

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

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## Rousseau's Influence on Schiller's Program of Aesthetic Regeneration

Whereas Rousseau is the most important modern exponent of the case for the perniciousness of the arts in human history, Friedrich Schiller is the author of the most famous, most emphatic case for the regenerative role of art, with his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795). Moreover, the 'anti-theatrical' *Lettre à d'Alembert* is opposed by Schiller's 'pro-theatrical' 'The Stage Considered as a Moral Institution' (1784). Therefore, my title is paradoxical, my task to set out how the paradox unfolds.

'The Stage Considered as a Moral Institution' is a brief, effusive lecture which displays Schiller's own theatrical nature. The same cynics who identify the author of the *Lettre à d'Alembert* as a failed playwright will identify Schiller's essay as the product of a spectacularly and precociously celebrated one. Schiller is rhapsodic in his idealization of his favored art: 'The stage, more than any other public institution, is a school of practical wisdom, a guide through social life, an infallible key to the most secret passages of the human soul.'<sup>1</sup> In contrast to Rousseau's request that we turn from the elevating message to the inherently corrupting medium, that is, from the desired moral uplift of d'Alembert's proposed theater to the problematic larger circumstance, the social-psychological and historical context, Schiller remains essentially focused on the primary content of ideal drama. The stage is a means to place all history and all the vicissitudes of human experience before us, dramatically heightened, in order that we may become stimulated, enlightened, moral. This vision of the theater as an essentially illuminating process—which expresses Schiller's own intent as a playwright—represents the most extreme point of disagreement with Rousseau. While the Genevan identifies the stage as a sphere of dissimulation which serves only to gratify conventional opinion, Schiller holds that 'It is only here that the great of the world hear what they rarely ever hear elsewhere: the truth' (184).

When Schiller does turn from play to audience, as with his final

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<sup>1</sup>'The Stage Considered as a Moral Institution' (1784), trans. J.B. Greene, in *Friedrich Schiller: An Anthology for our Time* ed. F. Ungar (New York, Ungar, 1959), 182. Citations in text are to this edition.

paragraph, the effusion is so great as to cause the more sardonic Voltaire or the more temperate d'Alembert to recoil.

'In the dreams of this artificial world, we can forget the real one. We find ourselves once more....And finally, what a triumph for you, oh nature.... when men from all corners of the earth and every walk of life, having shed their shackles of affectation and fashion.... united by the all-embracing bond of brotherly sympathy, resolved in one human race again, oblivious of themselves and of the world, come closer to their divine origin. Each enjoys the raptures of all, which are reflected upon him from a hundred eyes in heightened beauty and intensity, and in his breast there is room for only one sensation: the awareness that he is a human being'. (186f)

Schiller's audience is so focused on its 'artificial world' that it has soared above the 'shackles of affectation and fashion,' while Rousseau's typical audience is more concerned with these shackles than what is taking place on the stage before them. But my paradoxical path from Schiller back to Rousseau's influence begins at this point. Both are concerned with the re-unification of the individual and the consequent re-unification of society, according to the ideal of nature. The contrast lies in Schiller's means, not his ends.

The basis for the gloriously unified audience is the glorious unifying power of the stage. Our contemporary circumstance is one of acute social-psychological imbalance, which Schiller locates in a dualistic opposition of over-developed high and low capacities, where, for example, 'The scholar is likely to sink into dull pedantry, the common man to become a brute' (186). But a good night at the theater corrects such dualism since 'The stage is an institution where pleasure is combined with instruction, rest with exertion, amusement with culture. Not a single faculty is strained to the detriment of another, no pleasure is enjoyed at the expense of the whole' (187). Theater bridges and reconciles the dualisms, therefore it renders each theatergoer balanced, and the audience as a whole unified.

This vision arrives as Schiller's first articulation of art as regenerative in virtue of its position as a 'middle condition which would unite these two contradictory extremes,' an integrative middle experience which can pull together the pernicious dualisms of the modern age. The promotion of theater in particular as a solution to our degenerate, imbalanced, contemporary circumstance, leads to the regenerative role of art in general which Schiller puts forward as the redemptive climax to human history in his *Aesthetic Letters*.

