The writing self

Rousseau and the author's identity

Theo Jung

Introduction

»The History of the world«, the British historian, novelist and literary critic Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) famously wrote in his *On heroes, hero-worship and the heroic in history*, »is but the Biography of great men« (Carlyle 1840: 34). »They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain« (3). Naturally, not all agreed with this view. One outspoken contemporary critic of this type of historiography as the serial biography of a number of heroes was the philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903). In the second chapter of his classic *The study of sociology* he posed the question if there could be such a thing as a social science. At least two groups, he thought, would deny such a possibility. Those who saw the hand of Providence at work with every historical phenomenon were bound to write history as a series of acts of God. As every event was individually produced by a divine will which could change at any moment this could not, properly speaking, be an object of science. The second group, »allied« to the first and »equally unprepared to interpret sociological phenomena scientifically«, was made up of those who interpreted the course of civilization as the mere »record of remarkable persons and their doings« (Spencer 1874: 30).

Needless to say, what Spencer termed the »great-man-theory« of history was not at all to his taste. Dismissing as ridiculous the supernatural interpretation of the great man as a »deputy-god«, he stressed the necessity to

DOI:10.2390/indi-v1-i2-19

ISSN 2191-6721

account for his natural origins. Like all other phenomena, the great man should be understood as a product of a »long series of complex influences«. »Along with the whole generation of which he forms a minute part – along with its institutions, language, knowledge, manners, and its multitudinous arts and appliances, he is the result of an enormous aggregate of forces that have been co-operating for ages.« Although Spencer did not deny that certain outstanding individuals could have a decisive influence on the history of societies, he stressed that »[b]efore he can re-make his society, his society must make him« (34-35).

As the intellectual weaknesses of the »great-man-theory« were only too obvious, in Spencer's opinion its continuing popularity could only be accounted for by other factors: the universal love of »personalities«, the theory's enticing combination of instruction and amusement, and its beautiful simplicity (32-33). Significantly, Spencer traced its origins to the pre-scientific narratives told by »savages« assembled around their campfires and to the records of early – »uncivilized and semi-civilized« (30-31) – peoples. In this context there could even be, he admitted, a limited truth to the »great-man-theory« in that it »approximately expresses the fact in representing the capable leader as all-important«. But inasmuch as societies had become more complex, they could no longer be adequately understood in this way. A true science of society was needed and the degree to which someone was prepared to switch his focus from the individual to the general structures of social life could be taken as a meassure of his intellectual maturity: »If you want roughly to estimate any one's mental calibre, you cannot do it better than by observing the ratio of generalities to personalities in his talk – how far simple truths about individuals are replaced by truths abstracted from numerous experiences and things« (Spencer 1874: 32).

Carlyle had anticipated this type of argument and had tried to answer it in advance. In his eyes, the modern disposition against hero-worshipping was a woeful sign of the times. It was symptomatic of an age that reduced all greatness to the circumstances of its emergence. »Show our critics a great man,« he wrote, »they begin to what they call ›account‹ for him; not to worship him, but take the dimensions of him, – and bring

DOI:10.2390/indi-v1-i2-19

ISSN 2191-6721

him out to be a little kind of man! He was the ›creature of the Time‹, they say; the Time called him forth, the Time did everything, he nothing – but what we the little critic could have done too!« (Carlyle 1840: 15-16). The conditions of modern society, he thought, were not to be interpreted as the preconditions of the great man. In the best case they were only »dead fuel, waiting for the lightning out of Heaven that shall kindle it« (16), in the worst case nothing but »mountains of impediment« (188) under which heroic men were buried. Like Spencer, Carlyle was not afraid to draw conclusions regarding his opponents' identities: »Those are critics of small vision, I think, who cry: ›See, is it not the sticks that made the fire?‹ No sadder proof can be given by a man of his own littleness than disbelief in great men. There is no sadder symptom of a generation than such general blindness to the spiritual lightning, with faith only in the heap of barren dead fuel« (17).

Such heavy-handed polemics, pitting the ›unscientific‹ against the ›narrow-minded‹, seem from our point of view outdated and overly schematic. They belong to a period in which the disciplines of history and sociology were enemies, competing for academic respectability (and resources). Since then, they have grown much closer. History has left behind its predilection for the individual stories of dead white males and habitually includes social and economic structures as an integral part of its narratives. Sociology, on the other hand, has increasingly found ways to integrate particular historical circumstances and events as well as individual actions into its models of society. Even more important for our changed perspective on such questions than the reciprocal convergences of two disciplines is the gradual emergence – in both disciplines, or rather: between them – of a new type of question that sheds a new light on the opposition between individual agency and social structure itself.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, both the humanities and the social sciences have experienced a gradual shift of emphasis towards the analysis of ›meaning‹ and its role in the social construction of reality. What has been termed the ›cultural turn‹ (cf. Bachmann-Medick 2009) had many faces – a linguistic, a performative, a post-colonial, a spatial and an iconic ›turn‹, to name but a few. One important effect, however,

was that it produced a new way of conceptualizing the individual in its relation to the social structures surrounding him/her. Previously, the ›individual‹ had been primarily understood as a unified entity both forming the atomic building blocks of social structures and being constrained by them. Under the influence of post-structuralist philosophy, however, this traditional concept of the subject was ›de-centered‹ in several respects (cf. Reckwitz 2008: 11-22). Instead of understanding the individual self as an autonomous, irreducible and essentially a-historical universal entity, historians and sociologists alike began to turn their focus to the pluriformity of historically changing ›forms of subjectification‹. They analyzed the culturally specific and competing discourses and practices that make up what it means to be a (certain form of) self in particular historical circumstances. At the same time, the in-divisibility of the in-dividual was broken up into a multiplicity of identities played out in various contexts, identities which may or may not conflict with one another.

