OUTLINE OF THE CONFESSIONS

THE CONFESSIONS OF J.J. ROUSSEAU

Containing in detail the events of his life, and his secret thoughts and feelings in the various situations wherein he found himself.

I have often noticed that even among those who pride themselves the most on their knowledge of men, each man knows little beyond himself, if it can even be said that anyone actually knows himself; for how can one accurately determine the nature of a being by its inner correlation alone if there is no other point of comparison? Yet this same imperfect knowledge we have of ourselves is the only means we employ to know others. We have made ourselves the measure of all things, and here precisely is where we are caught in the double illusion of self-love: either by falsely attributing to those we are judging, the same motives which would have made us act as they did had we been in their place; or, within the same supposition, by mistaking our own motives through our inability to transpose ourselves into another situation.

I have made these observations primarily in regard to myself, not in the judgements I have made of others, but rather in the judgements they have made of me since I have long felt myself to be a separate species of being. These judgements were almost always false as to the reasons they set forth for my conduct, and, as a rule, the falseness of the judgement was in an exact ratio with the wit of the judge. The further they extended their rule, the further their false application led them away from the object.

This being said, I have resolved to take my readers another step forward in their knowledge of mankind, drawing them away, if possible, from this single and faulty method of always judging another's heart by one's own, whereas, to the contrary, it is frequently necessary in order to know one's own heart to begin by studying another's. I want, so that men may learn to appraise themselves, to give them at least one other point of comparison. Let each man know himself and one other; and that other will be I.

Yes, I, I alone, for I know of no other man who to this date has dared to do what I am proposing. Histories, lives, portraits, character
sketches! What are all these? Ingenious novels built upon a few exterior acts, upon a few discourses which relate to them, upon subtle conjectures in which the author is much more interested in showing himself to advantage than in discovering the truth. One seize upon the most striking features of a character, combines these with a few invented traits, and, as long as the whole makes a physiognomy of sorts, what matters if it bears any resemblance? Who would be able to tell?

In order to know a character well, one would have to distinguish between what in it was nature and what acquired; one would have to see how the character was formed, what circumstances developed it, what chain of secret passions shaped it, and how it was modified so as occasionally to produce the most contradictory and unexpected results. What is seen is but the smallest part of what is; it is the visible result of which the inner cause is hidden and often very complex. Everyone interprets in his own fashion and paints according to his fantasy, having no fear that his portrait will ever be confronted with its model. And how could we ever come to know this inner model when the artist who paints it within another person cannot see it, and the one who can see it within himself does not want to reveal it? No one can write the life of a man but that man himself. His interior way of being, his real life is known to him alone; but in the process of putting it on paper, he disguises it; under the title of writing his life, he has written his apologia; he shows himself as he wishes to be seen, not at all as he is. The most sincere are truthful, at the very most, in what they reveal, but they lie in what they hold back; and the part on which they remain silent so alters all they feign to confess, that by telling only a portion of the truth, they tell us nothing whatever. I place Montaigne at the head of these false confessors who seek to deceive by telling the truth. He shows himself with faults, but he only shows us those ones which are appealing; no man ever lived without blemishes which were hideous. Montaigne paints a good likeness, but he draws it in profile. Who knows whether some ugly scar across the cheek, or a missing eye on the side he hides from us might not completely alter his physiognomy. A man who is vainer than Montaigne but more sincere is Cardan. This same Cardan, however, is unfortunately so insane one can draw no instruction from his reveries,
and furthermore, who would want to fish for information, however rare, in ten folio volumes of ravings?

Therefore, it is certain that if I accomplish the task I have set for myself, I will have done something both useful and unique. And let no one object that because of my lowly birth I will have nothing to say which is worthy of the attention of my readers. This may be true as regards the events of my life; but it is not so much the history of these events in themselves that I am writing as an account of the state of my soul when they occurred. Now a soul can only be more or less illustrious to the degree that its sentiments are more or less noble, or its ideas more or less vital and abundant. Events, in this case, are only the occasional cause. However obscure the circumstances in which I have lived, if I have thought more and better than kings, the history of my soul is more interesting than theirs.

