

# Rhetorical and Lyrical Sensibilities in Rousseau's *Confessions* and Shen Fu's *Six Records of a Floating Life*

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## ABSTRACT

Though vastly separated by cultural differences, the autobiographies of Rousseau and Shen Fu share certain stylistic features which can be characterized as the rhetorical and the lyrical. Much of the effectiveness of the *Confessions* and *The Six Records of a Floating Life* lies in the rhetorical artifice both employ as well as their lyrical technique. The rhetorical sensibility more clearly dominates the *Confessions* (often under the guise of the lyrical), while the lyrical sensibility dominates the *Six Records* (though the results are, rhetorically, very persuasive).

## KEY WORDS

autobiography  
lyrical  
persuade  
personal

rhetorical  
sensibility  
emotional  
poetry quotes



From a comparative literature point of view, it is quite obvious that the two works under consideration do not fall into the conventional “influence” study approach or even a “period/movement” type of investigation (even though both authors were born in the eighteenth century). Rather, it is to “thematic” and “genre/style” considerations we must turn if fruitful comparisons are to be made. Hence, in what follows, after a brief paragraph about similarities in their thematic content and autobiographic genre, a more or less “formalistic” and “stylistic” mode of investigation will direct our investigation. I will concentrate on two stylistic features; namely, those reflecting the rhetorical and lyrical sensibilities manifested in Shen Fu’s 沈復 *Six Records of a Floating Life* 浮生六記 (written c. 1809) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* (Part I, 1782; Part II, 1789). Even in English translation, the stylistic features under consideration here are apparent, though I have occasionally quoted the original French and some of the key names, titles, and expressions in Chinese.

### **Thematic and Genre Considerations**

It is often difficult to find a single theme to get at the heart of a particular work, but one of the many themes both the *Six Records* and the *Confessions* have in common is: the personal reflections of two very sensitive men on the vicissitudes of their journeys through life. The journey motif is a significant one and an interesting study could be done by tracing their geographical treks along with a kind of mental mapping of their interior quests for meaning in life. The genre they have chosen can be described roughly as memoir or autobiographical essay but, as critics from both cultures have pointed out, neither author

falls neatly into the autobiographical form as conventionally conceived. Much study remains to be done on how Rousseau and Shen Fu have shaped and been shaped by their respective traditions. We can get a better understanding and appreciation of these two works if we look into their respective styles and how these styles are permeated by both rhetorical and lyrical sensibilities.

### Stylistic Considerations

It is customary in traditional Chinese rhetorical practice for the speaker to make a number of self-effacing remarks about his/her lack of competence, especially in comparison with so-called experts present. Profuse apologies are in order and the diminution of the speaker's importance, according to the degree of presumed deference or modesty, is almost in exact proportion to the increased sense of importance and superiority supposedly felt by the audience. On the other hand, in classical Western rhetorical tradition, speakers are expected to begin their presentations in such a way that they are perceived as being in confident control of the situation. Consequently, the listeners are to be rendered attentive, sympathetic, and teachable (literally, from the Latin, "*dociles*"). It seems to me that certain characteristics of these two traditions are found both in *Six Records* as well as in *Confessions*, and it will be illustrative to investigate the nature and extent of their presence in order to better comprehend their effect upon us.

In other words, in addition to very important differences in cultural background and serious differences in East-West notions of the autobiography as a genre, I am suggesting that much of the effectiveness of these two works lies in the rhetorical artifice both employ as well as their lyrical technique. I am not saying that one author is rhetorical and the other lyrical; rather, I suggest that both sensibilities are found in both authors, but in different degrees. This preliminary investigation indicates that the rhetorical sensibility more clearly dominates the *Confessions* (often under the guise of the lyrical) and that the lyrical sensibility dominates the *Six Records* (though the results are, rhetorically, very persuasive).

These two sensibilities are, in fact, inseparable but distinct in the *Confessions* and the *Six Records*. This does not exempt us from attempting some kind of descriptive definition before we proceed to the texts themselves. First of all, by “sensitivity,” I do not so much mean “susceptivity to tender feelings” (a common eighteenth-century notion in England), as much as the linking of emotive or affective responsiveness to reality. Literature, as a verbal portrait of life or reality, helps to make the experiences we all share memorable and personal to us. There are, of course, many artistic ways of communicating these kinds of experience, the rhetorical and lyrical being two of the most common.

