of justice. Women may be obliged, as Rousseau says, to suffer injustice more patiently than men, but if *Émile* failed to take Sophie's anger seriously, he would not be worthy of her love.

The coherence of Rousseau's argument requires there be some point at which justice and necessity are ultimately reconciled. For most eighteenth-century Europeans, that point of connection is God, although debates between Bayle, Malebranche, and Leibniz about the nature of connection had highlighted the difficulty of conceptualizing it in modern philosophical terms. The complicated argument of the “Profession of Faith” in *Émile* seems to me calculated precisely to blur the boundary between a personal God who wills something for me personally, a God whose justice one could proclaim (for Rousseau, on the basis his own personal sense of justification), and an impersonal deity who simply offers us an escape from

the web of personal intentions that entangles us here on Earth. What matters above all to Rousseau are the implications of being dependent on external forces, whether personal or impersonal.

Some degree of dependence is of course inevitable; what matters is whether that dependence must lead to alienation and corruption. Therapy for anger is part of the larger enterprise of mitigating the debilitating effects of dependence, and for Rousseau it is more urgent (and less scandalous)⁶ to pursue this enterprise in the realm of politics rather than religion. One day, during *Émile's* courtship, the tutor tells *Émile* his beloved Sophie has died. He uses *Émile's* anger at him for bringing such bad news to show his pupil how dependent he has become on something so fragile as another person. It is at this point that the tutor takes *Émile* on a long trip to complete his education by learning about forms of political power and dependence. Rousseau's conception of law in the *Social Contract* seeks to combine notions of intention and impersonality in such a way as to answer the need for justice while minimizing the citizen's sense of dependence on personal will. The enforcement of laws derived from the general will, Rousseau believes, should provoke no anger; on the other hand, citizens are justified in reacting angrily against the corruption of law by the government, composed as the latter necessarily is of particular wills. In the context of Enlightenment campaigns against the arbitrary decrees of kings, one can understand how Rousseau can place so much faith in the capacity of the rule of law to eliminate the feelings of slight that arise from personal dependence. Of course, Rousseau knew only too well how disparities of economic or social status could also lead to resentful anger, and although he thought a political system could be devised in which those factors could be minimized, the rehabilitation of anger in other parts of his work tempers the optimism of *Émile's* Senecan therapy.

In this other view of anger, which I associate here with the figure of Juvenal, Rousseau highlights the reaction of righteous indignation to injustice visited, not on myself as an individual subject, but on a group of people which may or may not include myself. Such indignation leads to a protest against injustice, but it may also involve provoking others to become angry themselves at an injustice they may not initially have perceived as such. The emotion of anger one feels is thus closely tied to the use of anger as a rhetorical device, and it is significant that Aristotle's most extended discussion of anger is found, not in his *Ethics*, but in his *Rhetoric*. Of course, the serenity of Seneca's essays has its rhetorical component, too, but Juvenal's satires — and the same is true of outstanding later satires, notably Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew* — highlight their problematic mixture of theme and form: they discuss, manifest, and provoke anger, in

different degrees and directions all at once. Another complicating factor is the importance of class or status difference in the characterization of speaker and audience. Whereas Stoic discourse points beyond the necessary distinction of master and disciple toward an ideal equality of soul in writer and reader, indignation, even, and perhaps especially, on behalf of others (since it presupposes that one feels an injustice others do not), involves claiming a right to anger which may be contested. The positive reception of Juvenal's "angry" satires has clearly been facilitated by the longstanding assumption (now considered questionable) that the author was a man of relatively high birth. Questions of taste and temperament aside, Juvenal thus enjoyed a license that Horace, as the son of a freedman, could not plausibly claim. Both the discursive and the social relationship between Rousseau and his audience thus need to be considered alongside the actual theme of anger itself.

