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JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU – FROM THE DELIGHTS OF EXISTENCE TO ITS HELL

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Abstract: *Jean Jacques Rousseau – from the delights of existence to its hell* tries to establish from a formal point of view what were the logical and ontological frameworks in which the great mutation in Rousseau's thought occurred, which determined his transition to a radically different way of thinking in relation to his era and even to himself.

Keywords: philosophy, vision, ecstasy, mysticism, sacred.

Before practicing the vast description of flawed existence, Jean-Jacques Rousseau experienced its delights. The first books of his *Confessions* are dedicated to their description and end precisely in the summer of 1749 when he experiences a real revelation whose terrible consequences would throw him right into the underworld of the world. “The sweet memories of the beautiful years spent in peace and innocence have left me with thousands of charming impressions which I love to call up incessantly. It will soon be seen how special the rest of my life is”¹. An existence outside these extremes would not have attracted his attention, and writing confessions without the tension generated by the extreme polarity of living would have been unlikely in such a case. “...royal children cannot be cared for more zealously than I was during the first years, loved by all that surrounded me /.../ How could I have become evil, when I had before my eyes only examples of gentleness and around me the best people in the world? My father, my aunt, the nanny, our relatives, our friends, the neighbors, everyone who surrounded me, they didn't sing to me, it's true, but they loved me, and I loved them the same. My desires were so little excited and so little defeated that it never occurred to me to have any”². He

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¹ J.J. Rousseau, *Confesiuni*, II, Publishing House for Literature, 1969, p. 74.

² J.J. Rousseau, *Confesiuni. Visările unui hoinar singuratic*, Vol. III, Publishing House for Literature, 1969, pp. 11–12.

confesses that the mere recollection of all these things gives him more pleasure than the actual experience of them³. “The sweet memories of the beautiful years spent in peace and innocence have left me with thousands of charming impressions which I love to evoke incessantly”⁴.

At the end of the five hundred pages, which he will need to describe the first part of his life, Rousseau recapitulates: “I have shown how my peaceful youth passed in a temperate life, quite pleasant, without great misfortunes and without great happiness/.../ What a special picture I will have to show soon! Fate, which for thirty years was favourable to my impulses, opposed them in the course of the other thirty...”⁵.

Rousseau is not stingy about the details of the happiness he experienced in the early part of his life. He provides information and details about all kinds of happenings, about friendships, love and feelings. Sometimes he speaks of this period in terms of paradise and happiness, at other times he colours it in the language of naivety and innocence deemed appropriate in describing such a subject. Most of the time, however, in terms of anecdotal and piquancy, without contrasting with the overall tone and intent. It abounds in the narration of feelings and affections, of contrasts that surprise and moderate the tone.

In a natural and almost mathematical estimation, the allocation of an equal number of pages to each of the two parts of the *Confessions* is surprising. It is as if, by an apportionment arrived at by indistinct reasons, happiness and unhappiness, heaven and hell, can only be described in terms of narrative equality. You cannot assign an extra description to one without an equal assignment to the other.

Terms and metaphors to describe happiness abound. Everything is potentiated by that trait of nature that Rousseau frequently mentions throughout the *Confessions* consisting of the extra experience he feels when he tells the story, an experience that exceeds the actual fact of it at the time it happened. Living is stronger in remembering than in actual living, and narrative is nothing more than the discovery of the method by which the substance of living is transferred from life to dreaming. It is not by chance that, from this point of view, Rousseau's writing slips unconsciously towards literature as a method of saturation of living, his most important writings being effectively considered novels, *Emil*, for example, or *The New Heloise*.

When, in *Book I* of the *Confessions*, he promises to give the exact account of the one who was, – something he considered unparalleled⁶ –, good and bad, beautiful and ugly will be there, nothing will be hidden. “I said good and bad with equal

³ *Ibidem*, vol. I, p. 227: “Events generally make less of an impression on me than the memory of them...”.

⁴ *Ibidem*, vol. II, p. 74.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 73.

⁶ “I am creating a work like no other and whose performance would have no imitator. I want to present to the people like me a man in all the truth of his nature; and this man will be me” (J.J. Rousseau, *Confesuni*, vol. I, Publishing House for Literature, 1969, p. 5).

impartiality. I did not hide anything ugly, I did not add anything beautiful. /.../ I showed myself as I was; contemptible and vile, when I was; good, generous, sublime, when, also, I was; I showed my soul as you yourself saw it⁷.

