

**Rousseau Rousseau
and et la
Criticism Critique**

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La Nouvelle Elle et Lui: Sand reads Rousseau

"La langue de J.-Jacques...s'emparait de moi comme une musique superbe éclairée d'un grand soleil. Je le comparais à Mozart; je comprenais tout."

George Sand

The importance of Rousseau to Sand's early education and her continuing preoccupation with every aspect of his life and work are well documented by the writer herself in numerous passages scattered throughout the autobiography and elsewhere: in "Quelques réflexions sur Jean-Jacques Rousseau," for example, written for the *Revue des deux mondes* in 1841; in "Les Charmettes," an account of an 1861 visit; and in Sand's preface to an 1847 Charpentier edition of the *Confessions*.

We have been reminded of the connection between the two writers in recent scholarship as well. In "L'Image de Voltaire et de Rousseau chez George Sand," Béatrice Didier's point is to show "la présence d'un écrivain chez un autre écrivain".¹ Didier concludes that article, however, with some interesting questions for further study. Aware that this "présence" goes far beyond a question of influence when one is dealing with a novelist, she writes: "La présence d'un autre écrivain chez un romancier modifie le mécanisme de la création des personnages...: les liens du réels et l'imaginaire se trouvent alors étrangement subvertis".² Didier presents a challenge to her reader to move beyond simple influence to textual analysis: "il serait nécessaire d'étudier le statut de la citation, avec toutes ses variations: citation précise, entre guillemets, hors texte; citation diffuse, fondue, infidèle et d'autant plus intéressante; référence explicite ou implicite...le champ d'investigation reste largement ouvert".³

I believe, and I will try to show in what follows, that when Sand closes the book, quite literally, on Rousseau in *Histoire de ma vie*: "Pardonne-moi, Jean-Jacques, de te blâmer en fermant ton

¹ Béatrice Didier, "L'Image de Voltaire et de Rousseau chez George Sand," *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France*, mars-juin 1979, p. 263.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 263-64.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

admirable livre des *Confessions*,"⁴ it is only to re-open it in the fiction where we find subversion, re-writing and revision of certain of Rousseau's major themes and structures, especially as concerns sexual difference and the Romantic writer.

Sand's re-presentation of Rousseau's powerful influence on Romantic philosophies of love and art takes precisely the form that Didier predicts: implicit as well as explicit references, inter-textual connections, mis-readings, and mis-representations (*infidèles*) in a writing process which establishes both identification with and difference from the writer whom she compared to "un père qui m'aurait engendré".⁵ If one takes the fiction into account along with the autobiographical writings, Sand is clearly not only one of the most prolific and systematic of her predecessor's critics, but one of the most provocative and challenging. Sand's sexual difference from Rousseau complicates the traditional pattern of anxiety of influence which concerns the relationship between a male writer's desire to both identify with and move beyond the literary father.⁶ A further complication, and the one that will be my major focus in what follows, is the anxiety of writing as a woman when the father already occupies the position of "the feminine."

Rousseau's move into the feminine position is documented in the first pages of the *Confessions*, where he describes how his father, Isaac Rousseau, would hold him tightly, asking him to fill the empty space that the death in childbirth of the boy's mother had left in Isaac's life and bed; he would not love him so, if he were *only* his son: "Console-moi d'elle, rempli le vide qu'elle a laissé dans mon âme.

⁴ For a discussion of the influence of Rousseau's *Confessions* on Sand's autobiography, as well as Sand's criticism of Rousseau's use of confession as an autobiographical mode, see Gita May, "Des Confessions à l' Histoire de ma vie: Deux auteurs à la recherche de leur Moi," *Présence de George Sand* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

⁵ George Sand, "Les Charmettes," *Revue des deux mondes*, XXVI, 1841, p. 706.

⁶ For the critical landmark which gave currency to the term, see Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (London & New York: Oxford U P, 1973).

T'aimerais-je ainsi si tu n'étais que mon fils".⁷ The son, as represented by Rousseau, the autobiographer, is transformed by the father's desire into a figure of the absent mother. From the perspective of the fifty-year-old autobiographer, femininity marks his sexual identity from early childhood: "ainsi commençoit à se former ou à se montrer en moi ce coeur à la fois si fier et si tendre, ce caractère efféminé".⁸

Femininity in the male artist, or in his fictional creations, has a long history which I have traced elsewhere as far back as the courtly love narratives of twelfth century Provence.⁹ However, what Barbara Johnson calls "the male privilege to play femininity,"¹⁰ in the latter half of the Nineteenth century, with all that that implies--masochism, passivity, hysteria and difference--had become explicit with Rousseau nearly a century earlier. After Rousseau, male femininity permeated Romantic poetry and prose, before emerging as a decadent, often grotesque, caricature of itself in the period Johnson takes up.

