

ROUSSEAU ET L'ÉDUCATION
ÉTUDES SUR *L'ÉMILE*

ACTES DU COLLOQUE DE NORTHFIELD
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ROUSSEAU'S *ÉMILE OU DE L'ÉDUCATION*:
THE READING OF A PROMISE, THE PROMISE TO READ

by Janie Vanpée

"To breed an animal with the right to make promises – is not this the paradoxical task that nature has set itself in the case of man? Is it not the real problem regarding man?"

*Nietzsche, "Second Essay",
On the Genealogy of Morals*

From the moment of its publication to the present, Rousseau's *Émile ou de l'éducation* has been subject to critical controversy. The ambiguity of the book's hybrid form, its combination of theory and fiction, and its paradoxical goal of creating an ideal man, who would also be a master pedagogue, out of the combination of the *le citoyen* and *l'homme naturel*, has generated radically different interpretations.

Two interpretations are most common. The more influential one places Rousseau's pedagogical treatise in the continuum of pedagogical thought as the practical manual which founds modern pedagogy and cognitive psychology. The other interpretation eschews the book's practical dimension and place in the history of pedagogy to focus primarily on the book as a phantasm of Rousseau's powerful imagination. The most incisive of this second group of interpreters include in their reading of the work as fiction an analysis of Rousseau's own lucid understanding of the necessary failure of the treatise's practical application. Given that the two types of interpretations take opposite points of departure for their analysis, the one from the content – what Rousseau says about education – the other from the form – namely Rousseau's invention of a novelesitic framework, it is no surprise that the two types of interpretation lead to irreconcilable readings – the first one to an historical reading tracing origins, developments and influences; the second to a traditional literary reading analyzing plot, characters, and themes.

The book has been read then as a theory and a manual of educational practice and as a novel about an education. But no interpretation to date has managed to account for the ambiguity might determine the critical response to the book. No interpretation has tried to elucidate how the book's particular literary form may function as an integral part of its pedagogical intentions.

That the book's hybrid structure, its mixture of a theoretical and a fictive discourse, generates these radically different, yet similarly mutilating, critical interpretations, is clear. Throughout the book, and especially in the preface, Rousseau speculates that the particularly undefined and multiple form of his work might disconcert the reader. However, he refuses to clarify the ambiguity. On the contrary, he insists on the text's mixed genre, calling it by a variety of names which sustain a deliberate confusion: «une espèce d'ouvrage», «un recueil de réflexions et d'observations sans ordre et presque sans suite» (O.C., IV, 241), *un traité, un mémoire, un livre, mes idées, l'étude, la méthode, les rêveries d'un visionnaire*. Recognizing the textual ambiguity and anticipating the critical objections to such hesitation, Rousseau excuses himself from the responsibility of erasing the ambiguity and places the responsibility to come to terms with the text's duality onto the reader.

Voilà ce que j'ai tâché de faire dans toutes les difficultés qui se sont présentées. Pour ne pas grossir inutilement le livre, je me suis contenté de poser les principes dont chacun devait sentir la vérité. Mais quant aux règles qui pouvaient avoir besoin de preuves je les ai toutes appliquées à mon *Émile* ou à d'autres exemples, et j'ai fait voir dans des détails très étendus comment ce que j'établissais pouvait être pratiqué: tel est, du moins, le plan que je me suis proposé de suivre. C'est au lecteur à juger si j'ai réussi. (IV, 265)

Appealing directly to the reader is a rhetorical play Rousseau uses frequently to disculpate himself. In this instant, however, the excuse is more than a rhetorical gesture deferring to the reader; it actually functions also as a veiled accusation anticipatory of the reader's inevitable misreading. Thus, it is significant that this appeal to come to terms with the book's formal ambiguity should be paradoxically the origin of a history of consistently truncated readings, and thereby appear to determine its own critical misreadings. That Rousseau's repeated warnings to the reader of the possibilities and pitfalls of misunderstanding both predict the misreadings while parrying them beforehand

and thus actually program those misreadings, points to a critical paradox.

It is this paradox, which, as an origin of the many partial (in both senses) interpretations, begs to be examined. The question of why *Émile* has been repeatedly ignored, misread, and refused the status Rousseau claims for it as the “key to his system” must be asked.

