Ultimate Sacrifices: 
Le Lévite d'Ephraïm

Il n'y a pas d'objet ou d'entreprise au nom duquel on ne puisse offrir de sacrifice, à partir du moment, surtout, où le caractère social de l'institution commence à s'estomper.
René Girard

Je ne veux que ces mots pour éloge: Dans les plus cruls moments de sa vie, il fit Le Lévite d'Ephraïm.
Rousseau

Et tout le reste est littérature.
Verlaine

Rousseau's freestanding prose poem Le Lévite d'Ephraïm was written during the summer of 1762 and, like the Lettres à Malesherbes, remained unpublished during the author's lifetime. The last thing we might expect on the basis of our reading thus far is that Rousseau would end up laying claim to the conventional understanding of occasional writing as perfunctory, impersonal, and strictly literary. And yet the Confessions reserve the right to do just that in the case of Le Lévite, whose artistic mediocrity they are likewise quick to acknowledge. But there are further ironic twists to the Confessions' astounding designation of the fifteen-page Lévite as, of all the works in his substantial corpus, the one Rousseau himself persists in holding most dear. His paraphrase of a narrative from the Hebrew scriptures is deemed "précieux" (2:1205) and "chéri" (1:586) for the very reason that it both is and is not the kind of perfunctorial, by-the-book writing of which Rousseau ordinarily claims to be incapable. It would have been dismissible as nothing more than a literary exercise had the circumstances themselves not cried out, on this exceptional occasion, for autobiographical writing or no writing at all.

The Confessions make a prima facie case for factoring the occasion into appreciations of the text. Jean-Jacques had just been forced to flee into exile amidst rumors that the Parlement de Paris had condemned his
Emile and placed a warrant out for his arrest or prise de corps. Under the circumstances, any other man would have understandably wallowed in self-obsession. Assuming that this hypothetical other man could have found the presence of mind to write, he surely would have seized the occasion to bemoan his fate or lash out in some manner of self-defense at his enemies. But Jean-Jacques was evidently not the kind of "any other" man to give in to ire or give voice to the cruel irony of his having counted on proceeds from Emile to fund a more orderly "retraite" from Montmorency (1:516). Nor was he the least bit paralyzed by fear. On the contrary, rather than panic or polemicize, our hero chose to while away the leisure of a hastily improvised carriage ride into the unknown by, of all things, drafting the first three of Le Lévite's four cantos. The autobiographer takes lasting satisfaction, in consequence, from the thought of having, for once in his life, turned his back completely on the occasion. It is an exemplary former abstinence from autobiographical activity that the Confessions can now invoke, autobiographically, as the surest possible sign of exceptional character or "un cœur sans fiel" (1:586). This time around, self-testing will have occurred without the self's having been brought, except belatedly, into the play of text.

The Confessions insist on the unforeseeable suspension of the fleeing Jean-Jacques's autobiographical activities: the would-be memorialist had been obliged to leave his supporting documents behind at Montmorency for triage by the Maréchal de Luxembourg and safekeeping by Thérése (1:582–83). But we have only to read Le Levite for ourselves to catch the Confessions in the act of breaking this suspension. An unmistakable coincidence of superficial detail works to narrow the gap between Rousseau's restrained and affectless account of Jean-Jacques's nocturnal expulsion and his adaption of one of the most gruesome Bible stories ever told. Perversely enough, the intertext reopens the very possibility of autobiography that the Confessions proper are working concurrently to foreclose. For its part, Le Lévite not only rehearses but belabors and compounds the unspeakably violent reprisals of Judges 19–21. It appears, then, that adapting the Scriptures was, in fact, the fugitive's way of giving vent to the anxieties and "fiel" that really filled his "cœur." In the midst of this barely disguised mutual interference between Rousseau's "autobiographical" and "literary" narratives, the Confessions recall that Jean-Jacques had been reading and dreaming about the book of Judges just prior to getting the bad news about Emile (1:580). That recollection
goes beyond explaining where he got his subject matter to render the dream itself uncannily prophetic. But to interpret the dream only as looking forward to the immediately ensuing events of Jean-Jacques's biography would be to fall for yet another cover story. We would miss out on the chance to appreciate the further, inestimable benefits derived by Rousseau from writing his doubly autobiographical *Levite*, which also looks back, surreptitiously, to unblock the guilty secret of his mother's death as a result of giving birth to him.

What in fact facilitates Rousseau's emphatic denials that the dream text of *Le Levite* has anything to do with him is his redeployment in the *Confessions* of the same sacrificial logic entrusted in the prose poem with transposing an original matricide into the reassuring terms of maternal self-sacrifice. The likewise self-serving *Confessions* make a ceremonial display of removing every last vestige of autobiography from *Le Levite*. The prose poem is thereby prepared for sacrifice, in the name of autobiography, as the quintessential last gasp of literature in Rousseau's lifetime. The difference thus engineered between literary beauty and autobiographical truth makes up in solemnity for what it lacks in substance, and testifies most eloquently of all to the fact and the force of Rousseau's desiring for a difference.

**JEAN-JACQUES RELIVES THE BOOK OF JUDGES**

"To hear this story is to inhabit a world of unrelenting terror that refuses to let us pass by on the other side."¹ Not even this direst of warnings can adequately prepare us to replicate (in Ostervald's French Protestant version) the reading done by Jean-Jacques on the fateful night of June 10, 1762. Rousseau's own retelling of the biblical horror story appears, at first glance, to relent somewhat. It certainly diverges in some significant ways from its source.

Chapter 19 of the book of Judges briefly recalls a state of political and judicial anarchy—"il n'y avait point de roi en Israël"—and then proceeds to recount how the Levite takes a concubine out of Bethlehem-Judah; how she "commet impureté chez lui" and returns to her father's house; and how, at the end of four months, the Levite journeys there to bring her back. After repeated successful attempts by the concubine's father to detain them for one last meal, the couple finally departs for home, about one third of the way through chapter 19.

Rousseau's entire first canto does not advance beyond this point. In-
stead of launching immediately into the Levite's story, Rousseau begins with an exordium that is structured as a series of apostrophes, each designating a new addressee: "Sainte colere de la vertu . . . Mortels . . . O vous, hommes débonnaires . . . Peuple saint . . . Benjamin, triste enfant de douleur" (2:1208). These insistent invocations take the place of direct address to Rousseau's real-life enemies, and serve to propel us back in time from the future when Rousseau "will tell" the events of a distant past if the "sacred rage of virtue" heeds his call for inspiration. The text's eventual readers become the next locus of regression by way of anticipation: we are reminded of our own mortality, only to be taxed with averting our gaze from the atrocities of Antiquity to be recounted here. Called, in turn, to witness the most spectacular of those atrocities are the twelve tribes of Israel or "Peuple saint." But Rousseau's chain of apostrophes will not have reached its ultimate destination until, at paragraph's end, it reaches back beyond the outset of the biblical original. It reaches back even beyond the Exodus named as the extreme limit of the tribes' collective memory by a quotation from that original: "Non, jamais rien de pareil ne s'est fait en Israël depuis le jour où nos pères sortirent d'Egypte jusqu'à ce jour." Bringing the book of Judges into an emphatically intertextual relationship with that of Genesis, the exordium summons the criminal whose race now bears his name and perpetuates his violence: "Benjamin, triste enfant de douleur, qui donnas la mort à ta mère" (2:1208). In contrast, the self-contained book of Judges never explicitly entertains this possibility of a genetic link between the latter-day crimes of Benjamin the tribe and those of Benjamin the individual.

Once Rousseau's Levite has taken up with the concubine (whom he calls "épouse"), the text lingers over the apparently beautiful beginnings of a love story. The Levite goes to great lengths to satisfy his beloved, succeeds paradoxically in boring her, and suffers so intensely in the "infidel"'s absence that he conquers his ambivalence and dedicates himself to winning her back (2:1209–1210). When her father's unabridged feints and parries can detain the couple no longer, the invented characters of the concubine's mother and sisters prolong the tearful farewells; the father's unbearable sorrow would have been greater still had he known that he would never see his daughter alive again (2:1211).

The remaining two thirds of chapter 19 correspond almost exactly to Rousseau's "Chant second." Rejoining chapter 19 in progress, we learn that, rather than stay the night in a city "où il n'y a point d'enfants d'Isra-
él," the Levite and his retinue pressed on to Gibeah, "qui appartient à Benjamin." No one gives them lodging there, however, until an old man returning from the fields spies them in the street and opens his home to them. A new paragraph recounts how, as "ils faisaient bonne chère," the men of the city ("de méchants garnements") surrounded the house and demanded to "know" the stranger. When the old man's refusal to surrender his guest and his subsequent offer of two (his own virginal daughter and the Levite's concubine) for one meet with resistance, the Levite himself sends out his companion, who is brutalized throughout the night and found at dawn lying on the threshold. When the Levite's exhortation that she get up goes unanswered, he transports what may or may not be her corpse back to his house. There, another new paragraph isolates the ultimate atrocity: "il prit un couteau, et prenant sa concubine, il partagea son corps avec ses os en douze parts, et il en envoya une part dans tous les quartiers d'Israël." Everywhere it is received, the message provokes the same reaction: "On n'a jamais fait ni vu rien de pareil, depuis que les enfants d'Israel sont montés hors du pays d'Egypte, jusqu'à ce jour. Pensez à cela, consultez et prononcez."

Rousseau deviates less radically here than in his first canto from the narrative outlines of the original. A further apostrophe warns modern readers against taking one city's behavior for the rule of ancient times, when hospitality flourished because it could not yet be bought with "vils métaux" (2:1212). And there are shifts in emphasis, most often involving reassignments of responsibility: Rousseau's Benjaminites have "plotted" in advance their more explicitly sexual attack on a Levite whose youth and "beauté" are stressed (2:1213–14); the host proposes only his own daughter as a surrogate victim and makes the Levite's inviolability a matter not only of his being a guest but of his belonging to the priesthood (2:1214). It is upon waking from a sort of stupor that the Levite himself thinks to offer his concubine in the virgin's stead (2:1214). The horror of gang rape is carried to further extremes of perversion when yet another apostrophe (to the perpetrators) makes it clear that the attack has extended beyond the moment of death (2:1215). Finally, the Levite's obsession with vengeance is named in so many words, as is the inhuman sangfroid of what becomes a surgical operation.

Rousseau's "Chant troisième," like chapter 20, to which it adds little more than a sprinkling of inhuman metaphors for human violence, chronicles the revenge of a united Israel against the tribe of Benjamin. Meeting
as one, the nation demands that the Levite tell his story and swears with one voice not to return to their tents and houses until Benjamin has been punished (2:1217). Whereas nothing further is heard in the Bible of the Levite, Rousseau takes time out here to observe his death and public funeral, imagining that he will have spoken dying words of reassurance to his concubine—“Fille de Bethléem, je te porte une bonne nouvelle; ta mémoire ne restera point sans honneur”—and that her corpse will have been reassembled and buried in the same sepulcher as his (2:1216).

