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Vladimer Jalagonia

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU: LITERATURE, POLITICS AND THE ECONOMY OF THE LIE

ABSTRACT

The following paper seeks to develop – or rather discern – what could be called the politics of literature in Rousseau's work, by attempting to situate the contradictory nature of the faculty of the imagination in relation to the possibility of lying. While the *Rêveries* frame literary fiction as a harmless lie, even a redemptive deployment of the imagination, the *Deuxième Discours* inscribes the imagination into the very logic of historical (as) violence. From this tension, the paper argues that Rousseau opens the possibility for a politics of literature: a critical praxis of a fiction that contests the re/production of the ideological foundations of law, property, and inequality, which fiction itself enabled. It will appear then, as I will argue, that Rousseau's description of a natural, pre-historic condition without (the possibility of) fiction is itself inscribed in this battle of fiction against fiction: the politics of literature.

KEYWORDS

Rousseau, Derrida, fiction, lie, politics, literature, inequality, history, imagination.

Introduction

To answer the question of whether an innocent lie is possible, in *Les Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire*, Rousseau develops an answer that is, in a sense, a repetition of the traditional elaboration of the problem. Indeed, it is the intention behind a lie – to harm and deceive another – that determines the moral status of an act of lying (*la mauvaise foi*). An innocent lie, therefore, would be possible in the absence of the intention to lie. Literature, which produces nothing but the simple play of the imagination, escapes the problem of justice, and so, for Rousseau, fiction amounts to an innocent lie. However, the innocence of this play of the imagination – which, in a way, invents a new (imaginary) world with its alternative history – would appear irreconcilable and wholly incompatible with Rousseau's anthropology, in which the play of language, the imagination, absence, image, etc., is considered perversion and absolute corruption. History, as a process of denaturalization (as a lie), was, in Rousseau's view, in

fact initiated in the virginity of the natural state by the free play of the imagination: even if it is property that institutes the social order, this institution itself, as I will argue, is impossible without the possibility of a certain political fiction that in turn is enabled by the faculty of the imagination. There is the pre-social origin of the social, and the work of fiction has already begun there.

In the following essay, I will attempt to reconcile this apparent contradiction between naturalness and artificiality, the primitive state and the play of the imagination (innocent fiction), by placing the concept of the innocent lie and the imagination alongside Rousseau's philosophy of history and, more specifically, his anthropology of the natural state and his description of history as the becoming of the original lie – the establishment of private property. The politicization of literature will be the general horizon of this effort of reconciliation. The first section of the essay will deal with the classification of the lie and will attempt to highlight the imagination as a possibility of the lie itself: even if, for Rousseau, literature, fiction, and deception are not interchangeable terms, the imagination is their common possibility, because of which the clear-cut distribution between being-innocent and being-guilty will be open to uncontrollable confusions. Thus, the reading of *Réveries* not only enables a description or placement of the faculty of the imagination and its relation to literature, but also, by underlining the contradictory nature of this description when compared to that found in the *Deuxième Discours*, opens up the possibility of the question of the politicization of literature. The second section, thus, will analyze Rousseau's anthropology, focusing mainly on his description of man and his capacity for the imagination in the natural state. Finally, in the third and fourth parts, I will deal with the structure of the establishment of the original lie and sketch out the possibility of resistance as a historically situated strategy – one in which the politicization of literature will be conceived as, to use a Derridean term, an economic function of this strategy: it is within this strategy that the very description of the natural state must be inscribed.

Lie, intentionality and imagination

“Lecteurs, je puis me tromper moi-même, mais non pas vous tromper volontairement.” (Rousseau 2003: 188-189)

After finding the book (sent to him by a friend) with the annotation *vitam vero imedenti* in his papers, Rousseau suspects that it was an ironic remark and relates it, on the one hand, to his life motto² and, on the other, to the memory of

1 My translation: “Dear readers, I may deceive myself, but I cannot deceive you deliberately.”

2 Rousseau (2003: 188–189): “*Vitam impendere vero* : voilà la devise que j’ai choisie, et dont je me sens digne.”

a childhood lie³ that Rousseau had never stopped thinking about. And this is how we immerse ourselves in the discourse that Rousseau unfolds around the definition of truth/lies and the right to lie in general. Two questions emerge instantaneously and define the style of questioning:

There are two questions to be looked at here, both of them equally important. Firstly, when and how should one tell the truth to others, since one is not always obliged to tell it? Secondly, are there cases when one can deceive people blamelessly? Of course everyone knows how to answer the second question – negatively in books, where the most austere morals cost the author nothing; affirmatively in life, where the morals of books are seen as idle and impracticable chatter. So, disregarding these conflicting authorities, let me seek by my own principles to find my answers to these questions. (Rousseau 2004 : 63)

Thus, with these two decisive questions, Rousseau excludes at once two possibilities for answering the problem of the definition of a lie: on the one hand, it is the dogmatism of formalism that imposes an abstract obligation, thereby disregarding both the singularity and the specificity of a human situation. Nevertheless, on the other hand, Rousseau does not go so far as to suggest a certain relativism, which would dissolve the boundary between truth and falsehood, since what is here strictly at issue is precisely “a reliable rule” (Rousseau 2004: 66) that would enable one to discern the value of the obligation to speak the truth in each instance. Therefore, although at the beginning of his speech Rousseau has already set aside two possible avenues of response, his attempt negates neither the generality of the rule nor the singularity and relativity of the situation. Quite on the contrary: he seeks to develop a path between these two possibilities – a path where they may, at last, be reconciled.

