

Why Emile Shall Wear a Mask: a silent response

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Something about the education of Emile is a little bit obscure: why should the boy go and see masked people? Is it just to observe the variety of masks or to wear a mask in order to disguise himself? Or, is it both? In any case, wasn't he supposed to be a modern Robinson Crusoe, or better speaking, a natural man, plainly himself without a representative liasion and with no masks at all? As a natural man wasn't he being prepared to overcome any social embarrassment and hindrance without capitulating in the representation game? Surely there is something implicit here, something silent and obtuse if we take Rousseau's general perception of representation as something vicious. If appearance and evil are reckoned to be the same thing, as observed by Starobinski (1991, p. 15), it is a paradox that the theater seems to be a paradigm through which Rousseau organizes his system and paves Emile's road to sociability.

In the beginning of his educational novel (OC, T. IV, p. 524),¹ Rousseau stated that the contradiction between appearance and reality is the first prompt to destabilize natural equality. By this point of view, we could say that natural education should flourish in isolation where all types of representation are banned, and where a 'negative' process of human formation should take place. Rousseau is adamant about this, particularly when he responds to D'Alembert (OC, T. V, p. 24) about the proposal that a theater should be established in Geneva to give the citizens good taste and finesse. Rousseau replied: "The more I reflect on this, the more I discover that everything that is represented in theater does

¹ Emile, p. 236

not approximate to us, but distances us from it.”² Instead of a remedy, Rousseau argued (OC, T. V, p. 113) that sophisticated spectacles in Geneva would be a poison thwarting public fraternity and natural behavior because any kind of innovation is dangerous for a small community if it’s not a matter of urgency.

It is even worse when dealing with political representation. Rousseau stated in the *Social Contract* that at the moment when a people have representatives, they are no longer free; they no longer exist.³ The same perspective can be seen in *Emile’s* education, when books and other pedagogical devices are criticized when they are used in place of the real things: “Never substitute the sign for the thing except when it is impossible for you to show the latter, for the sign absorbs the child’s attention and makes him forget the thing represented.”⁴ A few pages before, he commented, “So many devices! Why all these representations?”⁵ At first glance, the problem appears to be quite simple under the bipolarity of natural and social conditions. If society per se is pure representation, the natural drive seems to be the ideal conduit for the formation of human conduct.

Hence, we come across some passages in the same book, as well as in other writings, that show us a different road. Still using this metaphor, the way does not stretch out entirely within natural territory. It goes beyond borders with curves and bypasses crossing the frontier between natural and social conditions. This sinuous road means that the problem is not simple and the rearing of a natural man to live in a community, or a civilized savage to be self-sufficient, must involve exceptions. And the most important one is introducing the student to a representative world – that is the reason why *Emile* is full of references to representation and theater.

We know that the “world as scenery” is a cliché used in the XVIII century philosophical rhetoric, but in Rousseau the use of the analogy is not casual or merely trendy. Instead, he uses the representational figure of speech in his writings as a structural

² Free translation from French: “Plus j’y réfléchis, et plus je trouve que tout ce qu’on met en représentation au théâtre, on ne l’approche pas de nous, on l’en éloigne.”

³ Free translation from French: “À l’instant qu’un peuple se donne des représentants, il n’est plus libre, il n’est plus” (OC, T. III, p. 431).

⁴ *Emiles*, Bloom’s version, p. 170. See OC, T. IV, p. 434: “En general ne substituez jamais le signe à la chose que quand il vous est impossible de la montrer. Car le signe absorbe l’attention de l’enfant, et lui fait oublier la chose représentée.”

⁵ *Emiles*, Bloom’s version, p. 168. See OC, T. IV, p. 430: “Que de machines! Pourquoi toutes ces représentations.”

paradox through which he conceives the world. Then, the bipolarity is present in his educational treaty, like the excerpts I quote hereby using Bloom's translations of *Emile* (p. 241-2), although I prefer *l'Ouvre Complètes* to avoid ambiguity and the use of imprecise terms. Here are the passages: "But picture [Qu'on me *représente*] a young man raised according to my maxims. Think of my Emile [Qu'on se *figure* mon Emile]... Think of him at the *raising of the curtain* [lever de la toile], casting his eyes for the first time on the *stage of the world* [scène du monde]; or, rather, set *backstage* [derrière le théâtre], seeing the *actors* take up and put on their *costumes*, counting the cords and pulleys whose crude magic deceives the *spectators'* eyes."⁶ These excerpts, among other ones, refer to society in its *sine qua non* representative condition, which is the real scenario Emile has to be prepared for.