The term, “rhetorical,” has a complicated history, but let us take it in the broad sense of the art of persuasion or eloquence, often expressed through oratorical techniques and, therefore, public. “Lyrical” is an even more complex term but again, in a broad sense, it can be understood as the art of expressing a more personal, subjective emotion—therefore, private—through a variety of devices often associated with poetry. Such abstract formulations can never match the particular artistry of a piece of literary writing but, at least, they can focus our discussion on certain important features of the *Six Records* and the *Confessions*. Allow me to repeat once more, my point is not that either Rousseau or Shen Fu is to be associated exclusively with one or the other sensibility but, rather, that each writer employs both forms of communication—in different proportions, to be sure—for his own purposes.

### Confessions

Ironically, despite all of Rousseau’s protests about simply expressing how he is primarily a man of feeling and, therefore, associated with the mode of the lyrical and emotional, in fact, he does protest a bit too much. Basically, he is a rhetorician, persuading us—albeit through many deeply personal and affecting experiences—of the fundamental rightness of his life. He tries very hard to win us over, even though, at times, he exasperates us with his many complaints and incessant self-defensiveness. Rousseau frequently justifies his life style by appealing

to his basic honesty even though there are often unattractive manifestations of personal pique and prejudice. There is a kind of distortion present but it is impossible, of course, to determine if it is conscious or unconscious, deliberate or simply the result of some faulty impersistence of memory where he only can recall positive aspects of his past which he colors accordingly.

One thing that is clear in the *Confessions* is the fact that there is a very conscious—rather, self-conscious—rhetorician at work. Throughout the *Confessions*, Rousseau desperately tries to convince us of his just cause as he unfurls his banners of truth and grinds his axes regarding almost every person and event that came into his life. In doing so, he first attempts to establish himself as the boldly candid and, therefore, trustworthy narrator. This can be seen by examining the famous lines of his opening page in which we find many rhetorical flourishes and allusive references to the beginning of Augustine's *Confessions*:

Let the trumpet of the last judgment sound when it will; I shall come with this book in my hands to present myself before the Sovereign Judge. I shall say loudly, "Behold what I have done, what I have thought, what I have been. I have told the good and the evil with the same frankness: I have been silent about nothing bad, added nothing good, and if I have happened to use some inconsequential ornament, this has never happened except to fill up a gap occasioned by my lack of memory; I may have assumed to be true what I knew might have been so, never what I knew to be false. I have shown myself as I was, contemptible and low when I was so, good, generous, sublime when I was so: I have unveiled my interior as Thou hast seen it Thyself. Eternal Being, assemble around me the countless host of my fellows: let them listen to my confessions, let them shudder at my unworthiness, let them blush at my woes. Let each of them in his turn uncover his heart at the foot of Thy throne with the same sincerity; and then let a single one say to Thee, if he dares: "*I was better than that man.*" (Kelly 5)<sup>1</sup>

But as the story of Rousseau's life and times unfolds, we find that it is an elaborate argument to persuade us of his understanding of human nature by reference to his own personal experience and to justify his life rather than merely state it. Much of his "honest" posturing seems to be a subterfuge for winning the reader over to his interpretation of people and events that might otherwise have been interpreted negatively. This does not mean that Rousseau is necessarily dishonest or insincere; it only suggests that his deepest motivation and the way in which he penned it was more rhetorical (persuasive and public) than lyrical (personal and private). Why else would he be forever explaining away his actions and his motivations to the reader? In the concluding paragraphs of Book Two, he tries to rationalize his falsification of the famous incident where he was responsible for a servant-girl's dismissal because of a theft he himself had committed:

