Literature and the "Natural Man"
In Rousseau's *Emile*

*La littérature et le savoir de notre siècle tendent beaucoup plus à détruire qu'à édifier.*—Preface to *Emile*
Rousseau's concept of art has been obscured by its more striking counterpart—nature. Idealized as the absolute measure of man and society, it is related in the history of ideas to eighteenth-century utopianism and is interpreted autobiographically as the subconscious attempt by Rousseau to justify his own maladjustment and initial lack of success in Paris. Despite the disproportionate significance attributed to nature and art in Rousseau's thought, they constitute, in my opinion, two cutting edges of the same sword raised against established authority and tradition. This view is based upon the contention that Rousseau conceives of art in a systematic way. I propose, first, to elucidate his theory of art and, then, to examine it for consistency in *Emile*, where literature is utilized in educating the "natural man."

Rousseau's theory of literature, as introduced in the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (1750), issues from a broad sociological perspective that identifies government and art as the two main forces in society. Compared by Rousseau to the body and the soul, they are meant to complement one another in rendering man a well-integrated, happy being. Their balance in power results in liberty. However, instead of offering moral examples worthy of art's originally benevolent function of promoting mutual respect and understanding, Rousseau feels that art has traditionally collaborated with the government in ruling the majority (3:6). Supposedly, the artist forfeits his independence for the comfort, leisure, and
luxury necessary to the cult of art. In exchange for royal patronage, he not only turns his back on the general interest but blinds man to the reality of an eroded freedom by preoccupying his mind with aesthetic illusions. Elegant architecture justifies tyranny, and heroic paintings give the impression that virtue still endures (3:12, 22). Tragedy glorifies aristocracy and teaches man that he is not free; the clowns of comedy make the people forget its misery and leaders (pp. 174, 140). In short, the arts “étendent des guirlandes de fleurs sur les chaînes de fer” (3:7). Royal authority is rendered absolute when art establishes its own value system based upon the socioaesthetic “virtues” or politesse, bienséance, goût. Enforced through the king’s arm in society, the salon, they prevent any united resistance to his will by controlling social conduct, segregating citizens along sociocultural lines, and by effacing the general moral system of values.⁸

Rousseau’s conspiratorial theory of literature continues its radical course in the Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité (1755) where the origins of art are put on trial. Rousseau frees mankind from the demoralizing guilt of a crime committed against God through the implied concept of a founding “political sin.” He accuses the original founders of the “social state”—“les plus capables” and “quelques ambitieux”—of forcing the innocent majority out of nature’s paradise, “la société naissante,” and into the political state, which is corrupted on purpose through a false pact, one calculated to perpetuate and magnify the initial advantage of those emerging from nature first (3:178). As their supposed spiritual descendants, the philosophes are enjoined to atone for their part in the “political sin” by renouncing patronage (“pour le poète, c’est l’or et l’argent”) in order to represent the best interests of humanity (3:171). Primary condemnation falls implicitly on royalty and salon society as the major inheritors of the first elite who institutionalized their privileges in the “social state” as “les riches.”⁴

Of the three powers in collaboration against the general
good, the salon is regarded evidently by Rousseau as being the most vulnerable to attack and most offends his principle of nature and personal sensitivities. Rousseau’s campaign against the salon is unleashed in the Premier Discours, where he openly denounces the excessive, unnatural power of “une jeunesse frivol,” the salon, to decide the fate of literary works (3:21). His recommendations to institute independent academies or restrict creativity to the genius aim at neutralizing its influence. The thrust continues in the Second Discours, in which such rustic ideals as family love, patriarchal authority, and simplicity are presented as conforming to man’s natural goodness; and, by implication, the salon values of goût, bienséance, and politesse become corrupt deviations. So too the salon’s interpretation of sociabilité is challenged by Rousseau in the Notes, where he supports as a viable option the abandonment of society and return to nature in the form of an agricultural community (3:207).

Rousseau’s revolt against tradition both in politics and aesthetics, as embodied in the salon, reaches its violent climax in his third major work—the Lettre à d’Alembert sur les spectacles (1758). Rousseau censures the French classical theater for its monarchical, salon ethic that undermines the values of a republic as perceived by legitimate authority—the philosophe and the legislator. The salon assures its leadership in society, according to Rousseau, by demanding plays about love, the realm in which it legislates appropriate conduct. Racine’s Bérénice and Voltaire’s Zaïre are blamed by Rousseau for exaggerating the love interest to the detriment of “des intérêts d’Etat” (p. 159). Seeking only to please by mirroring polite society, the theater fails to awaken, in his opinion, the spectator’s conscience. As his prime example of the salon ethic dramatized on stage, Rousseau criticizes Molière’s Le Misanthrope by contrasting the deceit, slander, self-interest, corruption, and affectation found in Célimène’s salon with Alceste’s relative measure of virtue.

