

Rousseau Rousseau
and et la
Criticism Critique

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Rousseau's Critique Of Catharsis

In 1757, the volume of Diderot's *Encyclopedie* appeared that contained the article on Geneva. This article, written by d'Alembert, suggested that Geneva would benefit if it overturned its Calvinist ban on theater and established a playhouse. Rousseau, the celebrated expatriate citizen of Geneva, vehemently objected to the prospect of the introduction of an institution of the corrupt culture of Paris into what he imagined as a preserve of cultural purity. Rousseau's response, in his *Letter to d'Alembert*, is a broad statement of his views on the relation between a society's culture and its political life. Within this context, however, we can find a more focused discussion of the art of theater. In this paper I will take up Rousseau's critique of a standard theory of theater, the theory of catharsis.

Rousseau criticizes catharsis in order to deny the possibility that, in a city like Geneva, theater might have the good effect of reinforcing citizens' desirable moral qualities. This possibility follows from Rousseau's premise that theater is a form of entertainment. Entertainments are meant to give pleasure; hence the theater will present plays which are pleasing to its audience--who would otherwise pay it no attention. But theater is also, of course, mimetic: it reflects back to its audience an image of themselves. These two factors, Rousseau argues, jointly determine the kind of images that will succeed on stage. "The stage is, in general, a painting of the human passions, the original of which is in every heart. But if the painter neglected to flatter these passions, the spectators would soon be repelled and would not want to see themselves in a light which made them despise themselves."¹ It follows that the image of itself the audience sees in plays will be calculated to please; no playwright, Rousseau holds, will insult the audience. In writing to please their audience authors quite naturally incorporate the attitudes of the public into their own works. Thus, for Rousseau, plays simply reflect what people already think--they do not confront the audience with an alien moral view. Theater cannot divert fundamental cultural attitudes; at most it can reinforce and embellish the attitudes that already exist. Rousseau concludes, therefore, "that the general effect of the theater

¹ 'Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre', in *Politics and the Arts*, trans. Allan Bloom (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), p.18; henceforth 'Letter.'

is to strengthen the national character."²

Now if the national character is bad, it is obvious that theater would do nothing to make it better, but would only help to make it worse. But what if the national character is good? Would it not then follow that theater could improve it further? This possibility presents a problem to Rousseau: since the Genevan way of life is indeed good, admitting theater into the city could not hurt, and might even help maintain the standard of culture. Thus he must supplement his account, to undercut the putatively positive effects for theater his argument allows. Rousseau introduces his critique of catharsis at just this point--in order to assert that theater is a dangerous stimulus of the passions. He argues that in strengthening the national character, theater "give[s] a new energy to all the passions."³ But this is not a desirable thing, even if the national character is good. "It would remain to be seen if the passions did not degenerate into vices from being too much excited. I know that the poetic theater claims to do exactly the opposite and to purge the passions in exciting them. But I have difficulty understanding this rule. Is it possible that in order to become temperate and prudent we must begin by being intemperate and mad?"⁴

Two underlying notions ground Rousseau's disbelief in catharsis. First, as we have seen, he holds that plays do not lead, but follow the emotional commitments of the audience--some kind of emotional appeal is necessary to a play's success. We must feel attracted to at least one of the characters, "otherwise we would have no contact at all with the play."⁵ According to Rousseau, its proponents

² *Letter*, p. 20. Note that it is only when looked at from one perspective that theater has this effect--the perspective that attends to the fictional content of the presented plays. Rousseau also considers another perspective, which attends to theater as an institutional presence in a community. From this latter perspective the effect of theater is reversed: theater diverts people from their ordinary pursuits, hence tends to weaken the national character. Rousseau distinguishes the two perspectives in *Letter*, p. 57.

³ *Letter*, p. 20.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 21.

argue that catharsis works by generating emotions opposed to the dangerous passions we see in the characters.⁶ But since playwrights can only follow their audiences, they make characters attractive to the audience by investing them with qualities the audience already likes.

