

THE FLOWERING OF THE INTIMATE: FROM THE *CONFESSIONS* BY ROUSSEAU TO THE *MEMOIRS* BY MANON ROLAND

Laurence VANOFLEN, Lecturer in Literature and Philosophy, Paris Nanterre University

Introduction

The last event marking the end of the century in literature was the development of personal writing in the wake of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*; two volumes appeared posthumously in 1782 and 1789, giving birth to the autobiographical genre promised to have a rich future until today. Autobiography is different from memoirs where the interest of the narrative lies in the social status of the narrator, which is generally important. It gives him the opportunity to witness historical facts that make the genre so interesting in the classical era.

Autobiographical writing derives, on the contrary, from the emphasis placed on privacy in the 18th century with the emergence of the middle class as much as the sensualist epistemology of the Enlightenment. Identity is indeed the result of an experience. Autobiography implies enunciative duality but also the awareness over time of the narrator's genesis of his own personality. The singularity of a commoner self is therefore at the centre of the story, which is indeed the novelty of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*.

Part 1 - The birth of a genre: The *Confessions* of J-J. Rousseau

Published for the first six books in 1782, four years after Rousseau's death, the *Confessions* were nevertheless conceived at the end of the 1760s. The project was born in part from the need to justify the various attacks on Rousseau, especially after the banning of *Emile* in both France and Geneva. These attacks came from religious authorities as well as philosophers.

A pamphlet by Voltaire in 1764 reveals that the author of *Emile* abandoned his children. Rousseau would then feel the need to prove the goodness of his heart by going back through his life and confessing to his every mistake. He thus returns to the theft of a ribbon that cost the dismissal of a poor cook or to the episode of the broken comb at the home of Pastor Lambercier for which he is unfairly accused, just as he will return to his first sexual emotions during the spanking that is administered to him on that occasion.

Jean-Jacques's *Confessions* will, of course, cause scandal as soon as the book is published, throwing light on the peculiarities of his relations with women, from masochism to exhibitionism. He anticipated the revelations of Freudian theory. But the most important thing for Rousseau is to understand the coherence of his personality. The episode of the broken comb, for example, the extract of which can be found in the eBook, dates the beginning of indignation at the injustice that will animate the author of the second *Discourse*.

And Rousseau also underlines his contradictions, such as those between his imagination and his mind, contradictions that make him unsuitable for worldly life. I quote: "I would have done impromptu but at leisure", as he says with a certain humour in Book 3.

The autobiographical writing then becomes in itself a victory over time. The feeling of authenticity is indeed felt in the moments when Rousseau tells the happy course of the Charmettes in Book 6, or when he talks of a night under the stars during his wanderings between Paris and Chambéry. This happiness is at the junction between writing and memory. I quote again: "I liked the slightest facts of that time because they are from that time". And Volume 2, on the other hand, devoted to the entry into literature and its relationship with philosophers, will be darker, overwhelmed by Rousseau's growing sense of conspiracy.

But less than historical truth, what Rousseau then comes to affirm is subjective and felt truth. It does not matter that the memory is not faithful, that it filters and selects as it will be accused. Many other writers, after Rousseau, from the seducer Giacomo Casanova in Chateaubriand, Stendhal, George Sand to Marcel Proust, will continue the task at hand in the series of homages, the thrush of Combourg by Chateaubriand, like the madeleine by Proust, which undeniably owe to the periwinkle of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. But the hazards and violence of the Revolution will reinforce and exacerbate the need to leave a trace of individual existence, captured both in their uniqueness and in the circumstances of a humble and sometimes dramatic daily life.

Part 2 - Waiting for the guillotine: The *Private Memoirs* of Madame Roland (1793)

Thus, Manon Roland, the simple wife of a factory inspector who would become Minister of the Interior, caught in the fall of the Girondins, was arrested on 31 May 1793. As the muse of the Revolution, she became its victim and devoted the six months of her arrest, before her speedy trial and execution, to drafting some *Historical Records* and some *Private Memoirs*.

At first focused on the need to defend the action and memory of the men with whom she shared her political commitment, her husband, of course, Roland, Buzot or Brissot, her writing then turns to the evocation of childhood, going back to the date of 1780. Both derivative and an act of resistance to its accusers, her story is also an opportunity to pull oneself together.

Like Rousseau, she took a vow of sincerity and recounted an indecent assault she suffered in her father's studio in her early teens, as well as the psychological repercussions, unrest, guilt and shame she would experience. This is obviously a very rare testimony under a female pen, given the decorum in place. A book too, a precious chronicle of a childhood in the Parisian middle class, her father was indeed a master engraver, with her intellectual itinerary, the history of her friendships and her marriage.

Marked by Plutarch's reading of *The New Héloïse* at the age of eight after her mother's death, she forges for herself a heroic ideal marked by virtue and energy. This personality, which pierced her writing, earned her the admiration of Chateaubriand, Stendhal, Lamartine, or the English historian Carlyle. Witnesses reported her last words on the Revolution Square in front of the Statue of Liberty when she was guillotined; she was quoted as saying: "O freedom, what crimes are committed in your name!" Unfinished, the text of the *Memoirs* is written on the pressure of circumstances and the sinking of the political ideals which she has committed herself to. The last words of the *Memoirs*, at 39 years old, are a sober reminder of this.

These *Memoirs* will be published in 1795 in an altered form. Thus, writing appears as the only way to save an irreplaceable self that time threatens, from Restif to the aging Casanova who stayed away from the Revolution, or even to the nobles imprisoned or not, emigrated or not, like Madame de La Rochejaquelein, Madame de La Tour du Pin or Madame d'Arconville.

But personal writing also spread to diaries, even fiction at the same time. Let us think of the great monologue of Figaro by Beaumarchais or the novel by Chateaubriand, *Senancour*, or Benjamin Constant at the beginning of the 19th century. To conclude, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* thus mark the emergence of autobiography, understood as an ordered narrative by which a simple individual intends to give an account of what he is, of his singular identity captured again by memory.

Autobiography is telling of the profound transformation of literature at the end of the 18th century, insofar as it is an entirely new genre, without rules, which escapes decency to affirm the truth of the subject.