H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Julie, or the New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps.* Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1997. xxxi + 728 pp. $70.00, library, ISBN 978-0-87451-824-5.

Reviewed by Richard A. Lebrun

Published on H-France (August, 1998)

The translators and publishers of this new edition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's famous epistolary novel are to be praised on many counts. This is the sixth volume of the *Collected Writings of Rousseau*, which is fast becoming the standard translation of the Genevan's works. These volumes are distinguished by the quality of the translations and the completeness of the critical apparatus. *Julie* meets and even surpasses the standard set by the previous volumes in the series, whose general editors are Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly.

Not only is the translation accurate, idiomatic, and eminently readable, it is supplemented by a glossary of terms (English and French) which had particular connotations in the eighteenth-century or that Rousseau used in idiosyncratic ways. In addition, generous annotations (over seventy pages at the end of the volume) further explain peculiar usages and literary, historical, geographic, and intra-textual references, as well as relate Rousseau's statements in the novel to similar statements in his other works. Even the illustrations, which reproduce the twelve illustrations prescribed by Rousseau (originally printed and released separately from the text) are provided with helpful annotations.

Philip Stewart's brief but knowledgeable introduction defends the re-establishment of *Julie* as the novel's correct title and explains how the original sub-title, *La Nouvelle Heloise*, came to be commonly used as the title. Other helpful supplements to the text include a "Note on the Translation," "Notes on the Text and Engravings," Rousseau's "second preface" (which was not included in the first edition and which in some editions has been printed as an appendix since it makes better sense after the work has been read), and a series of appendices. These include "The Loves of Milord Edward Bromston" (prepared by Rousseau but omitted from the printed versions of the novel), "Subjects of the Engravings" (again, by Rousseau), a Narrative Chronology (based on that in the Pleiade edition), the glossary mentioned above, a "Table of the Letters and Their Contents" (not written by Rousseau, but approved by him), and a bibliography. In short, everything that could possibly be of assistance to either beginning or scholarly readers of Rousseau is provided in an easily accessible format.

A *roman a these*, "a vehicle for communication of a system of thought" (Stewart, Introduction, p. xix), *Julie* has an important place in both the literary and intellectual history of the eighteenth century. As Rousseau more or less explains in his delightfully ambiguous and playful "second preface" in the form of an imaginary conversation between the "editor" of the letters (Rousseau himself) and a "man of letters" (whose identity also remains mysterious), the author deliberately turned to the literary form of a "light" epistolary novel as a means of reaching ordinary readers, readers who lacked the sophistication and the patience to read serious works on philosophy and politics. As Rousseau puts it, "to make what you have to say useful, first you have to get the attention of those who ought to put it to use. My means have changed, but not my purpose. When I tried to speak to men no one listened to me; perhaps by addressing children I shall be listened to; and children do not relish the taste of naked reason any better than that of ill-disguised medicines" (p. 12). The novel embodies, in fact, all Rousseau's most distinctive ideas on such matters as religion, philosophy, politics, and education.

For anyone who has studied Rousseau primarily in his more "serious" works, such as his two discourses (on the sciences and the arts and on the origins of inequality), the *Social Contract* and *Emile*, what is most surprising about *Julie* is the way Rousseau plays with his own ideas. In their many letters, the important characters in the novel (Julie herself, her cousin Claire, her young love St. Preux, his English friend Lord Edward Bromston, and Julie's husband Baron de Wolmar) all present and critique diverse facets of Rousseau's "system." Just as the three interlocutors of Joseph de Maistre's *St. Petersburg Dialogues* allowed the author to air opinions more hazardous or heterodox than those for which he was willing to take full responsibility in his public role as the defender of orthodox Catholicism, so the device of an epistolary novel allowed Rousseau to reflect publicly on various possible perspectives on the questions that concerned him. Complex men, highly intelligent, and quite capable of understanding and appreciating differing view points and judgments on the contentious issues of their time, both authors found in these two quite different genres literary forms well suited to their genius.

As a novel, of course, *Julie* hardly suits the literary tastes of our own times. The rather unlikely plot follows the story of Julie d'Etange and St. Preux, a one-time lover who re-enters Julie's life at the invitation of her husband. Still, Philip Stewart is probably right when he contends in his introduction that Rousseau "has not often enough been credited with the construction of a plot that is for its time exceptionally coherent and chronologically consistent," with "all the main developments and many minor ones subtly foreshadowed" (p. xviii). If all the action unfolds in the pages of what are often impossibly long letters, Stewart can again maintain that "there is indeed as much inconspicuous versatility in the style as in the subject matter; practically every purpose that a letter can serve, practically every modality of expression finds a place in this work" (p. xviii). While the work appears long and leisurely today, it is only a third as long as that great exemplar of eighteenth-century epistolary novels, Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*. For the reader ready to acknowledge a literary aesthetics quite different from today's, who is willing to take the time to savour its effusiveness and to accept its conventions of tears and pathos, this new translation of a novel which has long been almost unobtainable in English provides a read that is both interesting and enjoyable.

The historical significance of this work is undeniable. *Julie* was an immediate best-seller when it first appeared in 1761 (with some seventy-two editions before 1800) and much more popular than Rousseau's overtly political works. If Rousseau's ideas had any influence on the coming of the French Revolution, it was most likely

through this novel, through *Emile* (his treatise on education), and through his *Confessions*, rather than through such works as the *Social Contract*. By reading *Julie*, students of history can experience Rousseau's strategy for reaching a broad readership and sense for themselves the magic of Rousseau's style and appeal. In addition to its possible influence on political history, the novel is, of course, usually acknowledged to be of enormous significance as one of the sources of French and English Romanticism. The Romantics imbibed Rousseau's highly developed sensibility, his sympathy with nature (exemplified in the novel's descriptions of Swiss scenery and simple family life), and the lyrical qualities of his prose.

Finally, the publisher must be commended for bringing out this valuable edition in a relatively inexpensive paperback format as well as in the cloth format that should find a place in every college and university library.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at http://www.uakron.edu/hfrance/

Citation: Richard A. Lebrun. Review of Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Julie, or the New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps.* H-France, H-Net Reviews. August, 1998.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2270