Thus, on the one hand, if we dislike a character, it follows that we would tend not to see its emotions as reflecting our own. That character's passion is hardly purged from us; we already hold it at a distance. On the other hand, if we like a character, it follows that we are quite happy to share in its emotions; whatever emotion we feel with respect to the character is again hardly purged, but rather re-inforced. In sum, because it mirrors its audience, "the theater purges the passions that one does not have and foments those that one does."⁷

Second, Rousseau believes that the proponents of catharsis hold a mistaken view of human psychology: they underestimate the contagiousness of emotional response. People enjoy satisfying their own emotional demands--to an extent that makes it impossible to contain emotionality once it has been provoked. Rousseau shows a Platonic fear of the emotions: in the psycho-political analogy of the *Republic* the emotions are an unruly mob threatening to usurp reason and dominate the psyche. The emotions, on this view, are inherently dangerous. Even if theater stimulates emotions directed towards morally acceptable ends, the unavoidable concomitant is a general susceptibility to emotionality. "Do we not know that all the passions are sisters and that one alone suffices for arousing a thousand, and that to combat one by the other is only the way to make the heart more sensitive to them all?"⁸ By offering an outlet for our emotions, theater only strengthens our desire for emotional outlet.

Now we should note that this is a curious position for Rousseau to take. His feminizing of the passions as sisters is an obvious corollary to the ancient association of women with emotions and men with rationality Rousseau generally embraces. Nonetheless, as A.O. Hirschman shows, the standard view in Rousseau's own time was that one passion could be used to control another: "the idea of engineering social progress by cleverly setting up one passion to fight

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 20.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 22.

⁸ *ibid.* p. 21.

another became a fairly common intellectual pastime in the course of the eighteenth century."⁹ Indeed, Rousseau understands catharsis to work by just this psychological mechanism of setting one passion against another. But, as we have just seen, he rejects its applicability within the theater--and as a general account of human psychology.

For Rousseau, then, theater does not purge the passions. Far from a cathartic effect, whereby the passions are calmed before they "degenerate into vices," theater intensifies the hold of the passions on the audience. The clearest example of the failure of catharsis for Rousseau occurs with what he calls the "love interest." Rousseau uses an anecdote from Plutarch to allegorize the effect he has in mind.

When the patrician Manilius was driven from the senate of Rome for having kissed his wife in the presence of his daughter, considering this action only in itself, what had he done that was reprehensible? Nothing, unquestionably; the kiss even gave expression to a laudable sentiment. But the chaste flames of the mother could inspire impure ones in the daughter. Hence, an example for corruption could be taken from a very decent action. This is the effect of the theater's permissible loves.¹⁰

Plays might well, as theater's defenders suggest, depict permissible loves, involving virtuous lovers who are in control of their passions. But, the allegory warns, there is no assurance that the audience will not dissociate the virtue from the passion, and be influenced only by the latter.

Rousseau's views on education are permeated by the belief in the power of examples to influence attitudes. That theater sets bad examples is a recurring charge in attacks on theater from Plato on.¹¹ Rousseau's point is that plays furnish their audiences with two kinds of examples--some which are explicit and others which are implicit.

⁹ *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton: U.P., 1977), p. 26. I owe this reference to Charles Larmore.

¹⁰ *Letter*, p. 52.

¹¹ See Jonas Barish, *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: Univ. Calif. Press, 1981) and M. Bassas, *The Stage Controversy in France from Corneille to Rousseau* (New York: Institute of French Studies, 1933).

"The love that is played in the theater is made legitimate; its end is decent; often it is sacrificed to duty and virtue; and, as soon as it is guilty, it is punished."¹² That is, the explicit lesson of a play might be morally unassailable. But beneath the explicit level--perhaps opposed to it--the play has an implicit content as well. I say content instead of lesson, because at the implicit level the content cannot easily be formulated into a specific moral. Instead, implicit in a play is a general picture of the world, which takes for granted the irresistibility of certain influences on our behavior--sexual desire, for instance. Thus, plays dispose "the soul to feelings which are too tender and which are later satisfied at the expense of virtue...[Such feelings] do not precisely cause love, but they prepare the way for its being experienced. They do not choose the person who ought to be loved, but they force us to make this choice."¹³

