Romanticism, Nature, and Self-Reflection in Rousseau's Reveries of a Solitary Walker

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Abstract

In The Reveries of a Solitary Walker (RSW), Rousseau keeps a record of the thoughts, ideas, and reveries that freely run through his mind during his solitary walks. He finds that it is only when he is alone and not being disturbed that he is able to exist just for himself, and can “truly claim to be what nature willed”. Rousseau goes on these solitary walks in the countryside on the outskirts of Paris. But if solitude is what he requires, why travel all the way to the countryside, which he says is very far from his residence in the middle of Paris? Put another way, why does he feel the need to be amidst nature in order to engage in these reveries? What do his reveries tell us about the role(s) that nature has played in his life?

This article will examine the role of nature in Rousseau’s solitary walks, as well as its presence in his life as revealed through his reveries. In particular, we will see that nature has played a central role in shaping Rousseau’s soul both during his adolescence and his adulthood. It is an essential ingredient to helping Rousseau realize his project of examining and ordering his soul, and in his attempt to understand what kind of man he is, given his deracination from mainstream society. Throughout his life nature has served as his mirror for self-examination; it acts as a trigger for various memories, it provides a harmonious setting for delving into the more painful of these memories, and allows him to extract insights that enable him to face his mortality.

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