This change of perspective was reflected by the type of historical narratives it engendered. Many traditional narratives of modernization had taken their cue from the dualism between the individual and the social, interpreting the history of ›civilization‹ either as the progressive emancipation of the individual from social constraints or, conversely, as the gradual subjection of the individual under ever stricter and more rationalized regimes of social discipline. As the dualism between the individual and society was progressively broken up, these grand narratives lost their appeal. They were replaced by a multitude of contextually sensitive studies about particular conceptions of subjectivity in specific historical contexts.

It is to a specific chapter of this history of the ›self‹, of ›subjectivity‹ or ›identity‹ (the terminology to be preferred is a matter of dispute) that we want to turn our attention here. Taking a well known ›anecdote‹ from the history of thought as a test case, the question is posed if and how the discussed new theoretical understanding of the (history of the) self provides a fruitful new perspective on specific historical events and developments, one that significantly broadens traditional accounts.

It will be argued that even if not all aspects of the post-subjectivist theories of subjectification are equally applicable at all times and to all subject matters, they are helpful in that they direct our attention to at least four dimensions of ›selfhood‹ that have remained underappreciated in the past. In the first place, this holds true for the general shift of focus from the individual as an analytical entity presumed to be self-transparent, rational, universal and a-historical to its various historically changing forms of subjectification. Second, for the fact that the individual's identity is never a given but always a socially contested construction at the centre of a permanent struggle between competing normative conceptions of identity put forward by the individual himself as well as by others. Third, it points to the fact that therefore the ›individual‹ is in fact ›divisible‹ in that he/she may resort to multiple forms of identity in various circumstances and contexts. The hybrid quality of the individual's identity is thus not something endangering his/her a priori unity from the outside, but rather an essential part of what it means to be an individual in the first place, resulting from the ambivalent, equivocal and often non-congruent forms of subjectivity that make up this unstable unity we call the self. Finally, it helps us understand that identity is not just a question of metaphysics but is essentially connected to specific social practices in the context of which forms of subjectivity are ›performed‹ or rather: ›put into practice‹. These ›strategies‹ or ›technologies‹ do not just express an identity that has been there all along. Rather, they are ways included in the individual ›working out‹ his/her identity, constructing his/her own self in the process.

Rousseau's ›illumination‹ and Diderot's counter-narrative

One example of such practices of subjectification meriting special attention is the individual's narration of his/her own life. Autobiography, though often posing as the objective analysis of the (past) self, is productive in that it reduces the multiplicity and ambivalences of lived experience to a single narrative, selecting ›relevant‹ events and providing them with the inner coherence of a structured plot. One of the best known examples of this practice of retrospective self-narration – one that was to become immensely influential in later times – are the many autobio-

graphical writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), most notably his *Confessions* (1782). At the centre of Rousseau's life story, as it is told by himself, stands an episode that has come to be one of the most famous anecdotes of literary history (cf. Starobinski 1980; Darnton 2003: 107-118).

In the afternoon of August 25th 1749, Jean-Jacques Rousseau was on his way from Paris to the medieval fortress of Vincennes just outside the city to visit his friend Denis Diderot (1713-1784) who was imprisoned there. Diderot, who a few years earlier had started the editing process of what would become the *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, had been arrested on account of the publication of his *Lettre sur les aveugles*. Tired from the long walk and the burning sun, Rousseau sat down in the shade of one of the oak trees lining the road with a copy of the *Mercure de France*. On its pages he found the announcement of a prize contest offered by the Dijon Academy of Sciences, Arts and Literature for an essay on the question »if the re-establishment of the sciences and the arts has contributed to the purification of morals«. This moment would prove decisive. On the spot and in a feverish state, he wrote down the so-called *prosopopoeia* (a technical term for a speech in the voice of a dead person or object) of the ancient Roman Fabricius (Rousseau 1751: 24-28). This would be the centrepiece of the discourse by which he would make a literary name for himself, a text which would spark a Europe-wide debate on the merits and drawbacks of civilisation (cf. Tente 1974).

In retrospective accounts, Rousseau would time and again emphasize this event's inspirational character. The question of the Academy had provoked in him a singular and irretrievable experience, a vision that had changed his life. In 1762, in an open letter to Frances head censor, Chrétien-Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes (1721-1794), he wrote:

> 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 lumieres; des foules d'idées vives s'y présentent à la fois avec une force, & une confusion qui me jetta dans un trouble inexprimable; je sens ma tête prise par un étour-

> dissement semblable à l'ivresse. Une violente palpitation m'oppresse, souleve ma poitrine; ne pouvant plus respirer en marchant, je me laisse tomber sous un des arbres de l'avenue, & j'y passe une demi-heure dans une telle agitation, qu'en me relevant j'apperçus tout le devant de ma veste mouillé de mes larmes, sans avoir senti que j'en répandois (Rousseau 1792: 248-249).

Later, in the eighth book of his *Confessions*, he returned to the event. Once more he interpreted the experience as a turning point in his life story: »A l'instant de cette lecture, je vis un autre univers, & je devins un autre homme« (Rousseau 1789: I, 228). This time, however, his later experiences placed the incident in a more ambivalent light. What had been the seminal experience of the one big truth to which he had dedicated his life had in the long run turned out to be a personal catastrophe.

> Ce que je me rappelle bien distinctement dans cette occasion, c'est qu'arrivant à Vincennes, j'étois dans une agitation qui tenoit du délire. Diderot l'apperçut; je lui en dis la cause, & je lui lus la prosopopée de Fabricius, écrite en crayon sous un chêne. Il m'exhorta de donner l'essor à mes idées, & de concourir au prix. Je le fis, & dès cet instant je suis perdu. Tout le reste de ma vie & de mes malheurs fut l'effet inévitable de cet instant d'égarement (I, 229-230).