Why does Rousseau fear the implicit content of plays? Clearly he believes that the effect of the implicit content of a play is longer lasting than the effect of the explicit content. "If the idea of innocence embellishes for a few moments the sentiment that it accompanies, the circumstances are soon effaced from the memory, while the impression of such a sweet passion remains engraved in the depths of the heart."¹⁴ At the explicit level, the playwright guides the audience's response to the appeal of the passions by providing a lesson about how the passions ought to be controlled. Rousseau assumes that the guidance is addressed to the spectator's reason. "But is it not ridiculous to pretend that the motions of the heart can be governed, after the event, according to the precepts of reason?"¹⁵ Setting the heart in motion is the effect of the implicit content; Rousseau's concern is that this effect will continue autonomously. If we were capable ourselves of providing the rational governance of the passions we feel, their persistence after we leave the theater would not be a problem. But in most of us reason is not strong enough. While the passions linger, the playwright's guidance of our response to them does not: it may work during the performance, but it dissipates once

¹² *Letter*, p. 51.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 51.

the performance is over. Given the strength of the passions in the audience, the implicit content of a play will inevitably subvert the play's explicit lesson.

Thus, Manilius was punished for the *implicit* example he set for his daughter, whereby the laudable sentiment of love might awaken a sensuality which he would not always be present to control. Rousseau argues not only that at the explicit level plays are unable to effect catharsis, at the implicit level they actually stimulate the passions the audience should struggle to keep in check. But Rousseau intuits a more profound moral flaw in theater, rooted not in what is presented but in the very conditions of theatrical presentation. Rousseau senses the structure of theatrical perception might have a cathartic effect--not of dangerous passions, but of the spectator's sense of moral responsibility.

Enlightenment defenders of theater had argued that plays can inculcate morality by making spectators admire virtuous actions and characters.¹⁶ Rousseau responds that in this respect theater is, at best, superfluous. "The source of the concern which attaches us to what is decent and which inspires us with aversion for evil *is in us* and not in the plays. There is no art for producing this concern, but only for taking advantage of it."¹⁷ That is, no play can *make* virtue appealing to its audience. People have an inborn love of the "morally beautiful" which playwrights exploit; if people lack this sense no play can instill it in them.¹⁸ The relevant question, however, is not whether we merely admire the moral beauty of certain actions--it is whether we act morally. For Rousseau it is not enough merely to like the hero; "what is important is to act consistently with one's principles and to imitate the people whom one esteems"¹⁹ (esteems for the right reason, of course--Rousseau has in mind the case of a spectator's response to a *virtuous* hero). But there is a gap between esteem and imitation, forced open by self-interest.

The heart of man is always right concerning that which has no

¹⁶ See Barish, p. 251.

¹⁷ *Letter*, p. 23; my emphasis.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, n.1.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 24.

personal relation to himself. In the quarrels at which we are purely spectators, we immediately take the side of justice, and there is no act of viciousness which does not give us a lively sentiment of indignation so long as we receive no profit from it. But when our interest is involved, our sentiments are soon corrupted. And it is only then that we prefer the evil which is useful to us to the good that nature makes us love.²⁰

Theater does nothing to close this gap; indeed, its structure makes theater exacerbate the situation. For in theater the audience can *only* be pure spectators. A feature of theatrical performances is that the spectators take no profit from the outcome of a play; their interests are not at stake. Indeed the extent of the audience's imaginative involvement in a play may be dependent on the fact of disinterestedness: "the heart is more readily touched by feigned ills than real ones" because our emotions "are pure and without mixture of anxiety for ourselves."²¹ We must speak, then, of another gap, between the imaginary world of the play and the real world of the audience. This gap might afford the spectators the emotional safety needed to respond to the moral dilemmas of the characters. It is easy--too easy--to be moved by grand moral sentiments in the theater: nothing of our own is at stake, hence no personal motive interferes with our admiration of what is right.

