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LEVELS OF ELOQUENCE IN

LA NOUVELLE HÉLOÏSE

In *Rousseau et l'art du roman*, Jean-Louis Lecercle states that the style of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is constantly oratorical, and attributes Rousseau's eloquence to the characters' persistent attempts to impose their will on each other. "Ce roman est constamment éloquent parce que ce sont des lettres, et qui n'ont pas pour fonction d'entretenir des relations mondaines, mais de convaincre autrui et d'agir sur sa conduite."¹ The critic also proposes that, although an oratorical tone predominates, it is not always at the same intensity. He indicates that political themes lead to the creation of an "éloquence républicaine," while such emotional questions as declarations of love, torments of conscience, and lyrical invocations of friendship forge an "éloquence sentimentale."² In actuality, however, three distinct levels of eloquence occur in Rousseau's epistolary romance — simple, middle, and sublime. These integral features of his technique as a novelist become readily apparent when compared to the rhetorical principles exposed in Rollin's *Traité des études*. Rousseau had so mastered this rhetorician's ideas that he included them as important features in his educational treatise *Mémoire à M. De Mably*, where he states his acceptance of Rollin's advice that young students be excused from the torturous experience of writing Latin themes. In addition, he desires to substitute "le Quintilien abrégé de M. Rollin" for a formal course in rhetoric and expects his charge to learn the *abrégé's* principles by heart, as well as the lessons contained in the *Traité des études*.³

According to Rollin, the simple style suits a statement of fact and any intellectual attempt to convince. Its main characteristics are clarity,

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1. Jean-Louis Lecercle, *Rousseau et l'art du roman*, (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1969), p. 231.
 2. Lecercle, pp. 245-6.
 3. *Œuvres complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1969), IV, pp. 28-29. Charles Rollin (1661-1741) held the chair of eloquence at the Collège de France and was also rector of the University of Paris. He was author of the famous treatise *Traité des études* (1726).

simplicity, and precision. "On n'y voit point de ces figures étudiées qui montrent l'art à découvert, et qui semblent annoncer que l'orateur cherche à plaire."⁴ Letters written in the simple style of eloquence occur in chronological, orderly, and plain statements throughout Rousseau's novel and reflect the characteristics outlined in Rollin's commentary. When St. Preux informs Julie of Milord Édouard's visit, he summarizes their conversation in plain expository prose. "Bientôt je vis avec plaisir que les tableaux et les monuments ne lui avaient point fait négliger l'étude des mœurs et des hommes. Il me parla cependant des beaux arts avec beaucoup de discernement, mais modérément et sans prétention."⁵ The same narrative procedure occurs when Claire announces that a quarrel has erupted between M. d'Étange and Milord Édouard, who had dared to propose the idea of marriage between Julie and St. Preux. "Ton père avait rejeté avec mépris cette proposition, et c'était là-dessus que les propos commençaient à s'échauffer" (168). These comments inform in direct and unembellished language; they go straight to the point and avoid any type of flowery communication.

In addition to statements of fact, simple eloquence appropriately expresses persuasion, debates, and refutations. When Julie wants Claire to live with her on a permanent basis at Clarens, she develops a well organized plan. She bases her first point on a comparison dealing with their earlier intentions. As younger people, they always regretted parting from each other. "Combien de fois, forcées de nous séparer pour peu de jours et même pour peu d'heures, nous disions en nous embrassant tristement: Ah! si jamais nous disposons de nous, on ne nous verra plus séparées?" The reality of their present situation contradicts their original intention. "Nous en disposons maintenant, et nous passons la moitié de l'année éloignées l'une de l'autre" (398). Julie continues to develop her argument by accentuating how old age gradually stifles happy feelings toward close attachments without ever replacing these inner emotions and consequently injects death into life before one has actually died. She and her cousin, however, must resist this aspect of the human condition. "Quand le froid commence aux

4. Rollin, *Traité des études*, vol. 1 (Paris: Librairie de Firmin Didot Frères, 1845 [1732-1733]), p. 398. All further references to this volume will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses immediately following the quotation.

