

Morality, Simulacrum and Distraction: The Function of Art according to Rousseau

João Gabriel Lima¹

Abstract: Jean-Jacques Rousseau was undoubtedly the first to investigate the ethical role of art in modern philosophical thought. However, his position was decidedly eccentric amidst the backdrop of the Enlightenment. According to Rousseau, Art was responsible for the destruction of virtue, but is responsible now for concocting a moral veneer. Art's function is to construct this "moral veneer" that brings a stop to man's turpitudes or, at least, reduces their occurrence. Art's ethical benefit is not that it leads man to do good. Rather, the artistic simulacrum prevents the most hideous crimes from occurring. This paper investigates the ethical role of art in Rousseau's First Discourse and in the preface to his play *Narcissus or the Self-Admirer*.

Keywords: art; ethics; Rousseau.

Resumo: Jean-Jacques Rousseau foi, sem dúvida, o primeiro a investigar o papel ético da arte no pensamento filosófico moderno. Sua posição foi seguramente excêntrica no contexto do Iluminismo. De acordo com Rousseau, a arte foi responsável pela destruição da virtude, mas se tornou responsável por criar um "verniz moral". A função ética da arte é construir esse "verniz moral" que põe a termo as torpezas humanas ou, ao menos, reduz a sua ocorrência. O benefício ético da arte não é, portanto, levar o homem ao bem. Ao contrário, o simulacro artístico apenas previne os mais terríveis crimes. Esse artigo investiga a função ética da arte no Primeiro Discurso de Rousseau e no prefácio a sua peça *Narciso, ou o amante de si mesmo*.

Palavras-chave: arte; ética; Rousseau.

Introduction

In Ancient Rome, each time senators felt suspicious about the morality of a novel proposition, they would to ask: *Qui prodest?* (Who benefits?). Indeed, if one is interested in discovering a thing's true nature, it is quite useful to investigate not only its form or matter, but also its purpose. Inspired by the old politician's adage, our efforts today are concerned with the future, the aim, the *final cause* of a very strange subject. Art. Who reaps the benefits of a work of art? What is the real objective of literature, poetry, fiction, painting, sculpture and so on? What should art's goal be? Could we say that art has an ethical aim? Would we be better off with or without art? These were major questions for the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

¹ Doutorando em Teoria Psicanalítica pela Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro. Endereço eletrônico: joagabriellimadasilva@gmail.com. O presente artigo provém de um trabalho apresentado na Rousseau Tercentenary Conference (Colorado College), em dezembro de 2012. O autor agradece a Brian Begnoche pela revisão do texto.

In this paper, we will consider the function and purpose of art in two important works from Rousseau: the *First Discourse* and the preface to his play *Narcissus or the Self-Admirer*.

Rousseau's First Discourse

Rousseau's first composition on the function of art was the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (better known as the *First Discourse*). The Dijon Academy proposed the following question as a matter for a brief dissertation: “Has the restoration of the sciences and the arts contributed to refining moral character?”². The philosophers of Enlightenment often insisted on the value of science – especially against the authority of religion – and also on the educative³ (and sometimes moral⁴) role of art for the purposes of civilization. The question itself emerged from an institution dedicated to promoting, producing and diffusing scientific knowledge. However, Rousseau's answer to the question was an astonishing and resounding “No”:

Where there is no effect, no cause need be sought: but here the effect is certain, the depravation real, and our souls have become corrupted in proportion as our Sciences and our Arts have advanced toward perfection. [...] Virtue has been seen fleeing in proportion as their light rose on our horizon, and the same phenomenon has been observed at all times and in all places (Rousseau, 1997, p. 9, transl. V. Gourevitch).

Où il n'y a nul effet, il n'y a point de cause à chercher: mais ici l'effet est certain, la dépravation réelle; et nos âmes se sont corrompues à mesure que nos Sciences et nos Arts se sont avancés à la perfection. [...] On a vu la vertu s'enfuir à mesure que leur lumière s'élevait sur notre horizon, et le même phénomène s'est observé dans tous les tems et dans tous les lieux (Rousseau, 1852, p. 466).

