

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

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## The Theater in Everyday Life

Rousseau's pronouncements on the theater have largely been associated with his *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles*. In this public document, Rousseau argues strenuously against the introduction of the theater into Geneva, citing the nefarious moral and political consequences that would be certain to follow in its wake. Towards the end of this letter, Rousseau presents the type of theatrical experience that would, to his mind, avoid the inevitable corruption of the theatrical spectacle as it is commonly understood. This is the theater where 'nothing is shown,' that is, entirely evocative but not representative (V: 115). By avoiding the false dichotomy between spectacle and spectator, and between audience and actor, this new type of theater would escape the inauthenticity of forcing people into confining and exclusive uni-dimensional roles. As Rousseau envisions it, this new type of spectacle would allow its participants to recreate themselves by their active participation in the theatrical spectacle. In this vein, Rousseau speaks of the 'republican fêtes' which would encourage all citizens to love and not manipulate each other. Rousseau even gives a practical example of this type of fête. He describes his version of the annual marriage ball, which would carry the double benefit of promoting marriages and thus ensuring a continued supply of future citizens, as well as maintaining an atmosphere of communal identification and solidarity.

In the *Lettre à d'Alembert* Rousseau's vision of authentic theatricality—theatricality that would avoid the dehumanizing distancing of people from each other as well as from their true individual identities—seems to be fully conceived and theoretically complete. In this context, role-playing—either on stage or within the confines of daily living—would appear to have no place. There is no need to dissemble in a world of total honesty. Of course, the complexities of Rousseau's thought—to say nothing of those of real life—ensure that the actual consequences of this reconceived theatricality are not nearly that simple. This paper will analyze the paradoxes of Rousseau's re-conceptualization of the theater as they manifest themselves in his literary works, particularly *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. This paper will go on to demonstrate that these dissonances directly reflect Rousseau's larger theoretical concerns to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic speech in the attempt to establish the politically authentic state. Finally, this paper will show that it is Rousseau's subtle but dynamic concept of theatricality that

enables him to persist hopefully in maintaining that the first steps towards the authentic polis can be constructed even in the midst of an inauthentic world.

The image of the republican fête in *Lettre à d'Alembert*, with its refusal of the distinction between spectator and actor, and where all divisions are lost in communal and active participation, leads one to expect that Rousseau's ideal concept of community life would be one in which the spirit of equality reigns, and where people are activated by the sense of their common human bond rather than of their differences from each other. Such, indeed, appears to be the spirit that animates Clarens, the estate managed by Julie de Wolmar and her husband in Rousseau's great romantic novel, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. A rare spirit of friendship and unity seems to mark the relationship among Wolmar, Julie, Julie's cousin Claire, and Julie's former tutor, St-Preux. This is quite surprising because before Julie's marriage, she and St-Preux had been lovers. Thus, the fact that they can all participate in a relationship of perfect amity with Julie's upright husband marks the uniqueness of their association. St-Preux's letters give particularly striking testimony to this phenomenon. Writing of the time these four friends share in the *Salon d'Apollon*, St-Preux describes the 'matinée à l'angloise' as full of friendship and ecstasy: 'Reunited and in silence, enjoying at once the pleasure of being together and the charm of contemplation ... But friendship, Milord, friendship! A heavenly and lively sentiment, what discourse is worthy of you? Thus two hours passed with us in unmoving ecstasy' (II: 558).

The image given here is of a unique compatibility, bereft of dissembling. Indeed, this is what appears to animate Wolmar's advice to Julie and St-Preux when they first meet each other after years of separation: "Do and say nothing that you don't wish everyone to see and hear ... live in private [dans le tête-à-tête] as if I were present, or before me as if I were not there' (II: 424).