The coordinates of the happiness of the thirty years, numerous, diverse, will always be subordinated to the most important: the fact of being a citizen of Geneva, free city: “I was born in Geneva in the year 1712, of Isaac Rousseau, citizen, and Suzanne Bernard, citizen”. When, later, he will sign his most important works, the political ones, his signature will be followed by the statement: *citizen of Geneva*. This is how he will proceed with the second speech, *Speech on the inequality between people*, and, further on, with the *Social Contract*; this clarification will lack from *Emil* and *Julie or The New Heloise*.

On the map of happiness that begins with the recognition of the political fact of republican membership, the small ones will be present, devoid of the emblem of public brilliance that will feed his vanity, but not of intrinsic importance: *the serenity of life as a child, the memory of the charm of childhood, total freedom, terrestrial paradise* and many others capable of leading to a beautiful view of life. Those who will support his idyllic, glamorous image of life: parents, relatives, friends, neighbours, moral entities against whom no indictment could be undertaken without the risk of making a mistake, will fuel his image of a beautiful and moral universe. Inside such a universe, Rousseau moves, adapts, recognizes its merits and, here and there, insignificantly, small deficiencies. By and large, however, this world is entirely satisfying. He meets peasants, craftsmen, merchants, nobles, clergy; men and women, young and old. Often Rousseau is inferior to them in skill, morals, faith.

The events that come to meet his needs and desires end in the happiest way possible. His life is in harmony with everything else. Nothing, or almost nothing, in this harmonious and gentle universe induces in him the idea that people are evil, and that there is something rotten in the present state of the world that would come to destroy the social order. There is no complaint in the face of this state and no desire or vague idea of correcting it in one way or another. Rousseau would easily have consented to a sentence like Leibniz's that the present world is the best of all possible worlds. In such a Leibnizian world the fact of living is the greatest pleasure, and the greatest sin before this world is grumbling. The deepest metaphysics, the most risky Leibnizian rationalism is confirmed, involuntarily, by Rousseau's experience up to this point.

In such a world, without ruptures and differences, without disappointments, Rousseau lives happily. If, sometimes, his desires do not reach the threshold of reality, he is realistic enough to direct his observations towards himself, noting certain declines, but without causing him disturbances or imbalances of the soul.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 5–6.

This belief in the goodness and beauty of the world ends for Rousseau at an exact date, the summer of 1749, probably July or August – a fateful date! *Book VIII* of the *Confessions* begins with it.

What brings him out of harmony with the world is not the evil in the form of the brutal and violent event. Nothing like instant rapture puts an end to the paradisiacal state in which he had been complacent until then. In the summer of 1749, on his way to Vincennes, where his friend, Diderot, was temporarily imprisoned, Rousseau came across a newspaper advertisement in which the Academy of Dijon was contesting a theme of *whether the sciences and arts contributed to the purification of morals*.

What he lives now, in front of this announcement, is like a revelation: he sees the truth, and what he had previously experienced appears to him as shrouded in error. And the truth takes the form of an answer to a question that didn't even belong to him and that he had never asked himself before. Never before had he felt that the arts and sciences were something negative, and that the morals which he himself had shared could be in themselves evil.

Never until that date had Rousseau doubted men, the sciences and arts invented by them. Not even their morals had convinced him to doubt it. Nothing in the world in which he had spent thirty years seemed to lead him to a negative answer to this question. On the contrary, these morals which he himself had approved had seemed to him pure and beautiful.

Where then did this thought come from if nothing he had lived and thought justified such a feeling? Because what Rousseau is experiencing now in the immediacy of the moment is something like a feeling, an intuition not yet reflected, by no means a thought.

In terms that he never agreed to and would never make a lexicon of, one could say that such an evil thought was a temptation, the dirty thought that came from those darkneses that he always disavowed. The night never gave him confidence, he says.

How could he succumb to such a thought when nothing in his past was pushing him to do so? Some commentators have been quick to believe that the thought was not his, and that the one who suggested it to him was none other than Diderot. But things don't change much because the question remains: how did such a tempting thought conquer him since nothing in his life confirms it?

Through such a thought, even lived in the ephemerality of the moment, Rousseau contradicts himself. His answer to the question of the Academy of Dijon is one of contesting the life, feelings and ideas lived until then. After all, Rousseau had said nothing disapproving. He had not contested the world in the name of anything, not principles, not history, not even an obscure metaphysics. How could he agree to such a suicidal thought?

In the late work, *Rousseau, the judge of Jean-Jacques*, is the veiled and useless response to such a situation of fickle schizophrenia. But this late dialogue is a failure. Rousseau is unable to reconcile with Jean Jacques without entering into a new and

devastating disaster. Moreover, the dialogue does not even register the notification of such an imperious solution.

