Rousseau on Arts and Politics

Autour de la Lettre à d'Alembert

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The Philanthrope: The Place of Religion in the *Letter to D'Alembert*

We have inherited the *Letter to d'Alembert* as Rousseau's contribution in a quarrel about the theater arising from d'Alembert's article 'Geneva,' but it didn't start out that way. It is not what d'Alembert blames the Genevans for—their hostility to theater—but what he praises them for—their radical religious views—that embroiled the Encyclopedists in their greatest and most threatening controversy.[1] At its height, according to Rousseau, nothing less than a 'civil war of religion' between equally zealous combatants loomed over Europe. Rousseau treats the various phases of this quarrel as the hallmark of his times (5: 366; I: 435-436). I suggest that the religious rather than the artistic controversy galvanized Rousseau into print, and that he is animated by a concern for his self-preservation rather than by civic zeal. I also think the *Letter* demonstrates Rousseau's own commitment to the development of a humane and tolerant society that will eradicate superstition and religious fanaticism and ameliorate the righteous indignation characteristic of the current debates. Elsewhere, he insists that removing the 'infernal dogma' of intolerance from cities is absolutely essential to public peace, and the intolerant man, the true misanthrope (3: 122; III: 341).

In the episode in question, the encyclopedists show themselves to be good neither for themselves nor for others. They were totally unprepared for the firestorm of criticism they unleashed.[2] Their naiveté makes them ridiculous; in the *Letter* Rousseau laughs at their expense. He detects their greatest political mistake in unfounded optimism about the power of reason alone to dislodge prejudice and persecutorial zeal. It is impossible, however, to argue the quarrel of the times to its conclusion. The philosophes' utopianism hurts 'the laity' and impedes the alliance between philosophers and the people that Rousseau seems bent on forging. Rousseau's own revolutionary strategy is safer for philosophers

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[1]See John Lough, *The Encyclopédie*, (New York: David McKay, 1971), 22-27, 116-130, 160-161.

[2]See, e.g., Voltaire, *Correspondence*, vol. 101 of *The Complete Works of Voltaire*, ed. Theodore Besterman (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1971), nos. 6781, 6800, 6813, 6840, 6862, 6912.

and more effective. He is good both for himself and for others (5: 420-421; I: 501-502).

We can see Rousseau's concern to avoid becoming a casualty of the times and to strike a blow against fanatical intolerance throughout the *Letter*, e.g., in his self-presentation, in the epigraph, in his response to d'Alembert's contentions, in his literary criticism, and in his alteration of the public theme.

In the Preface and first part of the text proper, Rousseau repeatedly insists that he is compelled to speak up by necessity. He dare not allow his silence to be construed as agreement with the philosophes. 'I must disavow what I cannot at all approve, so that sentiments other than my own cannot be imputed to me' (6; V: 6). Judging from the Preface, the 'sentiments' at issue have specifically to do with d'Alembert's proposal for the establishment of a theater in Geneva. 'This is the subject of my alarm; this is the ill that I would fend off' (5; V: 5). As if to leave no doubt about it, Rousseau goes so far as to offer d'Alembert a little free advertising by reprinting the offending portion of the article that 'placed the pen in my hand.' Nevertheless, in the opening paragraph of the actual text, Rousseau corrects this impression. There he says that 'silence is not permitted me' on 'the judgment that you make about the doctrine of our ministers in the matter of faith' (9, 14n; V: 9, 13n).

Rousseau also claims in the Preface that he has a duty to fulfill in this writing, but never specifies what it is. He says man's primary duties are to 'justice and truth,' and his primary affections to 'humanity and country.' He adds, 'Every time that private considerations cause [one] to change this order, he is culpable' (3; V: 3). Although Rousseau rejects private considerations that would alter this order of priority—in either duties or affections—his principle permits deference to private considerations that don't alter it. One can speak up in one's own defense then, if no one else will be hurt by it. The order of duties and affections, as well as the distinction drawn between them, is also significant: justice comes before truth; love of humanity takes precedence over love of country. In brief, while Rousseau speaks in the Preface of having a country to serve, and of the zeal he has shown it, the Citizen of Geneva never speaks in the *Letter* about having a duty to country.

