Lectures de *La Nouvelle Héloïse*

Reading *La Nouvelle Héloïse* Today

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TO REVOLT OR TO CONFORM:

THE DILEMMA CONFRONTING

JULIE D'ÉTANGE

AND THE ABOLITION OF NOBILITY

IN JUNE 1790

All modern readers, especially women, surely hope that Julie will revolt against her father and follow her lover. How could this not have been, deep down, what Rousseau, as an adept of nature, dreamt of? It seems very difficult for us today to understand the letter which Germaine de Staël wrote in 1786, when she was only 20 years old, on Rousseau's novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse*: his objective was to encourage women guilty of Julie's error to repent, by giving them the example of the virtuous life she led in the aftermath. In this long letter, Mme de Staël admires Rousseau's novel for the moral lesson it offers as well as its digressions into various other issues such as suicide and dueling; but she gives only a fleeting glance at the political aspect of the novel's plot. "Peut-être que, suivant le cours habituel de ses pensées, il [Rousseau] a voulu attaquer, par l'exemple des malheurs de Julie et de l'inflexible orgueil de son père, les préjugés et les institutions sociales. Mais comme il révère le lien auquel la nature nous destine! . . . Qui oserait se refuser à sa morale!"[1]

Julie does, we believe, revolt against society by falling in love with Saint-Preux whom Rousseau depicts as the perfect partner for her. In the words of Lord Bomston, a strong plea is made against the decision of Julie's father not to allow his daughter to marry a commoner and to impose upon her his tyrannical wish to fulfill the promise given to an old friend. Julie gives in to her father. Her compliance might be seen

1. G. de Staël, *Lettres sur les ouvrages et le caractère de J.-J. Rousseau*, Genève, 1979, letter 2.

as indicating a conservative attitude on the part of Rousseau, wishing to keep women in their place in a traditional society where their submission to the male order was the rule. However, we must not forget the much wider social context, involving habits and customs, of which Rousseau was so well aware. In this novel, as in other works of his, there is both the attempt to rebel against society as it has become and the even greater effort to reconcile the individual with the laws of nature which alone make any society worth living in.

Rousseau understood how attached men were to their environment and how they treasured certain habits and customs in which they had been bred. Julie would not be happy if she eloped with Saint-Preux; her ties with her parents, relatives, and friends are too strong to allow her to break with them. After falling in love with the young man and then giving in to her father, she continues to rebel against society through her life-long love for Saint-Preux and her early death. Her compliance with her father's wishes should be considered not so much as conforming to the social order as not wishing to go against the natural order requiring obedience to one's parents. Therefore, her decision is a mature one, typical of Rousseau's wisdom when dealing with the socio-political problems of his day. His writings deplored the evils of society and encouraged "revolt," but his advice was to do so within the context of the social order as it stood so as to bring about real and lasting change. The revolution he advocated lay in a gradual evolution of ways of thinking and acting so that no man should ever consider himself superior to another because born of a so-called "noble family."

The passages condemning the prejudices of nobility are scarce in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, but they are very powerful. By paying off Saint-Preux for his tutorial services, M. d'Étange wishes to make clear that he is in no way in debt to a "commoner": an insulting way of treating the other man once he has learned that he is neither noble nor rich (Part I, letter 22). When told that Saint-Preux is an "honest" man, his suspicions are aroused even more. The arrogance he displays in dealing with people not of his social order explains the resentment felt by many third estate deputies against nobles when they arrived in Versailles in 1789.

The disdainful remark made by Julie's father is carried further during his interview with Lord Bomston. In this passage, Rousseau indulges in an attack on the pretentions of nobility to be superior to the order of nature. Saint-Preux is endowed with many natural gifts: youth, health, beauty, common sense, sound habits and courage; he will also

benefit of the wealth Lord Bomston proposes to give him. Thus, all he lacks is nobility: a "vain prerogative" in a country where it is not required (Switzerland), but which he really possesses in the bottom of his heart. After a brief interruption by Julie's father, Bomston goes on to attack nobility's claim to superiority on the basis of descent from a long ancestry whose beginnings were probably not noble and might even have been dishonest. How ridiculous, he claims, to judge a man by his ancestry rather than by his actual merits and worth (Part I, letter 62). Almost thirty years before the abolition of nobility at the National Assembly on 19 June 1790, these lines of Rousseau's helped to serve the popular current of resentment against nobles who would suffer in consequence during the revolutionary years.

