Abstract: Rousseau’s interpreters often disagree over whether the Emile prepares its protagonist for membership in the Social Contract’s political community or presents him as an alternative to it. I argue that such attempts to determine the compatibility of Rousseau’s different “projects” obscures his broader engagement with his contemporary popular audiences—particularly those associated with the theater and the novel—and the political implications therein. In contrast to the above debate, I turn to Emile to argue that in this work Rousseau attempts to shape readers in distinct and crucial ways. Emile does not simply present precepts to be embraced but intervenes into the underlying communicative dynamics that need to obtain for Rousseau’s conception of collective self-legislation. It does so by shifting between the theatrical and novelistic generic conventions identified in his prior engagements with popular audiences, thus generating a reading experience that orients readers to continuously revisit their constitution as a collective audience.

Introduction

Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s interpreters often argue that he advances a stark distinction between his vision of the life of the individual shielded from social corruption and that of the political community bound by a general will.1 Yet more than a claim about the substance of his thought, this distinction

Boris Litvin is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science at Northwestern University, Scott Hall 2nd Floor, 601 University Place, Evanston, IL 60208 (borislitvin2012@u.northwestern.edu).

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1See, especially, Judith Shklar, Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau’s Social Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Arthur Melzer, The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau’s Thought (Chicago: University of
shapes what readers make of his texts, say, of *Emile* and its education of the individual child and the *Social Contract* and its conception of political life. Compare, for example, Judith Shklar’s depiction of Rousseau’s two “models” of “man” and “citizen,” whose “incompatible” natures demand one choose “to adhere consistently to one mode of life” to “escape from his present disorientation,” and Frederick Neuhouser’s argument that the “projects carried out in *Emile* and *The Social Contract*” are consistent insofar as “the completion of Emile’s education requires his entry into the civil order” and thus that the former work prepares its protagonist for the attachments conceptualized in the latter. While offering differing conclusions regarding the relationship between the individual and the collectivity, these approaches share an interpretive assumption concerning the nature of Rousseau’s intervention in this relationship. Insofar as they seek to determine the compatibility of *Emile* and the *Social Contract*, both seek to reconcile the interactions depicted in the two works. In this sense, both take Rousseau’s works to promote “projects” to be embraced by readers. In turn, these projects “fit” insofar as the character Emile either stands apart from Rousseau’s conceptualized polity or joins its ranks.

This essay revisits *Emile’s* contribution to Rousseau’s oeuvre to challenge the shared interpretive tendency underlying the above disagreement. I argue that attempts to determine the compatibility of Rousseau’s different projects obscure the conceptual and rhetorical significance of staging in his thought and practice. By “staging,” I mean Rousseau’s engagement with how claims are made to circulate, how they affect audiences, and how such audiences come to associate beliefs with practices, especially when they interact with his own works. As Rousseau argues in his *First Discourse*, the fact that “every artist wants to be applauded” renders activity associated with sciences and arts inexorably corrupt when one “has the misfortune to be born among a
people and a time when … frivolous youth set the tone.”

Because Rousseau takes his social context to be dominated by the sort of frivolous spectator who “no longer asks … of a book if it is useful, but if it is well written” (FD, 58), attempts to present “useful” content alone fail to engage what Jean Starobinski calls Rousseau’s ongoing indictment of the “broken communication” of “mediated communion.”

In effect, the terms of the above disagreement obscure how Rousseau’s works attempt to affect what popular audiences do when they embrace certain content, be it aesthetic or political. I argue that the logic of these interventions (1) is crucial for understanding Rousseau’s conception of collective self-legislation and (2) requires us to attend to his distinct efforts to shape readers in *Emile*.

The political stakes of Rousseau’s evolving interventions occupy this paper’s first section, which traces his engagements with popular audiences organized around the dominant *spectacles* staged in his context—namely, those associated with the theater and the novel. My reading puts spectacle into focus because this term figures prominently in Rousseau’s works prior to the 1762 *Emile* and *Social Contract* and denotes a significant multiplicity of meanings. For one, it refers to a theatrical representation staged in public, such as a play. It is in this sense that the shortened title of Rousseau’s 1758 work usually translated as the *Letter to M. D’Alembert on the Theater* is *La Lettre sur les spectacles*. After all, this work considers the social dynamics of spectacles staged before particular audiences, whose content is thus shaped by generic conventions and whose effects are circumscribed by institutional limitations. Moreover, in Rousseau’s context, spectacle likewise indicates a notion of public ceremonies and celebrations beyond the theater. It is in this sense that the *Letter* concludes that republican festivals “let the spectators become a [spectacle] to themselves” in reconfiguring the theater’s problematic dynamics between passive audiences and mimetic actors. And finally, the term denotes an even broader notion of an object that catches and retains one’s attention.

STAGING *EMILE*
spectacle”¹¹ in articulating this work’s capacity to motivate readers into performing social duties.

Noting these multiple meanings, my argument draws upon approaches that argue for the centrality of spectacle in Rousseau’s political thought.¹² Yet beyond conceptual centrality, I elaborate Rousseau’s efforts to stage things anew as themselves an evolving political project. I argue that he not only offers theoretical accounts of spectacles but intervenes in their very staging; he attempts to render political visions legible by making audiences amenable to them. As Terence Ball observes, “Rousseau was not simply some sort of elitist attempting to reach an already existing audience of attentive readers. He aimed instead to create it by teaching whoever reads him attentively to be that audience.”¹³ Indeed, Rousseau’s “creation” of new audiences requires us to track his engagements with their experiences amid the dominance of the theater and the novel. As I argue, these engagements put even the activity of “attentive reading” into question when we consider his navigation of the sociopolitical dynamics that constitute an audience’s relationship to its own experience in Emile.

Turning to Emile, my second section argues that this work’s depiction of its protagonist’s education stages a significant political interaction for its readers. Emile does not simply present situations to be emulated or precepts to be embraced but endeavors to reshape its very readers, thereby intervening in the underlying communicative dynamics that need to obtain for Rousseau’s conception of collective self-legislation. It does so by shifting between the theatrical and novelistic genres scrutinized in his prior works, in turn orienting readers to continuously revisit their constitution as a collective audience as they move through this text. Rather than another “model” alongside the Social Contract, on my reading Emile challenges the very presumption that it might serve as a model for an already-constituted audience, instead rendering its audience a political problem unto itself. Attending to Rousseau’s efforts to shape audience capacities for active self-regard thereby reveals a dimension of his involvement in the dynamics of collective agency obscured by disagreements over the compatibility of his works.


1. Rousseau and His Audiences

The Letter to D’Alembert between Content and Orientation

The Letter advances an attack on Jean d’Alembert’s proposal in the Encyclopédie for a Genevan theater, which argued that properly regulated plays could “form the taste of the citizens and would give them a fineness of tact” beneficial to Genevan moeurs (LA, 4). Rousseau in turn confronts the notion that virtuous plays inculcate virtuous behavior. To do so, he turns to the experiences of theatergoers, tracking them across two dimensions. The first concerns the content audiences encounter, disputing the claim that plays depict virtue. The second concerns how audiences orient themselves to this content, attacking the theater’s habituation of passive spectatorship. Developing these claims, the Letter gives way to a broad inquiry into the place of spectacle in civic life, challenging readers to consider how the relationship between content and audience orientation could be made to serve civic ends. Given this multifaceted nature of the Letter’s argument, recent interpretations tend to agree that Rousseau’s thought is not naively antitheatrical, noting his recognition of the theater’s palliative function amid Parisian corruption14 and his approval of the wide-ranging theatricality of Genevan festivals.15 Yet Rousseau’s intervention extends beyond these institutional prescriptions. He further attempts to transform the audiences he encounters. Navigating this latter undertaking, the Letter continues to reconsider which content could actually inculcate virtue and how audiences could be oriented toward it, at last raising problems even for the spectacles it endorses. This investigation thus reveals conceptual challenges for Rousseau’s understanding of the people’s capacity to “be the author” of civic-relevant content—ultimately, its own laws16—while illuminating an audience’s transformation as a distinctly political project.

