A WOMAN’S LAWS AND A MAN’S: EROS AND THUMOS IN ROUSSEAU’S JULIE, OR THE NEW HELOISE (1761) AND THE DEER HUNTER (1978)

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George Mason University Law and Economics Research Paper Series

12-82
Rousseau’s long epistolary novel begins about thirty years before its publication in 1761.¹ The New Heloise instantly became an international best seller, and it remained popular for several decades after it was published.² In the words of one biographer, “Its appearance transformed Rousseau from a celebrated author into the object of a cult.”³ Two and a half centuries later, the reasons for this transformation are not immediately apparent. The book is filled with lengthy and repetitious expressions of love, friendship, and self pity.


² Indeed, it appears to have been the most popular novel of the eighteenth century. See, e.g., Christopher Kelly, Rousseau as Author: Consecrating One’s Life to the Truth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 140.

Embarrassingly overblown, these letters can easily provoke impatience and even derision. Mixed in with all this self-centered sentimentalizing, we find didactic disquisitions on topics like religion, culture, and education. These can make the reader wonder whether he is reading a novel or taking a class from a showy professor of big ideas.

Rousseau expected that the novel would be criticized by sophisticated critics in his own time, and it was. Edmund Burke described *The New Heloise* as “an unfashioned, indelicate, sour, gloomy, ferocious medley of pedantry and lewdness — of metaphysical speculations blended with the coarsest sensuality.” Burke found this combination of qualities disgusting and pernicious. Readers today are more likely to find it boring and annoying.

In our time, it is nonetheless still possible to be enthralled by *The New Heloise*, and to love the people in it. But whether or not one is susceptible to the novel as a novel, one can seek to understand how Rousseau tried to change the thinking of the readers at whom it was aimed. In the first part of this paper, I take up that challenge. I then turn to an American film that was also popular with the public, but sharply criticized by sophisticated critics. The audience for this

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4 See Preface, O.C. II, pp. 5-6; Anna Attridge, “The Reception of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*,” *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 120 (1974): 227-67. Attridge offers this summary of the novel’s initial reception: “[W]hereas the reactions of the men of letters range from the hostile to the tepid, those of the general public range from the hostile to the rapturous.” Ibid., p. 250. Men of letters focused variously on what they saw as literary shortcomings and on the book’s perceived tendency to corrupt its readers (especially young girls). Ordinary people were much more likely to say that they had been entranced, elevated, and instructed. Attridge’s study is careful and level headed, so it is striking to see her report that “it is a moving and illuminating experience to read the letters of those who wrote to thank Rousseau for the way in which he had altered their outlook on the world.” Ibid.


6 *The Deer Hunter* was a box office smash, and it won several Oscars, including Best Picture. As in the case of *The New Heloise*, some critics attacked it
film was far removed from Rousseau’s in many ways. As their titles suggest, *The Deer Hunter* is oriented more toward men, and *The New Heloise* more toward women. Notwithstanding these and many other differences, both offer a kind of leadership that was out of step with the dominant opinions of their eras. Viewed attentively and sympathetically, neither work is directed exclusively at one sex, and the two point in much the same direction. Or so I will try to show.

In order to keep one’s bearings in what will be a fairly long discussion of these two works of art, it may be helpful to recall two famous images of the human soul offered to us by Plato, one in the *Republic* and one in the *Phaedrus*. In Book IV of the *Republic*, Socrates describes the soul as having three parts, the desiring (*epithumia*), the spirited (*thumos*) and the reasoning or calculating (*logistikon*). His use here of the word *epithumia*, rather than the word *eros*, is consistent with the dialogue’s systematic treatment of *eros* — in the primary sense of sexual love and desire — as a peripheral element of human experience that should simply be lumped together with our other animal appetites. In Book III, for example, Socrates

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7  439d4-441c7. Socrates is careful to note at the outset of this discussion that the tripartite image of the soul offers only an imprecise shortcut. 435b9-d5.

