Rousseau

We have somewhat lost the sense, in the wake of the 19th century, of the multishaped canons or bodies of work that were not unusual at the time of the Enlightenment. Victorian or modern poets and novelists are just that, novelists or poets, and we are almost surprised [sic] when we hear that someone as quintessentially "poetic" as Baudelaire, or Yeats, or Rilke tried his hand, and sometimes quite successfully, at novel writing—or when a novelist such as Hardy or Joyce, also writes verse. In many cases—one thinks of Balzac, [Dickens??], even Proust—it is hard to imagine the novelist writing poetry at all. When contemporary prose writers mix fiction and fact, novel and historical reportage, [reportage] we consider this is a major generic upheaval. It would hardly have surprised anyone in the 18th century, especially not in France or Germany. If one thinks of the complex works of prolific 18th century writers, next to their sometimes equally prolific successors in the 19th (Balzac, for example, or Walter Scott), the variety and diversity of genres and topics baffles our specialized and no longer encyclopedic minds. Diderot writes novels, plays, philosophical dialogues, literary and art criticism, para-scientific treatises, aesthetic investigations, all as a matter of course; Voltaire writes tragedies, comedies, epic poems, historical works, prose narratives, philosophical dictionaires and reflections, innumerable letters and polemical pamphlets. Curious similarities in the shape of a canon develop between [indecipherable] very different writers: Voltaire's canon, for example, resembles that of Schiller rather than of Lessing; Goethe's, in some respects, seems to combine the canons of Diderot, Rousseau, Voltaire and the romantic lyric poets. And so on; one could keep playing the game without progressing much in critical insight, for these external characteristics and conventions remain indeed external, and tell us little about the works themselves. They sometimes have more symptomatic significance and constitute the first level of difficulty, the first obstacle in the way of simple comprehension. More often than not, critical understanding remains stuck at this very level and never moves beyond it.

The main characteristic of Rousseau's work, taken as a whole, is easy enough to point out: in a manner that has few direct antecedents (the closest being Montesquieu, but the differences are considerable) it combines a highly literary discourse of fiction, autobiograpy and inner [meditation??]with social and political theory.

As a novelist, as a confessional author in the tradition of Augustine, Montaigne and Descartes, Rousseau is a highly introverted, self-reflexive writer whose considerable stylistic felicities demand a taste for the subtlest nuances of feeling and expression. But he is also and simultaneously a major political theorist, one of the founders, with Locke, Hobbes, Montesquieu and Hume, of what will later become the vast field of the social sciences. Leaving aside considerations of content, the outward shape of this part of his work is not so different from what one expects in the 18th century: the combination of political, historical, legal, anthropological, pedagogical, psycho-philosophical and theological concerns, complex as it may appear to us, is not uncommon in the age of Locke. What is uncommon is the juxtaposition, in the same author
and sometimes in the same text, of these interests with a literary and poetic productivity inspired not just, as in Diderot, by aesthetic experimentalism and reflection, but by a subjective interiority that earned Rousseau the historically dubious epithet of pre-romantic. This dichotomy has always been and remains today the crux, the enigma of Rousseau's work. It also has dispersed his influence and his interpretation among very diverse readers: the expertise and the sensibility required for the appreciation of the "literary" Rousseau has little in common with what is needed to understand and evaluate his contribution to contemporary political theory.

The question Benedetto Croce addressed to Hegel applies equally well to Rousseau: What is dead, and what is alive for us in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau? Is there indeed anything at all in his extensive corpus that is still fully alive? He is certainly not "alive: in the sense that he is extensively read, especially not the literary part of his work. [When it was first published,] Julie, or La Nouvelle Héloïse was one of the best-selling novels of all times [when it was first published] [1--footnote?], but the last complete English translation goes back to 178? Ever since, its appeal to English readers doesn't seem to have been strong enough to warrant a new translation, or even a modernized reprint of the 18th century one. We seem to have lost patience with the conventions of the novel of sensibility in Rousseau, although we remain quite tolerant in the case of Richardson or of the early Goethe. Very few people, in any, read Julie for pleasure nowadays; in this, they may be grievously mistaken but the fact remains. The most immediately accessible and enjoyable of Rousseau's books is without doubt the Confessions, which combine pre-Freudian analytical insight in the universal nature of neurosis with a picaresque gusto lost in post-romantic times. But to reduce Rousseau to the Confessions is like reducing the work of Rembrandt to the self-portraits: successfully as they are, they are only a part of the entire story.