The Letter’s first dimension begins as a straightforward extension of Rousseau’s concern in the First Discourse. Just as there applause shaped the artist’s output, here the stage’s place as “a painting of the human passions” shapes the content on it: “if the painter neglected to flatter these passions, the spectators would soon be repelled and would not want to see themselves in a light which made them spite themselves.” In generating applause, an author “only follows public sentiment,” while an author willing to “brave

the general taste” ends up writing “for himself alone” (LA, 18–19). Thus Rousseau’s initial conclusion that theater “strengthen[s] existing national character” and its “inclinations” and “passions” (20).

Given that an assertion of Geneva’s virtuous “character” frames his argument, we might reason that Rousseau’s logic suggests the theater would reinforce such virtuousness while reinforcing corruption in, say, Paris. Rousseau, however, inverts this verdict. Asking readers to consider what takes place in the reception of content that generates applause, he introduces a second dimension of this audience’s experience: “In the final accounting, when a man has gone to admire fine actions in stories and to cry for imaginary miseries, what more can be asked for him? … Has he not acquitted himself of all that he owes to virtue by the homage which he has just rendered it? What more could one want of him? That he practice it himself? He has no role to play; he is no actor” (LA, 25). Applause, then, does not merely shape the content that appears on stage but also orients the theatergoer toward this content in a specific way. Rousseau’s rhetorical questions illustrate that to be a spectator involves certain behaviors: to cry, to identify with “imaginary miseries,” to (perhaps) recognize the virtuous actions of others. In short, to do everything but actually enact virtue. The second dimension of the theatergoer’s experience thereby suggests that this institution shapes its audiences. It orients them away from the very action it represents. Having “experienced” virtue, the spectator remains satisfied, isolated, and passive: “he is no actor.”

Rousseau’s concerns over the political implications of a passive audience orientation underlie his contrasting evaluations of spectacles. Because Genevans lack this orientation, he argues they would suffer from the transposition of virtuous deeds into representations to be consumed. Conversely, in Paris, “since preventing [theatergoers] from occupying themselves is to prevent them from doing harm” (LA, 59), the theater serves a palliative function for an inexorably corrupt society. This clear-cut opposition between Paris and Geneva, however, should not prevent us from noticing a more multifaceted engagement that unfolds over the course of the Letter—namely, Rousseau’s investigation of theater by means of his shifting postures as playwright, critic, and absorbed spectator who “never willingly missed a performance of Molière” (132). These different postures reflect an ongoing effort to conceptualize how one intervenes in audience experiences by shaping which content they find compelling and how they are oriented toward it, ultimately prompting Rousseau’s reconsideration of what constitutes a spectacle. Beyond its Paris-Geneva opposition, the Letter thus continues to revisit its two dimensions of audience experience, searching for ways to generate virtuous content and to reorient audiences away from passivity.

Rousseau develops the Letter’s first dimension by offering criticism of Molière’s Misanthrope, instead reimagining how a true enemy of viciousness should act in contrast to Alceste, the comically rigid character depicted in the play. This attempt at reinterpretation serves to illuminate the perversion of this character given spectators’ generic expectations: one could have
depicted a virtuous protagonist “but one had to make the audience laugh,” and so “truth” suffered for entertainment (LA, 41). However, this exercise also revises Rousseau’s initial approach in the Letter. Assuming the postures of Molière’s critic and playwright, Rousseau entertains the actual implications of a spectacle with virtuous content, at least in theory. His virtuous Alceste holds out a prospect of content independent of national character, prompting Rousseau to reconsider how audiences could be reoriented to render such content compelling. Even as he asserts his Alceste would “fail” given existing theatrical conventions, his engagement with The Misanthrope suggests a more dynamic understanding of the relationship between content and audience orientation. The consequent challenge is to explore the possibility of this relationship.

With this challenge in mind, Rousseau launches into a discussion of the theater’s relationship to gender and sexuality, suggesting that its use of “the love interest” grants women “the same power over the audience that they have over their lovers” (LA, 47). This assertion revises Rousseau’s earlier conclusion regarding the relationship between content and audience orientation. As he argues, “the sweet emotions” felt with theatrical depictions of love “are not in themselves a definite object, but they produce the need for one,” thus “[preparing] the way for its being experienced” beyond the stage (51). Such content remains “engraved in the depths of the heart [gravée au fond du cœur]” (52), seducing its audience. And while the presentation of this content fails to generate virtuous action insofar as it only motivates audiences to vainly abandon themselves to love, it nonetheless inspires action and indeed “can do much toward changing [moeurs]” (57)—at least for the worse. In contrast to the passive spectator who was “no actor” above, seduction now motivates spectators toward the enactment of content “engraved in the depths of his heart.” Such seduction thus bridges certain content with a capacity to reorient its audience, indeed transforming our spectator—into a bad actor, yet an actor nonetheless.

The Letter thus articulates two possibilities denied by its initial argument against the theater: virtuous content not reducible to existing sentiments (with Rousseau’s interpretation of The Misanthrope) and effective audience reorientation (with seduction), albeit not toward virtuous action. Moreover, Rousseau’s very language of content “engraved in the depths of the heart” suggests that the apparent incompatibility of these possibilities within the theater portends a more insidious civic problem. If theatrical seduction manages to engrave, but engraves only vicious content, then it does more than weaken existing moeurs: it reorients its audiences toward new objects of desire. Indeed, Rousseau’s language of “engraving” anticipates its subsequent use in the Social Contract. In the latter work, he will argue that the law, or the product of what he defines as a collective “act” wherein “the people as a whole makes rules for the people of the whole” (SC, 2.6) must be “[engraved] neither on marble or brass, but in the hearts of citizens [qui ne se grave ni sur le marbre, ni sur l’airain, mais dans les coeurs des citoyens].”
Theatrical seduction thus competes with another domain where it is necessary to engrave content: self-legislation. More problematically, theatrical seduction “engraves” an object that is necessarily detached from its audience, subverting the very sense of collective unity that underlies self-legislation. Rousseau’s conception of citizenship, then, needs to capture a similar capacity for seduction while avoiding the dynamics of corrupt audience orientation articulated in his criticism of the theater. Citizenship requires its own spectacle.

The Letter advances such a conception of citizenship by turning to Geneva’s public festivals. The trick is that this spectacle subverts the relationship between content and audience orientation that has obtained in his discussion. In explaining what “will be shown” in the festivals, Rousseau’s first answer is “nothing”: one might as well “plant a stake crowned with flowers in the middle of a square, gather the people together there, and you will have a festival.” In effect, we have dropped the presumption of some preexisting content affecting audiences to inculcate virtue or inspire subsequent action. Instead, this spectacle renders the audience itself the object of festivity: “let the spectators become a [spectacle] to themselves,” Rousseau asserts, explaining that the festival renders spectators “actors themselves” (LA, 126).

Rousseau’s “nothing,” in other words, indicates less an evacuation of content and more a reorientation of the audience. Requiring participants to direct their attentions to other participants, the festival renders action and spectatorship coterminous activities. This spectacle thereby attempts to preclude the very possibility of complacent, isolated spectators detached from the content presented to them. The festival indeed places something on display, but this content is not discreetly “shown” to anyone as such. Instead, the festival stages its audience.

