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## Language and Solitude : Paradox of the *Dialogues*

The *Dialogues* - as Jones and McDonald, among others, have noted - were born from a silence engendered by a public reading of Rousseau's *Confessions*. Chronologically situated as they are between the latter work and the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, they provide both an interval and a bridge between these two texts and constitute what has traditionally been considered the second of Rousseau's three major autobiographical works. Yet if the *Dialogues* unarguably form part of the autobiographical enterprise, they stand quite apart from the other two works, creating a lacuna, as it were, within the silence with which the *Confessions* end and the *Rêveries* begin. That this difference is real in terms of both form and intention is avowed by Rousseau himself, first in the Preface to the *Dialogues* and later in the liminary pages of the *Rêveries*. "Je comptois sur l'avenir, et j'espérois qu'une generation meilleure, examinant mieux et les jugemens portés par celle-ci sur mon compte et sa conduite avec moi, démêleroit l'artifice de ceux qui la dirigent et me verroit enfin tel que je suis. C'est cet espoir qui m'a fait écrire mes *Dialogues*, et qui m'a suggéré mille folles tentatives pour les faire passer à la postérité [...]. Je me trompois." Having warned his readers that they should not seek in his *Dialogues* the same "lecture agréable et rapide (666)" that they might have found in the *Confessions*, Rousseau admits the failure of his undertaking only to take up "la suite de l'examen sévère et sincère que j'appelai jadis mes *Confessions* (999)," and which will form the basis of his final, though unfinished work - the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*.

To a large extent, the *Dialogues* provide a recapitulation and reworking of much of Rousseau's political and philosophical thought and bring full circle the fundamental theses upon which he had continued to expound since he first articulated them in the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*. That the two works are closely connected is further evidenced by the epitaph from Ovid that they share - *Barbarus hic ego sum, quia non intelligor illis*; Here I am a barbarian because I am not understood. Jean-Jacques the barbarian has been much maligned and misunderstood since making that initial entry into a language that would cast him forever into the public sphere and which would mark, as he tells in the *Confessions*, "le reste de ma vie et de mes malheurs (351)." From the perspective of his critics whose collective opinions have been appropriated by

the Frenchman of the *Dialogues*, Jean-Jacques is indeed a barbarian and worse - a vile and execrable monster whose pernicious voice and writings must be suppressed, an artful plagiarist whose crimes must be revealed at all costs. "Oh vis-à-vis d'un tel homme on ne doit négliger ni le plus ni le moins. A l'horreur du vice se joint l'amour de la vérité, pour détruire dans toutes ses branches une réputation usurpée, et ceux qui se sont empressés de montrer en lui un monstre execrable ne doivent pas moins s'empresser aujourd'hui d'y montrer un petit pillard sans talent (675)." The Frenchman and those whom he represents would silence Jean-Jacques once and forever by showing that he is a charlatan and that his books should go censored and left unread. The Frenchman, after all, does proudly proclaim in the First Dialogue that he has yet to read a single line of anything that Jean-Jacques has written<sup>1</sup> but is nonetheless the spokesperson of that public opinion that holds Jean-Jacques, the author and the man, in contempt.

Dialectically opposed to the Frenchman is Jean-Jacques' apologist who assumes the name of Rousseau. At the outset of the work, he, like the Frenchman, does not know Jean-Jacques the man, but he has read the latter's works and cannot conceive that writings which had so touched his heart and exalted his soul could have been produced by "le plus crapuleux, le plus vil débauché qui puisse exister (688)." To the Frenchman's contention that Jean-Jacques the author of books and imputed crimes is embodied in one person, Rousseau the apologist upholds the contrary, that the two cannot be one and the same. The dialogues which ensue, then, offer a reasoned argument between the two interlocutors whose quest is to uncover and determine the truth of the real Jean-Jacques.

