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Abstract

A philosophical reading of *Émile, ou de l'éducation* privileges Jean- Jacques Rousseau's pedagogic advice, while a literary reading privileges the narrative aspects: either *Émile* is a treatise on education that relies on fiction in order to clearly assert its position, or it is a novel with *Émile* as its title character that happens to offer practical advice on education. To read it as both would be to reconcile the literary and philosophical aspects of Rousseau's thought; however, as the "or" that divides its title suggests, this work confronts readers with the potential irreconcilability of literary and philosophical discourses. The difficulty of reconciling these competing discourses, and consequently the challenge of reading *Émile*, is most notable at the moment when *Émile*, himself, must come to read the only book he will ever need to read, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. This one book, suggests Rousseau, will teach him to read all others, but within *Émile* the reader discovers the possibility that one only ever learns to read as someone other than oneself.

Keywords

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, *Robinson Crusoe*, Daniel Defoe, reading, readers

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abstract



I do not know how I learned to read; all I remember is what I first read and its effect on me; this is the moment from which I date my first uninterrupted consciousness of myself.—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, Book 1

THOUGH ROUSSEAU himself considered *Émile* his best book and though Immanuel Kant compared the event of its publication with the event of the French Revolution, suggesting that its publication was of political and not simply pedagogic import, *Émile* remains an obscure and little-read text. Unlike some of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's better-known texts, such as *Julie* or *The Social Contract*, *Émile* has not found a place in university curricula. This may be owing not only to its length but also to the ways in which *Émile* crosses traditional generic boundaries. A bit of a rambling and unfocused text, *Émile* is both a novel and a philosophical treatise on education. It offers both the fictional story of the education of a young man, concluding with his marriage and his fathering of a child, and a literal model for the progress of human society. As a result, readers

of *Émile* have tended to privilege one of these options over the other. A philosophical reading privileges Rousseau's pedagogic advice, while a literary reading privileges the narrative aspects of the text: either *Émile* is a treatise on education that relies on fiction in order to clearly assert its position or it is a novel, with *Émile* as its title character, that happens to offer practical advice on education. To read *Émile* as both a novel and a practical treatise on education would be to reconcile the literary and philosophical aspects of Rousseau's thought. As the "or" dividing the title suggests, *Émile, ou de l'éducation* struggles to unite these discourses. The difficulty (if not impossibility) of reconciling literature and philosophy opens onto larger difficulties, for what is at stake in *Émile* is a person's ability to be both free and at the same time committed to a shared world.¹ *Émile's* ability to reconcile his freedom and self-sufficiency with his commitment to human society depends on his ability to learn to read the only book he should ever need to read, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

Émile begins as a philosophical treatise but slowly drifts towards the literary. Such a generic transition runs counter to the title, from which one might expect this work to move from being classified as a novel (*Émile*) to a philosophical treatise on education (*de l'éducation*). Though Rousseau produces *Émile* as a fictional character, a figment of his imagination, the opening of *Émile* consists of practical advice for the raising of real children. By the end, however, Rousseau begins to tell *Émile's* story and no longer uses him merely as a pedagogical aid for the illustration of a philosophy of education. The literary *Émile* takes over from the philosophical *de l'éducation*.

This move from philosophy to literature is analogous to the corresponding development of the pedagogic practices Rousseau demonstrates using the character of *Émile*. In the early books, *Émile* is to have a relationship to the world that is entirely

¹ It may not be a coincidence that Jean-Jacques Rousseau published *Émile, ou de l'éducation* in October 1761, between *Julie*, published in January 1761, and *The Social Contract*, published in April 1762. On the question of genre, see Laurence Mall, *Émile, ou les figures de la fiction* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2002), 9–44, esp. 11–12. Paul de Man describes the difficulty of reading Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins and the Foundations of Inequality among Men* in similar terms in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 135. The epigraph of this article comes from Rousseau, *Confessions*, trans. Angela Scholar (1782; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8.

grounded in his direct empirical experience of it. He is to be educated through his experience of things. Only later in his development will he be offered the opportunity to engage with signs. For Rousseau, the problem with signs (and readings of signs) is that they allow a person to mistake the experience of signs for a proper experience of things. In the second half of *Émile*, however, Rousseau recognizes and accepts the necessary importance of signs as he acknowledges the necessity of reading. Just as the text of *Émile* moves from the philosophical work of practical education to the literary work of the novel, so too does Émile's education move from the experience of things to the experience of signs.

Émile's education has the shape of a chiasmus. Initially, signs are capable of leading him astray from his proper, natural education, and Rousseau relies on direct experience of the natural world to keep Émile on track, but by the opening of book 4 it is the world that threatens to lead him astray, and Rousseau must turn to signs in order to redirect Émile's education. While Émile's exposure to signs is to be kept to a minimum, history books come to play a necessary role in his education. If in the first half of *Émile* present things are privileged over signs, then in the second half of *Émile* signs of absent things are privileged over the present social world. This switch from things to signs is only possible, however, once Émile has safely learned to tell the difference between signs and things, rhetoric and experience, literature and philosophy—only, that is, once Émile has learned to read.

