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# THE ROLE OF PROVIDENCE IN ROUSSEAU'S REVELATION ON THE ROAD TO VINCENNES

Every student of Rousseau is familiar with the extraordinary "illumination" he experienced one hot day in 1749 during his long walk from Paris to Vincennes to visit his friend Diderot who had been imprisoned for publishing the *Lettre sur les aveugles*. In the *Confessions* (I, 351)<sup>1</sup> Rousseau recounts that he was reading the *Mercure de France* and that his eye fell on a competition topic proposed by the Dijon Academy. The question to be discussed was whether or not the progress in the sciences and arts had contributed to the corruption or the betterment of morals. Rousseau says that immediately on reading the title he saw another universe and became another man. In the second of the four celebrated letters to Malesherbes he gives a more detailed account of the event: "Si jamais quelque chose a ressemblé à une inspiration subite, c'est le mouvement qui se fit en moi à cette lecture; tout à coup je me sens l'esprit ébloui de mille lumières; des foules d'idées vives s'y présentèrent à la fois avec une force et une confusion qui me jeta dans une trouble inexprimable; je sens ma tête prise par un étourdissement semblable à l'ivresse. Une violente palpitation m'opprime, soulève ma poitrine; ne pouvant plus respirer en marchant, je me laisse tomber sous un des arbres de l'avenue, et j'y passe une demi-heure dans une telle agitation qu'en me relevant j'aperçus tout le devant de ma veste mouillé de mes larmes sans avoir senti que j'en répandais" (I, 1135).

This experience of Rousseau can be found, in a variety of forms and settings throughout history, from Saint-Paul's transformation on the road to Damascus to that of Lévi-Strauss when he first read Robert H. Lowie's *Primitive Society*,<sup>2</sup> and includes men of such widely differing temperaments as Ignatius Loyola, Descartes and Pascal.<sup>3</sup> In most cases such episodes seem to have the character of a religious conversion. Although he never at any time, in speaking of this turning point in his life, explicitly treats it as a religious one, it is my belief, and I hope to demonstrate it in this paper, that Rousseau secretly regarded this event as a sign from God that he had been chosen to carry out a divine mission, that of reforming mankind.

Long before he had any grounds for doing so Rousseau felt himself to be singled out for a life of suffering. In 1731, for example, he complained, in a letter to his father, of the "triste sort de se voir forcé d'être à jamais ingrat et malheureux en même temps et d'être obligé de traîner par toute la terre sa misère et ses remords" (Leigh, 5).<sup>4</sup> It could be argued that this is a classic example of a young man's appetite for the dramatic. Certainly the language is extravagant and more suited to Racine's Oreste than to someone of nineteen in search of a career, but Rousseau seems to have felt and written this way most of his life. In another early letter, written at the age of twenty-six to Joseph Piccone, the governor of Savoy, from whom he was seeking a pension, Rousseau declared: "Je suis sorti très jeune de Genève, ma patrie, ayant abandonné mes droits pour entrer dans le sein de l'Eglise, sans avoir cependant jamais fait aucune démarche jusqu'aujourd'hui pour implorer des secours dont j'avais toujours tâché de me passer s'il n'avait plu à la *providence* de m'affliger par des maux qui m'en ont ôté le pouvoir ... Je suis désormais renfermée sans pouvoir presque sortir du lit et de la chambre, jusqu'à ce qu'il plaise à *Dieu* de disposer du reste de ma courte, mais misérable vie ... il est dur à un homme de sentiments ... d'être obligé ... d'implorer des assistances ... Mais tel est le décret de la *providence*" (Leigh, 28). It has been objected that this is a thoroughly insincere letter, written in a ridiculously inflated style entirely for the purpose of getting a pension.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, as far as the attitude towards providence is concerned, the letter embodies many of the elements that will recur in the more mature Rousseau. For example, the tone and the vocabulary differ in no discernible way from a letter composed some thirty years later in which Rousseau bemoans the loss of his young friend Sauttersheim: "La Providence me l'a ôté ... Sans doute le Ciel me trouve digne de tirer de moi seul toutes mes ressources, puisqu'il ne m'en laisse plus aucune autre" (Leigh, 6508).