At the same time, however, where the right to lie and the value of the obligation to tell the truth have emerged, Rousseau introduces a differentiation between three types of truth, and clearly, he is primarily interested in the third. As the first type of truth—abstract truth, mainly covering scientific knowledge – belongs indispensably to the essence of human life, its concealment, dissimulation, or suppression is strictly forbidden: “In its general and abstract sense truth is the most precious of our possessions. Without it man is blind; it is the eye of reason” (Rousseau 2014: 63). The a priori rule here defines and establishes that everyone is entitled to abstract truth, and to deny it is absolutely prohibited. But indifferent and sterile truth (Rousseau 2004: 64) – for example, the color of the sand at the bottom of the sea – will be treated quite differently: since it neither influences nor concerns existence, and so does not affect anyone, it remains outside Rousseau’s attention. Hence, it is the third type of truth (or the duty to tell the truth), whose concealment has an existential effect on others, and here the obligation of truth-telling must be thoroughly intertwined with the possibility of justice:

3 On the stolen ribbon and the Marion accusation against Rousseau, see Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les confessions*, II livres (2009: 79–129).

Something that is good for nothing cannot be owed to anybody; for something to be owed to somebody, it must be actually or potentially useful. Thus, the truth which we owe to one another is that which concerns justice, and it is a profanation of the holy name of truth to apply it to trivial things of which the existence is a matter of general indifference and the knowledge totally useless. Truth without any possible usefulness can therefore never be something we owe to one another; it follows therefore that anyone who conceals or disguises it is not telling a lie. (Rousseau 2004: 64)

However, establishing the relationship between truth and justice, or between the lie and its singular effect, does not answer the questions that opened the meditation, because it is intrinsically difficult to fix and calculate the effect of the lie/truth; in other words, this effect does not always manifest in the subject's immediacy, since there is a structural limitation of appearance irreducible to the empirical limitation of a subject. And Rousseau confirms it: "Apart from the fact that these effects are not always clear or easily ascertained, they are as infinitely varied as the circumstances in which the words are spoken" (Rousseau 2004: 66). Still, this does not produce a perplexity for Rousseau. The safe point will thus be displaced and relocated from this exteriority – between discourse or pronunciation and its effect on the other – toward the subject's interiority. In this way, Rousseau has replaced the space of problematization and introduced it into the immanence of the subject.

As the previous quotation indicated, Rousseau provides the definition of a lie in relation to signification and discourse, insofar as the latter first places the imaginary in the place of reality (in the subject) and, after that, externalizing it in signification (writing, spoken words). It is, therefore, the correspondence between discourse and reality, between signification⁴ and factuality that defines truth. If the exteriority between the subject of discourse, on the one hand, and the other – or the effect on the other – on the other hand, demobilized the possibility of finding a solution to the problem of the intentionality of discourse, here it is the will hidden behind the discourse that decides the moral status of any discourse, and thus also the innocence of the lie:

But their degree of goodness or malice can only be gauged and determined by the intention that produced them. Untruthful talk is only falsehood when deception is intended, and even the intent to deceive, far from being invariably linked to the desire to injure, is often produced by exactly the opposite motive. (Rousseau 2004: 66)

According to this definition, the forbidden lie cannot be equated with a break or an accidental discrepancy between discourse and reality, but rather it is only the motivation – or rather, the will – to lie that is scorned by Rousseau.

4 To thematize the relationship between truth, lies and language is typical of the spirit of Rousseau's century, and this presupposes not only the privilege given to the question of language in relation to truth and lies, but also the theme of the innocent lie. On this point, see Starobinski (2012: 166–186). Also Lisse (2016: 75–105).

Questioning lies in relation to justice, therefore, concerns only a certain kind of lie, or, more precisely, a certain intention to lie. “The truthful man” (Rousseau 2004: 69) completely identifies truth and justice with one another, but he does not rule out all lies – or more precisely, the possibility of lying without the intention of wanting to lie: “He will therefore feel no qualms in telling occasional lies about things of no importance, nor will he regard these as lies, but he will never tell lies to the advantage or disadvantage of himself or others.” (Rousseau 2004: 70). Consequently (and this is the main result of the passage from the exteriority to the interiority of intentionality), if the desire to affect the other negatively spoils the speech and corrupts the lie, then the absence of this desire will, of course, purify them and generate a becoming-innocent of the lie:

To lie to one’s own advantage is an imposture, to lie to the advantage of others is a fraud, and to lie to the detriment of others is a slander – this is the worst kind of lie. To lie without advantage or disadvantage to oneself or others is not to lie; it is not falsehood but fiction. (Rousseau 2004: 66)

Rousseau’s motto of “devoting one’s life to the truth” must be translated as a vocation to watch over one’s intentions and to prevent them from having a destructive effect on others. Admittedly, there would still be a disagreement between discourse and reality, between meaning and truth. But since such discourse would involve only the free play of the imagination, it would not intentionally or voluntarily affect others. At the very moment when the other is suspended in the discourse, when the exteriority *between* myself and the other is maintained, the lie – as a dissimulation of the real thing – would become totally innocent; it would be beyond the question of lying. In interiority, the play of the imagination does not concern justice, which, consequently, focuses precisely on the relationship between myself and others. But if Rousseau remains wary of the dangers that could be generated by fiction/literature, it is because the latter could falsify the “moral truth” (Rousseau 2004: 68), which exclusively concerns the relationship between the self and the other. Fiction is the lie that does not possess the will to lie; it falsifies, substitutes, and produces the simulacrum – but this process of substitution is marked and indicated as such; it signals itself as such and presents itself in the light of day. The lie of fiction says that it is a lie – that is to say, fiction does not lie insofar as its lying status is never lost sight of: since these fictions are “lies which would go against justice and the truth we owe to others,” and since Rousseau insists that we “keep to fictions which are a matter of equal indifference to myself and everyone else” (Rousseau 2004: 71), the play of the imagination “does not affect justice in any way.” (Rousseau 2004: 68). Given these differentiations and the exclusivity attached to the will to harm, the unforgettable lie of his childhood no longer appears to Rousseau as an immoral lie: “Never has a *premeditated* lie approached my mind, never have I lied to my own advantage; but I have often lied out of shame.” (Rousseau 2004: 71. Emphasis added)

