

THE SELF AS VICTIM: (1994)

A STUDY OF THE ROMANTIC ARTIST WITH
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO JEAN-JACQUES
ROUSSEAU AND PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

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PREFACE

The purpose of this thesis is to reconstruct the Romantic artist's image of the self as victim. This is done by examining some of the most representative works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822).

The choice of these two artists is significant. On the one hand, Rousseau truly represents the transitional period between the Enlightenment and Romanticism. The intellectual and political conflicts experienced by the Romantic artist during those troubled years is discussed in the introduction.

Rousseau's autobiographical work, which is dealt with in Chapter II, reveals the Romantic artist, longing for recognition but failing to exercise any influence through his speculative work. Rousseau's case shows how the 'Father of Romanticism' feels disillusioned with the intellectual milieu of the French Enlightenment. In that troubled epoch preceding the outbreak of the French Revolution, Rousseau, the Romantic artist, retreats into the self and presents posterity with two of the most seminal works for Romanticism; namely the Confessions and The Reveries of the Solitary Walker.

While Rousseau is a symbol of Romanticism in the bud, Shelley represents a more mature instance of the Romantic artist, struggling to assume an active role as a reformer who has seen the light and wishes to save his fellow-men through the sympathetic imagination. Disenchanted with reality and feeling deprived of his role in society, Shelley expresses his deep self-pity



in Adonais. In Chapter III Adonais is analyzed as a direct outcome of the ostracism experienced by Shelley. In reaction to this marginalization, Shelley glorifies the poet to the point of bestowing on him the halo of the prophet, as is evident in his Defence of Poetry.

As Rousseau represents the beginnings of Romanticism, Shelley stands for the end of the 'official' Romantic Movement in England. Indeed, his premature death in 1822 is often seen as coinciding with this end. In this context, Shelley's last fragment, The Triumph of Life constitutes a valuable link between the two representatives of the Romantic artist selected for this dissertation. Besides, this fragment, which Chapter IV attempts to reconstruct, appears to me to be the embodiment of all the Romantic artist's feelings of ostracism. In addition, in The Triumph of Life Shelley voices the Romantic artist's confusion amidst the sudden, mystifying developments in all fields of life during those troubled decades of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Moreover, it is an attempt on Shelley's part to reevaluate Romantic solitude and such related aspects as self-inflicted alienation and the poet's duty towards his fellow-men. This duty which, according to Shelley, Rousseau fails to carry out, lies in using poetic imagination to go beyond the self and save humanity.

To my knowledge, the interesting parallelisms between Rousseau and Shelley have not yet been the subject of any comprehensive study. This dissertation, though far from being all-inclusive, will hopefully illuminate the reader as to the striking similarities between these two ingenious Romantic artists, beyond

the different artistic genres chosen by each of them to express his feelings of alienation.

However, the goal of this study is not so much to draw the reader's attention to similarities or differences between the two writers as to place their contributions to the image of the self as victim in their respective contexts. Finally, if this dissertation succeeds in reviving the interest in these two gigantic figures in terms of their unique but representative experiences as human beings and artists, I hope it will incite the interested reader towards further exploration of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Percy Bysshe Shelley.

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To my invaluable source of intellectual and humane support, Professor Radwa Ashour, I owe a lot. Not only has she directed me to the choice of such a fascinating topic and encouraged me to bring my work to the best possible conclusion, but she has also been a true driving force and mentor for me ever since I was an undergraduate.

I would also like to express my thanks to the co-supervisor of this dissertation, Professor Amina Rachid for helping me to widen my scope and try to grasp the complexities of Jean-Jacques Rousseau who is highly illusive for any student or critic, let alone a student whose main field of specialization is English literature.

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To my dear, deceased father I am enormously indebted. The memory of his unfaltering encouragement to me in all my pursuits will always urge me to achieve all that he might have wished for me.

