

ROMANTICISM, NATURE, AND SELF-REFLECTION IN ROUSSEAU'S *REVERIES OF A SOLITARY WALKER*

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ABSTRACT: In *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (RSW), Rousseau keeps a record of the thoughts, ideas, and reveries that freely run through his mind during his solitary walks. He finds that it is only when he is alone and not being disturbed that he is able to exist just for himself, and can “truly claim to be what nature willed”. Rousseau goes on these solitary walks in the countryside on the outskirts of Paris. But if solitude is what he requires, why travel all the way to the countryside, which he says is very far from his residence in the middle of Paris? Put another way, why does he feel the need to be amidst nature in order to engage in these reveries? What do his reveries tell us about the role(s) that nature has played in his life?

This article will examine the role of nature in Rousseau's solitary walks, as well as its presence in his life as revealed through his reveries. In particular, we will see that nature has played a central role in shaping Rousseau's soul both during his adolescence and his adulthood. It is an essential ingredient to helping Rousseau realize his project of examining and ordering his soul, and in his attempt to understand what kind of man he is, given his deracination from mainstream society. Throughout his life nature has served as his mirror for self-examination; it acts as a trigger for various memories, it provides a harmonious setting for delving into the more painful of these memories, and allows him to extract insights that enable him to face his mortality.

KEYWORDS: Rousseau; Nature; Self-Reflection; Reveries of a Solitary Walker

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* is a quintessential example of Romanticist literature in Rousseau's corpus. The work departs from mimetic aesthetics in that it does not seek to describe and thereby recreate *la belle nature*. Yet, as we will argue, nature is central to the work in that it serves as inspiration for Rousseau in

formulating his thoughts and insights about his emotional states, and communing with nature enables his examination of his conflicted and tormented psyche; further, the work is romanticist in that (as in the *Confessions*) its readers are given a clear view into its author's soul. This paper will examine the role of nature in Rousseau's *Reveries*, and the ways in which *la belle nature* has acted as a catalyst in triggering Rousseau's self-reflections in this work. The importance of *la belle nature* to the *Reveries*, and the autobiographical nature of the text, makes this work an enormously important, and yet oft neglected contribution to the literary works that inspired the Romantic movement.

The mimetic approach to aesthetics can be dated at least as far back as Plato.¹ Plato's Socrates depicts art as an imitation of nature in Book X of the *Republic*. During the Enlightenment, the mainstream view of aesthetics, and the centrality of the concept of imitation within it can be expressed, for instance, by the words of Abbé Dubos, who authored *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting* (which was first published in 1719 and was being reprinted in the 1750s), who said: "Just as a painting imitates the features and colors of nature, so does the musician imitate the sounds, accents, signs, and inflections of the human voice, together with all the sounds with which nature expresses its feelings and passions."² As Timothy Blanning notes, imitation here does not mean simply copying, it "involved the seeking the best elements of nature at its finest (*la belle nature*) and reproducing them in a painting, sculpture, poem, piece of music, or whatever."³ The creation of art was governed by rules; Blanning quotes Sir Joshua Reynolds' statement in 1769, delivered to the Royal Academy in London, that "[artistic] models, which have passed through the approbation of ages, should be considered by them [aspiring artists] as perfect and infallible guides; as subjects for their imitation, not their criticism."⁴

In 1749, Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* as an entry for the annual essay competition by the Academy of Dijon; participants were asked to write on the question of whether progress of the arts and the sciences had had a positive effect on morals, and Rousseau argued that progress in these domains had in fact corrupted morals. The essay won first prize and was published in 1950. In 1753, Rousseau wrote his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, also an entry for the Dijon Academy's competition that year. The essay, while reviewing many of the arguments of his first discourse, introduced the concept of the 'noble savage,' and the "transmutation of this figure into the corrupt and civilized man who peoples cities and

¹ Timothy Blanning, *The Romantic Revolution: A History*, Modern Library Paperback Edition, 2012, p. 11

