

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

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The Geneva-born philosopher and novelist Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) has had a significant influence on thinking about childhood and education from the later eighteenth century until the present. Rousseau's work *Emile: or On Education* (1762) is concerned, like all of his major writings and like those of many of his Enlightenment contemporaries, with an inquiry into the notion of "progress" and the "perfectibility" of humankind. In *Emile*, Rousseau argues that the spread of "civilization" has not made human society more perfect but has instead corrupted it. *Emile* poses as a treatise laying out a scheme for a new form of "natural" education designed both to shield children from this corruption and to prepare them for their inevitable entry into the social realm where it prevails. Instead of resolving this contradiction by providing a tidy pedagogical formula, however, *Emile* asks to be read ironically, such that it reveals the ideal driving much thinking about education, in the Enlightenment and in post-Enlightenment modernity, to be unattainable, and even a danger.

Origins

Obsessed with origins, *Emile* in many ways follows from Rousseau's 1755 work *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*, which imagines a "state of nature" in which humans originally lived, so as then to identify how inequalities of wealth and power were instituted as a result of the process of "civilization." Similarly, *Emile* seeks to pinpoint the moment at which children are first instructed in the social norms that will regulate their lives. At the beginning of *Emile*, the narrator Jean-Jacques (not to be identified with Rousseau the writer, as we will see) declares: "Everything is good as it leaves the hands of" God, "the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man," who "wants nothing as nature made it, not even man; for him, man must be trained like a school horse" (37).

Here as elsewhere, *Emile* echoes John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), which argues that the mind does not possess innate ideas but instead resembles a blank sheet of paper on which impressions, and ideas deriving from them, are inscribed (121). However, Jean-Jacques does not depict the process by which the blank sheet, or *tabula rasa*, is written on as a felicitous one: as soon the child begins the artificial (rather than "natural") process of being "trained" in "the hands of man," the child "degenerates" from a state of original goodness.

Natural Man and Civil Society

However, immediately following the passage from *Emile* quoted above, Jean-Jacques indicates that he is no mere idealist; he realizes that the child born into a highly structured society (like those of mid-eighteenth-century Europe) cannot remain in the state of nature. Were the child to be left uneducated, he observes, "everything would go even

worse [. . .]. In the present state of things a man abandoned to himself in the midst of other men from birth”—and thus one not provided with a socializing education—“would be the most disfigured of all. [. . .] all the social institutions in which we find ourselves would stifle nature in him and put nothing in its place” (37).

The task for the educator, then, is to “civilize” the child while simultaneously striving to retain as much as possible of his natural qualities. In order to demonstrate how this pedagogical enterprise might be carried out, Jean-Jacques invents for himself an imaginary pupil, Emile, who is taught according to these principles from his earliest years until his arrival at maturity, which Jean-Jacques equates with Emile’s becoming a sexual subject and his marriage to “*Sophie* or The Woman” (357). In addition to Jean-Jacques, Emile, and Sophie, the text introduces a cast of supporting characters who take part in Emile’s education. For instance, he receives a lesson on property rights from his encounter with Jean-Jacques’s gardener, Robert, whose melon-plot Emile usurps for a bean-planting experiment (98-99).

An Impossible Goal

Jean-Jacques’ plan to socialize Emile while simultaneously preserving his natural goodness is inherently paradoxical. Rather than downplay this problem, Jean-Jacques readily admits that his scheme cannot succeed. It will produce a hopelessly conflicted individual: “He who in the civil order wants to preserve the primacy of the sentiments of nature does not know what he wants. Always in contradiction with himself, always floating between his inclinations and his duties, he will never be either [natural] man or citizen” of the civil state in which he lives: “He will be nothing” (40). Thus, Rousseau acknowledges from the start that he is pursuing an impossible goal. This admission alerts his audience to the fact that he intends *Emile* to be read not as a practical guide to raising children, but as a philosophical exploration of an intractable problem.