The book itself moves quickly beyond the specific concerns that occasioned it, and beyond Geneva. Indeed, the article Rousseau has read and reread 'with pleasure,' enables him, under d'Alembert's 'auspices,' to offer reflections 'to the public and my fellow citizens' in terms of an agenda of his own (14; V: 14). In turn, his reflections transform an arduous and even 'boring' duty, to the performance of which he is compelled, into another pleasure. After briefly disposing of d'Alembert's sortie in Voltaire's anti-religion campaign, virtually the whole rest of the

book qualifies as a 'digression' (6-7; V: 6-7). The same themes nevertheless persist in a new guise.

To establish Rousseau's focus in the *Letter* as a whole and to locate his place in the quarrel of the times, we can begin with the epigraph, the key he supplies for the interpretation of his works. The epigraph to the *Letter* is from Virgil's *Georgics*: *'Dii meliora piis, erroremque hostibus illum'* (v; V:1). On its face, Rousseau's appeal is made on behalf of his *concitoyens* in Geneva and against the enemy philosophes, who are infected with the madness of the age on matters religious and artistic. The epigraph seems simply to rehearse Rousseau's zealous stance against the Enlightenment.

Rousseau himself lends weight to this view in the *Dialogues* (1: 218; I: 941). In the 'Third Dialogue' the Frenchman compares Jean-Jacques' proceedings in the *Letter to d'Alembert* to d'Alembert's own in the pamphlet he published in response, specifically contrasting their epigraphs. In his gloss, Jean-Jacques' epigraph is 'a prayer to Heaven to protect good men from such a fatal error and to leave error to the enemies.'

While the Frenchman is at pains here to underline his 'attentive and reflective' reading of Jean-Jacques' works, his mistaken attribution of the epigraph to Virgil's *Aeneid* rather than the *Georgics*—despite the citation on the title page—suggests that he is in fact an artless or careless reader. The significance of any mistake of this kind, moreover, can be strongly inferred from the immediate context. For the contrast the Frenchman sees in the two men's works leads him to allege that Rousseau is an artless or careless writer; a perfect incarnation of Molière's Alceste. 'In everything I read ... I felt the sincerity, the rectitude of a soul that was lofty and proud but frank and without bile, which ... censures openly, praises without reticence, and has no feeling to hide.' By contrast, d'Alembert proceeds with 'affected circumspection'; he is 'subtle and crafty.' The Frenchman's conclusion is certainly in keeping with the expectations raised by Rousseau's Preface. Guided by surface appearances, the Frenchman may, however, come too quickly to judgment. His confidence in Rousseau's sincerity is not necessarily well-founded.

The Frenchman does not notice that where Virgil has '*Di*' or God, Rousseau has written '*Dii*' or gods, assuredly paganizing the quotation. Most importantly, the correct French translation for the Latin 'erroremque' is 'égarement,' not 'erreur,' which corresponds instead to the Latin 'erratum.' In the *Georgics*, Virgil is not describing an error, but a feverish madness afflicting horses as a consequence of a plague—as it happens, Voltaire's frequently used metaphor for superstition and religious fanaticism. Nor is this trope Voltaire's alone. In the *Letter*, (in

the context of discussing Voltaire's play *Le Fanatisme, ou Mahomet le prophète*), Rousseau says: 'Fanaticism is not an error, but a blind and stupid fury that reason can never confine' (31; V: 28). As an irrational passion, fanaticism cannot be combatted, as error is, by argument. Thus, while condoning Voltaire's motives in writing *Mahomet*, Rousseau declares the drama a poorly chosen vehicle to dislodge fanaticism; a point pertinent to all the philosophes. Once fanaticism exists, the weapons against it have 'nothing to do with reasoning or convincing.' Now in his works, Rousseau discusses two modes of persuading without convincing: one, in *The Social Contract*, with reference to Mohammed, and the other, in the *Letter*, in the context of discussing Voltaire's play about Mohammed. Together, these two modes add up to the two kinds of arms on which Machiavelli tells princes to rely—force and fraud (4: 154-157; III: 381-384).

