



**HAL**  
open science

# Putting Oneself in the Light: Rousseau and the Frontispieces of His Works

Nathalie Ferrand

► **To cite this version:**

Nathalie Ferrand. Putting Oneself in the Light: Rousseau and the Frontispieces of His Works. Pictures of the Enlightenment/ Bilder der Aufklärung, Elisabeth Décultot and Daniel Fulda (eds.), In press. hal-03929253

**HAL Id: hal-03929253**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03929253>**

Submitted on 8 Jan 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## Putting Oneself in the Light: Rousseau and the Frontispieces of His Works

Technically speaking, the engraving is a play with shadow and light. Diderot pays homage to it in just such terms in his *Salon de 1765*: “Regardez chaque point comme un rayon de lumière éteint. [...] Dans la taille-douce tout est éclairé, le travail introduit l’ombre et la nuit. Dans la gravure noire la nuit est profonde; le travail fait poindre le jour dans cette nuit”<sup>1</sup>.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was so enamoured of the colourless world of the engraving and of its intense expressiveness that hardly a single work of his was given to the world unaccompanied by some engraving. He was, moreover, himself a collector of such prints. Nor was it just in those works of his that fall into the category of the “literary” that Rousseau called the printed image to his aid. He did the same in his philosophical publications, placing at the threshold of each published work vignettes and frontispieces whose conception was the fruit of original reflection on the relation between the text in question and the signifying force of the engraved print. He would himself take the decision as to just which scenes and topics were to be illustrated and would even actively supervise the work of the draughtsmen and engravers, often intervening to regulate, so to speak, the luminous intensity of the images. Such was the case, for example, of the tenth engraving in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, which represents St. Preux’s nightmare (III. I)<sup>2</sup>. Rousseau, we know, several times requested that this plate, already dark in its initial version, be made still darker so as to create an atmosphere of terror: “The proof I have seen of this plate with the ghosts will do very well, provided it is made still darker and that a slightly more alarmed expression is given to the face”; “the ‘ghosts’ print will be an admirable one, once its lighter areas have been filled in and darkened”<sup>3</sup>. We find him making an analogous, even if photically inverse, intervention with regard to the first of the engravings which provide the illustrative plates for *Emile*,

---

<sup>1</sup> Denis Diderot, *Salon de 1765*, in: *Œuvres*. Vol. IV, ed. Laurent Versini, Paris 1996, p. 461: “Consider each point as an extinguished ray of light [...] On the copperplate all is light; the work of intaglio brings shadow and night. It is in deepest night, on the other hand, that mezzotint begins, with the work of burnishing causing day to dawn”.

<sup>2</sup> For a study devoted specifically to this plate of markedly Gothic atmosphere, see Nathalie Ferrand, *Hamlet dans ‘La Nouvelle Héloïse’*. *La leçon d’arts visuels de Gravelot à Rousseau*, in: *French Studies* 67/4 (2013), p. 494–507.

<sup>3</sup> *Correspondance complète de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. Critical Edition established and annotated by R. A. Leigh (hereinafter CC), 52 vols, Geneva/Madison/Banbury/Oxford 1965–1998, letters from Rousseau to Coindet dated 25 January 1761 (CC 1232) and 13<sup>th</sup> of February 1761 (CC 1286).

complaining that the flames of Hades had not been made bright enough in the scene of Thetis dipping her infant son Achilles into the waters of the Styx (III. 2)<sup>4</sup>.

What the present essay sets out to examine is how the engravings thematize and address, in such cases, the same concerns as are at issue in the substantial conceptual content of the respective texts themselves – that is to say, how engravings direct the luminous flux, as it were, of the reader's attention toward this or that essential aspect of these texts, sometimes hidden away in these latter's obscurest corners. I am going to begin with a rapid overview, in terms of a few broadly drawn chronological stages<sup>5</sup>, of the principal engravings which accompanied Rousseau's texts from 1751 on. I am then going to focus in on one particular case among these engravings: one which exemplifies especially clearly the connection between light and image in the engraver's art while at the same time demonstrating the conceptual value of images in Rousseau's work.

## 1. Rousseau and the Illustration of His Texts from 1751 to 1764

The first edition of the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, in 1751 (III. 3) represents an inaugural moment in this regard, with a frontispiece that can be said to be foundational for Rousseau's work as a whole. This is so inasmuch as the frontispiece gives graphic expression to the metaphor of Enlightenment but also, as we shall see below, to that of Creation. Its theme is a reprise of the mythological one of Prometheus giving fire to Man, with a satyr shown advancing from the side trying to grab the gift before it is passed on. 1751 is also the year which sees the start of the publication of the *Encyclopaedia* which, very significantly, likewise adopts, in the vignette which appears on the title page of its first volume, the metaphor of "Enlightenment illuminating the world" expressed via the motif of a winged figure, bearing a flame on his forehead, advancing through parting clouds. If the *Encyclopaedia's* vignette proposes a triumphalist interpretation of this theme - its interpretation, as it were, in a major key – the Rousseauan frontispiece interprets this same theme, as we shall see below, in a minor key, a more critical one, since the satyr serves to

---

<sup>4</sup> *Letter to Duchesne and Guy dated 7<sup>th</sup> of March 1762* (CC 1704).