Extensive preparations for battle include the choosing of warriors by lot from each tribe, an unheeded request for extradition of the perpetrators, and God’s decision that the assault should be led by the injured party of Juda (2:1217). The vastly outnumbered Benjaminites rely on their own ferocity and the sharp-shooting of left-handed (Judges) or ambidextrous (Rousseau) allies to win resounding victories on each of the battle’s first two days (2:1217–18). Their ranks decimated, the eleven tribes twice inquire of God whether they should continue to war against their brother Benjamin (2:1218). On the second evening, when the inquiry is prefaced by offerings and sacrifices, He promises them a resounding victory (2:1218). An inspired stratagem indeed enables the Israelites to surround the Benjaminites and to reduce their entire race to six hundred survivors, all adult males (2:1218–19). Chapter 20 ends with the eleven pursuing the remnants of the one into the wilderness and continuing to burn every city in their path; they will not be reported to have wept “larmes en abondance” until chapter 21. In Rousseau’s Canto 3, however, remorse follows directly, with no break in the text, from victory (2:1219).

Canto 4, finally, follows the lead of chapter 21 in effecting a reconciliation with Benjamin and finding a way to perpetuate “ce dernier et précieux reste d’une de nos Tribus” without violating the oath that no daughter of Israel shall be given to him in marriage (2:1220). Troops are dispatched to punish Jabesh-Gilead for failure to participate in the war of revenge; all inhabitants of the city are systematically exterminated, except four hundred virgins, whom the Benjaminites are summoned to take as brides (2:1220–21). Rousseau embroiders on the Benjaminites’ joyless return, imagining their downcast eyes and faces covered with “shame and remorse” (2:1221). As in the exordium, Genesis is made to speak between the lines of Judges; Rousseau recalls Jacob’s prophecy for his youngest son: “‘Benjamin est un loup dévorant; au matin il déchirera
sa proye, et le soir il partagera le butin’” (2:1221). The narrator then pauses to consider the situation from the hapless brides’ point of view: “Quelles noces pour de jeunes vierges timides, dont on vient d’égorger les frères, les pères, les mères devant leurs yeux, et qui reçoivent des liens d’attachement et d’amour par des mains dégoutantes du sang de leurs proches!” (2:1221). Out of context, the narrator’s apostrophic conclusions would seem to contradict the better known, more misogynic pronouncements of texts like *Julie, Emile,* and the *Lettre à d’Alembert:* “Sexe toujours esclave ou tiran, que l’homme opprime ou qu’il adore, et qu’il ne peut pourtant rendre heureux ni l’être, qu’en le laissant égal à lui” (2:1221).

Context prevails, however. Further bloodshed can be averted only if brides are found for the two hundred members of the vanquished tribe who still have none. The Bible authorizes those Benjaminites to lay traps for the virgins of Shiloh who “sortiront pour danser avec les flûtes” during an annual feast of the Lord. Rousseau does not, however, content himself with reporting the deed to have been done. Rather, he sadistically pictures and prolongs the violence of what amounts, in a radical paradox, to authorized rape: “Les ceps déchirent leurs voiles, la terre est jonchée de leurs parures. . . .” (2:1222). And he deviates just as markedly from his model in personalizing the moment of resolution. For the first time in either this version or the Bible, characters are given proper names. With the throngs of spectators torn between “justice” (for Benjamin) and “pitié” (for their latest victims), it falls to a particular virgin, “Axa, la tendre Axa,” to decide the fate of Israel (2:1222). As her beloved fiancé, Elmacin, looks on, Axa’s father enjoins her to do her duty and save his face. For, much as he cherishes his hand-picked son-in-law, it is the father himself who has selflessly proposed the collective rape to the Benjaminites (2:1223). It requires only that her glance meet that of her “vénérable père” for Axa to name Elmacin in a final adieu and fall, half dead, into the arms of his Benjaminite rival (2:1223). Elmacin, in turn, vows to cherish the memory of their innocent love and to dedicate his still pure body and heart to the service of God (2:1223). Swift imitation of Axa’s sacrifice by the remaining virgins inspires a collective cry of joy that stands in sharp contrast to the inconclusive conclusion of the biblical original. “En ces jours-là il n’y avait point de roi en Israël, mais chacun faisait ce qui lui semblait bien”—the last verse of chapter 21 echoes the first of chapter 19 and hints that the cycle of violence will really be
broken only later, through establishment of a monarchy. "Vierges d'Ephraïm, par vous Benjamin va renaitre. Beni soit le Dieu de nos pères! il est encore des vertus en Israël"—in Rousseau's final apostrophe, the future is already near at hand, thanks to the selfless acts of a personal virtue which no measure of violence can have extinguished entirely (2:1223).

But neither can this resolution extinguish our haunting memories of events centered on Rousseau's title character, the Levite. Comparing those events with the Confessions' account of Jean-Jacques's activities on the eve of his flight from Montmorency yields a cluster of cross-references that belie protestations of Le Levite's irrelevance to the author's personal situation. The experience of violent, nocturnal expulsion from what turns out to be an unsafe haven, the house of a host, occupies a central position in both narratives. Like the old man of Gibeah, the Maréchal de Luxembourg has taken in an unmarried couple, Thérèse and Jean-Jacques, on whom the population at large had turned its back. However grateful, Jean-Jacques is said to have reacted with characteristic ambivalence to the hospitality whose essential burden of reciprocity he felt unsuited, by reason of temperament and of inferior social class, to assume (1:517-18). How better to dramatize that ambivalence than through the increasingly importunate demands of the concubine's father that the Levite postpone his intended departure. How better to justify unwillingness to reciprocate than by exposing an unseemly, seemingly pointless rivalry between father- and son-in-law. How better, finally, to absolve Jean-Jacques of pathological punctiliousness than by recalling that, in the second biblical episode of hospitality gone awry, the old man's gesture not only fails to help but even contributes directly to death and disaster. The Confessions question only tacitly the sincerity of their host, the Marechal, who is said to have snatched back with surprising alacrity the garden key tendered him by Jean-Jacques (2:584). Writing the Levite as a kind of wish fulfillment, Rousseau may have wondered why the Marechal did not go to the same lengths as the old man to defend and detain a guest whom he purported to honor and had (half- or wholeheartedly?) invited to stay on incognito (1:581).

Both of Rousseau's narratives target the nameless "stranger" (the Ephraimite in Gibeah, the Genevan in Paris) as victim of a "plot" to which the Bible makes no allusion. Jean-Jacques doubles, however, as Levite and concubine. To the attenuated violence of a second separation
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from her family and the concubine's brutal expulsion into the night correspond, in reverse order, the two moments of Jean-Jacques's being summoned from his bed at 2 A.M. and his leaving the château the following afternoon (1:580, 583). Why, if not to reassemble the cast of characters present at his own leave-taking — Monsieur le Maréchal, Madame la Maréchale, Mesdames de Boufflers and de Mirepoix — would Rousseau have thought to endow his concubine with a mother and sisters (1:583)? In what looks very much like a further wish fulfillment, the tearful mother's unmitigated sadness at this "nouvelle séparation" (2:1211) corrects the "air" only "assez triste" of Mme la Maréchale, whose embraces Jean-Jacques finds less passionate than those of a year or two earlier (1:583). In both Rousseau texts, the final, most fond farewells are reserved for a father figure too overcome by emotion to speak; foreknowledge shared by Jean-Jacques and his host that they will never meet again recreates the pathos of foreshadowing in the Levite that the daughter will not live to see the next day's dawn (1:584; 2:1211).

As for the nocturnal expulsion itself, no horde of Benjaminites beats down Jean-Jacques's door. But the illusion of a crowd is created by the densely populated passage that has Thérèse lighting the way for M. La Roche (a valet), who bears a letter from Mme la Maréchale that encloses a further letter, where the Prince de Conti predicts the imminent prise de corps: "Ton enverra sur le champ le saisir" (1:580). Rousseau's later speculation will, of course, link Thérèse's "ambassade nocturne" to a "complot" more exactly analogous in its collective hatching and in its perversity with that of the Levite's enemies (1:587–88.) For now, it is already morning; as though violence enough had not been perpetrated by the very light and sound that first dragged Jean-Jacques from "a sort of dream," he is enjoined, like the concubine, to get up and go confer with the Maréchale (1:580).

If the Confessions text insists on the experience of expulsion by multiplying instances, so more systematically still does Rousseau's rendition of the biblical narrative. Having been left behind in his own home by his unfaithful consort, the Levite nonetheless experiences his plight, thanks to a corrective image, as that of a player excluded from a childhood game (2:1210). On the return journey from the father's home, he is said, in a second image, to have been as fearful of exposing his beloved to the "injures de l'air" as a mother bringing her child back from the wet nurse (1:1212). To be outside, exposed, whether coming or going, is
always to be in mortal danger; to be in danger is, at least sometimes, to be outside, exposed, en route—as when the concubine’s attackers are pictured as “un troupeau de loups affamés” attacking “une foible génisse” on her return “de l’abruvoir” (2:1214). A like fate might well have awaited the fugitive Jean-Jacques, whose voyage into the no-man’s-land between asile and exil takes as its starting point the “abruvoir” of Montmorency (1:584).

At every such point of intersection between the two texts, *Le Lévite* invests the *Confessions*’ anecdotal account of expulsion with intense anxiety. Simply retelling a biblical tale that forges a metonymic link between the two events of an expulsion and a *prise de corps* makes it unnecessary to choose between or reconcile the available models of birth trauma and castration anxiety. No sooner has the concubine’s body crossed the threshold than it is violated. An act in which Rousseau inscribes the several perversities of unwanted homosexual advances, gang rape, and necrophagia gives menacingly literal and nonjuridical meaning to the term *prise de corps*, which English translates simply as “arrest.” A narrative chiasmus further reinforces the link between the two traumas: having sent out the concubine to be mutilated by Benjamin, the Levite then mutilates her further—or, as he puts it with chilling matter-of-factness, “j’ai pris son corps” (2:1216)—and sends her back out to the twelve tribes of Israel.

Much remains to be said about Rousseau’s uses of this haunting “body in bits and pieces.” My point for now is simply that *Le Lévite* not only commemorates but remembers the occasion of Rousseau’s flight. At the very least, *Le Lévite* is made by the *Confessions* to look autobiographical. Details, details—upon the fugitive’s safe arrival at the way station of Yverdun, Book 11 closes with a meta-autobiographical postface where Rousseau admits to having unselectively recounted everything that he can remember and makes a general rule of “l’importance des moindres détails” (1:587–88). Our reading thus far has acted on his own suggestion that rehearsing “toutes les circonstances” is vital to the discovery of subtexts secretly at work; we have merely substituted, for the subtext singled out by him as “le complot,” his own *Lévite d’Éphraïm* (1:587–88). As is often the case, the *complot* surfaces conveniently when Rousseau intuits a patterning of the *Confessions* on some other of his own texts, since to admit that patterning would be to undermine the autobiography’s autonomy and singularity of direct access to Jean-
Jacques. In a further “[e]xemple grossier mais sensible” of cross-referentiality (1:588), Le Lévite makes much of insouciant feasting in the face of imminent disaster. The Confessions, in turn, linger over a picnic shared by Jean-Jacques with “deux Professeurs Oratoriens, le Pere Alamanni et le Pere Mandard” on the afternoon preceding his flight. Rousseau goes to otherwise unaccountable lengths to recall that, having forgotten glasses, they used straws to drink directly from the bottle, and insists that Jean-Jacques had never been so “gai” (1:579).

In a monograph devoted to Le Lévite, François van Laere cites several of the same uncanny coincidences en route to the conclusion that writing Le Lévite must have served Rousseau as an exercise in short-term self-therapy. Closing in progressively on the relationship between Jean-Jacques and Thérèse, van Laere supposes the author to have identified more or less exclusively with his title character and to have worked through ambivalent feelings inspired by his own concubine: love, hate, respect, scorn, guilt at having left her behind, hope that she will decide not to join him, and so forth. Whatever details do not inform this scenario are seen by van Laere as establishing a threshold level of identifiability, or as exceptions to the rule: “Est-il besoin de préciser que l’identification n’est pas absolue? L’on sait en quels termes Rousseau parle du pucelage de Thérèse: on ne pourrait sans ridicule prétendre que c’est à elle qu’il pense lorsqu’il fait dire par son Lévite au père de la concubine: ‘Quel autre que moi peut honorer comme sa femme celle que j’ai reçue vierge?’”