The sudden success of his first discourse had established Rousseau as a renowned and controversial author. It had made him a public figure in France and beyond and had provided him with access to the inner circles of the Parisian *beau monde*, something he had been aspiring to for a long time. At the same time, this had put him into a position in which he could no longer do full justice to the experience itself. His effort to articulate the vision he had had on the road to Vincennes had condemned him to be subjected to the logics and constraints of the literary world and of high society. These had aroused his self-love and ambition, his desire for an inane »gloriole littéraire« (Rousseau 1782: 59). His immediate experience of the truth, his pure love for it and his uncompromising willingness to devote his life to its articulation had thus ultimately lured him into a domain in which untruth reigned.

The specific nature of Rousseau's narrative of the events on the road to Vincennes becomes clearer when we contrast it to an alternative account of the same event that originated with Diderot and was circulated in writings of his friends – in Friedrich Melchior Grimms (1723-1807) literary newsletter, the *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique* and later in the memoirs of Jean-François Marmontel (1723-1799) and André Morellet (1727-1819) (Grimm 1829/1830: 140-141; Marmontel 1818: I, 434-435; Morellet 1822: I, 119-120). In *philosophe* circles, Diderot had told a markedly different story about the origins of the first discourse. In his version, after Rousseau's arrival at Vincennes and his excited report of the question posed by the Dijon Academy, Diderot had asked him what position he would take. »Celui des lettres«, Jean-Jacques had answered. He would argue that the sciences and arts had indeed purified morals. »C'est le pont aux ânes«, Diderot had replied, »prenez le parti contraire, et vous verrez quel bruit vous ferez« (Grimm 1829/1830: 140).

Though the accounts by Grimm, Marmontel and Morellet varied somewhat in their choice of words, the expression *pont aux ânes* turned up in every one of them. Diderot's central argument against Rousseau's initial position had not been, they contended, that it was untrue. Rather, his critique had aimed at the fact that it was too obvious, generally known, and boring. His proposal, on the contrary, would be *piquant* and would present »un champ nouveau, riche et fécond« to philosophy as well as to eloquence (Marmontel 1818: I, 435). It would have the allure of novelty, would be controversial and could therefore count on a wide literary resonance (*bruit*).

Modern historians tend for the most part to give priority to Rousseau's version (Sturma 2001: 22-23). The essential continuity between the discourse's central arguments and earlier statements from the 1740s as well as with later utterances speaks – even if a certain amount of polishing on the part of Rousseau is unmistakable – in favour of Rousseau's version. Diderot's account quite obviously aims to expose his one time friend in the eye of the reader. It can be understood against the backdrop of the alienation that had come between them after Rousseau's break with the *philosophes*.

This interpretation is confirmed by the setting in which Diderot brought up the Vincennes anecdote in his own writings. In his *Essai sur les règnes de claude et de Néron* (1778) he used the anecdote – which by this time was well known among France's literary circles – as an example of Rousseau's pathological disposition to contrariness. »Lorsque le programme de l'académie parut, il vint me consulter sur le parti qu'il prendrait. Le parti que vous prendrez, lui dis-je, c'est celui que personne ne prendra. Vous avez raison, me repliqua-t-il« (Diderot 1782: 137). The context in which the account appeared was most telling. What Diderot titled »mon apologie« was in fact a rant over several pages in which he charged Rousseau with being deceitful and false and called him an »ingrat«, »méchant« and »anti-philosophe«. Its final verdict was »Rousseau n'est plus« (Diderot 1782: 138-140).

In the absence of further sources, the real course of events on the road to Vincennes may remain beyond our grasp. Instead, we turn our attention to another – ultimately more interesting – question and ask how both accounts can be understood as two opposing models of interpretation, constructing conflicting images of Rousseau's identity as well as, more generally, of what it meant to be an ›author‹ in eighteenth-century France. This approach may not only shed new light on the anecdote itself, but also point to its wider significance within the context of contemporary debates about what it meant – as well as what it should mean – to be an author. It will be argued that the controversy over the events at Vincennes should be understood as a key episode in these debates. To this end, it is necessary to briefly go into the wider context which provided the basis for the conflicting interpretations of Rousseau as an author.

Literature on the market place and in high society

The controversy about Rousseau's identity as an author marked the centre of a wider debate about the identity of the *homme de lettres* (cf. Roche 1988; Chartier 1996), which itself took place against the background of profound structural changes in the literary field (cf. Raven 1992: 42-60; Melton 2001: 81-122). The eighteenth century witnessed an

DOI:10.2390/indi-v1-i2-19 ISSN 2191-6721

impressive expansion and diversification of literary production. As the number of individual publications rose, so did their average print runs. New textual forms arose, while traditional ones gained new significance. A large number of new periodicals appeared, with ever larger distribution and ever faster publication cycles. The publishing industry was reorganized and differentiated, to be able to keep pace with the many technological and organizational improvements in printing procedures. Although censorship by church and state was still a limiting factor, the sector found ever new ways to bypass it.

These developments in literary production had their counterparts on the side of the consumer, the reader. The gradual advance of alphabetization that had begun in the seventeenth century accelerated in the following. Especially on the countryside, among women and the middle and lower classes there was yet much progress to be made. At the same time, practices of reading underwent a change so fundamental that it has been termed a ›reading revolution‹ (Engelsing 1974; Wittmann 1999). Traditional, intensive ways of reading gradually gave way to more extensive reading methods. Instead of the repeated, collective reading of a few authoritative texts, readers increasingly turned to the extensive, silent and individual reading of many different texts. In this sense, the popular writer Louis Antoine de Caraccioli (1719-1803) differentiated between the modern style of reading *à la Française* (»c'est parcourir un *in-douze* dans la journée«) and the traditional style of reading *à l'Anglaise* (»c'est l'étudier tout un mois«) (Caraccioli 1777: 147-148). Along with the manner of reading, its aims gradually shifted from the acquisition of information and character building to entertainment and diversion. Furthermore, several new institutional forms – like the reading society and the public library – emerged and provided access to literature for ever growing numbers. Combined with the absolute growth of the population, a reading public of some size emerged which provided a steadily growing customer base for the publishing industry.

