
H-France Review Vol. 21 (June 2021), No. 89

John T. Scott, *Rousseau's Reader: Strategies of Persuasion and Education*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2020. ix + 328 pp. Notes, bibliography, index, halftones, and tables. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9-78-0226689142; \$35.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9-78-0226689289.

Review by Jane Anna Gordon, University of Connecticut, Storrs.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau described the discovery of “the system” that animated and unified his works as a change in his visual perspective. As John T. Scott writes, “He ‘saw’ something he had hitherto not seen, and [made] it his mission as an author to make his readers see what he saw” (p. 1). “[C]ondemned to be a writer,” Scott continues, Rousseau sought “to communicate feelings stirred by sight” (p. 3).

Over the course of an introduction, seven chapters, and a conclusion, Scott explains how, throughout his major philosophical works, Rousseau persuades his readers “that they are deceived by that which they see before their own eyes and they must learn to see anew” (p. 1). Rousseau does so through both the substance and form of his works. Given our corrupted vision, he cannot rely on narrow rationality alone. It is tied up in the erroneous ways that “we ordinarily view ourselves, our nature, and our social and political world” (p. 2). He must turn to modes of engaging his reader that can disrupt our conventional common sense. He does so through a vast range of rhetorical and literary devices “from choice of genre, complex textual structures, frontispieces and illustrations, shifting authorial and narrative voices, addresses to readers that alternately invite and challenge, apostrophes and metaphors...and, of course, paradox” (p. 2).

As readers familiar with Rousseau will know, he lamented the loss of the art of persuasion in politics and philosophy. He reflected, “One of the errors of our age is to use reason in too unadorned a form, as if men were all mind.... In neglecting the language of signs that speak to the imagination, the most energetic of languages has been lost” (Rousseau quoted in Scott, p. 3). In his own writing, he did not make the same mistake.

Building on Laurence Mall’s study of rhetorical and literary aspects of *Emile* and Denise Schaeffer’s study of that text as a philosophical work with pedagogical content—as aimed at training a pupil that is the book’s reader—Scott blends these analyses and extends them to all of Rousseau’s major philosophical works.[1] Perhaps surprisingly, Scott shows, Rousseau employed similar rhetorical and literary strategies in his philosophical works as he did in his novel, *Julie*. Throughout, he rejected the view that “the purpose of philosophy is to convey unadorned truth” or the widespread misperception, captured humorously by Scott, that

“philosophy, like revenge, is a dish best served cold” (p. 5). This deliberate choice, of warm rhetoric, “seductive style,” “emotionally charged prose,” “evocative imagery,” and “appeals to the heart against the head” (p. 5), led many to question Rousseau’s status as a philosopher, even charging him with sophistry.

Scott not only accepts Rousseau as a philosopher—whose works seek and elaborate truth—he sees him as one who innovatively utilized rhetorical and literary elements to convey it. As such, to encounter his insights fully demands thorough study of his technique. Citing Paul de Man, Scott affirms rightly that academic specialization or stratification “has often prevented the correct understanding of the relations between the literary and political aspects of Rousseau’s thought” (p. 9).

Scott’s method, of close textual analysis, presumes Rousseau to be a careful writer for whom “every word is necessarily where it must be in the text with respect to the design of the work as a whole” (p. 9). Confessing that he preferred the risk of overinterpretation, Scott centers the author-reader relationship. Utilizing Wayne C. Booth’s formulation of the “implied author,” Scott explains that this is not identical to the biographical author. Instead, this is “the author as constructed in the text, for example through authorial and narrative voice, an author whom the reader infers from the text” (p. 9). Scott also employs reader-response theory, which “focuses on the experience of the reader and how the ‘meaning’ of the text is created through the activity of reading” (p. 10). Rather than the response of a subjective or individual reader, Scott emphasizes the intentional interpretive community constructed between the “implied author” and the “implied reader” (p. 10). If this strikes some as old-fashioned, Scott insists “that the approaches on which [he draws] are a good match for the strategy [he employs] of close textual analysis based on strong assumptions about authorial intention” (p. 10).