The romantic hero of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Saint-Preux, is like his counterpart in the autobiography. In fact, he is so feminine that his character is confused in the novel's structure with that of Julie's best friend, Claire, who asks what is the novel's most important question for my study: "l'âme a-t-elle un sexe?".¹¹ Rousseau's use of a third character, usually another man who is unambiguously masculine and the hero's rival for the love of a woman, is most evident in his celebrated ménages-à-trois. The special sexual character of Rousseau's ménages-à-trois in the autobiography is marked by a structural constant: they are always composed of a feminine hero, a feminine

⁷ Rousseau, *Les Confessions*, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), vol.I, p. 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁹ See Donald Furber and Anne Callahan, *Erotic Love in Literature: From Medieval Legend to Romantic Illusion* (Troy, N.Y.: Whitston, 1982).

¹⁰ Barbara Johnson, "Gender and Poetry: Charles Baudelaire and Marceline Desbordes-Valmore," *Displacements: Women, Tradition, Literatures in French*, eds. Joan de Jean and Nancy K. Miller (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 178.

¹¹ Rousseau, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. II, p. 206.

heroine and a male rival. The Romantic lovers are feminine (Maman and Jean-Jacques, Rousseau and Madame d'Houdetot), and the "other man" (Claude Anet, Saint Lambert) represents the cultural category of masculinity. Claude Anet, for example, is described as follows: "Quoiqu'aussi jeune qu'elle, il était si mur et si grave, qu'il nous regardait presque comme deux enfants dignes d'indulgence, et nous le regardions l'un et l'autre comme un homme respectable dont nous avions l'estime à ménager".¹²

Rousseau places the shared femininity of the Romantic couple so much in evidence that one might easily miss it. To cite one example, in the second most important ménage-à-trois in the autobiography, the intimacy between Rousseau and Sophie d'Houdetot--the woman whom Rousseau says was the greatest love of his life and in whom he saw his Julie, "l'idole de mon coeur"¹³--is described as "une intimité presque sans exemple entre deux amis de différents sexes".¹⁴

Fiction affords possibilities for a male writer to represent himself as a woman which autobiography does not. In Rousseau's novel, the feminine homoeroticism of the romantic lovers is highlighted by Rousseau's invention of a supplement to the classic ménage-à-trois of the autobiography. While it is true that the central triangle in the novel is a classic ménage, Saint-Preux, Wolmar and Julie, a more interesting variation consists of two women, Claire and Julie and one man, Saint-Preux. This avatar of the structure reveals more than any of the others the fundamental, however unconscious, sexual implications which underlie the dominant structure of two men and one woman as represented in the autobiography, and in the central triangle of the novel.

Some of the novel's most intense moments, indeed its final scene, focus on what I call the "ménage supplémentaire" which allows for a metamorphosis of the Jean-Jacques figure of the *Confessions* into a woman, Claire d'Orbe, who is in my view the most original creation in all of Rousseau's writing. Claire comes the closest of all of his creations, fictional and autobiographical, to Rousseau's own sexuality

¹² *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 201.

¹³ Rousseau, *Les Confessions*, O.C., vol. I, p. 440.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 443.

as represented in the autobiography.

Claire loves Julie in the same way that Jean-Jacques loves Madame de Warens and Sophie d'Houdetot. Saint-Preux's presence in this ménage is illusory; in fact the designation "à trois" would be misleading in this instance. The translucent Claire, whose name represents her function, is a feminine figure superimposed on the feminine hero, Saint-Preux. Saint-Preux, like his prototype, Abelard--the tutor in the story of Heloise and Abelard, castrated for his illicit affair with his student--is emasculated. In the case of Saint-Preux, the castration is symbolic: since the lovers cannot and will not have sex, his sex represents both a pretext and an obstacle in their love story. After their initial surrender to physical desire which ends, significantly, in a miscarriage, their relationship is transformed into passionate friendship. It is this transformed relationship which constitutes Rousseau's experiment; the new Romantic lovers live together as two children who look to Julie's husband, Wolmar, for moral, spiritual and physical support--a representation which doubles the autobiographical relationship between Madame de Warens, Rousseau and Claude Anet. And, the passionate friendship of the heterosexual lovers, Saint-Preux and Julie, is in its turn doubled in the novel: the same-sex friendship of Claire and Julie provides a mirror wherein the image reflected corresponds more faithfully to the sexuality of the heterosexual lovers as it exists in Rousseau's imagination. Claire explains her feelings for Julie in a letter she writes to her friend, explaining why she plans to leave her husband to live with Julie and Wolmar at their estate. Claire's candid expression of her feelings is typical of her character:

