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Review: Mark Hulliung. The Autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes.

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Mark Hulliung. The Autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994. Pp. xiii + 293. Cloth, \$45.00

Arguing that studies of the Enlightenment have tended to ignore Jean-Jacques Rousseau and that accounts of Rousseau have typically overlooked his debts to the Enlightenment, Mark Hulliung convincingly portrays Rousseau as both a creature and a critic of the Enlightenment. Rousseau emerges from this immensely learned study as an “autocritic” of Enlightenment, expert in the conventions of eighteenth century thought, who turned the weapons forged by the Enlightenment onto the movement itself. The great service of this book lies in its revealing the fundamental philosophical disagreements that lay at the heart of a quarrel that, by the end of Rousseau’s life, had degenerated on both sides into ad hominem attacks. For Hulliung, the battle of Rousseau and the philosophes becomes nothing less than a debate on the nature, limits, and promise of the Enlightenment itself.

Much of the book is devoted to a meticulous demonstration of the extent to which Rousseau’s critique spoke to longstanding concerns of Enlightenment thought. When the *philosophes* attempted to reconcile interest with virtue, Rousseau confirmed their worst fears, arguing that in societies ruled by self-interest, civic virtue withered. When they wrote histories that focused on culture, rather than politics, Rousseau countered by emphasizing the centrality of political history for any understanding of contemporary culture. They called for a separation of church and state; he argued that republican virtue required civic religion. He used the Enlightenment’s own natural histories to argue that the *philosophes’* views on social progress were hopelessly naive. Even his withdrawal from Paris, ridiculed by those who saw the city as the epitome of civilized society, is viewed by Hulliung not as a repudiation of the ideal of Enlightenment but rather a gesture that questioned what it meant to be enlightened: “By implication all who stayed in Paris were obstacles to enlightenment properly understood” (76).

Hulliung is slightly less convincing when he insists that Rousseau’s aim was to rescue rather than repudiate the Enlightenment. His case hinges on the argument that Diderot, Duclos, D’Alembert held misgivings about the project of Enlightenment that converged with Rousseau’s

more emphatic critique. To the extent that Hulliung can show that Rousseau was simply stating explicitly and publicly the conclusions that some of the leading *philosophes* had reached more hesitantly or — in the case of *Rameau's Nephew* — in works that would appear only posthumously, then his portrait of Rousseau as an autocritic rather than a renegade rings true.

While Hulliung makes a compelling case that some of the arguments Diderot offered in *Rameau's Nephew* called into question his long-held conviction that “even in a society as poorly ordered as ours ... there is no better path to happiness than to be a good man,” Hulliung tends to assume too quickly that the Nephew’s attacks on this belief carry the day (99). Diderot did, after all, eventually provide the Nephew’s antagonist with some responses and while these may not always convince *us*, it is somewhat rash to assume that Diderot himself viewed them as completely empty. Further, while Hulliung carefully shows us what Rousseau found lacking in the *philosophes’* Enlightenment, it is not entirely clear whether the arguments he offered in *Julie*, *Emile*, and the *Social Contract* really constitute a “positive program for an alternative enlightenment” (225). Readers may leave the book still questioning whether Rousseau shared anything with his former colleagues other than their most troubling doubts.

The tension between the promise announced in the book’s title and the more precise focus delineated in the subtitle captures what is at stake rather nicely: in what sense does the quarrel between “Rousseau and the *Philosophes*” constitute an “Autocritique of Enlightenment”? Hulliung rightly notes that “It was one of Rousseau’s gifts that he always succeeded in bringing out the worst in the *philosophes*” (208). The book amply demonstrates that the same could be said of their ability to bring out the worst in him. Attacking his person, they prompted Rousseau to produce the autobiographical testimonials to his own sincerity that, while inspiring the coming generation of Romantics, did little to explain what Enlightenment was. To understand Rousseau’s role in the autocritique of Enlightenment it may be necessary to turn from the *philosophes* and consider the impact of his work on Enlighteners more sympathetic to his

arguments. It was, after all, a reading of Rousseau that persuaded no less an *Aufklärer* than Kant that an understanding of Enlightenment that ignored questions of morality misunderstood what Enlightenment truly involved.

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