If we observe Rousseau's request and shift from the primary content of the idealized artifact to its problematic historical context, that is, if we shift from *Lettre à d'Alembert* to its historical context, we find

that it was composed in the wake of Rousseau's friendship with Mme d'Epinau, and much more important, after the collapse of his problematic enthrallment by Mme d'Houdetot. In the *Confessions*, Rousseau underlines the function of the *Lettre* as therapy and sublimation: 'my heart mixed the feeling of its pains to the ideas that the meditation of my subject had caused to be born in me' (5: 415; I: 495). Therefore the remarkable antipathy towards women that the document expresses derives from Rousseau's recent enslavement by 'the first and only [love] in my whole life' (5: 369; V: 439). Therefore the renunciation that he wishes upon Geneva in the face of d'Alembert's cultural improvements also represents a personal renunciation, and expiation for his own embarrassing capitulation to the swoon of unrequited love, 'that fatal love which I was exerting myself to cure' (5: 415; I: 496).

The historical matrix becomes apparent at two passages where the veil drops, the Spartan pose is abandoned, and like the dubious hero, 'si dourcereux, si tendres,' of the theater he condemns, Rousseau exposes a wounded heart to his audience (117; V:107).

Under a phlegmatic and cold manner the Genevans hide an ardent and sensitive soul easier to move than to control. In this abode of reason, beauty is not foreign nor without empire; the leaven of melancholy often causes love to ferment there; the men are only too capable of feeling violent passions, the women of inspiring them; and the sad effects that they have sometimes produced show how great is the danger of exciting them by touching and tender dramas. (118; V: 108 )

We have entered into confessional autobiography. Rousseau speaks as one Genevan who has been seduced and abandoned by 'touching and tender dramas,' and thus especially unhinged by a native propensity towards 'violent passions.' The pattern of passionate men provoked by impassive women echoes the more acute and self-pitying formula of the romantic, idealistic man duped by the fatal charms of a calculating, shallow woman with which the *Lettre* is laced, which testifies to Rousseau's recent romantic trauma.

Love, love itself, takes on the mask of virtue in order to surprise it; love clothes itself with the enthusiasm of virtue; it usurps its force; it affects its language, and, when error is perceived, it is far too late to recover! How many men of talent, seduced by these appearances, from the tender and generous lovers they were at first, have become by degrees vile corrupters without mores.... (118; V: 108)

With the impassioned cadence of 'L'amour, l'amour même,' Rousseau admits to his participation in deceiving passion and moral decay. However, the passage concludes with a celebration of the victory over love: 'A weak impulse can easily be triumphed over, but he who knew true love and was able to vanquish it, oh! let us pardon this mortal,

if he exists, for daring to pretend to virtue' (118-119; V: 108). Here we come upon Rousseau's own struggle to a liberating virtue which lies on the other side of love's slavery: the path from his one 'fatal love' for Sophie to the strenuous self-command of the subsequent *Lettres Morales*. But note that the heroic virtue that this paragon claims is not achieved, complete virtue, but simply 'oser prétendre à la vertu.' We learn more of Rousseau's incomplete struggle towards virtue in a similarly confessional footnote wherein he again drops the veil to admit his submission to the delirium of romantic theater, and to defend himself, therefore, from the charge of hypocrisy. He confesses that his tastes are not those he recommends: 'La vérité est que Racine me charme....' He has in fact been taken in by the 'touching and tender dramas' cited in the prior confessional passage—and, accordingly, has become a victim of the delusions, corruptions, dependencies of love. He concedes the moral failure in his tastes, but claims virtue and forgiveness according to his intentions, i.e. defends his weakness of the will according to the primacy of intent. 'If my writings inspire me with some pride, it is for the purity of intention which dictates them, it is for the disinterestedness for which few authors have given me the example and which very few will wish to imitate' (131-132n; V: 120n). The disjunction between his tastes and his recommendations—which I take to be congruent with the gap identified in the incomplete 'oser prétendre à la vertu—testifies to his passage through corruption. Rousseau has been so ravaged by his encounter with Racine and unworthy yet intoxicating women that the best he can do is to *intend* virtue, to preach virtue to others and to his own corrupted, reluctant self—but the purity of his intent is so extraordinary that it expiates his inability to fulfill it.

There is more to the confession than self-display. It enforces the lesson. Rousseau's warning to Geneva (and the rest of us) is that if we expose ourselves to Racine, we will soon value passion over civic responsibility, enslave ourselves to coquettish women, find ourselves dragged into the system of vices and dependencies of modernity. With these two confessional passages, Rousseau proclaims that he knows what he's talking about. It is his participation in the depravity that he condemns that gives his lesson its force and wisdom. Rousseau has struggled through vice and dependency to liberating virtue. His direct experience of these two modes of life, corruption and moral freedom, gives force to his plaintiff words: 'Readers ... beware of my errors.' His plea is 'Lecteurs' craignez mes erreurs,' not 'craignez ces erreurs' (132n; V:120n).