il ne m'est rien auprès de ma Julie. Dis-moi, mon enfant, l'âme a-t-elle un sexe? En vérité, je ne le sens guère à la mienne. Je puis avoir des fantaisies, mais fort peu d'amour. Une invincible et douce habitude m'attache à toi dès mon enfance; je n'aime parfaitement que toi seule...¹⁵

The ideal ménage as conceived by Claire would be for her and Julie to live together "à deux;" any sexual expression of their perfect friendship in the physical sense would be irrelevant since the soul, according to Claire, does not have a sex. Like her creator, Rousseau, the expression of her own sexual desires would be reserved for erotic

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 206-207.

fantasy and Julie would have the memory of the great passion she once shared with Saint-Preux. What Claire imagines as perfect love is same sex friendship imbued with heterosexual fantasy. This is precisely the love that the Rousseau of the autobiography shared with Sophie d'Houdetot, the "idol of his heart." During the time they spent together like two friends of the same sex, Sophie spoke to Rousseau of her love for his friend, Saint-Lambert.

elle me parla de St. Lambert en amante passionnée. Force contagieuse de l'amour!...j'étois saisi d'un fremissement délicieux que je n'avois éprouvé jamais auprès de personne. Elle parloit et je me sentois émus; je croyois ne faire que m'intéresser à ses sentimens quand j'en prenois de semblables; j'avalois à longs traits la coupe empoisonnée dont je ne sentois encore que la douceur.¹⁶

Through the agency of representation, the philtre symbolized in literature as the poisoned cup since Tristan and Iseult, Rousseau begins to feel as she does. He becomes Sophie and shares in her desire: desire for her absent lover which is commingled in Rousseau's erotic imagination with his own desire. Nowhere in his writing does Rousseau ever clearly distinguish between his desire for a woman and his desire to be that woman. One of Rousseau's most persistent and baffling formulas is used here to describe his relationship with Sophie: "Mais j'ai tort de dire un amour non partagé; le mien l'était en quelque sorte; il était égal des deux côtés, quoiqu'il ne fut pas réciproque. Nous étion ivres d'amour l'un et l'autre; elle pour son amant, moi pour elle...si quelquefois égaré par mes sens j'ai tenté de la rendre infidèle, jamais je ne l'ai véritablement désirée....Je l'aimais trop pour vouloir la posséder..."¹⁷

The conclusion I draw is that in the fictional "ménage supplémentaire," the sex of the players comes close to the truth of Rousseau's sexuality: Claire represents Rousseau, Julie is Sophie and Saint-Preux is the absent lover, Saint-Lambert. The Romantic lover's identification with a woman is so close that physical possession is no longer possible. The sexual difference which is fundamental to the heterosexual notion of possession and submission, to the masculine

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 440.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 444.

and feminine roles in sex, is eradicated. And no alternative is suggested by the narrative; the reader of both the autobiography and the novel is seduced by the male narrator's refusal to possess the woman he loves and frustrated by the impossibility of sexual pleasure for lovers who share love as two women. Claire's solution would eliminate the need for the male partner in romantic love to ever have to consider "possessing" the woman he loves: her variation on the distribution of the sexes in the ménage-à-trois liberates the romantic lover, the feminine hero, from the physical burden of the masculinity which he has already surrendered figuratively by falling in love.

Sand's understanding of the problems which Rousseau's femininity creates for the Romantic woman writer are obvious in *Histoire de ma vie* where she explicitly writes against the confessional genre. It is Sand's thesis that women should not write confessions since all writing by women is already and always wrongly thought to be confessional. Johnson makes Sand's point when she writes that "when men employ the rhetoric of self-torture, it is *read* as rhetoric. When women employ it, it is confession. Men are read rhetorically, women, literally".¹⁸

Sand's strategies to reclaim the feminine and the right to represent it for the woman writer operate throughout the fiction where they are less explicit but more theoretically interesting. My illustrations here will be drawn from two novels: *Consuelo*, a mature, serious and canonically important work, and *Elle et lui*, the fictional account of Sand's affair with Musset. In *Elle et lui*, Sand confronts the dilemma head-on by showing the impossibility of heterosexual romance when the lovers are both artists.