² *Ibid.* p. 11-12

³ *Ibid.* p. 12

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 12-13

dominates society.”⁵ Then, in 1761, Rousseau published an epistolary novel, titled *Julie, or The New Héloïse*. The book consisted of a collection of letters exchanged between the principal characters (Julie, her tutor and lover Saint-Preux, her cousin and friend Claire, and Julie’s subsequent husband Baron de Wolmar)⁶. Although Rousseau was the sole author, he published the novel as not its author but its editor, i.e., as someone who had stumbled onto these letters⁷. The novel was a runaway bestseller, going through more than seventy editions before the century’s end.⁸ What made this novel different was not just its emotional appeal (for there were certainly other books with that feature)⁹, or its “passages of real erotic intensity”¹⁰, but, as Blanning argues, its “autobiographical dimension.”¹¹ As Maurice Cranston has noted, the work aimed to impact the reader by its authenticity, in contrast to “the manifest artificiality of neo-classical literature.”¹² Blanning quotes Rousseau’s remarks about *Julie, or The New Héloïse* from Rousseau’s *Confessions*: “Everybody was convinced that it was impossible to express feelings so vividly unless one had felt them, or so to depict the raptures of love except with one’s own heart as model. In that they were right, and it is true that I wrote the novel in a state of burning ecstasy.”¹³ This *expressive* approach, contra the mimetic approach to aesthetics, “placed the creator, not the created, at the center of aesthetic activity.”¹⁴

This brings us to an important fact of Rousseau’s work: as Isaiah Berlin has pointed out, the view that Rousseau was one of the fathers of the Romantic movement is problematic if we examine *what* he said rather than the “manner” in which he said it.¹⁵ Rousseau’s view that the modern man is corrupt and lives in a corrupt society; that to discover the truth requires that we examine the heart and soul of an uncorrupted noble savage (*Second Discourse*), or by a thought experiment involving raising a child in a rustic environment, away from the (corrupting) influences of the city, and in a certain way (*Emile*); that discovering these eternal truths of human nature entail that we ought to live in a very specific type of political system, are all, as Berlin puts it, “the purest

⁵ Nicholas Dent, *Rousseau*, Routledge, 2005, p. 58

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 32

⁷ Blanning, p. 9

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 9

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 10

¹⁰ Dent, p. 33

¹¹ Blanning, p. 10

¹² Maurice Cranston, *The Romantic Movement*, Blackwell Publishers, 1994, p. 12

¹³ Blanning, p. 10

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 11

¹⁵ Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 61

milk of the rationalist word.”¹⁶ Thus, rather than Rousseau’s specific doctrines, his *expressive* mode of literary communication, as exemplified in his novel (*Julie, or The New Héloïse*) and in his autobiographical works, and the display of “an understanding of human nature in all its immediacy and intensity”¹⁷ are what we must look to understand why he is justly considered one of the fathers of Romanticism.

Rousseau’s three autobiographical works, starting with *The Confessions*, continue this expressive approach. In *The Confessions*, Rousseau provides a chronological account of the events of his life, including many shameful episodes, with painful honesty and insight.¹⁸ The work eschewed traditional norms of restraint with regard to self-disclosure.¹⁹ In his *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues*, Rousseau mounts his defense against vilifications of his character by the contemporary intelligentsia; the work is constructed as three dialogues between an unidentified Frenchman and Rousseau himself.²⁰ Rousseau’s final autobiographical work, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, unfinished at the time of his death in 1778, adopts an unusual literary form: it is composed of ten chapters called *Walks*, where each *walk* consists of Rousseau’s reflections about human nature, society, and himself; the impression created is that these reflections came to him when he was wandering the countryside around Paris.²¹ It is this work that will be the subject of this paper.