We can begin to find an answer in one of Rousseau's definitions for his book. In the long list of names he uses, one comes up often, *le traité*, and with it Rousseau seems to classify the book in the category of theory, idea, concept. *Le traité* recalls the second part of the book's title «de l'éducation» which defines the work as a treatise on education. The word conjures up other meanings as well. In particular, it suggests an agreement between two parties or individuals, an engagement, a pact, a contract. Accordingly, *le traité Émile ou de l'éducation* could be interpreted not only as a dissertation *on* education but as a treaty, a pact, or a contract *for* an education.

Such an interpretation is explicitly thematized in the book. The pedagogical theory and its implementation in the fictive dramatization do depend on a contract. In fact, they depend on a double contract, first between a preceptor and the father of the future pupil and then, when the child comes of age to understand what a contract implies, between the preceptor and the child himself.

Although Rousseau does not specifically mention the word “contract” in the first agreement between preceptor and father, the terms of the agreement are those of a “contract”. That is, a definite exchange takes place between the two parties involved; the father surrenders his rights as tutor to the preceptor. To describe this first part of the initial agreement, Rousseau uses legalistic language which suggests a written form of the agreement:

Émile est orphelin. Il n'importe qu'il ait son père et sa mère. Chargé de leurs devoirs, je succède à tous leurs *droits*. Il doit honorer ses parens, mais il ne doit obéir qu'à moi. C'est ma première ou plutôt ma seule condition.

J'y dois ajouter celle-ci, qui n'en est qu'une suite, on ne nous ôtera jamais l'un à l'autre que de notre consentement. Cette *clause* est essentielle... (IV, 267; emphasis mine)

This initial agreement between father and preceptor is but a prelude to the basic contract or exchange between preceptor

and child. Bound together for an indefinitely long period of time by the initial agreement, the preceptor and child have the time and the context in which to carry out the exchange for mutual benefit at the heart of their contract — the preceptor will form (gain) a man capable of taking care of him in his old days (a pension plan) and, in return, the child will gain an education and a friend:

Mais quand ils se regardent comme devant passer leurs jours ensemble, il leur importe de se faire aimer l'un de l'autre, et par cela même ils se deviennent chers. L'élève ne rougit point de suivre dans son enfance l'ami qu'il doit avoir étant grand: le gouverneur prend intérêt à des soins dont il doit recueillir le fruit, et tout le mérite qu'il donne à son élève est un fond qu'il place au profit de ses vieux jours. (IV, 268)

While the agreement between father and preceptor is authentic, the agreement between preceptor and child is at first a pseudo-contract. It is made by proxy, the father substituting for the child as yet incapable of engaging himself into a contractual situation of his own. The father thus participates in two agreements, one for himself and one for the child.

But although there is, in fact, no real contract between preceptor and child at the beginning, the relationship between the two cannot function or even be conceived of without the assumption that a contract joins them. The continuity insured by the first semblance of an agreement is the necessary precondition for the second and authentic contract to take place and to function fully. Only by setting up the conditions within which the preceptor can guide the child to the stage where he will be able to *recognize* the contract, can the child come to know that he must take responsibility for his part in the exchange.

The importance of the second contract is marked by the care the preceptor takes to prepare for it. It is an extremely delicate task to authenticate a situation which has been founded on false premises. The preceptor must not tell the child of the initial tacit agreement, for the child, recognizing it as the master/slave relationship that it is, would only rebel and refuse to accept the terms of a contract that would appear to extend the terms of such a relationship. The preceptor's skill and success lie in his ability to lead the child first to recognize by himself that his relationship to his teacher is founded on a contract beneficial to him and then to choose willingly to continue the contract.

Je n'ai point voulu qu'on lui dit que ce qu'on faisait était pour son bien, avant qu'il fût en état de l'entendre; dans ce discours il n'eût vu que votre dépendance, et il ne vous eût pris que pour son valet. Mais maintenant qu'il commence à sentir ce que c'est qu'aimer, il sent aussi quel doux lien peut unir un homme à ce qu'il aime; et dans ce zèle qui vous fait occuper de lui sans cesse, il ne voit plus l'attachement d'un esclave, mais l'affection d'un ami. (IV, 521)

The child's recognition and free decision will simultaneously prove the success of the education, lend authority after the fact to the original proleptic contract, be the necessary condition for the second, this time authentic, contract, and allow the preceptor's initial gamble to be paid back. At the moment the child becomes mature enough to recognize the contract and to free himself from it by refusing to accept the terms he had no part in drawing up, he voluntarily abdicates his newfound autonomy and puts himself back into the contractual situation:

Je ne doute pas un instant qu[e] ...il ne vienne de lui-même au point où je veux le conduire, qu'il ne se mette avec empressement sous ma sauvegarde, et qu'il ne me dise avec toute la chaleur de son âge, frappé des dangers dont il se voit environné: Ô mon ami, mon protecteur, mon maître! reprenez l'autorité que vous voulez déposer au moment qu'il m'importe le plus qu'elle vous reste; vous ne l'aviez jusqu'ici que par ma faiblesse, vous l'aurez maintenant par ma volonté, et elle m'en sera plus sacrée... veillez sur votre ouvrage, afin qu'il demeure digne de vous. Je veux obéir à vos lois, je le veux toujours, c'est ma volonté constante... (IV, 651)

This time *Émile* is not the innocent pawn or object of the exchange; rather, he is a subject consciously participating in the exchange. And this time the preceptor does not disguise the language he uses to describe the agreement; he calls it explicitly a contract. «Quand le moment sera venu et qu'il aura, pour ainsi dire, signé le contrat, changez alors de langage; mettez autant de douceur dans votre empire que vous avez annoncé de sévérité.» (IV, 653)

The outcome of the education which the book proposes and which it illustrates in the dramatization of the contract, is predicated on the contract. Much as the preceptor creates an original pact out of nothing and under dubious pretenses in order to establish an authentic contract, the contract both *founds* the possibility of the education the book proposes and *authenticates* it. Without the contract, both the theory and the development of the fictive characters disintegrate.

Indeed, Rousseau suggests in the preface that the book could be interpreted in contractual terms. After exposing his intentions for the book, he ends the preface by referring to it as an «engagement» and a promise:

Il me suffit que partout où naîtront des hommes, on puisse en faire *ce que je propose*; et qu'ayant fait d'eux *ce que je propose*, on ait fait ce qu'il y a de meilleur et pour eux-mêmes et pour autrui. Si je ne remplis pas *cet engagement*, j'ai tort sans doute; mais si je le remplis, on aurait tort aussi d'exiger de moi davantage; car je ne *promets que cela*. (IV, 243; emphasis mine)

Now, to engage and to promise, or to engage in a promise implies that there be someone to whom the engagement and the promise are made. One can of course, promise to oneself, but in such a case, God is called as a witness, or in his absence, the self is doubled to witness the promise to itself. To promise, or to engage, are open-ended and future oriented actions whose realization and closure are defined but not assured. A promise and an engagement are serious only if they are actually proffered to someone, because someone must witness both the inception and the closure of the promise to verify that the promise was indeed a promise. In the case of *Émile*, the witness to Rousseau's promise is both the reader, and of course, the text itself (and Rousseau as author). Such a written promise acts more technically as a contract.

It is a contract, moreover, that Rousseau explicitly authenticated by insisting on having his name printed on the book's title page – an act analogous to signing a text or document, given the tradition not to indicate the author's name in the case of books likely to be censored.

From the beginning, the reader is thus engaged in a promise (and a contract) initiated by Rousseau, witnessing it, receiving it, and tacitly accepting it.

What the engagement and the promise actually consists in is difficult to ascertain. Rousseau speaks of «cet engagement» and «je ne promets que cela», using demonstrative adjectives and pronouns whose antecedents are unclear. The “that” (*cela*) that Rousseau promises ostensibly refers to the preceding sentence, «Si je ne remplis pas cet engagement, j'ai tort sans doute, mais si je le remplis, on aurait tort aussi d'exiger de moi davantage,» logically making the promise one of fulfilling «cet engagement» – «Je ne promets que cet engagement.» «Cet engagement», in turn, refers to the preceding sentence, «Il me suffit

que partout où naîtront des hommes, on puisse en faire ce que je propose, et qu'ayant fait d'eux ce que je propose, on ait fait ce qu'il y a de meilleur et pour eux-mêmes et pour autrui.» The promise thus becomes, «Je ne promets que cet engagement de faire des hommes ce que je propose.» What is promised is again deferred with an indefinite pronoun «ce que» defined only by the author's empty «je propose». But what Rousseau proposes *follows* the promise; it is the rest of the book. The ultimate promise is, in fact, “a promise to promise what I will propose, or what I will promise,” — the sign of a promise and nothing else. That Rousseau formulates the promise in the hypothetical mode further removes it; the text is not a promise, but it suggests that the promise may be a promise — if the reader engages himself.

