

Rousseau's *Confessions*: A Technology of the Self Huck Gutman

For a long time ordinary individuality--the everyday individuality of everybody--remained below the threshold of description.

Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

This turning of real lives into writing is no longer a procedure of heroization; it functions as a procedure of objectification and subjection... the appearance of a new modality of power in which each individual receives as his status his own individuality and in which he is linked by his status to the features, the measurements, the gaps, the "marks" that characterize him and make him a case.

Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. . . . Life will be imaged, but it cannot be divided or doubled. Any invasion of its unity would be chaos.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience"

Immanuel Kant was a man of extremely regular habits. Each afternoon he would go for a walk through the streets of Königsberg. His itinerary was so regular and his pace so precise that the townsfolk would set their watches by his appearance on their Street. Only twice was Kant's routine interrupted. Once was on that day when he learned of the storming of the Bastille, the day that ushered in the French Revolution. The other interruption was for a period of two or three days, during the period he was reading Rousseau's *Emile*.

Although we know that Kant was of the opinion that Rousseau was the most remarkable mind of his time, we do not know for certain why he interrupted his fixed and determined routines to read *Emile*. However, it is not difficult to understand, for Rousseau seems to have had a profound effect on almost everyone. Great numbers of people, like Kant, saw Rousseau as the harbinger of great possibilities for human growth and freedom. Not everyone, of course, found Rousseau remarkable or liberatory; many reviled him, so many that it is not unfair to say that no name or person was more hated in Europe from his day forth, until the arrival of a very different sort of person, Adolph Hitler, upon the historical scene. But it was no blood lust that Rousseau satisfied, nor did he promise relief for the anxieties of existence through a commitment to an ideal of racial purity. Rousseau's immense appeal—and the equally enormous disapproval he elicited—was directly owing to his sensibility, to the shape of his perceptions.

What Kant, the philosopher who bound truth to the shape of human perception, responded to in Rousseau seems clear. Rousseau reveals and celebrates the atomistic, autonomous self: He is perhaps the first human being to insist upon his own singularity. "My mind," he says, "needs to go forward in its own time, it cannot submit itself to anyone else's."¹ "For I knew that my experience did not apply to others" (67). He shatters the great paradigm of microcosm and macrocosm. If his life's story has relevance to the reader, it is not because we are all reflections of Rousseau but rather because we are all unique, all selves with our individual histories and idiosyncratic perceptions. Indeed, Rousseau understands his significance is rooted not in his similarity to others but in his "exaggerated sensibility" (235).

Kant must also have responded to a genuinely new conception of the self which shapes Rousseau's presentation of his life, a conception which sees the emotive life as the basis for individuality. "I felt before I thought" (19), Rousseau claims early in his autobiography, emphasizing in one short phrase both the primacy of feeling that was to mark his unique sensibility and the prescient recognition that it is in time, through temporal succession, that the self comes to be what it is.² In a famous passage explaining the onset of the physical disabilities that were to plague him for the latter half of his life, Rousseau speaks of a life governed by his emotions:

The sword wears out its sheath, as it is sometimes said. That is my story. My passions have made me live, and

my passions have killed me. What passions, it may be asked. Trifles, the most childish things in the world. Yet they affected me as much as if the possession of Helen, or the throne of the Universe, had been at stake. (199)

Although this valorization of feeling has roots in the Reformation, with its emphasis on the individual as the ultimate hermeneutic authority, it is with Rousseau that a genuinely modern temper, which we call romanticism, first comes clearly into view. Rousseau was the first Romantic.

There is a clear correspondence between the two aspects of Rousseau's sensibility—the emergence of an individuality, a clearly defined *self*, above the threshold of visibility, and the valorization of the emotive life—for the two exist in a reciprocally defining relation. When Rousseau meditates upon the activity he is engaged in, that of writing his life's history, he says:

I have only one faithful guide on which I can count; the succession of feelings which marked the development of my being, and thereby recall the events that have acted upon it as cause or effect. I easily forget my misfortunes [this is in fact not the case, despite his claim] but I cannot forget my faults, and still less my genuine feelings. The memory of them is too dear ever to be effaced from my heart. I may omit or transpose facts, or make mistakes in dates; but I cannot go wrong about what I have felt, or about what my feelings have led me to do; and these are the chief subjects of my story. The true object of my confessions is to reveal my inner thoughts exactly in all the situations of my life. It is the history of my soul that I have promised to recount, and to write it faithfully I have need of no other memories; it is enough if I enter again into my inner self, as I have done till now. (262)

What Rousseau "confesses" is that he is who he is—an individuated self whom he calls "Jean-Jacques"—because he has had a succession of emotions prior to, interwoven with, and resultant from his interactions with the world. And, as we shall see, it is not accidental that the emergence of this feeling and individuated self is connected to, and dependent on, the activity of writing.

