

**Jean-Jacques
Rousseau
et la
Révolution**

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**ROUSSEAU'S "LETTER TO D'ALEMBERT
ON THE THEATRE"
AND REVOLUTIONARY AESTHETICS**

Enlightenment aesthetics frequently stresses the social usefulness of art. The *philosophes*, unlike the 17th-century *moralistes*, wanted to improve social and political conditions, and the belief that the writer and artist should not be content merely to create entertaining, pleasing and decorative works was a tenet shared by such 18th-century thinkers as Diderot and Rousseau. The new conception made the Enlightenment to the 18th century what classicism had been to the 17th and what Romanticism would be to the 19th. Although it does not represent the whole spectrum of 18th-century aesthetics, it was nevertheless a motivating force behind important works of literary and art criticism.

One of Rousseau's major goals was to formulate a new relation between culture and society. His writings on literature, art, and music make clear that his aesthetics were inseparable from his ethical and political ideas. Both the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (1750) and the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755) reflect his ideological disapproval of the role of the poet and artist in society. Although music, fiction, poetry, and the theatre are intimately intertwined in almost all his work, for Rousseau the development of the arts, the progressive refinement in manners, mores, and standards of beauty and taste, and the impressive advances and achievements in architecture, theatre, opera, literature, and painting had not been matched by political and ethical progress and only testified to an ever-widening rift between nature and culture as well as to the increasing degeneration of social and moral values and of the human condition in general.

Rousseau's 1758 *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theatre* has come to occupy an increasingly central place in his *œuvre*. It is indeed of crucial importance, for no other writing by him so intimately and consistently interweaves his politics and his aesthetics, or so powerfully underscores the problematic nature of art in society. Until fairly recently, however, it

was either ignored or viewed quite negatively. Allan Bloom, the translator of the *Letter* and the *Émile* who has achieved recent celebrity with his book on *The Closing of the American Mind*, speaks of the *Letter* as a "neglected work" in the introduction of his translation.¹ Peter Gay, for his part, wrote in his study on the Enlightenment that "it is Rousseau at his most Platonic, most Genevan, and most paradoxical."² As for Lionel Trilling, in *Sincerity and Authenticity* he attributes this negative response on the part of a number of readers to the fact that Rousseau's moralistic and political preoccupations seem to make him indifferent to aesthetic values: "One of our most esteemed certitudes", Trilling writes, "firmly established in our advanced educational system, is that personal autonomy is fostered by art. Rousseau says just the opposite."³ Yet Maurice Cranston, in an article entitled "Ethics and Politics," asserts: "I do not think Rousseau can be said to have consistently believed that sincerity, authenticity, transparency is always imperative in either private or public life."⁴

If Rousseau focused so sharply on the theatre, it was not so much, as has so often been stated, to protect the virtue of his Genevan compatriots against the corrupting influence of Voltaire and the Encyclopedists as to show how our instinctive sociability (the pleasure we derive from looking at our fellow human beings) has become denatured when, in taking decisive and successive steps away from the state of nature, individuals have little by little transformed this spontaneous relationship into a formalized, ritualized theatricality that eventually fell into the hands of specialized professionals: "people grew used to gathering together in front of their huts or around a large tree; singing and dancing, true progeny of love and leisure, became the amusement, or rather the occupation, of idle men and women thus assembled."⁵ Thus already in the *Second Discourse* theatricality plays a key role in Rousseau's theory of social evolution.

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1. *Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre*, tr. Allan Bloom (Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press of Glencoe, 1960), p. xviii. Quotations from the *Letter* will refer to this translation. Also cf. *Letter à M. d'Alembert sur les spectacles*, ed. M. Fuchs (Geneva, Droz, 1948).
 2. *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, vol. II: *The Science of Freedom* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p. 258.
 3. *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 66.
 4. *Encounter*, June 1972, p. 21.
 5. *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, tr. Maurice Cranston (New York, Viking Penguin, 1984) p. 114.