To take the second problem first, we need to look at the culture of sociability within and against which Rousseau writes. As theorized in the writings of the Chevalier de Méré, Madame de Lambert, and others, the ethos of *honnêteté* governing relationships among polite and polished people leaves no room for anger. In the early years of the seventeenth century, when neo-Stoic influences were strong, Charron in his essays and Corneille in his play *Cinna* make the overcoming of anger an important theme. Yet, the manuals of politeness published later in late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century France do not, so far as I know, mention anger at all.⁷ This silence is so pervasive that it requires explanation. Why do these writers not address the problem as Adam Smith, for example, does in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which surely expresses a view common in both countries in Rousseau's day? "The expression of anger towards anybody present," Smith writes, "if it exceeds a bare intimation that we are sensible to ill usage, is regarded not only as an insult to that particular person, but as a rudeness to the whole company" (35)⁸. I would suggest that to discuss the problem of anger is to raise issues about personal independence that are at odds with the ideology of the French absolute monarchy (one thinks of the problem of duelling), but also with the later gradual blurring, in the *salons*, of status differences that remained quite rigid in society at large. Of course, anger does not disappear. But it can be marginalized and thus made removed from serious discussion. This had been the lesson of Montaigne's essay on anger.⁹ It is also the thrust of Molière's *Misanthrope*, whose angry hero is a comic figure even though he is young, intelligent, and well-born — a dramatic situation as "modern" in its contradiction of longstanding literary convention as the dignity of Sophie's anger in *Émile*. Alceste's anger is ridiculous because he cannot see its roots in that vanity or *amour-*

propre that corrupts all of humanity, high and low.¹⁰ Another way of controlling anger is to redefine its area of application. If we compare Boileau's satires with Juvenal's, we see that the modern poet's righteous indignation is directed above all at bad taste, and that other faults can be targeted in the same mood if they, too, can be placed in the same category. Anger is justified by appealing not so much to justice as to judiciousness of conduct.

The peculiar character of French polite culture is not the only factor inhibiting the expression of indignation to a degree not true of Britain. The other is religion. It has been argued that Juvenal's survival owes much to the Church, which put to use his attacks on human corruption (Hight 182f). The God of the Bible is an angry God, and the preacher is justified in expressing himself angrily in addressing his wayward flock. From the point of view of an early Christian polemicist such as Lactantius (and Rousseau will echo this view), Stoic tranquillity of mind is merely callous indifference to injustice. Serenity, not anger, is the real sign of corruption; divine anger is the necessary complement to divine love (Lactantius 4.11). In a France where memory of the religious wars was still fresh, such a view was no longer persuasive. Not that religion was considered unimportant, but direct appeal to religion by secular writers was viewed as transgressing an important political and cultural boundary. Within religious discourse itself appeals to divine anger were first limited by the subservience of religion to the state and its ideal of civil peace,¹¹ and then by the tendency, not only among writers influenced by deism, to downplay the Biblical God in favor of a more universal and impersonal deity, as far removed from anger as from love.¹² Likewise, for the *philosophe* to become angrily indignant is to personalize his relationship to his audience at the expense of universal and impersonal reason. It is also to claim a position of moral superiority incompatible with the Enlightenment ideal.

Rousseau's rehabilitation of righteous indignation as a sane personal attitude and a legitimate discursive stance thus faces major cultural obstacles. Like *Alceste*, Rousseau risks becoming a figure of fun. Indeed, he would appear as such in Palissot's satirical play, *Les Philosophes*. His response is therefore to adopt a strategy of indirection. He will express righteous indignation, not in his own name, but through other voices. This strategy, of course, is not without precedent in the satires of antiquity, and it is adopted in major Enlightenment texts, including Voltaire's *Contes* and Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*. But Rousseau's indignation is mediated by a form of distancing all his own — less ironic and more melancholy and pathetic. Thus, it is interesting that Rousseau announces his adoption of the motto from Juvenal, not in one of the feisty works of his early period, but in the *Letter to D'Alembert*, whose preface emphasizes the fragility of the

author's health, as well as his voluntary exile from society. In this work — and Rousseau's portrait of Alceste mirrors the image Rousseau projected of himself throughout the book — righteous indignation is not a heroic stance but rather one expression of a melancholy separateness.