5. *Œuvres complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1959) II, p. 125. All further references from this volume will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses immediately following the quotation.

extrémités, il (un cœur sensible) rassemble autour de lui toute sa chaleur naturelle; plus il perd, plus il s'attache à ce qui lui reste; et il tient, pour ainsi dire, au dernier objet par les liens de tous les autres" (399). Julie's arguments represent a simple attempt to persuade Claire. Even in her final thought concerning a sensitive heart, she is more analytic than emotional. This tendency to influence the will of another in a shrewdly considered manner also assumes moralistic overtones as characters, particularly Julie, sermonize on important decisions in life. After St. Preux's seduction in a brothel, Julie indicates that his bad company led him astray and then further explains her comments. "Les grossières amorces du vice ne pouvaient d'abord vous séduire, mais la mauvaise compagnie a commencé par abuser votre raison pour corrompre votre vertu, et fait déjà sur vos mœurs le premier essai de ses maximes" (298).

The main distinguishing feature of simple eloquence is the ease with which it can be understood. The greatest degree of clarity occurs when direct requests or orders are given. In I, 27, Claire calls for St. Preux to return from his exile at Meillerie after Julie falls dangerously ill. "Venez donc, sans différer. J'ai pris ce bateau exprès pour vous porter cette lettre; il est à vos ordres, servez-vous-en pour votre retour, et surtout ne perdez pas un moment" (94). In addition to directness, clarity takes the form of analysis. Emotions are dissected in the same manner as physical matter in order to arrive at perspicacity. Wolmar marries Julie and explains the beginning stage of his attachment for her. "Voyant dans une vie plus d'à moitié écoulée qu'un seul goût s'était fait sentir à moi, je jugeai qu'il serait durable et je me plus à lui conserver le reste de mes jours" (494). The striving for precision, clarity and directness, as well as minimal use of rhetorical figures and ornamental language, also produces an informative form of expression that is appropriate for didactic intentions. In the letter on music, St. Preux not only explains why Milord Édouard's musician has a prejudice against harmony but also outlines why simple melody is preferable. "C'est de la seule mélodie que sort cette puissance invincible des accents passionnés; c'est d'elle que dérive tout le pouvoir de la musique sur l'âme; formez les plus savantes successions d'accords sans mélange de mélodie, vous serez ennuyés au bout d'un quart d'heure" (132). The letters on Parisian manners and customs (II, 7), the theater and opera in the French capital (II, 23), the art of portraiture (II, 25), the long letter on domestic economy (IV, 10), the style of life at Clarens (V, 2), education (V, 3), wine harvesting in the countryside (V, 7), and the

Genevan personality (VI, 5) all represent examples of didactic missives in which the author communicates personal views and propensities, as well as dislikes and prejudice.

In his treatise, Rollin also underscores the nature of sublime eloquence. "Il y a un autre genre d'écrire, tout différent du premier; noble, riche, abondant, magnifique: c'est ce qu'on appelle le grand, le sublime" (398). This form of writing utilizes noble thoughts, rich expressions, and animated movement. "Le sublime, le merveilleux, est ce qui fait la grande et véritable éloquence" (407). This level of communication arouses more than just pleasure or adherence to the orator's will. "Le genre sublime produit en nous une certaine admiration mêlée d'étonnement et de surprise, qui est toute autre chose que de plaire seulement ou de persuader" (409). The sublime gives to the discourse "une vigueur noble, une force invincible, qui enlève l'âme" (409). A tone of majesty and grandeur, lively and animated expressions, and forceful vehemence overwhelm and conquer the listener.

