J.-J. ROUSSEAU

Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre

J.-J. Rousseau, Citizen of Geneva

TO

M. d'Alembert, of the French Academy, The Royal Academy of Sciences of Paris, the Prussian Academy, the Royal Society of London, the Royal Academy of Literature of Sweden, and the Institute of Bologna;

On his article *Geneva* in the seventh volume of *l'Encyclopédie* and especially on the project of establishing a dramatic theatre in that city.

Di meliora piis, erroremque hostibus illum.[1]
Virg. *Georg.* III. 513

NOTE: The numbers refer to the Translator's Notes at the end of the book; the asterisks to Rousseau's own notes at the bottom of the page.

make us love, and that odious disputes of theology trouble no more either their repose or ours. It is of import for us, finally, always to learn from their lessons and their example that gentleness and humanity are also the virtues of the Christian.

II

I HASTEN to turn to a discussion that is less grave and less serious but which is still of enough concern to us to merit our reflection and which I enter into more willingly as it is somewhat more within my competence. It is that of the project to establish a theatre for the drama at Geneva. I shall not expound here my conjectures about the motives which might have brought you to propose an establishment so contrary to our maxims. Whatever your reasons, I have here to do only with ours; and all that I shall permit myself to say with respect to you is that you will surely be the first philosopher* who ever encouraged a free people, a small city, and a poor state to burden itself with a public theatre.[12]

How many questions I find to discuss in what you appear to have settled! Whether the theatre is good or bad in itself? Whether it can be united with morals [manners]? Whether it is in conformity with republican austerity? Whether it ought to be tolerated in a little city? Whether the actor's profession can be a decent one? Whether actresses can be as well behaved as other women? Whether good laws suffice for repressing the abuses? Whether these laws can be well observed? etc. Everything is still problematic concerning the real effects of the theatre; for, since the disputes that it occasions are solely between the men of the church and the men of the world, each side views the problem only through its

* Of two famous historians, both philosophers, both dear to M. d'Alembert, the modern[11] would be of his opinion, perhaps; but Tacitus, whom he loves, about whom he meditates, whom he deigns to translate, the grave Tacitus, whom he quotes so willingly, and whom he sometimes imitates so well except for his obscurity, would he have agreed?

prejudices. Here, Sir, are studies that would not be unworthy of your pen. As for me, without believing that what I might do could serve as a substitute for your efforts, I shall limit myself in this essay to seeking those clarifications that you have made necessary. I beg you to take into consideration that in speaking my opinion in imitation of your example, I am fulfilling a duty toward my country, and that, if my sentiments are mistaken, at least this error can hurt no one.

At the first glance given to these institutions I see immediately that the theatre is a form of amusement; and if it is true that amusements are necessary to man, you will at least admit that they are only permissible insofar as they are necessary, and that every useless amusement is an evil for a being whose life is so short and whose time is so precious. The state of man has its pleasures which are derived from his nature and are born of his labors, his relations, and his needs. And these pleasures, sweeter to the one who tastes them in the measure that his soul is healthier, make whoever is capable of participating in them indifferent to all others. A father, a son, a husband, and a citizen have such cherished duties to fulfil that they are left nothing to give to boredom. The good use of time makes time even more precious, and the better one puts it to use, the less one can find to lose. Thus it is constantly seen that the habit of work renders inactivity intolerable and that a good conscience extinguishes the taste for frivolous pleasures. But it is discontent with one's self, the burden of idleness, the neglect of simple and natural tastes, that makes foreign amusement so necessary. I do not like the need to occupy the heart constantly with the stage as if it were ill at ease inside of us. Nature itself dictated the response of that barbarian* to whom were vaunted the magnificences of the circus and the games established at Rome. "Don't the Romans," asked this fellow, "have wives or children?" The barbarian was right. People think they come together in the theatre,

* Chrysost. in Matth. Homel, 38.

and it is there that they are isolated. It is there that they go to forget their friends, neighbors, and relations in order to concern themselves with fables, in order to cry for the misfortunes of the dead, or to laugh at the expense of the living. But I should have sensed that this language is no longer seasonable in our times. Let us try to find another which is better understood.