But by asking his audience to turn from the message to the problematic messenger in order to reinforce that message, Rousseau also undercuts it. When we do so, the two stage history of Geneva standing

before its decline to modernity is enlarged into a triadic historical pattern: pre-Racine Geneva, Racine and corruption, and the more or less post-Racine Genevan, Rousseau. This then offers us another possibility for escaping corruption, choosing to be post-Racine, like Rousseau. Why should we beware his errors, when they have brought him to great virtue and profound wisdom? Perhaps we should not do as Rousseau says, but as he does. Why not push aside the naive happiness of the innocent, the boring *amour propre* of the pre-nuptial dances,<sup>2</sup> and set off for Paris, theater, the thrilling *amour propre* inflicted by the urban Circes, and so arrive, *en fin*, at the wisdom, self-discipline, self-possession, and heroic virtue of our teacher?

The introjection of messenger into message—which simultaneously entails Rousseau's location of his artifact within his own problematic history—and the consequent undercutting of the message become all more extreme in *Emile*. The teacher climbs into his lesson as a permanent fixture. Therein he speaks (more to us than to Emile) as one who has known vice, been dependent, exterminated his youth and innocence, and *thereby* gained a painful wisdom that allows him to guide his charge to the unity and happiness which Rousseau himself has lost forever.

He is also more forthcoming here as to the positive content of virtue, and more explicit as to the usefulness of passing through corruption in order to grasp such virtue. The 'poor, exiled, persecuted' Savoyard Vicar stuns the angry, miserable, corrupted Rousseau by announcing that he knows the secret of happiness (266; IV: 564). True happiness is mediated, and roundabout. The vicar has determined that 1) happiness is found in the freedom and self-possession imparted to us through virtue, and 2) the essence of virtue lies in the accommodation of the self to the whole, i.e. 'the good man orders himself in relation to the whole' (292; IV: 602). While this marks the beginning of Rousseau's salvation, he is not yet redeemed. In *Emile*, as in the *Confessions*, the illumination of the Vicar is compared to a seed which eventually comes to fruition (265; IV: 565). Rousseau cannot grasp the precious wisdom until after more experience. More to the point, he cannot understand the import of moral freedom until after more slavery.

If we turn to the *Confessions* and the Savoyard abbe Gaimé who is 'to a great extent... the original of the Savoyard Vicar,' we read that 'his lessons, wise, but at first without effect, were a seed of virtue and religion in my heart that was never smothered, and that was only waiting

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<sup>2</sup>As Rousseau lets slip in this footnote which innocent Genevans are supposed to skip over, 'je m'ennui a voir danser.'

the care of a dearer hand in order to bear fruit' (5: 77; I: 92). This more beloved hand is the most beloved hand, Sophie's. The fruition is the *Lettres Morales*. As Rousseau confides to Mme d'Houdetot, 'je fais de la morale et je pense à vous,' 'je songe à nos principes de morale et j'en jette quelques mots sur le papier, ainsi j'ai le plaisir de m'occuper de vous toute la journée (CG, III: 220). The moralism of the *Lettres Morales* is a matter of 'nos principes de morale,' as it emerges from a shared self-discipline, practiced while strolling 'par un tres beau clair de lune' (5:373-374; I: 444), in the throes of a rapturously unconsummated romance, which is then realized in the far more acute self-discipline that Rousseau had to cultivate in order to take command of himself in the wake of this overwhelming 'first and only love.' In the same manner the subsequent *Lettre à d'Alembert*, he confesses, expresses both his love for Sophie and a consequent struggle to discipline the craving and take possession of his needy self: 'Alas, in it one feels only too much that the love, that fatal love which I was exerting myself to cure, had not yet departed from my heart' (5: 415; I: 496). Rousseau was only able to come to the self-possession of moral freedom, the fully realized wisdom of the Vicar, by means of passing through romantic obsession. He cannot grasp the significance of moral freedom until after being ruled by 'perhaps the most lively passion that any man has ever felt' (5: 402; I:480). He then refers to his definitive embrace of virtue in the *Lettres* as 'my profession of faith.'<sup>3</sup>

