Art and allusion

Nigel Warburton on the significance of two portraits of Hume and Rousseau

The pair of portraits of David Hume and Jean-Jacques Rousseau by Allan Ramsay, painted in London in 1766, are widely recognised as being among the finest mature works of a great portraitist. The circumstances of the commission and their subsequent part in the notorious quarrel between these philosophers make these paintings particularly interesting as relics of an episode that Hume at least clearly did not want to be commemorated. Beyond this, however, there are symbolic elements in both portraits which have not been recognised either by biographers of Hume and Rousseau or by the art historians who have written about Ramsay.

Hume's account of the year 1766 is laconic even by the standards of his eight page autobiography *My Own Life:* "In the beginning of 1766, I left Paris and next summer, went to Edinburgh, with the same view as formerly of buying myself a philosophical retreat." Yet this was the most turbulent year of his life; the year in which his public quarrel with "the blackest and most atrocious villain that ever disgraced human nature" – Jean-Jacques Rousseau – threatened to undermine his hard-earned reputation for virtue and wisdom. The details of the quarrel are well known: in short, after Hume helped Rousseau escape persecution in France by bringing him to London and then finding him a suitable retreat in Derbyshire, Rousseau began to feel that Hume was in league with his worst enemies on the continent. He poured out his heart in letters to Hume, and Hume, after an unsuccessful attempt at reconciliation, decided to publish his own and Rousseau's letters together with a commentary on them in a pamphlet, *A Concise and Genuine Account of the Dispute Between Mr. Hume and Mr. Rousseau.* In a letter written in the same year he had described the quarrel as "the most critical affair, which during the course of my life, I have been engaged in." But ten years later when summarising the major events of his life it seemed to have slipped his memory, or else to have been too insignificant to merit inclusion. The most charitable interpretation of this omission is that he had resolved never to publish another line on the subject, having published his *Concise and Genuine Account.* This is how Mossner chose to read the evidence. But this sort of explanation seems inconsistent with Hume's claim in his autobiography that, through a lack of irascibility, he had easily kept himself clear of all literary squabbles. Perhaps this was a kind of economy with the truth: his quarrel with Rousseau wasn't exactly a *literary* quarrel in that it didn't turn on any particular text that either had written. And it is certainly true that Hume rarely rose in print to the bait of criticism of his ideas. Yet James Boswell, who was himself implicated in the Rousseau affair, described it as "a literary tragicomedy", and the nice distinction between a literary quarrel and a quarrel between literary men smacks of a sophistry that would have riled Hume. Besides, in an important sense it *was* a literary quarrel. It was a private quarrel that was made public precisely because Hume feared his character would be defamed in Rousseau's forthcoming *Confessions.* In its public aspect it was a quarrel about a literary work, but about one that was still being written. By publishing his *Concise and Genuine Account,* Hume hoped to pre-empt Rousseau's attack on his character, or at the very least soften its impact.

A more plausible explanation than Mossner's of why Hume chose to omit one of the most significant episodes of his life from his autobiography is that a fundamental concern in *My Own Life,* as in all his public actions, was to present himself as an exemplar of the principles of his moral philosophy: following in the ancient tradition of philosophy he did not want to draw a line between his life and his thought. The role of the philosopher involved not only thinking well, but also living, and indeed dying, well. Only by retouching history a little could he achieve this. Omission of the quarrel could then be seen as a tacit admission that he could not easily describe his actions in terms of benevolence, charity and justice. He could admit to the poor reception of his *Treatise,* but it would have been playing into the hands of his detractors to confess involvement in a public squabble over reputation.

Hume must have been reminded of these events on an almost daily basis: Allan Ramsay's portraits of the two philosophers hung in Hume's parlour in Edinburgh until his death. Ramsay, a close friend of Hume's, had been appointed official court painter to King George III, a role which had led Laurence Sterne to remark: "Mr. Ramsay, you paint only Court Cards, the King, Queen and Knave." Though at the time he painted very few commissions outside the royal entourage, he had painted the portraits of Hume and Rousseau early in 1766, soon after their arrival in London. They are among Ramsay's finest paintings and provide a marked contrast: the seeds of the quarrel could perhaps be discerned in the depicted appearance of the two men. Not that Ramsay's portraits are disinterested records of appearances: his deep sympathy for his fellow Scot, Hume, both as a friend and as a thinker set this portrait apart both from Ramsay's society commissions and indeed from his portrait of Rousseau, who was a stranger to him, and whose notion of the Noble Savage he found absurd. He later commented in a letter to Denis Diderot:

> "Those who indulge in intellectual pursuits find little charm in the bare necessities of life. Reduced to bare necessity, one must bid farewell to poetry, painting and all the agreeable branches of philosophy, and embrace instead Rousseau's Nature – Nature on all fours."