Rousseau refused to acknowledge any intrinsic good in art or science. In fact, he argued the complete opposite, i.e., that both of them have contributed to the moral corruption of society. The philosopher witnessed firsthand how Parisians were affected by a luxurious life. But Rousseau went beyond his personal experience: he analyzed ancient cultures and observed an “unmistakable coincidence” between the rise of the arts and the decline of morality⁵. With the emergence of urban society, all sorts of concealment of virtue began to appear in the forms of politeness, aesthetic beauty, and luxury. The arts and sciences served not only to conceal and cloud the moral sense, but likewise served to expose, trivialize and stimulate immoral actions. The philosopher's

² “Le rétablissement des sciences et des arts a contribué à épurer les mœurs?” (Rousseau, 1852, p. 463)

³ Cf. Ménil, 1995, p. 21-48.

⁴ Cf. Naves, 1967, p. 192-203. The morality of theater was a great issue for the philosophes: “Pour les philosophes, le théâtre devient la tribune de la tolérance [...] Il conduira [François-Antoine] Chevrier à soutenir que le théâtre de Dancourt et celui de Piron sont d'une haute valeur morale” (Fuchs, 1946, p. XII-XIII); “Assim como Voltaire, Diderot atribui ao espetáculo um objetivo moral e pedagógico: assim como a filosofia combate os preconceitos, também o teatro deve esclarecer os homens, ensinando-os a amar a virtude e detestar o vício” (Matos, 2009, p. 12); “[...] les représentations théâtrales formeroient le goût des Citoyens, et leur donneroient une finesse de tact, une délicatesse de sentiment qu'il est très-difficile d'acquérir sans ce secours” (Diderot, 1777, p. 963). See also: Rousseau, 1948; Prado Jr., 1975.

⁵ Cf. Campbell & Scott, 2005.

criticisms were also aimed at the artist's unlimited desire for glory and applause⁶. According to Rousseau, artists are ambitious for public recognition (and, of course, for money); and, they will do everything possible to accommodate their public's most sophisticated and perverse desires⁷.

To Rousseau's mind, it would be improper to judge art's contribution to society merely by the amount of pleasure or emotion it conjured in an individual, much less by the financial benefits it conferred upon the artist or by the flattering commentary it won him. Morality should have primacy over all artistic objects. Although we will not face the challenging task of defining Rousseau's idea of "moral" in this paper⁸, it is useful to consider this central idea: that morality should be art's basic principle and end. Put otherwise, morality must determine art's basic principles and only the moral effects of art amongst the public can justify art's very existence.

For years, Rousseau's critique of art was interpreted by critics in the most banal way. His philosophical opponents claimed that Rousseau desired the annihilation of the Arts and Sciences, leading mankind back to the age of primitive man. Nothing could be more terrifying to the Enlightenment, nor less consistent with Rousseau's proposition. Rousseau spent a good part of his life trying to explain his critic's errors regarding his work. In a passage from his autobiographical and critical writing Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques, the philosopher exposes his true intentions for art:

In his [i.e., Rousseau's] first writings it was necessary to destroy the illusion which fills us with an absurd admiration for the instruments of our unhappiness and to correct those false sets of values which heap honors upon pernicious talents and despise benevolent virtues. Everywhere he shows us humanity as better, [wiser], and happier in its original state, and as blind, unhappy, and evil to the degree that it has departed from that state [...] But human nature does not turn back. Once man has left it, he can never return to the time of innocence and equality. It was on this principle that he particularly insisted. [...] He has been obstinately accused of wishing to destroy the sciences and the arts [...] and to plunge humanity back into its original barbarism. Quite the contrary: he [Rousseau] always insisted on the preservation of existing institutions, maintaining that their destruction would leave the vices in existence and remove only the means to their cure, putting plunder in the place of corruption. (Rousseau apud CASSIRER, 1954, p. 54-55. Transl. Peter Gay)

Dans ses premiers écrits il s'attache davantage à détruire ce prestige d'illusion qui nous donne une admiration stupide pour les instruments de nos misères et à corriger cette estimation trompeuse qui nous fait honorer des talents pernicioseux et mépriser des vertus utiles. Par tout il nous fait voir