If its audience’s activity is its very content, what does this spectacle actually show? While the festival enables Rousseau to begin conceptualizing a reorientation toward interactions underlying self-legislation, his vagueness about its concrete content should give us pause. It is one thing to claim that nothing is shown because no one is merely a spectator. However, to suggest nothing is shown invariably raises questions about what festivalgoers enact as their action inevitably materializes into “something.” Indeed, we should note that festive staging still does not enable Rousseau to integrate his own articulation of content unbounded from the generic limitations of the theater. If one need only “gather the people,” the virtuous Alceste again appears to have no place in this spectacle. Finally, Rousseau’s celebration of this spectacle becomes even more problematic as his discussion shifts from a hypothetical account to the particular case of the winter ball. Rousseau describes this Genevan courtship ritual, arguing that it could embody a similar festive dynamic if granted public authorization (LA, 129).

Cranston’s translation uses the term “inscribed,” departing from the French graver.
however, theatrical elements reappear: again, young people participate in “presenting themselves” for “spectators” albeit now with a certain “grace” identified as “salutary and befitting” (127–29). Rousseau proceeds to emphasize its differentiation of roles by encouraging dancers’ parents to attend, arguing that their spectatorship will grant balls an impression of public authorization, and going as far as to stipulate that married women participate only in judging and not dancing.

The case of the winter ball suggests that Rousseau’s dissolution of the spectator–actor distinction does not actually do away with either role. Rather, it attempts to combine the two. Unlike theatrical actors, the ball’s dancers function as spectators of other participants, just as its parental spectators are not simply an audience to be instructed (like d’Alembert’s theargogoers) but are themselves actors in a spectacle that constitutes the presentation of dancers. In this spectacle, all are actors, but some act as spectators. Yet this embrace of spectacle should still appear problematic. The celebration of distinct roles immediately following Rousseau’s conception of their festive dissolution should raise questions regarding why any given participant performs any given role as such. As Elizabeth Wingrove argues, we cannot simply reason that “nothing” is represented in Rousseau’s depiction of festive staging insofar as its organization of roles relies precisely on its participants’ performance of “sexual identity,” thus “[making] them unequal, as it makes them men and women, as it makes them ruler and ruled.” Indeed, this apparent inconsistency does not stop with Rousseau’s heteronormativity in asserting complementary male and female sexual identities or his sexism in setting these identities on unequal terms. More conceptually, this account seems unable to escape a hierarchical differentiation of roles. Festive staging claims to transform spectators into actors, but still relies on some to act as nothing but background spectators.

The Letter’s differentiated roles thus reveal a deep civic problem. Insofar as Rousseau has not heretofore articulated a natural sexual hierarchy, his embrace of festive inequality requires an account of how such roles are embraced by those who enact them in sexualized interactions identified with republican citizenship. While he insists that “in a republic, men are needed” (LA, 101), a staging of men premised on a staging of politically marginalized women requires Rousseau to make sense of how differences are deemed legitimate by actors whose identities he sees as conventional—unless, that is, they are reduced to a sheer “right of the strongest” the logic of which the Social Contract will reject. As Joan Landes argues, “Rousseau is far from a pedestrian misogynist. He did not just write about women. He wrote to them. And, by way of this address, he interpellated women as a

new kind of political and moral subject.” The challenge for interpreters is, then, to make sense of the relationship between his rhetoric in presenting such claims as legitimate and his articulation of the communicative dynamics of collective self-rule.

The Letter should thus leave us unsettled. On one hand, Rousseau endorses the festival to overcome a problematic audience orientation toward content. Festive staging indeed enables him to conceptualize an active and collective form of spectatorship. Yet the content necessary for such staging remains arbitrary. We still lack an account of how Rousseau could understand civic performances to become engraved “in the hearts of citizens” without falling back into his own criticisms of social life. It is with this problem that I now turn to his encounter with a different audience and his discovery of a new way to produce such engraving: that of the novel.

Julie and the Spectacle of Intimacy

Between the Letter’s festival and the Social Contract’s “form of association” where “each individual, while uniting himself with others, obeys no one but himself, and remains as free as before” (SC, 1.6) stands a monumental shift in Rousseau’s understanding of how popular communication can affect audiences. This shift requires us to account for what has been called “the biggest best-seller of the century”: his novel Julie, or the New Heloise. While the Letter has challenged a notion of content to be consumed by passive spectators, the Social Contract’s depiction of civic-minded individuals needs an account of self-obedience for its subsequent conception of the general will—of a phenomenon capable of engraving upon the heart. Rousseauian citizens need not only to enact (rather than simply observe) virtuous actions, but to do so with internal orientations that render them individually free.

Rousseau develops his understanding of an intervention into such internal orientations in his reflections upon the new ways in which Julie engages what he calls the “inner persuasion” of readers. It likely comes as no surprise that an epistolary novel featuring the slow development of a love triangle does not inspire interest in many political theoretical readings of Rousseau’s thought. Yet Julie’s relationship to Rousseau’s subsequent political work should command more attention. Here he begins to formulate an intimate and uniquely modern capacity to shape popular audiences absent in his prior reflections on communication and essential for his subsequent conception of collective self-legislation.

Much like the *Letter*, Rousseau’s discussion of *Julie’s* effect on readers considers the relationship between its content, the conventions that shape its style, and the corresponding reader orientations toward such content. Yet here, this relationship yields substantively different possibilities. As Rousseau’s imagined interlocutor in the work’s second preface exclaims, *Julie* appears not to contain the generic conventions one expects to see in a “good” novel: instead of “dramatic surprises” one encounters “a profusion of exclamations!” and “bombast” that likely strikes readers as forced (*NH*, 29). Rousseau, in turn, responds that such “vividly affected” speech reflects the “ways of seeing and feeling” of “Solitary Folk,” communicable only “in seclusion”:

Does it then follow that their language is highly forceful? Not at all; it is merely extraordinary. It is only in the world that one learns to speak forcefully. First of all, because one must say everything differently and better than others would, and second, because being obliged at every moment to make assertions one doesn’t believe, to express sentiments one does not feel, one attempts to give what one says a persuasive turn to make up for the lack of inner persuasion. (29)

While Rousseau’s indictment of the condition in which people compete to outwit each other echoes the *First Discourse*’s assertion that books are read only for style, *Julie’s* distinction between secluded and urban communication alters his prior identification of the logic of this condition. Interactions uncorrupted by amour-propre now appear wherever the social world ceases to exert its mediating force “the further one gets from ... large gatherings,” and thus where “many more novels are read” in ways that channel readers’ “inner persuasion.” As a result, Rousseau’s awkward “style” does more than depict the language of his specific characters but claims to embody the condition of readers where society’s “obstacles cease to be insurmountable” (32–33). It is the novel’s ability to engage readers in enduring isolation that distinguishes their uptake of its content from other media, shaping which content registers as meaningful. Rousseau thus asserts that for his characters to become “lovable ... you need to have lived a long time with them,” characterizing his newfound capacity to present characters that “reveal nothing but themselves” as a process wherein awkward yet genuine sentiment is “communicated to the heart by degrees” (31–32).