The reconciliation of these oppositions has practical consequences for Émile, whose education is designed to reconcile his experience of nature, based on a natural relationship to things, and of society, based on a conventional relationship to signs. Émile will be able to articulate the natural and social only when he aligns a philosophical and literary relation to signs, that is, a referential and semiotic approach to language, which is possible only via a particular model of reading that Rousseau describes in book 3. Émile's reading of history, the establishment of a proper relation both to things and to signs, depends on a scene of reading found almost exactly midway through the text of *Émile*. To read *Émile, ou de l'éducation* from beginning to end one must pass through this famous scene of reading, Émile's

reading of *Robinson Crusoe*.² This one book, suggests Rousseau, will teach Émile to read all others; it prepares him for the future reading of history books that will make possible his return to the social world from which the tutor removes him at the beginning of *Émile*. And yet, this scene of reading complicates Rousseau's larger philosophical enterprise as presented in *Émile* in its suggestion that Émile will only come to learn to read to the extent to which he learns to think of himself no longer as Émile but as Robinson Crusoe. The understanding of reading that emerges most forcefully from *Émile* aims to guarantee that texts transmit their proper (and most useful) meaning. Rousseau wants to guard his reader from reading texts to the wrong end. But this desire to guarantee reading—to guarantee that what is read is always read properly—comes at a cost. Learning to read necessitates one's differing from oneself, a difference within Émile that the pedagogical practices Rousseau outlines in *Émile* are meant to anticipate and prevent.

The Reconciliation of Opposites

The goal of *Émile* is to produce an exceptional man in harmony with his own natural tendencies and yet also capable of participating in human society without being adversely affected by its conventions and institutions. Rousseau describes the natural man as: "L'homme naturel est tout pour lui: il est l'unité numérique, l'entier absolu, qui n'a de rapport qu'à lui-même ou à son semblable" (*Émile*, 249). Natural man is self-coincident and exists entirely for himself; he has no need for others and, indeed, no need for knowledge of them. In contrast, "l'homme civil n'est qu'une unité fractionnaire qui tient au dénominateur, et dont la valeur est dans son rapport avec l'entier, qui est le corps social" (*Émile*, 249). The civil man is dependent on the social body for his existence; he is dependent on others and does not exist without them. Being dependent on others, he is cut off from himself, split by his relationship to and dependence on the community. Natural man, who is independent and free, however, is absolutely so. As a result, he is alone. Rousseau asks: what will a man raised uniquely for himself become for others? Natural

² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, ou de l'éducation*, in vol. 4 of *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 455–60. References are to this edition.

man may be independent, but he is entirely independent; there is no society for the natural man. The price of citizenship is one's independence or uniqueness. The price of independence and self-determination, though, is the very possibility of society itself. Unlike the *Social Contract*, for example, where Rousseau writes about transforming the civil order, in *Émile* he plans to transform the individual through new pedagogic practices. These are two different methods for arriving at the same end: a more perfect human society. Either the civil order must be revised or people must be more perfectly educated. If society cannot be changed or transformed radically enough from the outside, it must be changed from within. Man must be newly fashioned, and in the process society itself will be reformed.³

Neither the natural man nor the civil man is adequate to the task as Rousseau imagines it. Rousseau's goal is to find a way to fashion an individual in harmony with himself and with others, to reconcile natural freedom with the constraints of society, but not at the expense of society itself. Rousseau argues that the natural tendencies of man must be protected from the corrosive influence of human society, which perverts the natural world, but he does not wish to sacrifice society itself along the way. Simply to preserve the sentiments of nature is to privilege the natural over the civil man to the detriment of society. In contrast, *Émile* is to be educated in order to enter human society freely and independently. His education is not set in opposition to society, even if he is to be kept apart from society for a time.

The end goal of Rousseau's pedagogy is to preserve and protect *Émile* for a time from the untoward influence of society; however, his aim is not to keep *Émile* from ever entering society. If Rousseau's goal were to set natural pedagogy in opposition to society, then the success of *Émile*'s education would free him from the influence of society but simultaneously doom him to solitude. Instead of revolutionizing society, the pedagogical practices that Rousseau describes in the beginning of *Émile* would replace

³ For more on Rousseau's desire to reconcile an education for autonomy with an education for community, see Geraint Parry, "Émile: Learning to be Men, Women, and Citizens," *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, ed. Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 247–71. The publication of *Émile* resulted in the author's exile from France. See Maurice Cranston's biography of Rousseau, aptly titled *The Solitary Self: Jean-Jacques Rousseau in Exile and Adversity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), vol. 3.

sociability with solipsism. The end goal of Rousseau's philosophy of education, however, is a more perfect society, and thus *Émile* must find a way to return and bring with him the lessons he has learned in his natural education.

Rousseau's choice of *Robinson Crusoe* as his crucial pedagogic example is particularly telling on this point. If Rousseau celebrated a mere return to nature, then the choice of *Robinson Crusoe* would be an odd one, for this book tells the story of a man who is shipwrecked alone on an island for many years but returns to society to tell the tale of what he learned on the island. The success of *Émile*'s education rests on his being removed from society for a time, but the ultimate success of *Émile* rests on his reintroduction to society. *Émile* must come into society as a man who has learned from nature. Nature will provide him a relationship to things, but to bring that relation into society he must become a reader of signs. If the encounter with signs were delayed indefinitely, then *Émile* would never be able to participate in the conventions of human society. Yet this is not to ignore, how, for Rousseau, signs present real dangers to the child's education.