In order to understand what Rousseau was doing, and also what he was *not* doing, in his *Confessions*, we must look back to Augustine, bishop of Hippo. In 397, Saint Augustine wrote his *Confessions*, a work that in retrospect we might call a spiritual autobiography. Augustine lays before his readers the chronicle of his spiritual waywardness and his eventual turn toward the church and the service of God. But calling this project a spiritual autobiography is misleading in two respects. First, Augustine is not primarily concerned with *his* spirit, and second, although he recounts the episodes of his life that are important to his purpose, his purpose itself is not to tell the story of his life. What Augustine does is use his own experience as an *exemplum* of the glory of God and the workings of His spirit. Augustine, it is true, recounts his specific experience of stealing pears from a tree and his own strong attraction toward carnal knowledge of women, but he relates these episodes in order to show how even the least worthy of human beings can still discover the grace of God, whose mercy and forgiveness is available even to such a debased creature as the libertine Augustine once was. Any modern reader of Augustine's *Confessions* is struck by how little Augustine, and how much revelation of God's work, it contains. Although the *Confessions* is an enormously important work in that history of the gradual emergence of a visible self, its importance arises from the inclusion of individual experiences and personal shame as an exemplum of God's ability to rescue sinners from their life of sin. That Augustine committed his life and actions and his feelings to writing, so that they might be observed by his readers (and himself), was of signal importance to the Western tradition; on the other hand, nowhere in his *Confessions* does one find Augustine celebrating either himself or his own autonomy. The revelation of self, as it is hesitatingly presented in Augustine, is solely a vehicle to a higher end, which is the glorification of God's beneficence and mercy.

How different are Rousseau's *Confessions*! The purpose here is secular, not religious: It is not to glorify God and urge devotion to Him as the proper course for human beings. Rather, Rousseau's purpose is twofold: to unburden himself of his shame, to reveal himself in his weakness ("One goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell," as Foucault puts it),³ and to create a "self" which can serve to define himself, to himself and to others, in the face of a hostile social order. This defined self is what Michel Foucault has so thoroughly and eloquently shown to be a historically produced phenomenon in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, the "immense labor . . . to produce . . . men's subjection: their constitution as subjects in both senses of the word."⁴ Let me here state explicitly the central theme of my argument: If there has indeed been an immense labor to turn man into a subject (an individuated self and a defined personage in the social order) in order to subject him more completely and inescapably to the traversals and furrowings of power—and I think Foucault has conclusively shown that this is indeed the case—then Rousseau's psyche and in particular his *Confessions* have

provided an indispensable *techne* for the elaboration of this labor.

Here is Foucault on the modern confession, and on the revolution in its use ushered in by Rousseau in this regard:

*Western man has become a confessing animal. Whence a metamorphosis in literature: we have passed from a pleasure to be recounted and heard, centering on the heroic or marvelous narration of "trials" of bravery or sainthood, to a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage. The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement.*⁵

For Augustine, the self as exemplum is ancillary to the discourse. For Rousseau, the self is the subject of the discourse. His aim is not to glorify God but to provide the truth about himself by revealing himself *in all his completeness* to the gaze of the reader. "I never promised to present the public with a great personage. I promised to depict myself as I am. . . I should like in some way to make my soul transparent to the reader's eye. . . so that he may judge for himself of the principle which has produced them [the various dimensions of his soul]" (169).

Rousseau opens his *Confessions* by addressing his potential readers:

I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself.

Simply myself. I know my own heart and understand my fellow man. . . .