The real world involves appearance and representation. The problem resides in that the social core of cities has intensified artificiality and deceit. So, the best way of dealing with this reality, according to Letter XVI of the *Second Part* of *Julie* (OC, T. II, p. 242), is looking back to remote provinces. There, the low level of representation has kept natural inclinations vivid and fostered a quasi-non-representational world. At peasant festivals, for example, the simplicity of country life and the unselfish human interactions shield Emile from the social whirlpool he must face during and after the completion of his studies (Emile, p. 255 – [tourbillon social] according to OC, p. 550/1). That primary social haven is certainly the closest the preceptor and his disciple can get to the "Golden Era," and the most suitable cradle in which to foster the boy's upbringing. By cementing the primitive feelings in the soul, the *amour propre* can be guided and, according to Neuhouser (2013), used to channel Emile's need to be esteemed and valued as "someone" in his social life, i.e., "*healthy* self-esteem" (35– emphasis added) to avoid falling victim to political corruption. It is very important for Emile's education because as Kelly and Grace (2009, p. xiii-xiv) stated:

⁶ *Oeuvres complètes*, Pléiade, Gallimard, IV, 1969, p. 532: "Mais qu'on se représente un jeune homme élevé selon mes maximes. Qu'on se figure mon Emile, auquel dix huit ans de soins assidus n'ont eu pour objet que de conserver un jugement intégral et un cœur sain ; qu'on se le figure au lever de la toile, jetant pour la première fois les yeux sur la scène du monde ; ou plutôt placé derrière le théâtre, voyant les acteurs prendre et poser leurs habits, et comptant les cordes et les poulies dont le grossier prestige abuse les yeux des spectateurs."

In Rousseau's view, in fact, the opinions and expectations men and women have of one another play a decisive role shaping the morals that are the keystone of a sound political order, or of the best possible existence on the margins of a corrupt one.

Emile is not supposed to gaze upon this reality from outside with no relationships or in the absence of participation. He is slowly inserted into the community to exert his natural virtues in a harsh social environment. To avoid premature exposure, psychological tension, or even an outburst of inflamed passions, this process must be gradual, proceeding from the fringes to the center of social life. In Book II, the tutor says, "As for my Emile, whom I am *raising in the country*, his room will have nothing which distinguishes it from a peasant's" (Emile, p. 93 – emphasis added). This does not infer isolation because Emile is living among many people and the country is not remote. But this peasant's ambiance far from the urban social whirlpool with all its vices is not completely isolated, but it is certainly the best starting point for Emile's education. It is a place where undisguised relationships seem to be the pattern for any social encounter, gathering, or festivity. In such a situation, there is no need to wear a mask since the meetings are barefaced and in the most spontaneous form. Is Emile to stay there? Is it the ideal place for educational purposes? On superficial reading, anyone is tempted to say 'yes' to the question, and to agree that this idyllic community life would be the best for a natural education. Emile should never depart from it.

Nevertheless, as Rosen (1984, p. 59) pointed out, "Clearly Rousseau did not want to simply 'return' children to a condition of noble ignorance in nature, but to educate them to go beyond it, to participate in the eminently worthwhile construct of the State." As Rousseau himself said, "Emile is not a savage to be relegated to the desert" – and *that* would be an isolated place – but "a savage made to inhabit cities" (Emile, p. 205). Although the perspective of "constructing the State" seems an exaggeration, Emile is prepared to fulfill his social duties and exert his citizenship.

Aiming for this kind of gradual preparation, the tutor explains his methodology. By feeling for the right moment, Jean-Jacques starts the process by introducing Emile to the world as it is – pure representation – in a rather smooth and gentle way:

I begin by showing Emile a mask with a pleasant face. Next, someone in his presence puts this mask over his face. I start to laugh; everybody laughs; and the child laughs like the others. Little by little I accustom him to less pleasant masks

and finally to hideous faces. If I have arranged my gradation well, far from being frightened by the last mask, he will laugh at it as at the first. After that I no longer fear that he can be frightened by masks. (Emile, p. 63)

Even though his childhood might have meant a long period of lassitude among farmers and youngsters of his age, the boy is not supposed to stay longer. His educational process needs further steps because a more complicated world awaits him.

Leaving natural language behind (baby's babbling), children are very expressive creatures since they do not hide their feelings. They use gestures, facial expressions, and meaningful glances with much the same phlegm of the ancient free souls, mentioned by Rousseau in his *Essay on the Origins of Languages*. This ability is not to be lost as it has been in the denaturalization process. As a communicative signal, the masks, on the one hand, hide the real meaning of feelings but, on the other hand, can be wisely used by the educator to teach his pupil (/pew-pull/) the real *théâtre de la vie*. As Neuhouser (2013) noted, in such a situation, it is necessary to see and understand evil things to be able to "avoid them" in the state of society.

This treatment is a combination of natural feelings, amour-propre, and reason but with the purpose of improving the first without eliminating the latter. In this sense, Emile appears to be a natural artist, flexible enough to make drawings, go to the theater, attend church services, frequent magicians' performances, wander through fairs and engage in public games. The only thing to be limited is his reading: Defoe's novel is permitted but La Fontaine's fables are not. This critique of poetry, reminiscent of Plato's ban on poets, is an attempt to prevent the reader's identification with bad characters in the story. Emile is not an imitator but, like Robinson Crusoe, an innovative creator who is able to build his own world out of the wreckage without getting lost.