The Sign Absorbs Attention

In the opening half of *Émile*, Rousseau declares his distaste for signs. Signs, he argues, have no educational value. Signs are meaningless without prior experience and knowledge of the things that signs represent: "En quelque étude que ce puisse être, sans l'idée des choses représentées les signes représentans ne sont rien" (*Émile*, 347). Without an idea of the thing represented by a particular sign, and without an appropriate experience of the thing, the sign is nothing. It has no meaning. Given this logic, and the underlying prejudice against signs, it is understandable that Rousseau privileges experience over rhetoric, things over signs, doing over talking. Tutors err when they try to instruct using signs and not things, when they attempt to instruct using reason instead of allowing the child to experience what is necessary to experience in order to understand the tutor's lesson. As an example: the tutor might wish to communicate why it is important for the child always to take his bearings before setting out on a journey, because the experience of being lost is unpleasant. But this lesson will mean nothing to the child

without his first experiencing what it is like to be lost. "Lost" will have no meaning for the child without the experience of the idea of "lostness." An education based upon the transmission of signs will fail to produce the kind of adult that Rousseau aspires to produce in *Émile*, because the sign will have no meaning.

Elsewhere, Rousseau suggests that signs are not only meaningless without the prior experience of the idea or thing that they represent, but they also present a real danger to the child's education: "En général, 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" (*Émile*, 434). The price paid for an introduction to signs is the now forgettable world of things. Signs are not innocent, for Rousseau imbues them with real power; they actively participate in the derailing of *Émile's* education and substitute themselves for the things represented. The danger is not merely that signs will lead the child to misunderstand the world, but, more importantly, that they will distract his attention from the world and the things that make it up. Signs kidnap the child's attention and hold it hostage; they make the child forget things by removing him from the world, which is replaced by a fiction. *Émile's* introduction to signs risks an absorption of his attention that could undo the natural education that is designed to make him a model citizen. To safeguard his proper attention, *Émile's* education must be determined by his experience of things, and he should be kept safe from signs for as long as possible.

The danger that Rousseau identifies with signs helps explain his claim, in *Émile*, that he hates books: "Je hais les livres" (*Émile*, 454). Rousseau's hatred of reading, though it may seem a strong dismissal of an activity he describes as essential to his own development in *The Confessions*, offers an important insight into the problems that reading can sometimes occasion. Rousseau describes how *Émile* should first learn to decipher signs. For Rousseau, a child will take an interest in learning to read properly only once it has been made clear to him why he should want to know how to read, only, that is, after he knows what reading is good for. To ensure that *Émile* knows what reading is good for, Rousseau stages a scene. *Émile* will receive numerous notes from friends and relatives asking him to join them for a walk or to watch some public spectacle. But because no one is present to

read the note for him, Émile will miss the events planned for the day: “Ainsi l’occasion, le moment se passe” (*Émile*, 358). Only after the occasion has been missed will Émile find someone to read the note to him and so will come to understand, belatedly, that had he been able to read the note he would have been able to participate in the event announced by the note. He continues to receive more notes: sometimes the note is deciphered with him and for him, and sometimes it is not. After a while, and after repeatedly missing events announced in the notes, Émile will decipher part of a note himself: it has something to do with eating custard, but he does not know where to go. He wants custard, therefore he will make efforts to read the rest of the note (*Émile*, 358). Émile will learn to read these notes because he will wish to be included in the social outings that they announce. Because he will fail to read the notes, he will take an interest in learning to read so that he will be able to read future notes left for him. In this way, Rousseau unites for Émile the act of reading with his reception of particular messages conveyed in and through the text he reads. The child’s education in reading subordinates sign to thing, signifier to signified.

Rousseau elaborates on the potential danger that reading poses to children’s moral education when he describes the dangers implicit in a child’s reading of Jean de La Fontaine’s fables. Rousseau notes that children who are allowed to read fables before they are capable of adequately determining the moral of the fable are in danger of being led astray. Rousseau offers as an example La Fontaine’s fable of the fox and the crow, in which a fox encounters a crow carrying cheese in its beak. In an attempt to win the cheese, the fox flatters the crow’s singing voice, hoping that the crow will sing and so drop the cheese that it carries. The child is to identify with the crow and to learn the moral of the fable: “Do not give in to false flattery.” And yet, remarks Rousseau, if the child is allowed to read this fable too early in his career as a reader, it is possible for him to—and indeed highly probable that he will—take the opposite lesson as the moral. The child may identify with the fox and learn from the fable how better to acquire cheese: “le fromage gâte tout” (*Émile*, 356), writes Rousseau. Children are in danger of being taught by this fable how to trick others into giving up what is theirs. “Suivez les enfans apprenant leurs fables,” continues

Rousseau, “et vous verrez que quand ils sont en état d'en faire l'application de l'auteur” (*Émile*, 356). One must protect future readers from the possibility of such a monstrous misreading.

Because children might always read to the wrong end, *Émile* will hardly know what a book is before he is twelve. He will know how to read—this is important, writes Rousseau—but reading, which is the “plague of childhood” (*Émile*, 357), will be kept from him at all costs. Instead of using fables to teach children to read, Rousseau turns to the letters that will be left for *Émile*. Once *Émile* understands the proper role of communicating with others “at a distance,” once he understands that fables, like the notes left for him, address him across distance, he will understand the importance of reading to the right end. He will no longer, as he did when a child, read in a way opposite to the author's intention but will recognize in the text the message he is meant to decipher. As the notes left for *Émile* illustrate, to read against the author's intentions—or to refuse to prioritize the author's intentions—will result in harm done to oneself. Just as he would continue to miss the events the notes announced were he not to know how to read properly, he will miss the lessons offered to him in fables.