I will go still further. Experience and observation counting for something, my position in this regard may be the most advantageous that has ever fallen to the lot of mortal man. Having no class of my own, I have known all classes; I have inhabited them all from the lowest to the highest, with the sole exception of the throne. The Great know only the Great, the humble know but the humble, seeing the former only through a screen of admiration for their rank, and are looked down on by these in return with unjustified disdain. When relationships are too widely separated, the entity which is common to them both, man, escapes them equally. But I, always careful to remove his mask, have recognized him everywhere I turned. I have weighed and compared his tastes, his pleasures, his prejudices and his precepts; admitted everywhere as a person without pretense or importance, I am able to study him at my ease. When all disguises have been stripped from them, I can compare man with man and class with class. Being nothing and asking nothing, I embarrass no one; I enter everywhere without restraint, occasionally dining with princes in the morning, and supping with peasants the same night.

If I am not celebrated because of rank or birth, I have another sort of celebrity which is more my own, and one which I have better earned; I have the fame of my misfortunes. The news of what I have suffered has spread throughout Europe; wise men are amazed by it, and good men grieved; but all of them realized at last that I have under-
stood this enlightened and philosophical century better than they. I had seen that the fanaticism they all believed annihilated had only been disguised; I had said so before it first revealed its true face; I little thought that I would be the one to force this revelation. The history of these events, worthy matter for the pen of Tacitus, should not be uninteresting when set down by my own. The facts are public, accessible to anyone; the problem is to find the secret sources from which they spring. Naturally, no one ought to have seen these better than I; to reveal them is to write the story of my life.

The events have been so varied, the passions I have felt, so keen; I have seen so many kinds of men and passed through such different states, that in the span of fifty years I could have lived for several centuries had I but known how to profit from myself. Therefore, both in the number and the nature of my facts, I have everything necessary to make my narration interesting. If it is not so despite all this, the fault will lie with the writer rather than the subject, and an account of the most brilliant or august career might as easily suffer from the same defect.

For if my enterprise is odd, the situation which make me undertake it is no less so. Among my contemporaries there are few whose names are better known in Europe, or whose persons are more of an enigma. While my books were circulating through the cities, their author was only circulating through the woods. Everyone read me, everyone criticised me, everyone talked about me, but only in my absence; I was as remote from the discourse as from the men themselves. I knew nothing of what was being said. Everyone painted me according to his fancy, without fear that the original would appear to prove his portrait wrong. There was one Rousseau circulating in society, and another living in retirement who bore no resemblance whatever to the first.

It is not that on the whole I have cause for complaint concerning what the public has said about me; for, if they have occasionally shown no restraint in tearing me to shreds, they have often honored me in the same fashion. Depending on their disposition of the moment,

1. See the preface to my first discourse printed in 1750.
2. I wrote this in 1764 when I was already fifty two years old, and far indeed from foreseeing the fate which awaited me at that age. Now as it stands
whether the bias happened to be in my favor or against, they were as immoderate in their praise as in their censure. As long as I was only judged by my books, according to the tastes and interests of the readers, they simply made me into some outlandish imaginary being which changed its face with every new work that I published. But once I had personal enemies, these worked out systems among themselves whereby, having been unable to destroy my reputation altogether, they were at least able to establish it according to their own views. In order not to appear in too detestable a role, they did not accuse me of any evil actions either real or invented; or if they did, they imputed these to the weakness of my intellect in order to give the impression that they had been taken in through their good nature, and so that people would praise the nobility of their hearts at the expense of mine. But, while pretending to excuse my faults, they attacked me on my sentiments, and, while seeming to view me favorably, they knew how to make me appear under a very different light.

This cunning tone became all too convenient, and, with the best natured air imaginable, they blackened me with kindness; by an effusive show of friendship, they rendered me detestable and wept for me while tearing me to shreds. Thus it was that although my deeds were not attacked, my character was cruelly tainted, and I was made to appear odious by their praise. Nothing could have been more remote from what I really was than the picture they painted; I was not superior to it, if you want, but I was different. They did not do me justice in regard to either good or bad. By endowing me with virtues I did not possess, they made me out to be evil, while, to the contrary, with vices known only to myself, I felt that I was good. Had I been better judged, my value might have dropped in the estimation of the vulgar, but it would have been held in higher esteem by men of wisdom and virtue; and I have never sought the approbation of any but these.