Rousseau’s discovery of such novelistic intimacy alters his prior indictment of corrupt audiences in two significant ways. First, in contrast to the *First Discourse*’s depiction of the frivolous reader who only asked if a book was well written, *Julie* differentiates the capacities of novelistic audiences from all others. The isolated reader comes to be uniquely suited for the novel’s effect. The identification of such a reader offers a different understanding of the relation between content and audience orientation from that of the *Letter*. For example, the *Letter*’s reinterpretation of the *Misanthrope* was offered as a theoretical alternative whose inability to conform to generic
conventions precluded its actualization. In contrast, Julie now champions the possibility of a communicative medium that offers “readers only tableaux of objects that surround them, only duties they can fulfill, only pleasures of their own station,” in turn “attach[ing] them to their own estate by making it seem congenial to them.” The consequences of such an attachment are politically significant: while the arts “seduce” audiences with the “pretended charms of an estate that is not their own” (NH, 34), the novel acquires a capacity to render the everyday lives of “Solitary Folk” likewise seductive. Rousseau’s Misanthrope could not be successfully depicted in the theater, but it turns out it can be novelized. Unlike the theater or the festival, the novel’s capacity to persuade readers to “fulfill the same functions … but to fulfill them with a changed soul” (35) sets the stage for “an authentically new spectacle” (31).

Rousseau’s presentation of his novel as a new spectacle highlights the fact that he marshals Julie’s distinctly persuasive relationship to its readers to bring about an audience reorientation that contends with that of the festival. This novelistic reorientation represents the everyday activities of isolated readers—activities from which novels were taken to offer a respite—as sources of seduction. Where the festival sought to turn its spectators themselves into a spectacle, Julie instead stages a representation of its audience’s own activities such that their sentimental attachment to these activities is “reborn in their hearts” (NH, 35). Indeed, this spectacle likewise entails an orientation toward performance: Rousseau’s readers do not simply read; rather, they enter a world where their “ami Jean-Jacques” circulates heartfelt letters open to heartfelt reader responses corroborating the authenticity of the sentiments depicted therein. Such an audience orientation appears uniquely suited for staging what Rousseau depicts as a newfound intimate and popular capacity for “unmediated communication” emerging among its participants.

Spectacle and Collective Self-Legislation

Rousseau thus produces two distinct visions of spectacles: the festival that reorients audiences toward enactment and the novel that reorients them

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21 Indeed, Julie was first conceived as a play that Rousseau ultimately abandoned; see Christopher Kelly, “Taking Readers as They Are: Rousseau’s Turn from Discourses to Novels,” Eighteenth-Century Studies 33, no. 1 (1999). As Paige argues, Julie “enables Rousseau to do what he had, in the Lettre à D’Alembert, held to be an impossibility: he has made a virtuous character appealing” (Nicholas Paige, Before Fiction: The Ancien Régime of the Novel [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011], 128).

22 See Darnton, “Readers Respond,” esp. 222.

23 Ibid., 233. The cultivation of such a capacity indeed suggests that isolation is not defined by distance from the city but rather by the process of novelistic absorption as such.
toward persuasion. In turn, these visions illuminate conceptual challenges in his subsequent account of collective self-legislation. In general, Rousseau’s concerns over how audiences encounter content appear across the Social Contract: when differentiating the will of all and the general will, we learn that people’s “deliberations” but not their “communication” yield a general will (SC, 2.3); likewise, when establishing the people’s relationship to the law, we learn that the general will’s enactment as law hinges on how the people are taken to “declare” something (2.6). These examples suggest that the communicative challenges introduced above continue to trouble Rousseau’s conception of collective self-legislation. Yet unlike the discrete visions articulated in the above works, in what follows, I argue that the Social Contract entails a dynamic navigation between the spectacles of enactment and persuasion.

To begin, the Social Contract conceptualizes a need to join the above audience orientations. For one, the general will cannot be represented by anyone other than the sovereign people, yet is articulated to the people insofar as it is something to which they “consent” and thus may take the form of “commands” (SC, 2.1). The general will thus cannot be expressed from without to a passive people—they must express it. Moreover, the general will’s “common interest” entails content that is meaningfully differentiated from “individual desires,” the dominant communication of which threaten to replace the general will with mere “private opinion” (2.4). Considered together, these two arguments suggest that the general will institutes a dynamic relationship between the content, expression, and uptake of the common interest insulated from a notion of discrete, individuated action against a backdrop of popular passivity. It is in this sense that self-legislation entails a relationship “between the entire body seen from one perspective and the same entire body seen from another”—a relation under which no single “part” could function only as the object or only the subject of law (2.6; italics mine). As in the theater, this “body” needs a reorientation away from the passive reception of content as much as it needs content that is enlightened and legible.

Like Rousseau’s festival, the production of the general will thus requires that observing and acting be collapsed into the same activity. Yet, as noted at the outset of the previous section, he asserts that such an interaction also leaves each of its members “as free as before.” Accordingly, he evokes another spectacle. Conceptualizing a lawgiver who “transform[s] each individual … into a part of a much greater whole, from which the same individual will then receive, in a sense, his life and his being,” Rousseau theorizes this figure’s specific capacity to persuade. Distinguished from “violence” and “convincing,” persuasion must be accessible to “popular idiom” and capable of reorienting the above “individual desires” without coercion (SC, 2.7). Persuasion thereby entails transformative communication distinct from both philosophical argumentation (which seeks to convince) and eloquent deception (which deprives its targets of freedom). Indeed, there is precedent
for such communication in Rousseau’s thought: his newfound spectacle of popular intimacy. Just as Julie rendered readers amenable to language that otherwise appeared simply “forceful” by way of continuous and seemingly ineloquent communication, the lawgiver enables Rousseau to conceptualize a popular reorientation of what registers as persuasive. In doing so, the Social Contract maintains that “each individual” can undergo a veritable social transformation in a context where the dominance of private opinion threatens to corrupt communication such that it is no longer sincere.

Collective self-legislation thus requires a combination of the above reorientations toward enactment and toward persuasion. Yet how are we to square Rousseau’s attempts to reorient audiences in two substantially different ways? That the Social Contract conceptualizes the need for such reorientations does not mean it offers an adequate solution to this need. We might remain skeptical—say, of Rousseau’s abstruse depiction of the transformation wherein “the effect would have to become the cause” such that the “social spirit” produced through social institutions “preside[s] over the founding of those institutions” (SC, 2.7). This seemingly miraculous inversion of cause and effect reflects a broader vagueness: while depicting an active and persuasive general will, Rousseau does little to conceptualize how the ostentatiousness of a festival could be combined with the intimacy of a spectacle that appears “the further one gets from … large gatherings.” Again, our interpretive challenge is to make sense of the relationship between the Social Contract’s conception of political life and Rousseau’s efforts to transform audiences whose present condition stands at odds with collective self-legislation.

This challenge, however, proves problematic. For one, the Social Contract’s own audience is obscure. As Robert Ellrich observes, this work exhibits a “curious lack of concern … with his reader as a figure to be dealt with, persuaded, swept along,” with Ellrich classifying its rhetoric as “private” and “meditative.” We may doubt that this work’s style implies a willful carelessness. Yet James Miller further suggests that because Genevan readers were on Rousseau’s mind as targets of the Social Contract, he “wished to compose a work abstruse enough to avoid attracting censorship” from Genevan authorities, thereby adopting the treatise genre to employ a distinctly abstract language in communicating his political vision. That is, less a “lack of concern” and more a self-conscious decision to keep at a distance from his audience. These observations are not meant to suggest the Social Contract

24For an approach that frames Rousseauian persuasion in relation to presocial musicality in contrast to the modern/novelistic reading here, see Christopher Kelly “‘To Persuade without Convincing’: The Language of Rousseau’s Legislator,” American Journal of Political Science 31, no. 2 (1987): 321–35.
does not employ rhetoric, whatever that could entail. Rather, they suggest that Rousseau’s adoption of a genre of abstract argumentation means that the Social Contract forgoes effecting the sorts of audience reorientations explored in the Letter and Julie, even while continuing to articulate their importance for self-legislation.

As Dorothea von Mücke asserts, Rousseau’s “condemnation of rhetorical play with language as well as of frivolous theatricality and contemporary semiotic discussion ask for generic innovation.”