Although the growing demand for literary products resulted in a corresponding growth in the demand for the industry's raw material, content, this did not automatically translate into higher income for writers. Under

the system of royal privileges that regulated France's book trade until the Revolution, authors would usually sell their works to a publisher for a fixed sum. All income generated from this point onward (i.e. by all editions) would thus flow to the publishers who – after the work's approval by the official censor – held the privilege for a period of six years, with the possibility of indefinite renewal. Under these conditions, only a few of the most successful writers could actually live off the earnings from their literary products (cf. Saunders 1992: 75-115; Pfister 2010). Even fewer had other private sources of funding which provided them with the leisure time to dedicate themselves to their writing without any concern for financial matters. Most, then, were dependent on some form of patronage. As a result, the relationship of the author to the social elites remained of essential importance for their livelihood.

In the eyes of many contemporary observers, in the course of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the literary world and high society had formed a kind of strategic alliance. Literature played an increasing role in the social life of the elite. The negative view on books and knowledgeability that had been characteristic of traditional court culture made way to a keen interest in the world of letters and in the men of letters themselves. The *gens du monde* had admitted the *gens de lettres* to their world, and in the eyes of the *historiographe de France*, Charles Pinot Duclos (1704-1772), this association had been beneficial to both sides:

> Les gens du monde ont cultivé leur esprit, formé leur goût, et acquis de nouveaux plaisirs. Les gens de Lettres n'en ont pas retiré moins d'avantages. Ils ont trouvé de la protection & de la considération; ils ont perfectionné leur goût, poli leur esprit, adouci leurs mœurs, et acquis sur plusieurs articles des lumiéres qu'ils n'auroient pas puisées dans les Livres (Duclos 1752: 242-243).

Access to high society offered authors the opportunity to get to know its habitual forms and practices. This acquaintance with the ›ways of the world‹ played a key role in achieving literary success. Conversely, the presence of the men of letters saved the *beau monde* from its inherent boredom and injected it with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of talking points for polite conversation. What Duclos did not mention, however,

was the fact that the exchange between these two groups was by no means purely cultural or social. For most authors, their connections to high society were a financial necessity.

Since time immemorial, for most authors patronage had been the main source of income. Most publications included elaborate and – to our taste – servile dedicatory letters to (potential) patrons. In the course of the eighteenth century, the forms in which such ties between patron and client were ›acted out‹ in the context of polite society underwent a marked change. Increasingly, hierarchical relationships were cast in linguistic and performative forms that suggested – at least to the uninformed outsider – ties of friendship and equality. In spite of this, however, and perhaps unsurprisingly, in practice the social pecking order remained for the most part intact. The popular conception that the hierarchical ties of the pre-modern era had in the literary world been replaced by quasi-democratic ties of friendship between social classes on the basis of common intellectual interests remained a beautiful but deceptive utopia (cf. Hulliung 1994: 78-88; Lilti 2005: 419-428), as eloquently described by the *Encyclopédie*'s other editor, Jean le Rond d'Alembert (1717-1783), in his *Essai sur la Société des Gens de Lettres et des Grands* (1760).

The affiliation of the author to the *monde* remained precarious at all times. His *considération* or *dignité*, which he had gained as a result of his fame, could be revoked by his social superiors at any moment. A single *fauxpas* could result in his exposure as ›unfit‹ for the world and in unrelenting exclusion. An uninterrupted effort was needed not to transgress the subtle and implicit but rigorously monitored boundaries that separated the *cela se fait* from the *cela ne se fait pas*. To take the *grands* at their word when they habitually asserted their friendship was a luxury the author could not afford. It remained necessary to permanently be aware of his subordinate status and never to breach the forms of gratitude. To the author, being part of polite society meant, then, adjusting not just his writings but his whole attitude and behaviour to its tone (*bon ton*).

Although the relationship between the author and the *grands* were thus not in any general sense becoming less hierarchical, the author's corporeal admittance to the spaces (salons, theatres, clubs, sometimes even the court) of high society nevertheless did much to change the social dynamics of this dependency. His traditional attachment to a single wealthy patron was gradually loosened and progressively widened to a dependency on the favour of high society as a whole, what contemporaries called ›the world‹ (*le monde*). Whereas before the patron's decision to support an author financially in the form of gifts, grants or pensions had been for the most part a matter of his private discretion, now group pressure played an increasing part in this process. As such, the author was increasingly bound to please an indefinite multitude: ›the public‹.

The achievement of this goal, however, and the fame that resulted from it, were never a goal in itself. Rather, this was a form of social capital that was essential in the struggle for financial survival. The dark side of this dynamic became increasingly visible in the course of the eighteenth century, as a gap opened up within the literary world between what the historian Robert Darnton has called the *High Enlightenment* and the *Low-Life of Literature*, between those few authors that made it and those that did not (Darnton 1971). For every author that saw the doors to polite society open, a multitude remained excluded. As it was, this exclusion pushed such unlucky authors into a cutthroat market place, a verdict that almost inevitably resulted in abject poverty. This dynamic was in fact further aggravated by the fact that the cultural visibility and role model status of those happy few that had actually achieved literary success was great, so that every year new waves of ambitious youths came flooding into the city to try their luck as writers. Thus, alongside a few best selling authors a multifaceted, prolific and numerous class of literary hacks emerged that had to seize any opportunity – legal or not – to make ends meet. They practiced their writing as freelancing professionals, a way of life that in practice often meant living on the margins of subsistence (Darnton 1984: 145-189).

