

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 2 (November 2002), No. 123

Julia V. Douthwaite, *The Wild Girl, Natural Man, and the Monster: Dangerous Experiments in the Age of Enlightenment*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002. xiii + 344 pp. \$55.00 U.S. (cl); ISBN 0-226-16055-6. \$19.00 U.S. (pb); ISBN 0-226-16056-4.

Review by Martin S. Staum, University of Calgary.

In this era of serious concerns about the future of biotechnology and forebodings about human cloning, Julia Douthwaite has provided an extended meditation on Enlightenment and French revolutionary efforts to “perfect” human beings. She examines the unintended, sometimes harmful consequences of experiments on human beings performed in the name of progress.

She supports this well-illustrated study with an enormous breadth of research (there are seventy-nine dense pages of notes) from literary criticism, historical works, and a fascinating assortment of scientific pronouncements, educational texts, and novels. The major sections of the book include reactions to “feral” children, the philosophes’ “animated statue” model, and fictional and real-life applications of Rousseau’s educational model. The last chapter comments on revolutionary “regeneration” projects, pedagogical dystopias of the revolutionary era, Sade’s mockery of perfectibility, and Mary Shelley’s anxieties about unfettered and unethical experimentation. A basic thesis is that in literature, at least, British and French authors during the 1790s shifted from an optimistic appraisal of scientific potential to apprehensions about experimenters in general and approaches to human subjects in particular. The obvious context for this shift was the failure of the French Revolution to regenerate the citizenry, except by practices of Terror. An important subtext throughout the analysis is the persistent gender differentiation that resulted in perceptions of women’s limited capabilities. A somewhat exaggerated claim is that sensationism and materialism provided the necessary groundwork for both failed revolutionary plans and for the diabolical imaginings of novelists and reformers.

The sections on “wild children” and various home schooling programs help make this book an important supplement for reading lists on the Enlightenment. At the same time the slant of the author, who appears hostile to all aspects of “Enlightenment perfectibility,” will raise more controversy.

The discussion of “wild children” suggested to eighteenth-century readers questions about “natural” man or woman, the boundaries between the human and the animal, the “normal” and the “monstrous.”<sup>[1]</sup> For Linnaeus, these children filled a niche in the Great Chain of Being--“monstrous man.” Most observers, though, came around to conceding the humanity of Peter of Hanover (found in 1724), Marie-Angélique Leblanc (1731), and Victor of the Aveyron (1799). Later in the eighteenth century, despite all the patient efforts of Dr. Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard upon Victor, Douthwaite finds a predominant inclination to pathologize these children in view of deficiencies in their “nature” rather than deprivation of “nurture.” The most successful educational effort involved Marie-Angélique, who learned language and politeness. Literary accounts still accused her of alleged bestiality and found her unfeminine strength and temperament unnerving. The author concludes that all three efforts at social intervention were failures.

The reader is tempted to ask, however, in the context of a study that sees most social conditioning as misguided, "What would constitute the 'successful' integration of such a child?" Even the most successful of the three, Marie-Angélique, had to endure the imposition of social norms. Unlike the European relationship with "savages," where treatment as equals or simply leaving them alone was a conceivable choice, no "feral" child could be left alone. Perhaps the unstated conclusion to the argument is that "feral" children should at least enjoy primary attention to their welfare rather than be placed on display or studied for scientific purposes. Similar arguments have recently been made with regard to "Genie," the "feral" girl from a Los Angeles suburb.[2] But if "meddling with human nature" is unacceptable, how could any educator be "successful"?

The author is also aware that concern with the "abnormal" coincided with the emergence of phrenology and ultimately craniology that postulated deviations of other races from the European norm (pp. 64, 67). However, she does not proceed to what might be an important deduction—that, despite an abundance of other pretexts for racism, lack of confidence in perfectibility could have severe consequences for making invidious distinctions about the "Other."