So let the numberless legion of my fellow men gather round me, and hear my confessions. (17)

His method will be openness, what he calls "frank treatment: I decided to make it a work unique and unparalleled in its truthfulness, so that for once at least the world might behold a man as he was within" (478). The lever that propels him into this activity of committing his life to words, and his words to writing so that they may be subjected to the gaze of his public, has, as it were, a dual fulcrum. First, there is Rousseau's remorse (and here we might note a parallel to Augustine). In referring to the lie he told about a ribbon he stole, a lie that destroyed the integrity of an innocent fellow servant, Rousseau observes that "I took away with me lasting memories of a crime and the unbearable weight of a remorse" (86). Confession relieves this weight. "The desire to some extent to rid myself of it has greatly contributed to my resolution of writing these *Confessions*" (88). And the process of writing, of exposing oneself,⁶ is not only a relief but a pleasure. "Such were the errors and faults of my youth," he writes. "I have told the story of them with a fidelity that brings pleasure to my heart." Motivated by guilt and shame and remorse, having discovered a secular form of the religious practice of confession that brought alleviation from such self-mortifying emotions, it is no wonder that Rousseau acknowledged that "a continuous need to pour myself out brings my heart at every moment to my lips to . . . confess unreservedly" (152).

The other fulcrum of Rousseau's need to confess becomes increasingly apparent in the later, darker books of the *Confessions*. Betrayed by his friends, reviled by what seemed an entire continent, Rousseau confesses in order to justify his existence. He would constitute a self, in writing, as he feels his self to be. And he will hold this self up as an alternative before the gaze of a public that has only been able to see a Rousseau who is asocial, self-serving, immoral, and dangerous.

In order to defend himself against the grand conspiracy that tries to demean him everywhere, Rousseau must create himself as a character with a history. He must exhibit everything, expose himself completely before the public gaze. He must reveal every aspect and activity of his life, even the

petty details. . . since I have undertaken to reveal myself absolutely to the public, nothing about me must remain hidden or obscure. I must remain incessantly beneath his gaze, so that he may follow me in all the extravagances of my heart and into every least corner of my life. Indeed, he must never lose sight of me for a single instant, for if he finds the smallest gap in my story, the smallest hiatus, he may wonder what I was doing at that moment and accuse me of refusing to tell the whole truth. I am laying myself sufficiently open. (65)

So we see that Rousseau's confession develops as a response to social accusation, that it consists in total exposure, and that its revelations are to be subjected to an external (and judging) gaze. This process of self-exposure rules the shape and structure of the *Confessions*. Time and again Rousseau refers to this triumvirate of compunction, external

gaze, and the need for complete disclosure:

A change in my relations with Mamma, of which I must speak, since, after all, I must tell everything. (184)

(There is) my indispensable duty to fulfill it in its entirety. . . . If I am to be known I must be known in all situations, both good and bad. (373)

(In) my memoir. . . will be found. . . the heart of Jean-Jacques, which my contemporaries have been so unwilling to recognize. (585)

This major shift in consciousness has taken place in the many centuries that separate Rousseau from Augustine. It is a shift that Professor Foucault has addressed in his contribution to this volume.

Nowhere is the new consciousness that has emerged more apparent than in the sense of division that structures Rousseau's world. If we are to understand his sensibility, his celebration of the self and of feelings, it is toward an examination of these divisions that we must turn.

In order for a man or woman to be constituted as a subject, he or she must first be divided from the totality of the world, or the totality of the social body. For a "me" to emerge, a distinction must be made between the "me" and the "not-me." The boundaries of the self are those lines that divide the self from all that which is not the self, which is beyond the self. The first, and essential, move in the constitution of the self is division.⁷

And it is division, above all, that we discover in Rousseau. Division is the primary move in the countless analyses he provides as the explanation of the course of his existence. Rousseau divides, and then sees opposition between, head and heart; reason and emotion; nature and society; self and society; country and city; and self and nature.

It is this act of dividing that creates the two elements of his sensibility as he presents it. Rousseau's time had already divided the head from the rest of the body: It was, after all, the Age of Reason. What Rousseau did, following the cult of sentimentality that was his precursor, was rebel against the overvaluation of reason by asserting the claims of the emotions.⁸

This dividing strategy is the base of Rousseau's strength. In dividing himself from the world, he creates a self, he constitutes himself as a subject of knowledge and examination. He will explore, in the *Confessions*, the particular experiences he has had and, out of those experiences, he will trace the development and boundaries of his own, particular, consciousness. The modern secular confessional, as invented by Rousseau, involves not merely the recital of sins but the enumeration of each and every experience that has made one what and who one is.

