

**Rousseau      Rousseau  
and            et la  
Criticism     Critique**

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## Dialogue and Crisis: Rousseau Judges Criticism

*Rousseau Juge de Jean-Jacques*, from the same Pléiade volume as the *Confessions*, claims few admirers. Even specialists on the 18th century often admit to finding it oblique and dense or to attempt an impossible program<sup>1</sup>.

In form, *Rousseau Juge de Jean Jacques* is organized as three parts marked First, Second and Third Dialogue. Yet the supposedly visible skeleton of dialogic form gives scant help; the argument cannot be easily followed. This difficulty constitutes the interest of the *Dialogues* and the meat of this article. For purposes of my analysis, I take the difficulty of the text as given, then guided by its opening signals, I look at it. I do not try to resolve the difficulty, but I note where the difficulty comes from as a linguistic construct and then I try to situate that discovery in the context of concerns expressed within the three dialogues.

Before the first of the three dialogues is a preface of several pages entitled "Du Sujet et de la forme de cet écrit." And before that is a paragraph to readers that takes the form of a prayer:

Si j'osois faire quelque prière à ceux entre les  
mains de qui tombera cet écrit, ce seroit de vouloir bien le

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes, Vol. I Les Confessions; Autres Textes autobiographiques*, ed. B. Gagnebin, M. Raymond (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1976), pp. 657-992. Hereafter I refer to the text in whole as the *Dialogues*. Robert Osmont, in his introduction to the Pléiade edition of this work (I: p. lvi-lvii), sees in the *Dialogues* the expression of a paradoxical wish. Michel Foucault's introduction to *Rousseau Juge de Jean Jacques* (Paris: Colin, 1962) emphasizes the contrast with the *Confessions* which he characterizes as *parlées*, whereas these are *écrits* and labyrinthine (p. viii). Peggy Kamuf, "Seeing Through Rousseau," *Esprit Créateur*, XXVIII (4) 1988, 82-94, points out the paradoxical nature of the project of showing sight. James F. Jones in *Rousseau's Dialogues, An Interpretive Essay* (Geneva: Droz, 1991), concentrates on the difficult nature of the text. As part of a rhetorical study of politics, Carol Blum in *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1986) sees the *Dialogues* as "an unchecked expression of hatred against others" (p. 265). Michèle Lorgnet's "L'Écrivain et la norme: la subversion de la temporalité comme phénomène asocial dans les *Dialogues* de Rousseau," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, Vol. 264 (1989), p. 1166-1169, situates this text in relation to grammatical theories of the *philosophes* and finds in it "une volonté de déconstruction totale."

lire tout entier avant que d'en disposer et même avant que d'en parler à personne; mais très sûr d'avance que cette grace ne me sera pas accordée, je me tais, et remets tout à la providence<sup>2</sup>.

If I dared make some prayer to those into whose hands this writing will fall, it would be that they be willing to read it through entirely before disposing of it and even before speaking of it to anyone. But, very certain in advance that this grace will not be accorded to me, I remain silent and leave everything to providence.

A contradictory prayer introduces the *Dialogues*. Formally and intuitively a prayer suits this text since every prayer may be called a dialogue. But in the language and tropes of this statement we have a highly concentrated résumé of several important concerns of the *Dialogues*, a relationship which is not stated and cannot be apparent to any reader who has not struggled through the text that follows.

Not much about this one long sentence is regular. It starts as a condition, a negative condition of the contrary-to-fact kind. "If I dared" implies the opposite, that I do not. But there remains the prayer, so the statement negates its claim. In the most ordinary formulation, conditional sentences have the same subject in the two parts, technically known as the protasis and apodosis. This sentence does not observe that form but puts "it" instead of "I" as the subject of the condition's second part. Formally, this amounts to a correct and acceptable substitution of one subject for another.

In the wish expressed as what the prayer would be, the speaker asks for a change of heart in those who might find this work. In particular he asks for a willingness to read, an attitude to precede an action. Then, an opposition to the wish arises because the speaker is very certain, we do not know how, that this will not occur. Finally, a result of that certainty, the speaker claims to remain silent and to leave everything to providence. A contradiction involving silence, therefore, ends the prayer. To leave everything to providence is a prayer, which the opening words claimed the speaker dared not make. A promise of silence at the beginning of a three-hundred-odd page plea to readers is not genuine.