Working chronologically, chapter one analyzes the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, introducing a theme carried through the book, of Rousseau’s response to Socrates’ critique of writing as articulated in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. Emphasizing the *First Discourse*’s “dual identity” as a discourse to be read aloud for an academic-prize competition and read as a published written text, Scott concentrates on how Rousseau seeks to educate the reader in distinguishing appearance from reality, “for example to distinguish between the splendid appearance of the advance of the sciences and the arts and the reality of moral corruption” (p. 23). The discussion culminates in a challenge to distinguish the true causal argument of the work as a whole.

The second chapter continues the exploration of form and structure, now of the *Discourse on Inequality*, with special emphasis on the way its paratextual apparatus would “condition the reading experience” (p. 23). Through his guidance regarding whether and how to engage with the copious discursive endnotes he scattered through his text, again in response to Plato’s challenge, Rousseau made “available very different reading” experiences, “anticipat[ing] different types of readers” (p. 23). Scott offers detailed examination of the rhetorical and literary strategies Rousseau uses to “persuade the reader of the plausibility of his account of natural man as an asocial and undeveloped animal” through repeated comparisons between this figure and the “civil man,” with which he was all too familiar (p. 24).

The third, fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters are each devoted to distinct dimensions of *Emile*. First, Scott explores the choice of the hybrid genre of the treatise-novel. If the *Second Discourse* had to persuade the reader of the plausibility of his account of natural man, here Rousseau must

“persuade the reader of the truth of his imaginary pupil as an exemplar of the natural goodness of man, and simultaneously, of the artificiality of the children the reader has before his eyes” (p. 24). These lessons also turn on repeated comparisons. Next, Scott analyzes the five illustrations in *Emile*, which “educate and test the reader of the work by their allegorical character and especially by the complex dialogue Rousseau establishes between the illustrations and the text” (p. 24). Scott then investigates the structural elements of the “Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar” to analyze why Rousseau included it and who he intended as its audience. Scott suggests that Rousseau’s disavowal of authorship is an example of doubling himself, which he does to shift interpretive authority from himself to the reader, who is thereby charged to judge the contents of the “Profession.” Rousseau’s placement of the speech in a separate section implies that it would not be delivered to Emile, who, unlike the reader-pupils, lacks the character and capacity to engage in such acts of discernment. Scott closes discussion of *Emile* with analysis of the reading material given to Emile and, by implication, *Emile’s* readers, how it is assigned, and its revelatory purpose.

The last chapter, focused on the *Social Contract*, poses a challenge to Scott’s method as advanced up to this point. After all, in it there are few indications of the intended reader or dialogue between author and reader. In response, Scott turns to two principal readings of the treatise that he thinks Rousseau made available: “principles of political right that are always and everywhere the same...[and] a work that also attends to the...conditions for the creation and maintenance of a legitimate political association” (p. 25). Consistent with the procedure charted, he examines the précis of this political treatise in *Emile*, analyzes the structure of the earlier version of the work, the so-called Geneva Manuscript, and the structure of the *Social Contract* itself. On full display are what Scott describes as two of Rousseau’s favorite writerly tools or “one might even say tics”: he structures his conceptual and written terms in binary form of “natural” versus “civilized” or “force” versus “right,” only to destabilize or complicate the binary relations he has created “through chiasmus, a rhetorical figure in which terms are reversed from their anticipated order (e.g., ‘the rich and the poor, the weak and the strong’)” (p. 266). The book concludes with suggesting the more general usefulness of attention to the rhetorical and literary aspects of philosophical works through a brief examination of the author-reader relationship constructed in Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*.

Rousseau’s Reader is an excellent example of close reading. Especially since Scott invites the book to be read as a whole or as stand-alone chapters, I will urge graduate students writing on one of Rousseau’s texts, especially *Emile*, to study it carefully. Not only does the text enact the method for which it calls, but the fruits so generated are also on clear display. Scott also models scholarly professionalism and generosity. For those seeking to keep abreast of academic research and debates regarding Rousseau, Scott’s text is a wonderful guide. He also regularly acknowledges his inspiration by and debts to other scholars, attributing contributions where they have been made and not exaggerating the novelty or scope of a claim to establish its importance.

Also, most centrally, studying Rousseau as a pedagogue is long overdue. It is clear preoccupying commitments led Rousseau to write *Emile*, rather than *Emile* indicating a sudden concern with matters educational. Indeed, given how Rousseau’s political works have been engaged globally by leaders of varieties of transformative social movements, one could argue that it is their pedagogical character that has much to do with their continued appreciation and life beyond the academy.