In *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, love represents the principle leitmotif that produces the powerful effects referred to by Rollin. Love becomes a driving force that fuses two beings into a collective existence. During St. Preux's first separation from Julie, he refers to his departure as though he were leaving his own being. "Chaque pas qui m'éloignait de vous séparait mon corps de mon âme et me donnait un sentiment anticipé de la mort" (68). His steady flow of powerful emotions acts as a magnet that directs all of his mental and emotional energy toward his state of soul and permits him to lose consciousness of the limitations of distance. "À peine avais-je assez de présence d'esprit pour suivre et demander mon chemin, et je suis arrivé à Sion sans être parti de Vevei" (69). Nevertheless, St. Preux finds a way to bypass the hardships he endures. Instead of envisioning Julie as the woman he is surrendering, he imaginatively views her as the woman he wills to embrace. This mental orientation allows him to create a pleasurable condition in which he gives full vent to his desires, overcomes the obstacles of distance, and takes possession of Julie. "Tout ce qu'il y a de vivant en moi demeure auprès de vous sans cesse" (69). His soul, his inner spirit, impregnates her very being. "Il erre impunément sur vos yeux, sur vos lèvres, sur votre sein, sur tous vos charmes; il pénètre partout comme une vapeur subtile" (69). St. Preux essentially achieves the intimate union he desires in a substitute universe and offers full assent to this new world of fulfillment. "Je suis plus heureux en dépit de vous, que je ne fus jamais de votre gré" (7).

The power of St. Preux's love and the depth of his commitment arouse feelings of admiration. However, many letters communicating an intense emotional impact do not necessarily cause this feeling. In these instances, Rousseau often uses pathos as though it were a form of the sublime, while still remaining consistent with classical theory. In Boileau's treatise, Longinus' examples of the elderly Horace's statement — "Qu'il mourût" — or of the inspired words of Genesis — "Dieu dit: que la lumière se fasse, et la lumière se fit" — reflects the traditional view of the sublime as "une certaine élévation d'esprit, qui nous fait penser heureusement les choses." However, Longinus also states that pathos is a second acceptable source of the sublime. "La seconde consiste dans le *pathétique*. J'entends par *pathétique* cet enthousiasme et cette véhémence naturelle qui touche et qui émeut."⁶ The rhetorician Crevier, interestingly, speaks of a "style grand et élevé," which includes "le pathétique" and "le sublime." He views both pathos and sublimity as a heated, vehement, and emotional style that expresses passion and excites it. "Le pathétique, que l'on peut appeler style chaud, véhément, passionné, exprime la passion, et l'excite. Le propre du sublime est d'exciter l'admiration."⁷

St. Preux's missive to Julie in II, 1 represents a classical example of sublime pathos. The desired union with the woman he loves in a valid marriage becomes an impossible goal; his lower social status remains the primary impediment to the fulfillment of his aspirations; he pours out his frustration and disillusionment as he travels away from her into exile. His voyage becomes the journey of a disconsolate lover who laments the despair in his life and the loss of individual happiness. The intensely personal discourse has no other objective but the expression of his anguish. The lyrical theme of lost happiness introduces St. Preux's lament. "Ah malheureux! que suis-je devenu? Il n'est donc plus ce temps où mille sentiments délicieux coulaient de ma plume." Love becomes a source of alienation that not only affects the young hero's ability to express himself freely to the woman he adores but also changes the very nature of their inner being. "Nous ne sommes plus l'un à

6. Boileau, "Traité du sublime ou du merveilleux dans le discours traduit du grec de Longin," *Œuvres complètes de N. Boileau* (Paris: Librairie Garnier Frères, n.d.), pp. 257, 262.

7. Jean Baptiste Louis Crevier, *Rhétorique française* (Paris: Saillant et Desaint, 1765) II, p. 305. Found in *British and Continental Rhetoric and Elocution* (Anne Arbor: University Microfilms, 1976), Reel 11.

l'autre, nous ne sommes plus les mêmes, et je ne sais plus à qui j'écris." His present doubt, indecision, and estrangement eclipse the earlier state of well-being. "Quelle différence, ô Ciel, de ces jours si charmants et si doux à mon effroyable misère!" (189). Thoughts of death alone provide him with consolation as he recalls his former days of bliss. "Ô rochers de Meillerie que mon œil égaré mesura tant de fois, que ne servites-vous mon désespoir! J'aurais moins regretté la vie, quand je n'en avais pas senti le prix" (191). In the final analysis, never having loved Julie would be preferable to having possessed her and then lost her. "Il valait mieux ne jamais goûter la félicité, que la goûter et la perdre" (190).⁸