Thus, within the theater, the gap opened up between the world of the play and the real world aligns with the gap between esteem and imitation. We might esteem a character in a play--but this does not guarantee an improvement in our actions. The question is whether our esteem for him during the performance leads us to imitate him in our world. But in our world--the arena for our actions--we are enmeshed in the web of our interests. The force of our interests counteracts the force of the esteem we feel for the hero; the desire to imitate the hero does not survive the lowering of the curtain and the raising of the lights. The fragility of this desire is a necessary consequence of its genesis: at its birth it is sheltered from the corrosive effect of interest because it is born in the imaginary realm of the stage.

Rousseau, then, is concerned that theater inculcates a purely aesthetic relation to morality. By nature we take pleasure in seeing

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 25.

moral actions done; theater gives us that pleasure without demanding that we ourselves do anything. In the theater, morality becomes an object of pleasurable contemplation. Reduced to its beauty, morality is stripped of the component of *praxis* that makes it genuine.

In giving our tears to these fictions, [we feel] we have satisfied all the rights of humanity without having to give anything more of ourselves; whereas unfortunate people in person would require attention from us, relief, consolation, and work, which would involve us in their pains and would require at least the sacrifice of our indulgence, from all of which we are quite content to be exempt.²²

In David Marshall's words, "Theater is dangerous for Rousseau because it teaches people how to avoid sympathy... by substituting a simulacrum of sympathy for actual human interaction."²³ As Benjamin Barber observes, "Rousseau would have found nothing surprising in Broadway audiences who, after applauding the sentiments of black plays...rush anxiously from the theater into waiting taxis, buses and limousines that will protect them from and take them out of an inner city peopled with real-life equivalents of the struggling characters they have just finished cheering."²⁴

Rousseau's concern, then, is that theater can become a substitute for morality: we feel we have acted morally because we have understood and approved of the moral of a play. But, of course, in the theater we precisely avoid the difficulties that accompany moral action--the gritty reality of doing good. We need not confront the competing claims of morality and our own interests. Nor do we become personally involved with those we help; characters in a play do not confront us with their needs.

The very structure of theater thus disqualifies it from teaching morality, for Rousseau. Actual moral situations are complicated; morality in the theater is deceptively simple. The structure of theatrical

²² *ibid.*, p. 25.

²³ *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau, and Mary Shelley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 148.

²⁴ 'Rousseau and Brecht: Political Virtue and the Tragic Imagination', in *The Artist and Political Vision*, ed. B. Barber and M. McGrath (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1982), p. 9.

performance in principle insulates the audience from the most important dilemma of actual moral life--the dilemma between our desires to act virtuously and to serve our own private interests. This dilemma is exactly what the audience needs most to learn how to resolve. But, Rousseau argues, theater enables men to feel as if they have resolved it without in fact acting virtuously: while at the theater "the sterile interest [spectators] take in virtue serves only to satisfy [their] vanity without obliging [them] to practice it."²⁵ As Amal Banerjee puts it, theater enables spectators to "perform their moral duties on a purely imaginary plane."²⁶ Thus, Rousseau sarcastically asks whether the aesthetic relation we have to morality in the theater obviates the imperative we feel to act morally in the world:

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 practice it himself? He has no role to play; he is no actor.²⁷

That is, people emerge from the theater with the feeling that their responsibilities have been fulfilled; nothing remains for them to do.

Rousseau concludes, then, that theater might grant a kind of tacit permission to act contrary to virtue. Moral aesthetics allows for "moral catharsis": the theater purges its spectators not of their passions, but of their sense of responsibility. For, the vicious man's experience in the theater models his relation to morality: he takes pleasure in virtuous actions without having to perform any. "What then does he go to see at the theater? Precisely what he wants to find everywhere: lessons of virtue for the public, from which he excepts himself, and people sacrificing everything to their duty while nothing

²⁵ *Letter*, p. 57.

²⁶ 'Rousseau's Concept of Theatre', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, v. 17, n. 2 (Spring, 1977), pp. 171-77, p. 173.

²⁷ *Letter*, p. 25.

is exacted from him."²⁸ The phenomenon of "moral catharsis" can relieve the vicious man of any residual moral feeling that might serve as a brake on his moral free-riding; the emotional power of theater might allow him to deceive himself about his failure to act virtuously.

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²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 24.