Later in *Émile*, Rousseau returns to this discussion of fables, suggesting that a return to the lessons offered by fables after a fuller experience of the world will result in proper reading. *Émile* should only be allowed to read the fable of the fox and the crow, for instance, after he has experienced human trickery, which will guarantee that he reads the fable to its proper end by allowing him to receive the messages addressed to him: “L'enfant qu'on n'a jamais trompé par des loüanges n'entend rien à la fable que j'ai ci-devant examinée; mais l'étourdi qui vient d'être la dupe d'un flateur conçoit à merveille que le corbeau n'étoit qu'un sot” (*Émile*, 540–41). *Émile* should not be allowed to read fables until he is in a position to understand the moral questions involved through his own experience, which means he should not be allowed to read fables until after he no longer needs the lessons they offer. The moral will become in some sense redundant. To ensure that *Émile*'s education in reading proceeds, Rousseau suggests that the moral of the fable should be cut out or removed; if the child understands the fable only because of the explicit statement of the moral, then the child has not fully understood

the fable. In withholding the fable until after the child has experienced enough of life to know and understand the moral of the fable even in its absence, Rousseau guarantees that the child will read only once (and only because) he knows to read to the proper moral end. In this way, as Geoffrey Bennington writes, “the reading of fables will not simply be a pointless exercise in memorizing a text the child has not understood, but a supplement to experience which will allow the pupil to ‘draw out’ the maxim for himself and to profit from it.”⁴ The reading of fables is then one way to determine to what extent *Émile* knows how to read properly, whether, in other words, he reads as a child (without experience) or as an adult (with experience).

Rousseau acknowledges the dangers of reading to the wrong end, meaning reading otherwise than an author intends. And Rousseau labours to prevent this possibility by leaving letters for *Émile* and dismembering the fables he reads. Rousseau ensures that *Émile* only reads the fable once he is able, in a sense, to read it without needing to read it. The chance that the child will read in the absence of authorial intention is for Rousseau a chance that must be overcome through proper instruction in reading.

The Necessity of History

Reading, despite the potential threats it raises, plays an important role in *Émile*'s education.⁵ Rousseau asserts the importance of reading in several different ways in the second half of *Émile*, and while Rousseau “hates books,” learning to read properly is essential to *Émile*'s education. The opening of book 4 introduces the necessity of history books to *Émile*'s education. At this point in the narrative, *Émile* is an adolescent, approximately fifteen years old. With book 4, Rousseau begins to describe the importance of *Émile*'s (re)introduction into society, but he also explains how delicate this introduction will be. Until this moment in *Émile*'s education, he has been kept from others and has learned to rely only on himself and his own experiences. He must now learn to think about others as well as himself. He must no longer think of

⁴ Geoffrey Bennington, *Sententiousness and the Novel: Laying down the Law in Eighteenth-Century French Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985), 87.

⁵ See also Janie Vanpée, “Reading Lessons in Rousseau’s *Émile, ou de l’éducation*,” *Modern Language Studies* 20, no. 3 (1990): 40–49.

himself alone but must come to integrate into his consciousness the experience of society.

Émile must be introduced to human society, but how is this to be accomplished without ruining the education that he has received thus far? If Émile is introduced to others too early, then he might lose track of himself and only begin to think of himself in his relations with others. Instead of judging his neighbours by himself, by his own standard, he will judge himself by his neighbours. He will become a product of the society that he has been produced to change. If he is introduced to society too late, then he might become a scandalmonger and a satirist, peremptory and quick to judge. He will look upon the world with disgust and either become accustomed to vice or resigned to solitude.⁶

To mediate these dangers and make possible Émile's reintroduction to society, Rousseau turns to history: "Je voudrais lui montrer les hommes au loin, les lui montrer dans d'autres tems ou dans d'autres lieux, et de sorte qu'il put voir la scène sans jamais y pouvoir agir" (*Émile*, 526). Paradoxically, perhaps, Rousseau calls on history for the same reasons that he had denigrated books in the past; books were accused of causing problems for Émile's education because they made it possible to speak about things without having direct experience of them. Now, history books are necessary to his future education precisely because Émile will read about human society without directly experiencing it. In the beginning, direct experience is privileged over signs, doing and acting over reading; now reading is privileged over direct experience of society.⁷ If Émile's education proceeds without the mediating presence of history, then all of the effort spent keeping Émile safe from the untoward influence of society will have been wasted. Rousseau aims to introduce Émile to society indirectly, in other words, via signs.

⁶ "Il s'accoutumera du moins au spectacle du vice, et à voir les méchants sans horreur comme on s'accoutume à voir les malheureux sans pitié" (*Émile*, 526).

⁷ Rousseau goes on to describe some of the dangers of reading history: historians are generally better at painting a negative picture of the historical figures whom they describe; history, in order for it to be read, must be interesting, but in making history interesting historians may be tempted to distort the facts. Rousseau recognizes the potential difficulties history poses, but the potential benefits of such reading far outweigh its threat.