This uniformity of behavior—no play-acting, no role-playing—appears to have a salutary effect, not only within the Wolmar family circle, but also in the treatment accorded by the masters of Clarens to their servants (II: 468). St-Preux makes it clear that the working relationships at Clarens are extraordinary. Class distinctions apparently go unremarked: servants are treated like members of the Wolmar family (II: 445). Even during the harvest labors at the vineyard, St-Preux remarks, 'everyone is equal ... they dine with the peasants. . . unaffectedly' (II: 607). It would seem that Clarens has managed to achieve the perfect balance of human relationships: it can even boast of harvest festivals that evoke Rousseau's fond descriptions of the republican fête in the *Lettre à d'Alembert*.

However, it is precisely the description of the vendages at

Clarens that raises the suspicion that the 'republican fêtes' that are taking place there—that is, the actualization of the 'good' kind of theater—may not avoid the inauthenticity with which Rousseau taxes the 'regular' theater of his time. If this proves to be the case even in the 'perfect' society set up at Clarens, the ensuing implication would then be that all human lives must be irretrievably compromised by theatrical inauthenticity. This, in turn, would render the achievement of authenticity on any level—either personal or political—impossible. The dissonant note in the otherwise seemingly egalitarian and carefree description of the relationship between the masters and the servants at Clarens creeps in when St-Preux is praising the orderliness of the harvest celebrations. Disorderly conduct is never an issue, he tells us, because any breach of etiquette is punished by instant dismissal (II: 608-609). This ever-present reminder of the masters' power—the ability to dismiss a servant if that servant ever forgets his/her assigned 'place' on the social scale even in the ostensibly hierarchy-free paradise of Clarens—reinforces the notion that the purported 'equality' and lack of distinction between servants and masters at Clarens may in fact be no more than a sham, perpetrated to ensure the perfection of the servants' obedience. St-Preux's comment on the quality of domestic service at Clarens supports this interpretation: 'I have never seen a house where anyone did his tasks better,' he writes. At the same time, St-Preux hints that the workers at Clarens are deluding themselves, because he ends with this remark: '... and *imagined* himself less a servant (II: 445; my emphasis). That is to say, the workers do not think themselves to be serving the agenda of their masters—which is why they strive to excel at their tasks—but they are really deluding themselves, because their masters' agenda is exactly what they do further. The contradiction between the theoretical model on which Clarens is supposed to be based (patterned after the equality and mutuality of the authentic theater) and the realities which actually do exist there (the servants are clearly inferior to the masters) leads one to probe for further dissonances along these lines. And indeed, these exist in crucial areas. For example, servants may be considered family, but they are also encouraged to spy on each other: hardly an activity to encourage positive familial or communal sentiment (II: 460, 463). Similarly, servants are actually individuals, but they are not allowed to have personal lives of any sort that is not regulated by their masters (II: 449-450).

The dissonances in the social fabric of Clarens lead us to re-examine the purported perfection of the emotional ties of the extended Wolmar family (including Claire and St-Preux) which, like those of their servants, are consciously patterned after the mutuality of the authentic theater. We remember that life at Clarens is characterized by its inhabitants always acting the same at all times (II: 424). By the end of

the novel, when Julie admits that she has never stopped loving St-Preux, it becomes clear that Wolmar's insistence on perfect openness and honesty at all times had never actually existed. Equally obvious is that Wolmar's suggested formula for the achievement of this perfect openness (what Starobinski calls 'transparency') in fact guarantees its very opposite. If following Wolmar's dictum renders Julie incapable of acknowledging the person she truly loves, we must conclude that being the same at all times prevents one from ever being oneself at any time. Instead of being a celebration of authenticity—as St-Preux's description of the Salon d'Apollon would seem to indicate—life at Clarens reveals itself to be a constant spectacle before the Other. By denying the inhabitants of Clarens the privacy of their thoughts, Wolmar condemns them to live subject to the tyranny of the masks of their enforced *théâtre intime*.