Contemporary controversies

Contemporaries were well aware of these developments. Whereas some celebrated the enormous advances in literary production and consumption as the ›progress of enlightenment‹, others saw them more critically. Especially from the perspective of the ›economy of knowledge‹, the vast increases in quantity were not necessarily deemed beneficial to its quality. Today, in the so called ›information age‹, we are as familiar with the discursive topoi of information overload as with the everyday challenges of coping with its problems. But the problems that arise with the shift from a situation of information scarcity to its overabundance have in fact long been recognized (cf. Headrick 2000). Ever since the spread of the printing press, there has been a constant quest for better strategies of information management. In the year 1685 Adrien Baillet (1649-1706), to give but one example, opened a multivolume collection of literary criticism, worrying if the steady rise in numbers of new publications would not »fasse tomber les siecles suivans dans un état aussi facheux qu'estoit celuy où la barbarie avoit jetté les precedens depuis la decadence de l'Empire Romain« (Baillet 1685: Avertissement; Smith & Schmidt 2007). If he had thought of the paradox that his ›solution‹ – which consisted in critically separating the literary wheat from the chaff – would only aggravate the problem by yet another multivolume work is another question.

The fast increase in literary production in the course of the eighteenth century made such voices grow ever louder. Especially from the second half of the century onwards, a lively debate about the production and consumption of literature unfurled (cf. Goetsch 1994; Kreuzer 1977). On the one hand, the question was raised if the enormous rise in the quantity of text produced had affected its quality. Using metaphors of unstoppable ›rivers‹ or ›seas‹ of literature and comparing the short literary life of individual texts to withering ›flowers‹ or ›ephemera‹, the question was raised if the sheer extension of available text helped or hindered its meaningfulness. An analogous question was put to the readers. Had the increased speed of reading and the enormous quantity of text that was devoured every day in fact resulted in the spread of significant knowledge and good morals? Or had its speed in fact precluded its absorption

and left nothing but a superficial entertainment, so that the modern reader, as Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799) wrote in his private notebook, had read himself into some »educated barbarism« (quoted in: Goldmann 1994: 79).

The English divine John Brown (1715-1766) was one of many who interpreted the reading revolution as a purely detrimental development. In his eyes it was, as he wrote in his *An estimate of the manners and principles of the times* (1757), at once an expression of and an aggravating factor in the spreading of a culture-wide »vain, *luxurious* and *selfish* EFFEMINACY« (Brown 1757: 67).

> Reading is now sunk at best into a Morning's Amusement. BUT what kind of Reading must *that* be, which can attract or entertain the languid Morning-Spirit of modern Effeminacy? Any, indeed, that can but prevent the unsupportable Toil of *Thinking*; that may serve as a preparatory *Whet* of *Indolence*, to the approaching Pleasures of the Day (42).

The sheer number of authors, of readers and of texts read was widely felt to be a disgrace. The *age of paper*, *of ink*, or *of authors*, as the age was now sometimes termed, true knowledge, many thought, threatened to be drowned in a flood of paper and ink.

Closely tied to such worries about the relationship between quality and quantity in literature were debates about the changing identity of the man of letters. As it became more and more obvious that the social reality of the practice of writing had changed dramatically, the question of what it meant to be a writer attracted ever wider interest and became a battleground for conflicting normative conceptions. Two negative stereotypical ›figures‹ that played a central part in such debates were the ›scribbler‹ and the ›worldly author‹. Both provided a specific perspective on the modern writer that was contrasted to alternative normative ideals of the *homme de lettres* which were projected into the past.

The stereotype of the scribbler arose in the context of debates about the gradual rise of the market as a determining factor in the literary field. Though as yet the reality of the ›literary market‹ was by no means free

from non-economic ›constraints‹, the fact that market forces became on the whole more influential than before was by many contemporaries viewed with suspicion and alarm. It was understood – and condemned – as the commodification of literature. »In opulent and commercial societies«, Adam Smith wrote in an early draft of his *Wealth of Nations*, »to think or to reason comes to be, like every other employment, a particular business«. Unter these conditions, knowledge and literature appeared as a product among others, as a form of goods that could be purchased under market conditions »in the same manner as any other commodity« (Smith 1978: 574; Rommel 2008).

Within the context of Smiths work, this was by no means meant to be a derogatory remark. Rather, his purpose was to show how even the seemingly ›sterile‹ philosopher fulfilled a useful function in society. For many others, however, putting literary work on equal rank with any other commodity had very negative connotations. The real concern that lay at the heart of this criticism was an anxiety about the diminishing status of the author. In this vein, the Presbyterian theologian Samuel Miller (1769-1850) in his *Brief retrospect of the eighteenth century* (1803) complained that the »spirit of trade« had infected the literary world, with disastrous consequences: »It too often leads men to write, not upon a sober conviction of truth, utility, and duty, but in accommodation to the *public taste*, however depraved, and with a view to the most *advantageous sale*« (Miller 1805: III, 300).

> When pecuniary emolument is the leading motive to publication, books will not only be injuriously mutliplied, but they will also be composed on the sordid calculation of obtaining the greatest number of purchasers. Hence the temptation to sacrifice virtue at the shrine of avarice. Hence the licentious and seductive character of many of those works which have had the greatest circulation in modern times, and which have produced the greatest emolument to their authors (Ibidem).

In combination with the sheer volume of literary production, this development had severely compromised the status of authorship in the modern world.

> From the unprecedented spirit of publication, which the eighteenth century exhibited, it has happened, as a natural consequence, that the character of the *author* has become lower in the public estimation, than it generally stood in preceding ages. Every object loses something of its value in the public esteem, in consequence of being cheap and common. Thus it has fared with the dignity of authorship. Persons of this profession have become so numerous in society; many of those who engage in it discover such a selfish and mercenary spirit; and it is found so easy a task to compile a book, that their importance has suffered a diminution in some degree corresponding with the number and worthlessness of their literary labours (Miller 1805: III, 422-423).