In fact, nothing proves less stable in Le Lévite than the identities or one-to-one correspondences we are nonetheless encouraged to forge provisionally. As would not occur if he stood everywhere for Jean-Jacques, the Levite plays no part in the scene of parting where the concubine herself assumes Jean-Jacques’s distress, and her family that of his hosts. Rousseau may really have wished to throw Thérèse to the wolves in his stead, or thought guiltily to have done so by leaving her behind at Montmorency. But the concubine’s nocturnal expulsion does not merely project; it also recollects a single moment, that of Jean-Jacques’s arousal from “une espèce de rêve” (1:580), which the Levite relives literally and the concubine relives in all its primal, metaphorical terror. Both members of the biblical couple thus inform the experience attributed by the Confessions to a single protagonist. The narrative structure of revenge tends, as ever, toward the dissolution of fixed identities: in “taking the
body" of his concubine, the Levite mimics the gesture of his enemies and the designs of Jean-Jacques's.

Conversely, a single character in *Le Lévite* may stand for several in the *Confessions*, as when the biblical protagonist so thoroughly satisfies his beloved as to bore her. A letter to the Maréchal that postdates the drafting of *Le Lévite* names Thérèse as the one whose restlessness Rousseau himself fears: "je crains qu'elle ne trouve ma retraite trop solitaire, qu'elle ne s'y ennuye."? But the *Confessions* also chronicle Jean-Jacques's efforts to defend against the eventuality of his own boredom and especially against that of Madame la Maréchale's boredom with him. If fears about Thérèse inspire no specific plan of action, there is more than a little of the Levite's exquisite sacrifices—love songs, wild roses, golden honey, a turtledove (2:1209)—in the stratagems devised by a desperate Jean-Jacques to stave off the displeasure of his demanding hostess. He makes her the privileged repository of his darkest secrets (1:557) and of *les avantures de Mylord Edouard* (1:524–25); and he reads to her in discrete doses from *Julie* and *Emile*, like some latter-day Scheherazade (1:522, 534). In the locus of boredom, as well as in her "ambassade nocturne," Thérèse might be seen as replacing the more terrifying, or just as terrifying, figure of la Maréchale.

Even without opening the *Confessions*, we can notice how images deployed within *Le Lévite* make a travesty of identity. Jumping from the role of excluded child to that of solicitous mother, the Levite transgresses both generational and sexual barriers. The image that makes his concubine over into a male child being transported home from the wet nurse establishes the special case of surrogacy—that is, one-way interchangeability of identity—as a general rule and no localized accident of *Le Lévite*. How could it be otherwise in a text that, propelled by the contagion of revenge, repeatedly recasts yesterday's victims as tomorrow's avengers and grants no long-term immunity from the indifference of violence? Van Laere's psychoanalysis of Rousseau through his poem remains convincing as far as it goes, but, in its rigidity of identification, cannot hope to go far enough.

**A PROPHETIC DREAM OF MATERNAL SELF-SACRIFICE**

Freudian psychoanalysis does, however, provide a theoretical model, that of the so-called "prophetic dream," that accounts more fully for *Le Lévite* than any attempt to fix identities or assign specific complexes to
the real-life Rousseau. It is from what amounts, after all, to such a dream that the *Confessions* report Jean-Jacques to have been rudely awakened on the eve of his flight. The biblical Levite did not occur to him out of the blue as an appropriate subject for adaptation—rather, it was his long-standing practice to combat insomnia by systematic rereading of the Bible. On the evening in question, greater than usual wakefulness had allowed him to pursue his latest rereading all the way through “le livre qui finit par le Lévite d’Éphraïm.” This “affecting” story then formed the basis for the “espèce de rêve” that Thérèse’s arrival interrupted (1:580) and that Jean-Jacques might have dreamed on, had he exercised the option, acknowledged in retrospect, to stand his ground and “dormir tranquille­ment la fraîche matinée” (1:588). But in that case, would he have recalled the dream in his own mind, or in his autobiography? Jean-Jacques’s penchant for reverie notwithstanding, the *Confessions* almost invariably avoid discussing the content of specific dreams. This avoidance no doubt bespeaks the absence of Freudian authorization to make such dreams a worthwhile topic of discussion and privileged locus of scientific self-knowledge. Rousseau himself asks whether, had he gone back to bed, the same order would have gone out for his arrest. (1:588). Displacing his question, we might wonder whether, had the dream of Judges not to some extent come true, it would have come to consciousness. The Freudian model suggests otherwise.

The question of what to make of the ancient belief that dreams possess the capacity to divine the future recurs at intervals in Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*. A response entirely consistent with the author’s positivistic pretensions turns up only in a manuscript, “A Pre­monitory Dream Fulfilled,” dated six days after the *Interpretation* had been published. A timely breakthrough thus fulfills the analyst’s own wish that “prophetic” dreams might resemble all other dreams in fulfilling some “indestructible wish” of the past. Freud’s manuscript analyzes a dream reported to have struck the analysand as premonitory when, on the following day, she had a chance meeting with the individual, Dr. K, about whom she only then remembered having dreamt. The fleeing Jean-Jacques must have been likewise struck to find himself cast out like . . . the Levite’s concubine. His thoughts must have settled more understandably than the *Confessions* suppose, not on “tout ce qui venoit de se passer, et le Parlement, et Madame de Pompadour, et M. de Choiseul, et Grimm, et d’Alembert, et leurs complots, et leurs complices,” but on a
"souvenir qui me vint au lieu de tout cela . . . celui de ma dernière lecture la veille de mon départ" (1:586).

To be sure, Rousseau's naming the object of memory as "une lecture" brackets the dream itself and makes it impossible to know how much primary work on the source material had already been done by the sleeping or dozing Jean-Jacques. But the Confessions' claim that Jean-Jacques has not consulted his source since that fateful night—that is, not even in writing his text (1:580)—makes the dream's distortions part and parcel of his ultimate referent. Into the contrast between remembered reading and forgotten enemies cataloged exhaustively by name, we might read an intuition of the dream's having functioned precisely to blur identities. Beyond that, there is something intrinsically oneiric about the biblical source, which contains at least one major logical inconsistency. Rousseau shares the perplexity of more qualified biblical scholars as to why, if Levites were exempted from the prevailing marriage laws of endogamy, this particular Levite was precluded from marrying his concubine (2:1209, 1922). And the source derives its highest drama, that of the tribes' spontaneous response to receipt of the concubine's body parts, from an apparent ellipsis: "l'unanimité quasi magique des tribus à la vue de ce prétendu signe est peut-être due à un enchainement illusoire de cause à effet, une lacune du texte biblique ayant pu nous priver d’un maillon dans les péripéties . . ." In short, what Jean-Jacques remembers reading was already dreamed, and dream-like.

Freud proceeds to find a natural explanation for his analysand's apparent gift of prophecy in the fact that Dr. K names not only the relatively unproblematic figure whom she did in fact meet, but a second individual with whom she had earlier had a troubled, guilt-ridden relationship. Having opined that, were it not for the chance meeting with the second, relatively benign K, the dream would not have surfaced, Freud concludes: "Thus the creation of a dream after the event, which alone makes prophetic dreams possible, is nothing other than a form of censoring thanks to which the dream is able to make its way through into consciousness." The dream can be remembered because extraordinary circumstances make it possible to forget or disguise what the dream itself remembers. As though once again furnishing us with a key to Le Levite in the guise of a key to the "complot," Rousseau singles out from among the welter of details worth pondering the timing of the "Decret comminatoire" and of the "Decret réel" (1:588). Timing is indeed of the
essence if we are to read *Le Lévite* as the report of a dream rendered prophetic by those events of its immediate aftermath that it seems exclusively committed to foretelling. Rousseau knows enough about playing prophetic dreams by these rules to render *Le Lévite*’s own timing impeccable: he holds off on recalling Jacob’s prophecy for Benjamin until the moment of its having just been fulfilled. The *Confessions* proceed on the same tacit assumptions. If, in telling Jean-Jacques’s story, they half-forget his dream, they also half-forget their reasons for wanting to pin *Le Lévite* down to the there and then of July 1762 at Montmorency. Those reasons have to do with the prophetic dream’s unique capacity for covering over the past with the future, for replacing a greater with a lesser source of anxiety, for making a perilous voyage of retrospection appear to be prospective, for looking Janus-faced to the future in order to look back with impunity.

Throughout *Le Lévite*, Rousseau breaks with biblical tradition and alternates narration in the present and in the simple past. This apparently unremarkable recourse to literary convention carries a semantic load: two grammatically incompatible time frames are rendered accessible and pertinent to each other; instantaneous passage can be had, at will, according to no predictable pattern, between the here and now and the long ago and far away. The exordium is more suggestive still of temporal duplicity specific to the prophetic dream. Rousseau’s narrator weaves anticipation and retrospection into a kind of future perfect: I will tell (and am in fact foretelling here) the events of that distant past that you who will die (remember your future) have chosen to forget. What the exordium wishes—that the “crimes of Benjamin” be rescued from collective repression—will already have come to pass, thanks to onomastic slippage reminiscent of the two Dr. Ks (2:1208). A *Lévite* more respectful of the integrity of the book of Judges and of the forward march of history would have understood “Benjamin” to name only a tribe and “les crimes de Benjamin” to have commenced with the concubine’s rape; a literal exodus would have held firm as the terminus ad quem of collective memory. But Rousseau’s text acknowledges this barrier only to transgress it: a second Benjamin is summoned from beyond the pale to answer for what becomes his original crime of matricide. The exordium thus stages Rousseau’s journey back in time to the moment of his mother’s death as a result of childbirth. The *Confessions* would retell that death in strikingly similar terms. For Benjamin, Rousseau coins the epithet “triste enfant de
douleur"; for himself, "triste fruit de ce retour." You who "donnas la mort à ta mère" will become I who "coûta la vie à ma mère." In both cases, the criminal or "self-made orphan" is seen to have suffered for his crimes: "c'est de ton sein qu'est sorti le crime qui t'a perdu" versus "ma naissance fut le premier de mes malheurs" (2:1208; 1:7).

Tracing an imperfect circle from the crimes of one Benjamin to those of another, the exordium thus anticipates the movement of the overall text. A reversal of the same onomastic slippage that has all but named the birth of the baby Benjamin brings Le Lévite to the brink of giving rebirth to Benjamin the tribe. If the prose poem's definitive title, Le Lévite d'Ephraïm, corresponds roughly to the prophetic component or cover story of Rousseau's dream, the discarded alternative, Les Benjamites, bears witness to its component of regression: Rousseau looks ahead to the resurrection of heretofore suppressed traumas dating from the time immemorial of his own biography. The all-embracing storyline that problematizes the birth of Benjamin significantly displaces the unspoken, unfulfilled desiring of the biblical source for a monarch. Rousseau's Lévite rejoices in the imminent satisfaction of a different desire: that Benjamin should live; that the community without exception should desire and authorize him to live; that the mother's death (or swoon) should result not from matricide but from the ultimate maternal self-sacrifice.

