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### Review Article

#### Rousseau, Shelley and the Enlightenment

*Rousseau in England: The Context for Shelley's Critique of the Enlightenment.* By Edward Duffy. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979. Pp. x, 176. \$12.50.

One of the hoariest legends about Byron concerns the supposed influence of Wordsworth on the Third Canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Based almost exclusively on a conversation reported by the inventive and notoriously mendacious Medwin in his *Conversations with Lord Byron at Pisa* (from which the Countess Guiccioli's related report, many years after, was derived) and on some ill-considered, resentful remarks by a Wordsworth who seems, on his own admission, to have read little of Byron save *Lara* and the quotations he came across in periodical reviews, the legend has survived despite the fact that it is hard to find a single line in Canto Three (perhaps in a pinch we might concede one or two) that suggests Wordsworth as influence or even as analogue.

The most plausible influence or illuminating analogue (apart from the general background of eighteenth-century *genius-loci* nature in both its sublime and beautiful aspects) is Rousseau, and not the most Wordsworthian Rousseau either. What Medwin should have said in that much-quoted imaginary conversation is: "Shelley, when I was in Switzerland, used to dose me with [Rousseau] physic even to nausea." In fact, 1816 seems to have been one of Shelley's least Wordsworthian years: the Shelleys' reading for the year, according to Mary, included no books of Wordsworth, but three of Rousseau. What Shelley read with abandon during that Swiss spring and summer, and celebrated in his letters, was *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, and he read it with Byron. "I have traversed Rousseau's ground," writes Byron to John Murray, "with the Héloïse before me." The clearest Byronic consequences for Canto Three are the portrait of Rousseau and the Clarens stanzas. But some of the most notable analogues to *La Nouvelle Héloïse* are in earlier passages, almost certainly written before Byron and Shelley took their Genevan tour, and before they read the novel—not just together, but even (if we can trust the scholarly consensus) at all. Timing (and Medwin) seems to have forced scholars to invoke irrelevant analogies from *Tintern Abbey* and *The Excursion* when Harold's Rhine journey and his Alpine ecstasies call out for some of the most famous and most quoted letters from Book I of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Perhaps the irrelevant Byron-Rousseau comparisons of

Byron's first reviewers (which he hated) have spoiled them for later critics, even when comparisons are apt.

But enough of such free-wheeling polemics and puzzled queries. My tentative Byron example is just intended to bolster my general contention that the time is ripe for a new book on Rousseau and English Romanticism. Henri Voisine's *J.-J. Rousseau en Angleterre à l'époque romantique* (1956) was a fine, hard-headed book in its time and is still indispensable, but an up-to-date successor on the subject is certainly overdue. The excellent book now before me by Edward Duffy is not exactly that successor and does not really pretend to be. By concentrating on the growth of the English myth of Rousseau (rather than on his literary impact or relevance) and by focusing the whole argument ultimately on an explication of Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*, he necessarily skips material and issues suited to a more comprehensive approach. In other words, the sub-title of his book (*The Context for Shelley's Critique of the Enlightenment*) qualifies very considerably what is ostensibly its main title (*Rousseau in England*). But the latter still seems justified. Professor Duffy offers a good deal more context than is needed to illuminate Shelley, and the book would be a valuable contribution to scholarship even if it did not include the best discussion I have ever read of Shelley's last major poem.

To begin with the context, any reader of both Voisine and Duffy will note that, although Duffy often disregards matters that Voisine tackles, he almost invariably manages to provide fresh insight when the books overlap. They both, for example, discuss Godwin's novel *Fleetwood, or The New Man of Feeling*, but Voisine does little more than underline the obvious in examining the aged MacNeil's memories of Rousseau (whom he met in the Lake District!), whereas Duffy examines both MacNeil and Fleetwood and argues that the sentimental old man of feeling and the brutal new one illuminate two different (pre- and post-Jacobin) components in the developing English myth of Rousseau. Voisine simply finds Hazlitt perverse in claiming that Rousseau lacks imagination; Duffy, aware of the work done on Hazlitt's aesthetics in the past thirty years or so, recognizes the grounds for his judgment. Duffy's sophisticated, inventive, and yet very cautious discussion of the Luther-Rousseau parallel in *The Friend* and his argument for an inhibited, but somehow genuine, sympathy between Coleridge and Rousseau are on a level far beyond Voisine, who, among other limitations, did not have Barbara Rooke's edition to work with. In one place I suspect that an uncritically accepted Voisine argument may be leading Duffy astray. Both of them want to agree with Mary Shelley that Shelley first read *La Nouvelle Héloïse* in June of 1816. Both are faced with the fact that, when in 1811 he found himself unable to accept a *ménage à trois* consisting of himself, Harriet and Hogg, he wrote to the latter in self-justification: "I am not jealous, I perfectly understand the beauty of Rousseau's sentiment; yet Harriet is not an Heloisa, even were I a St. Preux,—but I am not jealous." Voisine argues at some