At what stage Rousseau first began to think his suffering was

designed for a special purpose, that he was chosen by God for a heroic career, it is impossible to tell. With his Calvinist background he was naturally familiar from his earliest years with the notion of the elect, but since we know of his childish thoughts and ambitions only through retrospective accounts, deformed by time and perhaps by intention, we have no way of telling if, from his infancy, he believed himself to be marked out for a unique destiny. It is for this reason that we are inclined to attribute the beginning of this conviction to the Vincennes episode, although he does say, in the *Dialogues*, that the ideas that came to him during the "illumination" had long been vaguely stirring in his mind.<sup>6</sup> It should also be recognized that Rousseau may not have immediately interpreted the revelation as emanating from God, as a sign that he had been chosen, since on winning the prize offered by the Dijon Academy he was somewhat dazzled, not only by the vision that had overwhelmed him but also by the sudden celebrity he had sought for so long. And after his resounding success in the theatre with *Le Devin du village* (1753)<sup>7</sup> it would scarcely be surprising if he found it difficult to see clearly what his mission was and how it should be carried out. This confusion is evident from the fact that his "reform" and withdrawal from Parisian society took several years to complete. But when the Dijon Academy proposed another topic that corresponded precisely to the evolution of his own ideas after the *Premier Discours*, he must have taken this as a sign from heaven that his future was not in the world of society.

In the letter to Malesherbes, previously cited, he refers to his reading of the competition in the *Mercure de France* as "un heureux hasard" whereas, in the letter to Christophe de Beaumont, written after his exile from France, he terms it "une misérable question d'Académie" (III, 927) and, in the *Dialogues*, "une malheureuse question d'Académie" (I, 828). These contradictory versions correctly express the consequences of the event. The revelation gave to Rousseau, for the first time in his life, a sense of purpose and dedication, but it also consigned him to a life of self-sacrifice and martyrdom. The fact that Rousseau referred to the episode as "un hasard" should not, however, mislead us into thinking he really regarded it as such. The "proof" that he considered the illumination an act of providence and not chance I shall now attempt to demonstrate.

In the seventh Promenade of the *Rêveries*, recalling the circumstances of the Vincennes episode, Rousseau says he was "jeté dans la carrière littéraire par des *impulsions étrangères*" (my italics, I, 1062). What he meant by this enigmatic remark and, in particular, what he meant by the term "*étrangères*", is revealed in the *Second Discours* and in the *Es-*

*sai sur l'origine des langues*<sup>8</sup>. Rousseau's well-known theory of the origin of mankind, as expounded in the *Second Discours*, is that, in the beginning, man was not naturally gregarious but lived, for countless centuries, a solitary, peaceful, happy, animal-like existence. The move from isolation to society is described as being due to a series of accidents, "[un] concours fortuit de plusieurs causes étrangères qui pouvaient ne jamais naître, et sans lesquelles il fût demeuré éternellement dans sa constitution primitive" (my italics, III, 162). A little later in the *Discours* these "causes étrangères" are identified as great floods, earthquakes and the tilting of the earth's axis. It was events such as these that forced man into closer proximity with his neighbour since there were consequent changes in climate that deprived men of the fertile abundance they had been used to, with the result that they were obliged to change their way of life, to work together to survive famine and drought.