Nevertheless, *Emile* has often been (mis)interpreted as a childcare manual or a pragmatic treatise on education. Rousseau invites readers to make this mistake by peppering his narrative with common-sense observations about children and their upbringing, as when he declares, “Children must sleep long because their exercise is extreme,” or “[L]et them eat, run, and play as much as they please, and be sure they will never eat too much and have no indigestion” (129, 155). Many of these maxims were borrowed directly from Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), which was designed to be a practical guide for parents. Yet Rousseau objected strongly when his readers tried to treat his book as a childrearing bible. For example, when a man wrote to him expressing his intention to raise his son like Emile, Rousseau tartly replied, “So much the worse, sir, for you and your son” (Douthwaite 135). He was right to distrust his own regime; when people like children’s author Thomas Day attempted to raise their children according to the precepts of *Emile*, the results were disastrous (see Douthwaite 134-145).

Rousseau’s Artifice

If the subtitle (*On Education*) also seems to invite this misreading, the title (*Emile*) provides a clue that one should approach the text as having more in common with the many eighteenth-century novels that have a character's name as their title, including Daniel Defoe's *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* (1722), Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones* (1749), and Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767). Such fictions seek to represent the life story of an individual from birth, at the same time as they ironize the realistic representational conventions involved in this faux-biographical (or faux-autobiographical) enterprise. *Emile* is a generically fractured text: it is part education manual, part philosophical reflection on the state of civil society, and a large part novel. As a novel, it employs with particular clarity the conventions of the fictional genre *bildungsroman* (German for "novel of formation" or "novel of education"), which follows the development of the protagonist from childhood to adulthood.

The literary qualities of *Emile* are perhaps most apparent in one of its funniest passages, where Jean-Jacques stacks the deck in favor of his success as a teacher by designing for himself the ideal pupil: Emile will have ordinary intelligence, be born in a temperate climate ("in France, for example"), be wealthy, be of noble birth, be healthy, and—most conveniently of all—be an orphan who "obey[s] only me" (52). This passage describes not a teacher's selection of a pupil for independent study but, rather, a novelist's notes towards the construction of a central character in a literary work in progress.

Rousseau devotes much space in *Emile* to an investigation of the ambiguities inherent in language, which he associates with the corruption attendant upon one's participation in civil society. "Restrict, therefore, the child's vocabulary as much as possible," Jean-Jacques advises the reader: "It is a very great disadvantage for him to have more words than ideas" (74). For Jean-Jacques, the most artificial form of language is literary language, and he often rails against "the instruments of [children's] greatest misery—that is, books. Reading is the plague of childhood and almost the only occupation we know how to give it" (116). Because the "child who reads does not think, he only reads; he is not informing himself, he learns words," Emile will have "No book other than the world, no instruction other than fact" garnered through his own sense-observations (168). If Emile "reads less well in our books than does another child," Rousseau declares, "he reads better in the book of nature" (160).

Given that the shortest sentence in *Emile* is "I hate books," it is deeply ironic that Rousseau places an argument for a natural, rather than literary, education in a lengthy book that is largely structured as a novel employing such complex literary devices as the *bildungsroman* (184). The reader attentive to irony is thus instructed to consider *Emile* not as a statement of educational theory that can be put into practice but rather as a meditation (as are so many of Rousseau's writings) on the failures of the modern civil state and (in the specific case of *Emile*) how those failures are reflected in the way the future members of the state are educated for participation in it. As far as any practical pedagogical applications of *Emile* are concerned, Rousseau declares in one of his more unveiled passages: "But did I tell you that a natural education was an easy undertaking?

[...] I show the goal that must be set; I do not say that it can be reached. But I do say that he who comes nearest to it will have succeeded best” (94-95).

Finally, as if fed up with readers—both critical and admiring—who thought that *Emile* was written with practical applications in mind, Rousseau composed a sequel, *Émile et Sophie ou les Solitaires* (published 1778), which effectively undermines its predecessor. In this unfinished work, the perfect couple move to Paris, Emile becomes absorbed in society, and Sophie becomes an adulteress; when she becomes pregnant by one of her lovers, Emile abandons her and the child. As Julia V. Douthwaite remarks, “In a very ‘counter-Enlightenment’ move, Rousseau shows that the Enlightenment project to liberate man from traditional moral and social constraints”—as Jean-Jacques seeks to do in educating Emile—“was more likely to aggravate latent problems rather than to achieve any lasting liberation” (115).