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<sup>2</sup> *Dialogues*, p. 658.

The next section of the text, still not the *Dialogues* but the prefatory statement "Du Sujet et de la forme de cet écrit," repeats the denied prayer, this time in the form of a negative wish with echoes of the earlier statement:

Je ne sais quel parti le Ciel me suggerera, mais j'esperai jusqu'à la fin qu'il n'abandonnera pas la cause juste. Dans quelques mains qu'il fasse tomber ces feuilles, si parmi ceux qui les liront peut être il est encore un coeur d'homme, cela me suffit . . . ."<sup>3</sup>

I do not know what part heaven will suggest for me, but I shall hope to the end that it will not abandon the just cause. Into whatever hands [heaven] may make these pages fall, if among those who will read them there is perhaps one human heart, that is enough for me . . .

By its important position, for it concludes the extra textual comment, this statement underlines the acknowledged need for divine help. But the plea does not invoke a muse; it asks for help not to write the work but to dispose of it in an unspecified future when it will fall into hands far from its author.

In Rousseau's text one more moment stands out for similar language and spirit, once again at a position which amplifies its weight. After the end of the *Third Dialogue* an addendum called "Histoire du Précédent écrit," offers a gothic-style short story *avant la lettre* of the author's attempt to dispose of the manuscript<sup>4</sup>. As he tells it he went to Notre Dame at two o'clock by the side door and found to his horror a grill he had never noticed which blocked his access to the side altar. His plan had been to leave on the altar his manuscript of these dialogues which carried a note headed "DÉPOT REMIS A LA PROVIDENCE," an indication that he was not giving it up but handing it over for safekeeping<sup>5</sup>. The narrator tells that he left the

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<sup>3</sup> *Dialogues*, p. 666.

<sup>4</sup> *Dialogues*, p. 977-989.

<sup>5</sup> To argue that the word "*dépot*" proves the manuscript was not to be handed over indefinitely follows from the frequent repetition of "*dépot*" in this part of the text.

church building vowing never to return and ran around Paris aimlessly for the rest of the day before going home to collapse in fatigue and sadness. At the end of this document, the *histoire*, Rousseau's last words are that he will abandon even the honor of his name and his future reputation.

These ancillary parts of the *Dialogues* tell us what to look for and what to make of what we find. The three conversations do not make easy reading, but themes that we have already noticed can be followed as organizing threads.

In all the *Dialogues* we have the same two interlocutors: the one called ROUSSEAU<sup>6</sup> whom we are not to confuse with Jean Jacques, the person being discussed, who stands accused of crimes. The other speaker is designated simply as "un Français." In mental capacity and quickness of wit the two are badly matched. ROUSSEAU sets the agenda, controls the pace of discussion, points out his partner's imperfect reasoning and he also does most of the talking.

The first *Dialogue* pursues, but not for a while, the problem of proof, the question of how one may know that something is so, and is to be believed. The idea of being "certain in advance" which opens this text is explored by both participants. The subject arises because ROUSSEAU wants to hear about Jean Jacques to prove that the person who wrote good books could not have committed crimes. In other words, he sees resemblance as a form of proof. By asking le Français for proof, he finally uncovers a practical problem: le Français has never read the books. In passing, ROUSSEAU notices that Jean Jacques is a kind of victim: every gift made by force is a theft and he has been forced to give up his good name<sup>7</sup>.

In the second *Dialogue* ROUSSEAU extends the same reasoning that depends on resemblance as a means of understanding a relationship. This time ROUSSEAU explains that Jean-Jacques is a moral man unlike anyone else ROUSSEAU knows. Implied here is an explanation: people fail to understand him because he is singular. Then a new technique shifts the focus. Rather than deny any charges

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<sup>6</sup> In this paper, I designate as ROUSSEAU the participant in the dialogues, to distinguish this character from the historical Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

<sup>7</sup> *Dialogues*, p. 746: "Or tout don fait par force n'est pas un don, c'est un vol."