We see then that the existence of an authentically reconceived theatrical metaphor is itself no guarantee that its implications will increase or even maintain current levels of authenticity. The perversion of the metaphor of even authentic theater at Clarens—the fact that it is subject to as many, if not more, misinterpretations than the regular theater which Rousseau unhesitatingly condemns—is reflected in the subsequent corruption of the most intimate and natural relationships at Clarens. Caught in the thrall of Wolmar's dictum, Julie is incapable of having a completely honest relationship even with her children: she bribes them in order to get them to learn how to read, and she literally sets the stage for their gifts of charity.<sup>1</sup> By the end of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, it becomes painfully obvious that proclaiming intimacy is not the same thing as actually having it.<sup>2</sup> It becomes likewise clear that the signs that Rousseau recommends for discerning authentic discourse and theater—e.g. gestural language—are themselves prey to inauthenticity. Julie's wordless reconciliation with her father, for example, presents a false 'spectacle' of family harmony, even though it mimics the reconceptualization of the

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<sup>1</sup>The pre-arranged 'spontaneous' shows of charity-giving set up by Julie for her children are described in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (II: 555). For Julie's bribery of the children in order to get them to read, see II: 581-582. Similarly, the Tutor in *Emile*, whose aim is to create the honest man who can survive in all places and all times, often resorts to manipulation in the course of *Emile's* education and socialization. See the episode of the rigged races in *Emile*, (IV: 395), or the episode of the disobedient child described in *Emile*, (IV: 366-368).

<sup>2</sup>Rousseau also notes that the need to ceaselessly talk about the achievement of transparency, as the characters in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* do, indicates that they probably haven't achieved it. See *Constitution pour la Corse*, (III: 937) and *Confessions*, (I: 38 and 236).

authentic theater with its active participation and re-presentation so vaunted by Rousseau in *Lettre à d'Alembert* (II: 175-176). Ironically, the deconstruction of the corrupt traditional theater into the reconceived theater where actor and spectator become one can be as alienating and inauthentic as the corrupt spectacle it is supposed to replace.

For Rousseau, the implications of this degeneration go beyond the realm of aesthetics or the social maintenance of the class system. In addition, the political implications generated by theatrical inauthenticity question the very possibility of ever establishing authentic political discourse in the public realm—and thus, of course, placing in doubt the viability of Rousseau's stated social and political goals. Hence, it is no accident that Rousseau himself locates his discussion of modern public discourse in the arena of the theater. This is not just because the theater is a convenient metaphor for the world at large. In addition, Rousseau perceives in the artificiality of the theater, with its pretensions to reality, a useful microcosm of the problem of distinguishing authentic from inauthentic discourse. Thus, the theater becomes the context for evaluating not only Rousseau's political goal for mankind—i.e., can authentic public discourse be established that would liberate people from artificial posturing?—but also for assessing Rousseau's aim for the individual's moral and humanistic development: i.e., is it possible for human discourse in *any* form to be honest and authentic? The theater is a useful context in which to raise both of these issues because the theatrical experience is largely dependent on language which, as Rousseau notes, is subject to the same difficulties of interpretation as the theater. In other words, to the extent that it is hard to tell honest from dissembling spectacle, it is difficult to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic discourse. According to Rousseau, this complication exists in language largely because language includes both authentic and inauthentic aspects. This, in turn, can be traced to Rousseau's two divergent conceptions of the origins of language.<sup>3</sup> Rousseau's depiction of two psychologically diverse moments of birth for human discourse allows him to portray not only the different needs that impel people to unite, but also the different uses to which language can be put. More specifically, Rousseau contends that language directly affects social and political institutions. 'There are languages favorable to liberty' Rousseau tells us in the unfinished chapter (XX) in the *Essay sur l'origine des*

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<sup>3</sup>In fact, Rousseau posits two alternative origins for human language. In the cold, northern countries, says Rousseau, language first begins with the heartfelt request for help: 'Aidez-moi!' ('le cri de la Nature, pour implorer du secours' (III: 148). In the warmer climes of the South, on the other hand, the original speech was a plea for love: 'Aimez--moi!' (V: 408)