ROUSSEAU’S PROJECT IN REVERIES OF A SOLITARY WALKER

In the first walk of *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (RSW), Rousseau explains his reasons for writing RSW. He explicitly gives four reasons: (1) As someone who has been torn from society and does not have much social interaction with people, he wants to discover what kind of person he is now²²; (2) he wishes to devote the remainder of his days to self-examination so as to give a coherent account of himself to God²³; (3) he finds joy in the act of self-reflection—a “sweetness of conversing with [his] soul”—and hopes that in examining his “inner dispositions” he will “succeed in putting them in better order and in correcting the evil which may remain in them”²⁴, and (4) as an author, he will take great pleasure in the future in reading the reflections in RSW, for

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 61

¹⁷ Cranston, p. 12

¹⁸ Dent, p. 28

¹⁹ Cranston, p. 14

²⁰ Dent, p. 28-29

²¹ Ibid. p. 29

²² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, tr. By C. E. Butterworth, Hackett, 1992, p.1

²³ Ibid. p. 5

²⁴ Ibid. p. 5-6

he will remember the pleasure he took in writing them, and it will be a way for him to relive his past through his younger self.²⁵

Rousseau says that the best way for him to carry out this project is to go on solitary walks, and keep a record of the thoughts, ideas, and reveries that freely run through his mind. He finds that it is only when he is alone and not being disturbed that he is able to exist just for himself, and can “truly claim to be what nature willed”.²⁶ Now Rousseau goes on these solitary walks in the countryside on the outskirts of Paris.²⁷ But if solitude is what he requires, why travel all the way to the countryside? For the countryside is so far from his residence in the middle of Paris that before he can reach his destination, he finds “a thousand objects along [his] path which constrict [his] heart” and he loses half a day in reaching his destination.²⁸ So why is the countryside so important to him? Or, put another way, why does he feel the need to be amidst nature in order to engage in these reveries? Our answers to these questions suggest that the *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, contra works of mimetic aesthetics of nature, is a work of expressive aesthetics—it displays the author’s internal state, psyche, and thoughts in different situations—and was conceived when Rousseau was communing with nature. In what follows, we will examine the role of nature in Rousseau’s solitary walks, his descriptions of the ways in which nature has acted as a catalyst in triggering his self-reflections throughout his life, and how it allows him to achieve his goals for the RSW project.

NATURE AS A MIRROR

One of Rousseau’s main insights about himself was discovering what for him was the best way of nourishing his soul—it was the act of “turning within”.²⁹ He discovered that as he cultivated the habit of self-contemplation--looking within himself and examining his heart and soul when he was alone--this habit eventually caused him to stop feeling the effects of his misfortunes, and often even to forget about them.³⁰ This activity of solitary self-reflection “soon sufficed to compensate for everything,” with its “moments of rapture” and “ecstasies.” Now most people look at themselves through the eyes of their family, friends, and lovers. Rousseau, who has been sundered from society and as a result of his experiences distrusts its members, uses nature to look at himself. We see in his description of his reverie in the second walk how nature serves

²⁵ Ibid. p. 7

²⁶ Ibid. p. 12

²⁷ Ibid. p. 119

²⁸ Ibid. p. 119

²⁹ Ibid. p. 13

³⁰ Ibid. p. 13

to facilitate his self-reflection and how it acts as a mirror that reflects his internal states. The description of the countryside as the season transitions from fall to winter triggers in him the thought that he has entered the final period of his life; it causes him to go over “the movements of [his soul] from the time of [his] youth, through [his] mature age, since having been sequestered from the society of men, and during the long seclusion in which [he] must finish [his] days”.³¹ Naturally enough, this leads him to ask questions as to how he has lived his life and what he has accomplished. He comes to realize that any failure on his part to do “good works” is not his fault, and he can at least offer to God “a tribute of frustrated good intentions, of happy feelings rendered ineffectual, and of a patience impervious to the scorn of men.” These thoughts give him a sense of satisfaction and pleasure.³²

We should also note here that for Rousseau, not only does nature reflect his internal states, but that sometimes in doing so it replaces them. In walk five, Rousseau describes his experiences when he lived on St. Peters Island; how on certain evenings he would find a hidden nook by the beach to sit in and watch the lake. He writes:

The ebb and flow of this water and its noise, continual but magnified at intervals, striking my ears and eyes without respite, took the place of the internal movements which reverie extinguished within me and was enough to make me feel my existence with pleasure and without taking the trouble to think.³³

The point here is that instead of seeing himself in the lifestyle, decisions, principles, and utterances of his friends, Rousseau appeals to the sights of nature for this very purpose. Changes of the seasons and its effects on the countryside, herbs and trees, the movement of the water in lakes and rivers, all take the place and role of friendship in giving him self-knowledge.