We know that the way is not a "rosy one" (Kelly, 2003, p. 115) just as it had not been for Crusoe. Taking Plato's analogy of the "pharmakon," the poison plays the role of remedy and the arts can be used to treat the infirmities they have caused. For example, even though he was against the introduction of ballets and intermezzi (in the *Querelle des buffons*), criticizing their excesses and lack of naturalness, Rousseau wrote songs and operas, like *The Village Soothsayer* in which the pastoral praises the simple life of the countryside. In this case, the poison (theater) can be effective on the urban chaos of disharmony and deceit. By watching the villagers in their simplicity people could be

moved and try to approach such a reality. That is the reason he finishes the *Letter to d'Alembert* by praising the civic festivals in Geneva, where the people are actors, spectators, and the spectacle itself – a good way to continue Emile's lessons and the process of socialization.

After proper dosages, Emile becomes more immune to rid himself of the vain disputes he encounters in social life. Even in the highest ranks, as in religion, Jean-Jacques remarks (Emile, p. 263): “He had seen that religion served as the mask of interest and sacred worship only as the safeguard of hypocrisy,” which is no different in the hard core of the political world. In Book IV of *Emile* (p. 211/212 - OC, T. IV, p. 504), he commented:

Do you wish, then, to excite and nourish in the heart of a young man the first movements of nascent sensibility and turn his character toward beneficence and goodness? Do not put the seeds of pride, vanity, and envy in him by the deceptive image of the happiness of men. Do not expose his eyes at the outset to the pomp of courts, the splendor of palaces, or the appeal of the theater.”

But that does not mean isolation because he adds, “Show him the exterior of high society only after having put him in a condition to evaluate it in itself.”

To get his disciple ready for this, the pedagogical use of the theater is different from D'Alembert's purposes. The tutor explained, “I take him to the theater to study not morals, but taste” (Emile, p. 344). Rousseau is far from recognizing a moral utility in the theater. According to Mostefai (2001), he disagreed with his fellow encyclopedists mostly because, by theatrical performances, the citizen alienates his identity and integrity to adopt the factitious character of an actor. Theater is certainly not an “agent of moral improvement” (Dent, 2005, p. 167), as his colleagues maintained, asserting that it had a cathartic effect on the public, but a good source of entertainment. Nevertheless, in already corrupt societies the aesthetic experience can be helpful on perfecting taste until it gets distinguishable and authentic; if not driven into a ‘spectacle’ level in which the stage representation feeds self-love in a way that reminds us of the first dispute over glory in the Golden Era.

I tentatively conclude that if “all the world’s a stage” and life’s a play (Shakespeare),⁷ the best mask is that of a civil man and the role is that of a virtuous man who does everything for the community. To negate the passivity of the spectator, from his youth Emile is engaged in village parties, peasant festivities, and public competitions. In Rousseau’s words: “Emile is not made to remain always solitary. As a member of society, he ought to fulfill its duties. Since he is made to live with men, he ought to know them” (Emile, p. 327). That is why his tutor gives him a substantial lesson on politics in terms of the summary of the *Social Contract*, inserted among his lessons, used as a scale by which to measure nations and their government forms, during Emile’s long journey taken to broaden his understanding of political and social order.

However, to understand human relations in practical terms, the tutor arranges Emile’s marriage and accompanies the couple to teach them everything they need to know, making clear that their deed is a contract whose terms are bound to individual and public virtue. The tutor reminds his grown-up student that in the theater he saw heroes, was scandalized by their acting and complained indignantly: “What? Are these the examples we are given to follow?” followed by the tutor’s advice: “Be more indulgent with the stage henceforward. Now you have become one of its heroes” (Emile, p. 443). Emile is not committed to be a hero or even a citizen of a fatherland in the pre-modern sense of the term, like Rome or Sparta.

Despite Rousseau’s affirmation of the impossibility of forming man and citizen at the same time, noting that one must choose between them, there is a query inherent in his statement (In this case, located in the word “if”). “**If** perchance the double object we set for ourselves could be joined in a single one by removing the contradictions of man, a great obstacle to his happiness would be removed” (Emile, p. 41 – emphasis added). This is ultimately the main objective of the tutor’s endeavor, which I defend in my book, *Rousseau’s Emile and the Formation of the Modern World Citizen*.

It is important not to see *Emile* as a practical manual of education. Neither is it an imaginary novel introducing political aspects developed in the *Social Contract*. It is the bridge between two worlds: the natural and the social. It is a link to connect Emile, the

⁷ Phrase in William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, spoken by the melancholy Jaques in Act II Scene VII. Source: William Shakespeare (1623). *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies: Published According to the True Originall Copies*. London: Printed by Isaac Iaggard, and Ed[ward] Blount. p. 194.

natural man, with any kind of community. Which is the best way to educate a person since he is probably going to live in a somewhat corrupt, mediatic, and artificial society. Rousseau has undoubtedly “advanced a concept of education that remains challenging and inspiring to this day,” to quote Damrosch (p. 1) in the introduction of his book, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius*. This concept helps us to understand that human formation is not just for the individual’s benefit but for social purposes. It has political implications in that the individual can be useful to the community if they can think about serving their nation instead of meeting just their needs. If necessary, Emile shall put on a mask not to frighten or deceive anyone but to accomplish his duties with virtue and resignation. Actually a mask Rousseau seemed to have eagerly tried to use his whole life: the mask of a citizen.

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