⁶ "Tout artiste veut être applaudi. Les éloges de ses contemporains sont la partie la plus précieuse de sa récompense. Que fera-t-il donc pour les obtenir, s'il a le malheur d'être né chez un peuple et dans des temps où les savants devenus à la mode ont mis une jeunesse frivole en état de donner le ton ; où les hommes ont sacrifié leur goût aux tyrans de leur liberté où l'un des sexes n'osant approuver que ce qui est proportionné à la pusillanimité de l'autre, on laisse tomber des chefs-d'œuvre de poésie dramatique, et des prodiges d'harmonie sont rebutés? Ce qu'il fera, messieurs ? Il rabaissera son génie au niveau de son siècle, et aimera mieux composer des ouvrages communs qu'on admire pendant sa vie que des merveilles qu'on n'admirerait que longtemps après sa mort". (Rousseau, 1852, p. 474)

⁷ "Il y a mille prix pour les beaux discours, aucun pour les belles actions. Voilà ce qu'à la longue doit produire partout la préférence des talents agréables sur les talents utiles [...]" (Rousseau, 1852, p. 474).

⁸ Cf. Cassirer, 1954, p.91-106; Schinz, 1929, p.138-150; Burns, 1996, p. 163-165; Ruzza, 2010; Lattman-Weltman, 1990. Mineau, 2007; Deluermoz, 2012; Melzer, 1995.

l'espèce humaine meilleure, plus sage et plus heureuse dans sa constitution primitive, aveugle, misérable et méchante à mesure qu'elle s'en éloigne. [...] Mais la nature humaine ne rétrograde pas et jamais on ne remonte vers les temps d'innocence et d'égalité quand une fois on s'en est éloigné; c'est encore un des principes sur lesquels il a le plus insisté. [...] On s'est obstiné à l'accuser de vouloir détruire les sciences, les Arts, les théâtres, les Académies et replonger l'univers dans sa première barbarie, et il a toujours insisté au contraire sur la conservation des institutions existantes, soutenant que leur destruction ne feroit qu'ôter les palliatifs en laissant les vices et substituer le brigandage à la corruption. (Rousseau, 1959, v. I, p. 934-935)

When we consider the elderly Rousseau looking back on the objective of his First Discourse, we can clearly understand the two faces of a work of art according to him. On one hand, Art is the channel through which evil can spread its influence over the public. The First Discourse warns of this – a warning forgotten by the philosophes until that time. But on the other hand, Art is also a medium to attenuate the effects of vices in real life. Art stops moral corruption from transforming into evil actions. (“le brigandage”, the unbridled violence). In short, Art has a potential to diminish unethical acts. This other side of artistic practice (i.e., the interruption of the immoral actions) received moderate exposure in another of Rousseau’s writings: in the preface of his play *Narcissus: or the Self-Admirer*.

Preface to *Narcissus or the Self-Admirer*

Rousseau wrote *Narcissus* when he was 18 years-old. It was not performed on stage until 20 years later, in 1752, when the Comédie Française decided to put on the play. At this time, the philosopher had already developed a good reputation throughout Paris. The success of his play can be measured by the statement of one of his contemporary critics: “the passion of Sir Rousseau is not to be applauded, but rather to be booed” (Fortes, 1997, p. 169). At the time of its publishing, Rousseau decided to write a brief preface in order to comment on some aspects of his “immature work”. At the end of this preface, Rousseau exposes some important new considerations on art’s aim.

Again in the Preface, we see Rousseau’s distrust of artists. According to him, artists are not concerned with ethics: they solely consider public approval and their public image. A small minority of artists – merely the exception to the rule – overcomes this banal desire for society’s attention and manages to concentrate their efforts on real problems of morality and virtue⁹. Like Plato¹⁰, Rousseau, so it seems, would have liked

⁹ “*J’avoue qu’il y a quelques génies sublimes qui savent pénétrer à travers les voiles dont la vérité s’enveloppe ; quelques âmes privilégiées, capables de résister à la bêtise de la vanité, à la basse jalousie, et aux autres passions qu’engendre le goût des Lettres. Le petit nombre de ceux qui ont le bonheur de réunir ces qualités, est la lumière et l’honneur du genre-humain ; c’est à eux seuls qu’il convient pour le bien de tous de s’exercer à l’étude, et cette exception même confirme la règle*” (Rousseau, 1964).