To ask if the theatre is good or bad in itself is to pose too vague a question; it is to examine a relation before having defined the terms. The theatre is made for the people, and it is only by its effects on the people that one can determine its absolute qualities. There can be all sorts of entertainment.* There is, from people to people, a prodigious diversity of morals [manners], temperaments, and characters. Man is one; I admit it! But man modified by religions, governments, laws, customs, prejudices, and climates becomes so different from himself that one ought not to seek among us for what is good for men in general, but only what is good for them in this time or that country. Thus the plays of Menander, made for the Athenian theatre, were out of place in Rome's. Thus the gladiatorial combats which, during the republic, animated the courage and valor of the Romans, only inspired the population of Rome, under the emperors, with the love of blood and cruelty. The same object offered to the same people at different times taught

* "There can be entertainments blameable in themselves, like those which are inhuman or indecent and licentious; such were some of the pagan entertainments. But there are also some which are indifferent in themselves and only become bad through their abuse. For example, theatrical plays are not objectionable insofar as in them descriptions are to be found of the characters and actions of men, where agreeable and useful lessons for every station in life can even be presented. But if an easygoing morality is retailed in them; if the people who exercise this profession lead a licentious life and serve to corrupt others; if such shows support vanity, idleness, luxury, and lewdness, it is evident that the thing turns into an abuse; and unless a way is found to correct these abuses or to protect ourselves from them, it is better to give up this form of amusement." (*Instruction chrétienne*,[13] Vol. III, Book iii, ch. 16.)

This is the state of the question when it is well posed. What must be known is whether the morality of the theatre is necessarily easygoing, whether the abuses are inevitable, whether its difficulties are derived from the nature of the thing or whether they come from causes that can be set aside.

men at first to despise their own lives and, later, to make sport of the lives of others.

The sorts of entertainment are determined necessarily by the pleasure they give and not by their utility. If utility is there too, so much the better. But the principal object is to please; and, provided that the people enjoy themselves, this object is sufficiently attained. This alone will always prevent our being able to give these sorts of institutions all the advantages they are susceptible of; and it is a gross self-deception to form an idea of perfection for them that could not be put into practice without putting off those whom one wants to instruct. It is from this that is born the diversity of entertainments according to the diverse tastes of nations. An intrepid, grave, and cruel people wants deadly and perilous festivals in which valor and composure shine. A ferocious and intense people wants blood, combat, and terrible passions. A voluptuous people wants music and dances. A gallant[14] people wants love and civility. A frivolous people wants joking and ridicule. *Trahit sua quemque voluptas.*[15] To please them, there must be entertainments which promote their penchants, whereas what is needed are entertainments which would moderate them.

The stage is, in general, a painting of the human passions, the original of which is in every heart. But 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 despise themselves. So that, if he gives an odious coloring to some passions, it is only to those that are not general and are naturally hated. Hence the author, in this respect, only follows public sentiment. And then, these repulsive passions are always used to set off others, if not more legitimate, at least more to the liking of the spectators. It is only reason that is good for nothing on the stage. A man without passions or who always mastered them could not attract anyone. And it has already been observed that a Stoic in tragedy would be an insufferable figure. In comedy he would, at most, cause laughter.

Let no one then attribute to the theatre the power to change sentiments or morals [manners], which it can only follow and embellish. An author who would brave the general taste would soon write for himself alone. When Molière transformed the comic stage, he attacked modes and ridiculous traits. But, for all of that, he did not shock the public's taste.* He followed or expanded on it, just as Cornéille, on his part, did. It was the old theatre which was beginning to shock this taste, because, in an age grown more refined, the theatre preserved its initial coarseness. So, also, the general taste having changed since the time of these two authors, if their masterpieces were now to be presented for the first time, they would inevitably fail. The connoisseurs can very well admire them forever; if the public still admires them, it is more for shame at recanting than from a real sentiment for their beauties. It is said that a good play never fails. Indeed, I believe it; this is because a good play never shocks the morals [manners]** of its time. Who doubts that the best play of Sophocles would fall flat in our theatre? We would be unable to put ourselves in the places of men who are totally dissimilar to us.

Any author who wants to depict alien morals [manners] for us nevertheless takes great pains to make his play correspond to our morals [manners]. Without this precaution, one never succeeds,

* Although he anticipated public taste by only a bit, Molière himself had difficulty in succeeding; the most perfect of his works failed at its birth because he presented it too soon and the public was not yet ripe for the *Misanthrope*.

All of this is founded on an evident maxim, i.e., that a people often follows practices which it despises or which it is ready to despise as soon as someone dares to set the example for it. When, in my day, the puppet rage was ridiculed, what was said in the theatre was only the reflection of what was thought by even those who spent their days at that silly amusement. But the constant tastes of a people, its customs, its old prejudices, ought to be respected on the stage. Never has a poet come off well who violated this law.

