

*H-France Review* Vol. 10 (April 2010), No. 64

Response to Walton Review of Robert Zaretsky and John T. Scott, *The Philosophers' Quarrel: Rousseau, Hume, and the Limits of Human Understanding*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. x + 247 pp. Illustrations, endnotes, index. \$18.00 (pb). ISBN 978-0300164282.

By Robert Zaretsky and John T. Scott.

David Hume explained that in his *Essays* he wanted to play the role of an ambassador between the “learned” and the “conversable” worlds in order to remedy the defects of each. Professor Walton finds our book “illuminating” for “general readers” and states that we offer “a well written account” of the Rousseau-Hume quarrel that “offers some compelling portraits of key Enlightenment figures.” We were delighted to read this, for such was precisely our primary—though not our only—intention. Professor Walton’s criticisms in his review therefore concern not our success in playing ambassador to the “conversable” world, but regard rather our success from the vantage of the “learned” world. Professor Walton worries that the specialist will find our book “flawed” because of some factual errors and strained analysis. As scholars ourselves, we appreciate this opportunity to respond to Professor Walton’s criticisms, as well as further explain our book’s aims.

First, Professor Walton claims we cite, but do not engage the scholarly literature on the psychology of Rousseau and Hume and Enlightenment culture more generally. The three works he cites on this score are Jean Starobinski’s classic study of Rousseau, Dena Goodman’s fine essay on the quarrel, and a monograph on Parisian salons by Antoine Lilti. Yet the most cursory reading of our book reveals our indebtedness to Starobinski and Goodman: not only do we engage their works, but use them to shape our own story. As for Lilti, we confess we have not read his book—it was published while we were writing our own—and no doubt would have benefited from his insights.

Our goal regarding these scholarly literatures was one of synthesis. We wanted to bring together two literatures that are rarely combined for the benefit of both scholar and general reader: first, analyses of the philosophy of Rousseau and Hume and, second, historical treatments of the intellectual, social, and political context in which they acted. Too often the philosophy of “high Enlightenment” thinkers such as Rousseau and Hume are analyzed like flies in aspic: as timeless products of disembodied minds. Or, alternatively, their thought is reduced to their time and space, or as the thoughtless reflex of their personalities, especially in the case of Rousseau. We wanted to explore their thought as it was revealed through their action in their environment, notably in their quarrel with one another. In so doing, we drew on the literature on Enlightenment culture in a way that is rare in studies of their thought. On the other hand, our contribution to and engagement with the literature on Enlightenment culture involved introducing an element of Hume’s and Rousseau’s serious grappling with philosophical questions into the study of the intellectual, social, and political context, where such an element is also too often absent. Despite Professor Walton’s reservations, we believe we have succeeded.

Second, Professor Walton finds the connections we draw between Rousseau’s and Hume’s ideas and their actions are often “strained.” He points in particular to our account of Rousseau’s appearance at David Garrick’s Drury Lane Theatre, which he finds “tortuous,” “speculative” and “unconvincing.” We are charged with torture because we suggest that Rousseau’s behavior that night—he made himself the evening’s spectacle by laughing during a comedy, crying during a tragedy, though he didn’t understand

a word of English—can be viewed through the prism of two contemporary works: Denis Diderot’s essay on acting (inspired in part by Garrick’s method of acting) and Rousseau’s own *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (which explores the transmission of emotion before or beyond language). Why this is tortuous Professor Walton does not say. If he had done more than summarize our long discussion in a single sentence and then conclude that it was all an act, as did some of Rousseau’s contemporaries (whom we cite), we would be able to respond. Instead, we must reply to Professor Walton’s claim that this is *our* interpretation.

We make it perfectly clear that this reading is one among a number of possible interpretations of this bizarre event and one worthy of consideration. David Hume, who sat in the same box as Rousseau that evening, may well have found such an interpretation compelling; he certainly leans in this direction in letters he wrote about the event to friends, as we point out. No less important, Rousseau’s *Essay*--translated by John Scott for the standard English edition of Rousseau’s collected works--not only offers a legitimate approach to understanding Rousseau’s behavior that night, but in our view also casts new light on the work itself. We also need to note that, on this particular subject, Professor Walton fails to cite us accurately. He writes that David Garrick, in his translation and revision of Voltaire’s tragedy *Zaire*, had “altered it in light of Rousseau’s damning criticism of it in his *Lettre to d’Alembert*.” We do not make this claim. Instead, as we make clear, Garrick himself worked from an earlier translation done by Aaron Hill and published long before Rousseau’s *Lettre to d’Alembert*.

Readers will have to decide for themselves whether our analysis is strained or illuminating on this and other occasions. However, the “strain” between the two philosophers’ ideas and actions may in a sense be confirmation of our book’s conclusion. Namely, if Hume and Rousseau thought of philosophy as a way of life and sought in important ways to apply their thought in their lives, their quarrel reveals the very limitations in their ability to do so. For all their understanding, Hume and Rousseau were unable simply or fully to apply their ideas in action. Whether the connections we make are “strained” therefore depends in part on whether we have the ideas right, which brings us to Professor Walton’s next concern.

Although he praises us for offering “compelling portraits” of some major Enlightenment figures, Professor Walton also finds them “troubling.” In fact, he seems to think we offer not portraits, but caricatures. According to him, we “often distort Hume’s and Rousseau’s overall philosophies by cherry-picking the ideas that appear to be consonant with the men’s actions.” However, the only example he brings forward is our presentation of Rousseau as, in Professor Walton’s phrase, “averse to reason.” This claim is bogus for a number of reasons. “It is worth stressing,” Professor Walton laments, “that Rousseau rejected neither experience nor reflection.” We agree, which is why we state explicitly in our introduction that Rousseau was *not* an irrationalist, which is a common understanding of his thought and a caricatured one. Indeed, we have been criticized by a few scholars who embrace this caricature for not making Rousseau enough of an irrationalist.

