Rousseau on Arts and Politics

Autour de la Lettre à d'Alembert

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Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles:* A Philosophical Aberration or a Moral Imperative?

To modern readers, Rousseau's *Lettre à d'Alemberi sur les spectacles* could seem perplexing. One would argue that in the *Lettre*, Rousseau's condemnation of the theater and its perceived evils was a philosophical aberration of sorts. Indeed, his negative reaction to d'Alembert's call for the establishment of a theater in Geneva would seem to contradict the ideals of Rousseau the artist. After all, Rousseau had himself written plays, and for him to denounce the very forum for the performance of those plays may appear to be illogical. Jean Starobinski describes this apparent anomaly in Rousseau's thought in reference to *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, explaining how, after lauding culture and the progress of the age of Enlightenment, Rousseau does an about-face ('volte-face') and that '[Il] nous met en présence de la discordance de l'être et du paraître.'[1] In other words, having led the reader to believe that he will write a *défense et illustration des sciences et des arts*, Rousseau begins a lengthy diatribe against both, warning the reader of the potential corruptive qualities of scientific and artistic progress to humankind and society. Starobinski writes: 'Les bienfaits des lumières se trouvent compensés, et presque annulés par les vices innombrables qui découlent du mensonge de l'apparence. Un élan d'éloquence avait décrit la montée triomphale des arts et des sciences; un second coup d'éloquence nous entraîne maintenant en sens inverse, et nous montre toute l'étendue de la 'corruption des mœurs'. L'esprit humain triomphe, mais l'homme s'est perdu. Le contraste est violent, car ce qui est en jeu n'est pas seulement la notion abstraite de l'être et du paraître, mais la destinée des hommes, qui se divise entre l'innocence reniée et la perdition désormais certaine: le paraître et le mal ne font qu'un'.[2]

It is precisely this dichotomy between 'reality' and 'appearance' that Rousseau would address later in his *Lettre à d'Alembert.* We see that Rousseau had formulated his basic ideas in the *Lettre* well before it

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[1]Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La transparence et l'obstacle, suivi de sept essais sur Rousseau,* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1971), 13.

[2]Starobinski, 14.

had appeared. This apparent contradiction in thought is what I will address in this article.

Much speculation has surrounded the publication of the *Lettre*. We know that, at the time, Rousseau's relations with the *Encyclopédistes* (Diderot, Voltaire) were strained because of the stance taken earlier against science and art. His friendships with Grimm and Mme d'Epinay were no healthier. One would be tempted to proffer Rousseau's combative mental state as a cause for his reaction to d'Alembert's article, 'Genève.' Certainly, at the time of the publication of the *Lettre* in 1758, Rousseau had not yet developed his universal conspiracy theory that he would describe in *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, written in the last years of his life, but it is true that he had already begun to quarrel with his contemporaries.

Such a conclusion, although tempting, is, of course, inadequate to explain why Rousseau would so adamantly oppose the foundation of a theater in Geneva. It does not seem plausible that Rousseau would knowingly protest against a forum for artistic performance solely for the sake of raising the ire of the *Encyclopédistes*, especially if he knew that he would open himself to charges of hypocrisy as a playwright himself. What I would like to propose is that, not only was the *Lettre à d'Alembert* far from being a divergence in Rousseau's philosophy, but that, on the contrary, it represented a remarkable consistency in Rousseau's moralistic thinking. In addition, I would argue that, in spite of the fact that Rousseau had himself been a playwright, his opposition to a theater in Geneva was not as contradictory as one might suppose, for Rousseau the moralist superceded Rousseau the artist in the vast majority of his work.