It may well be that this relative eclipse of Rousseau, this hesitation in [invoking] him as part of the monumental gallery of the canonical masterworks of all times, is due to an excess, rather than a lack of influence. We don't read Rousseau in the works of Rousseau because we constantly encounter him under the signature of so many other writers. Rousseau's influence is so all-encompassing, so all-powering that it has become impossible to observe it in its own right. Neither does one really want to see or to know about it. For whatever wisdom or lucidity he achieved is neither easy to bear nor entirely hopeful, and if it indeed corresponds to our actual measure of self-knowledge, as individual subjects as well as historical societies, then our defenses will all too easily be mobilized in the course of its repression. Be this as it may—and it is certainly much too early to state such a conclusion as a matter of course—a startling disproportion exists between Rousseau's influence and the number of his contemporary readers or, in terms of literary history, between the extent of this influence and the number of scholarly works in which it is mapped out. The quality and the quantity of Rousseau studies is remarkably high in the detailed interpretation of particular works and in the understanding of Rousseau as an individual phenomenon, but it is curiously lacking in [terms] of influences studies or of the historical overviews of which positivistic literary history is otherwise so fond 1. The reception (as

1 See, [f. acct.??], the proportion of influence studies in 10 years of the Annales.
the term is technically used nowadays) of Rousseau is a neglected area of study 2.

The question of Rousseau’s influence and contemporaneity as an intellectually alive force should not only be asked in terms of scholarship and critical interpretation. It reaches much further than this, invading, in the case of his political theory, the realm of political action and, in the case of his literary impact, that of actual literary production (as distinct from theory or criticism). It would be impossible, for instance, to imagine French 19th century literature in the absence of Rousseau—whereas it is quite possible, although curiously illegitimate and misleading, to ignore Voltaire or even, despite his considerable implicit importance, Diderot 3. Rousseau, however, is proeminently in everyone's mind. Not only is there a very important group of French writers, still neglected in canonical literary history which openly trace their origins back to Rousseau: Mme de Stael, Benjamin Constant, Senancourt, Joubert, Maurice de Guérin, etc, 4. But also in the case of such major names as Laclos, Chateaubriand and his circle, Stendhal, Balzac and, as becomes increasingly evident, Baudelaire, a strong positive or negative fascination with Rousseau has determining importance. His impact in Germany, in counterbalance to that of French classicism and of the Enlightenment, is not less powerful: it has been argued that the entire thrust of Schiller’s theoretical writings is directed toward Rousseau 5; the complex relationship between Goethe and Rousseau awaits careful investigation; Rousseau’s is the only historical and contemporary name (except for close personal friends) to appear in Holderlin’s poetry; Kant is first (and still close to unique) in recognizing Rousseau’s thought as part of the major philosophical tradition of the West; this same configuration between Kant, Schiller and Rousseau, is of prime importance to Kleist. Things become more diffuse as one moves on in the 19th century, but Rousseau’s impact in Germany remains so decisive that one needs all the critical restraint one can muster in order not to make him into a key that unlocks all the mysteries.

The mediations are more numerous and the distortions more complex in English [domain?], yet it suffices to listen to Hazlitt’s rhapsodic response to the Confessions, to Shelley’s boundless admiration for Julie which becomes the thematic axis of his last poem, The Triumph of Life, to Blake’s violent

2 In comparative studies, such investigations traditionally take the form of the nationally oriented surveys that used to be especially the basis of the French comparative establishment. Voiture, Rousseau en Angleterre. No R. in Germany or in the U.S. Slavic? Also, relatively few individual influence studies, despite the abundance of tempting topics: no R. and Goethe, or R. and [Herder], or R. and Kant. Note on Jauss, as beginning of reception studies in German domain.

3 It is perhaps not needless to insist that such statements have nothing to do with the intrinsic evaluation of the authors in question.

4 Note on Babbit’s awareness of this group. Link with Matthew Arnold. Importance of these authors in the interpretation of French romanticism undertaken by Raymond, Poulet, Mauzi and others.

5 Szondi? (check)
vituperations and Wordsworth's close critical reading of Emile in Book IV (?) of the Prelude—not to mention more subterraneous affinities—to document Rousseau's importance for English romanticism. When, more than half a century [later], certain attitudes in ARnold, certain assertions in Carlyle, certain moods in Hardy, strike us with a familiar ring, tracing them back to the romantics implicitly involves some inclusion of Rousseau, although by now the name lies hidden away under the numberless layers of a palimpsest. Like all influence studies, that of Rousseau's impact on the 19th and 20th century dissolves into vagueness as long as it is conducted along purely historical lines. But it should at least indicate that the recent critical interest in Rousseau, fostered primarily by philosophers and literary critics, has numerous antecedents among writers and poets. As for the impact of his political thought, Rousseau, next to MArx, is perhaps the only political theorist of which it is relevant to consider the direct impact on actual historical events—the French revolution; the creation of the constitutional, national state; the development of the legislative next to the executive branch of government, etc. All this, of course, is highly suggestive with regard to the currents of thought leading up to the creation of the American state; a reading of the Federalist in [continuation?] with the Social Contract, of Jefferson in continuation, not only with Locke but with Rousseau considered as a valid critic of the Lockean tradition would be even more illuminating than the relatively well known influence of Emile on Emerson and the transcendentalists. If political science, in the U. S. A., has been able to emancipate itself more effectively from the coercion of history than is the case in France or in Germany, this is due in no small measure to the incorporation of the Social Contract and, to a lesser extent, the two Discourses, among the major classics, next to Plato's Laws, Machiavelli's The Prince, Locke's ['], Hobbes [_'_] Leviathan, Hume ['], Burke, Kant's, Hegel's, etc. of political thought. It is a revealing fact that political theories of European origin whose influence in the U.S. has been particularly strong—one thinks of such diverse figures as Cassirer, Strauss and also Hannah Arendt—all have a particularly intense and revealing relationship, positive or negative, manifest or implicit, to the thought of Rousseau.