<sup>5</sup> For a full panorama of the images to which I will refer in the present essay the reader is referred to *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et les arts*. Catalogue of the exhibition held at the Pantheon, 29 June – 30 September 2012 under the direction of Guilhem Scherf, Paris 2012, in particular to p. 54–91, "L'illustration des œuvres de Rousseau" by Nathalie Ferrand. Also worth consulting is the pioneering catalogue of the exhibition *Jean-Jacques Rousseau face aux arts visuels. Du premier Discours au rousseauisme (1750–1810)*. Neuchâtel, 20 September – 23 November 2001 under the direction of Cecilia Hurley, Neuchâtel 2001.

evoke a certain mistrust of the knowledge symbolized by Prometheus's flaming torch. The drawing is attributed to the painter Jean-Baptiste Marie Pierre, although it was then engraved by Jean-Charles Baquoy, whose name was the only one to appear below the actual plate. Well-practiced in the treatment of mythological themes, Pierre was a great historical painter whose career can stand almost as a microcosm of the whole history of 18<sup>th</sup>-century French painting. He did not, for all that, consider himself above the illustration of the writings of his contemporaries, so that his works include, besides his many paintings in the traditional canvas form, also a significant number of such illustrative engraved drawings<sup>6</sup>.

In 1755, on publication of Rousseau's second discourse, the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, the philosopher's readers found themselves presented with two modes of literary illustration at once: namely, on the one hand a frontispiece and on the other a vignette placed in the middle of the title page presenting an allegory of liberty. As is indicated by the caption beneath the frontispiece, the theme which this latter illustrates is drawn from one of the *Discourse's* footnotes: "See note 13 p. 259". This type of reference, quite unusual in nature, had already been practiced in the frontispiece of 1751: "See note pag.31". The practice of the illustration of footnotes, of which we see an instance here, might well be a form of erudition interesting to study in its own right, so as to broaden somewhat the spectrum of phenomena already analysed by Anthony Grafton in his *The Footnote: A Curious History*<sup>7</sup>. In any case, illustrations of this unusual type appear at the threshold of each of Rousseau's first two *Discourses*. Perhaps there is something slightly provocative in thus drawing the reader's attention to what seems to be a mere detail lodged within the infra-paginal space of the text. But such a practice is in fact indicative of how demanding Rousseau is of his readers, requiring of them a constant close attentiveness to what and how he writes. The experience of this illustrated footnote allows one to perceive the contrast in rhythm between the rapidity of the perception of the image and the slowness of a true, attentive reading. Because in order truly to understand just what is being referred to here, one must have the patience to read through an entire text in all its complexity. What is illustrated in the frontispieces both of the first and of the second of Rousseau's *Discourses* is not – or is not solely – Rousseau's respective individual text. It is rather, in an important sense, the entire personal library on which Rousseau was drawing for each of these. In the frontispiece of the first *Discourse*, the

---

<sup>6</sup> Nicolas Lesur/Olivier Aaron, *Jean-Baptiste Marie Pierre, 1714–1789: premier peintre du roi*, Paris 2009. This work comprises a list of engravings attributed to Pierre but the engraving in question here does not feature on it, since it was not signed by the artist.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote. A Curious History*, Cambridge, Mass. 1997.

reference is a classical one, specifically to Plutarch (see below); in the second, it is to an anecdote drawn from an early modern travel narrative describing the failure of the attempts by European explorers to civilize and convert to Western values the savages encountered in remote regions of the world, these latter proving to be much more passionately attached to their own origins and customs than the Europeans had expected. That is to say, after the visualization in the first frontispiece of the failure of culture, the second visualizes the failure of the civilizing process.

In 1761 and 1762, for *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and *Emile*, Rousseau opts for the technique of engravings arranged in series, thus prompting readers to observe a certain highly specific rhythm in their reading of these lengthy and substantial works. When *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is illustrated for the first time in 1761, this work of illustration comprises no frontispiece, but rather consists of twelve plates inserted at strategic points in the story's development. Historically, it was in Germany, in the translation by Gellius which also appeared in 1761, that *La Nouvelle Héloïse* was to be provided, for the first time, with a frontispiece, depicting a scene of reading bringing together St. Preux and Julie<sup>8</sup>. In *Emile*, on the other hand, the series of engravings consists only of five frontispieces (all mythologically-themed) which open, respectively, the five books that together make up the whole work.