Thus far, Rousseau has assumed different postures—playwright, critic, novelist, citizen—to articulate his political claims. The need to transform genres, however, suggests a broader political project. It is a need to transform his audience’s very encounter with content: to stage the reorientations he has conceptualized with figures like the lawgiver and interactions like the festival. As John Scott argues, “Rousseau consistently uses rhetorical and literary techniques that are meant to change the reader’s perspective”—indeed, I would add, to reconsider even what one does as a spectator undergoing a change in perspective. It is with this transformation in mind that I now turn to Emile. I argue that Emile does not only offer another evaluation of staging in a new setting—say, an individual one in contrast to the above collective setting. Rather, it does so while directing its maneuvers at its very readers, who find themselves reading a novel after having started reading a pedagogical treatise. In doing so, I argue, Emile stages an essential aspect of the self-regarding communicative relationship conceptualized in the Social Contract.

2. Emile and Generic Transformation: Effect Becomes Cause

In its broadest sense, Emile is a work that sets out on a two-and-a-half-decade account of the education of its imagined protagonist, Emile, from the perspective of his tutor, Jean-Jacques, who guides his pupil through a sequence of informative incidents while making asides to readers regarding his pedagogy and its implications. The motivation behind this project should look familiar given Rousseau’s concerns: the difficulty of simply communicating knowledge, let alone reason or virtue, to one’s audiences—indeed, the counterproductivity of such attempts. As Jean-Jacques observes during Emile’s infancy, even parents’ typical reactions to a crying child begin to inculcate nascent forms of domination. When we oscillate between caressing and force in response to a child’s cries, “either we submit to his whims, or we submit him to us… . Thus his first ideas are those of domination and servitude.


Before knowing how to speak, he commands; before being able to act, he obeys.”

As Janie Vanpée argues, Emile “is predicated on the recognition of the failure of transmission between parent and child.” Its challenge is thus to organize education such that interactions between the pupil and his world avoid replicating existing forms of domination, be it of the servant who is commanded or the spectator on whom content is imposed.

It should be evident that this challenge continues to engage the communicative concerns of Rousseau’s previous works, albeit in a new, pedagogical, context. However, attempts to draw connections between Emile and Rousseau’s prior arguments must make sense of the distinct generic tension at the heart of this work: between a treatise with lessons to be emulated by pedagogues-in-training and a novel that increasingly brings attention to the contrived nature of didactic pedagogy as such. As Allan Bloom has observed, Emile is “a Phenomenology of Mind posing as Dr. Spock”—yet, I would suggest, also a work that increasingly questions what such “posing” means for both types of projects. An attempt to square Emile’s lessons with Rousseau’s political conceptions must contend with Emile’s simultaneous appearance as pedagogical example and novelistic character, and thus with Emile’s orientation of its audience in two different ways. In approaching Emile with an eye toward this navigation, I argue this work recasts Rousseau’s concerns with staging, in turn casting enactment and persuasion as ongoing interactions caught up in the communicative dynamics explored in this essay.

**Pedagogy as Spectacle**

From its outset, Emile’s education translates Rousseau’s concern with the dynamics of staging into a new, pedagogical mold. Just as the Letter criticized the passivity of theatrical staging, here Jean-Jacques asserts that a tutor “ought to give no precepts at all; he ought to make them be discovered” (E, 52). Thus follow the young Emile’s “discoveries,” from his habituation to scary masks to his night games meant to habituate him against a fear of the dark. Inherent to all these lessons is their underlying organization: Emile is never to be placed in the position of one who is “taught” content but rather one who happens to reach certain conclusions given his interactions with his world. Even though such interactions are meticulously organized for his benefit, he is never conscious of himself as a spectator.

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disengaged from the circumstances at hand. Indeed, it is from this perspective on the uptake of educational content that Jean-Jacques argues against John Locke’s proposal to reason with young children. Absent the development of the child’s concrete interactions with their world, reasoning becomes merely an abstract tool to be manipulated in the service of any given desire. To speak, say, of “duty” first necessitates a child’s self-understanding as an actor capable of having duties—a role that must be cultivated through the child’s experience as actor rather than the assertion of reason as such. As Jean-Jacques contends, cultivation can only obtain if the child experiences a “well-regulated freedom” (92). Thus, again, the need for staging.

Nowhere are the dynamics of this “well-regulated freedom” more significant than in Jean-Jacques’s staging of Emile’s encounter with property. This encounter again returns us to Rousseau’s engagement with Locke in his need to turn “to the origin of property” in communicating its meaning to Emile. Agreeing that property is derived from labor yet seeking to avoid “stuff[ing] children’s heads with words which have no meaning within their reach,” Jean-Jacques instead introduces Emile to the practice of gardening. Jean-Jacques thus captivates Emile with a desire to grow his own vegetables in order to demonstrate that they now belong to him: “I make him feel that he has put his time, his labor, his effort, finally his person there; that there is in this earth something of himself that he can claim against anyone whomever” (E, 98).

At first glance, this looks like a clear-cut case of Rousseau’s resistance to passive spectatorship. Rather than instructing Emile about property, Jean-Jacques renders Emile a laboring agent by staging his creation of property in the context of his concrete activity of gardening. Yet this staging does more than simply make Emile an actor rather than a pupil to be instructed: to feel a connection between an activity he now understands as labor and a claim to possession is precisely to establish the affective language of persuasion in contrast to the abstract reasoning that Jean-Jacques holds at bay. As Jean-Jacques later explains, “it is easy to prove to a child that what one wants to teach him is useful; but to prove it is nothing if one does not know how to persuade him. In vain does tranquil reason make us approve or criticize; it is only passion which makes us act” (E, 183). Jean-Jacques thereby presents his education of Emile as the mutual constitution of active enactment and passionate persuasion, again echoing the Social Contract’s attempt to fuse the festive and intimate spectacles conceptualized in Rousseau’s previous works. Yet Jean-Jacques’s innovation is to present staging as a regular practice. Emile’s education consists of a persuasive organization of mundane objects and experiences that is ongoing; indeed, one that readers addressed as fellow pedagogues are to replicate with their own pupils.

Given this distinct mode of address, it should come as no surprise that Rousseau’s readers struggle to make sense of his apparent equivocation regarding manipulation at the heart of Emile. After all, Jean-Jacques frames this work’s conception of pedagogy resistant to domination through an
account of how he goes about continuously manipulating the work’s protagonist. For Emile to gain an active and persuaded orientation toward willing he must remain ignorant of the conditions mediating his experiences—and readers are now made to be “in” on this pedagogical spectacle’s staging. As Tracy Strong argues, readers are made to know this manipulation, and so before we advance any “criticism” of it, we must question “what Rousseau intends the effect of this knowledge to be on the reader.” Unlike the readers of the Social Contract, Emile’s readers are made to assume precisely the perspective of the agent executing the staging as they observe Emile’s growth through his tutor’s eyes.

Emile’s encounter with property, however, proceeds to take an unexpected turn that likewise disturbs the relationship between Jean-Jacques and Emile’s readers. Upon returning to their garden, Emile and Jean-Jacques find it destroyed and their plants stolen. Enter the enraged gardener Robert who tells them that this is in fact his garden, that he had long labored here, that Emile’s beans have destroyed his melons. What follows is a sudden narrative shift: Jean-Jacques offers a scripted conversation between the three in which Robert articulates his grievances, Emile comes to understand that he was not the land’s first occupant, and then the three reach a settlement. Jean-Jacques concludes this episode by calling it a “model” (E, 99) for tutors to inculcate property relations in pupils. Yet the formal characteristics of this “model” are significant. Readers are not simply instructed on how to stage events for Emile; rather, these events are presented in a way that catches them by surprise, too. It is as if Jean-Jacques’s activation of Emile’s identification with gardening overtakes its exemplary function and instead renders Emile’s education a novel. Or, as if Jean-Jacques’s “model” for staging persuasive identification now exceeds its dyadic relationship between tutor and student and gives way to the persuasion of a collective readership established with Julie’s “authentically new spectacle.”