Professor Walton wants to stress that Rousseau “rejected neither experience nor reflection.” We agree. Offering a counter-portrait, Professor Walton argues that Rousseau wanted to find a way to reconcile reason with the sentiments and moral autonomy of the individual. Once again, our account clearly shows we agree. But, unlike Professor Walton, we also wonder how successful Rousseau was in bridging this gap. When push came to shove, as it did in the quarrel with Hume, where did Rousseau ultimately place his bet? Professor Walton suggests that Rousseau thought the best hope for such reconciliation was “exposure to, and hence *experience* of nature.” There is something to this, as Rousseau rhapsodizes in *Julie* over the curative powers of Alpine vistas (which we emphasize in the opening of chapter two) and writes movingly in the *Reveries* about the pleasures of botanizing and solitary enjoyment of nature (as we discuss in chapter six). Yet, as we note in our discussion of the *Reveries*, Rousseau’s experience of nature ultimately becomes a kind of experience of self. Take, for example, the famous description in the “Fifth Promenade” of his absorption in nature. Describing the dream-like state into which he is lulled, Rousseau writes: “What do we enjoy in such a situation? Nothing external

to ourselves, nothing if not ourselves and our own existence. As long as this state lasts, we are sufficient unto ourselves, like God. The sentiment of existence ... is itself a precious sentiment of contentment and of peace which would alone suffice to make this existence dear.”[1] Is this *experience* of nature or *experience* of self, and a non-rationalist and even solipsistic one? We return to Rousseau’s retreat into nature in our description of his sojourn in the north of England, in part because he in fact did so often retreat there with his long walks and botanizing but also because we thought that this impulse sheds light on his long accusatory letter to Hume, written in this environment and itself prone to solipsism and appeals to the truth of the heart. Have we thus distorted Rousseau’s thought?

Professor Walton thinks we also distorted Hume’s thought, but does not offer any examples. For fairness’ sake, we will therefore bear witness against ourselves. We confess that the strongly skeptical Hume we emphasize (especially in the beginning of chapter three) is known in the Hume scholarship as the “Old Hume.” In counterpoise to this venerable portrait, scholars have recently offered the “New Hume,” a portrait that stresses more how Hume wanted to build on a skeptical foundation (a side to his thought that we do, however, discuss in at the end of the same chapter). Why do we tend to emphasize the “Old Hume”? Because the skepticism he counsels concerning understanding oneself and others seemed to fail him in his quarrel with Rousseau.

Our narrative is, quite simply, an exploration of the ways in which the two protagonists understood—and misunderstood—their words and actions. As with any account of the past, we chose to emphasize certain facets of Rousseau’s and Hume’s thought. Every portrait and every story must have an emphasis to be effective. We have done so not in order to make their thought comport with the events we describe, as Professor Walton seems to think, but rather because their actions themselves highlight certain facets of their thought. We have emphasized common ground between Rousseau and Hume that is often unappreciated: their attention to the limits of human understanding. We have also emphasized differences between them: Rousseau’s stress on the passions and the truth known only to the self versus Hume’s stress on reason and the importance of the external verification of experience. Obviously, these emphases hardly exhaust their thought. The question is whether we have presented a caricature. We do not think so.

Finally, Professor Walton finds a handful of minor factual errors in our account. We are grateful for his corrections and will be certain, should there be a third edition, to make the necessary changes. (We will split the difference on the location of the Temple, however; we wrote it was on the eastern edge of the Marais, Professor Walton locates it on the northern edge, and closer inspection of a Paris map reveals it to have been at the northeastern edge.) But as for the “more significant” errors, we are puzzled. First, Professor Walton finds “extravagant” our observation that the salons “began to displace the academy and university as centers of learning,” but doesn’t say why. We look forward to learning more on this score. Moreover, he claims we “mischaracterize” Voltaire’s famous phrase “Ecrasez l’infâme” as the *philosophe’s* “campaign against absolutism.” Here, unfortunately, Professor Walton is picking cherries. What we wrote is that “infamy,” for Voltaire, occurs when “religious intolerance [is] married to absolute political power.” No less importantly, we make it perfectly clear that by such political power we mean the actions of the Toulouse Parlement and not absolutism. How could we intend otherwise when we then proceed to describe Voltaire’s mobilization of the Bourbon monarchy to redress the crime committed in Toulouse?

We began our response to Professor Walton’s review by relating Hume’s self-presentation in his *Essays* as an ambassador between the “learned” and the “conversible” worlds. Hume’s goal was not only to attract a larger audience for his thought than possible with his more abstruse philosophical treatise, which he bemoaned “fell still-born from the press,” but more importantly because of his conception of philosophy. For Hume, philosophy was a way of guiding our lives, of improving our material conditions and steering us clear of dogmatic enthusiasm on the one side and paralytic skepticism on the other. For all the differences between them, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s view of philosophy and his own attempts at reaching a wider audience through novels and other literary forms had a similar impetus. Philosophy is,

---

or should be, serious business even if it often has a comic side. Our aim in *The Philosophers' Quarrel* was to explore the promise and limits of the task of human understanding through an examination of the Rousseau-Hume quarrel. We did so in order to bring philosophy out of the cloister and highlight what we think is the broad and enduring appeal of philosophy— not as an academic discipline, but as a way of life.

#### NOTES

[1] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker, Collected Writings* (12 vols; Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College/University Press of New England, 1990-2009), vol. 8, p.46.

Robert Zaretsky and John T. Scott

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172