The second chapter discusses "animated statue models" by which Condillac, Buffon, and Bonnet portrayed the awakening of a statue, one sense at a time, to full awareness and the capability of thought. The author persuasively argues that such doctrines, based on the refinement of sensibility, could disqualify both women and the socially disadvantaged from full citizenship. Someone with weakened sensibility (women) or lack of the necessary sense experience might be judged incapable of political analysis. However, the general argument assumes that sensationist models viewed humans as automata. Contrary to this claim, Condillac was no materialist and argued that humans could repress their passions, especially through the power of salutary habit formation.[3]

The third chapter discusses Rousseau's *Emile*, along with the novels of Gaspard Guillard de Beaurieu (*Elève de la nature*, 1763) and abbé Henry-Joseph Dulaurens (*Imirce*, 1765). The neglected, posthumously published sequel to *Emile* recounts the seduction of Sophie and the moralistic abandonment of mother and child by Emile, as if Rousseau were repudiating his entire system. In citing the admittedly manipulative nature of all these systems, the author argues that materialism was at the root of their diabolical nature. Clearly, however, since Rousseau himself was not a materialist, it does not follow that one had to be a materialist to be manipulative. Dulaurens seems more a likely parodist than a disciple of Rousseau. His pornographic novel of the erotic awakening of a couple controlled by a ruthless captor was one of the publications that led a church court to sentence him to life in prison.

In this and later chapters, the author seems to reiterate the view that materialism created the conditions for a horrific Sadean outcome, in line with the older interpretations of Lester Crocker.[4] This argument could be reformulated more convincingly to state that materialists attempted to establish a natural morality. When Sade called their bluff by pointing out that "nature" was no foundation for morality, atrocious behavior could result. It simply will not do, however, to imply that materialists in general, including those who wrote interminably about "virtue," such as Helvétius, d'Holbach, Cabanis, and even Diderot, just paved the way for Sade.[5] These authors were very far from an amoral orientation. Nor did utilitarianism necessarily imply approval of willful torture or experimentation upon human subjects.

Certainly one of the most engaging sections of the work (the fourth chapter) concerns real-life experiments, at least partly inspired by Rousseau. The characters discussed include Richard Lovell Edgeworth as a father, Thomas Day, Manon Roland, Mme. de Genlis (her novel *Adèle et Thèodore*, 1782), and Edgeworth and his daughter Maria, who co-authored the earnest manual of *Practical Education* (1798). Edgeworth soon blamed Rousseau's theories for the failure of his son to develop social skills. Thomas Day attempted to inure his adopted daughter, Sabrina Sidney, to fear and pain by firing pistols at her and melting hot wax on her arms. There was also a gendered aspect to the projects of Day

and Manon Roland, who viewed the girls in their households as young Sophies, fit only for specifically feminine skills. The novel of the more religious Mme. de Genlis embodied a “panoptic maternal authority” (pp. 149-150). The politically conservative Edgeworths also perpetuated the stereotype of the self-effacing woman and fashioned an educational project that carefully controlled the library and the environment. Douthwaite argues that none of these plans allowed free play to the child’s imagination or time for “irrational” diversions (p. 159). The gender bias limiting young women to the aspirations of Rousseau’s Sophie seems obvious. Should the inevitability of dire consequences in these educational schemes all be traced to *Emile*? Educators such as the Swiss Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi also claimed inspiration from Rousseau. Despite his ferociously precise, timetabled school day, Pestalozzi’s signal contribution was an attempt at an atmosphere of emotional security for the child.

The fifth substantive chapter, “Utopian Politics and Dystopian Fictions,” evaluates the French revolutionaries’ literature of “regeneration” as the individual education plan writ large for the nation. The discussion of the educational proposals of Condorcet and Lepeletier covers familiar ground and presents a rather monolithic view of the Revolution. For Douthwaite, a conviction of individual malleability leads inexorably to social engineering of the worst kind, which in turn leads to the Terror. Aside from the questionable view of revolutionary discourse as a *bloc*, there are over-generalized claims, such as “(the) revolutionaries learned too late that civic virtue cannot be legislated into existence, and energy cannot be harnessed toward a given goal” (p. 164). There are few enthusiasts these days for severing people’s heads in the name of Virtue, but one cannot help thinking that a bit of legislated civic virtue could spare us an Enron or two.