In the process of examining the division of the self and the world, Rousseau creates the Romantic paradigm: the recounting of the history of the self so that the self can concurrently create itself in writing and affirm that self it has created. "I am made unlike anyone I have ever met; I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world" (17).

So substantial is the self he has created that he can treat that self as some sort of external object to be examined, as a thing with existence apart from his consciousness. I refer here to Rousseau's strange work, *Rousseau Juge de Jean-Jacques*,⁹ a dialogue—Foucault calls it "anti-Confessions"—in which a nameless Frenchman, a representative of the public gaze, subjects Jean-Jacques to an inquisition. Rousseau's "self" has become an object; it has become the subject of this investigation (inquisition). There is a clear relation in this colloquy between two forms of being a subject (a subject to be discussed, a subject in the political sense of being in an inferior relation to power) and a third form, in which the self recognizes it has its own subjectivity.

Nowhere is the self Rousseau has created by the dividing strategy, a self disparate from the world of nature and society, more in evidence than in the paranoid stance that marks his later works. The grand conspiracy that emerges as his constant theme in the second half of the *Confessions*, in the *Dialogues*, and in the *Reveries*, is the structural result of that move Rousseau made in dividing himself out from the rest of the world.¹⁰ Having separated self from other, it is no surprise that Rousseau discovers that the other is alien and, ultimately, inhospitable.

In order to understand that inhospitality more closely we might profitably examine Rousseau's reaction to the appearance of a rival at the menage of Mme. de Warens. Mme. de Warens—"Mamma," as Rousseau called her—provided Rousseau with the home for which he longed. Protectress, support, and ultimately sexual partner, Mamma was Rousseau's bulwark against the world. When the remarkable domestic triangle of Mme. de Warens, her older lover Claude Anet, and Rousseau, that symbolic family of which he says, possibly accurately, "between the three of us was established a bond perhaps unique on this earth" (194), was disrupted by the death of Anet and the

temporary departure of Rousseau, the space occupied by the two men—and that of Rousseau in particular—was filled by a stranger, Vintzenreid. Rousseau's place, both in Mamma's affections and in her bed, was taken by this young rival. Returning to *Les Charmettes* and confronting the new domestic order, Rousseau describes his predicament: "Insensibly I found myself isolated and alone in that same house of which I had formerly been the centre, and in which I now led, so to speak, a double life" (252).

If we read these words as extending beyond the confines of his particular situation in the household of Mamma, we stand before another major constituent of Rousseau's sensibility. "I found myself isolated and alone." Having divided the "me" from the "not-me," the "me" discovers itself apart, separated, isolated, alone. The world of totality, which was sundered in order to form a new whole, an individuated self, is no longer a totality. As we read this passage symbolically, we see the comforting centrality of the constituted self giving way to isolation and loneliness. Although the first reward of constituting oneself as a subject is a feeling of centrality and well-being, an inevitable consequence of that constitution, which depends upon division, is isolation. All selves lead double lives as object as well as subject (to be a subject is to be able to see oneself as an object); to know the fullness of the self is to encounter the seeming poverty of the world from which that self has been sundered, and out of whose plenitude the self has been filled. It is not surprising that Rousseau finds his internal division "has throughout my life set me in conflict with myself" (23).

Divided by the individuating process from the social world, Rousseau recognizes that an "exaggerated sensibility" contributes powerfully to his growing paranoia. "I was in the most unbearable position for a man whose imagination is easily set working" (458). Such paranoia is but an extension of that primary move that divides self from the world and places the self above that from which it has been separated. Rousseau's imagination—that central agent of the Romantic sensibility—is here acknowledged as a force in the emergence and expansion of his paranoid sense of a grand conspiracy that is marshaled against him.

But the role of the imagination, the power of the individual mind to create and re-create the world, is not limited to the expanding vision of an alien, dangerous, and ultimately persecutory world. The role of imagination in Rousseau's sensibility is dialectical: While it expands the inhospitable, it creates for itself at the same time a bulwark against this inhospitality. The imagination, which exaggerates the isolation and estrangement of the solitary consciousness that has separated itself off from the world, also domesticates a new (imaginary) world, so that the unhappy consciousness can regain, through the workings of the imaginative power of re-creation, what it has lost, so that it can once again be at home in the world.