In this context, the figure of the author lusting for success in the literary market became a stereotype that was negatively contrasted to the ›real‹ author. Lengthy treatises on the nature and historical development of the *polygraphe*, *petit auteur*, *littérateur*, *Skribent, Lohnschriftsteller* or ›sordid scribbler‹ appeared, such as Christian Ludwig Liscow's (1701-1760) satirical *Die Vortrefflichkeit und Nohtwendigkeit der elenden Scribenten gründlich erwiesen* (1736).

The main point of critique regarding this new social figure was that under these conditions the writer could no longer afford to measure his writings only by the criteria of truth or literary beauty. Rather, he was forced to submit to the tastes and whims of the reading public, and to continually readjust both form and content of his writings to accommodate its unquenchable thirst for literary novelties. Only thus could he assert himself in the competition with the multitude of other hacks that likewise aspired to the public's attention. In this new situation, then, the worth of a literary work was nothing more than the number of readers – or more precisely: of buyers – it reached.

»Was hat der Schriftsteller zu seiner ersten Pflicht?« asked Johann Georg Heinzmann (1757-1802), who, being an author and publisher, knew the book trade from both sides, in his *Über die Pest der deutschen Literatur*.

> Er soll den Geschmack seiner Zeitgenossen leiten, und ihr Vormünder seyn; er soll kein Sklavendiener der Mode, sondern ein freyer, gewissenhafter Mann seyn. Thut er das der Lohnschriftsteller? Schmeichelt er nicht um seines Vortheils willen der Eitelkeit, den herrschenden Sitten und Thorheiten? Ist er also nicht ein Verräther an der Menschheit, ein Giftmischer in einem geistigen Sinne (Heinzmann 1795: 161-162)?

As the figure of the scribbler figured in debates about the commodification of literature, the worldly author became the central stereotype in controversies over the author's position vis-à-vis high society. In contrast to the scribbler, however, this figure represented an aspect of the modern author's identity that was not exclusively judged negatively. On the contrary, as we have seen in the case of Duclos, many interpreted the author's integration into the circles of high society as a positive development.

One important factor in the spreading of this positive interpretation was a wealth of literature propagating a conception of the writer as an essentially social figure, knowledgeable of the ways of the world. In effect, this amounted to a strategy of self-assertion, meaning that those same authors standing in line to gain access to the inner circles of elite social life were the ones praising the virtues of the socially competent *homme de lettres*. At the centre of this re-thinking of the social role of the author there was a controversy about the interpretation of a figure that had come to be thought of as the writer *par excellence*, the *philosophe*. Whereas traditionally this term had been associated with the solitary and contemplative life of the sage, unconcerned with the world and solely interested in the eternal truths, from the beginning of the eighteenth century onwards and culminating in a general campaign in the wake of the publication of the first volumes of the *Encyclopédie*, a new notion of philosophy gained ever wider currency.

From being the ultimate outsider, the philosopher now moved into society, living in ›the world‹ as well as working to improve it (Gumbrecht & Reichardt 1985: 12-24; Schneiders 2006). Joseph Addison (1692-1719), who together with Richard Steele (1672-1729) co-edited the famous pe-

riodical *The Spectator*, wrote in 1711 that he would be proud to have it said of him that he had brought philosophy »out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables, and in coffee-houses« (Anonymous 1711). In France, in the introduction to his history of philosophy of 1737, André-François Boureau-Deslandes (1698-1757) in a similar vein stressed the differences between the real philosopher and his traditional, misanthropic, image. Certainly, history had witnessed many ›philosophers‹ that had removed themselves from social life »par des airs concertés, ou par des habits extraordinaires, ou par leurs gestes, leur ton de voix, ou par un goût continué de disputes & de crieries« (Boureau-Deslandes 1737: I, xi). These, however, were not to be misunderstood as examples of real philosophy. »La principale utilité qu'on tire de la Philosophie, c'est le bon-sens, c'est l'humanité, c'est la politesse des mœurs, c'est l'amour de la société« (I, xiii).

This line of argument, stressing the social character of the genuine philosopher, gained wide circulation when it was taken up in an anonymous pamphlet with the title *Le philosophe*, which first appeared in 1743 and would become the blueprint for the *Encyclopédie*'s article of the same title, published in 1765. Its author – probably the prominent grammarian César Chesneau Dumarsais (1676-1756) – took the argument one step further and proclaimed honour and social integrity to be the only »religion« of the modern philosopher and society the only »divinité« he recognised (Anonymous 1743: 188). In 1766, the Parisian theologian Claude-Joseph Boncerf (1724-1811) dedicated a full monograph to the issue. In a paragraph titled *Caractère du philosophe sociable*, he summarized the changes the concept of the philosopher had undergone in recent times.

> Dans l'esprit de bien des gens, un Philosophe étoit, il n'y a pas encore fort longtems, un Misantrope, ou un Cynique. La Philosophie aimable qui regne à présent parmi le beau monde, a donné une autre idée du Philosophe. Non, le vrai Philosophe ne fuit point le commerce des Hommes. S'il fait vivre avec lui-même, il faut aussi vivre avec les autres. Une dureté sauvage n'est point son caractère; au contraire, ses mœurs ne respirent qu'une élégante urbanité. Il donne l'exemple de toutes les vertus sociales, & les chérit, parce

> qu'il connoît mieux que personne combien elles contribuent au bonheur de la Société (Boncerf 1766: 3-4).

Many – first and foremost the *philosophes* and all who sympathized with them – thus interpreted the philosopher's integration into society as a form of progress, lending practical relevance to a figure that had been absorbed in unproductive, abstract contemplation. Still, as we have seen, others held a more negative view of this process. It was felt to interfere with the philosopher's splendid isolation and his exclusive regard for the truth. Thus it was seen as detrimental to his independence from the interests and fashions of the world. An analogous argument was made with regard to the writer more generally, of which the *philosopher* was generally understood to be the highest variety.