*The Social Contract*, first appearing in 1762, features a vignette on its title page, the allegorical significance of which slipped and shifted somewhat throughout the book's earliest editions. This was due to certain miscommunications between Rousseau and his publisher, Marc-Michel Rey. Rousseau had initially agreed that the allegorical figure representing liberty which had been used seven years earlier on the title page of the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* could be used once again on the title page of *The Social Contract*. He had stipulated, however, that this figure, whom he humorously referred to as "chubby-cheeked Liberty", should be redrawn, for the new title page, in a rather more dignified style. In the first of the two printings of the text which he oversaw in this year of 1762, Rey had the figure revised into a standing personage whose traits, however, turned out, due to a confusion about the symbolic attributes conventionally assigned to such personifications, to be, strictly speaking, more an allegorical representation of Justice than one of Liberty. Rousseau expressed his dissatisfaction with this and, in the second printing of *The Social Contract*, Rey had the image revised once again in a way that realigned it somewhat with the original

---

<sup>8</sup> Nathalie Ferrand, *Livres vus, livres lus. Une traversée du roman illustré des Lumières*, Oxford 2009, p. 66–67.

vignette from the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. That the same iconographic motifs and symbols were taken up in both publications establishes a certain continuity between these two political works of Rousseau's, and the placing of such an allegory at the threshold of both texts shows how right E. Cassirer was to see in Rousseau above all a thinker of liberty.

1764 is a pivotal moment: namely, that of the appearance of a first full edition of Rousseau's *Works* under the imprint of the Parisian publisher Duchesne. In this year, Duchesne assembles, in nine volumes, all the works of Rousseau published up to that point and enriches them with a series of engraved plates, the first of which (III. 3), signed by Gravelot, is a new version of the frontispiece of the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*. This opening image thus plays a double role: it both serves as a frontispiece to the first volume of this set of *Works* (the one containing the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* itself) and forms a visual threshold for the entire body of work published by Rousseau up to that point. Consequently, it takes on great importance. This edition provided the opportunity for certain of Rousseau's texts to be illustrated for the first time. Such was the case, for example, of *Le Devin du village*, or of the *Letter to d'Alembert* (the latter with a frontispiece showing the Judgment of Ares). *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, in this edition, is provided with an allegorical frontispiece by Cochin.

The 1764 frontispiece of the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* thus becomes the emblem of an entire *œuvre* and perhaps the emblem of the characteristic self-positioning of this *œuvre*'s author. This is why it is imperative to linger over the details of this frontispiece, taking care to examine the genesis of its design, its content, and its various significations<sup>9</sup>.

## 2. Prometheus and the Satyr: Genesis of a Frontispiece

That we are able to consider at all the 1764 frontispiece of the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* from the point of view of the genesis of its design is due to the exceptional circumstance that there have come down to us, intact, several versions of this plate produced in the course of the realization of the final printed illustration. These consist in two preliminary sketches, one in  *pierre noire*  pencil (III. 4) and one in ink (III. 5), and two artifacts marking stages in the actual process of engraving: namely, a proof etching "before letters"

---

<sup>9</sup> The following remarks represent a concise summary of the argument of a longer study which I have published under the title *Variation sur Prométhée et le satyre: la genèse du frontispice de Gravelot pour le Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, in: *Genesis* 50 (2020), p. 167–175.

and a copy of the work in something close to its final state, the etching having here been supplemented by burin-work creating shadow and relief. There appear beneath the more fully completed etching the signatures of both engraver and draughtsman. It is probable, then, that it represents an initial, tentative printing of the completed plate itself.

Gravelot's drawings are currently held in the Houghton Library at Harvard<sup>10</sup>, and the various artifacts testifying to the different stages of the engraving work carried out by Joseph de Longueil are to be found in a private collection in Britain, preserved as part of the famous portfolio which was given as a gift by Rousseau to George Simon Harcourt at the time of Rousseau's leaving that country and which contains proof copies of the illustrations to his own works that the author liked to collect<sup>11</sup>.

The passage illustrated by Gravelot (and by J.-B. M. Pierre in his first version of the frontispiece from 1751) is one located right at the start of the second part of the *Discourse* where Rousseau sets about showing that "the sciences and the arts owe [...] their birth to our vices."<sup>12</sup> Rousseau then evokes various myths of antiquity in order to show that both the Greeks and the Egyptians early on warned the human race against the danger posed by the arts and the sciences. He mentions in particular the myth of Prometheus, chained to his rock as punishment for having brought fire to humankind. A note here adds:

It is easy to understand the meaning in the Prometheus fable. It does not seem that the Greeks, who chained Prometheus to the Caucasus, were any better disposed toward him than were the Egyptians toward their god Theutus. 'The satyr, according to an ancient fable, wanted to kiss and embrace fire, the first time he saw it. But Prometheus cried out to him, Satyr, you will mourn the beard on your chin, for it burns when you touch it.' This is the subject of the frontispiece.<sup>13</sup>

The quotation inserted into the note comes directly from the *Moralia* of Plutarch, who had, in his turn, borrowed this burlesque scene from a "satyr-drama" (now lost) of Aeschylus

---

<sup>10</sup> The present study was written after a visit to this institution to examine them on site.