The *Dictionnaire des Constituants (1789-1791)*[2] offers its readers an index of the main themes discussed during the National Assembly (classifying the orators according to their estate). Exceptionally, it also gives the numbers of references made to the three chief Enlightenment authors — Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau — as follows:

	Clergy	Nobles	Third Estate	/ Total deputies
	331	311	673	/ 1315
Montesquieu	1	6	21	/ 28
Voltaire	4	5	7	/ 16
Rousseau	3	17	27	/ 47

These figures would, naturally, be higher if the index were based on the original speeches in the *Archives parlementaires* and not on our dictionary which merely gives a summary, but they indicate the importance of Rousseau in the intellectual background of the Constituent deputies[3] and the early years of the French revolution. Another indication may be seen in Louis-Sébastien Mercier's newspaper *An-*

2. E.H. Lemay, *Dictionnaire des Constituants (1789-1791)*, with the collaboration of C. Favre-Lejeune, the participation of Y. Fauchois, J. Félix, M. L. Netter and J. L. Ormières, and the assistance of A. Patrick, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford-Paris, 1991.

3. A vast literature has been devoted to this subject, namely: R. Barny, *Rousseau dans la Révolution: le personnage de Jean-Jacques et les débuts du culte révolutionnaire (1787-1791)*, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford, 1986, and my preceding communications at the meetings of this society: "Rousseau dans le discours politique de trois Constituants-juristes," *Swiss-French Studies*, vol. II, no. 2, Nov. 1981, pp. 6-22; "Inégalité et vote par tête au printemps 1789," J. Terrasse, *Studies on Rousseau's Discourses*, North American Association for the

nales patriotiques (3 Oct. 1789/19 Nov. 1792), which carried a quotation from Rousseau under its title in 17 per cent of its numbers: 20 different texts borrowed mostly from the *Social Contract*. In July 1791, the paper announced publication of Mercier's book *De Jean-Jacques Rousseau, considéré comme l'un des premiers auteurs de la révolution*, with a long excerpt explaining Rousseau's role in the new public order, built on the ruins of despotism and aristocracy thanks to the abolition of hereditary nobility, "germe éternel de dissension parmi tous les peuples policés."[4]

Throughout the parliamentary debates, Rousseau is quoted from the *Contrat social*, *Émile*, *Lettre sur les spectacles* and his work on Poland. *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* is never mentioned, but this does not mean that our deputies had not read the book which had had such success when it appeared in 1761, followed closely by the *Contrat social* and *Emile*. If the latter two works are more important for their political contribution, *La Nouvelle Héloïse* offers an impressive attack on nobility. In his general criticism of that order, Lord Bomston throws a better light on English nobles: more enlightened, their primary duty consisted of service to the nation rather than to the monarch. In England, law stood above the king and was defended, in the interests of the nation, by nobles prouder of their merits than of their ancestry (Part I, letter 62). In spite of the admiration for America and her newly achieved liberty, England was the model more often referred to in the Constituent debates because her history and her institutions were more relevant to French experience.[5]

The defence Lord Bomston makes of English nobility may be contrasted with the arguments used by the French nobles opposing the abolition of their order in June 1790. The question appears to have come up accidentally on the evening of Saturday June 19 when

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Study of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Ottawa, 1988, pp. 195-205; "Rousseau et la peine de mort à l'Assemblée constituante," G. Lafrance, *Studies on the Social Contract*, North American Association for the Study of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Ottawa, 1989, pp. 30-37; "La part d'Émile dans la régénération de 1789," colloque international, Montmorency, 27 Sept.-4 Oct. 1989 (forthcoming).