Rousseau, the Romantic Child, and the Institution of Children’s Literature

Emile has had a profound impact on nineteenth- and twentieth-century representations of childhood and education. Most immediately on the English Romantics: the argument that the child “is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things” but “degenerates in the hands of man” is echoed in William Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” (1807). Similarly, Jean-Jacques’s claim that “the child is at birth already a disciple [. . .] of nature” (61) rhymes with central themes of Wordsworth’s “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” (1798) and *The Prelude: or, Growth of a Poet’s Mind* (1850). A more sustained irony (like that running throughout *Emile*) governs the depiction of the “natural” child’s fragile innocence in William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and his *Songs of Experience* (1794), and the education of the creature in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) can valuably be read as a recasting of the ambivalent analyses of natural man and civil society at the heart of *Emile*.

In addition, children’s fictions have made prominent use of thematic aspects of *Emile*. In Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Books* (1894-1895), for example, Mowgli’s lupine education and his wariness of human society owe much to Rousseau’s work, as does the narrative of Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *Tarzan of the Apes* (1914). Readers of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1911) will recall that Mary Lennox’s rejuvenation begins when she undertakes a natural education that the teacher-narrator of *Emile* would surely approve, composed almost entirely as it is of gardening. Moreover, one can argue that *Emile* has influenced not only how children’s literature has been written but also how it has been *managed* by those—including publishers, reviewers, educators, and librarians—who take the provision of recreational reading for young people to be their professional turf.

This influence is most obvious in the case of *Robinson Crusoe*. Though he hates books, Jean-Jacques does not entirely deprive Emile of the opportunity to read; he eventually caves and allows his pupil to peruse the one book that “provides the most felicitous treatise on natural education,” Daniel Defoe’s *The Life and Strange Surprising*

Adventures of Robinson Crusoe (1719) (184). From the early nineteenth century on and largely due to its prominent place in *Emile*, Defoe's novel was in fact one of the most popular among young readers. It inspired a number of "Robinsonnades" written explicitly for children (as Defoe's novel was not), such as Johann David Wyss's *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812-1813) and R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1857). Jean-Jacques maintained that Defoe's novel would be more appropriate for *Emile* if it were "disencumbered of all its rigamarole," by which he meant the narrative of Robinson's spiritual trials and conversion (185). In other words, he felt that fully half of the novel should be excised, leaving only the story of shipwreck and survival. This has proven prescient: in exactly this redacted form, *Robinson Crusoe* remains a "children's classic."

Jean-Jacques's concern that his pupil's reading be chosen with an eye to its "appropriateness" is perhaps the most subtle influence *Emile* has had on the institution of children's literature. At one point in *Emile*, Jean-Jacques engages in an amusing exegesis of the fable "The Crow and the Fox," the point of which is to show that the fable, due to its use of figurative language, would either be beyond the ken of children or would confuse their morals and thus hasten the corruption that Jean-Jacques is at such pains to keep at bay. He declares that the adult may read La Fontaine's fables "discriminately" and with instruction as well as pleasure, because the adult cannot be "deceived about their object" (whether one thinks of that object in moral or aesthetic terms). By contrast, the child either "will not understand" the details of the fable or, "in those that he will be able to understand, he will [. . .] be led astray" (116).

In his obsession with determining appropriate reading for children, Jean-Jacques anticipates what have come to be seen as key duties of those in the industries of publishing, early education, and librarianship: seeking to determine what children read—and, more importantly, what they *don't*—as well as what they take away from that reading (no "rigamarole," nothing that would cause them to "be led astray"). Rousseau also anticipates the drive to regulate children's reading in terms of age; although few librarians would agree with his dictum, "At twelve, *Emile* will hardly know what a book is," the impulse to set aside certain texts as "young adult" literature is certainly familiar (116).

Emile did not initiate this process whereby societies have sought to discipline readers, especially young ones (it is as old as Plato). Moreover, to give this disciplinary process prestige was surely far from Rousseau's intent. Given that he viewed his proposed pedagogical system with an ironic and skeptical eye, readers should follow suit, questioning the habit of trying to control every aspect of children's textual consumption as searchingly as Rousseau's work interrogates its own efforts to monitor every element of the title character's education.

Recommended Reading

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