The reversal that occurs between books 3 and 4, between the first half of *Émile*, which describes Émile's isolation from society, and the second half, which describes his (re)introduction to society, has the shape of a rhetorical trope, chiasmus. Rousseau's distrust of human society has been consistent from the beginning of *Émile*. But his newfound reliance upon history books presents a potentially surprising reversal of Rousseau's opinion of books. The turn from nature to society, which corresponds to Émile's return from the isolation imposed on him by his tutor, is made possible precisely by those same things (books) that should have no place in Émile's early education. In *Émile*, Rousseau works to systematize the relation between nature and society via a tropological model of substitution.

Given the tropological (and so linguistic) structure of *Émile*, it may be no surprise that at the centre is the story of Émile's learning to read, the story of Émile's reading of *Robinson Crusoe*, the one book that will teach him to read all others. His reading of *Robinson Crusoe* is of great importance, for only once he reads *Robinson Crusoe* will it be possible for him to encounter history without the accompanying threat that signs had posed to his education. If he were introduced to history without *Robinson Crusoe*—without knowing how to manage the difficulty that reading poses—then the same problems that reading poses in the first half of *Émile* would remain to threaten Émile's reading of history books. Just as he might draw the wrong lessons from fables—learning to employ rather than eschew false flattery—so too might he learn to emulate the wrong historical figures or take from history books the wrong lessons. In order for the chiasmic reversal to take place, Émile must learn to read properly. And more specifically, he must learn to read *Robinson Crusoe*.

Reading "Robinson Crusoe"

As a result of his professed hatred and distrust of books, Rousseau seeks the one book that will guide Émile's future reading and prevent him from being waylaid by books. Rousseau turns to *Robinson Crusoe* repeatedly throughout his works, also celebrating it in *Confessions* and *The Dialogues*, for Crusoe is afforded a long-term respite from society; he is granted the opportunity to learn anew the value of nature free from the confines of human

society.⁸ Rousseau recognizes that *Robinson Crusoe* must mean something different to Émile. Unlike Rousseau, Émile does not need respite from society's demands because he has had no (or at least limited) contact with it. Émile's reading of *Robinson Crusoe* is meant, instead, to prepare him for his introduction into society. Crusoe's departure from, and inevitable return to, society serves as a model for Émile, whose journey will follow the second half of Robinson Crusoe's—from nature to society.

Robinson Crusoe is to provide Émile with a model of self-sufficiency. Deprived of the company of fellow men, Crusoe must successfully fend for himself, and so should Émile learn to fend for himself. More importantly, perhaps, Rousseau argues that this book, more than any other, upholds the true value of things over signs and emphasizes the need for the practical over the rhetorical. Crusoe's survival depends on his quickly learning the real value of things rather than being distracted or swayed by a thing's symbolic value or by the value another might ascribe to it. When, for example, he returns to the ship in order to salvage materials necessary for his survival, he must act decisively and with purpose. He must not linger, for the ship is in danger of being torn from the rock upon which it has become temporarily anchored. He must act decisively in order to collect the things that will give him the best advantage for survival.

To survive, Crusoe must learn that the value of a thing is not arbitrary but determined by what it will help him to accomplish. Things are instruments; their value is their utility. This lesson is crucial to both Crusoe's survival and Émile's future success as a model citizen. As a result of reading *Robinson Crusoe*, Émile will be inspired to know all that is useful, and he will base appropriate judgments on the utility of objects. He will also learn to value signs for their utility, which explains another, and perhaps the most significant, reason for Rousseau's selection of *Robinson Crusoe*. Émile will learn from *Robinson Crusoe* to relate even to language as a tool, as if it were a thing.

Though many have noted that *Robinson Crusoe* is to be Émile's first book, the story of Émile's reading of *Robinson Crusoe* is

⁸ Though the title of my essay foregrounds the sound of the two names, it is difficult to know for certain how attuned Rousseau was to the audible presence of his own name within "Crusoe." See also Geoffrey Bennington, *Dudding: Des noms de Rousseau* (Paris: Galilée, 1991).

complicated by a performance of over-identification with Crusoe that unsettles Émile's identity.⁹ Rousseau puts great pressure on what *Robinson Crusoe* will do for Émile; the novel must effectively ensure Émile's mastery over reading and so, by extension, the world of conventions and signs. As a result, Rousseau pushes his rhetoric towards hyperbole. Émile is not simply to read *Robinson Crusoe*; he is to perform the role of Crusoe and, in the process, come to believe that he is Robinson Crusoe.

The literal self-forgetting that Rousseau requires of Émile—if Émile is to be prepared to read the books of history—is meant to overcome the trouble with books that Rousseau so strenuously posits.¹⁰ To direct Émile's reading to its proper end and to limit the possibility that Émile will be led astray by the books that he will read, Rousseau introduces a performative aspect of reading: "Je veux que la tête lui en tourne, qu'il s'occupe sans cesse de son château, de ses chèvres, de ses plantations; qu'il apprenne en détail, non dans ses livres mais sur les choses tout ce qu'il faut

⁹ See also Diane Fourny, "L'Émile et la question du livre," *SVEC* 278 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1990), 309–19; Tetsuya Kumamoto, "Le 'Topos' de l'île chez Rousseau et le roman *Robinson Crusoe*," *Études de langue et littérature françaises* 70 (1997): 42–54; Patrick Hochart, "La Bible d'Émile ou l'emule de Robinson," in *Le Travail des Lumières*, ed. Caroline Jacot-Grapa, Nicole Jacques-Lefèvre, Yannick Séité, and Carine Trevisan (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2002), 339–60. While my essay has much in common with these articles, I place more emphasis on the question of reading in Rousseau and on the way in which Rousseau's suggestion of *Robinson Crusoe* as the one book that will help Émile to read all others is symptomatic of Rousseau's desire to put reading behind him. Mall addresses this question of reading directly, but does not focus on the specifics of Émile's reading of *Robinson Crusoe*. See Mall, "Scénarios de lecture dans Émile," *Études Jean-Jacques Rousseau* 9 (1997): 21–40; and Mall, *Émile, ou les figures de la fiction*, 69–74.