But if, indeed, *Émile ou de l'éducation* makes the promise of a promise to the reader, and thus engages him in a contract whose terms are left deliberately undefined, the reader, like the child Émile enters into a contract without knowing what has been promised. Since the meaning of the contract cannot be determined at this point by specific terms (what is being exchanged and for what value, etc.), it is reduced to the act of contracting. Rousseau's promise is the *act of promising* and the reader's acceptance of that act as a contract is the *act of contracting*.

To interpret the book in terms of a contract and a promise has direct implications for it, its readers and reading. If the book is a promise into which the reader contracts himself, the content of the book is displaced to make room for the reader's act of engagement; that is, the book is no longer primarily *about* something (in this case, about pedagogy). If the book is a promise of a promise, its focus shifts from what the promise is about to *how* it will actualize that promise. The reader's role changes from one of interpreter, either of the book's ideas and theories in terms of their truth as system, or of its language in terms of its beauty or persuasiveness, to one of actor whose part consists in saying “Yes” to the the contract and of participant in the realization of the promise. The reader's good will and active involvement become crucial to the success of the promise and to the book's pedagogical goal.

The private act of reading, however, is generally unwitnessed, and thus permits the reader to act in bad faith, to engage himself provisionally, or to ignore the promise held out to him. The

many (mis)readings of *Émile* prove that this is often the case. Readers and critics have either not understood the promise at stake, or they have willfully ignored it. That *Émile* is a book on pedagogy, where issues like the transmission of knowledge, the struggle for mastery, and exemplary behavior are at stake, further complicates the problem. The pedagogical nature and intent of the work predetermine a unique relationship between the reader/critic and the text. Critical failure to do the book justice by reading it completely can be understood in terms of a blindness to the critical role pre-inscribed in this pedagogical relationship between text and critic and in terms of a resistance to the radical implications of such a relationship.

I have tried to suggest that in *Émile*, Rousseau does not simply describe a theory and a methodology of pedagogy. He intends for it to have an effect on the reader — as its dramatization of the story of *Émile* and his preceptor exemplify on one level. As an act the work necessarily implicates the role of the reader and, in fact, displaces the reader from his position as critic to that of student receiving instruction from the text-book. The reader as critical master of the text is put into question. The story of the master's and the pupil's struggle and evolution, as recounted in the fictive narrative, predicts and reflects the nature of the reader's relationship to the text and of his readings. *Émile's* development from naïve child to ideal man and master-pedagogue exemplifies the theory but also functions as a model for the reader's double evolution from naïve reader to critic and from neophyte pedagogue to the pedagogue trained to carry on Rousseau's system.

The repeated critical gesture of privileging one aspect of *Émile* over another can now be understood in terms of the struggle into which reading *Émile* draws the reader. To interpret the book exclusively either as a theory or as a fiction is a deliberate subversion of its particular pedagogical intent and impact. It is a blatant and defensive gesture of refusing to accept that the act of reading this text presents itself as the model of the pedagogical act. But it is also an effective way of manipulating the text's fundamental ambiguity and, in so doing, of refusing to read it as it asks to be read. Collapsing the duality into a clear, univocal discourse is a deliberate way of controlling the text's meaning and its productions of meaning. The reader/critic retains his mastery over the text, but at the expense of mutilating and misinterpreting it.

The text's promise of a promise to the reader parallels the story of the master's promise to educate Émile. Just as the tutor promises and engages himself in a first contract by proxy, not knowing what the outcome of his pupil's education will be, but willing to accept the dare and the promise, so must the reader be willing to dare to accept the promise of a promise. Just as the child, Émile, ignorant of the agreement to which he is bound, allows himself unwittingly to be educated, so must the reader accept the naïveté of his original contact with the master/textbook. Just as Émile's tutor initially contracts *for* Émile and *with* himself, so must the reader contract with himself. Without his participation in the contract, there can be no reading, and he cannot be educated to read. And just as Émile later validates the contract by re-engaging himself voluntarily and in his own name, fulfilling in the one act the initial promise and proving that the first contract has been a success, so the reader must allow this second critical gesture to happen by not prematurely foreclosing his reading and his own education. To begin to read *Émile ou de l'éducation*, and to understand the originality and the intention of Rousseau's pedagogical thought, the reader must suppress the impulse to interpret too rapidly, to judge the text's ambiguity before he can have understood its function in the shaping of his reading. He must put himself in Émile's position – the innocent neophyte – and read as if it were for the first time.

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