Here are not only the motives that started me upon this enterprise, but my pledges that I will execute it with fidelity. Since my name is fated to endure among men, I do not want it to bear a false reputation; I do not want to be endowed with virtues and vices I did not possess, or to be painted with features which were not my
own. If I find any pleasure in thinking that I will live on in posterity, it is because of things that are closer to me than the letters of my name; I prefer to be known with all my faults and be myself, than with counterfeited qualities in the guise of someone else who is a stranger to me.

Few men have done worse things than I have done, and never has man confessed what I am going to tell about myself. There is no character flaw that would not be easier to avow than that of having done some base or sordid deed; and you can be assured that anyone who dares to confess such actions will tell everything there is to tell; here is the hard and certain proof of my sincerity. I shall be truthful; I shall be so without reserve; I shall tell all, the good, the bad, in short, everything. I shall fulfill my task rigorously; and No pious woman, however fearful of Hell's fires, ever made more thorough examination of her conscience, or opened up to her confessor the innermost recesses of her soul more scrupulously than I am about to uncover mine for the inspection of the public. Only begin to read me on my word; you will not go far before seeing that I intend to hold to it.

It would be necessary for what I have to say to invent a language as new as my project: for what tone, what style will I use to sort out this immense chaos of sentiments, so varied, so contradictory, frequently so base and occasionally so sublime by which I have never ceased to be tormented? What nothings, what paltry trivialities will I not have to expose? Into what revolting, indecent, infantile and frequently ridiculous details will I not have to enter in order to follow the thread of my secret inclinations, and to show how each impression which left its imprint on my soul entered there for the first time? Although I blush at the mere thought of the things I will be obliged to say, I know there are hard men who will still call me shameless for exposing myself to the humiliation of the most painful admissions. But I must make these confessions or disguise myself; if I remain silent upon a single detail, nothing at all will be known of me, so much does everything hold together, so much is everything of one piece in my character, and so much does this singular and bizarre collection need all the circumstances of my life if it is really to be unveiled.
If I want to make a carefully written book as the others have done, I am not going to paint myself as I am; I am going to put on makeup. But we are concerned with my portrait here and not with a book. I am going to be working, so to speak, with a camera obscura; I will have no need for any other art than that of following exactly the features I see delineated. I am therefore resigned in regard to my style as well as to my substance. I will make no effort to keep it uniform; I will always use whichever one occurs to me at the moment, and will change it without scruple according to my mood. I will say each thing the way I feel it, the way I see it, without contrivance, without restraint, without caring how I mix my colors. By abandoning myself at one and the same time to the memory of an impression received and my feelings at the present moment, I will be painting a double portrait of the state of my soul; that is to say, at the time when the event occurred and at the time when I describe it. My natural and uneven style, sometimes rapid, sometimes diffuse; sometimes wise, sometimes foolish; at times solemn and at times gay, will itself be a part of my history. Finally, however this work may be written, it will always be, because of its objective, a valuable book for philosophers: it is, I repeat, a point of comparison for the study of the human heart, and it is the only one that exists.

Here is what I have to say concerning the spirit in which I am writing my life, the way in which it should be read, and the use that can be made of it. The liasons I have had with several people make it necessary for me to write about them as freely as I do about myself. I cannot reveal myself without making them known too, and one should not expect me to dissimulate things in their regard which cannot be silenced without damaging the truths I have to tell; I will show no more consideration for others than I do for myself. I would be most distressed, however, to harm anyone, no matter whom; and my resolution not to allow these memoirs to appear during my lifetime stems from the consideration I would like to show my enemies in everything that does not affect the execution of my design. I shall even take the most certain measures to make sure that this work is not published until the events that it contains have become, with time, a matter of indifference to everyone; and I shall only place it in hands that I am sure can be trusted to see that no indiscreet use is made of it. For myself, I would not suffer much if it were to appear in my life-
time and would regret but little losing the esteem of anyone who might despise me after having read it. I am revealing things about myself here that are altogether odious, and I would be ashamed to attempt to excuse them; but this is also the most secret history of my soul; these are my most rigorous confessions. It is right that my reputation expiate the evils I have done in my efforts to preserve it. I await the public's commentary, those severe judgements which will be spoken aloud, and I will submit to them. But let each reader do the same, let him search inside himself as I have done, and let him say from the depth of his conscience, if he dares: I am better than was this man.