4. H. Aureille (research underway on the *Annales patriotiques*, at the Institut Raymond Aron, EHESS-Paris) has kindly given us this information.

5. See our "Les modèles anglais et américain à l'Assemblée constituante," *La Crise des Institutions et les Réformes*, Transactions of the Vth International Congress on the Enlightenment (1979), no. 9, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford, pp. 872-884; and "Lafitau, Démeunier and the Rejection of the American Model at the French National Assembly, 1789-1791," in M. R. Morris (ed.), *Images of America in Revolutionary France*, Georgetown, Washington, D.C., 1990, pp. 171-184.

discussing the forthcoming July 14 celebrations. Alexandre de Lameth proposed to eliminate the chained figures representing four French provinces at the foot of Louis XIV's statue. Lambel, a rather obscure lawyer and notary, then came up with the idea of eliminating all titles of nobility by burying them in "le tombeau de la vanité." This idea caught on very quickly among the liberal nobles, such as La Fayette. Charles de Lameth claimed that titles were an offence to the constitution's emphasis on "equality" and belonged to the feudal order destroyed on the night of August 4 1789: "Hereditary nobility goes against reason and harms true liberty; there is no political equality, no encouragement to be virtuous there where citizens are entitled to honours other than those attached to their actual functions in that society." Noailles, famous for his role on August 4, was most enthusiastic about this new idea: "Let us destroy these vain titles, frivolous children of pride and vanity . . . . Do we say marquis Franklin, count Washington, baron Fox? One says, Benjamin Franklin, Fox, Washington, names which need no qualification . . . but are always pronounced with admiration."

Leading third estate deputies, such as Lanjuinais and Le Chapelier, spoke in favour of abolition. Less well known, Anthoine, a lawyer and member of the lower courts, wrote to Necker (July 5, 1790) criticizing his attitude in favour of two social orders. Anthoine claimed that commoners felt noble in their hearts, where the law of equality had been engraved long before the declaration of the rights of man. According to him, equality was the foundation of the constitution.

The argument used by the conservative nobles in defence of their status was based on the principle that nobility was part of monarchy: one could not be eliminated without the other and in the past it had been the role of nobles to fight for the king. Contrary to the English, they emphasized the ties between nobles and king, rather than nobility's duty to protect the legal rights of the nation as opposed to the king. Some nobles invoked the declaration of the rights of man as protecting property rights, therefore their prerogatives. One noble, Count d'Escars, claimed that their status was God-given and no human power could deprive them of it. Another deputy, Count Faucigny, claimed that destroying the honours of nobility would not put an end to those granted bankers and usurers. Moreover, the question being of such importance, they reminded the Assembly that it was against parliamentary rules to take a decision during an evening session, especially when the matter had not been placed on the agenda. The discussion became

more and more heated, nobles being equated to the evils of feudalism; long before the feudal period, all Frenchmen (so one deputy, Bouchotte, claimed) had been considered equal. Finally, the motion was voted upon and five days later, 147 nobles signed a protestation against the decree, several among them writing up individual memoranda to justify their opposition before their noble electorate. La Queuille published what appeared to be a counter-revolutionary manifesto: abolishing nobility, he claimed, was attacking the liberty of all Frenchmen since nobles had fought for them in the past and the interests of both were linked.[6]

Returning to the novel, if the revolt against the prejudices of nobility seems evident, should we then accept Michel Launay's claim that Rousseau sought to consolidate social inequality by regulating it and assigning to each member of society his place in that body, prohibiting all changes?[7] Rather than put an end to the revolutionary message conveyed by the novel, emphasis should (we believe) be placed on the attempt to link customs and habits, natural to man, with the natural equality of all men. At no time, probably in the history of the world, did such faith exist in the possibility of a revolution conducted in a rational manner as in 1789. Certainly, if revolution meant violent change, Rousseau did not believe in its feasibility; but he hoped, by the example of *Julie* and his later works, to persuade men that their future happiness had more chance if they conducted their lives in close relationship to nature.