¹⁰ D.P. Leinster-Mackay, in *The Educational World of Daniel Defoe* (Victoria: English Literary Studies, 1981), explores the historical reception of *Robinson Crusoe* and its central role in school curricula. Since Rousseau recognized the value of *Robinson Crusoe*, it has continued to hold a central place in children's instruction. For example, Walter Wilson in *Memoirs of the Life and Times of Daniel Defoe* (1830) writes: "As a work of amusement, it is one of the first books put into the hands of youth; and there can be none more proper to insinuate instruction, whilst it administers delight" (cited in Leinster-Mackay, 10). Even John Stuart Mill, the famed prodigy who had read everything serious before he turned 12, remembers *Robinson Crusoe* as of great importance to him (cited in Leinster-Mackay, 10). For more on the historical reception of *Robinson Crusoe*, see Martin Green, *The Robinson Crusoe Story* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990); and Hubert Damisch, "Robinsonnades I: The Allegory," trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October* 85 (Summer 1998): 20.

savoir en pareil cas; qu'il pense être Robinson lui-même, qu'il se voye habillé de peaux, portant un grand bonnet, un grand sabre, tout le grotesque équipage de la figure, au parasol près dont il n'aura pas besoin" (*Émile*, 455). *Robinson Crusoe* will have the desired effect on *Émile* only if he comes to think of himself as also marooned. Only then will he be able accurately to judge things for their utility. But *Émile's* reading is incomplete until Robinson Crusoe also becomes real for him, that is, only once he becomes Robinson Crusoe through an almost mad act of absolute identification.¹¹ In order to learn to read and in order for his education to progress, *Émile's* head is to be so full of *Robinson Crusoe* that he begins not only to imagine but also literally to see himself as Crusoe; he is to see himself clad in Crusoe's skin(s). While this phrase presumably refers to the animal skins that Crusoe wears after the clothing he had prior to the shipwreck deteriorates, the phrase is itself a sign of the violence present in the scene. The literal desire for *Émile* to wear the animal skins worn by Crusoe becomes a metaphorical desire for *Émile* to get inside Crusoe's skin.¹² *Émile* is to forget, at least for a moment, that he is *Émile* and come to believe that he is another.

The chiasmic reversal in *Émile*, from the privileging of things and the denial of signs to the acceptance of signs (as history books), permits a metaphorical union of nature and society through an *Émile* who knows himself as self-sufficient. Unlike a dialectic in which society would function as the determinate negation of nature, or in which nature would function as the determinate negation of society, in the topological model that

¹¹ For a discussion of the problematic role of imitation in pedagogy, see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 204–5. According to Derrida, "Pedagogy cannot help but encounter the problem of imitation. What is example? Should one educate by example or explanation? Should the teacher make an example of himself and not interfere any further, or pile lesson upon exhortation? And is there virtue in being virtuous by imitation? All these questions are asked in the second book of *Émile*" (204). Derrida goes on to show the ways in which the possibility of imitation interrupts natural simplicity, for even "good" imitation carries within itself the promise of corruption.

¹² On *Émile's* identification with Robinson Crusoe, see also Josué V. Harari, *Scenarios of the Imaginary: Theorizing the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 118–24. Harari notes that "*Émile* is thus commanded to identify himself with a utopic ideal of man free from *all* relationships, those of society necessarily included" (122). Harari, however, does not pursue the potentially grotesque nature of *Émile's* identification.

Rousseau develops and relies on in *Émile*, Émile should learn to take Robinson Crusoe as an example. However, even accepting Crusoe's exemplary status, it is not clear why he should need to become Crusoe. The adequate systematization of the tropological model, Rousseau's text implies despite itself, depends upon evicting the very idea of a reading subject from the model of education asserted positively in *Émile*. There is no more reading subject, only the endless repetition of Robinson Crusoes. If the point of *Émile* is to produce a self-sufficient and self-identical model citizen, why should Émile need to see himself as another in order to learn to read as himself?

As Christopher Kelly points out, Émile's identification with Robinson Crusoe is meant to be short-lived: "Immediately after saying that Émile will think he is Robinson, Rousseau indicates that the boy will constantly be made 'to examine his hero's conduct; to investigate whether he omitted anything, whether there was nothing to do better; to note Robinson's failings attentively; and to profit from them so as not to fall into them himself in such a situation' ... In other words, the intensity of Émile's identification with his hero is considerably diluted by an actively critical spirit."¹³ Rousseau, suggests Kelly, acknowledges that the goal of Émile's reading is not full identification with Robinson Crusoe. Rousseau revises and retreats from his initial position, but in a sense the damage has been done. Every act of reading becomes an almost mad identification—a too literal identification—with a literary character and a critical reflection on the failings of "Robinson" (that is, Émile himself as reader).