** I say the tastes or morals [manners] indifferently. For although the one is not the other, they always have a common origin and undergo the same revolutions. This does not imply that good taste and good morals [manners] always reign at the same time; this is an assertion which requires clarification and discussion. But that a certain state of taste always answers to a certain state of morals [manners] is indisputable.

and even the success of those who have taken it often has grounds very different from those supposed by a superficial observer. If the *Arlequin sauvage*[16] is so well received by audiences, is it thought that this is a result of their taste for the character's sense and simplicity, or that a single one of them would want to resemble him? It is, all to the contrary, that this play appeals to their turn of mind, which is to love and seek out new and singular ideas. Now there is nothing newer for them than what has to do with nature. It is precisely their aversion for the ordinary which sometimes leads them back to the simple things.

It follows from these first observations that the general effect of the theatre is to strengthen the national character, to augment the natural inclinations, and to give a new energy to all the passions. In this sense it would seem that, its effect being limited to intensifying and not changing the established morals [manners], the drama would be good for the good and bad for the vicious. Even in the first case it would remain to be seen if the passions did not degenerate into vices from being too much excited. I know that the poetic theatre claims to do exactly the opposite and to purge the passions in exciting them. But I have difficulty understanding this rule. Is it possible that in order to become temperate and prudent we must begin by being intemperate and mad?

"Oh no! It is not that," say the partisans of the theatre. "Tragedy certainly intends that all the passions which it portrays move us; but it does not always want our emotion to be the same as that of the character tormented by a passion. More often, on the contrary, its purpose is to excite sentiments in us opposed to those it lends its characters." They say, moreover, that if authors abuse their power of moving hearts to excite an inappropriate interest, this fault ought to be attributed to the ignorance and depravity of the artists and not to the art. They say, finally, that the faithful depiction of the passions and of the sufferings which accompany them suffices in itself to make us avoid them with all the care of which we are capable.

To become aware of the bad faith of all these responses, one need only consult his own heart at the end of a tragedy. Do the emotion, the disturbance, and the softening which are felt within onself and which continue after the play give indication of an immediate disposition to master and regulate our passions? Are the lively and touching impressions to which we become accustomed and which return so often, quite the means to moderate our sentiments in the case of need? Why should the image of the sufferings born of the passions efface that of the transports of pleasure and joy which are also seen to be born of them and which the authors are careful to adorn even more in order to render their plays more enjoyable? Do we not know that all the passions are sisters and that one alone suffices for arousing a thousand, and that to combat one by the other is only the way to make the heart more sensitive to them all? The only instrument which serves to purge them is reason, and I have already said that reason has no effect in the theatre. It is true that we do not share the feelings of all the characters; for, since their interests are opposed, the author must indeed make us prefer one of them; otherwise we would have no contact at all with the play. But far from choosing, for that reason, the passions which he wants to make us like, he is forced to choose those which we like already. What I have said of the sorts of entertainment ought to be understood even more of the interest which is made dominant in them. At London a drama is interesting when it causes the French to be hated; at Tunis, the noble passion would be piracy; at Messina, a delicious revenge; at Goa, the honor of burning Jews. If an author* shocks these maxims, he will write a very fine play to which no one will go. And then this author must be taxed with

* In order to see this, let a man, righteous and virtuous, but simple and crude, with neither love nor gallantry and who speaks no fine phrases, be put on the French stage; let a prudent man without prejudices be put on it, one who, having been affronted by a bully, refuses to go and have his throat cut by the offender; and let the whole theatrical art be exhausted in rendering these characters as appealing to the French people as is the Cid: I will be wrong, if it succeeds.

ignorance, with having failed in the first law of his art, in the one which serves as the basis for all the others, which is, to succeed. Thus the theatre purges the passions that one does not have and foments those that one does. Is that a well-administered remedy?

Hence, there is a combination of general and particular causes which keeps the theatre from being given that perfection of which it is thought to be susceptible and from producing the advantageous effects that seem to be expected from it. Even if this perfection is supposed to be as great as it can be, and the people as well disposed as could be wished, nevertheless these effects would be reduced to nothing for want of means to make them felt. I know of only three instruments with which the morals [manners] of a people can be acted upon: the force of the laws, the empire of opinion, and the appeal of pleasure. Now the laws have no access to the theatre where the least constraint would make it a pain and not an amusement.* Opinion does not depend on the theatre, since, rather than giving the law to the public, the theatre receives the law from it. And, as to the pleasure that can be had in the theatre, its whole effect is to bring us back more often.