Although Rousseau concedes that the ideal of passionate
love is capable of elevating standards of conduct in a monarchy, its acceptance by Geneva would constitute a retreat from the higher ideals of love in a republic—la patrie and l'humanité (p. 218). Because dramatic art is bound to the traditions of a monarchical, salon society, Rousseau points to the necessity for a philosophic literature that would shun pure diversion, expose corruption, illustrate republican ideals, and disappear in a just society through lack of raison d'être. The dramatic spectacle would be replaced, as seen in the conclusion to the Lettre à d'Alembert, by popular festivals, and athletic associations would take the place of literary salons.

Although Rousseau's sociopolitical theory of art proceeds to its logical consequences, he is capable of altering his position on basic issues. For example, he denounces private property in the Second Discours as the source of crimes, wars, murders, troubles, and atrocities (3:164); yet, it is rehabilitated in Emile as the logical link between the material and intellectual spheres whose character enables the pupil to grasp his first concept (4:330). Literature performs a similar function in Emile's education. Because Rousseau proposes to form both "l'homme naturel" and "l'homme civil," a contradiction, literature proves to be indispensable in bridging the gap between natural virtue and moral conduct, sensation and sentiment, and independence and the demands of citizenship (4:29). Thus it would appear that nature and art are finally reconciled within the framework of Rousseau's pedagogical program.

The initial phase of Emile's education adheres strictly to the principle of nature. It aims at preserving man's innate goodness as seen in the "negative virtues" of happy ignorance and indifference to others, and it does not attempt to teach the child morality and truth but to protect his heart from vice and his mind from error (4:323). Because literature reflects the prejudices of society and deals with moral questions beyond the child's comprehension, it is prohibited from his learning experience. The method of "l'éducation négative" re-
quires, therefore, that Emile be separated from society and its art. To illustrate the inappropriateness of literature in elementary education, Rousseau evaluates the *Fables* of La Fontaine.

Consistent with his criticism of the theater, Rousseau reproaches the *Fables* for an art of imitation that reinforces unjust values. They fail to offer an elevating ideal of conduct and alternatives to the corrupt social code. Their wisdom is founded on conformity as manifested by cleverness and deception. In defense of his thesis, Rousseau analyzes the celebrated fable *Le Corbeau et le Renard*. His criticism of the fox resembles that of Philinte in his attack on *Le Misanthrope*. He is the *raisonneur*, the self-interested *philosophe*, the false friend, and the flatterer. He practices a double morality by saying one thing and doing the opposite. Just as Philinte represents the ideal of moderation, Rousseau believes that the fox becomes the hero of the little drama. Consequently, the child identifies with him—the charlatan (4:356).

Rousseau's exclusion of La Fontaine from Emile's education is only a provisional one. Just as the utility of the theater depends upon its sociopolitical context, the age of Emile determines the value of the *Fables* in his learning program. Unsuitable in his childhood, they play a crucial role in the development of Emile's judgment in early manhood. Before considering the problems arising from social relations, as dramatized in the *Fables*, Emile must first complete his apprenticeship in the rapports between man and things. From age twelve to fifteen, he moves from the level of sensations to basic ideas. This development requires a learning experience that will act as a transition between Emile's physical skills in nature and the material truths of society without arousing his passion or posing the complexity of moral decisions. The need is satisfied by Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. However, its choice and use do not reflect necessarily an acceptance of literature. They are governed by ideological rather than literary criteria.
In order to circumvent the problems of social man and protect Emile from false values, Rousseau proposes to teach only that part of the novel which deals with Crusoe's life on the island: "Ce roman débarrassé de tout son fatras, commençant au naufrage de Robinson près de son Isle, et finissant à l'arrivée du vaisseau qui vient l'en tirer sera tout à la fois l'amusement et l'instruction d'Emile durant l'époque dont il est ici question" (4:455). The novel is praised neither for its aesthetic beauty nor for its portrayal of tragic emotions but as an effective means to teach Emile "les vrais rapports des choses" (4:455). Rousseau uses Robinson Crusoe as a case history of Man without moral relations, freed through necessity from the habits, conventions and prejudices of society.