Never has wickedness been farther from me than in that cruel moment, and when I accused that unfortunate girl, it is bizarre but true that my friendship for her was the cause. She was present to my thought, I excused myself on the first object that offered itself. I accused her of having done what I wanted to do and of having given me the ribbon because my intention was to give it to her. When I saw her appear afterwards my heart was torn apart, but the presence of so many people was stronger than my repentance. I did not fear the punishment very much, I feared only the shame; but I feared it more than death, more than crime, more than everything in the world. I would have wished to bury myself, suffocate myself in the center of the earth: invincible shame outweighed everything, shame alone caused my impudence, and the more criminal I became, the more intrepid I was made by the fear of acknowledging it. I saw only the horror of being detected, declared publicly—with myself present—a thief, liar, calumniator. A universal agitation deprived me of all other feeling. If they had allowed me to return to myself, I would have infallibly declared everything. . . . It is also just

to consider my age. I had hardly left childhood [Rousseau was about 16 at the time!], or rather I was still in it. In youth genuinely heinous acts are even more criminal than in maturity; but what is only weakness is much less so, and at bottom my fault was hardly anything else. (72)

One of the curious manifestations of Rousseau's rhetorical thinking patterns is the way he will not let the reader leave off certain points. Rousseau will mention an incident and then—by way of further explanation and suspense to keep the reader engaged—tell the reader that he will take up such and such a point at a later phase of his narrative, often after a lengthy digression. I cite a few random samples (*italics are mine*): “I was easy to rebuff, I no longer went back. It *will soon be seen* that I was wrong” (70); “It will be said that in the end we had relations of another sort, however; I acknowledge it, *but it is necessary to wait; I cannot say everything at once*” (89); and “Besides, there are certain exceptions to all this, and *I will return to it later on*” (98).

This obsession with linking up everything in order to complete one's argument or interpretation of an event through a structural kind of logic, is quite appropriate for a writer like Rousseau who is forever explaining or rationalizing his actions. Notice, for instance, how he personalizes this principle of cause-and-effect:

There is a certain succession of affections and ideas that modify those that follow them and which one must know in order to judge them well. In order to make the chain of effects felt I apply myself above all to developing the first causes. I would like to be able to render my soul transparent to the eyes of the reader in some fashion, and to do so I seek to show it to him under all points of view, to clarify it by all lights, to act in such a way that no motion occurs in it that he does not perceive so that he might be able to judge by himself about the principle which produces them. (146)

Such “argumentation” rarely takes place in the *Six Records* with its episodic, often disconnected and “layered” narration of events. Rousseau proceeds in a roughly chronological way cataloging a great number of details in his life in order to give the impression of completeness and comprehensiveness: “I have only one thing to fear in this enterprise; that is not to tell too much or to tell lies; no, it is not to tell everything, and to be silent about things that are true” (147). Shen Fu, on the other hand, moves back and forth in time, obviously leaving out many details and communicating a full if not complete picture in a hit-and-miss fashion by looking at the same event from different perspectives.

Rousseau’s personalized linking of events often follows a common three-step pattern (with some variations) that plunges the reader forward in anxious anticipation about what is to come. The three phases can be described as follows: (1) He usually announces his excitement about making amends for some past event or some future prospect; (2) next, he analyzes his disappointment or let-down; (3) finally, he leads up to a new resolution, and starts the cycle over again. It is necessary to quote a number of passages at considerable length in order to illustrate the sequence of events. For instance, after proudly disengaging himself from a liaison involving a mother and her daughter (end of Phase 3 and beginning of Phase 1), he thinks of his “poor Mamma,” the good-hearted and sensual Mme. de Warens, Rousseau’s sexual partner for five years and whom he loved all his life: “I made the firm resolution to combat myself and to vanquish myself if this unfortunate inclination happened to declare itself. But why expose myself to this combat?” (217). Phase 2 follows immediately with his analysis:

What a wretched position to live with the mother with whom I would have been sated, and to burn for the daughter without daring to show her my heart? What need was there to go to look for that position, and to expose myself to misfortunes, affronts, remorse for the pleasures whose greatest charm I had exhausted in advance: for it is certain that my whim had lost its first vivacity. The taste for pleasure was

still there, but the passion no longer was. To this were mixed reflections relative to my situation, to my duties, to that mamma so good so generous, who—already burdened with debts—was even more burdened with my foolish expenses, who exhausted herself for me and whom I was deceiving so unworthily. This reproach became so lively that it won out in the end. (217)