In turn, Rousseau forces the wisdom of the Vicar upon Emile when it is time to teach his ward that true happiness is roundabout, i.e., mediated through virtue. Emile has won his Sophie's hand. Their participation in a baptism makes them want to follow suit, copulate and produce their own infant—but 'they are not where they think they are' (442; IV: 814). Believing that happiness is found in sexual passion and reproduction, they do not understand the nature of true happiness. Just as Rousseau came to the virtue and self-possession of the Vicar by means of the frustration of his desire for Sophie, so, according to Rousseau's command, Emile's sexual desire for his Sophie must be frustrated so that he can appreciate the virtuous and circuitous path to happiness. Therefore Rousseau intercedes and propels Emile on a roundabout orbit towards his sexual target, the path that passes through the cosmopolitan insights gleaned from travel, and a lecture in political right and the social contract—the latter being Rousseau's articulation of the procedure by which 'the good man orders himself in relation to the whole.'

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<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Charles Hendel, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Moralism*, (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), 305.

It is Rousseau's ostensible hope that Emile will be able to come to wisdom without passing through the degradation which he himself suffered. Yet, for all the instruction, Emile remains unable to manage his adulthood without Rousseau's ongoing assistance: 'As long as I live, I shall need you' (480; IV: 868). The kindly meddler is kept on, even after marriage and a child. And when Rousseau leaves the scene in 'Emile et Sophie' and they become 'Les Solitaires,' the engineered bliss dissolves into depravity. The latent conclusion is that if we come to the wisdom and virtue of the Savoyard Vicar in the manner of Rousseau, that is, by subjecting ourselves to its antithesis, high romance and the degenerate social-psychology of the modern city, then our understanding of this lesson will be more complete and secure than if it is spoon fed us by a benign, manipulative tutor. Therefore, our lesson is ambiguous. Do we chose Emile's naive happiness, or Rousseau's high wisdom, self-command, and virtue—which makes the naive happiness possible? It is the same puzzle that the *Lettre à d'Alembert* leaves us with. Should we pursue Genevan innocence (which cannot understand or defend itself), or should we give ourselves over to Racine and Parisian coquettes so that we can then claim the sublime virtue that lies beyond such dangerous indulgences, as well as the superior intelligence which went into the composition of the *Lettre*?

From this ambiguity emerges the optimistic theme, lurking paradoxically within the historical pessimism. While Geneva is denied theater, Rousseau's degradation is essential to his ascent. He could have only grasped the nature and significance of the moral freedom which serves as an inoculant or antidote against the vices of the modern city—could only have composed *Du Contrat Social*—by means of his passage through these vices.

This paradox, found within Rousseau's argument, points to the optimistic conjectural history extracted by Kant from Rousseau's fatalism. Thus the key to the specifically paradoxical element to Rousseau's influence upon Schiller lies in Kant's prior distillation of an optimistic theory of history from Rousseau's system. Kant chooses Rousseau's painful wisdom, secure self-command and moral freedom, rather than Emile's unitary naive happiness. This becomes Kant's historical ideal. Human history is a positive passage from innocence and ignorance through the useful purgatory of the modern vices, in order to arrive at the ideal of moral freedom. Therefore our vices are providential, they push us towards our proper destiny. In a notorious salute, Kant exclaims, 'Thanks be... for the incompatibility, for heartless competitive vanity, for the insatiable desire to possess and to rule! Without them, all the excellent natural capacities of humanity would forever sleep,

undeveloped.<sup>4</sup> These vices are dynamic; they serve to deliver mankind from primitive stasis and ignorance, the naive happiness of Arcadia.

Chief among these capacities is reason, since reason is, for Kant, the unique human attribute that guides us from the domain of 'heartless competitive vanity' to moral freedom. The functional reason which is developed on behalf of our vices makes possible the pure, autonomous reason of moral judgment: the categorical imperative, which is Kant's version of Rousseau's principle of the generalization of the will. Thus Kant's theory of history is a selective, rationalist interpretation of Rousseau, built up from two points: that the cultivation of our reason functions with the progress of our passions, 'we seek to know only because we desire to have pleasure' (3:27; III: 143); and yet, a fully developed reason ultimately offers us moral freedom from these passions. Mature reason brings us to the liberating argument of the *Contrat Social*, in particular the power to generalize our will and so free ourselves from being slaves to our dependent impulses. The supposition that Rousseau had to pass through the dismal corruption traced in the two discourses in order to compose *Du Contrat Social* (or the *Lettre à d'Alembert*) is enlarged into a theory of history where the human race must pass through these same corruptions in order to understand *Du Contrat Social*, or Kant's *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals*, i.e. in order to appreciate the worth of moral freedom, and the universalization of the will which enforces that freedom.<sup>5</sup>