Crusoe's island functions as a laboratory, purified of influences alien to nature, where Emile experiences "les rapports réels et matériels" and invents the values needed to judge man in relation to objects. He holds an instrument in higher esteem than an art object and learns to measure a man's worth by the utility of his material contribution. Consequently, the artisan wins his admiration, and the artist incurs his scorn. This view, although acquired before the completion of his education, remains a permanent attitude on the part of Emile. Motivated probably by Rousseau's petty bourgeois resentment of the rich, its weight falls heavily on the artist and, by implication, heavier still on his patrons.

The tempo and difficulty of Emile's education increase dramatically after the Crusoe adventure. He must progress from the study of "objets sensibles aux objets intellectuels." But they involve the passions (4:524). At this point, Rousseau encounters a dilemma, for his method requires that all learning be based on experience. For example, Emile identified with the hero of *Robinson Crusoe* by living and dressing like him. Consistency would seem to require that Emile adopt now the habits and costume of a libertine. Again, Rousseau resolves the contradiction through literature. The student reads Plutarch's *Lives*. Unlike modern history, it reveals the man be-
hind the public figure and allows Emile to understand the often dishonest, vicious motives of conduct in society from a safe, objective distance (4:530). The Lives offer another advantage. Its individual histories lend themselves to the justification of Rousseau’s view of man as being “naturally good” but corrupted by society (4:525). Evidently, Rousseau will discuss with Emile only those great men who illustrate his doctrine.

Emile’s instruction in moral relations is complicated further by the appearance of l’amour-propre (4:536). At eighteen years of age, Emile can no longer be warned or corrected directly without challenging his self-esteem and, thus, provoking rebellion. Rousseau avoids the danger by using La Fontaine’s Fables. Just as the Lives assure Emile an objective distance from which to judge vice, the Fables enable him to evaluate his own mistakes in a disinterested manner by seeing them enacted “sous un masque étranger” (4:540). Through the presentation of selected Fables that correspond to Emile’s personal experiences, the teacher helps the adolescent to understand his errors of judgment without offending him. Hence, experience and literature work in concert. The utility of the Fables derives not from their preventive capacity but from the art of generalizing on a personal experience. They engrave its lesson on Emile’s memory and transform it into a moral principle (4:541).

Rousseau’s use of the Fables is contingent, however, upon two changes in their organization. He contends, first of all, that the moral attached to the Fables distracts from Emile’s freedom to reason and his pleasure of self-discovery (4:541). In order to rectify this supposedly philosophic weakness, Rousseau proposes to discard the Fables’ aphorisms just as he dismissed the beginning and end of Robinson Crusoe. Secondly, Rousseau rearranges the Fables into “un ordre plus didactique” so as to relate them better to the moral and intellectual needs of his student’s development (4:542).

The rise of Emile’s amour-propre, which necessitates indi-
rect analysis of his faults through La Fontaine's *Fables*, introduces the general subject of love. Emile will search soon for a mate, and his adolescent self-love must be extended to others as a mutual sentiment in "le véritable amour" (4:493). Emile has an advantage over the traditionally educated student because he has not been conditioned by literature's stylized portrayal of love. His "negative education" safeguarded him from the literary game of love with all its conventions. He has not mimicked emotions beyond his comprehension. Consequently, his feelings retain their natural, true character (4:505).

Although at a theoretical advantage in attaining "real love," Emile runs the risk of corruption if he is instructed through direct experimentation. Once more, Rousseau solves the inherent contradiction of his method through art. Emile's emotions and understanding of love are refined in Paris by attending the theater. This expedient makes Rousseau vulnerable, in view of his *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles*, to the charges of inconsistency and hypocrisy. However, in his dramatic criticism, Rousseau conceded the theater's ideal of love as an uplifting force in a monarchy, and Emile is not destined to live in a republic (pp. 174, 218). His Mentor will select no doubt the plays most appropriate to Emile's emotional development. The violent passions of the theater are mollified by Emile's reading of poetry, especially Italian poetry. It is meant not to embellish his mind for polite conversation but to render him capable of deep sentiments. Once imbued with the ideal of a complete relationship with a woman, he becomes immune to the illusory happiness of a love based upon self-interest (4:677).

The role of literature in preparing sexual roles is best defined in the education of Sophie, the future wife of Emile. Her ideal of the perfect man is derived from reading Fénelon's *Télémaque*. The hero constitutes an image of perfection that enables her to surmount temptation. Sophie's courtship by Emile is accompanied by reappearing analogies with *Té-*
léméaque. For example, he and his tutor seek shelter from a storm at the home of Sophie. Their arrival is compared by her father to that of Télémaque and Mentor on the island of Calypso (4:775). Similarly, after falling in love, Emile must leave (but only temporarily) because passion places the couple outside of nature, society, and philosophic moderation. Emile and Sophie err by giving no thought to their future responsibilities as parents and citizens.