That quest - to know one's self - is, of course, a hallmark of the Rousseau corpus and has remained a governing principle of the author's works since the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*. The need for self-knowledge as fundamental and requisite to all other forms of wisdom which one might acquire is proclaimed as paramount in the first sentence of the Preface to the *Second Discourse*<sup>2</sup> and as the true object of study in the *Emile*<sup>3</sup>. To reveal the truth of the self lies at the very basis of the impetus that gave rise to the *Confessions* and provides the justification for which the *Dialogues* were composed. For as Rousseau the apologist states in the First Dialogue as he describes the inhabitants of his (and

<sup>1</sup>. See page 679.

<sup>2</sup>. *Second Discours*, page 122.

<sup>3</sup>. *Émile*, page 252.

Jean-Jacques') hypothetical, ideal world "Quelque heureuse découverte à publier, quelque belle et grande vérité à répandre, quelque erreur générale et pernicieuse à combattre, enfin quelque point d'utilité publique à établir; voila les seuls motifs qui puissent leur mettre la plume à la main (673)." The *Dialogues* may well have been born from silence, but they also came to life because of the author's need once again to tell his truth, to demonstrate the unity of the man and his work, and to quell the slander, the disfiguration, propounded by his critics and accepted by public opinion. Jean-Jacques must confront, on the one hand, his desire for solitude, his singularity, and, on the other, fulfill his felt obligation to render himself transparent through a mediated language that can both encapsulate and transcend the self.

It is this paradox which forms a vital matrix from which the *Dialogues* emerge. Solitude, as Polin has shown, constitutes the paradigm by which the existence of natural man is defined. He is "un tout parfait et solitaire,"<sup>4</sup> living in perfect harmony with his surroundings and his essence. Initially self-sufficient and independent of others, the solitary man is free precisely because he exists in a state of equality that binds him to nothing and to no one. When at a later stage he eventually enters into free associations with his fellow beings, that Golden Age of Rousseau's theoretical anthropology, man is still exercising his natural freedom since the relationships he has established exist by choice and not force. He has yet to begin looking beyond himself to fulfill his basic needs. "C'est le moment de son plus grand bonheur, car le bonheur, c'est l'exercice de la liberté naturelle. Elle demeure intacte et sans entraves, et cependant l'état de libre association permet aux "progrès naturels" à l'esprit humain de s'accomplir. L'existence de ce temps idyllique, qui est la jeunesse du monde, prouve à Rousseau, une fois de plus qu'il existe des modes de vie où liberté et société sont compatibles."<sup>5</sup> This premise, established in the *Second Discourse*, will inform the rest of Rousseau's major writings and function as the underlying principle of the society at Clarens, Emile's education, the development of the social contract, and the truths of the self which are disclosed in the autobiographical works.

Early in the First Dialogue, Rousseau's apologist evokes that idyllic world, "un monde idéal semblable au nôtre, et néanmoins tout différent (668)" whose inhabitants would speak a language quite different from our own because it would emanate from the heart<sup>6</sup>. Spending their

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<sup>4</sup>. *Contrat social*, page 381.

<sup>5</sup>. Raymond Polin, *La Politique de la solitude*, Paris, Sirey, page 21.

<sup>6</sup>. See page 672.

days without regard for the judgment of others or the capriciousness of opinion, communication would occur among them through a "language beyond language" where the word functions "as presence, as plenitude, and contrasts with written language, which is always derivative, a pale and exterior representation."<sup>7</sup> It is the language of transparency to which Rousseau the author himself aspires, where heart meets heart, where one can most fully realize that "notre plus douce existence est relative et collective, et notre vrai *moi* n'est pas tout entier en nous. Enfin telle est la constitution de l'homme en cette vie qu'on n'y parvient jamais à bien jouir de soi sans le concours d'autrui (813)." If Jean-Jacques has chosen to live apart from others, to take refuge in his solitude, it is hardly because he is the misanthropic scoundrel that public opinion would have him to be. On the contrary, it is a sign of his sincerity, a gesture by which he would live the tenets of his own creed. Jean-Jacques, his apologist observes, has not always fled the company of others<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, Rousseau admits in his own *Confessions* the various instances when he enjoyed "la douceur de la vie dans un commerce agreable et sur."<sup>9</sup> Yet he has always cherished his moments of solitude, and in that his apologist can aver with certainty "De tous les hommes que j'ai connus celui dont le caractere derive le plus pleinement de son seul tempéramment est J. J. Il est ce que l'a fait la nature (799)." Jean-Jacques is thus the man of nature, the barbarian, who, having found little solace or pleasure in the world of men, scorned, vilified and misunderstood by them, has exited that world for the flights of the imagination where "d'heureuses fictions lui tiennent lieu d'un bonheur réel (814)," leaving his case behind to be debated by others.