The Frenchman's mistake leads us to a second reading of the epigraph that inverts the first: fellow philosophers should leave to their enemies the madness that makes them resemble them, and renounce their own apparent 'proselytizing fury' (11n; V: 11n).

Owing to their mutual zeal and to the fact that modern philosophy has itself become a sect or party and a 'trade,' Rousseau sometimes establishes a kind of moral equivalence between the philosophes and their persecutors.[3] The philosophes' stance is, however, an error. Unlike real fanatics, they are susceptible to argument. When speaking of the contemporary dispute, for instance, Rousseau says the priests' trade is to 'torment'; the philosophers' 'trade' is 'to convince' (11n; V: 11n).

In the epigraph to the work in which Rousseau notoriously consummates his break with the philosophes, he may subtly acknowledge his kinship with them. At the least, the ambiguity in Rousseau's epigraph reveals the complexity of his position. In the *Confessions*, in relation to the contemporary debate, Rousseau calls himself a 'born enemy of all party spirit.' Perhaps more than anything else, Rousseau's proceedings evince his resolve to view the quarrel of the times as a spectator; while working on an oblique maneuver to bring it to an end.

As if determined above all to preserve his own independence, Rousseau refuses to be claimed by either party, while appearing to be available to both of them. He exhibits the talents he approves of in coquettes. In Book V of *Emile* Rousseau invents a thought experiment in which a woman is put in between two secret lovers. 'You will be amazed,' he avers, 'at the skill with which she will put both off the scent and act so that each will laugh at the other' (384; IV: 733). According to

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[3]*Confessions*, 5: 366; I: 435-36; *Emile*, 312-313n; IV: 634-635.

Rousseau, the woman is well-aware that she would lose both suitors if she treated them the same. Since all lovers are insulted by favors that are not exclusive, she pretends to discriminate between them. '[T]he one she flatters believes it is out of tenderness [e.g. Geneva], and the one she maltreats believes that it is out of spite [e.g. the philosophes]. Thus each is content with his share and always believes she is concerned with him, while actually she is concerned with herself alone' (384; IV: 733). Anyone—including philosopher-legislators—whose independence is threatened by a lack of political authority, will find the feminine mode of rule useful.

In his brief treatment of religion, Rousseau explores this political problem by juxtaposing the theoretical strengths of reason to its practical weakness. The difficulty is not discovering the truth, but making it effectual. Rousseau points especially to the limits set on reason not by the frailty of the mind, but by the power of the passions and the interests of sects—i.e., he emphasizes the political facts that d'Alembert and the philosophes thoroughly misunderstand or underestimate (10; V: 10).

Rousseau's fundamental religious principle is that no one has the right to inspect or to make inferences about the faith of another. Tolerance is a corollary of the natural right each human being has to govern himself (11n; V: 11n). As with Locke, the sanctity of the individual conscience is entailed by the absolute political freedom or self-ownership of men. Rousseau puts this principle forward as a 'practical truth,' i.e., a political truth, or principle of justice. If it were applied, it would end the quarrel of the times between 'priests and philosophers.' Rousseau expresses doubt, however, about whether the parties would ever come to a truce on their own.

Chiding d'Alembert like a friend, Rousseau urges him for his own sake not to behave like a 'fierce priest' (10; V: 10). But, as if to point to the real source of the problem, he also shows that the difference between the most liberal Genevan minister and the fiercest priest is negligible: 'the zeal of the pastor' to censure errors of faith belongs to ecclesiastics as such (17n; V: 16n). The solution to the quarrel of the times can only be the imposition of a principle of tolerance the regime is prepared to enforce by force. Less than the 'Creed of the Savoyard Vicar,' Rousseau's comments prefigure *The Social Contract*; a liberal regime where religion is left as a private matter by law sustained by force.