At first glance it seems odd that Rousseau should describe these natural phenomena as "causes étrangères" since it is hard to understand what could be alien to natural man in the operations of Nature, however violent, but we learn later that these natural disasters were not so much alien as alienating. However, that is another story. These accidents of nature are described in more detail in the *Essai sur l'origine des langues* where, surprisingly, they turn out to be not accidents at all but events specifically designed by God to terminate man's isolation and force him into society: "Celui qui voulait que l'homme fût sociable toucha du doigt l'axe du globe et l'inclina sur l'axe de l'univers. A ce léger mouvement, je vois changer la face de la terre et décider la vocation du genre humain" (p. 109). In the *Fragments politiques* Rousseau is even more specific about the role of God and his intentions: "Incliner du doigt l'axe du monde ou dire à l'homme: Couvre la terre et sois sociable, ce fut la même chose pour Celui qui n'a besoin ni de main pour agir ni de voix pour parler" (III, 531). The natural accidents or "causes étrangères", described in the *Second Discours* and the *Essai*, are here referred to as "D'autres causes, plus fortuites en apparence" (my italics, III, 533). In short, then, there was nothing at all accidental or fortuitous about these events all of which were deliberately designed to end man's isolation. These natural calamities, according to the *Essai*, were simply instruments employed by providence "pour forcer les humains à se rapprocher" (p. 113). It is quite clear, then, that when Rousseau, at the end of his life, speaks in the *Rêveries* of the Vincennes episode as the time when he was "jeté dans la carrière littéraire par des impulsions étrangères" he is making a direct though not overt comparison between his career and that of natural man. Just as God forced

man out of his innocent existence into a life of ceaseless struggle, so he forced Rousseau to undertake a task that would condemn him to a similar fate. Paradoxically, whereas man was forced into society to achieve his full stature, Rousseau, to fulfil his mission, was required to leave it. In the seventh Promenade Rousseau elaborates on the comparison between his fate and that of natural man in society by recalling the carefree life they both enjoyed before the intervention of providence: "Je sentis la fatigue du travail d'esprit et ... je sentis en même temps languir et s'attédir mes douces rêveries, et ... je ne pus plus retrouver que bien rarement ces chères extases qui ... m'avaient rendu dans l'oisiveté le plus heureux des mortels" (I, 1062). The foregoing, then, is my first "proof" that Rousseau interpreted the revelation on the road to Vincennes as the work of providence. My second "proof" is drawn from his accounts of the episode.

If we examine the language used to describe the event we find similarities, of which he may or may not have been aware, between Rousseau's formulation and that used by the Ancients to describe the state known as "poetic fury" in which the artist is portrayed as simply an agent of God, a man possessed despite himself. In Plato's *Ion*, for example, Socrates describes thus the poet possessed by the Muse: "... a poet is a light and winged thing, and holy, and never able to compose until he has become inspired, and is in ecstasy, and reason is no longer in him" (534b).<sup>9</sup> Rousseau speaks in the same vein of how the competition topic agitated his mind, in spite of himself, and he refers to the "vive effervescence," the "délire" and "fièvre" that informed his writings as a consequence of this revelation.

The period during which he considered himself under the influence of providence lasted anywhere from four to ten years depending on which of two accounts one reads. In the *Dialogues*, for example, he suggests that for ten years following the Vincennes episode, a period that covers the composition of all his major works, he was totally in the grip of this poetic fury. Speaking of himself in the third person, as he does throughout the *Dialogues*, he says: "De la vive effervescence qui se fit alors dans son âme sortirent ces étincelles de génie qu'on a vu briller dans ses écrits durant dix ans de délire et de fièvre, mais dont aucun vestige n'avait paru jusqu'alors" (I, 829). This figure of ten years contradicts the earlier account in the *Confessions* where the period of inspiration is set at four to six years. But the language is the same: "cette effervescence se soutint dans mon coeur durant plus de quatre ou cinq ans ... pendant quatre ans au moins que dura cette effervescence dans toute sa force, rien de grand et de beau ne peut entrer dans un coeur d'homme, dont je ne fusse pas capable entre le Ciel et moi.