length that since Shelley the husband is analogous to Rousseau's Wolmar, not to his St. Preux (Hogg's analogue), Shelley's allusion is based on hearsay, not on a reading of Rousseau. Duffy does not quote the passage and argue the point; a mere reference to "the nineteen-year old's egregiously mistaken identification of St. Preux" establishes ignorance of the novel in 1811. But Shelley's shifty, defensive feelings and his conditional clause ("even were I a St. Preux") should not be simplified so automatically. As husband he may want to identify himself with a Wolmar who conquers jealousy with ease, but may find identification with a St. Preux whose conquest is never complete far more natural. Certainly there is a difference between a kind of Freudian literary slip and mere ignorance. Moreover, Shelley seems to be responding to the prior introduction of Rousseau in a missing letter of Hogg (as Cameron points out in his *Shelley Circle* edition). I find it unlikely that two close friends who shared as much of their reading and intellectual life as Hogg and Shelley did would use *La Nouvelle Héloïse* as a point of reference in a personal controversy unless each were sure that the other had read it. But the scholarly argument remains inconclusive.

The freshness and vigour with which Duffy presents his detailed evidence is equalled by the skill with which he portrays (from 1751) the historical myth of Rousseau as it develops its cultural matrix in England and as it is given specific form by assorted writers up to 1822. That matrix, whose lines of force become increasingly complex, contradictory, unstable and even explosive as the eighteenth century draws to a close, was a challenge to be met in very different ways. As to the man of sensibility and austere virtue the myth adds the enlightened philosophe and the social radical and as to these it then adds the paranoid visitor to English shores, the private man of self-confessed weakness or debauchery and the saint canonized by a bloody revolution, the only solution for the individual mythmaker, faced with a complex whose centre will not hold, seems to be oversimplification or bold paradox, and Duffy presents the various permutations of these solutions with considerable power of discrimination and generalization. Among them are turning Rousseau into a philosophe indistinguishable from Voltaire, finding a ruling passion (generally "vanity") to cut across his heterogeneous components, making his "senti-sensuality" and the savage brutality of the Revolution two sides of the same coin (and seeing both of them as the inevitable consequences of a philosophe's futile attempt to live by reason alone), playing up the incompatible components to the point of turning him into the sort of "vile antithesis" of which the Byronic hero is the archetype, and so on. Duffy's permutations reach their climax both in the complexities of Shelley's growing awareness of the significance of Rousseau and ultimately in the dominant figure of *The Triumph of Life*, which, more than any other product of England's Rousseau myth (he argues), does justice to its cultural richness and at the same time creates a very individual synthesis of its parts.

There are two basic assumptions from which Duffy's interpretation of the poem takes its origin. One is solid and the other insecure, but on both he is able to build well. The solid assumption is the highly dramatic, self-reflexive nature of Rousseau's speeches. Rousseau produces the most complex, ironic, casuistical, and yet immediate and confessional, dramatic utterance that Shelley ever created for a character not ostensibly himself. The mixture of the defensive, the boastful and the self-critical is extraordinary (and well suited to the tone of the Rousseau of the *Confessions*). One striking consequence of Duffy's dramatic presupposition is the way he cuts through the controversy about the moral status of the "shape all light" (and of what it does to Rousseau) by locating the problem in Rousseau's response to it and not in the shape *per se*. But Duffy's critical method is pervasive. The conflicts inherited and transformed by Shelley out of the cultural myth reveal themselves not only in Rousseau's moments of discursive, self-analytical argument, but more especially (since these confessions are allegorical) in the subtle tensions within and between the images through which Rousseau tells much of his story.