ROUSSEAU criticizes the accusation. When ROUSSEAU makes this change, he evokes the discontinuity in the prefatory prayer. Each criticism is turned around at *le Français*. What are introduced as moral flaws are now transformed and presented as coming from another domain. *Le Français* reports, for example, that people say Jean Jacques is lazy. Of course he is, explains ROUSSEAU, in keeping with the temperament of solitary people. In other words, the criticisms are shown not to apply or to be inadequate because they leave out considerations of sentiment.

The nature of the shift that takes place in the second *Dialogue* evokes the double meaning of the root of the word for criticize. The Greek word *krinein* means "to judge" but also "to choose" (the sense from which the English word "crisis" derives). The former friends of Jean Jacques criticize him in their judgmental pronouncements. Now ROUSSEAU tries to force "*le Français*" to analyze what they have said and to choose which meaning he will put to the facts of character of Jean-Jacques.

ROUSSEAU continues his concern with proof and certainty. But once he has shifted the grounds for judgment, his own thinking has to change. "At first I wanted to get to know the author to make up my mind about the man, and it is through my acquaintance with the man that I made up my mind about the author." According to his reformed way of reasoning, the man is of a fine character and therefore his books must be good. As in the first *Dialogue*, resemblance is taken as proof.

Finally in the third *Dialogue*, the shortest, *le Français* reports that he has read the books. He demonstrates by quotation that many groups are hostile to Jean-Jacques. ROUSSEAU, who has already proven that the books are good, explains that Jean-Jacques's enemies, not his books, explain the alienation.

In the *Dialogues* a prolonged and elaborate self-defense seems overkill compared to the reported crimes; there is a question of authorship; a complaint about a forced gift. In terms of the text overall the imagined melodrama about the fate of the manuscript and into whose hands it might fall appears unrelated. Yet we all know very well that elsewhere in Rousseau's writings we learn a great deal about an error for which he suffered, which also has to do with authorship in its way and with anxiety about into whose hands an entity will fall.

I mean the big offense which haunts Rousseau's *Confessions*,<sup>8</sup> the abandonment of his children. Rather than assert the similarity as a theoretical construct, I want to examine how ROUSSEAU describes what he did with his pages but not as figurative language. I want to compare his account of his actions with what is known about how people did abandon children in 18th-century France.

To see in these *Dialogues* a meditation on that other act does not stretch the evidence nor does it depart from what I have shown to be the big shift within the argument, to criticizing his critics and asking le François to substitute a new way of choosing what is true. Substitution requires abandonment: if we put one view or one anything in the place of another, then the original place-holder is abandoned<sup>9</sup>. We can observe that abandonment is a condition of substitution.

To abandon children in Paris in the 18th century has to be seen as a practice more than as a crime. Rousseau talks a great deal in his *Confessions* about something which many people did without saying a word. From *Mémoires sur les hôpitaux de Paris* we know that the numbers were huge<sup>10</sup>. A modern article by Jean Meyer proposes that 20 to 30 percent of registered births in Paris represent children known to be abandoned, an estimate which appears conservative compared to others<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> See *Confessions*, Book XII, p. 702 and *Emile*, Book I.

<sup>9</sup> Not in the *Dialogues* but in the Preface to *Narcisse* Rousseau refers to his youthful writings as children: "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 envoie chercher fortune, sans beaucoup s'embarrasser de ce qu'ils deviendront." *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. II La Nouvelle Héloïse, Théâtre--Poésies, Essais Littéraires (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1978), p. 963.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques-René de Tenon, chirurgien, *Mémoires sur les hôpitaux de Paris* (Paris: Royez, 1788). For a presentation of figures showing a sharp increase in the second half of the century see Y. Saint-Geours, *Musée de l'Assistance Publique de Paris* (Paris, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> Jean Meyer, "Illegitimates and Foundlings in Pre-Industrial France," pp. 252-253 in *Bastardy and Its Comparative History*, ed. Peter Laslett et al. (Cambridge, Mass., 1980). For a discussion of Meyer's figures

In Paris today material evidence associated with the practice of abandonment is on view at Le Musée de l'Assistance Publique<sup>12</sup>. Paintings and other artifacts displayed there remind visitors that the most famous place for leaving children was *Les Enfants Trouvés* which was located in what is now the space in front of Notre Dame<sup>13</sup>.