As we know, Rousseau's moral objection to the theater did not represent a precedent. To cite one of the more famous examples of opposition to the theater, one could return to the Tenth Book of Plato's *Republic* to find the same objection. In *The Republic*, one is told that playwrights have a moral obligation to the state, and that the only acceptable plays are those that praise the virtues of gods and famous men: 'Homer is the best of poets and first of tragedians. But you will know that the only poetry that should be allowed in a state is hymns to the gods and paens in praise of good men.'[3] Rousseau, likewise, believed that virtue was central to government and society. We see this expressed directly in *Du contrat social* and *Emile*, both of which he composed at roughly the same period in which he was writing the *Lettre à d'Alembert*. In *Du contrat social*, Rousseau writes that morality and government are

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[3]Plato, *The Republic*, trans. H.D.P. Lee (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1955), 384; (606a-b).

inseparable: 'Le Gouvernement est en petit ce que le corps politique qui le renferme est en grand. C'est une personne morale....'(III: 398) Citing his contemporary, Montesquieu, Rousseau states, 'Voilà pourquoi un Auteur célèbre [Montesquieu] a donné la vertu pour principe à la République; car toutes ces conditions ne sauroient subsister sans la vertu' (III: 405). In *Emile*, Rousseau reiterates this belief in the inseparability of virtue from society, writing, 'Il faut étudier la société par les hommes, et les hommes par la société: ceux qui voudront traiter séparément la politique et la morale, n'entendront jamais rien à aucune des deux.'(IV: 524) From the very beginning, Rousseau had taken a stance against the performing arts—a stance from which he would not waver during his lifetime.

In the work that would establish him in the world of letters, *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, Rousseau had responded to the question posed by the Academy of Dijon about whether or not art and science had contributed to the purification of morals. It is interesting to note Rousseau's addendum to the question posed by the Academy. Rousseau added to the query the thought that art and science had actually served to *corrupt* humankind—not a popular position to take during the Enlightenment. In that treatise, Rousseau makes clear his belief that art and science have corrupted an otherwise innocent populace—an early paradigm of the 'noble savage' theory that he would develop later. In his *Discours*, Rousseau set a tone that would mark his writings throughout his lifetime, leading up to the *Lettre à d'Alembert.* In response to the Academy's question, Rousseau wrote: 'Avant que l'Art eut façonné nos maniéres et appris à nos passions à parler un langage apprêté, nos mœurs étoient rustiques, mais naturelles...nos ames se sont corrompuës à mesure que nos Sciences et nos Arts se sont avancés à la perfection' (III: 8-9).

A time-honored argument in favor of the theater is that it was virtuous in helping to expose the foibles of humankind. In effect, by viewing the horrors of a tragedy played out on the stage or by seeing characters in comedic situations wherein they are mocked, the spectator is supposed to leave with a better notion of morality, or so states the argument. In Rousseau's time, for example, it was argued that Molière inspired morality by providing a negative example to spectators: One would not wish to emulate Tartuffe, for example, after viewing his religious hypocrisy portrayed on stage. Plato had refuted this argument long before Rousseau had ever formed his own opinions. Plato had argued that tragedy and comedy had no such cleansing effect, because spectators were not likely to identify the faults committed on the stage as ones that they should avoid. On the contrary, plays inspired feelings that should be repressed in an ideal state. Plato expressed this as such: 'If you

consider that the poet gratifies and indulges the natural instinct for tears and the desire to give full vent to our sorrows, both of which we restrain in our private misfortunes. Our better nature, being without adequate moral or intellectual training, relaxes its control, on the grounds that it is someone else's sufferings it is watching.... For very few people are capable of realizing that our feelings for other people must influence ourselves, and that if we let ourselves feel excessively for the misfortunes of others it will be difficult to restrain our feelings in our own'. [4]