¹⁰ Questions regarding art are omnipresent in Plato's dialogues. The first important dialogue is the *Ion*, in which Socrates argues with a rhapsode who sings and explains Homeric poems. In this dialogue, the aim of Socrates is clearly not to deny the emotional impact that art engenders in the audience or even in the poet, but rather to reduce the pretentiousness of the poets and rhapsodes, who believed that poetry – and specially, Homer – gave them knowledge about life, war, love, virtue and all essential matters. Socrates understands the emotion imbedded in artistic manifestations as an “inspiration” or

to extend the requirement of ethical reflection to artists and men of culture as well. The triumph above narcissistic demands for glory and, moreover, the meditation on the moral impact of his work on the public are therefore the first ethical tasks that Rousseau presents to the artists.

Nonetheless, Rousseau presents a proposal in broader terms in the Preface. Not only do the Ciceros and Bacons welcome the moral purposes of Art, but mediocre playwrights and novelists do so as well¹¹. Rousseau argues that although man has been corrupted throughout history under the influence of Art, this does not affect Art's current potential for ethical tasks. The following passage is essential in understanding Art's moral aims in the Preface:

The same causes which have corrupted peoples sometimes serve to prevent a greater corruption [...] and it is in this way that the arts and sciences, after having hatched the vices, are necessary for keeping them from turning into crimes; at least they cover them with a varnish which does not permit the poison to find a vent so freely. They destroy virtue, but leave its public simulacrum, which is always a fine thing. They introduce into its place politeness and the proprieties, and for the fear of appearing wicked they substitute that of being ridiculous. (Rousseau, 2007, p. 28. Transl. C. Kelly).

[...] *Les mêmes causes qui ont corrompu les peuples servent quelquefois à prévenir une plus grande corruption [...] et c'est ainsi que les arts et les*

“divine dispensation” which the poet and the rhapsode feel while performing. But this “inspiration”, argues Socrates, has nothing to do with knowledge. As G. M. A. Grube (1973, p. 278) remarked, in the dialogue *Ion*, there is no contradiction between philosophy and art (or poetry). Both have their own intent: the former, to attain knowledge and reach the truth, the latter, perhaps, to inspire emotion in people. What remains especially important for Plato is that art is not able to reach any sort of knowledge or truth on its own. But Plato's main dialogue on arts is the famous book X of *The Republic*. Plato analyzes art by regarding its social value (Grube, 1973, p. 279). Being raised in Athens, Plato was instilled with a great respect for poets and artists through his upbringing, especially for traditional poets such as Homer. However, Plato sought to establish the conditions for a Republic in terms of true knowledge. Education was the essence of this project. In order to establish the philosopher as the guide of the State, once more he had to overlap the artist's ambition to serve as an ethical guide for the Greek people. Plato qualifies “imitation” or “personification” (μίμησις) as the action realized by a poet or an artist at the creative or performative moment. But if the artist is an imitator, people also tends to personify (or imitate) the character's actions and thoughts after being affected by the emotive power of art. Moreover, instead of inciting the rational morality that controls passions (πάθη), poetry and tragedy speak directly to the audience's affects through a dangerous excitement of senses. In a work of art, the public entirely surrender to the feelings, putting aside the faculty of judgment. (Jaeger, 2003, p. 985). For these reasons, Plato believed that performers and authors should not have the freedom to choose the object and style of their arts, but that they should but imitate that which is appropriate to their vocation (Grube, 1973, p. 283). This conception of art might seem quite naïve if it would not been related to Plato's theory of Forms. His argument – very briefly summarized – is that real knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) could only be found in an abstract idea or form (εἶδος). In keeping with this theory, the ordinary artist has no true knowledge about anything, since he does little but imitate things of the sensible world (which are derived from the intelligible world, the world of essences). In the famous “third bed argument”, Plato states that a work of art is three times removed from truth. As in the *Ion* dialogue, there is no reason to suppose that poets and artists truly have knowledge about the essence of the things they imitate in their art. Plato expels the artist from his Republic on the grounds that “poetry ruins the spirit of those who hear it and who do not possess the remedy of the knowing the truth” (Jaeger, 2003, p. 982). However, he does so only to the ones that emotionalize people disorderly, without knowledge. But if ever existed an artist who truly conquered true knowledge, an artist that were also a philosopher, Plato would be more than willing to open the gates of *The Republic* to such a man. (Grube, 1973, p. 290).

¹¹ Cf. Rousseau, 2005, p. 38.

sciences après avoir fait éclore les vices, sont nécessaires pour les empêcher de se tourner en crimes ; elles les couvrent au moins d'un vernis qui ne permet pas au poison de s'exhaler aussi librement. Elles détruisent la vertu, mais elles en laissent le simulacre public qui est toujours une belle chose. (Rousseau, 1964, p. 972).

