Review by Masano Yamashita, University of Colorado at Boulder.

In celebration of Enlightenment philosopher and writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s three-hundredth anniversary, Michael O’Dea has assembled a rich multi-disciplinary volume of thirteen essays that explores contemporary perspectives and proposes new directions in Rousseau scholarship. Acknowledging the fact that the 1960s and 1970s constituted a veritable Golden Age of Rousseau studies via the explosion of French theory (namely, deconstructionism, post-structuralism and phenomenology by way of Geneva), O’Dea seeks to elucidate what is left to probe and more importantly, what is at stake—theoretically, politically, aesthetically, and methodologically—in reading Rousseau in the twenty-first century. His well-curated collection draws attention to the vigor and breadth of twenty-first century Rousseau studies by bringing together an eclectic team of Rousseau specialists, including philosophers, musicologists, literary critics and a political theorist, to re-assess the place of Rousseau in the intellectual, social and literary history of the Enlightenment.

The volume of essays is divided into four thematic groupings. The first part of the volume is devoted to “Identities.” Jean-François Perrin frames Rousseau’s rich understanding of intersubjective relations by examining the tensions in Rousseau’s correspondance between two competing conceptions of friendship. One is utilitarian and worldly, stemming from elite, polite Enlightenment sociability, positing a service-oriented social world of art patronage, built on mutual services and benefits. The other is rooted in the Ancient, idealizing culture of friendship set forth by Cicero and Seneca, that proposes the pleasures of friendship as a pure end in itself. Perrin persuasively argues that the friendship and subsequent break-up between Diderot and Rousseau in their correspondance supplies an important case-study in the understanding and critique of Enlightenment sociability. Claude Habib also fruitfully pairs Rousseau and Diderot in order to investigate Rousseau’s conception of feelings by contrasting it with Diderot’s figuration of extreme emotions. This turn toward affect enriches the recently revitalised field of eighteenth-century affect theory (see for example in the recent 2012 issue of L’Esprit Créateur on Rousseau and the emotions). Habib underlines the distinct qualities of affects for Diderot: they were violent, excessive and by virtue of being irrespressibly “communicables,” (p. 68) involved the many. For Rousseau, by contrast, feelings were intensely personal and singular.

Ourida Mostefai’s essay analyses the literary figuration of failure as a core component of Rousseau’s authorial strategy in fashioning a compelling public self-image. In spite of the writer’s extraordinary literary success, Montesfai argues that Rousseau cultivated misfortune and failure as an autobiographical counterpart to his theoretical arguments about social alienation and the need to safeguard natural innocence. The motif of failure, seen from this framework, serves as a sign of the modern author’s success and moral integrity.

Jacques Berchtold presents an elegant essay that conjoins Rousseau’s treatment of rhetoric, the character of nations, and eighteenth century conceptions of selfhood. Tracing the writer’s suspicion of a rhetoric of “bel esprit” and “le brillant” as emblematic of French urbanity in Julie or the New Heloise,
The provocative question examined by Claude Dauphin is how Rousseau intervened, if at all, in Enlightenment debates on slavery and the deportation of Africans to the New World. The point of departure of this essay is the possible interpretations of Rousseau’s ostensible silence regarding the eighteenth century slave trade. Dauphin elucidates Rousseau’s position on slavery by focusing attention on his musical piece adapted from a creole poem titled “Chanson nègre,” authored by a government official of Port-au Prince, La Mahautière. Dauphin argues that Rousseau subtly encoded his own thoughts into this melody to
express his dismay at the social injustices of the Atlantic slave trade, advancing “[t]a recomposition musicale du poème créole de la Mahautière sous le titre de ‘Chanson nègre’ révèle assurément chez Rousseau une empathie pour les damnés de la terre de son époque” (p. 184). Dauphin goes on to argue persuasively that Rousseau was in fact very aware of Haiti and its theatrical scene, closely following the reception of the staging of his own Devin du Village in Saint-Domingue. This eloquent depiction of a creolized Rousseau, composing his melody as a “cryogramme musical,” makes an important contribution to recent studies of the complex perspective of the European Enlightenment on the slave trade.

Musicologist Jaecqueline Waeber focuses on the aesthetic and pedagogic implications of Rousseau’s professional experiences in music copying. Far from considering music copying as a devalued type of intellectual labor, Waeber demonstrates that music copying and the secretarial work of note-taking both stood as important didactic activities for Rousseau in musicology, his cultivation of literary taste, and the study of foreign and dead languages (Italian and Latin). It is clear that the activity of reading the margins of Rousseau (his minor texts, his secondary activities) still provides fertile terrain for new understandings of eighteenth-century culture.

The fourth and final section of the collection is devoted to the reception of Rousseau’s work. Shojiro Kuwase turns to eighteenth-century critical receptions of Rousseau’s Confessions to demonstrate how authors and critics unsuccessfully tried to assimilate Rousseau’s memoirs to its literary antecedents (Descartes’ Méditations métaphysiques) or contemporary models of self-writing. Kuwase highlights the unusual degree of discomfort experienced by eighteenth century critics in their attempts to analyze Rousseau’s work. This discomfort can be explained in part by Rousseau’s own efforts to demarcate his work with past literary models, and in part by of the split nature of Rousseau’s relationship with his contemporaries, who were divided between venomous detractors and faithful advocates. Lastly, Kuwase argues, the problematic status of the literary exposition of the private still poses hermeneutic questions regarding exemplarity and the limits of bienséances. Rousseau’s self-writings demand a new type of reader’s manual. François Jacob posits Rousseau’s lasting influence on the literary landscape by considering the pastiche of Rousseau’s Confessions, the Scottish writer William Boyd’s 1987’s New Confessions.

By demonstrating the plurality of readings and approaches to Rousseau’s oeuvre, Jean-Jacques Rousseau en 2012 showcases the continuing provocations of Rousseau as political theorist, music specialist, writer and cultural critic.

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Jacques Berchtold, “Le procès du faux brillant dans les Dialogues”

Bruno Bernardi, “Rousseau et la généalogie du concept d’opinion publique”

Claude Dauphin, “La ’Chanson nègre’ de Rousseau: une note de lyrisme dans cette humanité déchue”

Claude Habib, “Emotion feinte, émotion vraie”

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John T. Scott, "Emile et les principes du droit politique: le précis partiel du Contrat social et la double visée de la théorie politique de Rousseau”

Philip Stewart, “Le moi origine et fin: de la création à l’implosion”

Jacqueline Waeber, “Rousseau copiste de musique: l’envers de l’auteur?”

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