Early in the *Confessions* Rousseau recounts his experience as an apprentice. Denied both autonomy and a sense that the small world he inhabits is his home, he feels deprived; and deprivation leads to the attempt to find satisfaction in what might be called "devious" ways. "Because I was deprived of everything," Rousseau informs the reader, "so it was that I learnt to covet in silence, to conceal, to dissimulate, to lie, and finally to steal" (40). This structure—deprivation succeeded by the attempt to regain that of which he is deprived—underlies later, more profound developments in Rousseau's stance toward the world.

Rousseau turns to the workings of his imagination because the imagination can supply the lack he feels. Shortly after the passage about stealing cited above, Rousseau observes his youthful self "tenderly nursing my illusions. . . since I saw nothing around me I valued as much" (49). He speaks as well of his absorption in books, and this leads him to make this revealing statement: "The fictions I succeeded in building up *made me forget my real condition, which so dissatisfied me*" (48; emphasis mine). Rousseau is explicit later in the first part of the *Confessions*:

It is a very strange thing that my imagination never works more delightfully than when my situation is the reverse of delightful, and that, on the other hand, it is never less cheerful than when all is cheerful around me. It cannot beautify; it must create. . . as I have said a hundred times, if every I were confined in the Bastille, there I would draw the picture of liberty. (166)

Nowhere is the relation between deprivation and the imagination clearer than in Rousseau's description of the creation of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*:

The impossibility of attaining the real persons precipitated me into the land of chimeras; and seeing nothing that existed worthy of my exalted feelings, I fostered them in an ideal world which my creative imagination soon peopled with beings after my own heart. . . . altogether ignoring the human race, I created for myself societies of perfect creatures. (398)

So strong is his imagination, so powerful are the figures that it creates, that Rousseau ends up transforming the actual personages he encounters into the fleshly counterparts of the “chimeras” he has been creating. Rousseau wrote *La Nouvelle Héloïse* because he had never felt a full and satisfying love (he claims) in his life, and because he had never met a woman fine enough to elicit such a love from him. It should be no surprise, considering his penchant for the imagination—he says he was unimpressed on first entering Paris “for it is impossible for me, and difficult for Nature herself, to surpass the riches of my imagination” (155)—that, after having created the “chimera” of Julie, that imagination would re-create the “real world” so that he could encounter her in his daily, bodily life. His imagination transforms, and re-creates, reality (Rousseau refers here to the grand passion of his life, his love for Mme. d’Houdetot):

She came; I saw her; I was intoxicated with love that lacked an object. My intoxication enchanted my eyes, my object became identified with her, I saw Julie in Mme. d’Houdetot and soon I saw only Mme. d’Houdetot. (410)

So deficient reality is transformed into the imaginary, and the imaginary is superimposed upon the real in such fashion that the imaginary transforms, takes over, becomes, the real.

This double displacement, of the real into the imaginary and the imaginary into the real, raises difficult questions, which the reader of the *Confessions* must address. If the imaginary first displaces and then replaces the real, to what extent can the reader trust what Rousseau has to say about himself throughout his autobiography? Given Rousseau’s continual flight from deprivation and reality into the imaginary, is it not possible that the *Confessions* itself is a fiction created to remedy this deprivation, to hold the pressures of the actual at bay? And, further, is it not possible that “Jean-Jacques Rousseau” is a character, his self a “chimera,” his subjectivity a construct?

Rousseau helps the reader to answer such questions in the affirmative by time and again referring to the fictive quality of his narrative. On the very first page of the *Confessions*, four sentences after saying “My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray is myself,” Rousseau indicates that this is indeed a *portrait*, an imaginative construct: “I may have taken for fact what was no more than probability, but I have never put down as true what I knew to be false” (17). In other words, the self he puts before us may very well be made up! Although we can say that the self that has emerged above the threshold of visibility in Rousseau chooses to celebrate its own power to create and re-create the world, we can say with equal justice that the sensibility that seeks a recourse to the world in which it discovers itself chooses to invent a self as a refuge from, and bulwark against, that world. Encountering the complexities of social existence, the real fact of human oppression, the limits of human possibility, Rousseau in some sense “creates” himself as Jean-Jacques, as a subject who can discover in his subjectivity an escape from, and an alternative to, these conditions.