*langues* regarding 'The Relationship between Languages and Governments.'<sup>4</sup> Rousseau gives us some characteristics of these languages 'favorable to liberty': he tells us that these first languages were 'singable.'<sup>5</sup> The musicality of a language is an important indicator for Rousseau of its potential for honest communication, because a musical language can communicate without mediation. For Rousseau, lack of mediation is always the hallmark of authenticity, because lack of mediation by definition avoids the obfuscation and deceit that inevitably accompany mediated speech or action. Consequently, it makes perfect sense that unmediated language is 'favorable to liberty.' This directness and lack of mediation also explain why the republican fête can encourage authentic community. Like a language that is musical, the republican fête effects a transformation from mediated to direct communication. In this case, community action changes from being an artefact of mediated representation to direct 're-presentation.' Instead of alienating spectacle, this fête directly re-presents—that is, presents anew—the community to itself. By their channeling of public action, these republican fêtes recreate the historical moment of the arrival of a self-conscious identity

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<sup>4</sup>Presumably, if there are languages favorable to liberty, there must also be languages supporting the development of tyranny, although these are not listed by Rousseau in this unfinished chapter. Based on his identification of the Southern languages as those 'favorable to liberty,' one can assume that the Northern languages would favor tyranny. In fact, Rousseau tells us that in our own day and age, where the only purpose of public communication is to demand money, public speech is for all intents and purposes dead. Since no authentic polis exists, no language of public discourse can operate: 'it is necessary to keep the subjects scattered; that is the first maxim of modern politics' (V: 428; my translation). Rousseau argues that the lack of a public discourse is deliberate on the part of modern leaders, who understand the dangers that a unified polity—i.e. a united people—can pose to their inauthentic and despotic rule. In Rousseau's opinion, these leaders purposely use language in an 'opaque'—i.e., divisive—sense, instead of in a 'transparent'—i.e., unifying manner in order to maintain their own control. We may note Rousseau's constant pairing of isolation and despotism. In the *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, he arranges these elements in a causal relationship. Consequently, says Rousseau, we have no idea of what a truly sonorous language is like—and by extension, no honest conception of liberty (V: 190). As we shall see, the ability of language to both establish and reflect the authenticity or inauthenticity of a polity is understood by Rousseau not only as a structural given, but as a challenge to renewing the possibilities of authenticity in the contemporary state.

<sup>5</sup>*Essai* (V: 381). Music becomes an important element in Rousseau's understanding of the development of language, for Rousseau identifies the musicality of a language with its authenticity of expression. In writing of the Swiss air *Rans-des-Vaches*, Rousseau further elaborates that music can function not only as an ensemble of sounds, but as a *signe mémoratif* that can precipitate collective memory and mass action (*Dictionnaire de musique*, V: 924).

and thus the beginning of political community.<sup>6</sup> With this reaffirmation, authentic discourse itself can be reborn.

However, as powerful as the emotive connections of authentic language—and with it, the authentic fête—may be, it becomes clear in Rousseau's discussions of public discourse that it is often very difficult to distinguish authentic from inauthentic speech. Rousseau personifies this dilemma in theatrical terms, as he sets up the opposition between the Actor and the Orator:

When the Orator presents himself, it is to speak and not to put himself up as a spectacle: he represents only himself and performs only his proper role, speaks only in his name, and says—or ought to say—only what he thinks; the man and the character being the same creature, he is in his place, he is in the case of any other citizen who fulfills the function of his station. But an Actor on the stage, displaying sentiments other than his own, saying only what they make him say, often representing a chimerical being, is annihilated, so to speak, is destroyed with his hero, and in this omission [forgetting] of man, if anything is left of him, it is to be the plaything of the spectators. (V: 74; my translation)

Both the Actor and the Orator are public speakers who want to convince their audience of the truth of their messages. To that end, they use the art of rhetoric. But Rousseau seems to be indicating that what distinguishes the Actor from the Orator is not merely the absence or presence of objective truth from their statements, but also the attitude of the speaker himself to the content of his statement. The Orator is represented as speaking only for himself and saying what he thinks. In that sense, he is indistinguishable from any other citizen. His personality matters only insofar as it colors his opinion, but does not enter the picture on its own merits. The Actor, on the other hand, puts himself up as a spectacle. Paradoxically, however, he does so only to destroy his own self by mouthing other people's opinions. The falsity of the Actor's position is not just that he is a living mouthpiece for other men, but that he portrays his lie as the veritable truth, and the living fiction of his art as reality. In so doing, the Actor nullifies his personal authenticity, as well as that of his audience.