Equally important is the fundamental connection Scott builds between Rousseau's pedagogical aims and his singularity as a writer. As already stated, for some, Rousseau's literary genius was grounds to discredit his seriousness as an intellectual. For others, it was the primary basis for their admiration. Neither camp does what Scott has, making the writing itself the object of analysis. If Rousseau's prose style is unique in how it engages more than the reader's rational mind, as the conclusion of *Reading Rousseau* shows, most political theory also engages such stylistic resources, even if claiming to avoid them. As such, Scott's accounting of the wide range of intellectual resources at work in these texts invites broader consideration of how the political nature of political theoretical writing is constructed. Hopefully, it does so in ways that can help challenge knee-jerk scholarly gatekeeping regarding which genres of writing may count as such.

At the same time, as an avid reader of Rousseau, but one who puts the Genevan philosopher's ideas in conversation with those of twentieth-century Martinican-Algerian political theorist Frantz Fanon, I was left wondering about the political viability of books focused solely on Rousseau and on scholarship exclusively devoted to him. [2] In a period of much warranted, vigorous debate over the structure and content of academic canons, or of what should be treated as indispensable reading, is it a service to a figure like Rousseau not to make an explicit case for his ongoing relevance to those who are not already convinced? Scott offers an opening phrase about Rousseau being "the most famous writer of his time," but then gets on with the work of illustrating the richness of what emerges from careful reading and the insight of scholarly work produced in such endeavor. There is no case for why such attention is merited in a very crowded field of potential subjects.

If one writes on historical women or Global Southern political theorists, simply to publish, one always has to justify one's selection and its value to readers who are not themselves female or of the Global South. In the extreme, such demands are not only profoundly unfair, but wasteful of scholarly time. However, there is some pedagogical value to being pushed to connect one's foci and priorities to those of others. Given the breadth of Rousseau's creativity and interests, this is easily done.

For instance, as already implied, given his genre-bending and -blending, all in pursuit of advancing political truths, why not put him into conversation with other figures who also questioned the adequacy of one register of the written word? Were their products different because of the particular forms of illumination sought or the distinct cultural literacies to which they could make reference? Did they also dare, in pursuit of seducing them, to scold and challenge their readers?

Similarly, given the centrality of Rousseau's project of enabling others to see the difference between appearance and reality, his work can be compared with Plato's allegory of the cave and the variety of Marxists trying to mobilize readers to recognize their false consciousness. One might compare Rousseau's account of natural, uncorrupted man with other competing accounts, especially those that would frame his as distinctively European, even if differently so from the accounts of Hobbes and Locke. How have Caribbean and Amerindian thinkers responded to the idea that their forebears, as they were being encountered by European travelers and colonizers, represented Rousseau's ideal, the stage of human development portrayed as "a golden mean" (p. 87)? Or what of the literatures exploring the role of gender in Emile's (and our) education? Or what might scholars of animal studies offer Rousseau's

depiction of what human and non-human animals do and don't share? Scott's summary of Rousseau's discussion of Bacon, Descartes, and Newton, the "three preceptors of the human race" (pp. 70-74) whose genius lay in their independence from popular trends, their being unmoved by vanity and therefore insulated from the production of only what would be agreeable, invites consideration of conventions we embrace today: scholarship that readily invites praise. Given Rousseau's irreverence, curiosity, and imagination, who would he want to think and be engaged with? Whether or not it is a priority of scholars of Rousseau, might he leap to converse with writers and thinkers who are themselves descendants of the Caribs or of other foreigners and "half-outsiders," rather than solely with other members of a European canon?

Scott executes the tasks that he sets out with remarkable skill. The product deserves the serious attention it will no doubt receive. I only wonder whether studies of Rousseau and scholarship that treats him in relative isolation, even when done at their best, honor the political-pedagogical aims of Rousseau that Scott has so effectively portrayed. I have full faith that making the case for Rousseau to a wider swath of readers, who would approach him with their own demands, will surely affirm his enormous, continued value.

NOTES

[1] Laurence Mall, *Emile, ou les figures de la fiction* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2002); and Denise Schaeffer, *Rousseau on Education, Judgment, and Freedom* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2014).

[2] Jane Anna Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory: Reading Rousseau through Fanon* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

Jane Anna Gordon
University of Connecticut, Storrs
jane.gordon@uconn.edu

Copyright © 2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.