Let us shift the object of Rousseau’s description of his encounter with Mme. d’Houdetot from that erstwhile lady to Rousseau himself. If we make the appropriate substitutions, that passage then reads, “Jean-Jacques came; I saw myself; I was intoxicated with need that lacked an object. My intoxication enchanted my eyes, my object became identified with myself, I saw Rousseau in Jean-Jacques and soon I saw only Jean-Jacques.” It is indeed possible that the celebration of the self in the *Confessions* is a narrative similar in structure to the creation of Julie, and its effect on Rousseau’s actual daily existence is similar to the superimposition of Julie on Mme. d’Houdetot. It is indeed possible that, having divided the world into self and not-self, the embrace and celebration of self is yet another instance of Rousseau’s flight from reality into the imaginary. The self, then, is fetishized, the object of desire which is wished into being.

Yet it is one of the very great ironies of Rousseau’s autobiographical, confessional *oeuvre* that its central strategy, the dividing off of self from not-self and the consequent exploration and celebration of that self, is eventually negated. The individuated self of Rousseau finally proves ineffective, the deprivation it entails finally overcomes the compensatory satisfactions it produces, and Rousseau ends up annihilating—or desiring to annihilate—the very boundaries of the self that his confessional works seek to impose.

I refer here to the remarkable passage in Rousseau’s last work, *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*,¹² where in the “Fifth Walk” Rousseau abandons the active self, erases the boundaries between self and not-self, and surrenders to a totality that would seem to replicate that unity which preceded the division of experience into self and not-self. In this walk, Rousseau meditates on his short stay on Saint Peter’s Island in the Lake of Bièvre in Switzerland.

Readers of the *Confessions* are prepared for this astonishing meditation, for Rousseau, in stating that “True happiness is indescribable; it can only be felt, and the stronger the feeling the less it can be described, because it is not the result of a collection of facts but a permanent state” (224), had indicated that experience somehow transcends categories and divisions. Indeed, that passage denies the stated method of his autobiographical form—the attempt to

recount every detail of his life—in suggesting that existence is more than the sum of the statements one can make about it. Later, the “permanent state” is equated with the a-social and undirected activity of the young and the aged in a passage that attempts to describe his feeling of happiness on Saint Peter’s Island:

The idleness I love is not that of an indolent fellow who stands with folded arms in perfect inactivity, and thinks as little as he acts. It is the idleness of a child who is incessantly on the move without ever doing anything, and at the same time it is the idleness of a rambling old man whose mind wanders while his arms are still. . . . I love. . . to fritter away the whole day inconsequentially and incoherently, and to follow nothing but the whim of the moment. (591—92)

Ten years after he wrote this in the *Confessions* he returned to the same subject—his happiness on Saint Peter’s Island—in the “Fifth Walk” of the *Reveries*:

When evening approached, I would come down from the heights of the island and gladly go sit in some hidden nook along the beach at the edge of the lake. There, the noise of the waves and the tossing of the water, captivating my senses and chasing all other disturbance from my soul, plunged it into a delightful reverie in which night would often surprise me without my having noticed it. 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. From time to time some weak and short reflection about the instability of things in this world arose, an image brought on by the surface of the water. But soon these weak impressions were erased by the uniformity of the continual movement which lulled me and which, without any active assistance from my soul, held me so fast that, called by the hour and agreed-upon signal, I could not tear myself away without effort.

What do we enjoy in such a situation? Nothing external to ourselves, nothing if not ourselves and our own existence. As long as this state lasts, we are sufficient unto ourselves, like God. The sentiment of existence, stripped of any other emotion, is in itself a precious sentiment of contentment and 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. But most men, agitated by continual passions, are little acquainted with this state and, having tasted it only imperfectly for a few moments, preserve only an obscure and confused idea of it which does not let them feel its charm.¹³

What we see in these passages is a stunning convergence. By abandoning himself *entirely* to his reverie, to the imaginary, the imagining *self* is annihilated, and the self and nature, me and not-me, are merged into an undifferentiated and undivided unity. Freud, who called this state, referring to its ubiquitous appearance as a variety of religious experience, the “oceanic feeling,” a phrase one imagines Rousseau would have found felicitous, sees in this “oceanic feeling” the required desire of the ego for a loss of itself, for its undifferentiated merge into the cosmos.¹⁴

Thus, Rousseau in the *Confessions* intuits, and in the *Reveries* discovers, that the created self, the division of self from the world, is a strategic move finally incapable of engendering human happiness. The profound irony is this: The great architect of the modern self ends up discovering that the building he has constructed is, when it comes right down to it, uninhabitable. The imaginary, into which the self has retreated as its protection from the world, ends up by discarding the self and merging, in unmediated fashion, into the totality of things.