NATURE AS AN ENVIRONMENT FOR SELF-DEVELOPMENT AND SHAPING THE SOUL

In the tenth walk Rousseau recalls the time he spent as a teenager with Madame de Warens. At this point in his life, Rousseau’s soul was still in its formative stage. His experiences with Madame de Warens, and her love, lessons and gentle temperament, allowed Rousseau to flourish and to “give to [his] still simple and new soul the form which better suited it and which it has always kept”.³⁴ It was at this time that he developed his taste for solitude, thinking, and reflection, along with “the expansive and tender feelings made to be its nutrient.” He realized that he needed to live in the

³¹ Ibid. p. 14

³² Ibid. p. 15-6

³³ Ibid. p. 67

³⁴ Ibid. p. 141

country in order to maximize this intellectual and spiritual nourishment, as the chaos and noise of the city served only as obstacles. He moved with Madame de Warens to an “isolated house on the slope of a valley” and here, for a period of four or five years, he “enjoyed a century of life and a pure and full happiness,” filling all his time with “loving concerns or rustic occupations”.³⁵ The formative role played by nature is described even more explicitly later in the text:

The instructions and examples of Madame de Warens made me firmer in this attachment [of being a Catholic]. The rural solitude in which I passed the flower of my youth, the study of good books ...reinforced in her presence my natural disposition and affectionate feelings and rendered me devout ... Secluded meditation, the study of nature, and the contemplation of the universe force a solitary person to lift himself up incessantly to the author of things, to search with tender concern for the purpose in everything he sees and the cause of everything he feels.³⁶

Another example of nature acting as a catalyst for self-development occurs in the third walk. Here Rousseau gives an account of how, at the age of forty, he embarked on a quest to determine, once and for all, what his fundamental beliefs were, with the expectation that once he determined these beliefs, he would stick by them in the future. According to Rousseau,

The task I was undertaking could be carried out only in absolute seclusion; it required long and peaceful meditations that the tumult of society does not permit. This forced me to take up another way of life for a while, one in which I was subsequently so comfortable that, having since then interrupted it only when forced to and for a short time, I have taken it up again wholeheartedly, and have restricted myself to it without difficulty whenever I could.³⁷

A fair assumption from his remarks is that such meditation (if it did take place) would have been carried out in the countryside, or at least amidst nature, as opposed to an isolated room in the heart of Paris³⁸. So we see that a large part of Rousseau’s mental and spiritual development took place in the countryside, where nature allowed him to come into himself.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 141

³⁶ Ibid. p. 30

³⁷ Ibid. p. 31

³⁸ Rousseau does say that a certain kind of reverie—where we are aware of the sentiment of our own existence—could be had even in “the Bastille—even in a dungeon where no object would strike my sight” and be had pleurably (p. 70). But in the next sentence he admits that such reveries would be done “better and more pleurably on a fertile and solitary island, naturally closed off and separated from the rest of the world.”

NATURE AS A MEANS TO TRANSCENDING THE SELF

Most human beings have a powerful need to be part of or connected to something greater than themselves. In RSW, nature acts as a vehicle for Rousseau to connect to ‘something’ larger; this ‘something’ is frequently nature itself. Consider the description that Rousseau gives in the seventh walk of how this connection occurs:

Trees, shrubs, and plants are the attire and clothing of the earth. ... But enlivened by nature and arrayed in its nuptial dress amidst brooks and the songs of birds, the earth, in harmony of the three realms, offers man a spectacle filled with life, interest, and charm—the only spectacle in the world of which his eyes and his heart never weary.