Or, in other words: who, here, is being persuaded? And of what? One key contextual feature of Rousseau’s composition of Emile provides insight into this narrative shift: Rousseau first wrote Emile squarely as a didactic treatise. In fact, the character Emile was not prominent, and the work read rather like an instruction manual with philosophical digressions—that is, a text that followed more in the tradition of Locke’s Some Thoughts concerning Education rather than, say, Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe. The fact that Rousseau then decided to make his treatise increasingly (as we shall see) novelistic emphasizes the questions posed above. Insofar as this work was conceived to place its readers in the tutor-like position of grasping and replicating Jean-Jacques’s uses of staging, its novelization should leave interpreters asking how those engaging in such staging likewise continue to function as

audiences—indeed, audiences in need of persuasive reorientation.\textsuperscript{33} The remainder of this section thus turns to investigate the implications of this narrative shift.

\textbf{The Magician and the Contract: Staging a New Audience}

Emile is now entering adolescence, and it is time for him to learn about the sciences. After observing the magnetic properties of iron, Jean-Jacques takes him to a fair to apply his knowledge. Here, in the work’s longest novelized account so far, the two watch a magician make a wax duck move in a tub of water and conclude that they can replicate his trick with their own hidden magnets. The two thus plan to return and to expose the magician before a large crowd. Again, however, readers are in for a surprise. When Emile tries to perform his trick the following day, the duck floats away from him, exposing Emile before jeering spectators. The embarrassed Emile and Jean-Jacques thus flee the scene only to later meet the magician, who berates the two, saying that they should know better than to attempt to trick “a man who has spent his life practicing this paltry trickery”: he always has additional tricks “for the proper occasion, and after this one I have still others to stop tactless young men” (\textit{E}, 174). Thus disciplined, the two return to the fair the next day content to do nothing but watch the magician and appreciate their knowledge of his manipulations.

What, exactly, has been staged in this episode? On one hand, Emile’s (mis)application of his scientific lesson serves to persuade him of the limits of his knowledge and to temper his emerging amour-propre. Yet readers might remain unconvinced. As Rousseau’s skeptical contemporary Samuel Formey pointed out, this encounter makes little practical sense: are we simply to believe that a prideful magician is invested enough in this child’s education that he “gravely sermonizes” him on his conceit? And even if we do accept the plausibility of this character, how are we to ensure that “our” pupil encounters him? In a mocking note for \textit{Emile}’s subsequent edition, Rousseau responds to this criticism to clarify the terms of his staging: Formey failed to see that “this little scene was arranged and that the magician had been instructed about the role he had to play; for, indeed, I did not say so. But on the other hand, how many times have I declared that I did not write for people who have to be told everything?” (\textit{E}, 487). While Rousseau’s note

\textsuperscript{33}The distinction between “philosophical” and “novelistic” pedagogical texts and readerly expectations is, of course, itself caught up in broader generic shifts unfolding in Rousseau’s context. While this essay limits its scope to the relationship between \textit{Emile}’s generic innovations and Rousseau’s conception of self-legislation, a fuller examination would trace \textit{Emile}’s engagement with an evolving pedagogical genre. For an approach especially attentive to this engagement, see von Mücke, \textit{Virtue and the Veil of Illusion}. 
ostensibly renders the magician’s character plausible, it also alters how we understand Emile to engage the audience it has thus far charged with emulating Jean-Jacques’s examples. Insofar as these examples were meant to stage Emile’s education, it is now revealed that Jean-Jacques has withheld information from readers, challenging them to approach the work as those who do not “have to be told everything.” From this perspective, the novelization of Emile’s encounters serves as a misdirection for readers—a staging of its own. If readers criticize this encounter’s plausibility, then (the mocking Rousseau asserts) they have become seduced by the persuasiveness of an unreliable narrator: Jean-Jacques. In supposing themselves to be charged simply with replicating his lessons, they have failed to notice that his celebration of staging has problematized the very logic of direct, unmediated communication upon which such replications would be premised. They have failed to tell the didactic treatise from the novel.

Indeed, a number of Emile’s interpreters note that this work seems to invert its apparent pedagogical framing in the service of a pedagogical end directed squarely at readers. These misdirections are taken to cast readers as pupils and Emile’s growth as “an allegory of [their] own evolving understanding”;34 or to educate readers to see things anew and to question what appears as unmediated “experience” in making sense of social phenomena;35 or, more broadly, to recognize “the mediation of language and fiction” in their experience of “reality and truth.”36 Disputes over the pedagogical aims of this inversion aside, what emerges is a shared understanding that Emile’s narrative shifts effect a displacement of the reader’s relationship to Emile’s education. Having started the work addressed as tutors, readers find themselves undergoing the very communicative challenges that motivate Jean-Jacques’s pedagogical project, thus likewise cast as targets of Rousseauian staging.

While I follow these interpretations in arguing that Emile turns on readers themselves, it is crucial to notice that this inversion introduces a foundational tension in Rousseau’s use of staging. Insofar as Emile’s readers undergo a Rousseauian “education,” they find themselves in a precarious position: against Emile, they become privy to Jean-Jacques’s explication of the logic of his manipulations; yet with Emile, they are made to fall prey to these manipulations, finding themselves likewise surprised by Robert and tricked by the magician. Thus they are made to embrace two substantively different perspectives on Jean-Jacques’s reorientation of his pupil. As Denise Schaeffer argues, Rousseau “turns us away from the deceptions that surround us by seducing us with new ideals of happiness and freedom” while “wean[ing] us away from dependence even on these ideals by drawing attention to

34Vanpée, “Rousseau’s Emile,” 173.
their limitations and showing why they are nonetheless necessary.” Yet if this dual engagement amounts to the reader’s education, then it is never aligned with that of Emile, who remains ignorant precisely when readers are made to see each encounter for what it (apparently) is. Indeed, the magician’s assertion that he has additional tricks “for the proper occasion” might well serve as metacommentary for the dynamic at play. For Emile, this assertion signals the need to accept his position as spectator to the magician’s spectacle, while for Jean-Jacques’s reader-pedagogues it signals the need to resist the seduction of any novelized encounter—to stay one step ahead of Emile in making sense of the spectacle’s staging.38 In effect, Emile’s narrative forces readers to oscillate between these two perspectives as they proceed through the treatise-turned-novel.

These oscillations enable Emile to stage the arguments advanced in the Social Contract in a substantively different light. Consider, for example, Emile’s depiction of how Jean-Jacques renders his authority itself an object of Emile’s education as his pupil nears adulthood—an interaction that appears to mirror the Social Contract’s account of the lawgiver. Echoing the former work’s directive to use persuasion, Jean-Jacques imagines delivering a fervent speech to render his (now apparent) manipulations persuasive. He thus advises “overflowing sentiments” to “engrave [grave au fond de son cœur] the memory of what you say to him in the depths of his heart” (E, 323). Emile’s novelized response in turn appears to reenact the Social Contract’s conception of public enlightenment: he exclaims that Jean-Jacques “had this authority up to this time only due to my weakness” but now “shall have it due to my will,” thus asking him to “force me to be my own master” (325).