<sup>11</sup> On this portfolio see Ann-Marie Thornton, *A Gift from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to George Simon Harcourt: Etchings and Proofs of the Illustrations to His Works*, in: *Eigtheenth Century Fiction* (April/July 2002), p. 441–463. The portfolio remains the property of the descendants and heirs of G. S. Harcourt, whom I thank for their permission to photograph its contents.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, in *Œuvres complètes*. Vol. III, Paris 1964, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and the First and Second Discourses*, ed. a. with an introduction by Susan Dunn, New Haven/London 2002, p. 56 (translation slightly amended).

(*Prometheus the Fire-Lighter*). We see here, then, a “nesting” not just of one text within another but of both within yet a third. In Aeschylus, a troop of satyrs had wanted to steal the fire that Prometheus was bringing to humankind, but burned their beards in the attempt<sup>14</sup>. This scene, merely ludic in Aeschylus’s treatment of it, had been endowed with moral significance by Plutarch, who used it to point up how fire was useful despite its dangerousness<sup>15</sup>, and was now made, by Rousseau, to bear yet another meaning: that of a warning against the dangers posed by the arts and sciences. The figure in danger in this last Rousseauan treatment of the theme is a naïve and over-inquisitive satyr, who represents a mankind still at a primitive stage of development and needing to be protected from the moral corruption which will tend to be brought about by the sciences and the arts. In this transferral, then, from one author to another, there is to be observed a change in the whole meaning of the scene. And in the transferral into the sphere of the image, still other significant alterations occur. Thus, in Rousseau’s text, the situation evoked is one involving two actors only (Prometheus and a satyr); in this textual passage’s graphic interpretation, however, the initial illustrator Pierre (Ill. 2) adds a figure in the centre, making of it a scene involving three actors, an alteration which Gravelot then retained.

Rousseau’s choice of Prometheus as the hero of the frontispiece of the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* – surprising though it was – provided a fine opportunity for a painter such as Pierre to combine together several component parts of the myth, and several different aspects of the figure of Prometheus<sup>16</sup> coming to light in his existence prior to his punishment by the gods. For the crafty thief, who proved capable even of deceiving Zeus<sup>17</sup>, was also

---

<sup>14</sup> Aeschylus’s play, only a few fragmentary verses of which have come down to us, followed the rules and conventions described as those of the “satyr-drama” by François Lissarague in his *La Cité des satyres. Une anthropologie ludique (Athènes, vie-ve siècle avant J.-C.)*, Paris 2013, p. 24: “These dramas represented a sort of ‘playing with myth’ consisting in superimposing, upon some given history well-known to the entire audience, a group of satyrs who then proceeded to react to the given situation in a manner typical of satyrs. The recipe, in short, would be the following: take a well-known mythical episode, add in satyrs, mix well, and stand back and observe the result.”

<sup>15</sup> *Les œuvres morales et philosophiques de Plutarque, traduites de grec en françois, par Messire Jacques Amyot*, Paris 1618, p. 109 of the chapter *How One May Acquire Some Benefit from One’s Enemies*. The anecdote is cut short by Rousseau and acquires a meaning contrary to that which it had borne in Plutarch who had, in the end, assigned a positive value to fire, pointing out that “although fire burns when one touches it, it is also the procurer of light and heat and can be, once one has learned to make proper use of it, the useful agent of all forms of art. Similarly, one’s enemy [etc.]”. See Plutarque *Œuvres morales*, Paris 1989. Vol. 1, 2nd part, p. 197.

<sup>16</sup> On the complexity of the literary figure Prometheus, see the book by Raymond Trousson, *Le Thème de Prométhée dans la littérature européenne*, Geneva 1964 (republished in 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Far-sighted Prometheus represents “the very type of that devious intelligence, that power of deceit, which the Greeks designated by the name ‘mêtis’”; Prometheus “knows in advance exactly what is going to happen”: Marcel Detienne/Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Les ruses de l’intelligence. La mêtis des Grecs*, Paris 1974, p. 63.



renowned in myth as an artist<sup>18</sup> and remembered too, in a tradition which was preserved and frequently artistically represented still in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as the creator of Man himself<sup>19</sup>.

In the 1751 frontispiece, Prometheus occupies the uppermost part of the image. Larger than the other figures, he is borne upon a cloud, indicating his belonging to the world of the gods<sup>20</sup>. His forehead encircled by a headband, and bearded as was iconographically traditional for this figure,<sup>21</sup>, he holds in his right hand a torch which he is placing above the head of a statue of a beautiful ephebe; his left hand is resting on the shoulder of this not-yet-animated human statue in a Pygmalionesque gesture, which suggests that this touch is about to infuse life into an as yet merely sculptural being. This latter being – the one human and mortal (even if not yet animate) figure in the group – is placed much lower in the image, but at its horizontal centre, fully visible and illuminated and with both his feet on a pedestal. At the moment captured in the image, this figure is the least alive of the three, even if it is clear that his presently empty gaze is about to light up and his body, still frozen just at present in an attitude borrowed from the codes of antique statuary, is about to acquire life and motion under the effect of the fire stolen for his sake from the Olympians. The addition of this sculptural figure to the composition may be understood as resulting from the need to provide an allegorical personification of the arts, Prometheus's torch symbolizing rather the sciences, or knowledge in general.