The more sensitive a soul a contemplator has, the more he gives himself up to the ecstasies this harmony arouses in him. A sweet and deep reverie takes possession of his senses then, and through a delicious intoxication he loses himself in the immensity of this beautiful system with which he feels himself one. Then, all particular objects elude him; he sees and feels nothing except the whole.³⁹

And again, later in the seventh walk:

I never meditate, I never dream more deliciously than when I forget myself. I feel ecstasies and inexpressible raptures in blending, so to speak, into the system of beings and in making myself one with the whole of nature.⁴⁰

An additional description of being one with nature occurs in the second walk, shortly after Rousseau regains consciousness from being knocked down by the Great Dane.

Night was coming on. I perceived the sky, some stars, and a little greenery. The first sensation was a delicious moment. ... I was born into life at that instant, and it seemed to me that I filled all the objects I perceived with my frail existence. Entirely absorbed in the present moment, I remembered nothing; I had no distinct notion of my person... I felt neither injury, fear, nor worry. ... I felt a rapturous calm in my whole being; and each time I remember it, I find nothing comparable to it in all the activity of known pleasures.⁴¹

This idea that nature can allow us to tap into a greater whole or even a higher realm has been described by other historical figures⁴². Jonathan Haidt has described how Ralph Waldo Emerson, the father of the American Transcendental movement,

³⁹ Ibid. p. 91-2

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 95

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 15-6

⁴² Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Vintage, 2013, p. 263

argued in his 1830s lectures that the deepest truths of life are learnt through intuition and not reason, and that nature provides a powerful means of generating these intuitions. Haidt quotes Emerson in how the latter described taking a walk in the woods:

Standing on the bare ground,--my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, --*all mean egotism vanishes*. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am a part or particle of God.⁴³

Haidt also quotes Darwin in how the latter described a related experience in his autobiography:

In my journal I wrote that whilst standing in the midst of the grandeur of a Brazilian forest, “it is not possible to give an adequate idea of the higher feelings of wonder, admiration, and devotion which fill and elevate the mind.” I well remember my conviction that there is more in man than the breadth of his body.⁴⁴

Haidt writes that both Emerson and Darwin “found in nature a portal between the realm of the profane and the realm of the sacred.”⁴⁵ The passages quoted above from RSW show that Rousseau described this “portal” in his works a hundred years earlier.

NATURE AS A WAY OF APPRECIATING ONE’S EXISTENCE

Rousseau emphasizes throughout RSW that because “[e]verything is in continual flux on earth...[n]othing on it retains a constant and static form”.⁴⁶ In particular, our affections are unstable, and frequently oscillate between thoughts of the past and thoughts of the future, or are “attached to external things” which are subject to change. So all we have on this earth is “transitory pleasure.” But happiness is not “made up of fleeting instants but rather a simple and permanent state which has nothing intense in itself but whose duration increases its charm to the point where [one can] find supreme felicity in it.” Such a lasting state of happiness cannot, according to Rousseau, be found on earth. But a more lasting state that we can obtain on earth is that of contentment.⁴⁷ Contentment can last a short period of time, as in when one is acutely aware of one’s existence and is present only to the moment without thinking about the past or the future⁴⁸, or in the contentment one receives by taking joy in the

⁴³ Ibid. p. 263

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 263

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 263

⁴⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, tr. By C. E. Butterworth, Hackett, 1992, p.68, 122

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 122

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 68

contentment of others, for example, during public festivals.⁴⁹ But the state of contentment can be sustained for longer periods of time provided one is in a position to recreate these situations where one can tap into the sentiment of one's existence, or cause/observe the contentment of others. Rousseau found contentment during the two months that he spent on St. Peters Island because each day, during his excursions in nature, he was able to tap into this sentiment of his existence. He describes this sentiment as follows:

The sentiment of existence, stripped of any other emotion, is in itself a precious sentiment of contentment and of peace which alone would suffice to make this existence dear and sweet to anyone able to spurn all the sensual and earthly impressions which incessantly come to distract us from it and to trouble its sweetness here below. ⁵⁰

When one is in this state, "the present lasts forever without, however, making its duration noticed and without any trace of time's passage; without any other sentiment of deprivation or of enjoyment, pleasure or pain, desire or fear, except that alone of our existence".⁵¹ The entire account of the fifth walk in RSW is a description of how Rousseau's daily activities and his forays into nature allowed him to recreate this state each day during his time on St. Peters Island.

NATURE AS AN ESCAPE

In the seventh walk Rousseau explains how the study of botany during his solitary walks allows him to escape thoughts about his misfortunes. As someone who has been so wronged by others, it would be very easy for Rousseau (were he not to channel his thoughts) to start thinking about the ways in which he has suffered and about what his persecutors might be up to at the moment. His imagination would then take over these thoughts and run with them to the point where he would be emotionally crippled. For this reason, it is important that Rousseau focus his thoughts on particular things and on their details, for his imagination is much more likely to take over if his musings were more general in nature. Fortunately for Rousseau, "an instinct which is natural to [him], making [him] flee every depressing idea, imposed silence upon [his] imagination and, fixing [his] attention upon the objects which surrounded [him]".⁵² Now Rousseau could well have chosen any number of distractions to surround himself by. But botanical objects, with their "[f]ragrant odors, intense colors" and "elegant shapes [that] seem to vie with each other for the right of capturing [his] attention"

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 130-1

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 69

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 68

⁵² Ibid. p. 91

most appealed to him.⁵³ During his walks through “woods and mountains...[his] eyes incessantly strayed from one object to another, and in such a great variety it was impossible not to find something which would captivate them more and hold them for a longer time”.⁵⁴

As one who has always taken a great deal of pleasure in nature, and has spent many of his most enjoyable and peaceful periods in it, nature also triggers for Rousseau memories of happier times, and allows for more pleasant memories. He writes:

I am attached to Botany by a chain of accessory ideas. Botany gathers together and recalls to my imagination all the ideas which gratify it more. The meadows, the waters, the woods, the solitude, above all, the peace and rest to be found in the midst of all that are incessantly retraced in my memory by my imagination. ... It transports me to peaceful habitats among simple and good people ... It recalls to me both my youth and my innocent pleasures; it makes me enjoy them anew and, quite often, still makes me happy in the midst of the saddest lot a mortal has ever undergone.⁵⁵

In sum, nature gives Rousseau singularly beautiful objects to focus on, which help keep his imagination from focusing on his difficulties and worsening his emotional state. Since Rousseau has often spent the most enjoyable periods of his life in the proximity of nature, the objects of nature also generate memories of happier times for him. But for a man with as avid an imagination as Rousseau, it could hardly be the case that nature keeps him from completely avoiding painful memories. Try as we might, our imagination does not typically lend itself to being controlled. So what if certain objects in nature bring out deeply painful memories in Rousseau? Wouldn't this cause him to retreat even from nature? This question will be addressed in the next section.

NATURE PROVIDES A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR ROUSSEAU'S SELF-REFLECTIONS AND ALSO FACILITATES HIS INSIGHTS

As suggested in the section above, nature allows Rousseau to recall memories of happier times and places. In addition, we have seen that nature also facilitated Rousseau's development as a young man, and acts as a mirror into his soul, allowing him to reflect on his life and his internal states. In connection with this, we should be aware of the most striking fact of RSW—all of Rousseau's insights into human nature (his own and human nature in general) come to him during his reveries while taking

⁵³ Ibid. p. 92

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 92

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 103

solitary walks in the countryside i.e. during his time spent in nature. But many of these insights do arise from *painful* memories; try as he might to avoid them. Yet the fact that he does not retreat from nature, but is able to draw these insights from these memories during his walks suggest that nature gives Rousseau a safe environment to look into some of the more painful events in his past. Its atmosphere is therapeutic for him; he is able to withstand difficult memories as they run through his mind, and examine them in a detached way, the way one strives to do so in the office of a psychoanalyst. We briefly list four examples to illustrate the therapeutic effects of nature—with respect to the memories it allows him to examine, and the insights he gleans from such examination.