The next sentence begins Phase 3 and he resolves to avoid temptation:

While drawing near St. Esprit, I formed the resolution to go through Bourg St. Andréol without stopping and pass straight on. I executed it courageously, with some sighs, I admit; but also with that internal satisfaction that I tasted for the first time in my life of saying to myself, “I deserve my own esteem, I know how to prefer my duty to my pleasure.” This is the first genuine obligation that I had from studying. It was studying that had taught me to reflect, to compare. After such pure principles that I had adopted such a short time before; after the rules of wisdom and virtue that I had made for myself and which I had felt myself so proud of following; the shame of being so little consistent with myself as to give the lie to my own maxims so soon and so emphatically won out over voluptuousness: pride might perhaps have as great a part in my resolution as virtue; but if this pride is not virtue itself it has such similar effects that it is pardonable to mistake it for virtue.<sup>2</sup>

This sets him on his next adventure and the tripartite sequence of events begins again with Phase 1:

One of the advantages of good actions is to raise up the soul and to dispose it to perform better ones: for such is human weakness that one ought to number among the good actions’ abstinence from the evil one is tempted to commit.

As soon as I had made my resolution I became another man, or rather I became again the one I had been before whom this moment of intoxication had made disappear. Full of good feelings and good resolutions I continued my route with the good intention of expiating my fault; thinking only of regulating my conduct upon the laws of virtue from now on, of dedicating myself without reserve to the service of the best of mothers, of swearing as much fidelity to her as I had attachment for her, and of no longer listening to any other love than that of my duties. Alas! the sincerity of my return to good seemed to promise me a different destiny; but mine was written and already begun, and if my heart—full of love for good and decent things—no longer saw anything but innocence and happiness in life, I was touching the fatal moment that must drag the long chain of my misfortunes after it . . . .

Thus I arrived exactly at the time. From far away I looked to see if I might not see her on the road; my heart beat more and more as I drew near. I arrived out of breath, for I had left my carriage in the city.

Phase 2 occurs abruptly with no transition other than shifting briefly into the historical present, made even more vivid by its terse telegraphic style:

I see no one in the courtyard, at the door, at the window; I begin to get flustered; I dread some accident. I enter; everything is calm; some workers were snacking in the kitchen; otherwise no preparations. The maid appeared surprised to see me, she did not know that I was supposed to arrive. I go upstairs, at last I see her that dear Mamma so tenderly, so keenly, so purely loved; I run up; I throw myself at her feet. "Ah! here you are little one!" she says to me while embracing me, "Have you had a good trip? How are you?" This welcome bewildered me a little. I asked her if she had not

received my letter. She told me yes. "I would have thought not," I said to her; and explanation ended there. A young man was with her: I knew him because I had already seen him in the house before my departure: but this time he appeared established there, indeed he was. In short I found my place taken. (217-19)

This experience leads him to pages and pages of morose reflections that the reader is invited to attend. But these reflections finally give way to a new resolution in Phase 3 and the whole sequence begins again:

I formed the project of leaving her house; I told it to her, and far from opposing it she favored it. . . . Madame Deybens . . . proposed the education of M. de Mably's children to me: I accepted, and I departed for Lyon without leaving or almost feeling the slightest regret at a separation of which the idea alone previously would have given us the pangs of Death. I had just about enough knowledge to be a Tutor and I believed I had the talent. (223)

In reading passages like these, one cannot help but admire Rousseau's irrepressible resiliency as he goes through the ups and downs of his journey through life.

