

H-France Review Vol. 9 (October 2009), No. 128

Eli Friedlander, *J. J. Rousseau: An Afterlife of Words*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2004. xi + 160 pp. Notes, works cited, and index. \$46.50 (hb). ISBN 0-674-01514-2.

Review by Sean C. Goodlett, Fitchburg State College.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* has received sporadic attention in the last several decades, and only the occasional study has approached the book as a work of philosophy.[1] Eli Friedlander attempts this and something more ambitious: he has sought to make "manifest the idea of the book as a concentrated perspective on life, on the world, rather than a partial account of Rousseau's last days that must be balanced against his other works" (p. 6). Such a reading of the *Rêveries* offers Friedlander the opportunity to explore autobiography as "a possible style of philosophy" (p. 1) and to examine the "refraction" of Rousseau's other writings through this last work (p. 6). In engaging the *Rêveries* thus, Friedlander offers new life, and an "afterlife" of meaning, to the text.

Rousseau likely began to compose his final autobiographical work in the autumn of 1776, and on his death roughly two years later he left completed drafts of the first six, and fragments of the remaining four, *promenades*. Finding himself in the position of literary inheritor, René-Louis, marquis de Girardin, sought to rescue the unfinished manuscript from obscurity:

Nous n'avons pu rassembler avec de soins extrêmes que quelques Cartes ecrites au crayon et a moitié effacées, et quelques Chiffons de papier a moitié dechirés et Couverts de ratures et qu'après avoir deviné avec beaucoup de peine j'ai trouvé n'avoir rapport qu'a un petit ouvrage commencé dans lequel [Rousseau] rassembloit Les reveries de ses promenades depuis environ un an.[2]

The disorderly state of the manuscript greatly concerned the officious marquis, who sought to "improve upon" this and other unprinted autobiographical works, including the *Confessions*. Nowhere was his intervention more direct and egregious, though, than with his suggested revisions to the *Rêveries*.[3]

Rousseau himself was largely silent during the composition of the *Rêveries*. Roughly a dozen letters in the philosopher's hand survive for the period between August, 1776, and his death in early July, 1778, and in these only oblique references are made to the *promenades*. However, lengthy reflections on his solitary walks are found within one of his four famous autobiographical letters to Chrétien-Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes. In January of 1762, and at the age of fifty, Rousseau had insisted that it was not "les plaisirs de ma jeunesse" but rather "mes promenades Solitaires" that preoccupied him. The walks enabled the philosopher to people an imaginary world, "et chassant bien Loin L'opinion, Les préjugés, toutes les passions factices, je transportois dans les aziles de la nature des hommes dignes de Les habiter." [4] Encouraged to publish such peripatetic reflections by Malesherbes, Rousseau eventually made these autobiographical "sketches" the basis of the *Confessions*, a work which he intended to appear in print only posthumously. [5]

As for the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, Friedlander insists the work was never intended for the public. In the first *promenade*, the Genevan philosopher tells his readers that “the work is not *for us*” (p. 2): “je n’écris mes rêveries que pour moi.”[6] How then to separate reader from author when the only reader *is* the author? Friedlander’s answer rests on an examination of solitude. He views the various *promenades* as a discovery of “repose in the midst of persecution,” an embrace of an all-encompassing solitude and thus a state that is “utterly and completely hopeless” (pp. 12-13). In rejecting the reader, Friedlander concludes that Rousseau has only drawn him in, rendering the act of reading the *Rêveries* impossible unless the reader “transform[s] his thinking in order to become the book’s addressee” (p. 18). As Dena Goodman has argued, Rousseau was a master of such “univocal” rhetoric. In his dispute with David Hume during the 1760s, the philosopher conjures (in her words) a “false public.” In the case of the *Rêveries*, author and reader are (to paraphrase Goodman again) “always just sides of Rousseau.”[7]

For Friedlander, the problem of just how one reads the *Rêveries* is resolved in part through the sixth *promenade*. In this walk Rousseau reflects upon an act of charity that becomes an obligation, and he concludes that only in proffering it to a stranger is a gift freely given. Because Friedlander views the *Rêveries* as the product of abandonment, it becomes just such “a gift freely given.” The heightened transparency of the work, the “open ordinariness” of its peculiar autobiographical nature, and the “complete exposure” of the text only reinforce this sense of abandonment by Rousseau. In accepting the *Rêveries* as the product of abandonment, the reader’s task is no longer impossible, even if he is prevented from either appropriating or mastering the text (p. 72).

Friedlander’s preoccupation throughout *An Afterlife of Words* with the problem of reading the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* is merited. Making sense of this text — like the more problematic *Rousseau, juge de Jean-Jacques* — is and has historically been a difficult task. As he asks his readers, just what is Rousseau up to in the *Rêveries*? Evoking “the mood of a reverie”? Capturing the “sound of the soul itself”? Or is it simply that Rousseau seeks “the pleasure of [his] own company”? Here, an exploration of the act of writing down the various reveries aids in salvaging the meaning of the work. Friedlander views a reverie as a “spontaneous mental movement, essentially fluid, smooth, and lyrical,” and because its occurrence signals a “distracted state opposed to the concentration demanded by writing” the act of writing down the reverie necessarily becomes an act of re-creation, allowing for the regeneration of meaning (pp. 26-7).