The second, less secure assumption is that Rousseau's relation to the main imagery of the poem enacts Shelley's view of Rousseau's relation to the Enlightenment. Rousseau is pulled between the rationalism of the philosophes and his own modes of perception, which are less visual (unlike what is produced by the "glare" of the chariot of Life), more fluid and kinetic, more likely to emerge from "the breath of darkness" (to use one of Duffy's key phrases from *The Triumph*). The poem which Harold Bloom once saw as centering on the claims of competing lights becomes, in Duffy's words, "an ironic study in chiaroscuro" created out of the conflict between the Enlightenment and a light born of darkness. The main difficulties with this argument lie not in its literary criticism but in its attempt to tie external and internal evidence too closely together; surely (reacts the sceptical reader) a philosophe outside the poem does not always carry a charge of light imagery; nor do the false lights within the poem necessarily trail the Enlightenment after them. In Duffy's evidence the one side of his key metaphor too regularly and too automatically means the other as well, wherever he finds them. Of course, Shelley could not help knowing—and an explicit image in *Proposals for an Association* may reflect that knowledge—that French and German intellectuals had applied light imagery to themselves in naming their age (although the term "Enlightenment" took a long time to be imported into English and if Shelley ever uses it I have missed the reference); but that he ever superimposed the Enlightenment as such—from whatever language—on that very comprehensive chariot of Life I do not believe, although of course we must not forget that the philosophes and their patrons are a notable group of its victims and a renegade philosophe is Shelley's guide. Also, for another example of imprudence in handling the poem's historical dimension, Duffy overplays the role of

Napoleon. Recognizing (I suspect) the uncertainty of his internal evidence (see "symmetry suggests" on p. 112), he struggles to make the most of Shelley's letters and essays. "As far back as the summer of 1816," he writes, "Shelley saw Rousseau as one both responsible for and corrupted by the adventures of Napoleon." But the letter which he uses as evidence really makes neither point, as becomes even more apparent when his quotation is put back in context and out of the ones Duffy provides (see especially the one for "democracy"). Equally unconvincing is his attempt to support his Napoleon argument with Shelley's *Defence*. "What the 'Triumph' assumes," he writes, "is explicit in 'A Defence of Poetry,' where Shelley vigorously asserts that the Enlightenment is not enough. Guided by its lights, Europe had seen a revolution turn into a terror and its savior into a vulgar *Imperator*. Shelley's association of Bonapartist legions and Enlightenment thought is not meant to question either the necessity of the critical intelligence or the desirability of social reform. Instead he wishes by its fruits to question the adequacy of "mere reason" as an exclusive instrumentality towards this end." Duffy provides no footnote to the *Defence*, but he must be referring to the passage where "Locke, Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire, Rousseau, and their disciples" are praised for their useful exertions to improve the human lot, but placed well below the poets, whose contributions have been incalculably greater. Shelley's footnote goes on to separate Rousseau from the other listed intellectuals because he was a poet and they "were mere reasoners." In my quotation from Duffy he is surely claiming to paraphrase the Shelley passage as evidence for his opening assertion, and to a limited extent does paraphrase it. But Shelley never mentions Napoleon in the passage, or indeed anywhere else in the *Defence*, nor does he mention the revolution and the terror; and Duffy's importation of the Enlightenment and light imagery ("guided by its lights") is quite gratuitous. In these opening pages of Chapter V he works hard to establish solid Shelleyan support for parts of his historical thesis, but my admiration for his rhetoric and ingenuity is not always equalled by my trust in the details of his argument.

Such insecurities, however, do not stand in the way of some first-rate analysis of individual passages and of particular image complexes. The pages which show how Shelley's receding and emerging darkness-and-light images culminate in what Duffy calls "the radiance towards which darkness thrusts" and which place that culmination at the apex of Shelley's favorite "cone of night" image, where his favorite morning and evening star images must logically meet, take matters often discussed by other Shelley-critics to a new level of richness and precision. And when Duffy moves from Shelley's self-defeating visual images to his non- or even anti-visual (often kinetic) ones, his sensitivity to the texture of his poetry is especially apparent, as when he traces the course of those simile chains and images within images of which *The Triumph* is so full. But a final word of praise is due to his remarkable attempt to present Rousseau's failure with the "shape all light" as a variety

of *fiasco*. Duffy brings together as analogues Rousseau's *Pygmalion* and Leigh Hunt's comments on its translation, both printed in an *Enquirer* of 1820, the "spiritual fiasco" of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Faust and Gretchen, and finally the notorious Zuleika episode from Rousseau's *Confessions*. He knows just how much and how little weight his lively, graceful and speculative argument can bear, and he tells us the amount with disarming frankness. One can say of this engaging discussion, as one cannot say of everything in *Rousseau in England*, that it is a triumph of discretion.