At first glance, we may suppose that Emile’s assent offers readers a depiction of an autonomous, “persuaded” will. Yet here Emile again oscillates between the different generic functions of persuasion. As Jean-Jacques claims, his speech is meant for “the juncture of life that [Emile] has reached” (E, 325)—a strategy for managing the willfulness of an adolescent whose growing amour-propre will likely make him rebel. Lest readers mistake the novelization of Emile’s assent to authority for the actual enactment of autonomy, they are again reidentified as pedagogues who are to take Jean-Jacques’s persuasive intervention as cause for further manipulation: once Emile has, “so to speak, signed the contract” they are advised to make “your dominion” “gentle”: to indulge their pupils’ inclinations to manage them effectively (325–26). Again, Emile’s generic oscillations place

38 See Ray, “Rethinking Reading,” for a different reading of the implications of such metacommentary.
Jean-Jacques’s dyadic staging of Emile’s “contract” within an unfolding pedagogical spectacle staged for Emile’s collective readership.

This unfolding spectacle makes comparisons between the content of Emile and the Social Contract so fraught, be it of their individual and collective interactions or their domestic and political spheres. Above, I argued that the Social Contract drew upon Rousseau’s previous works to conceptualize how the people, figured as popular audiences, might produce an active and persuasive general will. Emile, instead, engages its own audience in a fundamentally distinct way. Unlike the experiences of festivalgoers, novelizations of Emile’s enactments of his lessons direct readers to notice the manipulations at play behind his performance of any given role. Moreover, unlike the experiences of intimate readers, Emile continuously brings attention to the ways that successful persuasion risks falling into seduced spectatorship. Oscillating between novel and treatise, Emile thereby casts its readers as “persuasive” manipulators only to reveal its ongoing staging of their own persuasion.

It is in making sense of this oscillation that approaches framed around determining the compatibility of Rousseau’s individual and collective “projects” prove insufficient. To be sure, such framing enables us to compare Rousseau’s accounts of different actors and interactions. Yet it also obscures the rhetorical entanglements that develop across these projects: of how a depiction of collective life cannot help but evoke individual persuasion, or of how such persuasion might be made into a collective spectacle. In short, it obscures an unfolding practical task underlying Rousseau’s theorization of collective self-legislation: the need to produce an altogether new audience that could navigate between its own reorientations toward enactment and toward persuasion. Rousseau presents this need in conceptualizing the general will in the Social Contract; yet it is Emile that attempts to stage these reorientations by means of its generic oscillations, persuading its readers while raising questions over how they enact persuasion.

In contrast to the lawgiver’s “miraculous” use of persuasion, Emile’s generic oscillations thereby position its readers to revise the perspective through which they make sense of its content. Where Social Contract appeals to a social transformation whose civic effect could become its own cause, Emile instead generates an audience constituted by its own generic reorientations. The “effect” of a given perspective indeed registers as the “cause” motivating each subsequent generic shift: even as each revelation of readerly manipulations ostensibly relays a more accurate account of Emile’s events, the staging of these revelations entangles readers in further manipulations. Such oscillations require readers addressed in one way to revisit Emile’s events and manipulations as a substantively different readership.

It is in this sense that Emile’s generic oscillations engage the communicative dynamics underlying collective self-legislation: this work stages its readership as a collective body that must interrogate its own changing place in its encounter with new content. In what follows, I lay out the political implications of this project. To do so, however, requires that we first make sense of
Emile’s introduction of its own miraculous if not palpably implausible character—the one to whom Jean-Jacques claims he will ultimately “abdi-
cate” his authority (E, 479): Sophie.

Sophie, or Genre Trouble

Introducing Sophie, Rousseau advances perhaps the most sexist and hetero-
normative claims in his oeuvre. Here readers are told “woman is made spe-
cially to please man” (E, 358), and that “women ought not to be robust like
men” but “for men” (366), among other such assertions. These assertions con-
sequently ground an essentially different education for Emile’s female coun-
terpart. Where Emile’s education seeks to inculcate virtue while avoiding
Rousseau’s communicative challenges, Sophie’s education seeks, at its core,
to cultivate a proper relationship to appearance. As Jean-Jacques argues,
“when a man acts well, he depends only on himself and can brave public
judgment; but when a woman acts well … what is thought of her is no less
important to her than what she actually is” (364). Appearance is thus the
organizing principle of Sophie’s education if not her entire character. This
account of women’s education has prompted disagreement among feminist
readers of Rousseau, with some arguing that it is a functionalist departure
from his individual-centered and egalitarian account of human nature39
and others finding in it the outcome of a logic of differentiated sexualities
stretching back to the Second Discourse.40 And while my above discussion of
Rousseau’s unfolding anxieties with gendered audiences aligns more with
the latter reading, it is also important to notice that here Rousseau’s attempts
to discipline gendered and sexualized interactions prove distinctly problem-
atic for his staging of audience reorientation. Oscillating between Jean-
Jacques’s articulation of “natural” gender roles and Emile’s ongoing revisions
of its readers’ perspectives, this work ultimately stages a wholesale generic
transformation rife with intractable tensions.

Consider, first, that while Jean-Jacques’s assertions regarding women’s cul-
tivation of appearance surely function to legitimate his sexist claims, these
assertions also complicate Emile’s engagement with its readers. As Susan
Shell argues in her reading of Jean-Jacques’s education of Sophie by means
of a self-mirroring doll, this object not only serves to cultivate Sophie’s “inclina-
tion” for “adornment” (E, 367) premised on a “lack of self-sufficiency,” but
also suggests that she “constructs herself by becoming her own audience” in

39E.g., Susan Moller Okin, “Rousseau’s Natural Woman,” Journal of Politics 41, no. 2
40E.g., Susan Meld Shell, “Emile: Nature and the Education of Sophie,” in The
Cambridge Companion to Rousseau, ed. Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 2001), 272–301.
contradistinction to Emile. Interestingly, Sophie alone navigates the communicative dynamic directed solely at Emile’s readers. Unlike the “well-regulated freedom” shaping Emile’s enactment of lessons organized behind his back, Sophie’s education entails that she learns to regard herself from another perspective.

To assert that Sophie’s education is organized to cultivate appearance should thus raise questions concerning Emile’s own ongoing manipulation of appearance as it educates its readers. What should such readers—positioned, as they have been, to revise their own perspective as they proceed through Emile’s manipulations—make of a character charged with cultivating this sort of capacity? How should they understand such pedagogical “content”? Sophie’s cultivation of appearance might underlie an education in modesty and male-oriented “pleasing,” as Jean-Jacques would have it. However, such cultivation might also serve what Schaeffer calls “an alternative model for the reader,” confronting precisely the conditions that structure Jean-Jacques’s staging of what Emile has understood to be his unmediated experience.

Indeed, Jean-Jacques’s fraught introduction of Sophie’s character continues to conjure these subversive possibilities as readers move through Emile’s narrative. Note, first, that Sophie is actually introduced well before Jean-Jacques’s reflections on women’s education but rather immediately following Emile’s above assent to Jean-Jacques’s authority, when Jean-Jacques begins to educate his pupil about love, telling him to imagine a future beloved named “Sophie” (E, 329). We encounter Sophie again during Jean-Jacques’s reflections on women’s education. He reasons that readers may doubt whether the product of this education could be anything but “chimerical” and tells them to consider that his prior invention “really existed” (402)—that Sophie was always, in fact, real. This new, novelized Sophie is placed into a family, educated according to Jean-Jacques’s logic, and thrust into society in search of a suitor. Yet here her troubles begin. Educated to master appearance, Sophie fails to find anyone meaningful in society: she recognizes that her suitors betray “their vanity, their jargon, their unruly morals, and their frivolous imitations” (404), which disgusts her much like the “double men” of theater and society disgust our own Rousseau. As this Sophie reveals to her parents, she is unhappy because she has spent her time reading Fénelon’s novel Telemachus; having fallen in love with its protagonist, she finds no such equivalent in society.