With the appearance of property and the emergence of civil society, theatricality became a tool in the hands of those who shrewdly perceived the uses that could be made of this growing need for a passive kind of catharsis based upon a clever manipulation of our pride. When our natural love of self (*amour de soi*) changed into pride (*amour-propre*), the stage was set for the emergence of play acting, both in life and in the more formalized theatre.⁶

Even such a gregarious propensity as our capacity for compassion, “an innate repugnance against seeing a fellow creature suffer,”⁷ plays a crucial role in the dangerous hold theatre came to exert upon us. In its present form it plays on this natural emotion of pity, while inhibiting it by gratifying it artificially—and enforcing our passivity—thus eliminating the need to follow the impulse in real life. After having shed copious tears over the misfortunes of fictional heroes and heroines, we feel so pleased with ourselves that we no longer see those who are imploring us for our help.

Rousseau does indeed challenge the commonly held and cherished notion that great art, even in a corrupt society, is a positive force liberating the most creative energies and impulses. We like to believe that great works of art express our highest and most ennobling aspirations. Rousseau, for his part, was convinced that art convincingly and seductively represents but rarely transcends those values fostered by a particular society: indeed it only serves as the handmaiden of existing institutions and its aim is the perpetuation of the *status quo*. Rather than seeking autonomy, truth, and authenticity, the artist, in a corrupt society, is inevitably led to flatter, please, and reinforce the prejudices and predilections of the public and reinforce its passive role by offering it enticing spectacles of great loves and undeserved suffering.

Rousseau was determined to uphold a simpler form of theatricality, even if this meant that he would have to stand alone against the *philosophes* in their optimistic belief that progress in the arts automatically would have a beneficial effect on society. The progressive refinement in the arts could only result, according to the Enlightenment doctrine, in the betterment of humankind. For complex personal and intellectual reasons that we need not go into here, Rousseau decided from the outset in his tumultuous career that he could not subscribe to the Enlightenment belief

6. *Ibid.*, p. 167. Also cf. Philip E.J. Robinson, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Doctrine of the Arts* (New York, Peter Lang, 1984).

7. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

that the refinement of the arts and the progress in science would have a positive impact on society. On the contrary. According to Rousseau this refinement was the clearest proof of how far removed the contemporary theatre had become from what our natural theatricality had been like. The sophistication and codification of the French theatre in particular only demonstrated its hopeless artificiality.

To be sure, Rousseau was acutely aware that theatricality plays a necessary role at all levels of personal, social, and political interaction. but one of his main concerns in the contemporary theatre was the passivity of spectatorship. In the *Letter* he seeks to transform the very notion of theatricality in order to bring it into greater conformity with his idea of a new society. His attack on the contemporary theatre should therefore not be considered as a fierce onslaught on the theatre in general or as a personal attack against Voltaire in particular, but rather as a passionate plea for a new kind of theatricality closer to our natural impulses, a participatory theatricality involving not just professional actors and actresses, but all citizens. The great patriotic spectacles on the one hand or the simpler rural festivities for persons of marriageable age that he advocates would give a healthy outlet to the people's instinctual need for some kind of public assemblage, activity, and performance.

Rousseau himself thought his *Letter* one of his best works and claimed that it enjoyed great success.⁸ His *Letter* is indeed remarkable for several reasons, one of which is that he managed to transfer a traditionally theological condemnation of the theatre to a social, political, and even economic sphere. Some of his most potent arguments against the theatre, however, draw from an arsenal of antistage controversy inherited from the 17th century, and among his sources critics have mentioned Bossuet, Bourdaloue, Massillon, and Pascal, among others. Pascal's own arguments against the theatre have the merit of stressing its psychological mechanism and impact on the passive and beguiled spectator in terms that we will find again in Rousseau's *Letter*:

All great amusements are dangerous to the Christian life; but among all those which the world has invented there is none more to be feared than the theatre. It is a representation of the passions so natural and so delicate that it excites them and gives birth to them in our hearts, and, above all, to that of love, principally when it is represented as very chaste and virtuous. For the more innocent it appears to innocent souls, the more they are likely to be touched by it. Its violence pleases

8. Cf. *Confessions*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. B. Gagnebin, R. Osmont, M. Raymond (Paris, Gallimard, Pléiade, 1964), vol. I, p. 501.

our self-love (*amour-propre*), which immediately forms a desire to produce the same effects which are seen so well represented. . . . So we depart from the theatre with our heart so filled with all the beauty and tenderness of love, the soul and mind so persuaded of its innocence, that we are quite ready to receive its first impressions, or rather seek an opportunity of awakening them in the heart of another, in order that we may receive the same pleasures and the same sacrifices which we have seen so well represented in the theatre.⁹

Rousseau echoes these words when he describes this passive catharsis as follows: "In the final accounting, when a man has gone to admire fine actions in stories and to cry for imaginary miseries, what more can be asked of him? Is he not satisfied with himself? Does he not applaud his fine soul? Has he not acquitted himself of all that he owes to virtue by the homage which he has just rendered it? What more could one want of him? That he practise it himself? He has no role to play; he is no actor."¹⁰ Rousseau's rather heavy-handed irony is quite evident in this sequence of rhetorical questions.

By an interesting coincidence, modern social historians, commenting on the fascination Hollywood exerted on the American public, especially during the years of the Depression, explained that its sure-fire way of attracting people was to give them compensatory illusions. "If motion pictures became such a big business in the thirties, it was largely because they offered unhappy men and women in untold numbers an artificial fulfilment of their hopes and aspirations. Hollywood did not aim to make these unsatisfied people go forth and take action in order to attempt to solve their problems. Instead, it offered them a dream that was in itself so enticing and irresistible that they would repeatedly return for more hours of imaginary escape."¹¹ In the same vein, Cecilia, the heroine of Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo* (set in the depressed 1930s) finds, like millions of other Americans of her time, life on the silver screen not only preferable but also more real than the world around her. As she excitedly confides to her sister: "I just met a wonderful man. He's fictional, but you can't have everything."

Rousseau presents arguments that for the most part are political and social, and he fashions a secular framework for what had long been primarily a theological debate. Thus he is widely accredited with having uncovered the true nature of theatre, even though he borrowed a number

9. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, tr. from the French, with an Introduction, by T. S. Eliot (New York, Dutton and Co., 1958).

10. *Letter*, tr. A. Bloom, p. 25.

11. Cf. H. A. Overstreet, *The Mature Mind* (New York, Norton, 1949).

of arguments from his predecessors. He even followed the example of Bossuet by dividing his works into two parts, one devoted to an attack on tragedy, and the other against comedy.

Rousseau's basic thesis is that even the greatest playwrights—he takes Molière's *Misanthrope* as a paradigmatic case—because they depend on pleasing the public for their very survival, tend to legitimate the *status quo*. And it is precisely because he acknowledges Molière's genius that he launches into a fierce attack on his representation of the sincere and well-meaning Alceste as a comical character and of Philinte, Alceste's cynical and accommodating friend, as a spokesman of wisdom. Lionel Trilling (in *Sincerity and Authority*) and others have rightly recognized Rousseau's impassioned self-identification with Alceste.