Lowest down in the image, we see a third actor, slightly hidden in shadow and somewhat in the background. This is the satyr, who appears to be rushing into the image from outside it, with only one hoof resting on the ground and his arm raised high into the air as if in an attempt to seize the fire of the torch, to the dangers of which he is clearly entirely oblivious. Half-human and half-animal, he represents humanity at the most primitive stage of its development, a being still immersed in Nature, a “wild man”. The trajectories of the

---

<sup>18</sup> As is shown, for example, by the series of paintings by Piero di Cosimo, see D. Arasse, *Le Sujet dans le tableau*, Paris 2006, p. 110–113.

<sup>19</sup> In the graphic arts, for example, a painting by Louis de Silvestre exhibited in 1702 at the *Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture* showed *The Forming of Man by Prometheus, Aided by Minerva* (preserved today, together with the sketch that it was based on, at the *Musée Fabre* in Montpellier). The arrangement of the figures in Silvestre's initial sketch strikingly resembles that seen in the frontispiece to the first *Discourse*: Minerva occupies the position of Prometheus and Prometheus that of the satyr, the figure of Man being placed in the centre.

<sup>20</sup> In the semiotics of paintings and pictures, clouds do indeed tend to indicate hierophany, or the manifestation of the sacred. See Hubert Damish, *Théorie du nuage de Giotto à Cézanne: Pour une histoire de la peinture*, Paris 1972, p. 67.

<sup>21</sup> Victor I. Stoichita, *L'effet Pygmalion. Pour une anthropologie historique des simulacres*, Geneva 2008, p. 119–125 of this book are devoted to Prometheus, a figure who is not without connection to that of the sculptor Pygmalion, whose legend was also very dear to Rousseau.

respective gazes of Prometheus and the satyr together form an oblique line which transects a second oblique line formed by the long cloud on which Prometheus is borne and does so at a point which constitutes the central symbolic element of the image: the flame of the torch, which brings life and knowledge and which is the point at which the metaphor of “Enlightenment” finds its concentrated embodiment. The caption below the engraving is a highly enigmatic one for anyone glancing at it before having read the *Discourse* itself: “Satyr, you do not know it. See note page 31.” The inscription of these words below the plate accentuates the presence of the satyr in the image. He becomes the subject addressed by it, addressed by the word of Prometheus, just as the reader is the subject addressed by the word of Rousseau.

The frontispiece serves, indeed, to present the work to its “target audience” and to signal some of the key topics and issues at stake within it. But it also constitutes, whether intentionally or not, a way of presenting an author. This is quite especially the case within this specific context of a prize set for public competition by an Academy: a context in which the winner of such a prize necessarily finds himself exposed to public scrutiny. One might well, then, pose the following question: Where is Rousseau himself to be situated within the set of permutable roles played out in the scene represented in this frontispiece? Is he Prometheus? In a sense he certainly is because, like Prometheus, Rousseau aspires to enlighten mankind and delivers, as a “prophet of truth” (J. Roger<sup>22</sup>), his message to this latter in the same tone – a tone at once stern and intimate – as Prometheus adopts when speaking to the unknowing satyr (the “you” of the “you do not know it, satyr” is in fact the informal, amicable “*tu*”). Like Prometheus too, Rousseau was later to attempt (in *Émile*) to form and mould a new type of human being and – a third and final common trait between them – was to end up a victim of his own audacity. In a way, then, this opening engraving is itself prophetic. But the roles are unstable. Might Rousseau’s role not possibly also be that of the human statue which appears about to take on form and life here at the opening of his book? This too might very well be the case in a symbolic sense, because every writer is the product of his or her own books. This applies quite especially to the book here in question, since it was this *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* that gave birth to Rousseau as a public, recognized author<sup>23</sup>. Indeed, we find

---

<sup>22</sup> “From this point on there has, once and for all, been constituted the image of the ‘pedagogue of the human race’, the prophet of truth illuminated by the sudden light of Revelation” writes Jacques Roger in his introduction to the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, Paris 1992 [1971], p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> In a “notice to the reader”, which was written later in life and intended for a re-edition of the first *Discourse*, but which remained, in the end, just an unpublished manuscript, Rousseau was to write: “What is fame? Here

Rousseau himself recounting, in a famous letter to M. de Malesherbes, his birth as a writer at the moment of composing the first of his *Discourses* in terms (those of the so-called “illumination of Vincennes”) which closely resemble what we see in the frontispiece. The “enlightened” statue portrayed in the engraving could have said of itself – and so might have run a caption for the plate alternative to the actually printed legend: *satyre, tu ne le connois pas* – “all of a sudden I felt my mind dazzled by a thousand lights”<sup>24</sup>. One might go so far as to say that, placed as it is at the threshold of the first *Discourse*, the engraving implicitly adds to the theme already announced by the title and by the terms of the competition the equally essential theme of *creation*: the creation at once of the human species (symbolized by the statue that comes, in a Pygmalionesque moment, to life), of an author, and of a body of work.