Thus, both the scribbler and the worldly author were figures that – at least with some – evoked negative interpretations of the developments of the literary field in general and of the changing identity of the modern writer in particular. The literary market place and high society were certainly two very different social spaces. Yet in the eyes of many contemporaries they had one essential aspect in common: both were arenas of fierce competition for scarce resources in the form of financial or social capital. Therefore, both were regulated by laws and pressures that were fundamentally foreign to the literary endeavour as it had been traditionally understood. As such, they put illegitimate constraints on the author's ability to live up to his mission: to freely express truth and beauty by writing.

Vincennes revisited

Our excursion into the social and discursive context in which the controversy over the Vincennes episode took place puts us in a position to reinterpret its conflicting interpretations as a part of the contemporary controversy over the author's identity. The specific form of Rousseau's self-narration can only be understood in the context of other socially available models of authorship from which Rousseau wished to distance himself. His was essentially a counter-narrative, a mode of self-interpretation that reacted against certain conceptions of the modern author that

understood him to be progressively subjected to the anonymous forces of the market and to the social pressure of ›society‹. As such, Rousseau's autobiographical narrative was part of a much wider array of strategies of self-presentation. By means of his conspicious ›armenian‹ dress, his rude and vociferous rejection of any form of patronage and especially his purposefully un-polite rhetoric, he constructed a distance to society. Already on the front page of his first publication – the very discourse that had originated on the road to Vincennes – he had announced this self-interpretation by a motto taken from Ovid: »Barbarus hic ego sum quia non intelligor illis …« (Rousseau 1751).

Rousseau's self-imposed isolation was bound to scandalize those who propagated sociability one of the author's prime characteristics. Voltaire in 1755 sarcastically characterized the second discourse as a »livre contre le genre humain« and wryly added: »[o]n n'a jamais employé tant d'esprit à vouloir nous rendre bêtes« (Voltaire 1995: 300-302). Especially hurtful to Rousseau was the thinly veiled criticism articulated by his one time friend Diderot in his play *Le fils naturel*, that »l'homme de bien est dans la societé, & qu'il n'y a que le méchant qui soit seul« (Diderot 1757: 76). Rousseau was by this time habitually called »l'homme insociable« or »misanthrope« by his enemies. In his many autobiographical writings he took great pains to regain control over his own identity. Time and again he stressed that what was interpreted as misanthropy was in fact the only genuine form of philanthropy (Rousseau 1758: 54-73). In his final, unfinished, work, the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, he returned to this issue, once again explaining why his resentment of society was not an expression of hatred for mankind. On the contrary, he maintained, only in his self-chosen solitude had he been able to preserve the sincere love of man that had always been his primary motivation:

> Alors pour ne les pas haïr il a bien-fallu les fuir; alors, me réfugiant chez la mere commune, j'ai cherché dans ses bras à me soustraire aux atteintes de ses enfants, je suis devenu solitaire, ou, comme ils disent, insociable et misanthrope, parce que la plus sauvage solitude me paraît préférable à la société des méchans, qui ne se nourrit que de trahisons & de haine (Rousseau 1782: 204-205).

In this context, his writings gained another level of significance. Rousseau's proverbial solitude was not just a rejection of ›society‹ as he understood it. It was also the precondition for his project of building an alternative form of community with his readers. In a literary world of his own fabrication, the free and open communication between virtuous souls that was made impossible by the rigid formality and dishonesty of modern society could – albeit on a purely fictional level – take place (cf. Wertheimer 1986; Konersmann 1992; Jurt 1994).

To achieve this, however, it was essential that his writings were not taken to be literary commodities, a product of his literary ambitions. Thus the central aim of his elaborate strategies of self-presentation was to make plausible that his activities as a writer were not in any sense strategic. That they had in fact, starting with the publication of his prize essay, led to social and even moderate financial success had been – so he stressed – an unfortunate side-effect of a pure impulse. In his characteristic manner of self-accusation, he was even willing to admit that the lures of this newfound fame had not failed to have their effect on his self-love (amour propre). All the same, they did not touch the real centre of his identity as an author which was based upon the sole wish – or, more precisely: the inner necessity – to give expression to an overwhelming and life changing experience.

At this point we are able to understand the central relevance of the Vincennes episode for Rousseau's self-image. As he painted the origins of his first publication as a sudden flash of inspiration, he demarcated his identity from the modern *homme de lettres* and its negative connotations. His authorship was not – in contrast to the scribbler and the worldly author – a function of his self-interest and of strategic calculation. Rather, he had become a writer despite himself: »Voilà comment lorsque j'y pensois le moins, je devins auteur presque malgré moi« (Rousseau 1792: 249). As he wrote in his *Rêveries*, he was »jetté dans la carriere littéraire par des impulsions étrangeres« (Rousseau 1782: 192-193). His writing activity was therefore to be understood not so much as a literary endeavour, but rather as a form of immediate expression, as the articulation of a higher truth.

This narrative had profound consequences for the complex structure of Rousseau's understanding of himself as an author. His writing self was, it had to be concluded, in a fundamental sense not his own. As far as he was himself, he was nothing but the mouthpiece of a higher power that inspired his utterances. Conversely, in as far as he thought of himself and of his own interests in the literary world, he was not properly speaking himself anymore.

It is not difficult to see that key elements of Rousseau's narrative point to an established tradition of literary self-reflection. The centrality of an experience provoked by reading is an obvious echo of the eighth book of Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, which also provided the model for Rousseau's most famous autobiographical work. Through the vocabulary with which he articulated the experience that formed the basis of his writing, Rousseau placed himself in a long tradition of inspired authorship reaching from antiquity via medieval mysticism through the aesthetics of genius and romanticism up to contemporary literature (cf. Zaiser 1995). At the same time, Rousseau's return to this tradition was more than just another instance in a long series. It would prove highly influential on future debates. Already during his lifetime Rousseau would become an exemplary figure, his name a cipher for a certain type of authorship. Especially the Vincennes episode played a key role in debates about authenticity, in which the example of Rousseau played a central part.