In this context, the appeal to Juvenal may seem surprising, but we need to remember that an element of melancholy appears in many eighteenth-century recollections of classical antiquity. The glory of Rome is gone and will not come again. Rousseau's motto, like his identification with the "old-fashioned" Alceste, is even more consciously anachronistic than the invocation of Fabricius in the *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*. The time when righteous indignation could be appreciated is past — the separateness of the angry figure is temporal as well as spatial. There is, in addition, a further reason for distancing oneself from the appeal to antiquity. In modern society, the anger one has to deal with most is the resentment of the weak and inferior — of those, who, like the plebeian Rousseau himself, find their hopes frustrated but whose right to feel slighted is itself denied by society.¹³ If Rousseau gives dignity to the anger of people traditionally classified as inferior (women, and of course himself) he also illustrates the need to contain or forestall the anger of the ignorant or vulnerable. In the *Letter to D'Alembert*, for example, he does not recommend that Geneva stage the kind of patriotic drama he acknowledged was legitimate in ancient Greece, lest the city's population be stirred once more to anger at the city's former enemies. Still, Rousseau is not Burke. We can appreciate the ambivalence of Rousseau's attitude toward anger by returning to *Émile*, and to the special status of the child in his thought. Obviously weak and vulnerable, and therefore prone to resentment, the child is also strong in the healthiness — the natural nobility — of his impulses. His anger, therefore, is and is not a feeling to be recognized. Similarly, in the political framework of the *Social Contract*, the citizen must have a capacity for anger if he is to be an active participant in the legislative action (that is, the active justice) of the sovereign people. Yet that capacity must not be drawn on explicitly, for to the extent anger becomes self-conscious in the subject, it can only manifest itself as resentment.

If such a delicate balance is to be achieved, however, something further is required. Although Rousseau emphasizes the impersonal nature of law, he himself is the most personal of writers. One way to address this problem, as I suggested at the beginning of this paper, is to ask what the opposite of anger would be in this context.¹⁴ In *Émile*, Émile and Sophie do arrive at a greater awareness of their modest place in a larger rational order, but what replaces anger is not just tranquillity of soul — which does not last long, as we know from the sequel, *Émile and Sophie*. More impor-

tant and enduring is the pupils' gratitude toward the tutor, who has enabled them to achieve self-mastery through his guidance. This guidance has taken the *form* of impersonal necessity, but as *Émile* matures he becomes aware of all the trouble the tutor has taken and this realization enables him to forge a new and more personal relationship with the tutor. For Rousseau, it is only when *Émile* has experienced his capacity for autonomous action that his gratitude will not be poisoned by resentful feelings of dependence. This lesson is presented, however, in a way difficult to accept for readers of *Émile* today. We tend to see the tutor's imitation of impersonal necessity as a dubious form of manipulation. Were we in *Émile's* place, the tutor's revelation of the strategies he used would provoke our anger more than our gratitude. But we have to remember, once again, that Rousseau was writing at a time when the impersonal necessity of law, even originating in the mind of a more or less shadowy legislator, represented a limitation on the oppressiveness of personal authority, thus opening a new space for the subject's own personality to flourish.

That the therapy of desire should lead to a new subjectivity through the very experience of impersonality has something paradoxical about it, and it is no wonder that Rousseau has difficulty finding the words to describe it. We see him struggling with the problem in the Savoyard Vicar's "Profession of Faith," the impersonal God gradually becoming an object of gratitude as the Vicar explores his potential for a free judgment not dictated by the senses. The most suggestive formulation of the opposition between anger and gratitude, however, come in the *Rêveries*. There, as I said, Rousseau lays aside irascible emotions: anger, but also hope. His goal, as he puts it in a famous passage of the Fifth Walk, is to become as self-sufficient as God himself. The famous *sentiment de l'existence* can perhaps be defined as an experience of impersonality from the inside, a necessary but not final stage of Rousseau's meditations. For what is the final, unfinished meditation of the Tenth Walk if not an extended expression of gratitude toward Madame de Warens, the woman who helped him become himself? True, the focus of the text is on Rousseau much more than on Madame de Warens herself: as in the Stoic discourse on anger, what is important is the state of one's own soul, not the reciprocal relation of two subjects. At the same time, personal independence is seen here as a gift from the other, the result of the other's love. Rousseau recalls "that unique and brief time in my life when I can truly say that I was myself, fully, without admixture and without obstacle, and when I can truly say that I have lived" (*Rêveries*, Tenth Walk 141). He goes on to add, significantly, that "I could not bear subjection; I was perfectly free and better than free, for bound only by my affections, I did only what I wanted to do"

(141). In the memory of that idyllic time, the distinction between independence and dependence fades away. This experience of gratitude only comes to expression after Rousseau has given up his writing career, and yet it is what allowed Rousseau write in the conviction that indignation at injustice need not be corrupted by vanity or resentment.