In the portrait Hume is dressed in the lavish scarlet and gold of his official uniform as Embassy Secretary, a position he had held in Paris for the previous twenty-six months. Under his jacket, he is wearing a white shirt with an elaborate lace cuff at his wrist. A neat wig is perched on his oval head. Smart describes this as the "semi-military" uniform which Hume had been asked to wear on being appointed in 1748 as secretary to general St Clair's Military Legation at Vienna and Turin. He offers no evidence for this some-

David Hume by Allan Ramsey, Scottish National Portrait Gallery

Jean-Jacques Rousseau by Allan Ramsey, National Gallery of Scotland

what implausible suggestion. It seems unlikely that a fourteen year old uniform would be in such good condition, or indeed that it would have travelled with Hume to Paris and back to London. Mossner's view that the uniform is the formal dress of an Embassy Secretary, and as such the garb of an ambassador, is a more plausible one.

In the portrait Hume's face, illuminated by light from a window, is chubby, pink, with a double chin; his mouth full, his eyes clear but with heavy lids. His mind seems to be on other things: an effect accentuated by the fact that he is staring directly at, but not apparently seeing, the viewer of the painting. The slightly vacant stare is probably an accurate rendition of Hume's characteristic expression, as evidenced by Lord Charlemont's comments about the philosopher:

> "Nature, I believe, never formed any man more unlike his real character than David Hume...The powers of physiognomy were baffled by his countenance, neither could the most skillful in that science pretend to discover the smallest trace of the faculties of his mind in the unmeaning features of his visage. His face was broad and fat, his mouth wide and without any other expression than that of imbecility. His eyes vacant and spiritless, and the corpulence of his whole person was far better fitted to communicate the idea of a turtle-eating alderman than of a refined philosopher."

His shoulders seem narrow compared with his body which is broad and corpulent. His hand rests languidly on two leather-bound volumes. Smart describes the lower one as bearing the title in gold lettering "TACITI/OPERA". However, whether due to framing or the picture's deterioration, no such lettering is now visible. If these words were once legible, then they might have alluded to Hume's literary output as historian as well as philosopher, (for most eighteenth century readers he would have been the Scottish Tacitus). However, this detail might simply be a straightforward representation of the books Hume brought back to London with him. We know that he took only four books to France: a Virgil, a Horace, a Tasso and a Tacitus

Whilst Ramsay's friendship with Hume and great admiration for his writing gave him insights that he would not have had with a stranger, some details of this portrait may have been idealised. For instance, the lavishness of the uniform was not typical of Hume: even King George III, who was keen to see the portrait, commented on this aspect. Ramsay's witty reply was "I wished posterity should see that one philosopher during your Majesty's reign had a good coat upon his back". It should be noted, however, that it wasn't in virtue of his *philosophical* ability that Hume wore that uniform – or at least not directly.

The uniform is probably a witty allusion to Hume's declared role in his *Essays* as "ambassador from the dominions of learning to those of conversation". Hume wears his ambassador's uniform because he was both literally and metaphorically an ambassador. Ramsay, himself a man of letters and member of Edinburgh's Select Society, not to mention a friend of Hume's, would have certainly been aware of this oft-cited phrase of Hume's. That Ramsay sometimes included pictorial allusions to features of his sitters' lives is generally accepted. Smart, for instance, talks about the light on Hume's face in the portrait in question as seeming "expressive of the light of intellect illuminating the surrounding darkness", and Shawe-Taylor suggests that similarities between the Hume portrait and French portraiture allude to the years that Hume had spent in France.

The notion that there is a level of unrecognised allusion in the Hume portrait is supported by an analogous aspect in its pair, the Rousseau portrait. Rousseau, half-turned towards the viewer, appears a slim figure with dark eyes and a slightly drawn face. Yet the fixed expression might not do justice to the impression he gave in life: it seems, at least on the basis of Hume's first encounters with him, that Rousseau's face gained any beauty it had from animation, something that Ramsay probably failed to elicit or capture: "M. Rousseau is of small of stature; and would rather be ugly, had he not the finest physiognomy in the world, I mean, the most expressive countenance." But it

is Rousseau's eyes which most clearly suggest his intelligence, and perhaps hint at his incipient paranoia. Robert Liston, who stalked Rousseau while in Paris, desperate to get to see the celebrated thinker, when he had finally tracked down his quarry, read his eyes as the index of his character: "His person is very thin and delicate looking, his face, and especially his sharp black eyes promise everything he has shown himself possessed of."