As with any widely repeated act in France, the act of abandonment usually involved some accompanying documents. Typically there was left attached to the baby a kind of prayer in writing addressed to the person into whose hands the baby might fall. This might show the name given to the baby and urge the finder to treat it well. Often the paper was torn so that it might one day be matched up with the other half of the document being retained by the parents. The implied hope was that some day the parents would come and find the child. Technically, parents retained the right to do so. In reality, this seldom happened. For one thing, any parents who might come to retrieve children from institutions, then owed for the years of care, feeding, clothing, instruction and the rest. Another reason for leaving documents or other recognizable objects--I have seen medals, necklaces of shiny beads, pale red for girls, blue for boys--was to avoid incest. People feared that these children, not knowing their parents, might one day by accident marry a sibling. The main point of these objects and prayers, for our purposes, is that they illustrate that when people left children it was, for appearance's sake at least, as a *dépot*, an object left for safekeeping, in the hope of one day being retrieved.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who abandoned five children, marked the swaddling clothes of one and he did attempt, in vain, to find that

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in relation to others see John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers* (New York: Random House, 1988), pp. 15-17.

<sup>12</sup> See note 10 above. The Archives of L'Assistance Publique are, at the moment, without a curator and therefore not accessible. The conservateur of the Musée de l'Assistance Publique, M. Valjean, gives assurances that the artifacts on display represent many, many more of the same kind in the museum's holdings.

<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault (see note 1) refers to Notre Dame as *un lieu anonyme* (p. ix). For my argument the place evokes the famous orphanage nearby.

first child<sup>14</sup>. (By then the child in question would have been 15 or 16 years old.) The *Dialogues* themselves insist on integrating kinds of evidence involved in such a search: his concern with resemblance as a form of proof leaps to mind. Certainly the whole question of authorship can easily be associated with questions of paternity. The odd self-denying prayer which stands at the head of the *Dialogues* repeats in spirit and in language the documents one finds attached to babies about to be left. This implied re-enactment elucidates the inexplicably charged story of trying to leave the manuscript on the altar at Notre Dame, very near *Les Enfants Trouvés*. It helps us understand his anguish at not being able to leave the small package with its note labelling it a "DÉPOT REMIS A LA PROVIDENCE," a designation which suits an abandoned child. When the *histoire* tells that the narrator wandered around Paris bewildered, that reaction is not easy to associate with not being able to let go a parcel.

If we see these *Dialogues* as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's re-experiencing of his leaving his children, we can recognize a matrix for several important themes--with the abandoning of the manuscript, ROUSSEAU's concern with proof, with clearing his name for posterity. We see as well his inability to deal with past errors in order to avoid repeating them (remember Rousseau did this five times), and we understand differently his elaborate defense of not trying to make money and his insistence on the damage done to one's reputation by unflattering and imperfect likenesses (some people might see in those words a definition of children).

The long self-defense in this text goes beyond the crimes that are mentioned. Its long discussion of authorship and the use of resemblance as proof have been substituted for a discussion of a different offense. Rousseau's former friends, now his enemies, have done him great harm, he admits. But they did so unjustly because they judged his actions and not his heart<sup>15</sup>. A man so unlike other people--dissimilarity proves difference--cannot be criticized fairly if the same

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<sup>14</sup> See the letter dated June 12, 1761, to his friend Mme. de Luxembourg, in *Correspondance générale*, éd. Théophile Dufour (Paris, 1924), Vol. 6, pp. 146-149. See also the chronologie of Vol. I of the *Oeuvres complètes*, p. cx.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of Rousseau's changing the relation of writer to reader, but not in relation to the *Dialogues*, see Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), pp. 215-263.

standards are applied to him as to others. ROUSSEAU asks le Français and the world to consider the great sufferings of Jean-Jacques and to practice a new kind of assessment by sentiment. He asks us to abandon the old ways of judging and choose a new style of criticism for a new kind of man.

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