The very fact that the theater inspired *any* kind of passion was, believed Plato, dangerous to the maintenance of a peaceful society. Such passions should be quashed for the maintenance of order in the state, according to Plato. Rousseau argues precisely the same in his *Lettre*. That is, he did not believe that the morality of the people would be corrected by the negative example given in tragedy or comedy. On the contrary, Rousseau believed that stage representations ('spectacles') inspired only the *semblance* of sympathy and identification between the audience and the actors on stage, that these representations were only imitations of reality, and that spectators felt that they had fulfilled their moral responsibilities simply by having seen immoral acts portrayed by actors on the stage. Such was a dangerous notion, according to Rousseau, who writes in the *Lettre*: 'En donnant des pleurs à ces fictions, nous avons satisfait à tous les droits de l'humanité, sans avoir plus rien à mettre du nôtre... Au fond, quand un homme est allé admirer de belles actions dans des fables et pleurer des malheurs imaginaires, qu'a-t-on encore à exiger de lui? N'est-il pas content de lui-même?... Ne s'est-il pas acquitté de tout ce qu'il doit à la vertu par l'hommage qu'il vient de lui rendre? Que voudroit-on qu'il fît de plus?... il n'a point de rôle à jouer: il n'est pas comédien'. (V: 23)

On the subject of comedy, Plato prefigured Rousseau also when he maintained that comedy was equally as pernicious as tragedy, causing spectators to behave like "buffoons" in everyday life: 'The same argument applies to laughter. For the effect is similar when you enjoy on the stage—or even in ordinary life—jokes that you would be ashamed to make yourself, instead of detesting their vulgarity. You are giving reign to your comic instinct, which your reason has restrained for fear you may seem to be playing the fool, and bad taste in theatre may insensibly lead you into becoming a buffoon at home'.[5]

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[4]Plato, 383-84 (606a).

[5]Plato, 384 (606c).

In effect, Plato had argued precisely what Rousseau does in the *Lettre*—that is, that the spectator's true identity is lost by watching a theatrical performance and that he or she becomes an 'actor' in everyday life, not realizing his or her true nature. David Marshall has remarked the same idea of 'self-annihilation,' 'self-forgetting,' and 'self-alienation' against which Rousseau warns in his *Lettre*.[6] Rousseau states that if Genevans were to attend the theater, they would forget their true selves. He believed that tragedy portrayed characteristics that were 'above' the nature of the average person and that comedy made a mockery of virtues held sacred by the common people. Writing of the supposed virtues espoused by tragedy and comedy, Rousseau writes in the *Lettre* that the playwright is responsible for instilling no such virtue in the people. In speaking of virtues, he states, 'Dans le comique, il [le dramaturge] les [vertus] diminue et les met au-dessous du peuple; dans le tragique, il les étend pour les rendre héroïques, et les met au-dessus de l'humanité' (V: 25). 'Spectacles,' according to Rousseau, served to *alienate* the populace from its true nature: 'Plus j'y réfléchis, et plus je trouve que tout ce qu'on met en représentation au Théâtre, on ne l'approche pas de nous, on l'en éloigne' (V: 24).

Here, Rousseau's ideology prefigures that of Brecht's idea of 'verfremdung,' ('estrangement,' or, 'alienation'). Brecht believed that the audience should be reminded at all times that it was watching a fictional, theatrical representation. The result would be a distancing of the spectator from the actors and actions viewed on stage. There would thus be no danger of the spectator identifying him or herself too closely with the actors or actions on the stage. Describing the differences between the Chinese and European theater, Brecht wrote of the Chinese actor's 'self observation' during the performance, which was designed to hinder any identity being formed between the actor and the spectator: 'The performer's self-observation, an artful and artistic act of self-alienation, stopped the spectator from losing himself in the character completely, i. e. to the point of giving up his own identity, and lent a splendid remoteness to the events. Yet the spectator's empathy was not entirely rejected. The audience identifies itself with the actor as being an observer, and accordingly develops his attitude of observing or looking on'.[7]

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[6]David Marshall, *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau, and Mary Shelley*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 145.

[7]Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed., trans. John Willet (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 92-93.

In Brecht's opinion, by seeing the actor in the role of spectator, the spectator would not confuse the actor with a real human being and would thus avoid any potential identification of the self with the actor and the actions performed on the stage.