Having once been responsible for the destruction of virtue, we see here that Art has now been transformed into an artificial – but efficient instrument that now serves moral aims. In other terms, though Art is unable to develop one's moral sense, it can at least maintain some secondary moral purpose, leaving a “public simulacrum”. In order to clarify the meaning of the term “simulacrum”, Rousseau proposes a definition in a likewise important footnote:

This simulacrum is a certain gentleness of morals that sometimes replaces their purity, a certain appearance of order that prevents horrible confusion, a certain admiration of beautiful things that keeps the good ones from falling completely into obscurity. It is vice that takes the mask of virtue, not as hypocrisy in order to deceive and betray, but under this lovable and sacred effigy to escape from the horror that it has of itself when it sees itself uncovered. (Rousseau, 2007, p. 29. Transl. C. Kelly).

Ce simulacre est une certaine douceur de mœurs qui supplée quelquefois à leur pureté, une certaine apparence d'ordre qui prévient l'horrible confusion, une certaine admiration des belles choses qui empêche les bonnes de tomber tout-à-fait dans l'oubli. C'est le vice qui prend le masque de la vertu, non comme l'hypocrisie pour tromper et trahir, mais pour s'ôter sous cette aimable et sacrée effigie l'horreur qu'il a de lui-même quand il se voit à découvert (Rousseau, 1964, p. 972).

Art, then, is responsible for bequeathing the simulacrum, which is clearly not moral in itself, but is rather the “appearance of order”, the “taste of moral” and “the admiration of beautiful things”. Following Rousseau, the simulacrum impedes the “forgetting” of “good things” and prevents a terrible disorder that would perhaps spread in art's absence. In this sense, Rousseau's idea of a “public simulacrum” seems to be the very exercise of maintaining the few superficial aspects of morality that our culture has not yet discarded.

But how is it possible to keep such semblances of moral? The philosopher Victor Goldschmidt argues that, to Rousseau, Art can benefit morality since it “permits [...] an action of postponement (retardement) over the corruption”¹². However, the efficacy of this “medicine”, reminds Goldschmidt, depends on the artist, which “doit empêcher le “simulacre” de tourner en “hypocrisie” et conserver au vice [...] sa mauvaise conscience” (Goldschmidt, 1987, p. 81-82). As long as the Arts, Sciences and Humanities were capable of maintaining the simulacrum (without being hypocritical), their moral existence remained justified as a “remedy for the evil that they have caused” (Rousseau, 1964, p. 972). Thus, Rousseau's argument is that Art is a palliative medicine that postpones the realization of turpitude, not through the example of virtue itself but through the “simulacrum”.

Rousseau also suggests that Art is able to serve virtue since it acts as a moral varnish¹³. Art has now a secondary purpose, or, a moral minimum, which consists

¹² “[...] permet [...] une action de retardement sur la corruption” (Goldschmidt, 1987, p. 81).

¹³ “[...] elles les couvrent au moins d'un vernis qui ne permet pas au poison de s'exhaler aussi

specifically of impeding the practice of heinous crimes¹⁴. The moral function of art would compensate therefore by preventing evil from taking form as a physical act – an unruly violent act in its ultimate form (“le brigandage”¹⁵). Art has then the moral responsibility to prevent crimes in the real world. The “public simulacrum” in Art serves as a moral varnish that does not allow evil to present itself in any other way but through art. If art has managed to contribute this to society, no matter how modestly, its use will have certainly been moral, ethical. Or rather: if art must bring moral disgrace to society; at least it can help us resist the slide towards immoral acts and criminal activity.

Rousseau remains convinced that the art of his time was unable to change a citizen’s moral judgment¹⁶. However, the philosopher did observe that Art serves to distract people for a given period of time. According to him, that “distraction” fulfills a moral function. Rousseau exposes his ideal of distraction in this passage:

It is no longer an issue of bringing people to do good: it is only necessary to distract them from doing evil; it is necessary to occupy them with foolishness to turn them away from bad actions; it is necessary to amuse them instead of preaching to them. If my Writings have edified the small number of good people, I have done them all the good that depends on me, and it is perhaps still to serve them usefully to offer objects of distraction to the others which will keep them from thinking about them. I would consider myself only too happy to have a Play to be hissed each day, if at this cost I could keep in check the bad plans of a single one of the Spectators [...] (Rousseau, 2007, p. 30. Transl. C. Kelly).