To become himself, Émile must become two; he must be himself and Robinson Crusoe when he reads. And this splitting of the reading subject has consequences for Émile and the version of the reading subject that emerges with *Émile*. Rousseau's pedagogical treatise is meant to guarantee reading never derails his pupil and to ensure (however impossibly) a self-sufficiency even in the face of societal pressures; and yet in order for reading never to derail the reader, Rousseau must introduce the necessity of Émile's reading as another, as someone he is not.

It is a memorable scene of reading, but the language of the passage introduces some complexities that are difficult to resolve, specifically with respect to the inclusion or exclusion of the umbrella (which Crusoe uses to shade himself from the harsh

¹³ Christopher Kelly, *Rousseau as Author: Consecrating One's Life to the Truth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 94.

sunlight): “qu’il pense être Robinson lui-même, qu’il se voye habillé de peaux, portant un grand bonnet, un grand sabre, tout le grotesque équipage de la figure, au parasol près dont il n’aura pas besoin” (*Émile*, 455). The expression “au ... près” can be positive or negative depending on the context. Two common English translations of *Émile* offer opposing translations of this passage. Barbara Foxley translates the passage positively: “let him see himself clad in skins, wearing the tall cap, the great cutlass, all the grotesque get-up of Robinson Crusoe, even to the umbrella which he will scarcely need.”¹⁴ While Allan Bloom translates the passage negatively: “I want him to think he is Robinson himself, to see himself dressed in skins, wearing a large cap, carrying a large saber and all the rest of the character’s grotesque equipment, with the exception of the parasol, which he will not need.”¹⁵ Given that the expression “au ... près” comes after the phrase “tout le grotesque équipage de la figure,” it follows that the parasol would be included in “all of the equipage.” But the context does not adequately control the two readings. If one translates the passage as “even to” or “including” the umbrella, then Rousseau is violating the very point behind *Émile*’s reading of *Robinson Crusoe*, which is meant to teach him to relate to things for their usefulness. Why should Rousseau want *Émile* to include in his costume something for which he will explicitly have no use? And yet, translating the passage as Bloom does also fails to resolve the complexity. What reason is there to draw a distinction between the cap and sabre that *Émile* does need and the parasol that he will not need? In what ways does *Émile* need a cap and sabre but not a parasol? At the very moment that Rousseau introduces the importance of a divided reading subject (*Émile* as himself and Robinson Crusoe), he also introduces textual complexities that are difficult to control. The attempt to control *Émile*’s reading produces a text that is itself difficult (if not impossible) to read. The story of *Émile*’s reading undoes one’s reading of *Émile*.¹⁶

¹⁴ Rousseau, *Émile*, trans. Barbara Foxley, intro. P.D. Jimack (London: Everyman Library, 1993), 177.

¹⁵ Rousseau, *Émile, or on Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 185.

¹⁶ When Rousseau returns to this question later in *Émile* in the *Profession de foi*, he discloses again the unreadability of *Émile*, an unreadability that emerges in the attempt to control *Émile*’s reading. See Paul de Man’s reading of the *Profession de foi* (221–45).

Reading as Robinson Crusoe is to help Émile learn to read properly, always to the right end, and so prepare him for the encounter with history books. Without *Robinson Crusoe* and without the performance of reading that Émile will learn from Crusoe, the chiasmic reversal upon which the whole of *Émile* depends will not be realized. Émile will fail to enter society without being mastered by it because he will fail to master his relationship to signs. And yet Rousseau's attempt to control Émile's reading introduces textual difficulties that demand more and not less reading, just as Rousseau's attempt in book 2 of *Confessions* to speak only once and no more of the ribbon-stealing incident results, almost mechanically, in his repeated returns to it (in the *Fourth Rêverie*, for example).

While Rousseau does not seem to acknowledge the strangeness inherent in this scene (of Émile's reading as Robinson Crusoe), the sequel *Émile et Sophie, ou les solitaires* offers Rousseau a chance to return to the pedagogical reading practices he describes. After yet another scene of reading, this time Sophie's reading of François Fénelon's *Telemachus*, which she too reads literally, *Émile* concludes with the marriage of Émile and Sophie. Sophie's reading of *Telemachus* prepares her for her meeting with Émile, as she identifies him with the hero and so falls in love with him. In *Émile et Sophie, ou les solitaires*, which Rousseau never finished, Émile recounts the failures of his life to his tutor. After many adventures, including being taken prisoner by pirates and surviving a period of enslavement, Émile realizes (that is, literalizes) his reading of *Robinson Crusoe*. *Émile et Sophie* shows that Émile's reading of *Robinson Crusoe* may indeed have had negative consequences, for Émile does become his ideal—and literally finds himself on a desert island.¹⁷ *Émile* is governed by Rousseau's attempt to turn two into one (Émile represents the possible articulation of natural and civil man just as *Émile* concludes with the marriage of Émile and Sophie). Both of these unions depend upon Émile's learning to read; and yet in the attempt to guarantee his reading, Émile himself becomes two: Émile and Robinson Crusoe. And the splitting of Émile in and through the attempt to learn to read eventually results in the splitting of *Émile* into *Émile* and *Émile et Sophie, ou les*

¹⁷ For more on *Émile et Sophie*, see Charles Wirz, "Notes sur *Émile et Sophie, ou les solitaires*," *Annales Jean-Jacques Rousseau* 36 (1963–65): 291–303; and Guy Turbet-Delof, "À propos d'*Émile et Sophie*," *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 64 (1964): 44–59.