Yet, despite Rousseau’s ultimate dissatisfaction with the self he had done so much to create and differentiate, the reader of the *Confessions* understands that its immense significance, its aura of newness, has to do with its documentation of the emergence of that subject which was theretofore largely hidden: “For a long time ordinary individuality—the everyday individuality of everybody—remained below the threshold of description.”¹⁵ What Rousseau does is take an essential step toward lowering this threshold: He describes himself, his individuality. He invents (or, in some senses, he elaborates and extends) several vital techniques in the constitution of the self as a subject. We have seen these techniques and the role they play in the *Confessions*:

1. The emergence of the unique, individuated self as a subject of observation and description
2. The division of human experience into self and other, me and not-me, individual and society
3. The emergence of the self as object of the gaze of the other, the public: what Foucault might call the self under examination

4. The development of the (secular) confessional mode of constituting the self by writing it, with its Rousseauian stress on completeness, on the inclusion of every detail
5. The dissatisfaction with these four techniques and their results, which leads to the valorization of the imaginary—only to culminate in the final annihilation, by the imaginary, of the self, division, the gaze, and writing

The importance of these first four techniques (we shall return to the fifth presently) cannot be overestimated. Rousseau helps to invent—and to justify and to circulate—those techniques which constitute the modern subject. The emergent self becomes the locus on which, through which, in which, the technology of power that Professor Foucault has traced will elaborate and invent itself.¹⁶ If we apply his three modes of constituting the subject both as object of power and as the self-recognized subject of power,¹⁷ we see all three at work in the *Confessions*. Rousseau constitutes the self as subject by objectivizing the speaking subject in language, by presenting him to the gaze of the knowledgeable reader. He objectivizes the subject by means of division. And he refines a technique (the written confession) by means of which the self comes to recognize itself as subject, and object.

Rousseau develops a technology of the self which, although not as yet observedly traversed by power, was shortly to become a prime agent in the modern elaboration of power. Rousseau brings the self above the threshold of visibility, and he provides several means by which this self can be made subject.

But if Rousseau is an unwitting agent in the elaboration of the technology of power, it must also be remembered that he is, ironically, also a prime agent in the emergence of a new and powerful opposition to regnant power. Just as the creation and celebration of his own self contained the imperative that led to that self's annihilation, so the creation of a public self subject to the microphysics of power gave rise to a counterforce that would oppose all regnant power. In the *Confessions* we encounter everywhere the sense of deprivation which, I have argued, is generated by that very division that constitutes the self. Because the self comes into being simultaneously with the perception of lack and loss, that emergence is everywhere linked to conditions the self must refuse to accept.

Yet, as Rousseau's constitution of the self has had historical ramifications, as the forms and techniques of knowledge that he developed have been traversed by power, so also his deprivation and refusal to be deprived have had political and historical effects. The very self that has been created by division, by the abundance of detail amassed about its activities, by its subjection to the public gaze and the public judgment, this constituted self generates not only its subjection but also an opposition to such subjection, a movement toward liberation.

The spirit of Rousseau is, after all, the spirit of the French Revolution. It was Rousseau who said, "I had seen that everything is rooted in politics" (377). It was Rousseau who would claim of the knowledge/power relation, "I could see only foolishness and error in the doctrines of our sages, nothing but oppression and misery in our social order" (387). And, finally, it was the very self that Rousseau helped to create that became the basis for the revolutionary desire to transform society so that it would be conducive to the liberty and equality of all men and women, each of whom possessed their own individuality.

Thus, the emergence of the modern self, the self as subject, figures prominently in the subjection of humankind, and figures prominently in the genesis of those modern struggles that seek, in the face of that subjection, to reclaim their humanity for men and women.