Voilà d'où naquit ma subite éloquence; voilà d'où se répandit dans mes premiers livres ce feu vraiment céleste qui m'embrasait ... J'étais vraiment transformé; mes amis, mes connaissances ne me reconnaissaient plus ... Qu'on se rappelle un de ces courts moments de ma vie où je devenais un autre, et cessais d'être moi; on le trouve encore dans le temps dont je parle; mais au lieu de durer six jours, six semaines, il dura près de six ans" (I, 351, 416-417). The *terminus a quo* is the Vincennes episode, the *terminus ad quem* is in doubt. But, whatever the length of the period, it is apparent from what Rousseau says that, for as long as it lasted, he saw himself as a man divinely possessed.

The third "proof" of the role of providence in the Vincennes experience is found in a comparison between that event and the conversion of Julie during the ceremony of her marriage to Wolmar. Just as Rousseau divides his life into the periods before and after the Vincennes revelation that launched him on his mission, so Julie divides her life into two distinct parts, before and after her marriage. In the case of Julie there is no doubt that during the ceremony she undergoes a mystical experience and is the recipient of an act of grace: "Je crus voir l'organe de la providence et entendre la voix de Dieu dans le ministre prononçant gravement la sainte liturgie" (II, 354). Where Rousseau referred to his transformation as "une grande révolution qui venait de se faire en moi" (I, 1015), Julie says, "Je crus sentir intérieurement une révolution subite" (II, 354). Rousseau's "effervescence" becomes for Julie a "fermentation". His temporary loss of consciousness during the revelation is matched by the experience of Julie who found herself "prête à tomber en défaillance" (II, 353). In an attempt to characterize the effect on him of the vision Rousseau writes, "Je vis un autre univers et je devins un autre homme" (I, 351). Julie, similarly, says of her conversion, "Je crus me sentir renaître; je crus recommencer une autre vie" (II, 355). Clearly Rousseau, through the personage of Julie, is reliving and celebrating the act of providence that radically changed his life.

From time to time, in subtle ways, Rousseau hints at the divine character of his enterprise. He can, of course, only hint at it. Any open declaration of his belief that he had been specially chosen by God would bring from the religious authorities a charge of blasphemy, and, from the *philosophes*, hoots of scorn and derision. So his references are generally oblique. In the *Discours sur la vertu du héros* (1751), for example, he notes that "les vues du vrai héros s'étendent plus loin; le bonheur des hommes est son objet, et c'est à ce sublime travail qu'il consacre la grande âme qu'il a reçue du Ciel" (II, 1113). In 1762, writing from exile, he says, "Je m'attendais à souffrir pour la cause de Dieu" (Leigh, 2016). And in the *Dialogues* he speaks of those "âmes vulgaires" who

misunderstood his mission, and consoles himself with the thought that "celles qui habitent nos régions éthérées reconnaissent avec joie une des leurs" (I, 829).