As Sara Ahmed argues, Emile’s gender roles shape “the very terms through which individuals share their world with others,” thus providing “happiness scripts” for them. Sophie in effect goes “off script” in her resistance to social

41Ibid., 286.
42Schaeffer, Rousseau, 136.
modes of appearance and her absorption in a character from a novel. Or does she? Has not Jean-Jacques offered Emile his own Telemachus in his “imaginary object” named Sophie? Here Jean-Jacques’s response points to the deeper navigation of appearance underlying what Linda Zerilli calls Rousseau’s fearful “sense … that gender boundaries must be carefully fabricated and maintained because they have no solid foundation in nature.”

With Sophie in despair, Jean-Jacques proceeds simply to rewrite her: “Shall I bring this sad narrative to its catastrophic end?” he asks, concluding instead to “let us render his Sophie to our Emile.” “I exist—” Sophie protests—and is erased from the page. Once readers recoil from the whiplash of a character whose nonconformity to a gender-appropriate script is “solved” by recalling her nonconformity to a narrative in which she is but fictional, they are presented with a revised, “correct” Sophie. This second (or third?) Sophie will in turn have a “less lively imagination and a happier destiny” (E, 405). With Jean-Jacques thus rewriting Sophie’s cultivation of appearance to limit its excesses, his own mediation between Emile’s readers and its content increasingly recedes. Emile and Sophie’s courtship becomes almost entirely novelized, while the work’s narrative occasionally even abandons Jean-Jacques’s first-person address for an omniscient narrator (e.g., 434). Emile’s generic oscillations thus give way to a broader generic transformation: what began as an educational treatise will end as a sentimental novel.

What are we to make of such a transformation? We might read the “off-script” Sophie as a simple cautionary tale against the excesses of imagination. However, the fact of her replacement continues to intrude on Emile’s narrative even as the introduction of her “correct” counterpart ensures that her courtship succeeds. For example, in their first encounter, Emile is shocked to find that his “imagined object” in fact exists. Yet Emile further redirects Sophie’s troubled relationship to fiction back toward readers with her prominent mention of Telemachus, coupled with Jean-Jacques’s assertion that “she sees that it is time to captivate the heart of her new Telemachus” (E, 415)—a claim legible only if readers refer back to the erased Sophie. As Wingrove argues, Emile’s characters “continue to rely upon an excess of illusion” even after Sophie’s replacement. Indeed, this excess continues to reorient readers, too. In essence, Emile’s presentation of successful courtship entails its novelization of Sophie’s navigation of appearance—such as her ability to convey modesty persuasively (415)—the logic of which Jean-Jacques has expounded in his discussion of women’s education. Yet this very capacity continues to recall the culmination of this discussion: namely, the revelation of Sophie as a fictional character and her subsequent revision.

Emile’s courtship thus celebrates the “success” of its gendered scripts while the generic transformation driving this courtship continues to recall their contingent constitution. Such a fraught staging of gendered scripts suggests a formation akin to what Judith Butler calls gender “identity” insofar as “that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”46 Or, we might say—following Rousseau’s turn of phrase—caused by its very effects. Rousseau effectively confronts readers with Sophie’s contrived nature, “solves” this contrivance by recasting her in a novelistic form he has associated with unmediated persuasion, and yet continues to refer to the mediating characteristics that prompted Sophie’s prior recasting.

Jean-Jacques finally declares that “I have said what I ought to have said. It makes very little difference to me if I have written a novel” (E, 416) as Emile fully embraces its novelized form.47 Yet readers should note how Rousseau’s navigation of gender, genre, and staging have been twisted over the course of this text. It cannot be the case that Jean-Jacques simply manipulates Emile’s characters to instruct would-be tutors or that Emile ultimately tries to persuade readers of the veracity its characters’ actions as long as Sophie’s depiction continues to recall her “off-script” counterpart and thus Jean-Jacques’s sleight of hand behind Emile’s transformation into a novel. Emile thereby secures its gender boundaries at the cost of its ultimate genre trouble: it generates a continuous need for further persuasive reorientation as its novelized embrace of “natural” gender dynamics continues to recall the manipulations underlying this novelization. Emile thus continues to showcase its engagement in staging even as it embraces a persuasive form of communication that resists further mediation—a reading experience of continuous suspicion, reorientation, and suspicion demanding further reorientation.

I contend that Emile’s staging of this experience should be understood as an attempt to remake its audience’s constitution. Consider, again, Jean-Jacques’s sexist and heteronormative claims in his didactic account of women’s education outlined at the outset of this discussion. Given Emile’s prior oscillations between different pedagogical perspectives, these lessons appeared either as precepts to be embraced or manipulations to be questioned. Emile’s subsequent generic transformation, however, has unsettled its audience’s very orientation toward such claims. Staging these claims via a novelized character who enacts them as a script before would-be tutors charged with recognizing Jean-Jacques’s manipulations, Emile orients its readers to continually reevaluate whom they understand themselves to be and what they understand

47I have altered Bloom’s translation from “romance” to “novel”; the French term roman implies both meanings.
themselves to do as an audience that in turn embraces, rejects, enacts, is persuaded by, or otherwise engages this content. In this sense, *Emile* is not only a work that attempts to shape its audience, but an endeavor to make an audience shape itself—indeed, in ways Rousseau may not foresee or himself be able to continue manipulating. Such an endeavor should recall the *Social Contract*’s depiction of self-legislation as a relation “between the entire body seen from *one perspective* and the same entire body seen from *another*.”

While above I stressed that this depiction resists divisions between the objects and subjects of legislation, *Emile*’s generic transformation now draws our attention to the perspectival maneuvering necessary for the “same body” to appear before itself. Read alongside the *Social Contract*, *Emile* reveals that such an appearance entails a fraught and multifaceted production of perspective itself. *Emile* thereby implicates an emergent collective body—its readership—in Rousseau’s ongoing engagement with the communicative dynamics of collective self-legislation.

**Conclusion**

This essay has examined Rousseau’s engagements with spectacles, arguing that these engagements problematize interpretive tendencies to approach his different works by determining the compatibility of his individual and collective projects. To ask if *Emile*’s education aligns with political life in the *Social Contract* requires that we grapple with *Emile*’s distinct navigation of the communicative challenges Rousseau identifies across his oeuvre. To ask if *Emile* fits into the world of the *Social Contract*, we must question how we understand *Emile* to “fit” within a world whose events serve as pedagogical misdirections and whose characters are doubled and erased. This essay thus offers a different perspective on these two works: one conceptualizes self-legislation, illuminating a need for collective reorientations toward enactment and persuasion, whereas the other stages the communicative interactions underlying these reorientations.

Beyond this argument, however, is the question of whether we take this project to be successful, and of how we might determine its success. In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière contends that “emancipation begins … when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing, and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection.”

Attending to Rousseau’s oeuvre as it unfolds from the *Letter* to *Emile* illuminates the foundational rhetorical difficulties of such a project. Rousseau’s account of the general will indeed attempts to unsettle the self-evidence of the activities Rancière mentions, reconceptualizing their relationship to depict self-legislation as an active and persuasive phenomenon. Yet this reconceptualization entangles

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Rousseau’s thought in persistent problems—in the elusiveness of a lawgiver’s miracle, or the reassertion of hierarchy in Rousseau’s efforts to discipline gendered and sexualized interactions. This essay, in turn, contends that *Emile’s* generic transformation attempts to engage such problems by staging an audience caught up in its continuous reevaluation of its own constitution as audience. To the extent that we understand this project to succeed, it illuminates the insufficiency of a conceptual account of emancipation.