Notes

1. *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* was completed in 1765 and first published in 1781. The English translation is by J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1953), p. 118. Subsequent quotations from this edition will be cited parenthetically in the text.
2. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), where the constitutive principle of the episteme of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is shown to be temporality and causation. Rousseau's stress on his own development is thus a key element in the transition from an Enlightenment episteme based on mathesis, or spatial placement, to the barely emergent episteme of the later period.
3. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 59.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
5. *Ibid.*, Pp. 59, 61.

6. One notes in this regard that Rousseau's early sexuality manifested itself in the desire to expose himself to public view. One can only surmise about the possible relations between Rousseau's purported early sexual practice and his later embrace of confessional self-exposure.
7. See J. H. van den Berg, *Divided Existence and Complex Society* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1974). Van den Berg develops his analysis in the context of scientific procedures that originated in the eighteenth century, procedures he sees as ultimately constitutive of a new sense of self. See also his *Changing Nature of Man: Introduction to a Historical Psychology*, trans. H. F. Croes (New York: Norton, 1961). Van den Berg, although he utilizes a phenomenological method different from Foucault's somewhat structural approach, is engaged in a project with many similarities to Foucault's work on the technologies of the self.
8. It is important to note that Rousseau was himself an Enlightenment figure. Despite the stress on his emotive life in the *Confessions*, he still highly values the clarity of thought so prized in the Age of Reason: "Feelings come quicker than lightning and fill my soul, but they bring me no illumination (as thought and reason do); they burn and dazzle me. I feel everything and see nothing" (113).
9. *Rousseau Juge de Jean-Jacques* (Paris: Colin, 1962). The introduction to this modern edition of the *Dialogues*, as the work is also known, is by Michel Foucault. In it Foucault emphasizes both Rousseau's creation of the Romantic self ("a pattern that is unified and at the same time unique") and the subsequent dissolution of that self ("the dissociated subject, superimposed on himself, a lacuna whom one can only call present by a sort of addition never achieved: as if he appears at a distant vanishing point which only a certain convergence allows the reader to ascertain"), pp. xv—xvi; translation mine.
10. These late works are often described, appropriately, as paranoid. Paranoia, the delusion of self-reference, is but an exaggeration of the self as arbiter of order, value, and meaning. That concept of self has its roots in the Reformation's stress on the individual's unmediated relation to God and reaches an apotheosis in the Romantic era, when the self replaced divinity as the arbiter of order, value, and meaning. Paranoia would seem to be a historically defined disorder, for it is dependent upon the development of the sense of self that came into being with Rousseau and the Romantics. The paranoid stance derives not from some erroneous sense of self but from an *exaggerated* notion of the importance of the Romantic self.
11. Rousseau has anticipated these questions. It is, after all, he who speaks of the "labour" required by writing the self: "Some of my paragraphs I have shaped and reshaped mentally for five or six nights before they were fit to be put down on paper" (114). It is he who warns us that "Being forced to speak in spite of myself, I am also obliged to conceal myself, to be cunning, to try to deceive" (263).
12. Rousseau, *Les Reveries du promeneur solitaire* (1776—78; pub. posthumously 1782), trans. Charles E. Butterworth (New York: Harper, 1982).
13. *Ibid.*, 67—69.
14. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), in *The Standard Edition*, vol. 21 (London: Hogarth, 1961).
15. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977), p. 191.
16. The traversing of the individual by power has been the subject of much of Foucault's later work. *Discipline and Punish* investigates the ways in which individuals have been subjected by the gaze of the other. *The History of Sexuality* examines the place of confession in making man and woman into subjects. Michel Foucault, *Power and Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972—1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), pursues the notion that "the history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning."
17. In a lecture at a conference on "Knowledge, Power, History: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Works of Michel Foucault" (University of Southern California, October 31, 1981), Foucault stated that his aim "is to create a history of the different modes by which the human being has been made a subject." This historical process, he explained, takes three forms: the objectivizing of the speaking subject by the sciences of language, work, and life; the objectivizing of the subject by the dividing practices; and the self-objectification whose workings become visible when one examines the historical struggles "against a technique, a form of power, which applies to everyday life, attaches him (the individual Subject) to his identity, attaches a load of truth to him which he and others must recognize," which in short makes him both a subject to power and an object to himself. Portions of the lecture have been reprinted as part of an essay, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1982): 777-97.