Let us see if there can be other means. The theatre, I am told, directed as it can and ought to be, makes virtue lovable and vice odious. What? Before there were dramas, were not virtuous men loved, were not the vicious hated, and are these sentiments feebler in the places that lack a theatre? The theatre makes virtue lovable . . . It accomplishes a great miracle in doing what nature and reason do before it! The vicious are hated on the stage . . . . Are they loved in society when they are known to be such? Is it quite certain that this hate is the work of the author rather than of the crimes that he makes the vicious commit? Is it quite certain that

* The laws can determine the subjects of the plays, and their form, and the way to play them; but the laws cannot force the public to enjoy them. The emperor Nero sang at the theatre and had all those who fell asleep put to death; still he could not keep everybody awake. And the pleasure of a short nap came close to costing Vespasian his life.[17] Noble Actors of the Paris Opera, if you had enjoyed the imperial power, I should not now complain about having lived too long.

the simple account of these crimes would produce less horror in us than all the colors with which he has painted them? If his whole art consists in producing malefactors for us in order to render them hateful, I am unable to see what is so admirable in this art, and we get, in this regard, only too many lessons without need of this one. Dare I add a suspicion which comes to me? I suspect that any man, to whom the crimes of Phaedra or Medea were told beforehand, would hate them more at the beginning of the play than at the end. And if this suspicion is well founded, then what are we to think of this much-vaunted effect of the theatre?

I should like to be clearly shown, without wasting words, how it could produce sentiments in us that we did not have and could cause us to judge moral beings otherwise than we judge them by ourselves? How puerile and senseless are these vain pretensions when examined closely! If the beauty of virtue were the product of art, virtue would have long since been disfigured! As for me, even if I am again to be regarded as wicked for daring to assert that man is born good, I think it and believe that I have proved it. The source of the concern which attaches us to what is decent and which inspires us with aversion for evil is in us and not in the plays. There is no art for producing this concern, but only for taking advantage of it. The love of the beautiful* is a sentiment as natural to the human heart as the love of self; it is not born out of an arrangement of scenes; the author does not bring it; he finds it there; and out of this pure sentiment, to which he appeals, are born the sweet tears that he causes to flow.

Imagine a play as perfect as you like. Where is the man who, going for the first time, does not go already convinced of what is to be proved in it and already predisposed toward those whom he is

* We have to do with the morally beautiful here. Whatever the philosophers may say of it, this love is innate to man and serves as principle to his conscience. (I can cite as an example of this the little play *Nanine,* which has caused the audience to grumble and is only protected by the great reputation of its author.[18] All this is only because honor, virtue, and the pure sentiments of nature are preferred in it to the impertinent prejudice of social station.)

meant to like? But this is not the question; what is important is to act consistently with one's principles and to imitate the people whom one esteems. The heart of man is always right concerning that which has no personal relation to himself. In the quarrels at which we are purely spectators, we immediately take the side of justice, and there is no act of viciousness which does not give us a lively sentiment of indignation so long as we receive no profit from it. But when our interest is involved, our sentiments are soon corrupted. And it is only then that we prefer the evil which is useful to us to the good that nature makes us love. Is it not a necessary effect of the constitution of things that the vicious man profits doubly, from his injustice and the probity of others? What more advantageous treaty could he conclude than one obliging the whole world, excepting himself, to be just, so that everyone will faithfully render unto him what is due him, while he renders to no one what he owes? He loves virtue, unquestionably; but he loves it in others because he hopes to profit from it. He wants none of it for himself because it would be costly to him. What then does he go to see at the theatre? Precisely what he wants to find everywhere: lessons of virtue for the public, from which he excepts himself, and people sacrificing everything to their duty while nothing is exacted from him.

I hear it said that tragedy leads to pity through fear. So it does; but what is this pity? A fleeting and vain emotion which lasts no longer than the illusion which produced it; a vestige of natural sentiment soon stifled by the passions; a sterile pity which feeds on a few tears and which has never produced the slightest act of humanity. Thus, the sanguinary Sulla cried at the account of evils he had not himself committed.[19] Thus, the tyrant of Phera hid himself at the theatre for fear of being seen groaning with Andromache and Priam, while he heard without emotion the cries of so many unfortunate victims slain daily by his orders.[20] Tacitus reports that Valerius Asiaticus, calumniously accused by the order of Messalina, who wanted him to perish, defended himself before

the emperor in a way that touched this prince very deeply and drew tears from Messalina herself. She went into the next room in order to regain her composure after having, in the midst of her tears, whispered a warning to Vitellius not to let the accused escape. I never see one of these weeping ladies in the boxes at the theatre, so proud of their tears, without thinking of the tears of Messalina for the poor Valerius Asiaticus.[21]