The pattern of the useful purgatory of contemporary vice bringing us to our ultimate self-command, which Kant extracts from Rousseau's writings, passes from Kant to Schiller's theory of history. In the *Aesthetic Letters* we find, again, the triadic pattern of 1) an ignorant, primitive unity embodied by the Greeks, 2) the contemporary, dynamic yet corrupt era, leading providentially to 3) a re-unified, 'natural,' liberated social order—echoing Rousseau's prior pattern of pre-Racine Geneva (or Rousseau), Paris, Racine and corruption, and post-Racine Rousseau.

Schiller's characterization of the contemporary circumstance is the most intense denunciation between Rousseau and Marx—and a condemnation the Genevan would have approved of.

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<sup>4</sup>'Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,' Akademie Edition, Vol 8, p. 21. *On History*, ed L.W Beck (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 16.

<sup>5</sup>Kant's integration of the vices of modernity and Rousseau's antithetical moral freedom in his theory of history is addressed in B. Merrill, 'Kant's Importation of Historical Materialism,' *Proceedings of the Eight International Kant Congress*, ed. Hoke Robinson, vol. 2, (Milwaukee, Marquette U.P., 1995), Pt. 2, 713-19.

'That Enlightenment of the mind, which is the not altogether groundless boast of our refined classes, has had on the whole so little of an ennobling influence on feeling and character that it has tended rather to bolster up depravity by providing it with the support of precepts.... In the very bosom of the most exquisitely developed social life egotism has found its system, and without ever acquiring therefrom a heart that is truly sociable, we suffer all the contagions and afflictions of society. We subject our free judgments to its despotic opinion.... Proud self-sufficiency contracts the heart of the man of the world, a heart which in natural man still often beats in sympathy; and as from a city in flames each man seeks only to save from the general destruction his own wretched belongings.... Civilization, far from setting us free, in facts creates some new needs with every power it develops in us.... Thus do we see the spirit of the age wavering between perversity and brutality, between unnaturalness and mere nature, between superstition and unbelief; and it is only through an equilibrium of evils that it is still sometime kept within bounds.'<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, Schiller contends, the corruption and social-psychological dualism are providential:

'There was no other way in which the species as a whole could have progressed. With the Greeks, humanity undoubtedly reached a maximum of excellence which could neither be maintained at that level nor rise any higher....'

If the manifold potentialities of man were ever to be developed there was no other way but to pit them one against the other. This antagonism of the faculties and functions is the great instrument of civilization—but it is only the instrument; for as long as it persists. we are only on the way to becoming civilized'.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore art, the 'middle condition,' is called upon to heal and redeem. Here Schiller rejects Kant's rationalism, the interpretation of history as a passage from the functional reason of contemporary corruption to the autonomous reason of morality. He draws upon Rousseau for support. The first batch of his *Letters* is graced by a quote from *La Nouvelle Héloïse* on the title page: 'Si c'est la raison, qui fait l'homme, c'est le sentiment, qui le conduit.' The thrust of the quote presses against Kant's rationalism, the ideal of being ruled by pure practical reason. Rather, the ideal person is the unified person, inspired by a harmonious mixture of reason and sentiment. Schiller's goal is a

<sup>6</sup>Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, ed. & trans. by E.M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby. (Oxford, 1967), letter 5, paragraph 5.

<sup>7</sup>Schiller, *Aesthetic education*, letter 6, para. 11-12

whole and happy man in the spirit of Emile, not the divided, indirectly happy man represented by Emile's tutor, and Kant. Thus Rousseau's words are deployed to justify Schiller's recovery of his vision of the stage as a unifying 'middling condition' put forward in the earlier essay, which becomes the model for art in a global sense, as the key to the regeneration of a corrupted age.

The paradoxical influence of Rousseau upon Schiller is captured in Schiller's summation of his historical ideal: 'to restore by means of a higher Art the totality of our nature which the arts themselves have destroyed.'<sup>8</sup> 'To restore the totality of our nature' is Rousseau's ideal. That the arts have destroyed that totality is the theme of the *First Discourse*. That there is a providential link between the destruction and the restoration echoes Rousseau's obsessive autobiography of a self lost, a higher self regained.

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<sup>8</sup>Schiller, *Aesthetic education*, letter 6, para 15.