Rousseau was concerned first and foremost with the virtue of the populace, and he sincerely believed it to be in danger of corruption if a theater were to be founded in Geneva. Rousseau's idea had other precedents as well. His compatriot, Montaigne, had expressed similar feelings about *les spectacles*, and Rousseau himself quotes Montaigne in his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, as stating, 'J'ayme à contester et à discourir, mais c'est avec peu d'hommes et pour moy. Car de servir de spectacle aux grands et faire à l'envy parade de son esprit et de son caquet, je trouve que c'est un mestier tres-messeant, à un homme d'honneur.'[8]

I would maintain that Rousseau was a moralist philosopher, more concerned with the creation of a moral utopia than with the supposed advantages of art. Perhaps his major influence was that of his French compatriot and moralist predecessor, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, who had published a treatise similar to Rousseau's *Lettre*, entitled *Maximes et réflexions sur la comédie* (1694). It is perhaps no coincidence that Rousseau's criticisms of Molière as a corruptor of morals in the *Lettre* parallel those made by Bossuet nearly half a century earlier. Bossuet states that Molière was an author of plays 'où la vertu et la piété sont toujours ridicules, la corruption toujours excusée et toujours plaisante, et la pudeur toujours offensée' (this, in allusion to *Le misanthrope, Tartuffe, Dom Juan*, and *L'Ecole des femmes*).[9] Bossuet echoes Plato in his concern that theater excites passions, which are dangerous to the state, and he condemns such passions as being antithetical to Christianity, just as Plato had said that the only permissible form of theater should be that which praises the gods. Bossuet writes, '... la représentation des passions agréables porte naturellement au péché.'[10] Bossuet had also written of the dangers of spectators who identify too closely with actors on the stage, an idea that was expressed in the citations by Rousseau and Brecht above: 'On se voit soi-même, dans ceux qui nous paraissent comme transportés par de semblables objets; on devient bientôt un acteur

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[8]Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, ed. Albert Thibaudet (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), III: 1033.

[9]Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *L'Eglise et le théâtre*, (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1930), 172.

[10]Bossuet, 183.

secret dans la tragédie; on y joue sa propre passion....'[11] Bossuet's main concern, like that of Rousseau, was that of virtue, of morality, and Bossuet had stated what Rousseau would in the *Lettre*—that is, that vice is often portrayed as a virtue. Finally, Bossuet suggests that 'le spectacle' is more dangerous than 'la lecture,' a point that is of the utmost importance in understanding Rousseau's attack on the theater. Bossuet claims that 'les spectacles' lend a visceral immediacy to the process of spectating, which was more likely to inspire dangerous passions in the audience, whereas reading is a solitary pursuit which allows the reader to properly reflect on what is being read. The reader is much less likely to be affected negatively by what he or she reads than by what he or she sees performed on the stage, especially in light of the fact that the act of attending the theater is a collective experience, wherein, according to Bossuet, spectators are whipped into a frenzy of sorts by the emotive applauding of others. This stance, although highly debatable, continues in modern society as well with regard to the effects of television and films, whose effects, positive or negative, are both immediate and visceral. Bossuet writes:

'Combien plus sera-t-on touché des expressions du théâtre, où tout paraît effectif: où ce ne sont point des traits morts et des couleurs sèches qui agissent, mais des personnages vivants, de vrais yeux, ou ardents, ou tendres et plongés dans la passion, de vraies larmes dans les acteurs qui en attirent d'aussi véritables dans ceux qui regardent; enfin de vrais mouvements, qui mettent en feu tout le parterre et toutes les loges.... On s'exite et on s'autorise pour ainsi dire les uns les autres par le concours des acclamations et des applaudissements, et l'air même qu'on y respire est plus malin'.[12]