In putting an effectual end to predatory clerics, a social contract society would also end the zealotry of the philosophes. Rousseau strongly implies that philosophers have more to gain than clerics from this change. The secular principle of tolerance will, however, (and did) drive the

philosophes as a party or sect, so to speak, out of business, by removing their *casus belli.*

Neither Rousseau's friends nor his enemies respect the secrets of consciences, which, for his part, he takes to be a religious duty (14; V: 13). Since the duty to respect others' secrets derives from the right to keep one's own, however, justice (at least to oneself) can still be served. Adhering to a distinction between philosophers and authors that he treats as essential (11; V: 11), Rousseau embraces a principle of self-censorship that leads to the adoption of a public persona; exempting him from the need to be candid in print. Rousseau may despise the 'trade' of acting, but he exhibits the actor's talents (79; V: 72-73). Herein, he avails himself of a natural tendency to identify the author with the character he resembles. The uncandid Rousseau impersonates the man whose middle name is candor. Alceste says of himself, 'To be frank and sincere is my greatest gift.'[4]

Rousseau follows out this theme in his consideration of Molière, taking it upon himself to rewrite what he calls the masterwork of French comedy. His reform of *The Misanthrope* re-enacts his quarrel with the philosophes, but seems to leave men of the church alone. Rousseau draws Alceste more like the man he presents himself to be and 'the philosopher' Philinte, more like d'Alembert, Diderot, and Voltaire. In Rousseau's new *Misanthrope*, one would laugh at the philosophes rather than at Rousseau; if, that is, they are recognized for who they are (26; V: 24).

According to Rousseau, in *The Misanthrope*, Molière ridicules the virtuous man. Alceste's dominant feature is 'a violent hatred of vice, born from an ardent love of virtue and soured by the continual spectacle of men's viciousness' (39; V: 36 ; c.f. 7, V: 7). That Rousseau allows Alceste to represent the man of virtue—underlining his harshness, zealotry, and, above all, righteous indignation—gives his argument a double edge. Alceste is a fanatic.[5] With this character Rousseau points to what is problematic in the ancient virtue he so often defends. At the same time, he has a way to put before the public both forms of the modern fanaticism, which has retained the severity of ancient virtue without the virtue itself. It would be inaccurate then to say that men of the church are not in his play, or that one can see the philosophes only in the character Philinte. Rousseau illustrates the general problem when he discusses the virtuous man's hostility to comedy and, thus, to comic poets: 'the good

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[4]Molière*The Misanthrope*, trans. Bernard D.N. Grebanier (Woodbury, New York: Barron's, 1959), III: vii.

[5]See Rousseau's discussion of fanaticism in *Émile* (312n; IV: 634n).

do not make evil men objects of derision, but crush them with their contempt, and nothing is less funny or laughable than virtue's indignation' (26; V: 26-27). Nothing, that is, until Molière's *Misanthrope*.

Rousseau repeatedly emphasizes the primacy of indignation to the misanthrope. Alceste's 'intrepid and vigorously punctuated censure' reveals his true 'hard and unbending' character. When he wants to speak ill of someone, he says it 'to his face' (44; V: 41). So essential is this outspoken and uncompromising moralizing to the character, that Rousseau takes Molière to task for any qualification whatever of Alceste's candor and bluntness. At the slightest adulteration of the truth, 'where is the sufficient reason for stopping before one becomes as false as a courtier?' (43; V: 40)

Alceste's righteous indignation and censoriousness make him the enemy of philosophers and poets. In the matter of Oronte's sonnet, the force of Alceste's character insists that he say bluntly, 'Your sonnet is worthless; throw it in the fire' (43; V: 40). If he were in a position of authority himself, Alceste would make an excellent censor. Rousseau puts him here on the side of the bookburners. Rousseau had admitted earlier that such a person loves to spy out the hidden motives of others' actions with a secret pleasure at finding corruption in their hearts (40; V:37). He has something in common then with the 'fierce priests' who draw inferences about philosophers' faith from their published writings or who devise tests of faith to torment them; and also with their philosophic imitators. With a twist that is especially pertinent to the philosophes, moreover, this fanatic's zeal for censure makes him liable to persecution and censorship himself.

According to Rousseau the misanthrope is prepared for the effects of his censure on others. 'He knows men.' Would Alceste be astonished then at Oronte's retaliation, 'as if it were the first time in his life that he had been sincere, or the first time that his sincerity had made an enemy?' (41; V: 3) But Rousseau also makes clear, 'If he had not foreseen the harm that his frankness would do him, it would be a folly and not a virtue' (40; V: 37).

