

Confessio Amanitas: Rousseau's Dilemma

Karunakaran B Shaji

DESSH Regional Institute of Education Mysore- 570006 India

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56293/IJMSSSR.2025.5920>

IJMSSSR 2025

VOLUME 7

ISSUE 6 NOVEMBER - DECEMBER

ISSN: 2582 – 0265

**Abstract:** Rousseau's encounters with idealism and philosophy of Romanticism had been problematic always. The never ending dialectics between the self-consuming subjectivism and the fierce commitment to the revolutionary ideals of Romanticism often proved to be undoing of the Rousseau's own version of the Romantic ideal which insistently demanded a saner consciousness barring all stipulations of conventional codifications and norms which became the substratum of the later romantics. In the wilder polemics of the mainstream romantics, Rousseau often found symptoms of an anti-aesthete. This paper explores different dimensions of Rousseau's conflicting relationships with the Romantic ideal.

**Keywords:** contemporary civility, sexual promiscuity, social morality, authoritarian ideas, possible permutations

### 1. Introduction

Rousseau demonstrated that the world can be viewed from another dimension, something the earlier writers dared not or ignored, thereby providing one of the most crucial ingredients to the concoction of the Romantic mystique. Rousseau was making the later unsuspecting Romantics commit to his theology. It may be one of the starkest ironies of English Romanticism that Hazlitt himself fell a pray to the charms of Rousseau when his own autobiography *Liber Amoris* chose to bring out uninhibited passion for the daughter of his landlady.

*Confessions* has been an audacious attempt to destroy the invisible obstacles created by the modern urban civilization which stood in the way of man understanding his fellow human being. It is a silent revolt against the hypocrisies and malice that characterised the contemporary civility. In *Reveries* Rousseau comments:

'It is true that such compensations cannot be experienced by every soul or in every situation. The heart must be at peace and its calm untroubled by any passion. The person in question must be suitably disposed and the surrounding objects conducive to his happiness.'

The disarming honesty and candour of Rousseau's *Confessions* pioneered a breed of literary introspection that shocked many an orthodox sensibility. There are differing views as to the real implications it held for the Romantic age. Some schools contend that it created a precedent that meant erosion of those cherished ideals of the civilised society. Byron's Childe Harold and Don Juan through their explicit attempt at reinstating the ostracised passions and forbidden pleasures clearly trace its ancestry to Rousseau. Hazlitt offers threadbare analysis of Rousseau's disastrous influence on the English speaking world's ethos in 'On the Character of Rousseau'. To Hazlitt, Rousseau has been the most vicious manifestation of the an inflated ego which shatters the credibility of *Confessions*. But at the same time the author acknowledges Rousseau's unparalleled ability to share with his readers the state of his soul.

Romanticism is one such terms in literature that has consistently resisted all attempts at a comprehensive definition. Romanticism as a genre of literature has rather a conflicting history of existence. It is more of an attitude, a culture as well as state of mind. Though roughly it can be said to be a movement extending from 1830s to 1890s, there are hardly any common denominators for Romanticism. In a way there are many Romanticisms than a single, centred one with canonical texts or schools of its own. At its best Romanticism is often characterised as a revolt against the dilapidated conventions, traditions and belief systems of the society.

Collins and Cowper could be considered as the precursors of the Romantic movement. The Romantics lived literally through the periods of transition between the the age of reason and the age of unreason. So most of them had to be either insane or eccentric, driven to that stage precisely because they found themselves unable to cope with the largely insensible and hostile society of the times.

The irreverent classic of De Quincy *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* following the same Rousseauvian strain was accused of encouraging opium consumption. The author was later forced to make extensive revisions yielding to the pressure of the self-professed champions of the English social morality.

It could be seen that this tendency promoted a new found interest in the life story writing during the Romantic age. The literature reading public developed an appetite for the unknown private lives of the writers and poets which had the tinge of voyeurism in it. Mary Shelley anticipating the possible permutations and suggestions of sexual promiscuity of her famous husband by his potent biographers in future wrote his biographical notes herself to be supplemented in the edition of his poems. A similar psychosis possessed other novelists and poets like Scott, Wordsworth, Byron and Keats.

It could be said with a little reservation that Lamartin's poems ushered French Romanticism in Revolution. Revolution and Romanticism could be analogous and could always displace each other. But the obvious thing is that Romanticism always carried with it the dormant energies of the revolution. Otherwise, Romanticism could have attained further heights had Revolution never made forays. It had its unenviable gallery of martyrs too like the French poet Andre Chenier.

Victor Hugo, a second generation Romantic had his royalist leanings in the beginning. But the members of his clan got affiliated to liberal views with the passage of time. The century that followed witnessed the upsurge of passionate revolutionary zeal and its downswing many a time.

The invention of steam engine inaugurated the Industrial Revolution in England in 1775 which coincided with the arrival of spinning and weaving machines. The cityscape was changing into the loud clamour of mills and factories. It replicated through Belgium, France, Germany and North America. Since the spontaneity and overarching drama of the French Revolution was missing in these cases, they find only passing references in the writings of the early Romantics.

For the Romantics, the dehumanising factories and 'dark satanic mills' were the visible manifestations of the soulless capitalist practices and commercialism, whose underlying creed was utilitarianism. The literary world had to wait until 1854 for its searing and poignant portrayal in Dickens's *Hard Times*. Jeremy Bentham, the presiding deity rejected poetry as a futile enterprise. The reductionist theme of pleasure as the end to be attained negated all aesthetics and magic of life.

The Bohemian subculture of Romanticism has been a natural course for the inevitable disillusionment that followed. They searched everywhere for alternative courses and contented with an assortment of claimants like the 'noble savage', the guilds of Middle ages, the cities of ancient Greece, the folklore of Scotland and the evasive gypsies. Blake found his ideal in the Biblical lessons of brotherhood and social bond.