The premeditation *prior* to the expression and realization of the discourse that deceives presupposes, of course, a possibility of temporalization and an exteriority between the self and the other – and therefore, a heterogeneity between two temporalizations. The *premeditation* and production of the lie in interiority, which would currently define the notion of will, must presuppose temporality and the capacity for the de-presentation of the past and the anticipation of the future (Husserl 2013: 31–41). In other words, nothing could be substituted or falsified without the faculty of transgression beyond the limitation of appearance in *hic et nunc* toward possible and imaginary appearance. The lie appears in the world as an externalization of premeditated falsification, but not as a simple imitation or interpretation of the thing in the world; it distorts, reconfigures, *re-elaborates* moments of reality, the temporal order, etc., of the world. By reshuffling the sequence of the process, interrupting it with an unfaithful interpretation, and introducing an inverted image of the reality of things, the lie proposes an alternative scenario. If Rousseau defined the lie as the problem of non-correspondence between two orders (discourse and reality), it is because he assigned to man the anthropological capacity to imagine several possibilities, thus introducing into the order of things fiction as the falsification of order. The lie, therefore, is the result of the *bricolage* of the imagination.

So there are two forms of lie: the lie that lies and thus would evoke the eye of justice, on the one hand, and the lie that exists without the will to want to lie to the other, on the other; they both reconnect in the same condition of their possibility, and this is why the answers to the two questions on which the discussion was opened appear here, in a way, to be both certain and confused at the same time. On the one hand, the right to lie would be acceptable in a singular situation, if it were possible to have absolute certainty that this lie would preserve the other from a devastating effect. Rousseau provides us with two examples of this type of lie from his personal life (which saved people from moral, economic, and physical harm) (Rousseau 2004: 72–88). But given that the distance between me and the other is infinite, and since the effect is never available in its entire certainty, the responsibility taken on by telling a lie is nevertheless incommensurable. On the other hand, the problem with literature, with fiction, is that it does not fit into the legal differentiation between punishable and innocent lying, because the dazzling aura of fiction has the inevitable possibility of seducing the subject (and Rousseau himself), either without obtaining the subject's acquiescence or with deliberate affirmation. The textual dispensability from the original intentionality, its aesthetic potency, and the possibility of its substitutive power demobilizes the differentiations that Rousseau proposed in order to stabilize the difference between the lie that concerns justice and the lie that is innocent. And Rousseau himself confirms this malicious and seductive incitation of literature. After indicating at the beginning of the *Promenade*:

However, on going over my life more carefully, I was very surprised by the number of things of my own invention which I remembered presenting as true at the

very time when my heart was proud of my love of truth and I was sacrificing my security, my best interests and my own person to this love of truth with a disinterestedness for which I know no parallel among men. (Rousseau 2004: 62)

And he concludes the chapter thus:

when the pleasure of writing led me to embellish reality with ornaments of my own invention, I acted even more wrongly, because to decorate truth with fables is in fact to disfigure it. (Rousseau 2004: 77).

The fact that the innocent and guilty lies here do not seem to be separated by a clear-cut demarcating line points back to their common origin: the imagination. The mere amusement of the imagination and its deployment for the substitution of reality to affect the other negatively are structurally open and available for each other. The pleasures of literature are thus always already open to its own opposite: *literature cannot be exclusively neither guilty nor innocent*.

But, furthermore, literary fiction – even in the case of innocent fiction, which is, in a certain sense, virulent in the imagination without limits and therefore absolute substitution – appears to be irreconcilable with Rousseau's anthropological description of primitive man and the prehistoric natural condition. On the one hand, if fiction possesses the power to seduce the subject, the certainty and presence of intentionality (as demonstrated in the last quotation), and if the becoming-guilty of the innocent lie is evoked when it touches or intervenes in the realm of historical truth, justice, etc., then why does Rousseau present fiction as an innocent lie? On the other hand, the absence of the will to lie – or pure fiction, if such a thing exists – would not protect it from participating in what he called the destruction, perversion, catastrophe of history as alienation and the corruption of the natural condition through the movement of substitution. Is literature not going to take part in – and even accelerate or aggravate – this catastrophic development of/as history?

Even if the distinction between falsehoods that hurt people and those that do not were to stand – and presupposing that one could control or reliably calculate a possible effect of an innocent lie – there is always the same possibility at work in both of them, which means that the communication and unnoticed interplay between them has always already started (not, or not only, in their effects, but) in their common origin. The contamination between them is always already an open possibility, and this possibility is a structural necessity. Thus, if the association between the criminal lie and the innocent lie, in IV *Promenade*, appears in the capacity of the imagination (as their condition of possibility), the place and function of the imagination itself in *Deuxième discours* will be even more malicious and ambivalent: it has at the same time founded and stolen the natural state; it corrupts history and provides the means against the historical violence of imposture. When this discrepancy between the two types of description is considered, it is clear that imagination has a paradoxical function in Rousseau's *oeuvre*; but this paradoxicality also enables the politicization of the function of literature in the struggle against the naturalization

of a fundamental lie, using the means provided by the history initiated by the catastrophe in the first place. This deployment of violence against itself is what I will be developing in the coming chapters, following Jacques Derrida's infamous reading: the economy of imposture and of the violence of (as) history.⁵

Natural state, compassion and imagination

*"...the book of nature which never lies.
All that comes from her will be true..."*

(Rousseau 2002: 89)