The conflict between aspirations for a spiritual form of happiness and the real conditions of a perishable human being not only account for the many passages that contain chants of desire and the satisfaction of passion but also explain the melancholy, anguish, preoccupation, restlessness, fear of being forgotten, the anguish of failure, and the thirst for death that occur particularly in Books One and Two. Rollin summarizes the potency of sublimity and, in so doing, seems to describe the effect of Rousseau's elevated style. "Celui-ci remue, agite, élève l'âme au-dessus d'elle-même, et fait d'abord sur les lecteurs ou sur les auditeurs une impression à laquelle il est difficile ... de résister, et dont le souvenir dure et ne s'efface qu'avec peine" (410). Rollin compares it to a simple form of elegance. "En un mot, l'un plaît et flatte, l'autre ravit et transporte" (410). The sublime reflects a mind in possession of generous feelings, unflinching ideals in the face of suffering, and noble pride; it results from the loftiness, grandeur, or heroism of the speaker's thoughts; it arouses such powerful emotions as admiration, awe, or pity. "Cette élévation d'esprit et de style doit être l'image et l'effet de la grandeur d'âme" (411).

According to Rollin, the third type of style, which occupies a middle ground between simple and sublime eloquence, "n'a ni la simplicité du premier, ni la force du second ... il a plus de force et d'abondance que le premier, mais moins d'élévation que le second" (399). Rollin calls it "le genre orné et fleuri, parce que c'est celui où

8. Other examples of anguish and despair in the novel are II, 28, where Julie's mother discovers the young couple's letters to each other; III, 5, where Julie announces her mother's death to St. Preux; III, 15, where Julie agrees to become St. Preux's lover and live as an adulteress; and III, 6, where, referring to Julie, St. Preux states: "L'amour vainqueur fit le malheur de sa vie; l'amour vaincu ne la rendra que plus à plaindre" (318).

l'éloquence étale ce qu'elle a de plus beau et de plus brillant" (415). The orator seeks not only to express clearly personal ideas but also to persuade and emotionally to move an audience. Since he appeals to both the intellect and human sensitivity, he must take logic and imagination into consideration. Pleasure essentially aids persuasion, inclining listeners to accept what is attractive as true. "Il ne suffit donc pas que le discours soit clair et intelligible, ni qu'il soit plein de raisons et de pensées solides. L'éloquence ajoute à cette clarté et à cette solidité certain agrément, certain éclat; et c'est ce qu'on appelle ornement" (416). Thus, the middle style simultaneously exposes solid truths and proofs while allowing the presence of beauty, delicacy, embellishment, and creativity; it represents a mixture of the simple and the sublime, occurring essentially when emotional outbursts combine with instructive and didactic intentions to produce a type of discourse that Rollin labels a "genre tempéré" (415).

In I, 12, St. Preux outlines his plan of studies for Julie and exposes his pedagogical ideas; before doing so, however, he renews his complete subjection to her will and pledges unfailing fidelity. "Pour moi qui ne puis ni vous oublier un instant, ni penser à vous sans des transports qu'il faut vaincre, je vais m'occuper uniquement des soins que vous m'avez imposés" (56-7). In I, 23, when St. Preux describes the attractive physical features of the Valais in Switzerland, the beneficent effects of mountainous terrain on human sensitivity, and the pleasing manners and customs of the inhabitants, his descriptive discourse remains for the most part illustrative of the simple eloquence that suits instructive or didactic intentions. However, the letter becomes intensely lyrical toward the end, when he reveals how he imagined Julie at his side throughout the voyage. "Je ne faisais pas un pas que nous ne le fissions ensemble. Je n'admirais pas une vue sans me hâter de vous la montrer." He finally declares how idyllic their life would be together in this charming region. "Que ne puis-je couler mes jours avec toi dans ces lieux ignorés, heureux de notre bonheur et non du regard des hommes!" (83).