The interlocutor is put in a very difficult position. He must

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<sup>6</sup>This formulation expands on that of Jacques Derrida. Regarding writing, Derrida says, 'Writing *represents* (in every sense of the word) enjoyment. It plays enjoyment, renders it present and absent.' *Of Grammatology*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 312; original emphasis. In Derrida's terms, what Rousseau hopes to accomplish with his open-air fêtes is the avoidance or artificial simulations of feeling, encouraging instead a new manifestation of the people's self-conscious identity and unity.

distinguish between the Actor and the Orator in order to be able to decide which message to heed. But if language by its very nature is ambiguous, can human discourse ever yield truth? These questions are particularly compelling in the effort to establish authentic public discourse—of which the authentic theater is just one form—in the actual world that is still inauthentic. In a paradoxical way, Rousseau does answer these questions with a qualified affirmative. Regarding the issue of language and how to distinguish the truth-content of a message, Rousseau insists that the ambiguous character of language requires the use of extra-textual clues, such as context, for example, to ascertain the veracity of the text/discourse.<sup>7</sup> As for the even more fundamental question of whether the theater (as an example of public discourse), or any other type of human (i.e. private) discourse can ever yield truth and authenticity, Rousseau treats this issue in a particularly novel way. Perhaps surprisingly, he utilizes the model of the theater in everyday life. Ironically, this is the very same image whose consequences in *Clarens* seem to indicate unequivocally that any form of theater—whether traditional and inauthentic or reconceived and ‘authentic’—ultimately degenerates into manipulative inauthenticity. Still, in dealing with the issue of whether human discourse can ever be the vehicle for transformation into personal and political authenticity, (or whether its imperfections inevitably doom humanity to misery and inauthenticity), Rousseau insists on finding a measure of hope in the very structures that seem to condemn mankind to hopeless inadequacy, even if that hope is not guaranteed and complete. The vehicle that Rousseau uses to demonstrate this thesis is the opinion voiced by and the lifestyle choices made by Julie’s cousin Claire.

Although ostensibly a minor character in the quartet of close friends at the heart of *Clarens*, it is Claire who demonstrates that the imperfections of human life can be viewed as a means for the achieve-

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<sup>7</sup>Rousseau also mentions the sincerity of the author/speaker, as well as the sympathetic responses elicited in the Reader/Interlocutor as alternate methods of ascertaining the truth of a text/speech. Now, it is true that context in and of itself is not an infallible guide to the veracity of the content of the message. Still, Rousseau maintains that some form of extra-textual clue is required to help discern the truth of a text or discourse. This is particularly true when the context can be veiled or disguised. That is what happens in the case of the false social contract cited at the end of *Discourse on Inequality*, where the proposal made by the rich is placed in a context of contrived political sincerity. Clearly, the poor are duped by their naive acceptance of this presentation. On the other hand, in terms of the message itself, it would be difficult to say, using the criteria that Rousseau sets for the Orator, that the rich are not speaking for themselves and in their own name. Perhaps they don’t say everything that they think, but then again, who does? Certainly not even the Legislator of the *Social Contract*, who, while being the model of political authenticity, works ‘in secret’ on men’s souls and *moeurs* to accomplish his stated goals.