But that is precisely the point. When the very thing Alceste predicts actually does happen and he loses his case, he is taken completely by surprise. It's not that he cannot turn his defeat into additional grist for his mill; what is astonishing is that he—the only non-Tartuffe in a world full of them—expected to win. The man who claims to be thoroughly disgusted with man's venality and hypocrisy is utterly shocked when they turn out to be what he says. Alceste's surprise is, of course, the punchline of the comedy; *the* thing that makes him ridiculous, and the crux of Molière's characterization.

The strong echoes in Rousseau's description of Alceste's

situation of Rousseau's own make this aspect of the character very significant. Is it reasonable that Rousseau lacks foresight about the effects of his writings that he finds ridiculous and 'a folly' in Molière's Alceste?

Assuming the ideal misanthrope would anticipate those effects, however, we must then wonder whether the good man is obliged to invite them. Under the circumstances—given the disastrous effects of candor—is not candor itself a folly? Had Socrates only been armed with the weapons in Alceste's arsenal, he would not have been long for Athens.

Rousseau seems to take it on himself to teach this very lesson. Rather than drawing from the Gospel, which tells men to be wily as serpents and guileless as doves, Rousseau quotes Juvenal's *Satires*, once again paganizing his quotation—whether to say one good book is as good as another or to modify the admonition: 'Censure is indulgent to crows, and hard on pigeons' (35, V: 32).

If the implicit criticisms that Rousseau makes of Alceste do not apply to himself, they apply very well, in ways that they are unaware, to the philosophes; their zeal for their cause blinds them to their interest, with the battle over 'Geneva' being an excellent case in point (42; V: 38-39). On the point of intrepid candor and surprise at its effects, d'Alembert and Alceste are the dull pigeons; Molière and Rousseau, the clever crows.

Further, Rousseau indirectly answers the question about the folly of frankness by condoning, as Alceste would never have done, Molière's practices as an author. By Alceste's lights, Molière is an imposter, but his *tartufferie* protects him from Alceste's fate. Rousseau says that one cannot make the slightest alteration of truth and still be Alceste. Yet he goes on to justify Molière's intentional dilution, even degradation, of his character's attributes in order to keep him laughable—not because it is in the interest of the character to do so, but because it is in the interest of Molière (45; V: 41-42). It is in the author's interest because 'many have thought that he wanted to depict himself.' Behind the actor Molière, who actually played Alceste on the stage, people saw a real Alceste.

Unlike d'Alembert, Molière defuses righteous anger while insinuating subversive ideas. By making the spectators laugh, he forces 'by an invincible charm, even the wise to lend themselves to jests which ought to call forth their indignation' (35; V: 32). Thus, among other things, he circumvents the censors. For all these reasons, Rousseau holds him up as a model.

According to Rousseau, Molière put his own maxims in Alceste's mouth. Rousseau, for his part, puts Alceste's maxims in his own. Rousseau and Molière both don the mask of Alceste, but for different reasons. The character Alceste enables Molière to attack

established institutions, so to speak, from within (36,38; V: 33, 35). For Rousseau, the mask of Alceste obscures his status as an outsider; his detachment from society and from the quarrel of the times. For all its problems, 'zeal' is a sign of attachment. Rousseau likens Alceste's indignation to a father's anger at his own children (37; V: 34). Rousseau actually does what Alceste only threatens, ad infinitum, to do. In or out of Paris, he is a solitary. [6]

Ideally, *The Misanthrope* should, Rousseau says, depict the contrast between one who cares only for himself and not at all for public problems and one who cares only for public problems and not at all for himself. Rousseau's own life and writings, as well as Molière's, which are a kind of image of them, suggest an alternative. Neither writer is immune to the corruptions of the world around him and neither is careless of his own preservation. Both men write about corruption without re-animating the righteous indignation that is hurtful to the people as much as to philosophers and poets; breaking thereby the cycle of pious cruelty—torments, persecutions, and retaliation in kind—that is characteristic of virtue in both its robust and decayed forms. When Rousseau—zealous polemicist against the theater—nevertheless states in the *Confessions* that a spirit of 'gentleness' suffuses his writing in the *Letter*, he may have had this point in mind (5: 420, 415; I: 502, 495).

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[6]Molière, V: iv.