The path to this denouement is strewn with thwarted attempts at return to the womb. Each successive displacement of the Levite and his concubine approximates such an attempt: from their retreat to the "côtes du mont Hébal" and repeated descents "dans les vallons de Sichem" to her misguided attempts at flight back to the bosom of her family, to his retrieval of her from the arms of the wet nurse, to her metaphorical return as heifer from the drinking trough and literally falling short on the host's threshold (2:1209, 1210, 1212, 1214, 1215). In each case, the return is either failed or short-lived; a new instance of violent expulsion inevitably follows. Nor can Axa find permanent refuge in the arms of her mother, to whom she flees from her Benjaminite captor (2:1222). Only Benjamin will be welcomed back into that oft-cited "sein" of Israel from which the other tribes first think to expel him (2:1217–18). But the womb must first be made over into a truly safe haven; there will be no going back for good until it is no longer possible for the children of Israel to be massacred "chacun dans son habitation"
In the interval, the house of a host remains no more secure than a public square and, in effect, less secure.

No imagery could more drastically call into question the notion of the womb as refuge than that of the tribes’ instructions to the brideless Benjaminites: “Allez, et mettez des embuches aux vignes: puis quand vous verrez que les filles de Silo sortiront pour danser avec des flutes, alors vous les enveloperez, et ravissant chacun sa femme, vous retournerez vous établir avec elles au pays de Benjamin” (2:1221). In the story’s penultimate paroxysm of violence, rape is figured as entrapment or envelopment in makeshift wombs. It makes no difference that the rapists are really male, or the victims female. The call to violence is worded as a call to violate sexual identity more systematically than ever before. The Benjaminites are enjoined to arm themselves with “embuches” in which to ensnare virgins endowed with the “flutes” suggestive of male sex organs. In an apostrophe to the virgins, the narrator insists on the impossibility of escape from this omnipresent, all-devouring womb: “Jeunes beautes ou courez-vous? en fuyant l’opresseur qui vous poursuit vous tombez dans des bras qui vous enchaînent” (2:1222). Benjamin’s “return” to the womb as refuge is thus predicated on forcing the virgins to return to the womb as trap. But this episode only dramatizes a principle self-consciously at work throughout the text: wherever violence needs the nourishment of renewed impetus, new wombs are improvised. The Levite’s own revenge depends on his ability to inscribe the Benjaminites’ crimes within the broader matrix of Israel as corporate body and on his seeing to it that the public embraces and swallows up his private story.

The “desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body” thus becomes the inescapable locus of crimes committed in a text-long crisis of indifferentiation. The “crise sacrificielle” that René Girard postulates as the necessary and sufficient cause of recourse to the legitimating violence-to-end-all-violence of sacrifice comes about with and through such denials of difference. In Le Lévite, this crisis of indifference manifests itself in symptoms ranging from the localized ambidexterity of the Benjaminites’ allies to the global ambiguity of innocence and guilt; from the apparently benign reciprocity of hospitality to the obviously malignant reciprocity of mutual recriminations; from the positively charged pole of “un amour partage” to what the text sees as the perversion of homosexuality; from the boring...
sameness of ritualized love-making between the Levite and his concubine to the mortal sameness of repeated massacres; from the literary use of animals to figure human violence to the literally indiscriminate slaughter of "tous les habitans, hommes et femmes, jeunes et vieux, grands et petits, jusqu'aux bêtes" (2:1219). In the process, there is a further leveling of differences between the local and the global, the positive and the perverse, the benign and the malignant, the boring and the mortal, the literary and the literal. Rousseau's text seizes on the lack of respect for difference that was inherent in his source and carries chaotic anarchy to new and more emphatic extremes. Paradigmatically, the Benjaminites continue their assault on the concubine beyond the no longer operative limit between life and death.

In this, as in any crisis of indifference, violence breeds violence and will continue to do so until a mechanism is devised for reasserting difference by projecting the totality of indifference onto a "guilty" party. One symptom must be singled out as the carrier of contagion; violence must be traced, arbitrarily but such that the community remains blind to this arbitrariness, to a single source. As I have already suggested, Le Lévite targets sexual indifference as symptom and the womb as source. The very fact that any site in the text can be outfitted as a female inner space means that the womb has lost its material specificity. But as the locus of nondifference between mother and child, that space can—arguably, if not necessarily—be voided of any specifically female or benignly positive connotations. Our matricidal dreamer's peace of Israel and peace of mind depend on reading those vaguely encouraging signs of indifference to mean that the sum total of the text's violence can and must be recontained in a literal womb. In order to short-circuit the violent reprisals to which his biblical source gives full rein, Rousseau will thus tap into the archetypal resonances of his personal prehistory. Le Lévite replaces the truism that violence begets violence with the original, originating tautology that violence is begetting and begetting violence. "Fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power."

Preparations are under way from the outset of the poem for the supreme moment of scapegoating when the womb of Axa, mother-to-be as sacrificial victim, will have been made available to assume the totality of violence within the text. No sooner has the initial charge of matricide been entered against Benjamin than he is in turn endowed with uterine
Metaforical matrilinearity recasts the erstwhile father of his race as the monstrous source and victim of a new matricide. Only divine intervention saves the tribes of Israel from playing out the same dual role to its logical conclusion: “ton peuple . . . périra-t-il pour vouloir ôter le mal de son sein?” (2:1218). However much Benjamin the tribe is said to suffer from shame and remorse for his crimes, this version of Israel’s collective death wish is closer to suicide than to matricide and so already approximates the really desired outcome of maternal self-sacrifice. From the anxious son’s perspective, there is further cause for reassurance in the knowledge that the Levite’s sacrificial gesture of delivering his/her child to the enemy was imperfectly executed (and, in fact, no sacrifice at all since he later yielded to the temptation of revenge).

In preparation for the other, more desired and desirable sacrifice, Le Lévite misses no opportunity to feminize its many instances of violence. The apostrophe to the concubine’s rapists, earlier designated as “loups affamés,” masculine animals with gaping jaws, concludes as follows: “Barbares, indignes du nom d’hommes; vos hurlemens ressemblent aux cris de l’horrible Hyene, et comme elle vous devorerez des cadavres” (2:1215). The evocation of an animal whose name has no masculine form, the “elle” that establishes the “Hyene” herself as an absolute referent, the implied interchangeability of her devouring with forthcoming burial in “mother” earth—all tend toward obscuring the biological identity of the apostrophe’s addressees. Man (vir) versus woman replaces man (homo) versus animal as the passage’s operative polarity. The attackers’ homosexual intent is thus realized as a kind of lesbian lechery with overtones of infanticide.

Earlier, a gratuitous digression on ancient hospitality had produced the assurance that in those days, “l’homme avoit des entrailles” (2:1212). That assurance might, in some other text, have given rise to no other reading than the metaphorical, platitudinous “human beings had feelings.” It looks suspiciously here like a literal key to reading this text’s metaphorical subversion of sexual difference. In these days of biblical revisionism, men have wombs. This same aside grounds the phenomenon of ancient hospitality in blissful ignorance of exchange mediated by “vils métaux,” thereby condensing Rousseau’s well-known equation of metallurgy with catastrophic descent into Mother Earth’s nether regions. A feeling humanity would not violate its common mother; in this admitted
exception to the rule, men with wombs do repeated violence to whatever mothers they encounter. Even the most literally hypervirile violence is recorded through obsessive recourse to feminine articles and pronouns: "Mais les Benjamites étant sortis en bon ordre l’attaquent, la rompent, la poursuivent avec fureur, la terreur les précède et la mort les suit" (2:1217). (The referent, whose name comes to matter less than its gender, is not in this instance the concubine, but rather “l’armée d’Israël.”) The fields of Rama are likewise strewn with cadavers “comme les sables d’Elath se couvrent des nuées de sauterelles qu’un vent brulant apporte et tue en un jour.” (Another exclusively feminine animal name, “sauterelles,” has the further advantage of already containing the feminine surrogate *elles*.) And all this on a day when no actual females took part in the Benjaminites’ killing of twenty thousand men with the aid of allies brandishing slingshots in both hands, as though in testimony to their hyperbolic masculinity (2:1217).

The doubling which will eventually make a difference to the text’s outcome is that of the female. Provisional pairings between virginal daughter and concubine, mother and surrogate mother, Benjamin’s mother and Benjamin as mother point ahead to the possibility of a single female’s occupying simultaneously the two poles of subject and object in the enactment of self-sacrificial violence. This condition of efficacy is graphically recalled by the made-to-order name of Axa, A times a. Rousseau’s twice, even exponentially feminine heroine can be named as the common denominator of violence, thanks to the femininity that factors twice in her name.

The person of Axa likewise freezes the wide-ranging vacillation of the Levite’s feelings toward his concubine in an untranscendable ambivalence. The virgin who must be defiled in order to be deified is the eighteenth-century commonplace for what Girard describes as the dual nature of any sacrificial victim: "Il est criminel de tuer la victime parce qu'elle est sacrée . . . mais la victime ne serait pas sacrée si on ne la tuait pas." The anarchical violence that has made a travesty of difference between innocence and guilt now fixes itself, arbitrarily but unanimously, on the solitary figure of Axa. Transposition of the dreamer’s life story into the sacrificial register dignifies the commonplace and reduces his anxiety, by rendering moot the question of “real” innocence and guilt. It follows instantaneously from the ceremonial punishment of the innocent-but-
guilty mother that the child whose life derives from her death can and must worship her.

"Sexe toujours esclave ou tiran, que l'homme opprime ou qu'il adore, et qu'il ne peut pourtant rendre heureux ni l'être qu'en le laissant égal à lui." The narrator's lucid and surprisingly sympathetic outburst recognizes the feminine condition per se to be inscribed within a sacrificial order to which equality as the political analog of sameness is, sadly, anathema (2:1221). But this unseasonable editorial handwringing goes nowhere; a lone voice of dissent speaks up too late to produce any substantive inflection in what has by now emerged as the universally endorsed plot line of sacrifice. There can be no two ways about it, except in the initial stages of a dream that, en route to choosing the sacrificial order over the disorder of equality, promiscuously intermingles the two. Nowhere do the aspirations of the dream text contradict themselves more blatantly than in the purple prose of the Levite-concubine romance:

In its telling from the Levite's point of view, with him as the only active participant, this "amour" would appear to be anything but "partagé." The promise of reciprocity is broken from the initial moment of the erstwhile priest's indulgence in idolatry. He makes a goddess of the
woman whom he will later recall having “taken” as a virgin. A text desirous of having it both ways tenuously links this violation with the later rape, only to write out original violence by using a reciprocal reflexive to declare, romantically, “ils s’unirent” (2:1209). The same refusal to choose invests the entire series of images that both repeat sexual initiation as profane event and ritualize it as sacrifice. Read “literally,” the images tell of simulating an original violence, of offering Nature’s children to the lover-goddess in order to keep her and the violence she incarnates at a safe distance. Read as images, they tell of literal lovemaking, as predicated on a desire for human intercourse where her desire would return and replicate his own. On whose womb, Mother Earth’s or his partner’s, did the Levite visit his violence? Did he merely stage sacrifices and observe them voyeuristically, or cast himself in the lover’s role? Did he pick flowers for, or deflower, the concubine? mine golden honey for her, or ejaculate? Does the turtledove’s trajectory mimic that of a sacrificial victim, or that of the male member in repeated coitus? Even when this final image is taken only for a euphemistic depiction of sex (and not intentionally sacrificial) acts, it underscores and displaces confusion between the sacred and the profane: masculine self-sacrifice becomes the necessary condition and concomitant of romantic love between the sexes. In a surrender that amounts to attenuated auto-castration, the male fashions wombs (“pieges trompeurs”) for himself and sees his member reduced to equivalence with yet another exclusively and emphatically feminine animal, “une tourterelle craintive.”