Man's natural state, in its first approximations, has generally been described by Rousseau in a negative way: as the total absence of the historical and social condition. But, strictly speaking, what defines the natural state in the final analysis is not only the absence of history, but foremost the impossibility of appearance as such – that is, a present presence without memory and anticipation of the future, without the condition for the possibility of history and temporalization. The exclusion of absence, whether in the form of the past or the future, constitutes a life without the experience or the appearance of that life, and therefore without a relation to death as absolute absence:

he fears no evils but pain, and hunger; I say pain, and not death; for no animal, merely as such, will ever know what it is to die, and the knowledge of death, and of its terrors, is one of the first acquisitions made by man, in consequence of his deviating from the animal state. (Rousseau 2002: 97)

By excluding temporalization, and therefore the becoming-finitude of life, absolute presence neither allows nor demands substitution in order to preserve itself from the terror of death. The image, which necessarily presupposes the capacity for representation and thus an internal lack within presence, would disturb and surpass this absolute tranquility.

In his way, immediate existence in nature knows no lack and, especially, no lack in desire. There would therefore be no need to compensate for or make up any lack. After the destruction of the primitive condition, historicity enters – within which desire intersects with the imagination, which then never ceases to reproduce the new object of desire; thus establishing an immeasurable distance between the power to satisfy desire and the object of desire. Desire would itself become inventive and creative. Man's misfortune in history lies, paradoxically but also logically, in the infinite capacity of the imagination, which will always exceed the capacity to fill this lack and realize an image. In other words, primitive man's desire is more a physical instinct than desire *per se*; the emergence of physical needs and their satisfaction happen at the same

5 On the notion of the economy of violence, see Derrida 2014: 172–180.

time, and so desire, deploying a capacity to invent or multiply the desired object, does not disturb primitive man's immediacy:

his heart asks nothing from him. His moderate wants are so easily supplied with what he everywhere finds ready to his hand, and he stands at such a distance from the degree of knowledge requisite to covet more, that he can neither have foresight nor curiosity... His soul, which nothing disturbs, gives itself up entirely to the consciousness of its present existence, without any thought of even the nearest futurity; and his projects, equally confined with his views, scarce extend to the end of the day... (Rousseau 2002: 97–98).

The imagination, which can give rise to absence and therefore posit an object always in the distance and beyond immediate perception, disturbs the immediacy between desire and its object. It is distinct from primitive existence: the simple instinct, as the absence of exteriority between memory/future and desire, is in fact desire without imagination. Rousseau's description of natural conditions is principally understood and defined as the absence of imagination and representation as such. Therefore, without any lack, natural man does not know the image as representation – which would re-present what does not exist in the immediacy of presence – and thus remains outside any artificiality of substitution that appeared, after the catastrophe, with the becoming of history. We are, of course, a long way from literature, and hence *from the free play of the imagination that produces the innocent lie*: that which creates a world different from the real and, without a fixed edge, transgresses and transforms current events – and sometimes, without taking actual history as a starting point, invents an autochthonous history and an alternative scenario. But the fable or literature that evokes and produces desire, at this point, appears as a perversion and an absolute evil, and hence we can see here the discrepancy we were signaling all along in full force between *Promenade* and *Deuxième discours*.

In his *Deuxième Discours*, Rousseau, as is well known, takes aim at Hobbesian anthropology (as well as that of Locke and Pufendorf, see: Goldschmidt 1974: 495–509), which, in his view, manifests a radical and dangerous prejudice. According to this critique, when Hobbes tried to describe the condition and psychology of primordial man, his attempt was not sufficiently radical and, consequently, in describing primitive man, he imposed on him characteristics that were already historical (rationality, the ability to calculate, etc.), which enabled him, on the other hand, to justify an ideological lie of the existing historical condition (Althusser 2006: 303). Rousseau, in contrast to the concept represented by *Homo homini lupus est*, introduced the notion of pity as man's second fundamental and natural instinct, which, to some extent, moderated and regulated the first natural instinct – self-preservation and self-love. Pity, which expresses itself principally in compassion and solidarity toward others, prevents or hinders the outbreak of hostility among human beings and hence the state of war. The state of war, as Hobbes described it, belongs, according to Rousseau, to history, which arises only with the image that disrupts the

simplicity of instinct and the immediacy of givenness. Rationality awakens, and the voice of pity is buried. In contrast to the historical world, the possibility of a balance between pity and self-love is another definition of the natural state.

But it is precisely at this point – when Rousseau is, in fact, trying to describe the natural condition – that he delivers a description of the condition for the possibility of denaturalization as the beginning of substitution in place of absence, lack, and representation.

Pity does not need the intervention of reflection; indeed, it is not the result of a certain intentionality or will, but, on the contrary, it functions instinctively and instantaneously as “the cry of nature” (Rousseau 2002: 101). But how will pity for the other be possible without a minimum distance between myself and the other – a distance that is not just an empirical space, but also a phenomenological one? A certain identification *between* the two must be established, which presupposes a phenomenological separation, allowing pity to appear. Identification with the misery of the other, therefore, requires the subject to possess the capacity to re-present, hypothetically, the situation of the other, with whom identification *then* takes place. The image thus appears in the subject’s interiority and enables a representative joining with the other: in this way, the image, representation, temporality, and absence settle into the immediacy of the natural state and, of course, disturb and contaminate it. Rousseau himself asserted the necessity of the imagination for the functioning of pity in the famous Chapter IX of his *Essay on the Origin of Language*:

Les affections sociales ne se développent en nous qu’avec nos lumières. La pitié, bien que naturelle au cœur de l’homme, resterait éternellement inactive sans l’imagination qui la met en jeu. Comment nous laissons-nous é mouvoir à la pitié ? En nous transportant hors de nous-mêmes ; en nous identifiant avec l’être souffrant. Nous ne souffrons qu’autant que nous jugeons qu’il souffre ; ce n’est pas dans nous, c’est dans lui que nous souffrons... Celui qui n’imagine rien ne se sent que lui-même ; il est seul au milieu du genre humain. (Rousseau 2015: 124)⁶