In I, 37, Julie narrates that her parents have left the household and thereby make it possible for her rendez-vous with St. Preux at the chalet. She complements this factual information with her regrets of lost innocence. "Hélas! qu'est devenu ce temps heureux où je menais incessamment sous leurs yeux une vie innocente et sage, où je n'étais bien que contre leur sein, et ne pouvais les quitter d'un seul pas sans déplaisir? Maintenant coupable et craintive, je tremble en pensant à

eux" (114). In I, 60, St. Preux recounts how Milord Édouard's apologies end their dispute and make their duel unnecessary. He becomes lyrical upon seeing the letter that Julie had written to the English Lord on his behalf. "Quels mouvements j'ai senti à sa lecture! Je voyais une amante incomparable vouloir se perdre pour me sauver" (164). In I, 65, Claire narrates the scene of St. Preux's constrained departure for Paris. The account, however, is interspersed with high moments of emotion. "Un voile sombre de tristesse et de consternation a couvert son visage: son œil morne et sa contenance effacée annonçaient l'abattement de son cœur" (184).

When St. Preux and Julie undertake the journey to Meillerie in V, 17, he oratorically points out all the impressive features of the panorama as they cross Lake Geneva. However, the actual visit to the spot emotionally awakens bygone memories of his former exile at the same location and rekindles his former passion. "Fille trop constamment aimée, ô toi pour qui j'étais né! Faut-il me retrouver avec toi dans les mêmes lieux, et regretter le temps que j'y passais à gémir de ton absence?" (519). During the return to Clarens, the movement over the water and the happy sounds of nature's creatures provide a foil to St. Preux's melancholic state of soul. "Le bruit égal et mesuré des rames m'excitait à rêver. Le chant assez gai des bécassines, me retraçant les plaisirs d'un autre âge, au lieu de m'égayer m'attristait. Peu à peu je sentis augmenter la mélancholie dont j'étais accablé." The charming aspects of the physical setting fail to transform his frame of mind. "Un ciel serein, les doux rayons de la lune, le frémissement argenté dont l'eau brillait autour de nous, le concours des plus agréables sensations, la présense même de cet objet chéri, rien ne pût détourner de mon cœur mille réflexions douloureuses" (520).

The middle style, which lies somewhere between the simple and sublime, utilizes the features of both and thereby represents a third level of eloquence. It may be viewed as the passage from the simple to the sublime or vice versa in the same letter. Intellectual examination, didactic instruction, statements of fact, persuasive intent, and refutations deintensify the personal nature of a missive or else receive the elevating influence of an emotional and lyrical content. Rollin uses metaphors to differentiate between the three types of elegance. He describes the simple style in terms of a meal. "Il en est de ce genre d'écrire comme de ces tables servies proprement et simplement, dont tous les mets sont d'un goût excellent, mais d'où l'on bannit tout raffinement, toute délicatesse étudiée, tout ragoût recherché" (398).

The high style is compared to an impetuous and roaring river. "C'est elle qui tonne, qui foudroie, et qui, semblable à un fleuve rapide et impétueux, entraîne et renverse tout ce qui lui résiste" (399). The middle style also resembles a river but one that flows less savagely. "Il coule doucement néanmoins, semblable à une belle rivière dont l'eau est claire et pure, et que de vertes forêts ombragent des deux côtés" (399).

In *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Rousseau's ability to move from one level of style to another becomes evident as the subject matter of each letter changes from logical reasoning to more emotional communication. This subtle fluidity remains a constant principle of his artistic technique. Lecercle claims that the principle of Rousseau's eloquence is his use of contrast.⁹ Although this procedure stands as an important influence on his writing, the real, underlying explanation of his eloquence is the ability to utilize all the resources necessary to create three different levels of style and then to facilitate a delicate and refined shifting between them as circumstances warrant.

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9. "Le principe de cette éloquence est le contraste." Lecercle, p. 232.