Although the figure of the author as the authentic voice of a higher power echoed a long tradition, it gained new relevance in view of modern developments of the literary field. It could function as a contrast, a counter-identity, against the pressing constraints of the modern literary world. It was in this vein that Josias von Hendrich (1752-1819), privy councillor in Meiningen, contrasted Rousseau and Voltaire. Like many of his contemporaries, he interpreted the two as representing two types of authorship. Whereas Voltaire typified the modern ›worldly philosopher‹, Rousseau had been solitary and shy. His rigid nature and ›apostolic‹ gravity had made it impossible for him to adjust to the forms of society. In this manner, his composure and style had marked him – against the fashionable finesse and sophistication of the *philosophes* – as an ›old sage‹.

Von Hendrich characterized Rousseau's peculiar style in manner and dress as well as that of his writings in a quasi-religious vocabulary of genius. The distinguishing marks of the strength of soul that had characterized the citizen of Geneva were his »tiefempfundene Sprache des Herzens, die starken originelle Züge seines Geistes, die das Gepräge der Erhabenheit und der eigenen Geistes-Stimmung ihres Urhebers tragen, und die aus seiner Einsamkeit wie aus einer überirdischen Region hervorstrahlten« (Hendrich 1797: 27-29).

By this time, such vocabulary had become widespread in the many reflections upon the identity and mission of the author that marked debates about literature since the second half of the eighteenth century. Several key literary currents like *Sturm und Drang* or Romanticism formulated new answers to the old question of the essence of writing and authorship. These were expressed in a vocabulary that at times reached quasi-religious elevation, which made Paul Bénichou speak of a *sacre de l'écrivain* (Bénichou 1985). In this process, the figure of the author as the authentic voice of a higher experience gained renewed currency. As the case of Rousseau suggests, this attempt at reinterpretation of the author's identity must at least partly be understood as a reaction to the rapid changes in the social and economic conditions of literary activity during this time. The self-image of many authors could not be conciliated with what – in view of recent developments in the literary field – many felt to be their assigned role: to be a freelance producer for a market oriented branch of industry, competing in the social arena as well as on the market, desperately trying to please ›the public‹. In this context, the Rousseauian concept of authorship provided many with a way of rethinking the author in – but also: against – the modern world.

Rousseau's auto-narration thus has to be interpreted against the backdrop of this wider controversy over the identity of the author. The same is true for Diderot's opposing strategy of deflation. The significance of his alternative narration lay in the fact that it exposed Rousseau's style and ultimately his whole *persona* as nothing more than a social and literary strategy. Therefore, Morellet was right when he wrote about Diderots counter-narrative: »Ce récit, que je crois vrai, renverse et détruit toute la

narration de Jean-Jacques« (Morellet 1822: I, 119-120). Not surprisingly, this version of the anecdote would play a major role in the anti-Rousseau literature that became, in the last decades of the Old Regime, a popular literary form in its own right. From its point of view, Rousseau's proverbial ›authenticity‹ was nothing more than a mask, an artful dissimulation in the service of popular success. Tellingly, Marmontel ended his version of the anecdote with the remark: »Ainsi dès ce moment, ajoutai-je, son rôle et son masque furent décidés«. He gave the final word to Voltaire: »Vous ne m'étonnez pas, me dit Voltaire; cet homme-là est factice de la tête aux pieds, il l'est de l'esprit et de l'ame; mais il a beau jouer tantôt le stoïcien et tantôt le cynique, il de démentira sans cesse, et son masque l'étouffera« (Marmontel 1818: I, 435).

It is important to note that in the end both sides recurred – with differing motives and in a contrary direction – to the same discursive fault line. Both Rousseau and Diderot interpreted the modern literary world as a space of competition and of strategic action. Whereas Rousseau tried to construct a concept of authorship that emphatically put this modern literary world at a distance and attempted to steer clear of its many pressures, Diderot exposed this alternative form of identity as just another strategic device in the literary arena.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, we return to the question posed in the introduction: to which extent may modern perspectives on the self – understanding the individual's identity as a result of hybrid, conflicting and historically changing forms of subjectification that are neither fixed nor unified, but rather present an object of continuous construction through a number of practices – shed new light on historical processes? The answer seems to be that even though the story resulting from the application of this new perspective may not be new in every respect, our interpretation is indeed enriched by focussing on the four major dimensions of subjectification mentioned in the introduction. As an analytical concept, it has proven to provide a fruitful way to overcome the traditional opposition

DOI:10.2390/indi-v1-i2-19

ISSN 2191-6721

between individual agency and social structures and integrate both aspects into a single model.

From this point of view, the episode at Vincennes proved to be less of a story (true or not) about an exceptional individual and his battle with the constraints of society than a key moment in the history of changing forms of subjectification, of changing models of what it *means* to be an individual. It could be shown that Rousseau's identity was not in any meaningful sense a fixed, given entity. Rather, it must be understood as an arena of conflicting interpretations, of which Rousseau's own self-narration being just one of many. His autobiography was thus part of a wide range of practices by way of which Rousseau attempted to construct a certain form of the self. The result of this struggle between conflicting interpretations was by no means a unified, self-sufficient or self-transparent identity. Rather, the concept of the self as the authentic voice of an overwhelming inspiration, as it emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century, was essentially hybrid. It contained major inner tensions that surfaced whenever it became an object of reflection. This was a form of selfhood which could only become itself through an absolute disregard for its own self-interest and which could only become autonomous by the total submission to a higher truth that it could in no way claim as its own.

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DOI:10.2390/indi-v1-i2-19 ISSN 2191-6721