It is precisely this dichotomy between 'spectacle' and 'lecture' that I would like to address in reference to Rousseau. I agree with David Marshall that Rousseau's *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles* has been falsely translated as *The Letter to d'Alembert on the theater*. The distinction is central to my argument, for, as I have stated, Rousseau was concerned first and foremost with the morality of the Genevans. What is crucial to Rousseau's argument in the *Lettre* is less the danger of the theater as a form of art than that of its *representation* on stage, the *spectacle*, which was likely to turn Geneva *itself* into a stage, transforming it into a model of Paris, the city that Rousseau had identified as the epitome of corruption. Marshall states this idea in the following terms:

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[11]Bossuet, 178.

[12]Bossuet, 185.

'What is at stake in the *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles* is less the presence of a theater in Geneva than the possibility of Geneva as theater. Rousseau argues that d'Alembert's proposal to establish a 'théâtre de comédie en Genève' would make a theater of Geneva. Theater would threaten to transform Geneva into Paris, to change it from a modern-day state of nature to a theatrical society in which not just the actors but all citizens would be condemned to exist in the regard of others. Theater would reproduce itself off the stage by drawing spectators into theatrical positions and by promoting the internalization in individual consciousnessess of the theatrical relations that in Rousseau's view characterize social life'.[13] As I stated earlier in this article, I believe that Rousseau was a moral essayist not particularly concerned with 'art' as a means of expression.

How, then, does one confront the seemingly paradoxical issue that Rousseau himself had written plays. From his youth until 1754, Rousseau wrote or drafted seven plays, not including musical works. He published only one of his own accord, *Narcisse ou l'amant de lui-m*ême (1752), and it was the only one performed at *La comédie française*. Two others were published in 1776 in an edition in which Rousseau took little interest. Four others were published posthumously. Of the seven, three were not completed, two were completely re-edited but were never performed. One, *L'Engagement téméraire*, was perhaps presented informally. Rousseau never denied his theatrical works, but they were a rather insignificant part of his work. In his preface to *Narcisse*, Rousseau seems to anticipate the accusations of hypocrisy from his contemporaries and deflects possible criticisms, citing his young age as a reason for his foray into the theater: 'J'ai écrit cette Comédie à l'âge de dix-huit ans, et je me suis gardé de la montrer aussi long-tems que j'ai tenu quelque compte de la réputation de l'Auteur. Je me suis enfin senti le courage de la publier, mais je n'aurai jamais celui d'en rien dire'(II: 959). He continues his self-defense in the preface, again citing his young age as an excuse for having not yet formulated his ideas on the theater and comparing the work, not surprisingly, to the sentiments of a father of illegitimate children:

'Il y auroit peut-être de la dureté à me reprocher aujourd'hui ces amusemens de ma jeunesse, et on aurait tort au moins de m'accuser d'avoir contredit en cela des principes qui n'étoient pas encore les miens... je ne pense plus comme l'Auteur dont ils sont l'ouvrage. Ce sont des enfans illégitimes que l'on caresse encore avec plaisir en rougissant d'en être le père, à qui l'on fait ses derniers adieux, et qu'on

[13]Marshall, 141-42.

envoie chercher fortune, sans beaucoup s'embarrasser de ce qu'ils deviendront'. (II: 962-63)