Thus, paradoxically, the naturalness of the human is activated by the faculty that is unthinkable without the possibility of absence and substitution. If the savage eventually unfolds and develops its difference from the animal, it is because it possesses the internal condition for denaturalization, which does not appear by chance or come from the outside, but, on the contrary, is inscribed “au cœur de l’homme” in his natural state. If the natural catastrophe does not produce the denaturalization of the animal as such, but rather humanization as the denaturalization of man, it is because the possibility of linguistic substitution and the temporalization of the becoming of history as the concealment

6 My translation: “Social affections develop in us only by our own light. Pity, though natural to the human heart, would remain eternally inactive without the imagination that brings it into play. How do we allow ourselves to be moved to pity? By transporting us out of ourselves; by identifying with the suffering being. We suffer only insofar as we judge that he suffers; it is not in us, but in him that we suffer... He who imagines nothing feels only himself; he is alone in the midst of humans.”

of nature has always already been installed in him. Thus, whereas the desire of the savage never went beyond the actuality of presence, the capacity of the imagination would destroy the tranquility of this desire: “Comme la raison a peu de forces, l’intérêt seul n’en a pas tant qu’on croit. L’imagination seule est active et l’on n’excite les passions que par l’imagination.” (Rousseau 2019, 851)⁷ If the imagination was defined in the forms of literary fiction as an innocent form of play, here it appears as the condition of denaturalization and catastrophe, and hence the distance between the two textual descriptions is immense.

The “faculty of improvement” (*faculté de se perfectionner*) (Rousseau 2002: 96) and speech – two characteristics that distinguish man from animals – are not, of course, external to the imagination. Covetousness, aimed at acquiring the desired object, and desire, which continually invents and multiplies its objects, are at the root of the development of man’s intellectual, physical, social, etc., capacities. And given that Rousseau envisaged the function of language as a sensitive, depictive function of a directly present object, the image implies a representational capacity that had accordingly always already operated as a language. But it is now, when the imagination and the ability for perfectibility intertwine in the dialectical movement of development, that language and the use of “the inflections of the voice” (Rousseau 2002: 101) become inevitable and appear as necessary – because “the moment the imagination stops, the mind can continue to function only with the aid of discourse” (Rousseau 2002: 103). Language is already inscribed in the image, but the imagination is sustained only through language. The appearance of the image, on the one hand, has the effect of upsetting, deceiving, and hiding the purity of the original condition. It is with the image, with the possibility of discourse and, therefore, with the disruption of absolute immediacy, that the problem of the correspondence between representation and the real world is born. The difference between truth and lie was established as soon as primordial naturalness was destroyed, and this is why, according to Rousseau, substitution – as imposture, dissimulation, and deterioration – is total. The concept of history as the lie and hence as an unstoppable propagation of images or distantiations would not be critically thinkable without the presupposition of a certain naturalness, which, for Rousseau, despite the devastating process, has been maintained throughout history – but always disfigured and deformed in self-love. There is a process of progressive substitution and deformation of primordial naturalness, which nevertheless, in a way, moderates the devastating effect of this lie. And the possibility of fiction is, in fact, inscribed in this inevitable process of substitution. But, on the other hand, the simplicity of the antithesis between pity and self-love becomes even more complicated as soon as we consider the first imposture in history as a certain fixation of the movement that had already begun with imagination. Thus, man’s anthropological capacity

7 My translation: “As reason has little power, interest alone does not possess as much as we esteem. The imagination alone is active, and passions are only aroused by the imagination.”

for imagination⁸ both constitutes the naturalness of pity and opens the door to substitution, denaturalization, and, in effect, aims at the institutionalization of the lie (property, law, state, etc.). Imagination is the battleground between these two – indispensable to each other – extremes, and the political function of fiction is installed in this paradoxical placement of imagination: fiction is, simultaneously, the destructive potency and the possibility of resistance to the effects of that destruction. This is the function that the following chapters will explore, respectively.

Fiction, original lie and the establishment of law

“What therefore is precisely the subject of this discourse? It is to point out, in the progress of things, that moment, when, Right taking place of violence, nature became subject to law.” (Rousseau 2002: 87).

Reflection and rationality, as the ability to find a suitable means of achieving the desired object, are caught up in the game. The balance established between pity and self-love is upset: “It is reason that engenders self-love, and reflection that strengthens it; it is reason that makes man shrink into himself” (Rousseau 2002: 107). The emergence of reason and the rupture between the subject and the world (of the other) lead to an impasse, bringing closer the act of appropriation as the origin of fundamental imposture and the foundation of a history that is nothing but the evolution of this imposture. Thus, unlike the first part of the *Deuxième Discours*, which was devoted to describing the natural condition, the second aims to present the history of humanity as the adventure of a lie: private property (as “les objets interposés” (Starobinski 1973: 38)). Rousseau opens this second part with the following paragraph:

8 Derrida (1967: 264) : “Échappant à toute influence réelle et extérieure, faculté des signes et des apparences, l’imagination se pervertit elle-même. Elle est le sujet de la perversion. Elle éveille la faculté virtuelle mais elle la transgresse aussitôt. Elle met au jour la puissance qui se réservait mais, en lui montrant son au-delà, en la « devançant », elle lui signifie son impuissance. Elle anime la faculté de jouir mais elle inscrit une différence entre le désir et la puissance. Si nous désirons au-delà de notre pouvoir de satisfaction, l’origine de ce surplus et de cette différence se nomme imagination. Cela nous permet de déterminer une fonction du concept de nature ou de primitivité : c’est l’équilibre entre la réserve et le désir. Équilibre impossible puisque le désir ne peut s’éveiller et sortir de sa réserve que par l’imagination qui rompt aussi l’équilibre. Cet impossible – autre nom de la nature – reste donc une limite.” My translation: “Escaping all real and external influence, the faculty of signs and appearances, the imagination perverts itself. It is the subject of perversion. It awakens the virtual faculty but immediately transgresses it. It brings to light the power that was reserved for itself but, by showing it its beyond, by ‘pre-empting’ it, it signifies its powerlessness. It animates the faculty of enjoyment, but it inscribes a difference between desire and power. If we desire beyond our power to satisfy, the origin of this surplus and this difference is called the imagination. This enables us to determine a function of the concept of nature or primitiveness: it is the balance between reserve and desire. This balance is impossible because desire can only be awakened and come out of its reserve by the imagination, which also breaks the balance. This impossible balance – another name for nature – therefore remains a limit.”

The first man, who after enclosing a piece of ground, took it into his head to say, *this is mine*, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society. How many crimes, how many wars, how many murders, how many misfortunes and horrors, would that man have saved the human species, who pulling up the stakes or filling up the ditches should have cried to his fellows: Beware of listening to this impostor; you are lost, if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong equally to us all, and the earth itself to nobody! But it is highly probable that things had by then already come to such a pass, that they could not continue much longer as they were. (Rousseau 2002 : 113)

If, in the final chapter, we tried to describe the movement that began with the awakening of the faculty of imagination – in which the establishment of imposture appears as inescapable (“But it is highly probable that things had by then already come to such a pass, that they could not continue much longer as they were.”) – from now on we encounter directly the moment, structure, and architecture of this “first source of inequality” (Rousseau 2002: 82). As the very first sentence of the quote shows, there are, at the very least, four constitutive moments, each indispensable to the others, that establish the condition of possibility for the institutionalization of the lie: 1) the subject of the announcement (“The first man ...”) 2) the locution or act of language (“*this is mine*”), 3) the object or referent of this locution (“... people simple enough ...”) and, finally, 4) the belief (“to believe”)⁹:

1. “The first man ...”: The primacy of the subject does not concern the empirical nature of the announcement – the first actor who announces his intention for the first time to appropriate – but the legal installation of the locution. Consequently, it is the first to succeed, to establish, to set up both the right and the law of appropriation. It is not only the author of the fiction who expresses a desire for substitution, but also someone who actually naturalizes the non-natural and hence establishes the lie itself; in other words, the first person who mobilized the necessary conditions for the staging in which the affirmation of the new law would have taken place. Literature, authorship, theatricality, and politics appear in the same opening. The establishment of the lie – and therefore the establishment of the authority of the law – requires no external justification, because the lie is in itself its own proof and its own foundation. History as a lie, by repeating this self-foundation of imposture, will falsify the artificiality of the first law. The catastrophe of history as a lie is thus (also) the naturalization of this artificiality, and so the relationship between nature and artificiality will be reversed. With this self-foundation of imposture, we come to locution and the act of language.

⁹ The numbering used here could not, of course, mean a chronological succession; there is no chronology in the constitution of the imposture, but, on the contrary, a certain simultaneity and an indissociable correlation. Without the presupposition of language and that of ‘people’, the person who founded society would not appear. But without the presupposition of the first legislator, it would not be possible to ‘find’ people, accumulate them and unify them through a law.

2. “*this is mine*”: phrase, as a founding locution, does not merely describe what it actually is; it not only indicates the new reality of the thing, but invents it performatively. It is not the empirical mark (barrier, frontier, etc.) that constitutes property, but the performativity that announces this mark as a mark in the first place. Based on the double function of the verb “to be,” the locution here pronounces both the right and the law of possession: *this is mine*, on the one hand, and *this must be/remain mine*, on the other. These appear simultaneously, and in this way, the act of language produces the context for any subsequent performativity. The descriptive function and the performative function essentially combine and finalize the act of substitution.¹⁰ The peculiar form of fiction and its performative role is also at work here.
3. “... people simple enough ...”: Legislation, and the announcement of legislation through vocal significations, would be ineffective without the people who hear and accept it. The legitimacy of the archaic lie requires a certain general affirmation, and so the people who accept the lie are not only the object of the enunciation, but also appear, at the same time, as subjects of the affirmation and, thus, of the establishment of the lie. This affirmation therefore goes beyond mere passive acceptance and becomes productive, inventive, and active. The original lie, thus, has multiple accomplices and authors.
4. “to believe”: If the facticity of the border does not constitute the legal function of the border itself, and if the legislator needs people who have also participated in the constitution of the imposture, it is because there is a necessary link between the discourse and the facticity of the border. Belief accomplishes this donation and establishes the symbolic function of the border. Henceforth, the simple and banal gesture takes on a constitutive, performative role in the new order of reality. In effect, it signifies the establishment of the fiction of appropriation, and each time it is repeated, the new order will ensure, in one way or another, that the gesture of original meaning is reenacted. Belief, which is the necessary outcome of the process, retroactively and performatively generates the necessary alliance between the legislator, the people, the border, and the law. Belief adds a constitutive supplement to the fiction that has been produced by multiple actors – even as these actors are themselves produced by this fiction.

