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James Swenson, *On Jean-Jacques Rousseau Considered as One of the First Authors of the Revolution* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000. xiii+ 320 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. $55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8047-3555-7.

Review by Richard Lebrun, University of Manitoba.

Though it bears a perhaps rather naive and certainly eighteenth-century sounding title, and though is takes up the very old question of Rousseau's role in the coming and course of the French Revolution, this is an impressively original study that offers a deliberately deconstructionist and highly sophisticated "reading" of Rousseau's works and then traces the vicissitudes of the reading of Rousseau's texts during the revolutionary period. In the author's own words, this is a book "about reading as a historical problem" (p. ix). It is about reading Rousseau, but it is more than that because the author, who is a literary critic, intends, by concentrating on the problematic character of "reading" and "influence," to formulate "a new interpretive framework of old questions concerning the relation between the Enlightenment and the French Revolution." Swenson does not claim to resolve these questions, but "to understand why they are so thorny, and so necessary" (Ibid.).

As early as 1791, Louis-Sébastien Mercier proclaimed Rousseau to be "one of the first authors of the Revolution" (whence Swenson's title), a filiation that many others of the time, including both his admirers and critics, seconded, and that historiographical tradition has never ceased to echo. As Swenson notes, there are at least three sets of difficulties bearing on the relationship of Rousseau to the Revolution. First, there is the fact that in the pre-revolutionary period the publication of Rousseau's political works was hardly noticed by the public, while his literary works were widely read and acclaimed. Second, with the outbreak of the Revolution, Rousseau's pre-revolutionary admirers would be found in all political camps. Third, "readings" of Rousseau's works in the course of the Revolution were often very contradictory and highly partial. Swenson's basic contention is that "these paradoxes stem from the structure of Rousseau's discourse itself" (p. x), and he argues that if Rousseau was "one of the first authors" of the Revolution, it was "because he provided the terms in which the logic of events could be interpreted" (Ibid.).

In accord with the purpose of his study, the first chapter of Swenson's book addresses the "intellectual, cultural, and ideological origins" of the Revolution. It includes a concise and extremely useful review of the historiography of the debate about the relationship of the Enlightenment to the Revolution and a discerning examination of the issues posed by the attempts (by Daniel Mornet and his successors) to measure influence by such methods as counting editions and books in private libraries, and the attempts by historians and literary critics to understand how readers of past generations "read," understood, and interpreted the texts of complex authors such as Rousseau. The section concludes with an exploration of the new forms of sociability characteristic of the eighteenth century (voluntary institutions such as the salon, the academy, and the lodge), the kinds of "discourse" that occurred within this new kind of "public sphere," and the contentious issues raised by the leading scholars who have tried to relate these developments to the question of the "influence" of literary texts. Swenson finds in these debates a general consensus that the late eighteenth-century saw "a growing incompatibility between the form and content of Enlightenment sociability" (p. 52). He identifies, in particular, "the presence or even the dominance of recognizably Rousseauian motifs within a cultural context that is both theoretically and sociologically inimical to them" and argues that "disturbances" related to this kind of incongruity, already present in the Enlightenment, were most often and most forcefully "signified by the name, person, and work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau" (Ibid.). For example, the Rousseuian theme of "persecuted virtue" was often utilized by lawyers in court challenges to what were increasingly portrayed as decadent and self-interested abuses of power by those who held authority under the political and judicial institutions of the old regime.

Swenson's second chapter, on "the unnatural order of Enlightenment universal history," examines "the presence in Enlightenment historical discourse of a number of models of historical causality, particularly with respect to the role of ideas in history" (p. 56). The emphasis is on the contrast between the views of Rousseau and Condorcet, but Scottish writers (including Adam Smith, William Robertson, and David Hume) and other French writers (Turgot in particular) are introduced to contextualize the discussion. The argument here is complicated, but appears designed to elucidate Rousseau's peculiar definition of "the state of nature" as "excluding, to as great an extent as possible, any elements of continuity between nature and civilization" (p. 114). History for Rousseau, in contrast to Condorcet and a majority of Enlightenment thinkers who see it as a record of progress, is a "process of denaturalization" brought about by a series of accidental "revolutions" (such as the discovery of iron).

