

Rousseau on Arts and Politics
Autour de la Lettre à d'Alembert

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sous la direction de

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INTRODUCTION

Rousseau on Arts and Politics: *Autour de la Lettre à d'Alembert*

'Ouvrage de circonstance et pourtant cri du couer, ... un texte où ne manquent ni les paradoxes ni les surprises'—so Jean Rousset described the *Letter to d'Alembert* when it finally appeared in the long-awaited fifth volume of the Pleiade edition of Rousseau's *Oeuvres Complètes*. In probing the complexities of the *Letter*, the essays in this volume underscore the truth of Rousset's claim.

The *Letter*, a response to d'Alembert's *Encyclopedia* article, 'Geneva,' was written at a pivotal point in Rousseau's life. On one hand, the *Letter* appears to be a continuation of earlier work. It seems so closely related to the *Discours on the Sciences and the Arts* and the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, that Ourida Mostefai asks if it should be read as the 'Third Discourse.' The work shares a kinship with the two earlier discourses in exalting the ancient concepts of virtue rooted in a people. In this, as Guy LaFrance observes, it stands in marked contrast to the *Moral Letters* and the *New Heloise*, where Rousseau embraced a thoroughly modern notion of moral action rooted in individual will and intention. Resolving the tension between these competing conceptions—between the collective and the individual—became the task of the *Social Contract*. Jim MacAdam, in 'Can Democratic Freedom Justify Censorship?' downplays the idea of Rousseauian individualism and suggests that Rousseau was an unnamed target of J.S. Mill's *On Liberty*. Rousseau's call to cultivate feelings of social equality appeared to Mill as grave threats to personal development.

On the other hand, the work announces and effects Rousseau's final break with Diderot and the world of the philosophes. Although the central question of the *Letter* is whether or not Geneva should build a theater, as Pamela Jensen notes, Rousseau began by considering d'Alembert's praise for Geneva's religious radicalism. At the very outset in the *Letter*, she argues, Rousseau broke with philosophes over religious issues by maintaining the no one could rightfully judge another's faith.

In the *Letter*, the once avid theatergoer and would-be playwright issued a ringing diatribe against d'Alembert's case for creation of a theater in Rousseau's native city, a paradox Patrick Day explores. Rousseau's call to bar the doors against a theater echoes Plato's wish to ban poets from his ideal state in the *Republic*. Rousseau's *Letter* sparked heated debates about the theater which Jeff Ravel characterizes as typical of eighteenth century controversies going on elsewhere. In Geneva, debates on the theater became part of class warfare pitted aristocrats against bourgeoisie, while in France, the clash often took the form of an absolutist, centralizing state versus local communities. The *Letter* also points to fundamental tensions between politics and art which persist to this day and are explored in Grace Roosevelt's 'Mass Media and the End of Innocence.'

Although Rousseau rejected theater as a form of amusement for an uncorrupted society, he did not reject all forms of amusement. In the *Letter*, he specifically endorsed republican fêtes and, as Alexandra Cook suggests, later in his life he would offer botany as one alternative use of leisure which avoided the ills associated with theater. Furthermore as several contributors (Morgenstern, Mall) to the volume point out, despite Rousseau's condemnation of the falsity of modern theater, he himself relied on staged spectacle and 'mise en scène' as integral parts of his later works. Manipulations by Emile's tutor (Johnston) and Wolmar (Toczyski) shaped the social order in *Émile* and *Héloïse*. But Rebecca Kukla claims that Rousseau's strategies in these works depended on concealment, and concealment was possible only if women, whose identities were themselves 'as spectacles,' were kept away from the public realm. Penny Weiss then tests the coherence of this strategy in her parodic reply 'On the Theatrics of Gender.'

Examining Rousseau's *Letter* in comparison with works of Le Franc de Pompignan, a contemporary partisan of the theater, Theodore Braun argues that Rousseau actually added little new to the debate on the morality of the theater. Rather, his originality consisted in his economic arguments. Zev Trachtenberg focuses on these arguments and claims that Rousseau stressed the deleterious economic effects of theater precisely because he realized that his audience was motivated by self-interest. At the same time, (like the playwrights he condemned) Rousseau avoided telling his audience the harder truth—that their commercial spirit was at odds with the Spartan simplicity he idealized. Meanwhile, Rousseau offered the utopian portrait of the Montagnon society, examined by Aubrey Rosenberg. Rosenberg (with d'Alembert) is led to wonder why Rousseau supposed his vaunted Montagnon society would crack so easily once exposed to theater. Rosenberg finds his answer in Rousseau's understanding of human passions. Theater would activate dormant *amour propre*. The relationship between theater and the

passions is further explored by John Scott who recalls that the spectacles of Rousseau's day included dance and music as well as drama. Scott turns to an analysis of Rousseau's works on music to shed light on his understanding of the passions. Finally, Bruce Merrill explores Rousseau's understanding of theater and its effects on passions in connection with Romanticism, specifically Friedrich Schiller.

This volume stands as a record of the Ninth Biennial Meeting of the Association nord-américaine des études Jean-Jacques Rousseau/North American Association for the Study of Jean Jacques Rousseau, held at Wabash College, June 1-4, 1995. Special thanks are owed to Wabash College, Sheldon Wettack, Daniel Evans, Andrew Ford and Craig Pankiewicz whose support made the conference possible.

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Note on Citations Note au sujet des citations

This volume uses a standard set of citations to Rousseau's works. Throughout this volume, French references to Rousseau's works are taken from the Pleiade edition of *Oeuvres Complètes* and reported with the volume in Roman numerals followed by the page number. References to Rousseau's correspondence are marked either as *CC*, referring to the *Correspondance Complète* edited by Ralph Leigh, or as *CG*, referring to the *Correspondance Générale* edited by Dufour and Plan.

A uniform set of English editions have been used throughout the volume. For the *Letter to d'Alembert* and *Emile*, English translations by Allan Bloom are used. For *The Government of Poland*, the translation is by Willmoore Kendall. All other English references are taken from the *Collected Writings of Rousseau*, edited by Masters and Kelly. For works quoted in English, the English reference is provided first, followed by the corresponding volume and page of the Pleiade *Oeuvres Complètes*. References to the *Collected Writings* give volume numbers in Arabic numerals, followed by the pages.

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