Il ne s'agit plus de porter les peuples à bien faire, il faut seulement les distraire de faire le mal; il faut les occuper à des niaiseries pour les détourner des mauvaises actions; il faut les amuser au lieu de les prêcher. Si mes Ecrits ont édifié le petit nombre des bons, je leur ai fait tout le bien qui dependoit de moi, et c'est peut-être les servir utilement encore que d'offrir aux autres des objets de distraction qui les empêchent de songer à eux. Je m'estimerois trop heureux d'avoir tous les jours une Piece à faire siffler, si je pouvois à ce prix contenir pendant deux heures les mauvais desseins d'un seul des Spectateurs [...](Rousseau, 1964, p. 972-973).

Firstly, the idea of distraction to Rousseau means a “recreation” or “pastime”. People have to actually spend some time enjoying art, otherwise it is not a distraction. The distraction is therefore the Art's capacity to absorb one's mind for some time with a pleasurable experience. However, distraction is also related to the idea of deviating. “They must be occupied with silly trifles”, argues Rousseau, “in order to steer them away from pernicious actions” (Rousseau, 2011). He further states: “It is no longer a matter of bringing people to do good, but only of distracting them from doing evil” (Rousseau, 2011). It becomes ever more clear that Art is nothing more than a distraction – “a detour” – from an “immoral path”. This immoral path signifies not only the possibility of desiring something immoral, but more importantly, it represents the impetus to repeatedly commit immoral acts. Rousseau realized that Art is incapable of

librement" (Rousseau, 1964, p. 972).

¹⁴ “C'est ainsi que les arts et les sciences après avoir fait éclore les vices, sont nécessaires pour les empêcher de se tourner en crimes” (Rousseau, 1964, p. 972).

¹⁵ Cf. Rousseau, 1959, v. I, p. 934-935.

¹⁶ Cf. Letter to D'Alembert. (Rousseau, 1948).

eradicating man's immoral desires. But, at the very least, it could serve as a way to impede those desires from coming to fruition via immoral acts.

As Rousseau seems to support in the Preface, all the evil contained in works of art is justified if it can keep someone from enacting immoral deeds. Although displaying scenes of immorality, Art obstructs and delays the drive to realize immoral actions, impelling the individual to follow more and more the artistic deviation. But Rousseau is very aware of the fact that Art is often hypocritical¹⁷. Instead of reducing audience's impulse to commit evil actions, Art sometimes excites audience's desires to practice immorality. Every work of art that incites immoral desires amidst an atmosphere of light diversion is hypocritical in relation to what should be its actual function, according to Rousseau – which is to reduce people's drive to commit evil acts. The function of Art is therefore to permanently block the path of immoral acts, offering a diversion, a distraction which would guide the “passenger” to his destination, but through a longer, recreational and ever-changing route. In other terms, Art means the very possibility to indulge immoral pleasures, but without actually committing immoral acts. Nevertheless, in order to accomplish its ethical task, Art must also reinforce the simulacrum, reinforce the sense that the possibility to act immorally is obstructed. In short, a true, a non-hypocritical Art is one that transforms evil into artistic matter while hindering the audience's desires to commit immoral acts.

Conclusion

It would be disingenuous to believe that Rousseau remained satisfied with this “secondary moral” for the sake of achieving his desired “authentic and true human community” (Cassirer, 1954, p. 55). But instead of immediately expelling the second-rate artists from the State, as Plato did, Rousseau admits that even the “immoral Art” of his (and our) times has the side effect of morality. Rousseau holds that this precarious – but vital – side effect justifies the prescription of this medicine, at least until humankind is prepared for a revolutionary change in Art's conception. When this happens, Art will be relieved of this secondary task of distracting man from doing evil, assuming its primary function: the very expression of freedom.

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¹⁷ “C’est le vice qui prend le masque de la vertu, non comme l’hypocrisie pour tromper et trahir; mais pour s’ôter sous cette aimable et sacrée effigie l’horreur qu’il a de lui-même quand il se voit à découvert” (Rousseau, 1964, p. 972).

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