1. In the third walk, among other things, Rousseau wishes to investigate the virtues that allow old people to face their death.⁵⁶ This takes him on a mental tour of his life—his development under Madame de Warens, his first taste of success, his withdrawal at age forty for the purpose of pinning down his fundamental beliefs, the vicious condemnation that his “Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar” received, and how only those same fundamental beliefs gave him the strength to survive all the misfortunes that followed after. At the end of this painful tour, he recognizes that “patience, sweetness, resignation, integrity, and impartial justice are goods we can carry away with ourselves” when we die, and he resolves to “endow and adorn [his] soul with [this] learning”.⁵⁷

2. In the fourth walk, he seeks to investigate why his enemies might perceive him to be a liar. This involves thinking about the difficult lie concerning Marion that he told in his youth, and thinking through other lies that he had told in his life to extricate himself from embarrassing and shameful situations. After undertaking a very subtle and complex study of the nature of lying, the lesson he draws from his examination is a simple but beautiful one: it is to be modest in his aspirations. Describing himself using aspirational mottos like *vitam impendere vero*, and “to dare to profess great virtues” is “to be arrogant and rash”⁵⁸; rather one must aspire to be “wise, true, modest, and to presume less of oneself”.⁵⁹

3. In the sixth walk, Rousseau undertakes an examination of acts of spontaneous or willful generosity versus those arising out of a sense of duty or obligation. For him, to “give a gift” is a “pleasure”⁶⁰, but when his generosity creates future obligations—a “chain of duties”—then he finds these obligations to be a burden, an “almost

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 28

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 40

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 58

⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 59

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 78

unbearable annoyance”⁶¹. These thoughts lead him to reflect on his youth when he “obtained friends by [his] own good deeds”⁶². Here Rousseau gently makes a point that contains a deep and powerful insight. He says that he’d had the impression that “those whom [he] benefited became friendly towards [him] through gratitude even more than through self-interest.” This is consonant with the principle that gratitude is one of the pathways to contentment—the latter is a result of the former, and not the reverse⁶³. This however, leads him to think of his many childhood friends who abandoned or betrayed him as adults.⁶⁴ It leads him to realize that while people come though some hardships stronger and wiser, other hardships “strike [the soul] down and kill it” and these are the kinds that he endured.⁶⁵ The point of our discussion here is to see that these reveries do take Rousseau to some rather painful places in his past. The fact that he undertakes these reveries during his nature walks, that he draws useful insights from these reflections, and finishes these walks at peace with himself (rather than anxious and agitated) speak to the nurturing power that the natural environment has on his disposition.

4. As our last example of how nature allows Rousseau to contemplate painful memories and draw useful insights, we consider the eighth walk. Here Rousseau seeks to understand how it is that he is able to contemplate his lot in life and not “be disturbed by it” and how come he is able “without struggling or exerting” himself, to see himself “almost with indifference in a condition” that “perhaps no other man could bear without horror”.⁶⁶ The very purpose of this inquiry entails that he think about his sentiments when he was undergoing his misfortunes, so as to be able to trace how he came to emotionally be in his current state. As he describes it, the transition to his current state of “serenity, tranquility, peace, even happiness” (p. 113) was natural,

⁶¹ Ibid. p. 75

⁶² Ibid. p. 78

⁶³ Related to this, at the beginning of Walk 8 (p. 110), Rousseau talks of how he has no “pleasant memory” of wellbeing during times of prosperity, while during the trying times of his life he “constantly felt [himself] filled with tender, touching, delightful sentiments which, pouring a salutary balm over the wounds of [his] broken heart, seemed to transform its suffering into pleasure.” He attributes this to the fact that his sentiments at the time were “drawn back around [his] heart” and were not “being wasted on all the objects of men’s esteem.” But one wonders if part of the reason for his memory of positive sentiments during difficult times was because of a sense of gratitude for any help or support he may have received, however scarce it may have been. Human nature is such that once time creates some distance from painful events, the memory of people who assisted us during those times remains. Even the kindness shown to him by strangers, who did not know who he was, would have sufficed to affirm his positive conception of human nature.