In the letters to Malesherbes the whole time from the illumination of Vincennes to just before the publication of the *Emile* is recalled as one of extraordinary happiness, in sharp contrast to the bitter way in which he will portray this period in the *Confessions*, written in exile. It is true that during these years he suffered many reverses -- the hostile reception accorded his *Second Discours*, the disastrous affair with Sophie d'Houdetot, the break with Diderot, the uncontrollable fear that the Jesuits were plotting to interfere with the publication of the *Emile*, to name but a few -- but, throughout such misfortunes he was reassured and comforted by his confidence in the justice of providence. In a letter written in 1758, for example, he reproaches pastor Vernes for his lack of faith: "... vous donnez trop de prix aux biens et aux maux de cette vie. J'ai connu les derniers mieux que vous, et mieux, peut-être qu'homme qui existe, je n'en adore pas moins l'équité de la providence, et me croirais aussi ridicule de murmurer de mes malheurs durant cette vie que de crier à l'infortune pour avoir passé une nuit dans un mauvais cabaret" (Leigh, 647). Nothing other than the conviction that God was protecting and guiding him can fully account for the optimism of the four crucial letters to Malesherbes that are so different in tone from the correspondence that will follow. At the end of the first letter he writes: "je mourrai plein d'espoir dans le Dieu Suprême". In the second letter, as already noted, the Vincennes episode is referred to as "un heureux hasard". In the third letter, instead of bemoaning the implacable fate that will become a dominant theme of the *Confessions*, he exults, "Ô que le sort dont j'ai joui n'est-il connu de tout l'univers! Chacun voudrait s'en faire un semblable". In this letter, in contrast to the *Confessions*, he does not claim that his childhood was a golden age or that the days before the illumination were the happiest of his life. On the contrary, despite all he has suffered he looks to the more recent past, to the life that resulted from the day of his election: "Quels temps croiriez-vous Monsieur que je me rappelle le plus souvent et le plus volontiers dans mes rêves? Ce ne sont point les plaisirs de ma jeunesse, ils furent trop rares, trop mêlés d'amertumes, et sont déjà trop loin de moi." The times he savours are those of his "retraite" where, in his imagination, Rousseau created his own golden age and communed directly with God. The language here is again reminiscent of that used to describe the feeling of transport experienced on the road to Vincennes: "... de la surface de la terre j'élevais mes idées ... à l'être incompréhensible qui embrasse tout ... j'étouffais dans l'univers,



j'aurais voulu m'élancer dans l'infini. Je crois que si j'eusse dévoilé tous les mystères de la nature, je me serais senti dans une situation moins délicieuse que cette étourdissante extase ... qui dans l'agitation de mes transports me faisait écrier quelquefois: Ô grand être! Ô grand être, sans pouvoir dire ni penser rien de plus."

Only a few months after this, when *Emile* has been condemned and Rousseau begins to discover that Switzerland is not the hospitable haven he had imagined, he will lament to his disciple Moultou that "la providence s'est trompée; pourquoi m'a-t-elle fait naître parmi les hommes, en me faisant d'une autre espèce qu'eux!" (Leigh, 1873). And to another correspondent he writes: "J'ai rempli ma mission, Monsieur, j'ai dit ce que j'avais à dire, je regarde ma carrière comme finie ... Il importait peut-être que ... il s'en trouvât une fois un d'une autre espèce, qui osât à tout risque dire aux hommes les vérités solides qui feraient leur bonheur" (Leigh, 2039). From this time on, although Rousseau will continue to express his faith in providence he will do so with increasingly less conviction. And, as his paranoia grows more severe, he will come to wonder whether God is not simply indifferent towards him but actively hostile. The Vincennes episode will be portrayed in a new light, not as an epiphany, not as the day he was born again into a new world, but as that critical moment that would initiate the ineluctable tragedy of his life.<sup>10</sup>

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## NOTES

1. All quotations are taken from the four-volume Pléiade edition of Rousseau's *Oeuvres complètes*. The spelling has been modernized.
2. "La révélation m'est seulement venue ... à la lecture d'un livre rencontré par hasard et déjà ancien: ... Ma pensée échappait à cette sudation en vase clos à quoi la pratique de la réflexion philosophique la réduisait. Conduite au grand air, elle se sentait rafraîchie d'un souffle nouveau. Comme un citadin lâché dans les montagnes, je m'enivrais d'espace tandis que mon oeil ébloui mesurait la richesse et la vérité des objets." *Tristes Tropiques*, Paris, Plon, 1955, p. 64. See my "The Temperamental Affinities of Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss," *Queen's Quarterly*, LXXXII (1975), 548