Rousseau also engages the reader in other ways; frequently, there is an artful attempt to bring about suspense and lead the reader to follow up on the outcome of an event in his life, frequently reinforced by rhetorical questions. In the passage below, Rousseau is referring to his falling out with Friedrich Melchior Grimm and Denis Diderot:

This so-called friendship was as fatal to me inside as outside. The long and frequent conversations with Mme le Vasseur for several years had perceptibly changed that woman with regard to me, and this change was assuredly not favorable to me. About what did they deal in these peculiar tête-à-têtes? Why this profound mystery? Was the conver-

sation of that old woman pleasant enough to take her in secret this way then, and important enough to make such a great secret of it? For the three or four years that these colloquies lasted, they had appeared laughable to me: when I thought about them again at that time I began to be astonished at them. This astonishment would have reached the point of anxiety, if I had known then what that woman was preparing for me. (395)

### Six Records

When we come to Shen Fu's autobiographical technique, we discover that he is not very strong on clear transitions or logical connections; furthermore, he deals more in quiet foreshadowing than in dramatic suspense. This is very poignantly expressed in the subtle description (notice the two related references to young deaths) hinting at his wife's early death on the very first page of the *Six Records*:

When I was young I was engaged to Chin Sha-yu, but she died when she was eight years old. Eventually I married Chen Yün, the daughter of my uncle, Mr Chen Hsin-yü. Her literary name was Shu-chen.

Even while small, she was very clever. While she was learning to talk she was taught the poem *The Mandolin Song* and could repeat it almost immediately.

Yün's father died when she was four years old, leaving her mother, whose family name was Chin, and her younger brother, Ko-chang . . . .

One day Yün found a copy of *The Mandolin Song* in her brother's book-box and, remembering her lessons as a child, was able to pick out the characters one by one. That is how she began learning to read. In her spare moments she gradually learned how to write poetry, one line of which was, "We grow thin in the shadows of autumn, but chrysanthemums grow fat with the dew 有秋侵人影瘦，霜染菊花肥之。" (Pratt 25-26)<sup>3</sup>

The allusion to *The Mandolin Song* is from a Tang Dynasty poem (*Pi-p'a Hsing* 琵琶行) by Po Chu-yi 白居易; it tells the sad story of a former courtesan, now abandoned by her husband, who meets an exiled official. This use of verse lines in prose narrative is a typical Chinese device of employing lyric poetry to communicate the intensity of a deep emotion without having to engage in the indecorous act of making such a feeling explicit by personal reference. The sensitive reader is thus prepared, through subtle foreshadowing, that Shen Fu's wife is destined to experience a tragically brief life.

We can appreciate Shen Fu's artistry by contrasting it with what we have learned from Rousseau's technique (without placing a value judgment on either). Rousseau comes across as having an argument to win and he quite explicitly creates a very human and believable person—all the more believable because of his human frailties—to win us over to his way of thinking. Shen Fu, on the other hand (and, again, ironically), manages, in his way, to persuade us most effectively when he is trying to be the least persuasive. He comes across as very simple and spontaneous, even casual, almost careless. This is not to say that he was not an assiduous reviser of his work; the point is that the end result seems to be so effortless and natural, even in the very educated elegance of its classical style. This is the result of a master stylist: the right word in the right place.

In other words, we don't find in the *Six Records* much overt rhetoric about Shen Fu's life-style. In the *Confessions*, however, Rousseau appeals frequently to authority, logic, reason, and philosophical reflection. Although Shen Fu, like Rousseau, was a victim of life's vicissitudes, he simply states and refers to his experiences as a kind of musing or reverie rather than trying to explain away the machinations of society against him. In this lies the basic charm and attractiveness of the *Six Records*; namely, the sharing of a deeply felt emotional and personal experience which remains unaffected and detached and never embarrassed. The opening pages of Parts One and Three of the *Six Records* are indicative (note again the allusions to poetry):

I was born in the winter of the 27th year of the reign of the Emperor Chien Lung, on the second and twentieth day of the eleventh month. Heaven blessed me, and life then could not have been more full. It was a time of great peace and plenty, and my family was an official one that lived next to the Pavilion of the Waves in Soochow. As the poet Su Tung-po 蘇東坡 wrote, "All things are like spring dreams, passing with no trace 事如春夢了無痕." If I did not make a record of that time, I should be ungrateful for the blessings of heaven.

The very first of the three hundred chapters of the Book of Odes concerns husbands and wives, so I too will write of other matters in their turn. Unfortunately I never completed my studies, so my writing is not very skilful. But here my purpose is merely to record true feelings and actual events. Criticism of my writing will be like the shining of a bright light into a dirty mirror. (25)

.....