Early in their liaison, Julie writes to Saint-Preux, whom she has sent away, that her father has returned home after an absence of eight months. She describes her joy at seeing "the best of fathers" and asks him to try to understand her feelings for her parents. In this letter (part I, letter 20), Rousseau stresses the importance of family unity and harmony into which the outsider should enter and conform. With her father at home, Julie admits that all her thoughts as a daughter have been devoted to him, as they should be. In his answer, Saint-Preux explains the great difference separating them, due not to rank or fortune, which honour and love can replace, but to the fact that she lives in the midst of a well-regulated family where blood relations and friendship bind each member together. On the contrary, he has no family and almost no country; therefore his love for her is all the more important

6. E. Laurent et J. Mavidal, *Archives parlementaires*, 1[e] série, 1789-1799 Paris, 1882, vol. XVI, 19 June 1790: for all the speeches mentioned above.
7. R. Pomeau, "Le dossier de l'œuvre," in Rousseau, *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, Garnier, Paris, 1960, p. lxxxiii.

(Part I, letter 21). In this passage, Rousseau differentiates between a sort of nomadic existence (that of Saint-Preux, closely resembling his own) and one consisting of strong community ties (parents, family, village). Where the latter predominate, ties based purely on a love relationship were considered secondary. Since passions are short-lived, it is obvious that Rousseau would ideally place them in a context where other ties were important. But the ideal state is the objective to strive for, not necessarily the reality. Rousseau's apparent compliance with the social order (reality) did not mean it was the perfect state of things. As Saint-Preux ends his letter to Julie: "toi; ma Julie, ah! je le sais bien, le tableau d'un peuple heureux et simple est celui qu'il faut à ton cœur" (Part I, letter 21). Indeed, in this picture Rousseau depicts a state where Julie would naturally be allowed to marry her lover: the reconciliation of society with nature. Such, however, was not the way of the world as it then stood.

The 1789 revolution introduced the principle of political equality, a new idea which went far beyond the mere abolition of nobility. However, by abolishing titles and prerogatives based on one's ancestry, the Constituent Assembly realized that after destroying the Bastille and the feudal system, it was now (a year later) tearing down another bastion of the "ancien régime." When Julie writes to her cousin Claire, "quels monstres d'enfer sont ces préjugés qui dépravent les meilleurs cœurs, et font taire à chaque instant la nature!" (Part I, letter 63), she is preparing the revolt of the third estate deputies who, in 1789, would claim double representation so as to confront the privileged orders with some measure of success. Not only were they requesting political equality, but they deplored all the humiliating stigma which differentiated them from nobles: different costumes worn in public ceremonies; special benches in church reserved for nobles; military schools closed to sons of commoners; and upper ranks of the clergy reserved to sons of nobles, as were the offices in the superior royal courts.

Lord Bomston complains to Claire about the ridiculous prejudices which turn men away from the paths they would naturally take and upset the harmony which could develop between young people made for each other. He deplores the tyranny of Julie's father as, later, third estate deputies were to deplore titles and tokens differentiating them from nobles. Rousseau set the problem in romantic terms which 18th century readers appreciated, often with tears in their eyes. Lord Bomston echoes the future aspirations of the third estate when he suggests; "Que le rang se règle par le mérite, et l'union des cœurs par

leur choix, voilà le véritable ordre social; ceux qui le règlent par la naissance ou par les richesses sont les vrais perturbateurs de cet ordre; ce sont ceux-là qu'il faut décrier ou punir. Il est donc de la justice universelle que ces abus soient redressés; il est du devoir de l'homme de s'opposer à la violence, de concourir à l'ordre . . ." (Part II, letter 2). If Lord Bomston's efforts to convince the tyrannical and unreasonable old man (Julie's father) end in failure, this does not mean that those efforts should not be renewed in other ways, and Julie's exemplary life as a wife and mother are proof that her initial revolt did not trespass on her fundamental virtue.

The great enthusiasm and optimism of the 1789 revolution owed much to the romantic faith in nature which Rousseau tried so hard to convey to his readers in such a refreshing manner.

Edna Hindie Lemay