Besides, the huge number of confessional writings is nothing but the reflection of the felt need to resolve the current conflict. Mass correspondence does nothing but prolong, stretch into description and self-knowledge, often hidden, opaque, the suicidal acuteness of an artificial and inappropriate *weltanschauung*.

With the exception of the two speeches and the *Social Contract*, all of Rousseau's writings are confessional and literary, constant signs of returning to himself from the abstraction of an idea that denied him in the original state of feeling.

Here, on this fateful day, the beginning of the ontological rupture between history and destiny, of his own schizophrenia, is born. Accepting the answer and receiving the truth it speaks of is actually the birth of reason. The ground on which such a thing takes place is the contestation of the soul, that is, of its entire history. Rousseau is right in calling his confessions the history of his soul. It is a history of the tearing of the soul by reason and the birth of a *Weltanschauung* in which the truth of one's own soul is not recognized. Not even admitted, Rousseau's rationality is the forgetting of the soul and its prohibition.

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Secular ecstasy. In the middle of Rousseau's life – 1749 – the event that will divide his life in two takes place: the announcement of the Academy of Dijon regarding the competition of a theme: *If the progress of the sciences and arts contributed to the purification of morals*. Reading the notice, Rousseau has a true enlightenment comparable to that which gave birth to Descartes's *Discourse on Method* with Pascal's *Memorial*⁸. The terms in which Rousseau will describe enlightenment are those of ecstatic experience: “The moment I read this, another universe appeared before my eyes and I became a different man. Although I well remember the impression I felt, the details have slipped from my mind /.../ What I distinctly remember about this circumstance is that, on reaching Vincennes, I was in a state of agitation similar to delirium”⁹. What these lines announce is of the nature of religious experience that changes destiny or creates it. However, Rousseau does not live such an experience, and nothing of the aura of the subject of faith, of the **noumen** definitively classified by Rudolf Otto, concerns him. What Rousseau actually experiences here is of the nature of the secular experience of ecstasy, its side devoid of sacredness, charged instead with the full transformative power of secular truth. Even the word ecstasy is not formulated to characterize the experience whose magnitude, however, only he can procure. Rousseau lives a secular ecstasy that he describes in the coordinates of the original one, the sacred ecstasy. The entire shell of the original ecstasy is to be found in the present description. The content, however,

⁸ Irina Bădescu, in J.J. Rousseau, *Scrieri despre artă, prefață și tabel cronologic*, p. XXXIII.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

does not belong to him because what is experienced here is not the sacred, it is not the mystical God whose vision is to be described. Moreover, not even the truth, which is the object of experience, is persistently named. Two coordinates are given as seen: another universe and another man.

But they are obtained from the illumination procured by a vision whose object is too late to be named. But there is no lack of naming the provided experience: "I was in a state of agitation similar to delirium", something typical of mystical experience. What is prioritized in the foreground are *the ideas*, they are seen, viewed at the sacred altitude of the absolute object. They follow their feelings. "My feelings awakened to the voice of my ideas with incredible rapidity". However, when he has to describe his experiences, as in any mystical experience that wants to be described, Rousseau will be struck by the impotence of its ordered, italic reproduction, as it were, in the ontological order of the revealed absolute. He will describe the result of this vision in a writing that will form his answer to the question of the Academy of Dijon concerning the sciences and arts, but this writing, full of warmth and force, is completely devoid of logic and order. However, living was neither without logic nor order. Any mystical experience, Heidegger would later say, is perfectly coherent and logical in its unfolding.

Every mystical experience has its own time when it is quickly consumed. The intensity that contributes to the power of vision does not pass without definitively marking the outline of the object of experience. Not a slow experience nor unfolding over large segments of time, on the contrary, the mystical experience captures a time concentrated to the maximum, as much as the time within which it is concentrated can be concentrated, the vision lives fully the ontology of the sacred. The sacred that reveals itself needs no time. It is as if time allows living without its usual flow. It is an experience that dispenses with time, being nothing but a transcendental condition devoid of effective reality.