Yet, an obstacle arises when one considers that Jean-Jacques does not reside within the realm of the imaginary but exists in both time and space. And despite his efforts to take refuge in the "ethereal regions" where his critics are unable to pursue him<sup>10</sup>, his ostensible silence and solitude cannot be maintained, for he is impelled anew to speak of his life and work and to prove that they are one. Though choosing the dialogue as the form most suited to his purpose of exposing "le pour et le contre

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<sup>7</sup>. Christie V. Macdonald, "The Model of Reading in Rousseau's *Dialogues*," *Interpretation of Narrative*, Eds. Mario J. Valdés and Owen J. Miller, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, page 13.

<sup>8</sup>. See pag3 812.

<sup>9</sup>. *Confessions*, page 188.

<sup>10</sup>. See page 815.

(663)" of his thesis, and ostensibly relegating his voice to an apologist while assigning that of public opinion to the generic Frenchman, Jean-Jacques is hardly absent from his text. On the contrary, he remains vitally interested in the fate of his manuscript and of the use which his eventual readers will make of it. "Que deviendra cet écrit? Quel usage en pourrai-je faire? Je l'ignore, et cette incertitude a beaucoup augmenté le découragement qui ne m'a point quitté en y travaillant (666)." Once the dialogues are over, that same authorial concern manifests itself again. To whom can the manuscript be entrusted? Who will be its guardian until such time as it is published and ensure in the process that its truth is disclosed? Certain that the readers whose discretion he implores will not heed his request he vows to remain silent and resign himself to the will of providence<sup>11</sup>. That resolution, too, appears thwarted, however, when he finds the gates to the altar of Notre-Dame, where he had hoped to offer the manuscript himself, locked before him. The author thus finds himself alone and silenced; his latest effort to make himself heard and understood, to speak the language of the heart, has been spurned even by heaven itself. And so Jean-Jacques will turn his attention back upon himself as the only sure reader of his text and soul. "Seul pour le reste de ma vie, puisque je ne trouve qu'en moi la consolation, l'espérance et la paix je ne dois ni ne veux plus m'occuper que de moi [...]. Livrons nous tout entier à la douceur de converser avec mon ame puisqu'elle est la seule que les hommes ne puissent m'ôter."<sup>12</sup>

If, however, the state of complete and total solitude defines the first existence of natural man as he is described in the *Second Discourse*, it bears mentioning that Jean-Jacques' apologist in the *Dialogues* deems such a state sad and contrary to nature. It is in the later stage of free associations with others where natural man can realize his greatest happiness, for it is in these relations that "les sentimens affectueux nourrissent l'ame, la communication des idées avive l'esprit (813)." If the development of language coincides with the development of the social order as Rousseau the author theorizes in both the *Second Discourse* and the *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, if language has become opaque and truth disfigured in the modern state, communication among kindred souls can nonetheless occur in the idealized and hypothetical worlds envisioned by Jean-Jacques. Hence Rousseau the apologist can confirm upon returning from his visit with Jean-Jacques the man never to have seen him as gay and at peace as when he had been able to spend some time

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<sup>11</sup>. See page 659.

<sup>12</sup>. *Rêveries*, page 999.

alone, after which his conversations were more open and gentle than usual<sup>13</sup>. Such is the effect of solitude on those who seek it by choice. Far from hating mankind, they are naturally "humains, hospitaliers, caressans (789)." Jean-Jacques, his apologist concludes, is precisely the man he had thought he would find - a timid soul who cherishes virtue and is incapable of the crimes attributed to him. In short, he is indeed the author of the works which had moved Rousseau the apologist, for only such a person could create in his solitude a language that so touched the heart and soul of his reader.