So, it has been quite correctly noticed by Margel, that the accomplice deeply involved in these four constituent moments of the original imposture is

représenté un écueil, un récif, voire un mirage nécessaire, constitutif, structurant. Et ce, non seulement pour fonder la société civile et ses diverses institutions de l'inégalité, de la famille à l'école, de la prison à l'hôpital, mais encore

10 J. L. Austin 1962: 1–12.

et surtout pour voiler, effacer ou maintenir inaccessible, voire irreprésentable, toute la stratégie frauduleuse qui constitue ce fondement des sociétés. (Margel 2007 : 17–18)¹¹

The original imposture does not only entail the realization of a certain fiction – which in itself, even without realization, would already be disastrous – but also the establishment of a new principle of truth or reality, one that imposes its own framework of possible interpretations and provides the conditions for defining or deciding what can be called a lie.¹² The deception of this imposture lies in the rewriting of its own structure and the concealment of what it is: fiction, imposture, artificiality. Because the artificiality of the law conceals itself and presents itself as natural facticity, the difference between a lie and a truth is established in relation to the naturalization of artificiality and, consequently, of inequality between men. This difference thus participates ideologically in the reproduction of the hegemonic institution. At this precise moment, the process of denaturalization that began with the power of imagination is radicalized and finalized: absolute denaturalization is the naturalization of what is not natural at all. The question that must now be asked concerns the resistance potential of fiction – without which, as we have just seen, the primordial catastrophic institution would not have been possible.

The economy of the lie and of violence

If the beginning of history, writing, language, society, and political organization was considered an absolute aberration, Rousseau nevertheless never proposed, as a solution to this injustice and inequality – the inevitable effects of the archaic imposture – the abandonment of organization or of history as such. As indicated on several occasions, historicity, as well as its vices, are indispensable and ontologically ineffaceable: nothing can completely fill the crack between appearance and an object appearing, and thus, nothing can efface the

11 My translation: “represented a stumbling block, a reef, even a necessary, constitutive, structuring mirage. And not only to found civil society and its various institutions of inequality, from the family to the school, from the prison to the hospital, but also and above all to veil, erase or keep inaccessible, even unrepresentable, the whole fraudulent strategy that constitutes this foundation of societies.”

12 On the subject of this complicity between the legislator and theatricality/fiction, see Margel (2007:18): “D’un côté, c’est le législateur, qui valide l’autorité, justifie le pouvoir et rend légitime un droit de l’inégalité parmi les hommes, en séparant le corps propre du corps collectif. De l’autre, c’est le lecteur, qui impose les normes du sens, les critères d’interprétation et les conditions de toute lisibilité, en divisant l’homme de l’intérieur de toute lisibilité, en divisant l’homme de l’intérieur entre son corps propre et son nom propre.” (My translation: “On the one hand, it is the legislator, who validates authority, justifies power and legitimises a right of inequality among men, by separating the proper body from the collective body. On the other, it is the reader, who imposes the norms of meaning, the criteria of interpretation and the conditions of all legibility, by dividing man from within all legibility, by dividing man from within between his own body and his own name.”)

force or the possibility of fiction. At the very moment when absence or lack was introduced by imagination, depraving the virginity of the natural condition, the dissolution of temporalization and the multiplication of appearances became impossible. Since violence, as the essence of history, is now inescapable, Rousseau proposes a political strategy against the violence of history – namely, to economize and minimize this violence. Pity, “the simple impulses of nature” (Rousseau 2002: 97), which moderate the relationship between men in the natural state, will, of course, be inflated and concealed by the movements of rationality and self-love. But at each historical moment, the task of social organization must be (re)established in such a way as to correspond, as far as possible, to pity – by which it would moderate, through a certain violence, the violence of self-love: violence against violence. The law, which was the absolute imposture, is now used in the becoming of history against the violence of history. The simple givenness of feeling must be replaced by the duty of laws – although this replacement must remain correlated to what it replaces. And here, writing, language, society, and political organization are inscribed within a new reality, while still retaining their characteristics of concealment and violence.

The progress of knowledge has brought with it new forms of domination, and so real progress will consist in developing new ways of countering it. As we quoted above: “It is to point out, in the progress of things, that moment, when, right taking place of violence, nature became subject to law.” If the play of dissimulation is absolute, the solution for Rousseau would not be to simplify the organization of society as much as possible and come closest to nature, but rather to conduct, locally and historically, a strategy to establish a new relationship between the instance of interruption of dissimulation, pity, and knowledge as reflexivity/rationality. If the forms taken by different rationalities in history are constructed as products of substitutive movements – and, moreover, if original tranquility is inevitably intertwined with rationality and reflexivity – then this same knowledge can only be used against itself in order to minimize the damage of history as a lie. Nothing would be untouchable for the movement of the economy of violence; nothing should escape the eventual decision of revolution and restructuration of the given – *especially not*, in our reading, *the concept of private property*. Civil society and the law must reconcile themselves with the natural instance and attempt to bring the law into play in order to moderate malice and economize it. The law must therefore supplement and regulate the damage done by history: history against history is the movement that finds its source in pity, which, as we have seen, is instituted by imagination and thus is never free from a form of fictionality. To conclude about this strategy, we can quote the paragraph from *De la Grammatologie*:

Mais le concept de supplément, considéré, comme nous l’avons déjà fait, en tant que concept économique, doit nous permettre de dire en même temps le contraire sans contradiction. La logique du supplément – qui n’est pas la logique de l’identité – fait que, simultanément, l’accélération du mal trouve sa compensation et son garde-fou historiques. L’histoire précipite l’histoire, la

société corrompt la société, mais le mal qui les abîme l'une et l'autre a aussi son supplément naturel : l'histoire et la société produisent leur propre résistance à l'abîme. (Derrida 1967 : 264)¹³

The response to the injustice of the effects, disfigurements, and delusions of the original imposture depends on the possibility of an alliance between imagination, reflection, and rationality. The task of finding a certain balance between the antitheses of history and the natural feeling of pity would mean developing and inventing new forms of *garde-fou* against its dissemination – a *garde-fou* that would never itself be entirely distinct from the original lie. The political and critical function of literature must be determined here, as Rousseau himself suggests in *Promenade IV*: there is an enormous difference between, on the one hand, literature that addresses the question of historical truth and morality, and, on the other hand, literature that is idle, “quite empty kinds of fiction” (*purement oiseuse*) (Rousseau 2011: 67), which serves no useful purpose. Literature with political potential is deployed with a view to this task and, in one way or another, provides a (possibility for) critical discourse on the political, economic, and social situation – relying on fiction as the necessary means for initiating this critical distance and, ultimately, to “défaire les nœuds” (Todesco 2019: 37) of the complex structures of dissimulation.