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 79

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 80

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 112

imperceptible, and without struggle.⁶⁷ It came from the gradual realization that what happened to him was the result of necessity⁶⁸, and in recognizing his misfortunes as such, he gave up trying to control his fate and in particular, the judgments of both the public and the people he respected.⁶⁹ Furthermore, he recalled how he realized at the time that, whatever lingering resentment he held onto was the result of “self-love” (*amour propre*) disguising itself as the natural reaction of a proud soul that had suffered an injustice.⁷⁰ This insight allowed him to “overcome it.” Now he is guided by self-care (*amour de soi*): in withdrawing into himself and cutting himself off from “external relations” and the “comparisons and preferences” that are often a part of such relations, his soul “returned to the natural order and delivered [him] from the yoke of opinion”.⁷¹ As one who is guided primarily by his senses, he can “rarely escape any perceptible slight”⁷², but even if his “ardent natural temperament irritates” him, his “indolent natural temperament pacifies” him.⁷³ Thus, no matter what he may suffer at the hands of his enemies, “in the first instant of respite” he again becomes “what nature wanted.”

ROMANTICISM AND THE *REVERIES*

Nature has played a central role in shaping Rousseau’s soul both during his adolescence and his adulthood. It is an essential ingredient in helping Rousseau realize his project in RSW of examining and ordering his soul, and in his attempt to understand what kind of man he is, now that he lives outside of mainstream society. Throughout his life nature has and continues to serve as his mirror for self-examination; it acts as a trigger for various memories, it provides a harmonious setting for delving into the more painful of these memories, and allows him to extract insights that enable him to face his mortality. We see all of these features in RSW, making it one of the earliest works of Romantic literature, preceded perhaps only by Rousseau’s own novel *The New Héloïse*, and his first autobiographical work, *Confessions*.⁷⁴ The

⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 112

⁶⁸ Rousseau is not specific here (p. 113) on what he means by necessity, but in Walk 2 he does attribute his misfortunes to God: “God is just; He wills that I suffer; and He knows that I am innocent. That is the cause of my confidence” (p. 21).

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 113

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 115

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 116

⁷² Ibid. p. 118

⁷³ Ibid. p. 120

⁷⁴ There are aspects of Romanticism in Rousseau’s writings, in a series of exchanges (via published pamphlets and letters) he had with Rameau on the philosophy of music, that pre-date even *The New Héloïse*. While Rameau claimed that the ruling principle in music was (the fixed rules of) harmony, Rousseau claimed that it was (the varieties of) melody; for more details on this, see Cranston, p. 5-11.

generation of romantics after Rousseau also treated nature with reverence; they sought out nature in its unadulterated forms as opposed to “formal gardens and artificial lakes.”⁷⁵ As Maurice Cranston points out, for painters during the age of Louis XV, including Fragonard, Watteau, Boucher, and Chardin, nature was a source of “inspiration and renewal” for their work⁷⁶, though not guided by the rigid rules of exact imitation characteristic of mimetic aesthetics as practiced in the prior generation.⁷⁷ To those who followed the age of the enlightenment, and were disillusioned with the notion of God and with the church, nature (as an object of worship), and the accompanying practice of contemplation of the self filled a void that the scientific outlook of the time could not⁷⁸; in this regard, Rousseau’s *Reveries* is a striking example of how such a communion and introspection could occur.

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⁷⁵ Cranston, p.16

⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 16

⁷⁷ Blanning, p. 13

⁷⁸ Cranston, p. 11