The Romantic, often counter-revolutionary, reaction to the Terror is the backdrop to the final section on the “pedagogical dystopias” of Maria Edgeworth’s *Belinda* (1801) and the friend of Mary Wollstonecraft, Eliza Fenwick’s *Secresy* (1795). In Edgeworth’s novel, English good sense saves the day from the abstractions of *Emile*. Sibella Valmont in *Secresy* helps dispel the image of an undeveloped Sophie. The claim that literature turned against scientific optimism rests on the “scientific dystopias” of Jacques-Antoine Révéroni Saint-Cyr (*Pauliska*, 1798) and the various fictional works of de Sade. Révéroni Saint-Cyr’s maniacal, vampirish aristocrat uses terrifying scientific instruments to torture the heroine and attempt to rejuvenate himself. The justification of cruel experiments seems to the author a “distorted echo of Condorcet’s meliorist rhetoric” (p. 196). Sade’s novels provide the *reductio ad absurdum* of perfectibility. For in *L’Histoire de Juliette* (1797), Pope Braschi explains that no destruction can harm nature itself; therefore, perfectibility is a mockery. These reflections allegedly symbolize the dangers of science and politics in a revolutionary age.

The epilogue discusses eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fears of degeneration and monstrosity, in a return to the themes that haunted the attitudes to feral children. Maupertuis feared that monstrous albinos would perpetuate their weakened race. Similarly, European reactions to the English “Porcupine Man” suggested fears of degeneration. Finally, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) raised all the issues concerning the hubris of the experimenter, the new popular distrust of experimentalism, the fear and loathing of the “Other,” and the anxiety about monstrous races. Among the very interesting reflections in this section is that the naturalist William Lawrence, at the time Shelley was writing her novel, proposed experiments in human breeding by marriages of the strong and handsome.

Generally, the author echoes the conventional view that Romantics lamented the propensity of science to “murder to dissect.” How representative these forebodings were of the entire picture of postrevolutionary cultural history remains an open question. In the years of the Romantic literary reaction, authors such as Saint-Simon and Comte were creating the very essence of the optimistic positivist vision.

Many readers will appreciate the excellent survey of accounts of feral children and the comments on the gendered aspects of educational theories and practices. The author’s expressed fears of unregulated

science are appropriately thought-provoking. But the arguments against the concept of perfectibility do not consider what its absence might entail. Paradoxically, the Rousseauist concept of gender roles suggests what happens when there are predetermined *limits* to perfectibility—for women. There were many motives for racism in the eighteenth century, and some architects of perfectibility such as Condorcet were sometimes callous concerning the fate of North American aboriginals, for example. Yet one of the most powerful arguments for racial hierarchy in the early nineteenth century was the assumption that the “Other” could never be improved.[6] That ominous conclusion might be as unsettling to present-day readers as anything dreamed up by Rousseau and Condorcet.

## NOTES

[1] For samples of the abundant literature on “feral children,” see Lucien Malson, *Wolf Children and the Problem of Human Nature* (New York: Harper, 1994); Douglas Candland, *Feral Children and Clever Animals* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Harlan Lane, *The Wild Boy of Aveyron: a History of the Education of Retarded, Deaf and Hearing Children* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1976).

[2] Russ Rymer, *Genie: A Scientific Tragedy* (New York: Harper, 1994).

[3] Condillac, “Traité des animaux” (1755) in *Oeuvres philosophiques*, ed. Georges Le Roy (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1947) vol. 1: 362-64; and “Dissertation sur la liberté” 1: 317.

[4] Lester G. Crocker, *An Age of Crisis. Man and World in Eighteenth-Century French Thought* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1959) and *Nature and Culture. Ethical Thought in the French Enlightenment* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1963).

[5] For d’Holbach on merit and virtue, see *Système de la nature* (London [Paris], 1774) vol. 1: 161, 345; for Cabanis’s optimistic link between moral sympathy and perfectibility, see *Oeuvres philosophiques* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956) vol. 1:578.

[6] For the shift to polygenism and more rigid racial hierarchy in early nineteenth-century French racial theory, see Claude Blanckaert, “Monogénisme et polygénisme,” *Dictionnaire du Darwinisme et de l’Evolution*, ed. Patrick Tort (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), 3021-3037; and my forthcoming *Labeling People: French Scholars on Society, Race, and Empire, 1815-1848* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press).

Martin S. Staum  
University of Calgary  
mstaum@ucalgary.ca

Copyright © 2002 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 redistribution/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 re-publication 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.

ISSN 1553-9172