In *Consuelo*, Sand's re-reading of Rousseau is so clearly in evidence that a reader looking for it might not see it. The novel is 1500 pages long; readings of Rousseau traverse it from beginning to end.

Creative sparks fly between the two titles: *Confessions*, *Consuelo*. The first syllable of each is the same; the differentiating syllables of the harmonious titles point our gaze in the direction of the dissimulation of the feminine: "the fessé," the spanking administered by Mlle Lambercier, a pleasurable punishment for having replaced the mother, and in Sand's title, the imposed transvestite form of the heroine's name, *Consuelo*, occludes its natural feminine form,

¹⁸ Johnson, p. 176.

Consuela.

In the first pages of this novel Sand writes: "Lecteur, tu ne te rappelles que trop ces détails et un épisode charmant raconté par lui à propos dans le Livre VIII des *Confessions*. Je n'aurai garde de transcrire ici ces adorables pages, après lesquelles tu ne pourrais certainement pas te résoudre à reprendre les miennes".¹⁹ The episode alluded to in this passage takes place in Book VII, not Book VIII of the *Confessions*. By mis-leading the reader to the wrong book in Rousseau's autobiography, Sand enters into complicity with the reader to read her pages instead of Rousseau's.

When we first meet Consuelo she is a young girl who has lost her mother to an early death; she sings like an angel; she is in love with a tenor named Anzoletto. In Book VII (not Book VIII) of the *Confessions*, Rousseau meets a young soprano named Anzoletta in Venice. Anzoletta's mother is willing to sell her to the highest bidder and Rousseau is naturally attracted to a creature abandoned by maternal love; he forms what he calls "un attachement paternel" for the young woman. Sand re-assigns gender, and Consuelo characterizes her attachment for Anzoletto as that of a mother, not a father, for "le fils de mon âme."

Sand responds to Isaac Rousseau's words, "Console-moi," from the first pages of the *Confessions* with *Consuelo*. The heroine's name is the first word of the Spanish phrase "Consuelo de mi alma" (Consolation of my soul). She has made a vow to her mother, who named her, that she would never allow Anzoletto to take her (her mother's) place in Consuelo's bed where the mother and daughter slept together before the mother's death. One night when Anzoletto must spend the night at Consuelo's she works out this plan: When you sleep in this bed, I will be giving you my place, not my mother's. "Mais en te laissant dormir ici pour la première fois, ce n'est pas la place de ma mère que je te donne, c'est la mienne."²⁰ The displacement of the titles, the pages, the letters in the name Anzoletta/Anzoletto, and finally, the displacement of the male lover--here a figure for Rousseau's feminine hero--from the mother's place in the bed is but one example of Sand's subversion of Rousseau's code of love and

¹⁹ George Sand, *Consuelo and La Comtesse de Rudolstadt*, 3 vols. (Paris: Edition Garnier Frères, 1959), vol. I, p. 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

writing. When Rousseau represents himself as occupying his mother's place in his father's arms, the male artist is arrested in the female role. And, when this happens, the woman artist no longer has access to feminine space. From Rousseau, the "feminine" in Romantic love and writing can be defined as the final term in a system of substitutions whose referent is masculine desire and writing. Rousseau's favorite novel was *L'Astrée*. The hero, Celadon, becomes a transvestite to win the love of a woman and he stays in drag for at least 90% of the novel's 3,000 pages. Only the intervention of the gods forces him to take off his skirts.

When Consuelo offers Anzoletto her own place in bed and assumes the place of the mother she allows them both access to the feminine as difference: Consuelo functions as a female artist, and assumes the position of rival vis-à-vis the Romantic male artist for whom femininity is a travesty.

When Consuelo comes upon Albert de Rudolstadt hiding in a cave, he is described as the Romantic hero in the tradition of Rousseau: "Dès sa première enfance, il eut l'esprit frappé d'idées bizarres...A l'âge de quatre ans, ils prétendait voir souvent sa mère auprès de son berceau, bien qu'elle fut morte...il voyait sa petite mère...Il passait pour fou, et unissait à une âme sublime, une maladie de l'imagination."²¹ Albert mistakes Consuelo for his mother. He also believes that his own name is Jean. Consuelo, in an attempt to wake him from his illusions, says "Ton nom n'est plus Jean."²² Consuelo will save him from his mistaken identity.