In the portrait Rousseau is wearing the fur-collared Armenian coat and fur hat that he had begun wearing for comfort – a urinary complaint made breeches uncomfortable for him – but which was generally seen as an affectation (Hume described it as "pure whim"). The background in the portrait is a gloomy brown, most of the light falling on Rousseau's face and shoulders. In contrast with the full lips of the Hume portrait, Rousseau's are narrow and tight. There is something slightly distrustful in his expression, an effect exacerbated by the way his body turns away from the viewer and by the way he holds the edges of his cape together protectively with his right hand. Side by side with the Hume portrait there is a marked contrast in every element. Hume's grey wig sits on top of a plump oval face; Rousseau's angular demeanour is overshadowed by dark fur hat. Hume stares frankly and calmly at the viewer with pale blue eyes; Rousseau looks intently but obliquely out from the gloomy corner in which he has been painted: confident, but not relaxed. He later complained that he had been made to stand supporting himself with one hand on a low table in a posture which made the muscles on his face strained, and that the result turned him into a Cyclops. However, this later impression of the portrait may well have been based on misleading copies and engravings of Ramsay's portrait, such as those by his assistant David Martin.

Perhaps the most marked contrast between the two sitters is in their dress: Hume's scarlet ambassador's outfit with its gold brocade and lace shirt is almost dandyish; Rousseau's Armenian outfit is plain in comparison, as was fitting for the defender of the simple life. Hume's hand rests on his books; Rousseau's clutches the edges of his cape. Hume is full-faced, pear-shaped, relaxed; Rousseau, slim and tense.

Although he conceived of them as paired portraits, Ramsay treated the sitters very differently in each. Hume's portrait, based on fuller knowledge of the man and his thought, is, as we have seen, somewhat flattering about his expression and customary dress: the pose and manner of portrayal are designed to show him as Scotland's greatest philosopher and historian. He is almost regal in his appearance. Even the hint of a smile on Hume's lips has a correspondence in his writing: it perhaps alludes to the playful irony that is so much a feature of his prose style. In the case of the portrait of Rousseau, Ramsay was in part fulfilling a widespread desire to get a glimpse of the author of the controversial *Emile,* satisfying curiosity at a more superficial level. When Rousseau first came to London, even King George III was eager to see him in the flesh and contrived to sit in a box opposite him in the theatre at Drury Lane, spending more of the performance scrutinising him than following the action on the stage.

But there is more to Ramsay's portrait than a simple likeness. Consider the position of Rousseau's hand, holding the edges of his coat together. His index finger is extended in a natural position, but it is pointing directly at his heart; given Rousseau's emphasis on feeling, both in his life and his philosophy, this is surely no coincidence. Hume, whose emotional life was considerably less turbulent, commented: "He has only felt, during the whole course of his life; and in this respect, his sensibility rises to a pitch beyond what I have seen any example of."

The pose that Ramsay had Rousseau adopt is typical of self-portraiture standing in front of an easel; it is the mirror image of that taken in Ramsay's own self-portrait of 1756, and one which recurs frequently in Rembrandt's self-portraits. The Rousseau portrait has frequently been singled out by art historians as influenced by Rembrandt both in terms of lighting, palette and even pose. But the symbolic significance of the pose of the self-portraitist for Rousseau in 1766 has not been remarked upon. He was then immersed in writing his autobiographical *Confessions* and even used the metaphor of portraiture in the first lines of the preface:

> "Here is the only human portrait, painted exactly from nature and in every respect true, which exists and which, probably, will ever exist."

Hume picked up on this metaphor in his sceptical reaction to the project in a letter to the Comtesse de Boufflers written from London in January 1766, suggesting, perhaps that he had read a draft of the opening section during the journey from France: "I believe that he intends seriously to draw his own picture in its true colours: but I believe at the same time that nobody knows himself less." This reveals that Rousseau made no secret of the nature of his project; we can be reasonably sure that if Hume knew of his 'pupil's' intention to pa

Forum suggested reading

Aristotle, Poetics **(various editions)**

Clive Bell, Art **(Chatto and Windus)**

R G Collingwood, The Principles of Art **(Clarendon)**

David E Cooper (ed.), Aesthetics: The Classic Readings **(Blackwell)**

David E Cooper (ed.), A Companion to Aesthetics **(Blackwell)**

Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgement **(various editions)**

Carolyn Korsmeyer (ed.), Aesthetics: The Big Questions **(Blackwell)**

Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley, Arguing about Art **(Routledge)**

Friedrich Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man **(Oxford University Press)**

Roger Scruton, The Aesthetics of Music **(Clarendon)**

Roger Scruton, An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture **(Duckworth)**

Anne Sheppard, Aesthetics **(Oxford University Press)**

Leo Tolstoy, What is Art? **(Penguin)**

Nigel Warburton, The Art Question **(Routledge, forthcoming)**