

Irony in Rousseau's *Emile*

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Professor Thompson sees a common ground in the theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Carter G. Woodson, in that both “stress the centrality of experience and the importance of a nurturing and supportive environment that allows learners to explore their possibilities to the fullest.” Yet they differ from one another in that Rousseau’s child-centered education “tends to equate authenticity with unmediated, politically innocent individual experience,” and “typically assumes some degree of detachment from...social conditions.” Woodson’s adult-centered education seeks authenticity in shared political experience, beginning with “the social, political, cultural, economic, and historical situation of learners.” This is a suggestive and useful distinction, and Professor Thompson’s characterization of the differing roles of teachers which these differences suggest is quite persuasive.

Yet in characterizing Woodson’s teachers as those whose “pedagogical focus is on the situated student,” and in portraying Rousseau’s “good and pure man,” an image that requires “approaches that reference education to the ‘innocent’ child,” Professor Thompson conveys the impression that Rousseau (as the fictional Jean-Jacques in *Emile*) did not study the situation but only the student. Concerning the problem of finding uncontaminated teachers, Professor Thompson says, Rousseau “neatly finesses...by fictionalizing his account — saying in effect, just suppose that we start with the kind of tutor we require, and just suppose that that person is me.”

I would like to offer a different reading of Rousseau, with the aim of viewing his portrayal of Emile’s education from another perspective. There is no doubt that Emile is fictional; in the book’s Preface Rousseau says that what he has written is “less an educational treatise than a visionary’s dreams about education.”¹ This puts us in mind of Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality*, where he says that he is “laying aside facts”² and writing a “hypothetical history of governments.”³ Both the *Discourse* and *Emile* are “hypothetical accounts.”

It is important to note that in *Emile*, not only is Emile a fictional person, but so is the tutor Jean-Jacques. To recognize this is to suggest that Rousseau’s appeal, instead of being “to the occasional pure man, such as himself,” is to a hypothetical Jean-Jacques. I am suggesting that it is just because Rousseau is not a “pure man,” and just because he has not found anyone who is, that he creates a hypothetical Jean-Jacques. Not knowing what such a tutor must do to teach a hypothetical Emile, Rousseau has Jean-Jacques act as if he knows what he must do. And, not knowing what the hypothetical Emile will do in response to Jean-Jacques, Rousseau has him respond as if Jean-Jacques knows what he is doing.

Jean-Jacques, in crafting Emile’s education, does not work with “the student alone,” but creates an entire situation in which Emile grows from one age to another. Not trusting the mis-educative influences of the larger society, Jean-Jacques removes Emile from it and creates a hypothetical society. It is a miniature society,

populated by Jean-Jacques and Emile. Yet Jean-Jacques brings other characters into it when he finds them necessary to further Emile's development: for example, the gardener, whose property Emile violates when he plants beans; the carnival man, when Emile needs a different lesson; and, of course, Sophie appears when it is time for Emile to meet a woman. Jean-Jacques must change the situation as Emile moves on from childhood toward the "age of reason." Rousseau characterizes Emile's needs when he attains that age:

Now, needs change according to the situation of men. There is a great difference between the natural man living in the state of nature and the natural man living in the state of society. Emile is not a savage to be relegated to the desert. He is a savage made to inhabit cities. He has to know how to find his necessities in them, to take advantage of their inhabitants, and to live, if not like them, at least with them.⁴

It is not too much to say that Emile's "innocence" is less important to Rousseau than what is necessary for his growth; indeed, the frequency with which the terms "necessary" and "necessity" appear in *Emile* attests to their importance. And, what is more, if we take *Emile* as a hypothetical account of educating an individual, to be a counterpart of the *Discourse on Inequality* as a hypothetical account of the development of the human race, we can find in the *Discourse* a kind of social situation in which Emile could be happy. The "best" social situation for Emile would be like the one in Rousseau's hypothetical history, in which:

the development of the human faculties, holding a just mean between the indolence of the primitive state and the petulant activity of egoism, must have been the happiest and most durable epoch. The more we reflect on this state, the more convinced we shall be, that it was the least subject of any to revolutions, the best for man...this condition is the real youth of the world, and...all ulterior improvements have been so many steps, in appearance towards perfection of individuals, but in fact toward the decrepitness of the species.⁵

Emile's education must not make him another example of "the decrepitness of the species"; instead, Emile must exemplify a mean between indolence and egoism.

Yet, when Emile attains the age of reason, prepares to marry Sophie, and takes the "grand tour" to observe what society is like, Emile finds that there is no city fit for a "savage" such as he. He has come to understand the truth in Jean-Jacques' earlier claim — that Emile must learn to live with inhabitants of cities, but that he will not be like them. Thus there is a certain irony in Rousseau's hypothetical account of Emile's education. After Emile becomes the kind of person who would not succumb to "the petulant activity of egoism," he finds that there is no place to live which is not characterized by that sort of activity. Emile cannot be free under the conditions of society as it exists. Near the end of *Emile*, Jean-Jacques says to Emile: "Freedom is found in no form of government; it is in the heart of the free man. He takes it with him everywhere."⁶

Finally, then, Rousseau the author is so far from being a "pure man" that he makes a hypothetical one whose hypothetical tutoring shapes a hypothetical Emile who learns that he cannot live like others, but must make do by living with them. "Pure men" such as Jean-Jacques and Emile are not to be found in actual cities, but only in hypothetical ones.

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1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 34.
 2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality Among Mankind*, ed. Lester G. Crocker (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), 177.
 3. Rousseau, *Discourse*, 173.
 4. Rousseau, *Emile*, 205.
 5. Rousseau, *Discourse*, 219-20.
 6. Rousseau, *Emile*, 473.