The "literary" as well as the "political" Rousseau, are much too influential figures to allow for the [indecipherable] needed for traditional studies of influence; they are too closely assimilated to ourselves to be treated as if they were the other. If this is true of the two distinct Rousseaus, the poet and the political theorist, it is more true still of the paradoxical figure that carries within itself the paradox of the enigmatic relationship between its two divergent aspects. It is not surprising that the tradition of Rousseau reception, unable to order and map out its diverse domains, has split into a plurality of topics, a variety of different Rousseau's which it becomes very difficult to bring together under a common denominator. Let us consider, in their own light, some instances of current Rousseau images, prior to asking in the name of which category they can, if not reconciled or dialectically offered, be at least put into more dialogical exchange with each other.

6 [S.? esp, Voisine (perhaps a concluding sentence).]

7 Find a quote in Gay? [Grober?] somewhere?
Is R. important, for us? What is alive and what is dead in Rousseau?

His enormous importance as reception: in critical and philosophical [indecipherable]

Aberrant readings: [foreclosure? presclosure? Underlined twice. so, on, to] Rousseau but also in the poetic and literary traditions


2. Rousseau as person; noble version in R. as cogito (Raymond, Poulet) Augustine

persecution cure R.

3. Rousseau as psycho-analytical case. (Staro)

schizoid structure of work: Cassirer. The case Rousseau

4. Rousseau as political impotent (Engels, Althusser--[indecipherable] and overcome R. American school of interpretation: Strauss, Bloom,

contribution of self-consciousness---discrepancy of individual and collective order (Julie)

x of theory and praxis (violence)

[economy and law: against [natural] law against natural economy

5. Rousseau as theological deist; theodicy Emile/education/political

anti-estheticism education/[secularity] as separation of religious and (Kierkegaard) political experience

[indecipherable]

[indecipherable. Leaves a ????]

Theory of language as [beg?] Derrida

Precisely not--does not resolve anything because language disappears as ground
Critical power of Rousseau’s thought for the present. Today’s 'Rousseauisms': Wittgenstein, Derrida, Foucault, not carnivalesque theorists of anarchy (Lyotard, Deleuze, etc.) [assertive?] ideology

An alternative third page, apparently from another draft (since p. 2 does not lead directly in p. 3), and roughly corresponding to the section beginning at the top of p. 2 of transcript), reads as follows:

expertise. The major challenge, the deepest break however is between literary approaches and those deriving from the social sciences, including history. It is clear that even the simplest evocation of the most exterior aspects of Rousseau’s canon take one at once into deeply troubled institutional waters. Confronted with the task of introducing an author who has been dead for nearly (over?) 200 years, one cannot dodge the most conventional of questions: by asking "What is dead and what is alive for us in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau?" The metaphor of life and death is tricky for, as Croce’s own essays testifies, what is declared death has a way of coming to live with a vengeance a few decades later, and what is found to be most lively at first can look [quietly? fully?] moribund afterwards, killed often enough by the very essay that was supposed to sustain its existence. In the case of Rousseau, one could even go so far as to ask: is there indeed anything in his work that is still alive for us at all? The editor of a volume [such?] is not likely to declare his subject dead from the start, few authors indeed, if any will be found to be more "alive" than Rousseau. But, just as the live Rousseau was a source of embarrassment to many of his contemporaries, the posthumous Rousseau has come to us after two centuries of tortuous reception and rejection; if he is at all present today, it is not in a straightforward and simple way. The incompatibilities between the understanding achieved by literary-minded, as compared to that achieved by social-science minded scholars, is only the tip of the iceberg or, to shift from one cliché to another, the most visible and therefore the least informative, symptom of a very complicated syndrome. Rousseau, for example, is not "alive" in the sense that he is much being read--as Dante, or Cervantes, or Rabelais, or Plato, or even Machiavellé and Hobbes have remained best-sellers, through the ages. Most of his books were quite successful in his lifetime and his novel Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse was one of the biggest selling novels of all times.