Some of the major attempts in this genre are Thomas Moore's *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron*, biography of Keats by Richard Monckton Milnes and Elizabeth Barret Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. The prevalent trend of these books of biographies is the enduring strands of the Romantic ideal like an honest search for the truth about oneself and quest for the indefatigable spirit of humanity.

In his Western Philosophical Thought, Bertrand Russel Observes:

'Rousseau appealed to the already existing cult of sensibility, and gave it a breadth and scope that it might not otherwise have possessed. He was a democrat, not only in his theories, but in his receiving kindness from people only slightly less destitute than ingratitude, but in emotion his response was all that the most ardent devotee of sensibility could have wished. Having the tastes of a tramp, he found the restraints of Parisian society irksome. From him the romantics learnt a contempt for the trammels of convention- first in dress and manners, in the minute and the heroic couplet, then

in art and love, and at last over the whole sphere of traditional morals.'

In Enlightenment, there had been a beautiful fusion and synthesis of Rationalism and feeling. As is commonly thought of, Enlightenment never advocated or adhered to the assertion of the solitary reason, though the emphasis was on posing a challenge to the traditional institutions, authorities and models. Above all it sought to emphasise the purity of the natural freedom and the value of feeling in deep contrast to the debilitating dehumanising urban culture and civilisation.

Rousseau's *The Social Contract* is a vehement attack on the inequalities and injustices in the society. He proposes a more equitable distribution of wealth and the principle of social justice and goes onto to propound the concept of 'general will' as the basic principle for the formation of the government. The ultimate sovereignty must reside with the people. Rousseau's basic ideal was that of Enlightenment which gradually leads onto Romanticism.

William Blake one of the professed champions of Enlightenment political radicalism feared that a culture deep rooted in materialism would ultimately prove detrimental to the spirit of humanism. Thomas Paine in his *Rights of Man*, asserts the importance of rationality over that of the feelings:

'But Mr. Burke appears to have no idea of principles, when he is contemplating governments. Ten years ago, I could have facilitated France on her having a government, without inquiring what the nature of the government was, or how it was administered. Is this the language of a rational man? Is it the language of a heart feeling as it ought to feel for the rights and happiness of the human race?'

In his 1919 book *Rousseau and Romanticism*, Irving Babbitt identified Rousseau as the mainspring of Romanticism:

'If we wish to see the psychology of Rousseau writ large, we should turn to the French Revolution.... Rousseau and his disciple Robespierre were reformers in the modern sense, - that is they are concerned not with reforming themselves, but other men.'

Rousseau rejected the theme of 'unreasonable rationalism' to whom what guided and inspired the human lives were fear and threats to individual security and sympathy for the situation of others. In the natural state of Rousseau, the needs are simple and so easily satisfied, which may be characterised as animalistic existence. But Rousseau reminds his readers that what makes man different in his freedom to choose, which in turn gets evolved into a desire for perfection, a capacity capable of making them either subhuman or superhuman. This seems to be sumum-bonum of Rousseau's critique of contemporary human civilisation.

Rousseau's natural state was characterised by innocence and freedom which was gradually destroyed by the social state. He identified the contemporary civilisation as the root of all malice that afflicts the society, though he pointed out that the culprit is not the civilisation itself, but the way it happened, an idea clearly stated in *The Social Contract*:

'The passing from the state of nature to the civil society produced a remarkable change in man; it puts justice as a rule of conduct in the place of instinct, and gives his actions the moral quality they previously lacked. It is only then, when the voice of duty has taken the place of physical impulse, and right that of desire, that man, who has hitherto thought only of himself, finds himself compelled to act on other principles, and to consult his reason rather than study of his inclinations. And although in civil society man surrenders some advantages that belong to the state of nature, he gains in return far greater ones; his faculties are so exercised and developed, his mind is so enlarged, his sentiments so ennobled, and his whole spirit so elevated that, if abuse of his new condition did not in many cases lower to him to something worse than what he had left, he should constantly bless the happy hour that lifted him forever from state of nature and from a stupid, limited animal made a creature of intelligence and a man.'

If education can have a romantic ideal, Rousseau's *Emile* offers the best classic instance which places emphasis on unrestricted, fearless development of the child in the natural surroundings which is a marked deviation from the authoritarian ideas of education as prevailed during those days. Though charges of being masculinist and anti-feminist are levelled against *Emile*, it is remarkable for its focus of individualism which is typically romantic in nature.

### References

1. Arnold, D. (Ed.). (1983). *The New Oxford Companion to Music* (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press.
2. Bailey, K. (Ed.). (1986). *The Hamlyn Junior Encyclopaedia*. Hamlyn.
3. Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Rabelais and His World*. Indiana University Press.
4. Bauman, R. (1992). *Performance Theory and Folklore*. *Journal of Folklore Research*, 29(2), 3–20.
5. Bhagawat, D. (1958). *An Outline of Indian Folklore*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.
6. Botkin, B. A. (1971). *A Treasury of American Folklore*. Crown.
7. Espinoza, M. (2004). *Folklore and Modernity: Reading the Oral Texts*. Cambridge Scholars Press.
8. Frazer, J. G. (1925). *The Golden Bough*. Macmillan.
9. Freud, S. (1983). *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Penguin.
10. Herkovitz, M. (1959). *Cultural Anthropology*. Knopf.
11. Redfield, R. (1960). *Peasant Society and Culture*. University of Chicago Press.
12. Schechner, R. (2003). *Performance Theory*. Routledge.
13. Turner, V. (1987). *The Anthropology of Performance*. PAJ Publications.
14. Undes, A. (1978). *Essays in Folkloristics*. Meerut: Archana Publications.