Why are there misfortunes in life? They are usually the retributions for one's own sins, but this was not so with me! I always have been friendly, frank, and open, and kept my word to others, but these qualities only became the reasons for my troubles. My father, the Honourable Chia-fu, was also a most generous gentleman, anxious to help those in trouble, to assist anyone in need, to marry off other people's daughters and to bring up their sons. There are countless examples. He spent money like dirt, most of it for other people. (73)

Ironically, this ability to maintain a certain aesthetic distance on the artist's part attracts us to enter more deeply into Shen Fu's experience; we are drawn more by the immediate experience itself rather than an explanation or justification of the experience. The general tone of the autobiography seems to be the unprotesting acceptance of life's troubles in an almost fatalistic way. Therefore, the emphasis in the *Six*

*Records* is more simply on presenting the emotion rather than on the emotion as refurbished, so to speak, by the author. There also seems to be an essential "subjectiveness" about this artistic stance in re-creating reality; it is highly personal but does not degenerate into an obtrusive and sentimental wearing of one's heart on one's sleeve.

Although one could examine a wide variety of literary techniques employed by Shen Fu to document his artistic achievement, I shall just concentrate on the one I have already introduced; namely, his frequent references to poetry. This basically lyrical sensibility "persuades" us of the verisimilitude of the deeper, emotive parts of his life's story.

First of all, Shen Fu reminds us how common the writing and reading of poetry was in his day. To wile away the long summer months, his wife and friends would simulate the Imperial examinations and gamble away at poetry contests:

The examination master would announce two lines of poetry, one of five characters and one of seven characters, and the candidates would then have the time it took a stick of incense to burn in which to write lines rhyming with them. They could walk or stand while thinking, but no one was allowed to talk or exchange ideas. When they had finished their couplets they put them into a box, and were then allowed to sit down. To prevent favouritism, when everyone had handed in his paper the recorder opened the box and copied the papers into a book which he then gave to the examination master. (65)

These carefree days are meant to contrast sharply with his beloved wife's untimely death. There is an unexpected and touching irony in Shen Fu's genuine grief over his wife's death as opposed to his taking up with a concubine a few months later. This practice was not unusual in Shen Fu's time in order to insure a son would carry on the family line, and it was actually recommended by his wife who sought the most suitable candidate. At the end of the following passage, the hyperbolic couplet quoted from the Tang poet, Yüan Chen (元稹 779-

831), is a clever way of saying something very emotive in highly exaggerated language, but maintaining one's aesthetic distance, so to speak, by taking it from the mouth of another. His wife, Yün, is speaking:

‘It is all because of me that you have lost the affection of your parents and drifted apart from them. Do not worry, for after I die you will be able to regain their hearts. Your parents’ springs and autumns are many, and when I die you should return to them quickly. If you cannot take my bones home, it does not matter if you leave my coffin here for a while until you can come for it. I also want you to find someone who is attractive and capable, to serve our parents and bring up my children. If you will do this for me, I can die in peace.’

When she had said this a great sad moan forced itself from her, as if she was in an agony of heartbreak.

‘If you part from me half way I would never want to take another wife,’ I said: ‘You know the saying, “One who has seen the ocean cannot desire a stream, and compared with Wu Mountain there are no clouds anywhere 曾經滄海難為水，除卻巫山不是雲。”’ (88-89)

A couple of pages later, Shen Fu again resorts to poetry to communicate his sorrow: “After I lost Yün, remembering the poet Lin Ho-ching 林和靖 wrote that ‘the plum tree is my wife and the crane my son,’ I called myself ‘he who has lost the plum tree 妻梅子鶴語，自號梅逸”’(91).