Thus, Rousseau seems to have realized early on that being a playwright for the reason of actually presenting his plays on stage was a futile or immoral act. In other words, Rousseau perhaps had no qualms about his plays being *read*, but he did have misgivings about the *representation* of plays on the stage. I do not find such a view to be contradictory. Rousseau decided early in his career to be a didactic moralist, whose works were meant to be read as treatises on various ideologies—government, education, virtue, and the like. Even *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, which is ostensibly an epistolary novel, is, I believe, a moral guidebook of sorts in the guise of a novel. Through the medium of the novel, Rousseau teaches the reader how to behave morally in society. It is no coincidence that its action takes place in Switzerland, the idyllic locale of Rousseau's dreams. Indeed, he uses the novel as a pretext to make moral observations on a variety of subjects, including, curiously, the theater, which is perhaps not surprising, for Rousseau was working on the novel concurrently with the *Lettre*, and St-Preux's diatribe against the dangers of the theater represents a treatise in miniature of the *Lettre*. St-Preux writes Julie from Paris, and outlines basic ideas which would appear in the *Lettre*. For example, on Parisian tragedy, St-Preux writes, 'Plusieurs de ces pieces sont tragiques mais peu touchantes, et si l'on y trouve quelque sentimens naturels et quelque vrai raport au cœur humain, elle n'offrent aucune instruction sur les mœurs particulieres du peuple qu'elles amusent' (II: 251). St-Preux states that the people most susceptible to these 'spectacles' are the provincials or bourgeois, who tend to ape what they see performed on stage, much to their detriment, as Rousseau would make clear in the *Lettre:* Included in St-Preux's diatribe is the obligatory criticism of Molière: 'Le peuple, toujours singe et imitateur des riches, va moins au théatre pour rire de leurs folies que pour les étudier, et devenir encore plus fou qu'eux en les imitant. Voila de quoi fut cause Molière lui-même; il corrigea la cour en infectant la ville, et ses ridicules Marquis furent le premier modele des petits-maitres bourgeois qui leur succédent'. (II: 253)

Finally, St-Preux cites the danger of the spectator becoming an actor and thus losing his or her natural identity in the process. He claims that people attend the theater more to see and be seen than to profit from any pleasure or moral lesson contained in the play: 'Personne ne va au spectacle pour le plaisir du spectacle, mais pour voir l'assemblée, pour en être vu, pour ramasser dequoi fournir au caquet après la pièce, et l'on ne songe à ce qu'on voit que pour savoir ce qu'on en dira.'

While I do not wish to enter into a polemic concerning Rousseau's views on the perceived dangers of a theater in Geneva, I do

maintain that his stance was not some philosophical aberration designed to antagonize the *Encyclopédistes*. Furthermore, I do not find an inherent contradiction in his stance against the arts. Rousseau's mission was always a moral one, and whether or not his sense of morality was or is palatable to readers is irrelevant, I believe. In his freedom of expression, Rousseau was remarkably consistent. Carol Blum remarks in her book, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue*, precisely what I have in this article—that the majority of Rousseau's writings contained ideologies designed to teach humankind how to behave morally. Blum describes the years in which Rousseau was writing *Du contrat social*, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, *Emile*, *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne*, *Economie politique*, and the *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles*, as a time in which Rousseau expressed in various ways the same path that would lead to virtue: 'While structurally dissimilar, all offered strategies by which men might be led to virtue, the operational substrate of the central problem of how to make virtue reign. In these works the mythic Sage Rousseau extended to all men the goodness he found within himself, while relieving them of the struggle with culpability that he described as so onerous. From all these works emerges a single paradigm by which either a whole state or a single individual could be trained to virtue without any struggle for domination'.[14]

Rousseau had claimed such consistency of moral thought in his *Lettre à Christophe de Beaumont*, stating, 'J'ai écrit sur divers sujets, mais toujours dans les mêmes principes: toujours la même morale, la même croyance, les mêmes maximes, et, si l'on veut, les mêmes opinions' (IV: 928).

What was perhaps difficult to understand in the age of Enlightenment, as it is today, is why Rousseau would attack an artistic medium in such a vehement manner. His *Lettre à d'Alembert* provoked a polemic that seems as relevant today as it was in the eighteenth century—a polemic that rages on in modern society over a variety of artistic media and their supposed moral worth. While most of us in academia would find fault with Rousseau's desire to prevent theatrical representations in Geneva, we cannot deny that Rousseau was true to his moral ideals.

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[14]Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: The Language of Politics in the French Revolution*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 66.