If, according to the observation of Diogenes Laertius, the heart is more readily touched by feigned ills than real ones, if theatrical imitations draw forth more tears than would the presence of the objects imitated, it is less because the emotions are feebler and do not reach the level of pain, as the Abbé du Bos believes,* than because they are pure and without mixture of anxiety for ourselves. In giving our tears to these fictions, we have satisfied all the rights of humanity without having to give anything more of ourselves; whereas unfortunate people in person would require attention from us, relief, consolation, and work, which would involve us in their pains and would require at least the sacrifice of our indolence, from all of which we are quite content to be exempt. It could be said that our heart closes itself for fear of being touched at our expense.

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 of him? Is he not satisfied with himself? Does he not applaud his fine soul? 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.

The more I think about it, the more I find that everything that is played in the theatre is not brought nearer to us but made more

* He says that the poet afflicts us only so much as we wish, that he makes us like his heroes only so far as it pleases us.[22] This is contrary to all experience. Many people refrain from going to tragedy because they are moved to the point of discomfort; others, ashamed of crying at the theatre, do so nevertheless in spite of themselves; and these effects are not rare enough to be only exceptions to the maxim of this author.

distant. When I see the *Comte d'Essex*,[28] the reign of Elizabeth is ten centuries removed in my eyes, and, if an event that took place yesterday at Paris were played, I should be made to suppose it in the time of Molière. The theatre has rules, principles, and a morality apart, just as it has a language and a style of dress that is its own. We say to ourselves that none of this is suitable for us, and that we should think ourselves as ridiculous to adopt the virtues of its heroes as it would be to speak in verse or to put on Roman clothing. This is pretty nearly the use of all these great sentiments and of all these brilliant maxims that are vaunted with so much emphasis—to relegate them forever to the stage, and to present virtue to us as a theatrical game, good for amusing the public but which it would be folly seriously to attempt introducing into society. Thus the most advantageous impression of the best tragedies is to reduce all the duties of man to some passing and sterile emotions that have no consequences, to make us applaud our courage in praising that of others, our humanity in pitying the ills that we could have cured, our charity in saying to the poor, God will help you!

To be sure, a simpler style can be adopted on the stage, and the tone of the theatre can be reconciled in the drama with that of the world. But in this way, morals [manners] are not corrected; they are depicted, and an ugly face does not appear ugly to him who wears it. If we wish to correct them by caricaturing them, we leave the realm of probability and nature, and the picture no longer produces an effect. Caricature does not render objects hateful; it only renders them ridiculous. And out of this arises a very great difficulty; afraid of being ridiculous, men are no longer afraid of being vicious. The former cannot be remedied without promoting the latter. Why, you will ask, must I suppose this to be a necessary opposition? Why, Sir? Because the good do not make evil men objects of derision, but crush them with their contempt, and nothing is less funny or laughable than virtue's indignation. Ridicule, on the other hand, is the favorite arm of vice. With it, the respect that

the heart owes to virtue is attacked at its root, and the love that is felt for it is finally extinguished.

Thus everything compels us to abandon this vain idea that some wish to give us of the perfection of a form of theatre directed toward public utility. It is an error, said the grave Muralt,[24] to hope that the true relations of things will be faithfully presented in the theatre. For, in general, the poet can only alter these relations in order to accommodate them to the taste of the public. In the comic, he diminishes them and sets them beneath man; in the tragic, he extends them to render them heroic and sets them above humanity. Thus they are never to his measure, and we always see beings other than our own kind in the theatre. I add that this difference is so true and so well recognized that Aristotle makes a rule of it in his poetics: *Comoedia enim deteriores, Tragoedia meliores quam nunc sont imitari conantur.*[25] Here is a well-conceived imitation, which proposes for its object that which does not exist at all and leaves, between defect and excess, that which is as a useless thing! But of what importance is the truth of the imitation, provided the illusion is there? The only object is to excite the curiosity of the public. These productions of wit and craft, like most others, have for their end only applause. When the author receives it and the actors share in it, the play has reached its goal, and no other advantage is sought. Now, if the benefit is non-existent, the harm remains; and since the latter is indisputable, the issue seems to me to be settled. But let us turn to some examples which will make the solution clearer.

III

I BELIEVE I can assert as a truth easy to prove, on the basis of those mentioned above, that the French theatre, with all of its faults, is nevertheless pretty nearly as perfect as it can be, whether from the point of view of pleasure or that of utility, and that these two