3. Descartes' night of "enthousiasme" or divine revelation in which three successive dreams changed his life, and Pascal's ecstatic experience on the miraculous cure of his niece are well known. Less well-known, perhaps, is the striking parallel between Rousseau's account of his illumination and that of Loyola. Like Rousseau in the *Dialogues* Loyola speaks of himself in the third person. The event occurs while he is seated on the bank of a river, lost in his devotions: "Et tandis qu'il était là assis, les yeux de son entendement commencèrent à s'ouvrir. Non pas qu'il vît quelque vision; mais il comprenait et apprenait à connaître beaucoup de choses ... avec une clarté si grande que toutes les choses lui paraissaient nouvelles ... Dans tout le cours de sa vie, en réunissant tous les secours de Dieu et toutes les choses qu'il a apprises, tout cela mis ensemble ne lui paraît pas égalier ce qu'il avait alors obtenu en une seule fois." Quoted by E. Ritter in the *Annales Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, VII (1911), 97. In the same volume of the *Annales* G. Gran, "La Crise de Vincennes," points out that the biographies of such writers as Chateaubriand, Lamartine and a host of other European Romantics contain similar reports of a sudden and overwhelming moment of revelation.
4. All quotations from the letters, except those from the four to Malesherbes included in the *Oeuvres complètes*, are taken from Ralph A. Leigh's edition of the *Correspondance complète de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Geneva and Oxfordshire: The Voltaire Foundation, 1965-198?, 50 vols.
5. In his commentary on letters such as this, Leigh likens the tone and style to the outpourings of Des Grieux. See, for example, his remarks on letter 53 in which Rousseau seeks employment from Claude Dupin.
6. In the *Dialogues* he speaks of having glimpsed, from his youth, "une secrète opposition entre la constitution de l'homme et celle de nos sociétés, mais c'était plutôt un sentiment sourd, une notion confuse qu'un jugement clair et développé" (I, 838).
7. "Le Devin du Village acheva de me mettre à la mode, et bientôt il n'y eut pas d'homme plus recherché que moi dans Paris" (I, 369).
8. Ed. C. Porset, Bordeaux: Ducros, 1968. There has been and still is considerable disagreement about the contextual and chronological relationship between the *Essai* and the *Second Discours*. For details see C. Porset, "L'inquiétante étrangeté de l'Essai sur l'origine des langues: Rousseau et ses exégètes," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 154 (1976), 1715-1758, and R. Wokler, "L'Essai sur l'origine des langues en tant que fragment du Discours sur l'inégalité: Rousseau et ses mauvais interprètes," *Rousseau et Voltaire en 1978. Actes du Colloque international de Nice* (Juin 1978), Genève-Paris: Slatkine, 1978, 145-169. Having nothing to add to this controversy I use the two works simply for the light they throw on each other, without reference to the order of their composition.
9. In *Ecco homo* Nietzsche tells how he felt when composing his *Zarathustra*. The experience is amazingly like that of Rousseau, even to the shedding of tears, and it is an excellent example of poetic fury: "Has anyone at the end of the nineteenth century any distinct notion of what poets of a stronger age understood by the word inspiration? ... If one had the smallest vestige of superstition in one, it would hardly be possible to set aside completely the idea

that one is the mere incarnation, mouthpiece or medium of an almighty power. The idea of revelation in the sense that something becomes suddenly visible and audible with indescribable certainty and accuracy, which profoundly convulses and upsets one -- describes simply the matter of fact. One hears -- one does not seek; one takes -- one does not ask who gives: a thought suddenly flashes up like lightning; it comes with necessity, unhesitatingly -- I have never had any choice in the matter. There is an ecstasy such that the immense strain of it is sometimes relaxed by a flood of tears ... Everything happens quite involuntarily, as if in a tempestuous outburst of freedom, of absoluteness, of power and divinity." *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, translated by Thomas Common, New York: Carlton House, n.d., pp. 18-19. For Plato, of course, a poet was far too irresponsible ever to be entrusted with a divine mission. Rousseau's "fureur poétique" is much more akin to that of Ronsard and his group who portrayed themselves as missionaries of God.

10. "Tout le reste de ma vie et mes malheurs fut l'effet inévitable de cet instant d'égarement" (I, 351).