It is concluded that Emile and Sophie are too young and immature for marriage; he is twenty-two and she, eighteen. By traveling for two years with his Mentor, Emile is to learn "les rapports nécessaires des mœurs au gouvernement" through direct observation and discussion of Montesquieu's De l'esprit des lois (4:850). Paradoxically, Emile must leave Sophie in order to love her completely. By finishing his education through the study of governments, it is implied that their marriage will be based on reason, social consciousness, and moral commitment. Emile postpones his natural inclination and, in doing so, elevates his love from the fiction of an illusory passion to a social act. Upon his departure, he and Sophie give each other symbolic gifts from among their favorite readings. Emile will study Télémaque, and Sophie, Addison's Spectateur (4:825). The exchange acts not only as an engagement; it signifies that Emile has yet to become a mature man and that Sophie must expand her view of the world beyond the desire for a personal, domestic bliss.

To summarize, the task of this study is to evaluate Rousseau's use of literature in educating the "natural man." Is it consistent with his conspiratorial theory of art? I maintain that Rousseau does not retreat from his basic position as introduced in the Premier Discours. His suspicion of collaboration between the artist, the throne, and the salon against the general good continues below the surface of Emile and erupts on occasion: "C'est le peuple qui compose le genre humain; ce qui n'est pas peuple est si peu de chose que ce n'est pas la peine de le compter. . . . Respectez donc votre especie; son-
Paradoxically, literature poses a major threat to Emile's education as a child but plays an indispensable role in forming his character and developing his sensitivity as a young adult. In Emile's development, art bridges the gap between nature and society. However, he is not exposed to literary works until his reason has been grounded on rational, material truths. Hence, the salon's socioaesthetic principles have no hold upon him. When Emile cultivates taste, it is merely for the purpose of acquiring another tool, *l'instrument* with which to expand his judgment and facilitate his adjustment to society (4:671). His appreciation of artistic beauty compensates, in part, for the loss of his rustic delights, but he negates the pretensions of taste to either a rational or moral foundation (4:677). Thus, Rousseau continues to undermine the authority of the salon "savantes, les arbitres de la littérature," in order to purge the enlightenment of its discriminatory social prejudices (4:673).

In conclusion, I maintain that Rousseau accepts literature and private property in his pedagogical program only in the sense of their originally benevolent functions as stipulated in the principles of *se plaire* and *la main d'œuvre* (3:6, 173). Through the study of selected works, Emile adds a social, moral dimension to his behavior that enables him to live in close approximation with his fellow man. However, Rousseau's
manipulation of literature in his "programmed" education poses another, broader problem especially when considering his definition of authority: "Qu'il croye toujours être le maître et que ce soit toujours vous qui le soyez. Il n'y a point d'assujettissement si parfait que celui qui garde l'apparence de la liberté; on captive ainsi la volonté même" (4:362). The recommendation of total control through deception together with Rousseau's recriminations against the rich and powerful make him vulnerable to the charge of preparing twentieth-century totalitarianism. However, such an interpretation of Emile would grant precedence to the novel's hypothetical implications without regard for its actual influences. The history of pedagogy verifies the positive, enduring impact of Emile. Rousseau's defense of individual differences and affirmation of a social mission in education have been respected as basic ideals in progressive teaching for two centuries. The severe restrictions imposed upon literature in Emile's education pay a negative tribute to its influence in the formation of social, political, and moral values. Despite its excesses, Rousseau's theory of art makes a contribution analogous to Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois*. He reveals the "spirit" of literatures that functions both as the effect and cause of customs and mores. Social progress, within his primary context of French absolute monarchy and its salon society, requires that the writer renounce patronage, align himself with the general interest, expose injustice, and offer constructive alternatives. As a vehicle of change, Rousseau composes the pedagogical novel, *Emile*, where the cultural attitudes of French classicism and its sociopolitical implications are laid bare. By increasing our awareness as to the rapports between literature and such determining factors as type of government, class structure, institutions, and economic conditions, Rousseau ranks with Montesquieu as one of the two foremost *philosophes* in the Age of Ideas who prepare the modern social sciences. It is a debt recognized by Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, and Claude Lévi-Strauss.

2. References to the Pléiade edition of Rousseau's *Œuvres complètes* are indicated by volume and page number. Those to the *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles* refer to *Du contrat social* (Paris: Garnier, 1962) and are indicated by page number.