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Notes

¹ “[S]anabilibus aegrotamus malis: ipsaque nos in rectum genitos natura, si emendari velimus, iuvat.” The translation is taken from Seneca, *Moral and Political Essays*.

² See Braund.

³ For further recent discussion of emotion in antiquity, see Braund and Gill, especially the article by Fowler.

⁴ In his recent book *The Anger of Achilles: Mênis in Greek epic*, Leonard Muellner calls for an “anthropology of emotions.” Emotional terms, he writes, need to be viewed “not as universal pure feelings but as culture-specific social concepts with no necessary relationship to what we may intend and comprehend by a word like anger. A basic principle of this approach is to try to avoid imposing analytic categories and distinctions from without on terms for emotions and, insofar as possible, to define them from within their cultural context, in terms of each other, as part of a coherent and articulated set of ideas about the world” (4).

⁵ I omit the story of Émile’s garden, which I have discussed elsewhere (see Coleman 254–74). Émile’s indignation gives way to “sad bitterness” (99) as he learns about Robert’s legitimate prior claim to the land and his own dependence on what is presented here as an impersonal system of property relations.

⁶ Rousseau was repelled by the rather crude efforts of d’Holbach and others to cure people of dependence on God.

⁷ The Chevalier de Méré, generally considered to be the leading exponent of this idea, makes only passing reference to anger in his various works. He does not feel the need, as Montaigne did, to devote a separate essay to it. Nor does Madame de Lambert, in her widely read *Avis d’une mère à son fils*. There is a comment on anger in *Spectator* 438 (Steele), but Duclos’s *Considérations sur les mœurs* (1751) says nothing at all.

⁸ It may be relevant to remember that Smith was lecturing in Scotland.

⁹ He points out that unlike other weapons, “our hand does not guide it, it guides our hand; it holds us, we do not hold it.” Yet, although he frankly

admits that he does get angry, he “glories” in “deceiving [the] expectation” of those around him that he will take out his anger on them (544).

¹⁰ Another telling example may be found in another play to which Rousseau alludes in the *Letter to D'Alembert*, Delisle de la Dravetiere's *Timon the Misanthrope* of 1722. In this play, Timon is coaxed out of his grumpiness by his servant, who is none other than Harlequin, imported from Italian comedy to dispel Timon's anger, bring him back into society, and facilitate his marriage to the lovely Eucharis. It is unclear whether Delisle knew Shakespeare, but he has turned a tragedy into a what could easily become a comic opera. Looking back on *Timon of Athens* from this vantage point, the tragic hero who squanders his fortune on his friends and then hates them for not helping him pay his debts seems very close to becoming a comic figure himself.

¹¹ The impact of the Jansenist quarrels, first in discrediting the notion of righteous anger in civil society, then in politicizing it as the indignation of the oppressed nation in the decades leading up to the Revolution, would have to be explored here.

¹² The influence of Lucretius, and of Cicero's *De natura deorum* (a favorite book of Voltaire's) is important here.

¹³ In this connection, it is worth mentioning a story about Samuel Johnson and his own use of Juvenal. It is said that as he read aloud his extended description of the scholar's woes in “The Vanity of Human Wishes” he “burst into a passion of tears,” a reaction to satire that surely would have amazed the Roman poet (ix). Curiously, a similar mood of self-pity appears in Diderot, when he criticizes both Seneca and Rousseau in his late *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron*.

¹⁴ Such a procedure can be found in Descartes's *Passions of the Soul*, and of course earlier in scholastic philosophers such as Aquinas.

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