At the end of Part Three of the *Six Records*, Shen Fu sums up his personal loss and looks to the future:

Yün had only one son, and he did not live to give her descendants. When Cho-tang learned of this he too heaved a deep sigh. He presented me with a concubine, a young woman who renewed in me the spring dreams of life. I was thrown back into the maelstrom of daily existence, a dream

from which I do not know when I shall awake. (97)

The reference to "spring dreams" in the above quotation has its own special irony when we recall the very first paragraph of Part One which we have already quoted, namely, Su Tung-po's verse: "All things are like spring dreams, passing with no trace" (25). Structurally, to place the same "spring dreams" reference at the emphatic positions of the beginning of Part One and the end of Part Three suggests the almost mythic paradox of finding one's end in one's beginning and vice versa.

If we dare to generalize, in the *Six Records* there seems to be more attention paid to the synthesis of intensely personal events than to what? Consequently, these intimate experiences are difficult to express except through impressionistic remarks. Shen Fu's technique, therefore, is more implicit and elusive, and he seems to feel little compulsion to explain or even explore. Like so much classical Chinese poetry, the writer seems to be more comfortable by simply juxtaposing lines of poetic experience about what happens in life (often a scene in nature) with what one personally feels (some corresponding emotion).

This is not to say that Western authors like Rousseau do not also make use of poetry. But unlike his Chinese counterparts whose education depended in great measure upon the memorization of the classics and poetry, Rousseau admits that he is a "man absolutely devoid of verbal memory, and who has never in his life been able to retain six verses by heart" (96). When he does make reference to song or poetry, it seems to serve a decorative or ornamental function, only important because of its power to remind him of a person or event, not because of something intrinsic to the poem itself. This is clearly illustrated when he recalls the tunes (rather than the words) of certain songs his Aunt Suson sang to him as a child:

Would anyone say that I, an old dotard, gnawed by cares and troubles, sometimes catch myself weeping like a child muttering these little tunes with a voice already broken and trembling? There is one especially which has completely come back to me, as for the tune; but the second half of the

words has constantly resisted all my efforts to recall it, although the rhymes come back to me in a confused way. Here is the beginning, and what I can recall of the rest.

Tircis, je n'ose  
 Ecouter ton Chalumeau  
 Sous l'Ormeau;  
 Car on en cause  
 Déjà dan nôtre hameau.  
 .....  
 [. . .] un berger  
 [. . .] s'engager  
 [. . .] sans danger;  
 Et toujours l'épine est sous la rose.

[Thyrcis, I dare not listen to your pipe under the elm; for they are already gossiping about it in our hamlet. A heart runs too high a risk in getting involved with a shepherd: and the thorn is always under the rose.]

I seek the touching charm my heart finds in this song: it is a caprice about which I understand nothing; but it is completely impossible for me to sing it to the end, without being stopped by my tears. A hundred times I have planned to write to Paris to have the rest of the words sought out, if there is anyone who still knows them. But I am almost certain that the pleasure I take in recalling this tune would partially vanish, if I had proof that other people besides my poor aunt Suson have sung it. (10)<sup>4</sup>

Rousseau would undoubtedly be the first to admit that his grasp of poetry could not compare with his love for music. Curiously, he refers to a couplet from Voltaire's poem, *The Henriade*, as a useful tool to assist him to "reflect on elocution, on elegant constructions":

I was corrected of a spelling mistake that I made along with

all our Genevans by these two verses from *The Henriade*:

*Soit qu'un ancien respect pour le sang de leurs maitres  
Parlât encor pour lui dans le coeur de ces traitres.*

[“Perhaps some ancient respect for the blood of their masters still spoke for him in the heart of these traitors.” *The Henriade*, II, 337-38.]

The word *parlât*, which struck me, taught me that a *t* is needed in the third person of the subjunctive; instead of which I formerly wrote and pronounced *parla*, as in the present of the indicative.<sup>5</sup>

Even though Rousseau might quote verses from famous Latin authors like Horace, he had to admit that “those Ostrogothic verses made me sick to my stomach and could not enter my ear. . . . I have never known prosody, still less the rules of versification. Since I desired nevertheless to feel the harmony of the language in verse and in prose, I made many efforts to succeed in it . . . Having learned the composition of the easiest of all the verses, which is the hexameter, I had the patience to scan almost all of Virgil and to mark the feet and quantity in it” (200). Not surprisingly, Rousseau’s own attempts at poetry were examples of tepid wit and mere doggerel.

