

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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Works ranging from Rousseau's *Confessions* and *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* to Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Coleridge's «conversation» poems, «Dejection», «Frost at Midnight», «Lime Tree Beauty» are examples of the romantic exploration of the self. Because romantics see the individual's relation to the outside world as the source of morality and wisdom, the importance of nature becomes a prime concern. Unlike urban environments that distort and hinder one's sense of relation to the world, natural settings leave the romantic individual free to understand her or his own «interpenetration», as Keats called it. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* is a quintessential example of Romanticist literature in Rousseau's corpus. The work departs from mimetic aesthetics in that it does not seek to describe and thereby recreate la belle nature. Yet, as we will argue, nature is central to the work in that it serves as inspiration for Rousseau in formulating his thoughts and insights about his emotional states, and communing with nature enables his examination of his conflicted and tormented psyche; further, the work is romanticist in that (as in the *Confessions*) its readers are given