Conclusion

The interweaving of reality and fiction is, in fact, announced right from the beginning of the first chapter of the *Deuxième Discours*: in the section between the preface and the first part, but which belongs neither to the preface nor to the text proper. The political implications of literature could be extrapolated even from there. At the beginning of the penultimate paragraph, Rousseau explains:

Let us begin, therefore, by laying aside facts, for they do not affect the question. The researches, in which we may engage on this occasion, are not to be taken for historical truths, but merely as *hypothetical and conditional reasonings*, fitter to illustrate the nature of things, than to show their true origin... (Rousseau 2002: 88. Emphasis added)

After that in the last paragraph he concluded this:

O man, of whatever country you are, whatever your opinions may be, attend to my words; here is your history such as *I think I have read it, not in books composed by your fellowmen, for they are liars, but in the book of nature which never*

13 My translation: “But the concept of supplement, considered, as we have already done, as an economic concept, should allow us to say the opposite at the same time, without contradiction. The logic of the supplement – which is not the logic of identity – means that, at the same time, the acceleration of evil finds its historical compensation and safeguard. History precipitates history, society corrupts society, but the evil that damages them both also has its natural supplement: history and society produce their own resistance to the abyss.” See also McDonald (1974: 90–92); Imbert (2000: 289–294).

lies. All that comes from her will be true, nor will there be anything false, but *where I may happen, without intending it, to introduce something of my own*. The times I am going to speak of are very remote. How much are you changed from what you once were! It is in a manner the life of your species that I am going to write, from the qualities which you have received, and which your education and your habits have succeeded in depraving, but could not destroy. There is, I feel, an age at which every individual would choose to stop; and you will look for the age at which, had you your wish, your species had stopped. Discontented with your present condition for reasons which threaten your unhappy posterity with still greater vexations, you will perhaps wish it were in your power to go back; and this sentiment ought to be considered a panegyric of your first ancestors, a criticism of your contemporaries, and a source of terror to those who may have the misfortune of coming after you. (Rousseau 2002 : 88–89. Emphasis added)

This internal interweaving between fiction, “hypothetical and conditional reasonings,” and “the book of nature,” which “never lies,” does not mean that there are no differences between the actual and the imaginary, the real and the fictitious, truth and lies, but that the change in history re-establishes the relation between the two sides. Since any artifice conceals, hides its origin, and thus dissimulates its own contingency, it is this naturalization of the artificial that must be tackled by critical scrutiny. Revealing, disguising, and dismantling this artificiality of the historical lie – of this falsification that is presented as natural, stable, constant, firm truth – requires us to establish a certain affiliation between fiction, imagination, and reality, for which the idea of a fiction-less condition appears as nothing more than a literary invention serving critical political purposes. In other words, it is “fiction nécessaire” (Stiegler 1994: 119) that enables interpretative intervention. This is why the natural state, “*if ever it did [exist], does not now, and in all probability never will exist, and of which, notwithstanding, it is absolutely necessary to have just notions to judge of our present state*” (Rousseau 2002: 82. Emphasis added), remains in the undecidability between reality and fiction, and carries in itself a certain impossibility. This impossibility and the undecidability between fiction and reality represent, in fact, the condition of possibility for critical discourse to establish a new truth of history – one that would overcome the violence of the given stage of history. In other words, in this movement, literary fiction and the power of imagination become part of the economic direction and no longer appear as a devastating lie: this is why Rousseau can consider it, at one point, an aberration, and in another, an innocent lie. Accordingly, it is precisely for this reason that we must monitor the deployment of fiction and decide, within the singular context of history, whether it is complicit with the principal lie. The critical force of literature would thus also be directed against itself – but only by measuring itself against the ideological lie that establishes inequalities, subjugations, or dominations. In other words, and to sum up, the political dimension of fiction/literature consists in unveiling, posing, dismantling, and exposing the enslaving or limiting fictions of politics: the politics of fiction as literary praxis against the fictions of politics.

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Vladimer Žalagonija

Žan-Žak Ruso: Književnost, politika i ekonomija laži

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad nastoji da razvije – ili, preciznije, da prepozna – ono što bi se moglo nazvati političkom književnosti u Rusoovom delu, nastojeći da situira protivurečnu prirodu moći imaginacije u odnosu na mogućnost laganja. Dok *Sanjarenja* predstavljaju književnu fikciju kao bezopasnu laž, pa čak i kao isključujuću upotrebu imaginacije, *Drugi diskurs* upisuje imaginaciju u samu logiku istorijskog (kao) nasilja. Iz ovog napetog odnosa rad izvodi argument da Ruso otvara mogućnost politike književnosti: kritičke prakse fikcije koja osporava re/produkciju ideoloških temelja zakona, svojine i nejednakosti, koje je i sama fikcija omogućila. Pokazaće se, kako ću tvrditi, da je Rusoov opis prirodnog, praistorijskog stanja bez (mogućnosti) fikcije sam upisan u ovu borbu fikcije protiv fikcije: politiku književnosti.

Ključne reči: Ruso, Derida, fikcija, laž, politika, književnost, nejednakost, istorija, imaginacija