The appropriately redundant expression “pieges trompeurs” bespeaks the essential aim of sacrifice, “ce trompe-violence.” But it also exposes the cross-purposes at which the Levite works when he both seeks to ward off violent reprisals by doing the violence of auto-castration to himself and desires that his partner return the favor. The only reciprocity the Levite really knows to demand is reciprocity of sacrifice. And reciprocity of sacrifice is something the female lover could not deliver even were the notion of reciprocal sacrifice not intrinsically oxymoronic. In the aftermath of half-forgotten sacralization, she has nothing of value left to give him; gods must be worshiped from afar if they are to keep “their” violence to themselves. The Levite’s enterprise fails for lack of a single focus, not so much because a really insatiable goddess no longer smiles on his efforts as because he seeks to worship and be worshiped by a supposed goddess. The concubine does pay him back for his violence.
and for the passivity to which Rousseau's text has relegated her. Repayment does not, however, take the form of self-sacrifice; it comes, rather, in the form of an autonomous human desire, which matches his own, for safe return to the womb of her parents' house. What was never really perfect happiness thus disintegrates into an unavowed rivalry that will be played out to the death, and beyond: one or the other of the two "lovers" must be expelled from the house of the host. As though to punish her desiring no less than the Benjaminites', the Levite will cold-bloodedly dismember the one who has made his own exhausted member palpate.

There is something suggestive, as well, about the fact of the concubine's desiring to be with the mother, rather than be the mother of Rousseau's dream. That desire erupts at the very moment when the wriggling turtledove in her womb (or at her breast) might just as well be a love child as a sex organ. Foreclosing this possibility, the text depicts her, at the moment when she expels the Levite into solitude, not as a mother but as "other"—that is, equal—"children" (2:1210). The text will not be prodded into naming the second use of the concubine's duplicitous womb until such time as the Benjaminite rapists move to "desecrate the act intended for procreation" (2:1214). The concubine remains radically unsuited for the role of sacrificial victim as specified by the text of Rousseau's desire. She cannot be "the one" of maternal self-sacrifice. The residue of her romance guarantees that she will, at best, approximate that role, and only for the fleeting instant before the Levite's exorbitant gesture of mutilation implicates her body in the perpetuation of violence.

Romantic, emasculating love having been rendered incompatible with thoroughgoing, exclusive sacrifice of the female, the denouement takes care to discriminate between the two instances of Axa. The mother of Benjamin will make a point of having nothing more to do with the lover of Elmacin. This fourth canto was written at a further temporal remove from Rousseau's dream than the others; as we might expect, it is less tolerant of contradictory wishes or, at least, more mindful of getting its priorities straight. Accordingly, in Le Lévite's lone instance of directly recorded female speech, Axa names Elmacin as the object of an autonomous desire, which she renounces immediately by falling into the arms of her Benjaminite captor (2:1223). Baby Benjamin will have her all to himself; nothing remains of the lover or of reciprocal love in the victim charged with putting an end to reciprocity.

Elmacin has been added to the cast precisely so that he can be elmi-
nated, and as a corrective to the Levite's indulgence in revenge of and against his concubine. But Elmacin has a further role to play in saving *Le Lévite* from noncompliance with the normal requirements of sacrifice. A true sacrificial victim would die, not merely swoon; she would remain metaphorically sterile, that is, utterly insusceptible of provoking reprisals; and her death would herald a community's metaphorical re-birth. But what a Rousseau in personal crisis needs instead is the fertile womb of a surviving mother. That *Le Lévite* addresses this need with single-minded intensity is suggested by a letter that Rousseau wrote during the same week to the Maréchale de Luxembourg: "Je dois pourtant vous dire qu'en passant à Dijon il fallut donner mon nom, et qu'ayant pris la plume dans l'intention de Substituer celui de ma mère, il me fut impossible d'en venir à bout; la main me tremblait si fort que je fus contraint deux fois de poser la plume." Axa, the mother whose name can be written, will have absorbed the son's violence and survived to bear literal fruit. But that requires of Elmacin that he spontaneously retire from the locus of revenge *and* assume the sterility that should otherwise have fallen to Axa.

Only then can the text's final apostrophe proclaim the glad tidings of Benjamin's return to the womb, or, more precisely, to the even more ideal state of being on the brink of birth. Neither expelled from the womb nor engulfed by it, Benjamin is still together with the mother and already separate enough from her to know the value of that togetherness. The autobiographer Rousseau would become can only look back on what must have been paradise; Rousseau the dreamer can look back on that paradise *and* live it. In this magical equilibrium of difference and indifference, even the Levite's wish for reciprocal sacrifice would seem to be susceptible of fulfillment. The original Benjamin's perverse repayment in kind—Rachel gave birth to him; he "gave her death" (2:1208)—is rewritten in a major key. The denouement's Benjaminite rapist reserves for Axa an otherwise precious gift, a child so nearly identical to himself as to bear his own name. The onomastic slippage that we posited as the enabling condition of Rousseau's prophetic dream brings a further desire to fruition: he who gives (a facsimile of) himself to the mother can neutralize the anxieties of fatherhood and sonship by becoming, in essence, his own father.

It is precisely "on the brink" that the *Confessions* place Jean-Jacques on what would stand as the afternoon of his greatest "gaiety." About to be
expelled and seized, he picnicked. Having forgotten to bring glasses, he and two harmless “fathers” of the church improvised with the largest “chalumaux de seigle” (1:579) they could find and playfully engaged in the contained rivalry of a drinking contest. Taking their distance, the Confessions parody the more profound pleasures of rewriting his own birth that the same evening’s dream held in store for Jean-Jacques.

SACRIFICING LE LÉVITE (AND ALL THE REST) AS LITERATURE

“[J]e coutais la vie à ma mere” (1:7). The Book 1 narrative that recounts Jean-Jacques’s crime against maternal generosity in mercantile terms likewise testifies to a partial dismantling of the sacrificial apparatus that had brought the crime to consciousness. Readers have always managed to appreciate Jean-Jacques’s lifelong quest for maternal surrogates and repeated failure to sustain normal relations with women without knowing Le Lévite. Book 11 deviates, however, from the Confessions’ established practice of attempting to settle issues of innocence and guilt without recourse to the sacred. Rousseau returns to embrace Le Lévite’s preoccupation with the anxiety-reducing properties of sacrifice per se. In the telling of Jean-Jacques’s hour of doom, sacrificial gestures are as tightly woven into the fabric of everyday life as in Old Testament times.

Amidst deafening rumors of problems with the publication of Emile, it is the prospect of being elected to “suffer for truth” (1:579) that explains a singular lack of anxiety and action on Jean-Jacques’s part. Notwithstanding appearances of laziness, passivity, even willingness to let his book burn in his stead, Jean-Jacques quite simply has no choice once he has been designated as a sacrificial victim. This sacrificial reflex is exercised anew when it comes to denying the apparent cowardice of flight from Montmorency. The honor of being sacrificed to truth will in turn be sacrificed to the honor and tranquility of Jean-Jacques’s hostess; conversely, Mme la Maréchale must not be made to suffer for his crimes (1:580). Her “blindness” to the heroism of this project, failure to discourage him from leaping onto the altar, and general “indifférence” (1:581) suggest that “sacrifice” has by now become, largely, a question of semantics.

In support of Jean-Jacques’s nomination as a kind of all-purpose sacrificial victim, Le Lévite is eventually summoned to provide documentary evidence. A “normal” individual would have sought immediate reprisals against the violent excesses of his tormentors. But not the Jean-Jacques
who, as though putting an end to some latter-day crise sacrificielle, declares himself "stérile de vengeance" and "characteristically" vacates the locus of recrimination into which circumstances have placed him: "Naturellement emporté j'ai senti la colère, la fureur même dans les premiers mouvemens, mais jamais un désir de vengeance ne prit racine au dedans de moi" (1:585). Of course, sacrifice, in this instance, imperfectly masks what van Laere aptly names the "vengeances à rebours" of using a display of perfect calm to frustrate his enemies' desire to get a rise out of him. "Il n'y a qu'une seule chose au dessus de leur puissance, et dont je les défie: c'est en se tourmentant de moi, de me forcer à me tourmenter d'eux" (1:586). The pointed absence from this sentence of any reciprocal reflexive belies the subject's less than total retreat from reciprocity. Like the Levite himself, Jean-Jacques straddles the fence between the sacred and the profane.

But if the temptation to rivalry proves irresistible, the Confessions will provide it with a forum or "champ clos" for controlled reenactment. At the historical midpoint between prophylactic rituals and the modern judiciary, Girard situates "les aménagements et entraves à la vengeance, comme les compositions, duels judiciaires, etc., dont l'action curative est encore précaire." In this spirit, Rousseau proposes a storytelling contest whose outcome, were he to enter Le Lévite, would be a foregone conclusion: "Qu'on rassemble tous ces grands philosophes, si supérieurs dans leurs livres à l'adversité qu'ils n'éprouverent jamais, qu'on les mette dans une position pareille à la mienne, et que dans la première indignation de l'honneur outragé on leur donne un pareil ouvrage à faire: on verra comment ils s'en tireront" (1:587). The mere fact of having written Le Lévite permits Rousseau to account for his in-flight activities, and would attest to extraordinary powers of self-discipline if he were not really more eager to promote a simply extraordinary self. Whatever secret resentments he might be suspected to have harbored even as he wrote are further supposed to have left no trace in his text.

Lest we object that Rousseau has mistaken transparent projection for abstinence, the remnants of the sacrificial apparatus come once again to the rescue. The biblical source is named as the source of a violence that Rousseau's revisions will have done everything in the power of pastoral overlay (a "style champêtre et naïf") to attenuate (1:586). The Confessions radicalize and essentialize a difference for which no profane reading of Le Lévite can take their word. Their account of the poem's
composition takes as its starting point “un sujet si atroce,” and as its
destination the “véritable” idyll whose “douceur de moeurs” and “an­
tique simplicité” will have been achieved “malgré l’horreur du sujet, qui
dans le fond est abominable” (1:586). Cutting off lines of communication
between the biblical and writing subjects, the Confessions echo the
poem’s original, originating call for sacrifice: “Sainte colère de la vertu,
vient [sic] animer ma voix” (2:1208). There will be no writing Le Lévite
until the explicit externalization of violent inspiration establishes the
poem’s authorial voice as “essentially” violence-free. No wonder that
Rousseau makes a point of not having reread the book that only to the
best of his recollection “est le livre des Juges” since the night of his
dream (1:580). Sacrifice run rampant renders untouchable whatever vic­
tims it designates—including, inevitably, Le Lévite itself.