However, a fully rescued reading of the *Rêveries* would involve “bringing the agitation of meaning to rest by concentrating it intensely” (p. 94). For Friedlander this translates in part into freeing Rousseau’s final autobiographical text from literary-critical “attachments and entanglements.” It also means transplanting the experience of the reveries into a reader’s memory. Friedlander insists that the meaning on the page (*feuille*) — like the leaves of plants Rousseau randomly collects in the sixth *promenade* — “can be detached from its original life.” Such transplanting allowed Rousseau himself to “rekindle” past reveries. When applied to the reading of the *Rêveries* by other readers this method “might bring meaning to rest beyond intention” (pp. 82-3). In the last years of his life, and particularly after the carriage accident in October 1776, the philosopher had given up hope of controlling the meaning of his works. But Friedlander goes farther. He implies that Rousseau’s act of abandonment exposes the reader himself to being “revealed” by the book (p. 105), and thus reading the *Rêveries* becomes a new form of engagement with Rousseau and potentially oneself.

Moreover, Friedlander feels it is Rousseau’s meditation on existence (the search for an answer to the question, “What am I?”) that gives purpose to this final autobiographical work. If he is to take the *Rêveries* seriously as philosophy, Friedlander must therefore confront Rousseau’s descent into a final “monadic” existence (p. 21). The solitude of his last years, he argues, returns Jean-Jacques to a State of Nature. Alone there, the Genevan discovers what Nature means for him to be, while the writing of autobiography enables the collection of these thoughts and the re/collection of reveries. Moreover, it is here in this final solitary moment that Rousseau — ostensibly the only intended reader of these reveries

-- discovers a "higher self [in] the text" (p.17). Not simply Natural Man, but "the exception to the social law" and "the singular" (p. 20) emerge in the *Rêveries*. It is, incidentally, in treating such concepts as Natural Man that Friedlander most successfully "refracts" the Genevan philosopher's earlier writings.

*An Afterlife of Words* falls short as a comprehensive, even coherent, analysis of the *Rêveries*, but this is not Friedlander's intention. Neither does he hope to interpret the work in the light of "the material conditions of its production [or] the state of affairs that gave rise to the writing of the work" (p. 3). Readers looking for such a critique will have to go elsewhere.[8] Instead, Friedlander engages in philosophy (p. 2), and his treatment of the problem of reading concludes in a "reversal" whereby the reader of the *Rêveries* is in turn *read by the book* (p. 105). The "afterlife" that Friedlander captures is thus not only Rousseau's attempt "to use his own past fund of life, [to] feed on his own substance" when re/collecting his reveries (p. 28), but (as he phrases it) a movement of meaning beyond the life of Rousseau and the pages of the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*.

## NOTES

[1] An exemplary case is Michael Davis, *The Autobiography of Philosophy: Rousseau's The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

[2] Letter from Girardin to Paul-Claude Moulto, 5 September, 1778, in *Correspondance complète de Jean Jacques Rousseau* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1965-1998), vol. xli, p. 262. R.A. Leigh adds that Girardin had "entre les mains une mise au net des six premières *Promenades*, avec un brouillon du reste" (note "f" in the "notes explicatives" to Appendice 680, CC, Vol. xl, pp. 352-3). Marcel Raymond offers as solid a chronology for the composition of the various *promenades* as is possible in his introduction to the *Rêveries* within *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959-1995), vol. 1, pp. lxxxv-lxxxvi. The notes Rousseau took in composing the *Rêveries* betray a distracted state, and they provide Friedlander a fascinating book cover: a draft of a *promenade* on a playing card—apparently, the eight of hearts.

[3] Raymond Birn, *Forging Rousseau: Print, Commerce, and Cultural Manipulation in the Late Enlightenment* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 2001), pp. 117-23 and 137; see esp. note 49, p. 122, where Birn insists that by the early 1780s "Girardin wished to edit the *Rêveries* as an act of vengeance" against Marie-Thérèse Levasseur, Rousseau's companion.

[4] Letter from Rousseau to Malesherbes, *Correspondance*, Vol. x, p. 52-8. The so-called "autobiographical" letters (Nos. 1622, 1633, 1650, and 1654, composed on 4, 12, 26 and 28 January, 1778, respectively) appear conveniently in *Œuvres*, Vol. 1, pp. 1130-47 and are translated in Appendix 1 of the fifth volume of *The Collected Writings of Rousseau* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1995), pp. 572-83. For the surviving letters in the last two years of Rousseau's life, see Vol. xl of *Correspondance*.

[5] Rousseau purportedly told his longtime friend Paul-Claude Moulto to withhold the publication of the second part of the *Confessions* until "le dix-neuvième siècle et après la mort de ceux qui y étaient nommés." As for the first part of these "mémoires," the philosopher felt that it "ne dit de mal que de moi," and thus it could appear on his death ("Entretiens entre JJ et Moulto," Appendice 667, *Correspondance*, Vol. xl, p. 315). For the letter from Malesherbes to Rousseau urging publication see *Correspondance*, Vol. ix, p. 354-6.

[6] *Œuvres*, Vol. 1, p. 1001.

[7] Dena Goodman, "The Hume-Rousseau Affair: From Private *Querelle* to Public *Procès*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 25(1991-1992), p. 184. Friedlander echoes Goodman when he claims that "the

autobiographical dialogue, *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques*, leaves no room for ... an external standpoint by occupying all the positions in a court of judgment" (p. 15).

[8] *The Rêveries* continues to inspire serious study. See most recently the collection of essays edited by John C. O'Neal, *The Nature of Rousseau's Rêveries: Physical, Human, Aesthetic* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 2008).

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ISSN 1553-9172