I am quite conscious of the fact that I am not being entirely fair to Rousseau and do not, in any sense, want to denigrate his many obvious literary talents. I simply wish to contrast two sensibilities in reference to poetry. In any case, the *Six Records* seems to be part of this general Chinese sensibility which takes most naturally to the lyrical mode of expression, a sensibility which states more than it explains, which resorts to quoting poetic verse rather than straining to communicate a strong feeling through what would have to be prosaic by comparison.

## Conclusion

As Edward Corbett says of rhetorical criticism, “it regards the work [imaginative literature] not so much as an object of aesthetic contemplation but as an artistically structured instrument for communication. It is more interesting in a literary work for what it does than for what it *is*” (xxii). On the other hand, in a quote from Barbara Hardy which, I believe, can be expanded to include the lyric sensibility, she notes: “The lyric does not provide an explanation, judgment or narrative; what it does provide is feeling along and without judgment or narrative” (1). Finally, in the words of Archibald MacLeish’s concluding lines to his “*Ars Poetica*,” a poem “Should not mean / But be.”

This paper just hints at some lines that might be worth developing in a more in-depth study of the *Six Records* and the *Confessions*. Further investigation of particular passages in both works such as their structures, metaphors, imagery, allusions, rhetorical devices, and types of diction, is certainly worth pursuing. I am convinced that further documentation would substantiate my general contention that, although both works contain rhetorical and lyrical sensibilities, the *Six Records* seems to favor the lyrical and the *Confessions* a more rhetorical approach. The ultimate irony, perhaps, is that while Rousseau was striving so stridently to be personal and sincere—and, therefore, convincing—he seems less so than Shen Fu. The latter’s unobtrusive and simple sharing of his experiences, without elaborate justification and explanation, makes for a far more persuasive case.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All *Confessions* quotes are from the Christopher Kelly critical edition and translation (see Works Cited). In this first quote, Kelly neglects to add a concluding quotation mark. Kelly does provide a useful reference regarding the relationship between the respective “Confessions” of Augustine and Rousseau: Ann Hartle, *The Modern Self in Rousseau’s “Confessions”: A Reply to St. Augustine* (Notre Dame, Indiana: U of Notre Dame P, 1983). For an excellent overview

of key issues in Rousseau's *Confessions*, see Kelly, xvii-xxxvi.

<sup>2</sup> A propos of the last few lines quoted in the body of my text, Kelly makes a key distinction in Rousseau's thinking: "This is an example of a virtuous, rather than merely, good action. In the latter, one would be following a personal inclination while performing a good deed, whereas in this case, Rousseau is overcoming a personal inclination in order to perform a less pleasant good deed. It should also be noted that Rousseau leaves open the possibility that virtue and a certain sort of pride are indistinguishable both in practice and in principle" (630, n. 72).

Also see Kelly's comments on pp. xxi-xxvi, for an elaboration of the difference between Rousseau's idea of goodness as a *natural* quality and virtue as a *moral* quality.

<sup>3</sup> All quotes from the *Six Records* are found in the Pratt translation (see Works Cited). The text of the Chinese original I have access to is found in Works Cited under "Shen Fu." Another useful translation is Lin Yutang's 1935 *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, also available in a number of Lin's own anthologies. For a fine summary treatment of editions and translations as well as a discussion of genre issues, see Milena Doleželová-Velingerová and Lubomír Dolež, "An Early Chinese Confessional Prose: Shen Fu's *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*," *T'oung Pao* 58 (1972): 137-60. In a discussion of the *Six Chapters'* place in Chinese historical trends, the authors include the importance of confessional literature written in poetry, beginning with Chü Yüan's *Encountering Sorrow*, and assert that "mood" is "the basic principle of plot structure" (147).

<sup>4</sup> The English prose translation of the verses, in braces, is from Kelly, 601, n. 36.

<sup>5</sup> The English prose translation of the couplet, in braces, is from Kelly, 613, n. 48. Kelly adds an additional note: "All the manuscripts read this way although *parla* is from the *passé simple*, rather than the present" (613, n. 49).

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