We have come to the point of no return, where the long arm of
sacrifice reaches out to tap the poem per se. It is precisely this possibility
of sacrificing Le Lévite that explains why the author of the Confessions
both holds it so dear and goes to such lengths to deny its auto­
biographical content. “Jamais,” writes Rousseau of Le Lévite, just prior to
announcing the storytelling contest, “je ne l’ai relu, jamais je ne le relirai
sans sentir en dedans l’applaudissement d’un cœur sans fiel qui loin de
s’aigrir par ses malheurs s’en console avec lui-même et trouve en soi
dequoi s’en dédomager” (1:586–87). Readers denied direct access to Le
Lévite thus join in progress a series of ritualistic rereadings, which are
presumably derivative of some forgotten original reading. The possibility
foreclosed is that the usual violence of interpretation might, at some fu­
ture date, produce a significant deviation from that original. Rousseau
rereads Le Lévite not to learn from it, but rather to reproduce the affec­
tive experience most dramatically rendered by the metaphor of the clap­
ning heart. This new touchant-touché27 or impossible fusion of hand and
organ instills mere being (which would be figured as a beating heart)
with value, and implicates Le Lévite in the sacred business of putting
Rousseau in touch with himself. To what extent and in what way will by
now have been forgotten; the content of the prophetic dream is evacu­
ated from the structure that places Le Lévite at the intersection of past—
“Jamais je ne l’ai relu”—and future—“jamais je ne le relirai.” In an expe­
rience of identity that yields a single kernel of character, “un cœur sans
fiel,” Le Lévite plays a privileged role by its exclusion. Nonreflexive pro­
nouns referring to the text give way at the appropriate moment to a
cascade of reflexives, subject-object relations to metaphorically onanistic orgies. From beyond the ceremonial circle, we ethnographers look on as *Le Lévite* is served up to the whole race of Rousseaus past and future. By way of preserving their “community” against internal dissension, they use the sacrifice of *Le Lévite* to predicate their collective identity on an absence of rancor.

That the autobiographical yield is singular in both senses of the word invests Rousseau’s ritualistic rereadings with a further urge to commemorate the birth of autobiography per se. What the *Confessions* have long since promised—that Jean-Jacques will retire from “littérature” and devote himself to “mémoires” (1:514–17)—presupposes a polar opposition between two discrete activities, consecutive in time and carried out in different geographical sites. In coding the two by respective times and places, Rousseau avoids the issue of a substantive difference. And yet, he seems so sure that “littérature” and “mémoires” will never meet in some murky middle ground of “literary autobiography” or “autobiographical literature” that the *Confessions* make the distinction without betraying a moment’s hesitation or anxiety. In forging the distinction, Rousseau’s letters of confession to the censor Malesherbes were a start, but finally less of a step in the right direction than a one-time leap outside the purview of literature as usual. In fact, if the *Confessions* can make axiomatic an antithesis that continues today to preoccupy talk of “autobiography,” it is thanks to *Le Lévite d’Éphraïm*. The *Confessions* use *Le Lévite* to render transition as violent disruption, to ground the birth of autobiography in nothing less than the death of literature, to observe that death and so make it observable.

For the difference between a literary before and an autobiographical after to accede to the status of the sacrosanct requires that sacrifices be offered in the name of autobiography. That much is already implicit in the account of Jean-Jacques’s activities on the morning of his flight from Montmorency: “Depuis que j’avois résolu d’écrire un jour mes mémoires, j’avois accumulé beaucoup de lettres et autres papiers, . . . Une partie de ces papiers déjà triés, furent mis à part, et je m’occupai le reste de la matinée à trier les autres, afin de n’emporter que ce qui pouvoit m’être utile et bruler le reste” (1:582). This project of triage and burning remains unrealized at the level of anecdote: “nous ne pumes achever dans la matinée, et je n’eus le tems de rien bruler.” The project will find deferred fulfillment, not in violence inadequately focused on random non-
autobiographical letters, but in a forthcoming (mis)reading that prepares *Le Lévite* for sacrifice as the quintessence of literature.

The timing could not be more right for a final, finalizing fling: an unforeseen literary postscriptum will reopen the book on literature so as to close it more emphatically and self-consciously than could anything written in ignorance of autobiography already “in the works.” Nor can a heavy dose of chance—Jean-Jacques only happened to read the book of Judges, to complete it, to leave when he did, to remember his dream, and so forth—help but enhance *Le Lévite*’s attractiveness as a sacrificial victim. Violence would be done to a party really and solely guilty as charged (and not merely available) at the expense of the desired sacrificial dimension. That dimension is already underwritten by Rousseau’s insistence on the generic duality of his “poème en prose.” *Le Lévite* is thereby set up to cover all conceivable instances of literature in Rousseau, from the most youthful poems to the recent treatise on education. Even *Le Lévite*’s avowed lack of literary values serves to qualify it for forcible valorization on other grounds. The enactment of sacrifice will have simultaneously translated intrinsic mediocrity into infinite worth; autobiography will owe everything to *Le Lévite d’Éphraïm*.

But the work of preparation for sacrifice has only just begun: in addition to his biblical “lecture,” the fleeing Jean-Jacques will have fortuitously recollected “les *Idylles* de Gessner que son traducteur Hubner [sic] m’avoit envoyées il y avoit quelques tems” (1:586). The possibility of pastiche occurs and takes hold: “Ces deux idées me revinrent si bien et se mêlerent de telle sorte dans mon esprit, que je voulus essayer de les réunir en traitant à la manière de Gesner [sic] le sujet du *Lévite d’Éphraïm*” (1:586). What was once a life-and-death occasion has become doubly, even wholly literary. Embracing a perceived challenge to literary mastery, the *Confessions* proceed to tell the whole story of *Le Lévite*’s composition as the triumph of indifference over apparently irreducible difference between the biblical and Gessnerian inspirations. By virtue of commingling the sacred and the profane, the ancient and the contemporary, the abominable and the idyllic, and more and less recent readings, *Le Lévite* comes to share in the quintessence of any sacrificial victim. It can be declared different only and precisely as the carrier of an indifference that it carries to the point of blatant contradiction. Symptomatically, several lines after confessing to the “facilité” with which he rendered his ideas, Rousseau takes credit for the “merite” of “la difficulté
Ultimate Sacrifices

vaincue” (1:586). Self-congratulation is, purportedly, in order on the (to us) dubious bases of Le Lévite’s virtuousness and virtuosity: “je suis sur de n’avoir rien fait en ma vie où règne une douceur de mœurs plus attendrissante, un coloris plus frais, des peintures plus naïves, un costume plus exact, une plus antique simplicité en toute chose, et tout cela, malgré l’horreur du sujet, qui dans le fond est abominable” (1:586). These doubly distortional lines misrepresent both the text at hand (or at arm’s length) and the lifetime of literature that preceded it. On the one hand, they postulate an all but unrecognizable Lévite, made good (touching, fresh, naive, exact, simple) in memory/anticipation of the good it will have done. And on the other hand, however much Le Lévite really does to defy (advantageous) comparison with much of anything else he ever wrote, the writer forces it to epitomize his “vie” synecdochically, as more and most of same.

In the fabrication of a literary text to end all literary texts, Rousseau’s original contributions are limited to superior craftsmanship, and by the fact of his having imitated Gessner. What the Confessions conveniently fail to remember is that Rousseau first encountered Gessner not as the author of Idylles but as an unabashed Rousseaufophile and precursor in biblical paraphrase.28 Unavowed similarities between Le Lévite and Gessner’s Der Tod Abels extend beyond the obvious “epic pretensions” and “division into cantos.”29 There is the more profound commonality of ambivalent fascination with the all-devouring womb. It may appear that “love” is exuded everywhere in Gessner for “sheltered, enclosed spaces.”30 But that does not stop his Cain from being driven to fratricide by a prophetic nightmare where he foresees that his own proudly virile race will be swallowed up by the violent “mollesse” of Eve’s younger son.31 Recognizing the smouldering misogyny of La Mort d’Abel and imagining how gratified Rousseau must have been by the popularity and docility of his self-styled disciple make it easy to see how Gessner came to mind at a moment when the traumas of violent disapproval and actual violence had invaded the safe haven of Montmorency.

These biographical and neo-biblical connections are nonetheless suppressed by the Confessions, which pick their spots and use the Gessner of the Hellenic Idylles to make Rousseau’s Lévite a matter of derivative artistry. The sacrificial order converts even this apparent minus into a plus. With respect to his inviolable biblical source, the
would-be littérateur occupies the precise position that Girard recalls Aristotle's having reserved for the tragedians of Classical Antiquity: “le bon auteur ne touche pas et ne doit pas toucher aux mythes, parce que tout le monde les connait; il doit se contenter de leur emprunter des ‘sujets’.”

It is, arguably, the essence of art to embellish or, as Gessner puts it in his preface to La Mort d'Abel, to inventory “la nature” for the “multitude d’images dont il orne artistement son objet chéri.” And the Rousseau who “confesses” to doing nothing more or other than embellish gains the right to call himself the quintessential artist. His modesty, like Gessner's, attests indirectly and somewhat prematurely to the narrow specialization in matters aesthetic that was the fate just beginning to be reserved for literature by the incipient rise of modern science. But beyond that, naming Gessner and advertising his indebtedness allows Rousseau to contain the business as usual of imitative rivalry within the confines of literature. The territory of autobiography is, by implication, set aside as still virginal. It can be (re)discovered, as though for the first time, when the preamble to these same Confessions proclaims their absolute originality: “Je forme une entreprise qui n'eut jamais d'exemple, et dont l'exécution n'aura point d'imiter.” (1:5).

This preamble comes back to mind when Rousseau as proud author of Le Lévite challenges all comers to a storytelling contest on the model of Gessner's pastoral “concours de chants.” Striking parallels between Rousseau's two challenges, to outdo the autobiographer and to write a better story than Le Lévite, confirm the two paradigms of literature and autobiography in the wished-for relationship of non-interference. But by the same token, these parallels confirm Le Lévite's privileged role in founding and formalizing difference. Only the deviations of sacrificial logic from everyday thought processes can, in short, explain why the autobiography makes so much of Le Lévite's preciousness. The Confessions would have us read Le Lévite not as a companion piece or even as a “source” in the normal sense of the word, but as an enabling precondition of their own and Jean-Jacques's self-identity. In Girard's terms, the consummate oeuvre d'art will have been not only fetishized “sous le rapport de la beauté,” but “radicalement niée et émasculée... posée en antithèse imaginaire de l'inflexible et désolante vérité scientifique.”

In the Confessions' embrace of this “antithèse imaginaire,” Le Lévite serves the cause of sending littérature out of Rousseau's life not with a whimper but with a bang. The prose poem is charged with figuring the many mo-
ments of beauty in Rousseau’s career to which the Confessions will oppose a single, autobiographical moment of truth.

**BODIES IN BITS AND PIECES: Sacrifice and Synecdoche**

Multiple rereadings are purported to have taken place without provoking the slightest hesitation as to the validity of this scenario. Even such clues as the Confessions plant about attention to detail and timing send us off in hot pursuit not of the mother’s womb but of a phantom plot. Rousseau’s readers have, for the most part, followed the lead of his rereadings. Jean Lecercle takes the Confessions at their word and goes them one better, by obligating *Le Lévite* to an even greater profusion of literary sources: “La Bible, Homère, Fénélon, Gessner sont là, et mal­heureusement les derniers plus que les premiers. Rousseau n’y est pas. Il ne lui convenait pas de faire de la littérature.”35 On the other hand, Thomas Kavanagh’s convincing reading of *Le Lévite* in relation to major works like the Social Contract challenges the pertinence of Lecercle’s pejoratively (and anachronistically) narrow definition of littérature. And despite a misleading over-emphasis on the men of *Le Lévite*, Kavanagh is nonetheless struck by the subject’s special fascination for “a man whose life was marked by the death of a woman.”36

Such defections from the ceremonial circle of Rousseau’s authorized rereadings were bound to happen someday. An extant text differs from traditional sacrificial victims by its potential ability to talk back and, in this instance, to make its own case for inclusion under the rubric of “autobiography.” Still, if Rousseau did not publish *Le Lévite*, neither did he burn it. And his having left us more to go on than the word of the Confessions is not necessarily the undoing of his, albeit wishful, sacrificial scenario. Actual encounters with selected regions or bits and pieces of the prose poem can still work wonders; there is more than one way to isolate a Lévite that, as though inspired by Axa, all but asks to be sacrificed as the ultimate in literature.