In his third chapter, exploring further what it might mean to call Rousseau an "author of the Revolution," Swenson examines how Rousseau himself conceived of "authorship". Since many of Rousseau's works (and not merely his *Confessions*) were autobiographical, there is ample grist for the literary critic's mill. Again, the argument is complex, subtle, and difficult to summarize, but hinges on the "singular character of the personality of the author" (p. 125), with Rousseau portrayed as a "fundamentally divided" writer characterized by "an original and inexpugnable contradiction" (Ibid.). In this perspective, Swenson suggests, the unity of Rousseau's works is exhibited in "an inimitable and eminently consistent breakdown [...] of narrative and causal logic" (Ibid.). Citing chapter and verse at considerable length, Swenson concludes that "Rousseau's description of causal narratives demonstrates that any reading of his texts that seeks to become effective will necessarily include a constitutive moment of discontinuity and misunderstanding" (p. 158). For example, in developing the conception of nature as having an author, Rousseau presents the relation between cause and effect as semiological (as figurative representation) rather than metaphysical in the classic sense, but at the same time uses the concept of author to banish chance and assure intelligibility." When the revolutionaries adopted "Rousseau" as the "author" of their experience, they were, in effect if I read Swenson's argument correctly, seeking to assure the intelligibility of their own experience of discontinuity and misunderstanding. To take (or in Swenson's prose to "(re-)invent") Rousseau as the "author" of the Revolution, the revolutionaries were (as Rousseau had done) interpreting the relation between cause and effect as semiological or figurative."

In the fourth and final chapter on "the author of the revolution," in weighing claims that the Revolution in some way fulfilled Rousseau's political theory, Swenson begins with an analysis of the paths by which his reception travelled. This involves first establishing that Rousseau's political works, and in particular the *Contrat social*, were more widely available than Mornet and that others had concluded--or that at the least it was not unknown. It was, in Swenson's judgment a "potentiality waiting to be actualized" (p. 170). To get at just how the actualization occurred, Swenson uses the appearance of Rousseau's definition and understanding of sovereignty of the people (as opposed to a more diffuse sense of majority rule) as a touchstone of his influence. Through a careful reading and analysis of official documents such as the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, the writings of influential theorists such as Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, and the debates over the issue of the royal veto, he demonstrates a very visible presence. Yet for Swenson, the "fundamental question" is not whether Sieyès or any other figure was "subjectively" Rousseauist, but the extent to which he (and very many of his colleagues) were "objectively" Rousseauist in the sense that they were "led by a combination of available concepts and tactical exigencies to recapitulate certain problems [...] that Rousseau had laid out with particular force and perspicacity" (p. 211). This perspective, Swenson believes, "situates the importance of Rousseau's thought for the Revolution at a theoretical rather than at an ideological level" (Ibid), which means that it was important for the understanding of the dynamics and dilemmas of democratic politics it made available; it was not merely a question of the "influence" of its themes or rhetoric.

In his conclusion, citing Lynn Hunt and her reference to Jacques Derrida's *On Grammatalogy* as bearing on her exposition of the "violence of conspiracy politics" and her statement that "revolutionary rhetoric was constantly 'deconstructing' itself, that is, at once positing the possibility of a community without politics and inventing politics everywhere,"[1] Swenson notes that Derrida's book was a study of Rousseau, and that his own argument has "been simply to say that this is no accident, and that the relationship between Rousseau and the Revolution is to be found not in a logic of linear causality but rather in a shared constitutive instability, in their practice of 'deconstruction'" (p. 225). Swenson continues: "Rousseau is the first author of the Revolution precisely because the Revolution could not make its reading of him coincide with itself any more than it could make its political discourse coincide with itself" (p. 226). It was, he thinks, "the combination of a passionate longing for unity and a rigorous experience of division" that "represent the Revolution's greatest fidelity to Rousseau" (Ibid).

Whether or not Swenson has been able to formulate a new interpretive framework for dealing with the relationship between the Enlightenment and Revolution, he has produced a very well written, well organized, interesting, and provocative study of Rousseu and his relationship to the Revolution. The sophistication of the argument may restrict its appeal among undergraduates and non-specialists, but this study can certainly be recommended as a significant contribution towards a better understanding of Rousseau, the Enlightenment, and the Revolution.

NOTES

[1] Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 49, n85.

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