With the beginning of the Third Dialogue, the Frenchman finds that he must accede to the conclusion of Rousseau the apologist. Having read and re-read the works of Jean-Jacques and having carefully considered the account of the man as related by his apologist, the Frenchman can no longer sustain his earlier arguments. Rather, he must now believe that Jean-Jacques is indeed innocent and virtuous (945), that he is the man of nature, that he is the author of his books. "En un mot, il falloit qu'un homme se fut peint lui-même pour nous montrer l'homme primitif et si l'Auteur n'eut été tout aussi singulier que ses livres, jamais il ne les eut écrits [...] Si vous ne m'eussiez dépeint votre J. J, j'aurois cru que l'homme naturel n'existoit plus, mais le rapport frappant de celui que vous m'avez peint avec l'Auteur dont j'ai lu les livres ne me laisseroit pas douter que l'un ne fut l'autre (936)." Jean-Jacques' newest reader, then, has become his ally; he has read the works, understood the model from which they sprung, and seen the infamy of the cabal intent on the disfiguration and calumny of the author.

Convinced as he is of Jean-Jacques' innocence, he feels nonetheless impelled to reject the proposal of Rousseau the apologist, that the two join forces to expose and denounce publicly the plot against the author and thus vindicate his name and his person. And in this refusal, an act of self-interest inspired by fears of retribution, Rousseau the author suggests his own fears about the nature of the relationship between his text and his readers, both present and future. "Il se passe bien peu de jours que de nouvelles reflexions ne me confirment combien j'étois dans l'erreur de compter sur le retour du public, même dans un autre âge; puisqu'il est conduit dans ce qui me regarde par des guides qui se renouvellent sans cesse dans les corps qui m'ont pris en aversion. Les particuliers meurent, mais les corps collectifs ne meurent point."<sup>14</sup> That the imaginary Frenchman of the *Dialogues* refuses to confront Jean-

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<sup>13</sup>. See page 813.

<sup>14</sup>. *Réveries*, page 998.



Jacques' adversaries, that the real Frenchmen among whom he attempted to distribute his circular letter would not accept it, that modern academicians would still speak to the public of Rousseau's "delusional obsessions" and "monstrous egocentricity"<sup>15</sup> do not belie the possible clairvoyance with which he spoke. As in the ideal world described by his apologist in the Second Dialogue, the language of the heart is accessible only to those in a condition to understand it, and the truth of the self can thus only be discerned by an elite few, and perhaps, because of his professed singularity, only by Rousseau himself. Despite the resolution of his apologist and the Frenchman to form with Jean-Jacques "une société sincère et sans fraude (974)" in which the three will be able to open their hearts and live in perfect harmony with one another and thereby temper the horror of the solitude in which Jean-Jacques has been forced to live, the Frenchman advises caution. The two interlocutors must act with circumspection in their relation with the author, lest the outside world look askance at any perceivable change of attitude on their part. To protect himself, the Frenchman cannot and will never reveal to Jean-Jacques "les mystères de ses ennemis (975)." And so the society of three is doomed from its outset because the conditions to be placed upon it must ultimately subvert the principles of the idyll. All that is left, then, is silence. Hence the anticipated death of Jean-Jacques in the final lines of the text, and the inevitable and ultimate return of Rousseau to the solitude of the *Rêveries* where the writer will position himself as his own and unique reader.

The *Dialogues* thus end, as Jones as noted, without closure or finality, but remain suspended instead in immanence, awaiting some future time in which the truth of Jean-Jacques can be finally revealed.<sup>16</sup> And while a sense of non-ending does characterize other of Rousseau's works, in this instance the problematics of inconclusiveness may point to a critical issue within the autobiographical enterprise - namely, how to represent oneself through the mediation of language. The *Dialogues* were indeed born from silence, but they emerged from solitude as well. Having suffered the silent reception given his *Confessions* and alone in Paris, Rousseau gave himself over to his new work, a "dialogue conducted by voices that were his own" and that would provide him "a

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<sup>15</sup>. Lester Crocker, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau The Prophetic Voice 1758-1778*, New York, McMillan, 1973, pages 341 and 344.