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CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER I : INTRODUCTION	1
A- THE ROMANTIC SELF	1
B- ROUSSEAU: THE OSTRACIZED VICTIM	22
C- SHELLEY : THE VICTIMIZED LEGISLATOR	49
CHAPTER II : ROUSSEAU'S LITERATURE OF SOLITUDE	64
CHAPTER III: <u>ADONAI</u> S: A REQUIEM FOR THE ROMANTIC SELF	97
CHAPTER IV : <u>THE TRIUMPH OF LIFE</u> : SHELLEY AND ROUSSEAU	116
CONCLUSION	145
BIBLIOGRAPHY	156

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A- THE ROMANTIC SELF

So now I am alone in the world, with no brother, neighbour or friend, nor any company left me but my own. The most sociable and loving of men has with one accord been cast out by all the rest. With all the ingenuity of hate they have sought out the cruellest torture for my sensitive soul, and have broken all the threads that bound me to them.¹

These lines from Rousseau's Reveries (1776-8), undoubtedly represent the two major aspects of this study of the Romantic artist. In them are epitomized the Romantic preoccupation with self and the image of the self as primarily a victimized entity. Indeed, these statements uttered by "The Father of Romanticism", might have been written by an alienated Beethoven, a desperate, young Goethe, a dejected Coleridge or a disillusioned Shelley who exclaims "I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!" (Ode to the West Wind, 54)². They set the tone for a long line of sufferers from the "mal du siècle", characteristic of a turbulent historical and cultural epoch in the latter part of the eighteenth century and the early decades of the nineteenth.

Rousseau's utterances announce a new emphasis on the self as a subject worthy of becoming the primary motif of art in a world where external commotion leaves the alienated Romantic artist no refuge but the attempt to achieve an illusion of fixation and assurance within the realm of the self. However, the Romantic artist finds himself trapped between two crushing forces. The more he feels estranged in the reality of Enlightenment culture and political despotism, the more he withdraws into a hard shell of egocentricity. There he is preyed upon by his own self-aggrandizement and his thwarted idealistic

1 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Reveries of the Solitary Walker, Translated with an Introduction by Peter France, Penguin Books Ltd., 1979, p. 27.

2 All quotations from Shelley's poems and prefaces will be from Percy Bysshe Shelley, Poetical Works, Edited by Thomas Hutchinson, Oxford University Press, London, 1970.

hopes. Forever torn between the wish to be part of a whole and the inability to fit into the mould of social reality, he seems to attain mere glimpses of hope through the flashes of his imaginative genius.

In fact, the romantic victim's sighs of woe, evident in Rousseau's literature of solitude, and his idealistic visions of hope in surmounting the reality of alienation and persecution, predominant in Shelley's prophetic poetry, most certainly present posterity with an invaluable opportunity to meditate upon the issues of freedom and selfhood. In other words, the Romantic artist's dilemma epitomizes the human struggle against oppression from without and, more significantly, from within the self.

Although the Romantic artist's view of himself ^{as victim} is a prominent theme in many Romantic works, there is no doubt that Rousseau and Shelley provide the critic with two extremely rich varieties of Romantic ostracism. This study seeks to examine their respective contributions to Romantic selfhood. Though similarities and differences may be pointed out in the course of this dissertation, it will basically be concerned with the general tensions between the romantic artist and society on the one hand, and his extreme alienation due to his exaggerated emphasis on the self, on the other. Romantic egocentricity actually turns out to be a tyrannical force which at times seems to surpass all other external, crushing forces that might enhance the Romantic artist's estrangement. Moreover, the study of Rousseau's portrayal in Shelley's The Triumph of Life (1822) in Chapter IV brings the two figures into direct association by underlining Shelley's evaluation of Rousseau's victimage and his attempt to place himself as a wiser descendant of his Romantic forefather.

On reading any major Romantic poem or prose work, the obsession with self undoubtedly emerges as a seminal feature of Romantic discourse. In her study of the Romantic self, Patricia Ball comments on the obvious concern with personal identity by writing:

The Romantic concern with personal identity emerges in theoretical comment; as in Shelley's Defence of Poetry, Coleridge's Notebooks and other works in particular the poets are very ready to observe the phenomenon of the creating self. . . .and they suggest in their various ways that the relationship of poet to poem holds for them a distinctive place in the whole issue of self and non-self.³

Indeed, two of the Romantic artist's most treated issues are the search for identity, and the role of artistic creation as a step towards self knowledge.