One might even ask, indeed, whether one might not legitimately adopt yet a third interpretative point of view and understand Rousseau’s position within the image to be that of the satyr, this latter being read as a being “according to Nature”, bearer of the values of the human species in this species’ earliest form. The plate, however, appears to rule out such a hypothesis, since, in its caption, the satyr is addressed as a “you”, whereas the author is necessarily and inevitably an “I”. Set back a little, situated in shadow and even, in part, externally to the frame of the image, the satyr occupies a decidedly marginal position. This matches, indeed, his status as a hybrid creature at the margins of humanity; but it could also be construed as expressing a certain affinity or proximity of the satyr to Rousseau who also presents himself, on the title page, as a marginal being, namely in the form of a misunderstood “barbarian”<sup>25</sup>. Pierre, in any case, chose to visually “sideline” the figure of the satyr, leaving to Gravelot, as we shall see, the possibility of proposing another possible way of proceeding.

Let us turn, then, to the work of Gravelot, which can be examined in the two drawings held in the Houghton Library, both drawn from a large portfolio of sketches containing at least 1,800 drawings, now scattered in collections all around the world<sup>26</sup>. They give us access to the

---

is the unfortunate work to which I owe mine. It is certain that this piece [...] made my name [etc.]”: Rousseau, *Correspondance*, p. 1237.

<sup>24</sup> Rousseau, second letter to Malesherbes of 12<sup>th</sup> of January 1762: “If anything were ever more like what is called a ‘sudden inspiration’ [...] ; all of a sudden I felt my mind dazzled by a thousand lights”, in: *Œuvres complètes*. Vol. I, p. 1135. Could it be that this *a posteriori* reading of the Vincennes event is a reading filtered through the recollection also of the allegorical frontispiece of the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*?

<sup>25</sup> *Barbarus hic ego sum quia non intelligor illis*: this quotation from Ovid’s *Lamentations* appears for the first time in Rousseau’s work here at the threshold of the first *Discourse*.

<sup>26</sup> David P. Becker, *Drawings for Book Illustration. The Hofer collection*, Cambridge, Mass. 1980, p. 24. The author recalls that R. Portalis, at the end of his entry on Gravelot in *Les dessinateurs d’illustrations au dix-huitième siècle*, mentioned the discovery, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, of this portfolio “in which Gravelot had conserved, one can suppose, almost all the sketches forming the bases of his works. This collection, in which

creative universe of this artist who collaborated with the most important writers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A painter by training, but specializing in engraving, Gravelot represented that new profession which did not, at this time, yet adopt the name “illustrator”, but certainly underwent considerable expansion and development in step with the growth of the bookselling business in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>27</sup> Gravelot was perhaps the best-known practitioner of this as-yet-nameless profession. He had already collaborated with Rousseau on the engravings for *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), an experience that has passed into critical history as an unenviable one for the draughtsman who, we are told, suffered much from the demanding, indeed unrealizable stipulations of the writer<sup>28</sup>. Gravelot, however, proved able to navigate the perils of this collaboration, revealing all the depth of Rousseau’s discourse by contributing an illustrative vision of his own, which was creative while remaining closely pertinent to the text. At the time of the re-edition of the *Discourse* under the imprint of the publisher Duchesne in 1764, when his frontispiece was called upon to decorate the first volume of the *Œuvres de M. Rousseau*,<sup>29</sup> Gravelot was working, indeed, within a constraining framework, since the text with which he was dealing had already previously been illustrated and he was obliged to comply both with the author’s instructions and with the existing graphic realities of the preceding frontispiece, which had already come to form part and parcel of the history of the text. What margin of manoeuvre, then, as regards possible variations did Gravelot enjoy<sup>30</sup>?

The alterations vis-à-vis the 1751 frontispiece which we observe in the preparatory *pierre noire* pencil sketch made for its 1764 successor (III. 4) are focussed principally on the figure

---

there is to be found, in the form of sketches, initial ideas, studies and graphic emendations, pretty much the entire *oeuvre* of Gravelot, amounts in total to around 1,800 sheets and is of the greatest possible interest [...] [It] comes from the Marquis de Fourquevaux”, see Roger Portalis, *Les dessinateurs d’illustrations au dix-huitième siècle*, Paris 1877, Vol. I, p. 293–294. In the possession, at the time, of the collector Emmanuel Bocher, the drawings that originally belonged to it became scattered in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A certain number of them are today to be found in US libraries.