Already Stendhal, in so many respects a great admirer of Rousseau, saw in what might be called the Alceste complex a real danger of social alienation for the individual endowed with a superior moral conscience and sensibility. Whereas Rousseau fully and unquestioningly identified with Alceste and viewed him as the embodiment of sincerity unjustly ridiculed and misunderstood, Stendhal understood that not all truths are of equal portent and that nothing is more pathetic and absurd than the spectacle of a man so preoccupied with himself that he is constantly proclaiming what he considers to be earth-shaking verities to hostile, indifferent or mildly amused bystanders.¹²

But this reading of Rousseau's *Letter* does not take into account the fact that for Rousseau comedy was not to be taken lightly and that, according to him, if Molière succeeds in making us laugh, he is all the more guilty for drawing us into a relationship of complicity through the use of his superior talent. While, unlike Bossuet, he is not quite disposed to send Molière to hell ("Malheur à vous qui riez, car vous pleurez," "Woe on you who are laughing, for you shall weep"), like his predecessor he firmly believes that Molière's theatre is a "school of vice and bad mores." In this respect, it is worth noting that his negative assessment parallels that of Diderot's famous character, Rameau's Nephew, who in response to a query by *Moi* proclaims that what he finds in Molière's plays is a compendium of ways in which to indulge his favourite vices with impunity: "When I read *The Miser*, I say to myself, 'Be as miserly as you like, but don't talk like the miser.' When I read *Tartuffe*, I say 'be

12. Cf. Raymond Trousson, *Stendhal et Rousseau: Continuité et ruptures* (Cologne, Verlag Georg Mölich, 1986); Gita May, *Stendhal and the Age of Napoleon* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1977).

a hypocrite if you choose, but don't talk like one. Keep any useful vices, but don't acquire the tone and air which would make you ridiculous."¹³ Rameau's nephew reads *Tartuffe* ironically and cynically; he identifies with the villain. The lesson is clear: in a corrupt society, every individual becomes an actor—that is, one well-versed in the art of wearing a mask and in the ruses of deception.

To be sure, Diderot approached the artist's creative process and procedures and the interrelation between art and society with a personal sense of sympathetic, enthusiastic involvement. Whereas Rousseau viewed the arts with profound suspicion, Diderot found in them an unending source of personal delight and spiritual enrichment, as well as eventual social regeneration. Whereas Rousseau perceived a deep cleavage between art and moral values, Diderot sought to reconcile the respective exigencies of the aesthetically pleasing and the socially useful. Yet Diderot's strictures against such contemporary practitioners of slyly erotic and pleasingly titillating art as Boucher and Fragonard are not that far removed from Rousseau's wholesale condemnation of the theatre of his day. What Diderot searched for among his contemporaries with all-too-frequently disappointing results was an art at once grandiose, forceful, and morally uplifting, as well as intimate and immediate in its depiction of human situations, conflicts, and emotions. Diderot too yearned for an art that could be spiritually ennobling, yet closely related to life and its everyday concerns. No wonder, therefore, that when he had the opportunity to view in his last *Salon*, that of 1781, the work of a promising young artist, Jacques-Louis David, who was to become the painter of the French Revolution and the designer of its great symbolical and patriotic festivities, he signified his approval in no uncertain terms. Here at long last was a new kind of art, high-minded, civic, and virile.

To return to Rousseau's *Letter*: what especially provoked his indignation, when dealing with Molière's *Misanthrope*, was the playwright's representation of Philinte, the individual who is so highly accommodating and adaptable as to have no moral integrity of his own, as the living incarnation of wisdom, whereas Alceste, the righteous critic of society, is debased to the rank of buffoon and his legitimate complaints grossly trivialized and debased:

13. Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew and Other Works*, tr. J. Barzun and R. H. Bowen (Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1956), p. 50. Also cf. Robert Niklaus, "Diderot et Rousseau, Pour et contre le théâtre," *Diderot Studies IV*, ed. O. Fellows (Geneva, Droz, 1963), pp. 153-89.