Take, for example, the fourth and last canto, whose deferred composition mimics in miniature the overall Lévite’s belated literariness. Not only does Rousseau fictionalize here to a degree unprecedented in the earlier cantos, but his imaginary characters—Axa, her father, Elmacin—link *Le Lévite* to one of Rousseau’s earlier fictions. A father who handpicks his son-in-law and may even be accused of using his own daughter to mediate male friendship; a daughter who, even as she takes the Father’s
word for divine fiat, suppresses her own desire imperfectly and names its object on her deathbed; a lover who retreats voluntarily into the posture of Platonic adoration, contenting himself with memories and vowing never to know another woman—where else have we heard something very like this story, if not in the pages of Julie? It is only fitting that the “manière de petit poème en prose” (2:1205) earmarked for equation with literature should recall the “espèce de Roman” (1:434) that constitutes the real summum of literariness and literary success in Rousseau's oeuvre. Moreover, en route to sacralization, Le Lévite as palinode is systematically stripped of Julie's impurities. This father will eventually sacrifice his daughter to a higher cause than ego gratification; this daughter will come to her husband's embrace as a virgin; equally virginal, this lover will cherish his memories and preserve his beloved against temptation by entering the priesthood. It is as though Julie had undergone purificatory rites and emerged, ripe for sacrifice, as Le Lévite. A further point of commonality occurs: Julie's plunging into the canal to save her son from drowning, which critics have tended to dismiss as a plot device or only occasional cause of her death, reasserts its claim to preeminent causality through the univocal, unequivocal celebration of Axa's parallel sacrifice.

But the Confessions want to hide the sacrificial mother behind the sacrificial Lévite and to package the imminent birth of Benjamin/Rousseau as that of autobiography. In support of this enterprise, Le Lévite permits of an allegorical rereading where excesses of femininity might be used to figure those of literature. Rousseau's violation of his biblical source most often comes in the form of metaphors, which in turn work most often to subvert identity, especially sexual identity. “Forced” metaphors, contradictory, even self-contradictory metaphors, metaphors that singly and en masse call into question the most sacred categories of being—all tend toward “identifying” metaphor as the inherently violent mother of all violence. Assimilation in Le Lévite does not so much reconcile opposites as breed rivalry and reprisals, and assimilation occurs whenever metaphors come into play. What Rousseau's metaphors of violence end up proving is the violence of metaphor. On several occasions, literal and metaphorical instances of the same terms cohabit close quarters of the text. Having been abandoned among the “roches brulantes” of Gelboa, the Levite “burns” to rejoin his concubine (2:1210). Later, as the Benjaminites likened to the wolves of “[l]es Alpes glacées” prolong their
attack, the narrator asks, rhetorically: “comment cette beauté mourante ne glace-t-elle point vos féroces désirs?” (2:1214–15), and so forth. Making a spectacle of making metaphors lays bare a crime of appropriation that would otherwise go undetected. Caught in the act of stealing from nature, metaphor beats down the door between the human and the inhuman and assumes the semantic burden of “man’s inhumanity to man.” We have already traced the Levite’s troubles to his “improperly” diverting the name of God onto his concubine and seen how indeterminacy between the literal and the figural plays havoc with a love affair that metaphors would seem at first glance only to “embellish.” But to embellish is already, for the goddess-concubine, to preside, if she will, over the games of local athletes (2:1209) and, for goddess-metaphor, to preside over the deadly serious play of language and the dissolution of difference in the text. 

There is no such thing as an innocuous metaphor in Le Lévite; violence is as indissociably linked to figurate as to female beauty. And “beauty,” in turn, is the name reserved for Rousseau’s variation on the theme of Judges from the moment of the exordium’s enjoining us mortals to respect not only “les moeurs” and “l’hospitalité” but, first and foremost, “la beauté” (2:1208). The moral thus pointed is extraneous to the biblical narrative and prepares us for the moment when the Levite’s “beauté” and not the Levite himself will be designated for use as a sacrificial victim; “que sa beauté,” demand the rapists, “nous paye le prix de cet azile” (2:1213). If beauty feminizes the Levite, then it is of beauty that he must rid himself; beauty must be objectified, fetishized, projected, made other. Exit the concubine, the soon-to-be “beauté mourante” whom the further violence of metaphor will transform into the personification of the Levite’s physical “property” (2:1214). Throughout the host’s harangue on hospitality, the Levite remains immobile; he leaps into action only when his inviolability is further predicated on his being not merely a guest but man of God (2:1214). Had he been secure in that identity, he could have witnessed a sacrifice of the other man’s daughter as confirming the feminine in its otherness. But since he is really threatened in that identity, he must begin by externalizing the feminine other in him. The situation demands not a sacrificial victim in the narrow sense that Girard reserves for the already marginal beings who figure in the ritualistic recreation of original violence, but a bona fide victime émissaire on whom to wreak that original violence.37
He cannot stop there, however: the Levite whom Rousseau’s “poème en prose” beautifies is himself an aesthete and a poet. He first places his “true” identity in jeopardy by worshiping a graven image; his sacrilegious practice takes the form of inveterate image-making: “sur un sistre d’or fait pour chanter les louanges du Très-Haut, il chantait souvent les charmes de sa jeune épouse. Combien de fois les côteaux du mont Hébal retentirent de ses aimables chansons?” (2:1209). If love emasculates the lover, literature emasculates the author in the text with whom Rousseau so identifies as to make him the eponymous hero of a story from which he disappears halfway through. Like Le Levite’s author, the Levite as alter ego and poet-priest traces a route to reclamation of his singular priesthood that takes him through a final, finalizing paroxysm of poetry: he dismembers his concubine and sends her body to the tribes of Israel.

By way of illumination and contrast, we might recall Rousseau’s earlier evocation of that act in the Essai sur l’origine des langues:

Quand le Levite d’Ephraïm voulut venger la mort de sa femme, il n’écrivit point aux tribus d’Israël; il divisa le corps en douze pieces, et les leur envoya. A cet horrible aspect, ils coururent aux armes en criant tout d’une voix: Non, jamais rien de tel n’est arrivé dans Israël, depuis le jour que nos pères sortirent d’Egypte jusqu’à ce jour. Et la tribu de Benjamin fut exterminée. De nos jours l’affaire, tournée en plaidoyers, en discussions, peut-être en plaisanteries, eût trainé en longueur; et le plus horrible des crimes fut enfin demeuré impuni.38

What this passage states more directly than Le Levite is Rousseau’s understanding of the surgical operation as essentially scriptural: body parts were sent in lieu of letters; the Levite wrote with the corpse of his concubine. Le Levite makes the same point more subtly: however unprecedented in the history of Israel, the decisive dissection nevertheless has a precedent in Rousseau’s story. In the process of exhorting the Benjaminite rapists to cease and desist, his narrator breaks the victim’s body down into its component parts: “Voyez ses yeux déjà fermés à la lumière, ses traits effacés, son visage éteint; la pâleur de la mort a couvert ses joues . . . elle n’a plus de voix pour gémir, ses mains n’ont plus de force pour repousser vos outrages; Hélas! elle est déjà morte! . . .” (2:1215). A text that will already have realized the death by dissection that it then reports its protagonist to do goes a long way towards establishing the Levite’s gesture as not only essentially but paradigmatically scriptural. In
a redoubling of synecdoche, one part stands for the textual as for the bodily whole. The Levite, "le barbare" (2:1215), does not so much substitute violence for writing as realize to the fullest and with maximal efficacy the violence that is writing. Insofar as the Levite replicates Rousseau's writing of Le Lévite, the poem rejects emphatically the alternative presupposed by the Confessions to be that of revenge, on the one hand, and writing, on the other; Rousseau did not choose writing over revenge, it would appear, but revenge through writing.

But the parallels with his role model go deeper still, to the heart of Rousseau's career as a writer and philosopher of writing. A prevailing plot economy of one-for-one, eye-for-eye, and tooth-for-tooth reprisals makes the Levite's mysterious "projet" exorbitant, and conceivable only in the aftermath of its realization. Writing in the text is thus endowed with appropriately violent origins and devious intentionality. The vengeful Levite's recourse to dissection as dissemination and to epistolarity as deferral and disappropriation literalizes the logic whereby writing as renunciation of being is credited with leading circuitously to its reclamation. Beyond that, the use of (a human) being as a metaphor for writing hazards a scandalous reversal of priorities, in hopes that re-reversal will be forthcoming. Derrida summarizes thusly the logocentric credo at the root of the writer's calculated risk-taking: "L'acte d'écrire serait essentiellement—et ici de manière exemplaire—le plus grand sacrifice visant à la plus grande réappropriation symbolique de la présence." 39

Dreaming of or as the Levite, Rousseau experiences immediately the immediacy of writing’s return to being. He reverts to blissful ignorance of what the Essai had acknowledged to be the profane alternative to sacrificial circularity. Oneiric teleportation to patriarchal times allows him to turn his back on the "plaidoyers," "discussions," and "plaisanteries" that typically bog down modern-day writing in the potentially infinite linearity of deferral and in eventual death through dissipation of energy. Endowing the Levite's story with a proper denouement, where the concubine's body will have been reassembled and reunited with his, fulfills doubly the wish of perfect, timely restitution. There is, of course, the nagging imperfection of the corpse's having, in the interval, become a corpus of letters. The text does its utmost, however, to divert attention from this trace of epistolarity and to re-humanize the concubine. The Levite addresses the still-scattered body parts as "Fille de Bethléem" and reappropriates not merely her being as such but the even more precious
truth and value thereof: “ta mémoire ne restera point sans honneur” (2:1216).

From the central episode of the biblical Levite, Rousseau thus abstracts a familiar scenario: the containment of writing per se and conversion of scriptural into salubrious violence. Emphasis nonetheless falls, in this variant, on the containment/conversion of specifically figural language. The poet-priest did not merely write but wrote imagistically. In its retelling by Rousseau, the perverse fetishism of dissection comes to fetishize whatever “embellishing” the latter-day prose-poet will have done to his source. Dissection not only replicates in (more) graphic terms the rapists’ violation of bodily integrity but rivets the reader’s gaze on the scandal of synecdoche.

It is already unnerving to have to admit that the body parts can speak more eloquently and efficaciously than would the concubine’s body in assembling and exciting the wrath of a united Israel. As Derrida puts it: “Que le signe, l’image ou le représentant deviennent forces et fassent ‘mouvoir l’univers’, tel est le scandale.” It is precisely this scandalous state of affairs that the overall Lévite produces by using imagery as the virtually exclusive means to radical displacement of biblical emphases: poetic “padding” changes the narrative’s shape; meaningful metaphors force it into compliance with the indestructible wishes of Rousseau’s own past. But why privilege synecdoche, if not as the quintessential image, as the root of all figurative evil, and good? No mere metaphor among others, synecdoche instead founds metaphor by that necessary division into component parts or “properties” that underwrites the perception and proclamation of commonality. Synecdoche leaves little doubt, moreover, as to its being a figure; unlike the metaphors (or what may be the metaphors) of the Levite’s lovemaking, for example, synecdoche cannot be (mis)read literally, insofar as it always leaves something but not quite everything to the imagination. Or rather—and this is the supreme scandal—that “thing” that synecdoche bids us imagine consists not in the absent whole itself, but in the unnameable act of severing, in that which will have constituted the whole only by separating the part. The Levite’s letters “refer” less fundamentally to the concubine than to the rape of the concubine, less fundamentally to that rape than to the letters’ own fabrication. It is to violence of unknown origin, violence without origin, inconceivable violence as origin that the tribes react in the only way possible: “Non, jamais rien de pareil ne s’est fait en Israël depuis le jour
ou nos pères sortirent d'Égypte jusqu'à ce jour” (2:1208). They deny, cannot name, render external to human history the writing writ large that alone makes possible distinctions such as those between history and pre-history, the human and the inhuman.