What Rousseau experiences lasts in the most ordinary time. "What is more amazing is that this effervescence continued in my heart for more than four or five years in such a high degree, as perhaps it had never before been known to the heart of man". To properly understand the duration to which Rousseau refers, the time of vision measured in common units depends on the assimilation of the idea that differentiates between the sacred mode of vision of God, in which time is suspended and concentrated in a simple conditionality from which He is effectively absent, and the secular way of obtaining a truth even in the instantaneous form that Rousseau speaks of here. Because a secular truth, such as the one here, is not obtained in the ecstatic manner of the sacred from mystical experiences. He does not even aim at the absolute, because Rousseau's truth is not the truth of Parmenides' proposition: there is only being, nothing outside of it. Such a being, given to ecstatic experience, leaves nothing out. However, the truth from Rousseau's vision is not the ontological truth,

i.e. the secularized absolute. It is a modest truth, relative to history and human society, their evolution in the parameters of error, justice and injustice. A moral truth since it involves notions such as right and wrong. Error, which belongs to the lexicon of logic, is only operative here as a moral metaphor.

Cosmogonic mutation. *Another universe appeared before my eyes* – although nothing of a visual order characterizes what is happening to him, the terms used are borrowed from the common religious vision. The eyes have a predilection here, the visual sense is the most favoured before the sacred. And what is revealed is not of the order of the idea, nor of the understanding. The sacred is revealed as such for which the idea or anything else in the lexicon of understanding is insufficient. Therefore, Rousseau's wholeness is the universe as a substitute for the totality of the sacred.

The mutation produced is radical. The vision does not reinforce Rousseau in what he was, in what he believed, it does not confirm opaque dimensions of his faith, nor does it clarify anything for him. The vision had edified Pascal on which side the truth was, it clarified a dilemma he was in. Rousseau, however, has no dilemma. He is the devotee of a common faith to which he no longer finds any correspondent. The mutation produced is of the order of emptying a belief of truth.

Rousseau's vision is, first, a cosmogonic perspective in which the universe is targeted at the end of which he becomes another man. It is of little importance whether the universe named here is the cosmogonic universe or, more narrowly, only the human universe. What is interesting is how the totality is involved since its genetic resort is missing or, at any rate, not carried through to completion. Reading the first sentences that relate the vision, it is precisely the absence of the decisive ground, God, that is striking. The perspective here could by no means be common. "Great and beautiful is the image of man emerging as if from nothingness through his own efforts, with the light of his mind, the darkness in which nature had enveloped him; rising above himself; soaring through the spirit to the heavenly realms; traversing with giant sun-like strides the vast expanse of the universe, and, what is still grander and more arduous, turning within himself to survey man and know his nature, duties, and purpose"¹⁰.

How is it that just such a vision that almost lacks an engine can take him there so that the universe collapses and another man emerges from its ruins? How can it transform him as a man, in the entirety of his cognitive essence, since nothing shown to him has the character of completeness? Because Rousseau did not see the heavens or their occupant. An absent God characterizes Rousseau's vision here, and his ecstasy, an obviously secular one, contains nothing to suggest the anguish of a failed quest. What Rousseau would say about God belongs to the late description of a *Weltanschauung* that processes the original data of the ecstasy here, falsifying it by addition. In the second speech he will add: God made man good, history and society corrupted him. When, several years later, he will encounter God as the basis of religious education, he will

¹⁰ Rousseau, *Scrieri despre artă*, Minerva Publishing House, 1981, p. 6.

process his status as a deist. The ontology of the divine being as it will be described in *The Confession of Faith of a Vicar of Savoy*, will be the rational construction of the sacred subject to the norms of deistic reason, common philosophical processing¹¹.

I became another man (mutations of truth) – in the sense of sharing from a new truth. Previously it had operated on the basis of sharing the truth in common. He had believed what could be believed, seen what could be seen. It is very likely that such a man was very close to Heidegger's description of **das man** – the impersonal se.

Once again, the terms in which Rousseau describes his experience are edifying. He does not say “I saw”, not even *intuition* as a term is present. He only refers to the change he feels: “I have become a different man”. He says, it is true: “another universe has appeared before my eyes”, but it is no universe in physical condition, but one in metaphysical and historical condition. Or, for something like this, the visual could not be the competent organ. Suddenly the feelings change, they become different, the ardour for truth is now born.

From now on, Rousseau thinks differently. Everything changes: truth, freedom, virtue. Indeed, he becomes a different man since his way of thinking becomes different. The world, as it had been seen until now, ceases to be. The road from Paris to Vincennes becomes the road to Damascus.

For this truth, Rousseau will pay. The price will be his own unhappiness. Which will not be the case neither for Pascal, nor for Descartes, nor for all those who will place their truth at the origin of authentic life.

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¹¹ Voltaire will do the same thing in *Treatise on Metaphysics*, a youthful work that will absolve him of the need for further clarifications.