<sup>27</sup> Described by the brothers Goncourt as “the century of the vignette” (in their chapter on Gravelot in *L’Art du dix-huitième siècle*, 1868).

<sup>28</sup> Pascal Griener, *Gravelot au service de Rousseau et de Voltaire: deux visions opposées de l’illustration*, in: *Annales Jean-Jacques Rousseau* 45 (2003), p. 377–409.

<sup>29</sup> *Discours qui a remporté le prix à l’Académie de Dijon, en l’Année 1750. Sur cette question proposée par la même Académie : Si le rétablissement des Sciences & des Arts a contribué à épurer les mœurs*. Barbarus hic ego sum, quia non intelligor illis. Ovid., in *ŒUVRES DE M. ROUSSEAU DE GENEVE. NOUVELLE EDITION. Revue, corrigée, & augmentée de plusieurs morceaux qui n’avoient point encore paru*, A Neuchatel, 1764–1768, 9 volumes, Vol. I.

<sup>30</sup> Daniel Ferrer, *Variantes et variations: la sonate de Beethoven et le chien de Hogarth*, in: *Logiques du brouillon. Modèles pour une critique génétique*, Paris 2011, p. 130–139.

of the satyr. We note an especial concern with graphically revising the position of the satyr's hand, since this rough draft sketch gives, in fact, the satyr no less than three hands.

These preparatory drawings allow us to observe the draughtsman at work, searching for his motif and placing his figures. Both drawings already bear the signature of the artist: "*H. Gravelot inven.*<sup>31</sup>". The original frontispiece's caption is also taken up into this one – truncated, indeed, by the removal of the footnote reference which had helped to specify its meaning in the plate of 1751. But this means that the image can now fully take on the role of a frontispiece, illustrating not a detail but a general vision of the work.

Gravelot's reflection on the image finds its point of departure in his predecessor's artistic proposition, which he cites even as he modifies it at several points, bringing about a shift in its sense and meaning. One discovers here again, indeed, the trio of figures brought together earlier by Pierre: Prometheus, the statue and the satyr. But their positions vis-à-vis one another have changed and, instead of an almost rectilinear procession of the figures in descending hierarchical order against the background of clouds and sky, Gravelot plays on the dimension of depth and creates a spiral movement, the initiating actor in which is no longer Prometheus, but rather the satyr himself, who is now placed in the foreground, one hand extended toward the torch and the other toward the "gazers" (to use a term which approximates, in English, to the French neologism *regardants* coined by Rousseau), that is to say, toward us, the readers. Prometheus is now placed farther away from the humanity-symbolizing statue and his hand is no longer posed on this latter's shoulder.

Let us now turn to consider the graphic revisions which result, in this sketch, in a doubling of the satyr's left arm. Perhaps misled by the polyvalence of the formulation "you do not know *it*", in which the pronoun *it* might possibly also be taken to refer to the still-inert human being embodied in the marble of the statue, Gravelot wavers here and the satyr's hand is drawn by him, initially, as reaching out toward the statue as if to touch it. It is the satyr, in this first draft version, who stands ready to perform the gesture that is no longer Prometheus's: to place his hand upon the inanimate marble, in order to "know it" or, symbolically, to bring it to life. But the sense of touch becomes completely obliterated in the final version of the drawing because, understanding his mistake, Gravelot now raises the satyr's arm so that it is reaching rather toward the torch. Then, in the ink sketch, the hand is drawn arched back even farther so as to make the satyr's intention still more clear. From this point on in the frontispiece's

---

<sup>31</sup> The term abbreviated here is "*invenit*", since it is the draughtsman who *invents* the engraving, while the engraver himself only *sculpts* (*sculpsit*) it; see *supra* fig. 1.

development, the hand of the satyr will come to occupy the central position within the image, replacing and displacing the fire of Prometheus.

It will maintain this position in the next phase: that of the progressive fabrication of the engraving itself by Joseph de Longueil. De Longueil is yet another “author” of the print, responsible for the *intaglio* into the metal which gives this latter another form of existence.<sup>32</sup> To be noted, in this final stage, is the disappearance of the caption which had previously frozen the satyr into the position of the addressee (“you”) and had prevented him, as it were, from speaking in the first person.

Through a series of retouches, Gravelot makes of the satyr the true protagonist of the frontispiece, first by moving him into the foreground, then thanks to the play of his hands, one of which now takes the place of the Promethean torch while the other seems to beckon the reader to enter the dance of the image.