solitaires. The presence of *Émile et Sophie* acknowledges the very instability that Rousseau happens upon and repeats with the attempt to control Émile's reading—and therefore, in closing, reading itself.¹⁸

Two for One

I began by claiming that *Émile* is Rousseau's most sustained attempt to link together two competing discourses, the philosophical and the literary, and that Rousseau pursues the opposition of these two discourses via the structural opposition of nature and society. In order for *Émile* to be successful, Émile must manage to unite these two competing states, the natural and the social, which also correspond to two competing relationships to signs. In the early books, Émile is to have a very limited number of encounters with signs; in fact, the fewer encounters with signs the better off he will be and the more perfect his education will become. For this reason, he is not to read fables until later in his life, only after the chance is minimized that reading books will lead him astray. However, in the second half of *Émile* Rousseau asserts the importance of reading and of books to Émile's education; without books Émile will never marry Sophie, and his education will never be complete. I have argued that this reversal depends upon the scene of Émile's reading *Robinson Crusoe*, which occurs midway through the text and subsequently midway through Émile's education and development.

The complexity of Émile's reading of *Robinson Crusoe*, however, suggests that more is at stake than his development. We can understand the necessity of *Robinson Crusoe* to Rousseau's argument as expressed in *Émile* in slightly different terms. While Rousseau pretends that Émile's education is governed by—and must respond to—natural changes, *Émile* is an imagined experiment and not an empirical one; as such *Émile* offers itself as an allegory and not an empirical model of development. From the moment Rousseau begins to depend upon a substitutive system, from the moment that he stresses through hyperbole the need

¹⁸ See also Janie Vanpée, "Rousseau's *Émile, ou de l'éducation*: A Resistance to Reading," *Yale French Studies* 77 (1990): 156–76. Whereas Vanpée argues that in the sequel Rousseau critiques his previous interpretations of pedagogical models, I argue that the presence of the sequel discloses a truth about his own pedagogy (and in particular his pedagogy of reading) that only later became legible for Rousseau.

for *Émile* to become Robinson Crusoe, it is clear that Rousseau's concerns are also linguistic and not simply psychological.

In linguistic terms, *Émile*'s reading of *Robinson Crusoe* functions as an attempt to articulate two competing and potentially incompatible linguistic models: the natural and the differential. The natural man has no relation to anything else. In *Émile*'s early education, which is to correspond to the condition of nature, signs have meaning because they have a unique and natural relation to the things to which they are said to refer. This is why, for instance, *Émile* is to learn to decode signs through the notes left for him that refer to particular outings and events that he will miss because he is not yet fully literate. Rousseau continues and extends the importance of the sign's relationship to its signified with *Robinson Crusoe*, where utility in the world of things is the ultimate signified. *Émile*'s reading of *Robinson Crusoe* will teach him to relate to signs as the things they signify. The civil man, on the other hand, is defined by his relations with others. In the opposing linguistic model, that is, signs have value not because they refer to things, but because of the network of signs of which they are a part. Signs are granted meaning and value by the system that produces them and through their difference from other signs, not by the things to which they refer. Just as Rousseau finds both the natural and the civil man lacking, he is also dissatisfied with either linguistic model; the goal of *Émile* and the goal of *Émile*'s reading is to unite these two models, the natural and the differential.¹⁹

As a reader, *Émile* is to unite the natural relationship to signs (as things) with the conventional relationship to things (as signs). *Émile* achieves this, or so Rousseau imagines, but only to the extent to which the experience of reading belongs to another, namely Robinson Crusoe. When this moment of identification is translated back into a psychological vocabulary, and it must be possible to do so since readers of *Émile* should not forget that this is also a pedagogical treatise that aims for a degree of practical applicability, then certain difficulties arise for Rousseau's model of education. In particular, certain difficulties arise concerning the relation (or non-relation) of experience and education, particularly the experience of learning to read.

¹⁹ One might also identify the natural model as aesthetic because such an approach to language assumes that the meaning of a particular signifier is somehow related to its appearance and that one can move from appearance to signification without interruption.

It may be possible (however unlikely) to pass from nature to society, and so unite a natural and differential understanding of signs, but only at the expense of the one who would know that such a passage (as an event available to individual consciousness) occurs. In order for *Émile* to unite the natural and civil—in order for him to pass into human society—he must learn to “read” *Robinson Crusoe*. To “read” *Robinson Crusoe*, though, he must learn to read as Robinson Crusoe. Dressed in Crusoe’s skins, *Émile* is not to recognize himself as *Émile*. As a result, Rousseau’s *Émile* suggests that reading is to be taught only if the one who reads forgets he reads as himself, only, that is, if the experience of learning to read is missed. It may not be a surprise, then, that *Émile*, which inscribes within itself a story of the difficulty of knowing that one knows how to read, should also raise persistent questions about its own readability, disguised for example in the “or” that divides its title. Each time there is an attempt to control reading, the text merely produces more problems for reading. *Émile* will only come into being as a proper reader to the extent to which he is split into two, the very thing *Émile* (and *Émile*) is meant to overcome. *Émile* testifies to a truth about education that may be difficult to integrate into any systematic understanding of education. It suggests that education—specifically an education in reading—is not an experience that can be claimed by the one who reads as himself, which may explain why readers, including Rousseau himself, so often fail to remember learning to read at all.



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