Consuelo marries Albert on his death bed; the marriage is not consummated. Later, when she meets a masked "chevalier inconnu" named Liverani who bears an uncanny resemblance to her dead husband, she experiences for the first time in her life what is clearly distinguishable as physical passion. A distinction which moves is not possible for Rousseau. Consuelo returns to Albert's cave to resolve the guilt she feels over her passion for Liverani and to renew her marriage vow. There she swears that it is Albert she loves, and not Liverani. At that moment, Liverani appears, removes his mask, and reveals himself to be Albert, his own rival. Albert, the man whom Consuelo married on his deathbed, resembled Jean-Jacques of the *Confessions*. The

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 320.

creation of the mysterious stranger, Liverani, frees Albert from being arrested-- like both Jean-Jacques and Celadon--in a travesty. Consuelo and Albert marry a second time; Romantic love, and its goal of androgynous fusion, seems to conquer. But this too is an illusion. For when Consuelo looks into her husband's eyes she says, "Oh, Liverani," a name which is an anagram for the rival who is not a rival (le rival, ni rival), a lie and a truth which interweave the terms of sexual rivalry and literary rivalry in a genial way.

Laurent, the hero of Sand's novel *Elle et lui*, is an artist. He sees the woman he loves, also an artist, as a rival. His desire to be more of a woman than she destroys their love. Sand's novel transcends the simple duality of its title; in fact, the title itself is ironic. Elle et lui (she and he): complementarity; Elle est lui (she is he): identification--and Héloïse. The novel begins with a letter but turns out not to be an epistolary novel, an ironic evocation of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. The heroine's name is Thérèse-Jacques, an ironic fusion of the names of Rousseau and Thérèse Lavasseur. Rousseau refers to Thérèse as "le supplément par excellence." Even more interesting is the name that he calls her: Tante. He called his first love, Madame de Warens, Maman; Tante, however, expresses far more accurately the oblique place held by all of the women in his life, neither mother, nor daughter, nor sister, nor mistress, nor friend, nor wife. Aunt, the equivalent of Uncle in the structure of influence and desire, is the only position a woman can hold vis-à-vis the romantic artist who himself exercises all rights of "jouissance" which might be called "feminine" in any direct sense.

Sand's Thérèse-Jacques is described as "une fille sans parents, une mère en même temps qu'elle est un ami (sic) sérieux, et intelligent."²³ Her lover Laurent, the consummate male artist, describes his creativity in a way as directly and uniquely female as possible; he compares what he feels during the creation of a work of art to the deep pain of childbirth: "Elle m'opprime et me torture jusqu'à ce qu'elle ait pris des proportions réalisables, et que revienne l'autre souffrance, celle de l'enfantement, une vraie souffrance physique que je ne peux pas définir."²⁴ He calls Thérèse "un homme supérieur

²³ George Sand, *Elle et lui* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, n.d.), p. 76.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

déguisé en femme:"²⁵ only a travesty of the true artist who must be, as he is, a real woman.

Thérèse and Laurent travel to Italy where they are joined by an American, Dick Palmer, whom Laurent mistakes at first for an Englishman, calling him Milord Palmer, an evocation of Edouard Bromston in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. He is a friend to both but, in the fashion of Rousseau, feels "quelque chose de plus" for Thérèse and, Sand strongly hints, for Laurent as well. Their relationship evokes several of Rousseau's ménages-à-trois: "Laurent...ne quittait pas ses deux amis, se promenant avec eux en voiture...se faisant une joie d'enfant d'aller dîner dans la campagne en donnant le bras à Thérèse alternativement avec Palmer."²⁶

Elle et lui concludes with an accusation: the romantic poet is unable to love a woman: "Sois tranquille, Dieu te pardonnera de n'avoir pu aimer...les femmes de l'avenir, celles qui contempleront ton oeuvre de siècle en siècle, voilà tes soeurs et tes amants."²⁷

Sand's challenge to male femininity might be seen as an artistic victory for the woman writer who exposes the travesty and in so doing reappropriates the feminine position and the right to represent it from the male artist. But to conclude with a resolution would be a disservice to the creators of Liverani and Claire, the pure signifiers, who represent the third term which precludes an essentialist solution to the problem of sexual difference, allowing both sexes to participate in its representation.

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²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

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