This virtuous character is presented as ridiculous. It is indeed ridiculous in certain respects, and what demonstrates that the poet's intention is really to make it so is Philinte's character, which he sets in opposition to the other. This Philinte is the wise man of the play: one of those decent members of high society whose maxims so much resemble those of knaves, one of those gentle, moderate people who always find that everything is fine because it is to their interest that nothing be better, who are always satisfied with everyone because they do not care about anyone; who, at a good dinner, assert that it is not true that the people are hungry; who, with a well-lined pocket, find it disagreeable that some declaim in favour of the poor; who, their own door well secured, would see the whole of humankind robbed, plundered, slain, and massacred without complaining, given that God has endowed them with a most meritorious gentleness with which they are able to support the misfortunes of others.¹⁴

Of special significance is the magnificently rhetorical sequence of clauses beginning with the anaphora "who," referring to Philinte, the spokesperson of the privileged few. In this extraordinary passage there is no doubt as to whom Rousseau identifies with: it is the many, the underprivileged, *the people (le peuple)*. Philinte is one of those "who, at a good dinner, assert that it is not true that *the people* are hungry; who, with a well-lined pocket, find it disagreeable that some declaim in favour of the poor" ("qui, autour d'une bonne table, soutiennent qu'il n'est pas vrai que le peuple ait faim; qui le gousset bien garni, trouvent fort mauvais qu'on déclame en faveur des pauvres."¹⁵

These are strong words indeed, and their inflammatory rhetoric is among the most striking in Rousseau's works. It is worth noting that, by an interesting sleight of hand, the discussion has shifted not only to a social, but also to an economic plane. Nowhere in Molière's play and in Alceste's angriest tirades is there any reference to social or economic inequality. Alceste levels his most indignant outbursts against the moral insincerity and duplicity of his contemporaries and at the constant compromises with truth a man of his birth and rank has to accept in order to be well liked by his peers. Rousseau's tirade against Philinte, viewed as the complacent spokesman of an unjust social order, is both moving and disturbing because it exemplifies so powerfully and eloquently the author's exclusive concept of comical characters in political and moral terms as well as his deliberate disregard for the distortion and exaggeration required by the aesthetics of the theatre in general, and comedy in particular. For Rousseau the theatre, both tragedy and comedy, provided

14. *Letter*, tr. A. Bloom, p. 39.

15. *Ibid.* For French text, cf. Fuchs edition, p. 51.

a model for understanding the insidious workings of the social and political life of his time both as he experienced it personally and subjectively and as he attempted to comprehend how it had evolved to that point.

One could of course argue that Rousseau's choice of the *Misanthrope* is unfair to Molière. He could not have made the same case for Molière's duplicity had he selected *Tartuffe* as the subject of his demonstration. If anything, *Tartuffe*, a ferociously satirical portrait of a religious hypocrite and the dramatist's most controversial play, caused him enormous difficulties with the authorities of his day. Nowhere in the *Letter* is there any mention of this play, and for good reason. While its theme would have reinforced Rousseau's argument that hypocrisy and deviousness help one to get ahead in a corrupt society, the fact that a playwright was bold enough to tackle such an explosive topic would have weakened his argument that the French contemporary theatre, by its very nature, seeks only to flatter the public and cater to its prejudices and predilections.

It was the education of good citizens in an ideal republic that mattered for Rousseau. Viewed in this light, his attack on the theatre in general, and on the French repertoire in particular, makes a great deal of sense. He intrepidly challenges the notion that the perfecting of the arts would inevitably contribute to the betterment of humankind. His *Letter* is not so much a condemnation of the theatre or the expression of a personal antipathy toward dramatic art, as has so frequently been claimed, as an appeal for a new kind of theatricality, one on a grand, majestic scale, involving all citizens in great patriotic spectacles. The various *Fêtes de la Révolution* seem to have answered Rousseau's fervent wish. Indeed, modern historians of the French Revolution credit Rousseau with having contributed significantly to these revolutionary festivals, with their emphasis on outdoor celebrations and processions of an educational, patriotic nature.¹⁶

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16. Cf. Emmet Kennedy, *A Cultural History of the French Revolution* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 330-38. Also cf. Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, tr. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press), 1988.