But synecdoche can also epitomize the restorative powers of figural language. “Alors j'ai pris son corps, je l'ai mis en pièces, et je vous l'ai envoyé à chacun dans vos limites” (2:1216). Reporting on his activity, the Levite mentally puts together the still-scattered pieces; a singular pronoun ("je vous l'ai envoyé") names as a reconstituted whole that which each tribe, individually, will have received. Synecdoche's residual violence is not so easily short-circuited or circumscribed, however: in the same report, the communal whole ("vous") disintegrates into the parts ("chacun dans vos limites") that only the amputation of Benjamin will reassemble into a new community. Only the idolater's return and rededication to the recognized sacred order rehabilitates synecdoche as that figure of sacrifice that, by forcing the part (Benjamin) to stand for (the unrecognized violence of) the whole (Israel), permits the new whole minus one to believe in its immunity from violence.

In fact, the writing of letters is but one part, the first, of the Levite's two-stage "projet." Had he but written, Benjamin would not have been sacrificed, even imperfectly. In its highly motivated insistence on the second stage of oral confession to the tribes, Le Lévite deviates tellingly from the Essai sur l'origine des langues. Taking ellipsis to new lengths, the Essai had suppressed everything, including the confession, which happens in Judges 20 between the gathering of the tribes and the extermination of Benjamin. The point the essayist wanted to make about the efficacy of the Levite's gesture benefits from this dramatic foreshortening, but so too does the polarity he was in the process of establishing between gestural and oral language.ём The Essai's Levite emblematizes the former and does not engage at all in the latter: he writes, the tribes speak. There are traces in Le Lévite proper of the Essai's further theoretical investment in tracing gestural language to needs and orality to passions. As though mindful of how sorely the Essai's "dispassionate" dissector had strained credibility, the prose poem does what it can to void his vengeance of the signs of passion and to view him as doing "d'un œil sec et sombre" and "sans hésiter, sans trembler" only what "needs" to be done (2:1215).

But Le Lévite's deeper, more heartfelt investment is in making the
gestural/oral polarity work to the advantage of difference between literature and autobiography. That requires a minor but meaningful improvement on the biblical source. No sooner desired than done; dreams formulate wishes primarily through their fulfillment. Once the tribes' oral expressions of initial shock have been removed without a trace to the exordium, Rousseau's third canto is left with two complete, discrete linguistic moments. Israel will not speak here about the unspeakable, Israel will only buzz inarticulately "like bees" (2:1216) until the time is right for speaking. In a first, scriptural moment, movement provokes only movement; the tribes gather in response to the Levite's letter. Their declaring war on Benjamin is, in turn, contingent on the erstwhile poet's speaking first and, more specifically, on his making his oral confession. Having written in (literally, with) the third person, he now tells—simply, straightforwardly, in strict chronological order—a story whose high incidence of first-person pronouns makes it unmistakably his:

Je suis entré dans Gabaa ville de Benjamin avec ma femme pour y passer la nuit; et les gens du pays ont entouré la maison où j'étais logé, voulant m'outrager et me faire périr. J'ai été forcé de livrer ma femme à leur débauche, et elle est morte en sortant de leurs mains. Alors j'ai pris son corps, je l'ai mis en pièces, et je vous l'ai envoyé à chacun dans vos limites. Peuple du Seigneur, j'ai dit la vérité; faites ce qui vous semblera juste devant le Très-Haut. (2:1216)

Whereas the poet had counted on the overwhelming power of a single image, the priest counters by letting or seeming to let the facts speak for themselves. So sober is his prose that it does not even editorialize through the use of connectives. Metonymy takes over for metaphor to the point of mitigating even the most obvious cause-effect, tit-for-tat relationship between rape and mutilation. Of course, we know the Levite to have blatantly misrepresented his own violence toward the concubine: he was in no way "forced" but rather inspired to throw her to the wolves. But our looking on as the Levite "gets away with murder" renders all the more decisive whatever impression his narrative creates among the unquestioning tribes of his having told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. In fact, the distinctions we have just drawn between the Levite's letter and his confession are, at best, impressionistic; they owe more than a little of their apparent "truth" to the fact of being grounded
ultimately sacrifices in the gestural/oral polarity that the *Essai* had proclaimed to be logically and chronologically absolute. *Le Lévite* recontextualizes the polarity, forging new associations between the literary and the scriptural on the one hand and between confession and orality on the other. A Rousseau already contemplating the *Confessions* separates the two moments of literature and autobiography and makes the second dependent on but essentially different from the first. The violence of writing is thus written out of autobiography, which tells of that writing in the past tense.

The erstwhile poet no longer has anything to fear from the effeminacy of literature: he has learned since Canto 1 to postpone his worship of beauty for the aftermath of its utter desecration by him. Indeed, the Levite who, without risk, rejoins the concubine in death acts in accordance with a personal agenda—the emasculation/sacralization of literature—that remains distinct from that of the tribes and more pertinent than theirs to that of the dreamer. How suggestively Rousseau elects to unite the buzzing bees of Israel around their “King” (2:1216). There is a poetic truth to this violation of the laws of zoology. For the Levite both joins the tribes in unswerving orthodoxy and worship of the one true God and harbors a secret feminocentric cult on whose objects—the concubine goddess and goddess literature—a more straightforwardly truthful text would rightly have bestowed the title of “Queen.”

The Levite’s “confession” and its unanimously favorable reception no doubt fulfill the perennial wish of a tongue-tied author for successful self-defense before a jury of his peers. (The Parlement de Paris is the particular jury that comes to mind on this occasion of their having condemned *Emile*) And it must have done Rousseau’s heart good to rewrite the Levite’s use of synecdoche to inscribe his personal story within the sacred history that narrowly averts the sacrifice of a younger son and consummates that of a willing mother. These necessary and sufficient sequels to the Levite’s story facilitate regression and gratify survival instincts. But this focal point of Rousseau’s dream also has a properly “prophetic” dimension: it is only after writing *Le Lévite* that Rousseau will be able to confess in his own name and glory in the indisputable fact that when his enemies did violence to him, he too did nothing but write literature. The *Confessions*’ authorial first person will have adapted the Levite’s misleading confession to his own needs. The literary text thus predicts but also
undermines what the *Confessions* proclaim about *Le Lévite*’s being, always and forever, only literature.

The literature/autobiography polarity collapses in part because there is so much overlapping, even outright duplication, of autobiographical content between *Le Lévite* and the *Confessions*. But the literary text also knows better than the autobiography about the facticity of fetish, the arbitrariness of sacrifice, the fiction of a fine line between “good” and “bad” violence. The narrator of the *Confessions* chooses to ignore the blind spot (of sacrifice) at which his counterpart in *Le Lévite* takes direct aim: “Malheureux humains qui ne savez ce qui vous est bon, vous avez beau vouloir sanctifier vos passions; elles vous punissent toujours des excès qu’elles vous font commettre” (2:1220). From the “unhappy” autobiographer’s exorbitant recourse to sacrificial models, we learn less about the difference between autobiography and literature than about the excesses of his desiring that they should differ. Wherever it occurs, writing is, after all, always writing and always violent. Nothing Rousseau writes can prevent our choosing to read *Le Lévite* and the *Confessions* profanely and intertextually.

Still, as spectators to the dramatization of that desire for difference, we can speculate less idly than before about how much Rousseau may have known and chosen not to reveal with regards to autobiographical source materials in the other occasional texts we have read. In this, their last, most sustained direct engagement with an occasional antecedent, the *Confessions* bring the issue of indebtedness to the fore and into focus through the sheer volume, force, and single-mindedness of their denials. A question occurs: is it really the whole catch-all category of literature that the *Confessions* will have attempted, with mixed feelings and results, to silence through *Le Lévite*? Or does Rousseau’s less controversial insistence on the fact of *Le Lévite*’s occasional status count for enough to train a more realistic version of the *Confessions*’ ambivalence on the body in bits and pieces of his occasional corpus? In any case, *Le Lévite* alone prods the autobiographer into making a priority of responding to an occasional text’s prior claims on autobiography. Previously, we have seen avoidance of the issue (when the “Préface” to *Narcisse* is credited only with advancing Rousseau’s ideas), displacement of the issue (when the *Préface de Julie* is acknowledged to have fostered autobiographical readings of *Julie*), projection of the issue (when
the Genevans' misreadings are blamed for initiating discussion of the
dedicator's self-image), and haste to declare a non-issue (when the
Lettres à Malesherbes are singled out as a précis and first draft of the
Confessions).

What we see for the first time through the Confessions' thorough­
going (mis)treatment of the most highly cherished Lévite is a self-con­
scious grappling with the less than utter otherness of an other text. That
revelation provides a real basis for generalization, and a warning against
taking generalization too far. The same Confessions to which it occurs to
deal sacrificially with an intrinsically sacrificial text will have played out
their previous denials of indebtedness on a case-by-case basis. In each
instance, by showing the way to the means and meaning of its own partial
suppression, the occasional antecedent becomes part and parcel not only
of the Confessions' "untold story" but of their likewise untold storytell­
ing operations. From the "Préface" to Narcisse, the Confessions learn
about playing autobiography off against self-portraiture; from the tactical
errors of the Dedication to Geneva, they learn to make a strategic neces­sity
of playing the fool. They are inspired by a second, overlong preface to Julie to write a third that is even longer and more self-serving; and, by
the Lettres à Malesherbes, they are inspired to essay a more lastingly
truthful accommodation between confession and censorship. If the un­
conscious dimension of Volume 2 turns out to be primarily textual and
less singular than serial, neither can any one member in the series be
reified as that which, written out, would have made no lasting contribu­tion to the protean processes of writing. Time and again, we have known
the Confessions to divert the adventures of Jean-Jacques into an allegory
play of their own inscription, each of whose acts is a product of collab­
oration with the occasional text of the hour.

In the debate that pits evolutionary against "big bang" theories of
autobiography, Book 11 of the Confessions nevertheless comes down
hard on the side of the big bang. To the extent that he can blind himself
to the arbitrariness of his choice, Rousseau will have wreaked the perfect
revenge on his enemies. Rather than allow him to slip prosaically, imper­
ceptibly into retirement and incidentally into the writing of memoirs,
they will have choreographed the one step back into literature that can
propel him once and for all into the great beyond of confession. If the
fleeing Jean-Jacques is reported to have handed over the key to the castle
housing his document collection at Montmorency without the slightest
reluctance (1:584), it is no doubt because Rousseau knows the keys to the *Confessions* to lie elsewhere, in other texts. Whether or not *Le Lévite* really spells the end of literature and founds a new age of confession, there is a holiness of purpose in and about the sacrificial text that surely differentiates the memoirs we might have read from the *Confessions* we do read.