The creator and his experience which together yield the created work present a psychological situation with a unique mirroring intimacy and hence a mutual illumination of subject and object... Thus Romantic theory and practice are unified in their fundamental preoccupation with creativity as an aspect of self discovery.⁴

There can be no doubt that works such as Rousseau's Confessions (1766-1770) and Reveries, (1776-78) and Shelley's diverse poems among which are Alastor (1815), Ode to the West Wind (1819) and The Triumph of Life (1822) embody a quest "to recover and discover identity, to possess it with the knowledge of possession: and in the pursuit of this mission, the territories of self are extended."⁵

It is significant to bear in mind that in the Romantic quest for identity, recollection plays a

3 Patricia M. Ball, The Central Self: A Study in Romantic and Victorian Imagination, The Athlone Press, University of London, 1968, p.5.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., p.140.

seminal role. Whether in Wordsworth's autobiographical poems such as The Prelude, The Excursion or his Immortality Ode; be it in Rousseau's Confessions or in his life-story as presented in Shelley's Triumph, the difficulty of tracing the history of the Romantic artist's self adds to the complexity of Romantic expressions of the search for the self. Ball quotes Shelley's statement in his Speculations on Metaphysics and rightly finds in it proof of this complexity. Shelley writes:

if it were possible to be where we have been vitally and indeed- if, at the moment of our presence there, we could define the results of our experience- if the passage from sensation to reflection- from a state of passive perception to voluntary contemplation, were not so dizzying and so tumultuous, ... a faithful history of our being might be achieved .⁶

Yet, however ambiguous or hard this tracing of the history of the self can be, it certainly constitutes an essential part of the process of Romantic spiritual healing by writing about the self. On examining Romantic expression of selfhood, it seems appropriate to shed some light on earlier notions of the self. It is relevant to keep in mind that the Romantics were not the first to assert the individuality of the creative self. In his contribution to the volume entitled Technologies of the Self, Michel Foucault reminds us that preoccupation with the self goes as far back as Greco-Roman philosophy. He explains:

The precept "to be concerned with oneself" was, for the Greeks, one of the main principles of cities, one of the main rules for society and for the art of life. . . .In Greek and Roman texts the injunction to know yourself was always associated with the other principle of having to care of yourself, . . . In the Socratic dialogues, in Xenophon, Hippocrates, and in the

⁶ Quoted in Ibid., p.13.

Neoplatonist tradition from Albinus on, one had to be concerned with oneself.⁷

In fact, it is astounding to notice the parallelism between Socrates' invitation to others to preoccupy themselves with themselves as presented by Foucault and Rousseau's explicit intention of teaching the reader through his autobiography how the examination of the self can be a model for instruction, as will be discussed in Chapter II. Foucault writes about Socrates:

- (1) His mission was conferred on him by the gods, and he won't abandon it except with his last breath.
- (2) For his task he demands no reward; he is disinterested; he performs it out of benevolence.
- (3) His mission is useful for the city - more useful than the Athenians' military victory of Olympus because in teaching people to preoccupy themselves with themselves, he teaches them to occupy themselves with the city.⁸

Thus, long before the Romantics, and since the time of Socrates, a link is established between the particular and the general. Besides, even more significantly, a rapport is founded between the act of self-examination and the process of writing. While stressing the fact that the Delphic maxim "Know thyself" has superseded and almost obscured "Take care of yourself" in Western culture, Foucault reminds us that by the Hellenistic age, . . . the self is something to write about, a theme or object (subject) of writing activity. That is not a modern trait born of the Reformation or of romanticism, it is one of the most ancient Western traditions. It was well established and deeply rooted when Augustine started his Confessions.⁹

7 Technologies of the Self: A Seminar With Michel Foucault, Edited by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick Hutton, The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1988, p.19.

8 Ibid., p.20.

9 Ibid., p.27.

Indeed, no study of the Romantic self as victim could be adequate without reference to the art of confession, which will be analyzed in Chapter II. In this context, St. Augustine certainly emerges as one of the earliest examples of a writer indulging in self-examination. Foreshadowing Jean-Jacques Rousseau, St. Augustine describes the function of autobiography as follows:

These acts I perform within myself in the vast court of my memory. Within it are present to me sky, earth, and sea, together with all things that I could perceive in them, aside from all the things I have forgotten. There too I encounter myself and recall myself, and what, and when, and where I did some deed and how I was affected when I did it.¹⁰

Thus, recollection plays an important role in the process of self-discovery as is evident in Rousseau's autobiographical works, as well as Wordsworth's autobiographical poetry. However, Gutman points out the fact that though St. Augustine's Confessions lay before his readers "the chronicle of his spiritual waywardness and his eventual turn toward the church and the service of God",¹¹ his purpose is not so much to tell the story of his life, as to use it to assert the glory of God. Unlike Rousseau's Confessions, which revolve around the Romantic self,

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.¹²

Hence, the exaggerated emphasis on the autonomy of the self is not full-fledged until the emergence of Rousseau's autobiography.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 67.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 102.

¹² Ibid., p. 103.