ment of a measure of transformational authenticity. In Claire's explanation to Julie of why she does not want to marry again, she confesses that her life has been a series of consciously chosen roles: 'I set myself to play the merry widow well enough to fool [even] you ...*It is an act*' (II: 407; my emphasis). However, this role-playing does not force Claire into being a manipulated object, as Rousseau describes the actor in the traditional theater in *Lettre à d'Alembert*. Quite the contrary: by *choosing* the role she is to play, Claire manages to create a distance between her public persona and her private self. By accepting that the constraints of society will never allow these two to be one and the same, she makes a virtue of necessity. The space between her public and private lives provides for her an area of autonomy—albeit a severely restricted one—in which she can examine her options and her actions. It is true that achieving this measure of control is dependent on a willingness to put on a mask and to experiment with one's life. For Claire, however, there is no other option if she is to enjoy any autonomy at all. In other words, for Claire some authenticity—even if incremental in nature—is better than none at all. She advises Julie to do the same, for Claire believes that this emotional distance between private thoughts and public actions can be achieved even within the traditional feminine roles of wife and mother (II: 501).

It is important to note, however, that while Rousseau condemns the (traditional) theater in no uncertain terms (and while Rousseau demonstrates that the reconceived theater is not inevitably as authentically transformational as one might wish), Rousseau's utilization of the theatrical metaphor here is no guarantee either that incremental authenticity must always be the outcome even in a consciously strategic use of the theatrical and role-playing metaphors. In fact, *La Nouvelle Héloïse* can be read as a presentation of alternate uses and misuses of theatrical imagery in daily life. We have seen that Claire, as her name suggests, is truly 'claire d'orbe'—clear of eye: she consciously chooses roles that will afford her at least some (hopefully incremental) autonomy in her life. (And to the extent that she has at least some life outside the confines of Clarens, she succeeds.) Wolmar, the other character who understands the gist of Claire's message—that wearing masks can bring with it a freedom of its own—also passes his entire life wearing masks.<sup>8</sup> In Wolmar's opinion, life is nothing more than a series of roles. He therefore engineers a part for himself that will allow him to sit on the sidelines and

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<sup>8</sup>Wolmar characterizes his entire life as a series of consciously assumed roles. He even admits to having changed his name. In the most consummate instance of role-playing, he inverts his very identity, claiming to be a mere laborer in Julie's garden when in fact he directs by the force of his silent and all-pervasive observation (II: 491-492).

manipulate other people's actions and beliefs. Wolmar's genius is that he manages to dominate people's imaginations, so that they think they spontaneously generate the image of him that his role-playing is designed to elicit. But Wolmar's audience mistakes his two-dimensional mask for a three-dimensional human being. Unlike Claire, Wolmar remains less than human: just a distended eye—'*un oeil vivant*.'

The other two characters of the quartet at Clarens, Julie and St-Preux, never really understand the paradoxical use of the mask that can help achieve a measure of autonomy in a less-than-perfect world. Whereas Claire can accept the world on its own terms, Julie and St-Preux insist on achieving honesty and transparency in all aspects (private and public) of their lives. They truly endeavor to fulfill Wolmar's dictum of 'being the same at all times.' The ultimate result of this, however, is that they are completely manipulated. St-Preux remains subject to Wolmar, and Julie is totally crushed by attempting to be something that she is not. Julie thinks she has attained transparency, but in the end, is forced to admit that her life had been one of complete hypocrisy. Ironically, Julie, who abjures the very notion of masks, is forced to live her life wearing one. In the end, Julie's refusal to acknowledge the need for *some* role-playing makes her succumb to the most total alienation of all. She dies, leaving only a mask as a reminder of the individual that once existed.

To be sure, one could argue that the amount of authenticity that Claire must sacrifice in her role-playing to gain the bit of autonomy that is granted to her is no great bargain. One could point out, moreover, that Claire's sense of self is pretty shallow to begin with and so the creation of any sort of autonomy in that context may be no great feat.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Claire's demonstrated survival—as opposed to Julie's real demise—gives us a blueprint of hope and a methodology for how to survive in an inauthentic world while still laying the foundations for a better one. That Rousseau manages to use the very institutions that he condemns as manipulative on both the personal and political levels to lay the foundations for the incremental construction of our own authenticity serves to increase our hope in the transformational possibilities of society.

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<sup>9</sup>See *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, (II: 174, 407). Finally, see Claire's remark on the emotional prison that she found her married life to be (II: 408).