<sup>16</sup>. See James F. Jones, *Rousseau's Dialogues An Interpretative Essay*, Genève, Droz, 1991, page 162.

role in the dialogue he was [...] forbidden to have with others."<sup>17</sup> From this exchange of point and counterpoint, this dialogue with the multiple voices of the self, his truth was to emerge, a truth of which he was avowedly the champion no matter the personal costs to him. "La différence donc qu'il y a entre mon homme vrai et l'autre, est que celui du monde est très rigoureusement fidelle à toute vérité qui ne lui coute rien mais pas au delà, et que le mien ne la sert jamais si fidèlement que quand il faut s'immoler pour elle."<sup>18</sup> What Rousseau discovers, instead, is that self-truth is not self-evident, that mediated language is insufficient to encompass in its totality the essence of the human condition, that the true "I" cannot be fixed in time and space. The self cannot be authentically represented on the printed page, for it cannot contain the "language beyond language" requisite to the communication between like souls. All that can be related, then, is the quest, the constant effort to follow the mandate of the inscription at the temple of Delphi, that most difficult and least advanced of all branches of human knowledge.

In the Second Preface to *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Rousseau's interlocutor contends that the characters of the novel "belong to another world", "that they are not in nature."<sup>19</sup> Rousseau is quick to reply to the criticism. "Pourquoi décidez-vous ainsi? Savez-vous jusqu'où les Hommes différent les uns des autres? Combien les caracteres sont opposés? Combien les mœurs, les préjugés varient selon les temps, les lieux, les âges? Qui est-ce qui ose assigner des bornes précises à la Nature et dire Voilà jusqu'où l'Homme peut aller, et pas au-delà?"<sup>20</sup> For Rousseau, in fact, the very distinction between fiction and reality appears inconsequential, because the representational principle dictating that fictional depictions draw their value solely from their faithfulness to human nature is misleading. The entity to be represented is not given; it is contingently defined by our conventions, by our language. Human nature is an imaginary being.

Julie, Saint-Preux, Claire, Wolmar exist in nature because they have been born from the vision of their creator. Their voices emerge from the language of his soul, and so they speak to and from the heart. They may well belong to a fictional world, but they are no less real for it. There is a lesson, a truth to their story. Likewise, the Jean-Jacques of the

<sup>17</sup>. Jones, page 182.

<sup>18</sup>. *Réveries*, page 1031.

<sup>19</sup>. *Nouvelle Héloïse*, page 12.

<sup>20</sup>. *Nouvelle Héloïse*, page 12.

*Dialogues* may be read as a creation, or rather as a series of creations. There is the "negative" Jean-Jacques whose portrait has been framed by his critics. There is the "positive" Jean-Jacques whose innocence and virtue are to be praised, if only in private, by his apologist and, eventually, the Frenchman. And there is Jean-Jacques the author who, through the dialectics of his imagined arguments with himself, aspires to depict the man that he is. Each instance involves an act of creation and re-creation which, as Jones suggests, may be the ultimate truth of the *Dialogues*, "that there is no truth to be perceived, that the truth of the self is always a fiction, always in need of being endlessly created."<sup>21</sup>

It may not be possible completely to know the self, but as a fiction, as an imaginary being, the self cannot lie. "S'il s'agit d'un être imaginaire il en peut dire tout ce qu'il veut sans mentir, à moins qu'il ne juge sur la moralité des faits qu'il invente et qu'il n'en juge fausement."<sup>22</sup> In the end, however, truth must still be vindicated even as it remains elusive, and Rousseau will continue to write, this time to construct in solitude a language of reverie through which communication might take place. That work, too, will remain unfinished and open-ended at Rousseau's death, bringing an end to his life work but not to his life story, his ultimate fiction whose truth remains suspended in immanence, still awaiting a time yet to come.

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<sup>21</sup>. Jones, page 189.

<sup>22</sup>. *Rêveries*, page 1031.