But who is this satyr who emerges from the “satyr-drama” of Aeschylus and whom Rousseau, via Plutarch, invites to make his way into the polemical, iconoclastic space of his first *Discourse*? Who is this satyr who, a minor presence in the text, becomes a major one in the image? In the excellent book that he has devoted to this figure, François Lissarague informs us that, in 6<sup>th</sup>-century BC Greece – when the city-state was just being constructed and established as the ideal form of political co-existence and the main task facing Greece was that of civilizing human violence – the satyr arose as an “open manipulatory model” and an “aberrative factor”,<sup>33</sup> which made it possible to play with social and cultural codes by contesting these codes through the de-centred, ludic gaze of the goat-man.

The form of the “satyr-drama” represented a way of “playing with culture, which is first, as it were, cast off and then reconstructed through the intermediary of the satyrs, who behave like clueless innocents, discovering for themselves the world which surrounds them along with all its objects.”<sup>34</sup> This “play” is surely one and the same as the “play” in which Rousseau himself engages, in his turn and in his own era, by putting radically into question the sciences and the arts while all the while playing with the codes of these latter, so that he too becomes an “aberrative factor” in the society in which he lives. In Gravelot’s frontispiece, then, it is perhaps rather the role of the satyr than that of Prometheus that Rousseau himself is called upon to play, particularly as the satyr portrayed here is a satyr who has forfeited something of

---

<sup>32</sup> On the collaborative dimension of creation, see Nicolas Donin/Daniel Ferrer, *Auteur(s) et acteurs de la genèse*, in: *Genesis 41* (2015), p. 7–26.

<sup>33</sup> François Lissarague, *La Cité des satyres*, p. 37.

<sup>34</sup> François Lissarague, *La Cité des satyres*, p. 24.

his “wildness”: Gravelot gave to him, via the discreet play of accessories added as parts of the décor, the attributes of the god Pan, god of pastoral culture and a musical god, namely, the shepherd’s crook and pipes of the style that Pan was supposed to have invented<sup>35</sup>. In the course of his work on the engraving, then, Gravelot can be said to have subtly shifted the accent of this scene: he has discreetly raised the satyr to the rank of a divinity and has transported the action into Arcadia, habitat of the god of shepherds and wooded groves. The violence is allayed. We are not far removed from an atmosphere of bucolic daydreaming anticipating the way in which Rousseau’s mental and moral world came to be perceived after the performance of *Le Devin du village* and the publication of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*.

### 3. Conclusion

What did Rousseau think of the work? His response to his publisher, who sent him the etching in the summer of 1763, was a stinging one: “the Prometheus [proof] has all the faults of M. Pierre’s but none of its beauties, such as the figure of Prometheus himself. One cannot distinguish whether the satyr is making to embrace the fire or the statue, a highly inappropriate ambiguity which it would have been easy to avoid just by placing the torch on the side of the satyr so that it would be almost up against his face”<sup>36</sup>. But in order to satisfy this objection of Rousseau’s, it would have been necessary to shatter the equilibrium which Gravelot had succeeded in finding and to restore to Prometheus that foremost rank among the image’s figures which he had forfeited, becoming somewhat evanescent, in this new version. This was not done and the frontispiece was printed without further modifications.

It was Gravelot, then, who, against Rousseau’s own expressed desire, succeeded in bringing out the centrality both to the *Discours* and to Rousseau’s whole *oeuvre* of this liminal figure of the satyr: a disobedience to which we owe, perhaps, the possibility of a *political* reading of this frontispiece. Decades later, one of the most prominent antagonists of the French Revolution, Antoine de Rivarol, was to write, as a reproach cast against Rousseau for not having sounded a clearer warning against (what Rivarol perceived to have been) the misdeeds of the Enlightenment, the following lines, which show how profoundly Rivarol had

---

<sup>35</sup> These pipes and the shepherd’s crook are the attributes of the god Pan according to Pierre Grimal, *Dictionnaire de la mythologie grecque et romaine*, Paris 1951, p. 342. The preferred instrument of the satyr was the type of pipes known as *aulos*.

<sup>36</sup> Letter of 21<sup>st</sup> August 1763, to Nicolas Bonaventure Duchesne.

himself been marked by the frontispiece of the first *Discourse* and how far the satyr (i.e. the people) approaching the fire (i.e. knowledge and power) in order to seize it had, all along, really been the matter most essentially at stake in this frontispiece: “Rousseau had engraved at the head of his political works a satyr reaching out for a torch, and he cries to him: *Satyr, stand back, for fire burns*. But he explained his allegory here very badly, because the satyr, being far away still, is struck only by the torch’s light. The warning cried out to him, then, ought to have been *Satyr, stand back, for light burns*. And this, indeed, was the heart of the matter. Our philosophers threw the light to our satyrs, without considering the fact that light burns”<sup>37</sup>. But it was too late. The satyrs had seized the fire and learned to use it.

Translated into English by Alexander Reynolds

---

<sup>37</sup> *Pensées inédites de Rivarol*, 1836, pp. 129–130, see Roland Mortier, *Clartés et ombres du siècle des Lumières: études sur le XVIIIe siècle littéraire*, Geneva 1969, p. 51–52.