8  *Epithumia* primarily means desire in general, although it can refer to sexual desire, especially unadorned lust. In the passage from the *Republic* under consideration here, Socrates illustrates *epithumia* with a list of examples in which he includes *eros* along with hunger and thirst. *Thumos* can also be used to refer to passion in general, or to basic animal passions. When set in contradistinction to *epithumia*, however, it primarily refers to spiritedness or self-assertiveness, which we see displayed in anger, and in the pursuit of honor and victory (including the pursuit of self-mastery, and thus in shame). By juxtaposing *epithumia* and *thumos*, moreover, Socrates invites attention to their common root, which should make us wonder how distinct they truly are. This invitation is reinforced later, when he suggests that each of the three aspects or forms of the soul has its own desires
suggests that education is needed to harmonize the thumotic and the philosophic, whereas one might reasonably expect it to harmonize thumos and eros.9 Later, Socrates provides for the guardians in his beautiful city to be bred through a scientific eugenics program, like livestock.10 In Book I, the elderly Cephalus praises the freedom that old age can bring from the despotism of sexual enticement (taphrodisia) and other desires (epithumiai).11 Eros rules the tyrannical soul, we hear in Book IX, and drives it like a gadfly so that it is always full of disorder and regret.12 Throughout the dialogue, sexual eros is unremittingly disparaged as Socrates persistently seeks to conjure what he calls at one point “true eros for true philosophy.”13

As we will see, the highly spirited protagonist of the The Deer Hunter also pushes sexual eros to the periphery of his world, and the film almost always presents the sexual behavior of the other men in the film in a sordid or comic fashion. This parallel with the Republic does not mean that the film’s purposes are those of Plato, or that anyone in the film has the slightest inkling of what Socrates knows about true eros for true philosophy. But the Republic’s tripartite treatment of the soul provides a useful tool that may help us view the film’s protagonist as more than a somewhat peculiar fictional character. He is, on the contrary, a peculiarly important kind of human being whose thumos is, as the Republic suggests it can be,
amenable to reason,\textsuperscript{14} and whose sexual eros is as well. As we will see, moreover, his portrayal in the film seems consistent with Leo Strauss’ comment that “[w]hereas eros is primarily the desire to generate human beings, spiritedness is the derivative willingness to kill and to be killed, to destroy human beings.”\textsuperscript{15} If the film’s protagonist does not turn finally to philosophy, as he certainly does not, he does bring his thumos and eros into a closer harmony by the end of the film. In that sense, he undergoes an education from which the audience might learn something.

Eros is front and center in \textit{The New Heloise}. Indeed, thumos scarcely shows itself in the novel except in such refined forms as shame and self-control.\textsuperscript{16} As it happens, the \textit{Phaedrus} presents a different tripartite image of the soul than the \textit{Republic}, in a context that resembles Rousseau’s novel in putting sexual eros in the foreground. Enticed by Phaedrus, Socrates makes a rare sojourn outside the city’s walls, and most of their private conversation takes place in a secluded spot in the country. Phaedrus has been smitten with an unorthodox seduction speech written by Lysias, which argues that a boy should soberly bestow his sexual favors on the seducer precisely because he is not in love with the boy. Socrates responds with an even more powerful critique of the madness of love and lovers than Lysias had offered. Although Socrates’ competing speech does not quite propose that the addressee submit sexually to the speechmaker, and in many respects would seem to discourage such submission, Socrates had covered his head in shame while delivering it. The reason soon becomes apparent when Socrates delivers a spectacular (and obviously pre-planned) palinode in praise of eros.

\textsuperscript{14} 439e6-440a3.


\textsuperscript{16} The principal characters in the novel would probably find Achilles almost incomprehensible, but I think they could more easily identify with the struggle of Leontius against his desire to gaze upon corpses. \textit{Republic}, 439e6-440a3.
The treatment of eros in Socrates’ first speech resembles that of the Republic. The erotic man is a pathetic slave of his bodily desires, driven by a gadfly,\textsuperscript{17} and harmful to those he pursues: “the friendship of the lover does not arise with good intentions (\textit{eunoia}), but as with food, to gratify an appetite — as wolves treat sheep affectionately, so are lovers friendly to a boy.”\textsuperscript{18} The palinode rejects this account in favor of an elaborate myth in which the soul is likened to a team of horses and a charioteer.\textsuperscript{19} According to the myth, souls are immortal, and their wings strive to carry them toward the region where the gods spend time viewing the pure intelligibles that lie outside the visible world. Except for the gods, most souls can at best catch glimpses of these intelligibles, and eventually most of them injure their wings and fall to the earth, where oyster-like they occupy the bodies of human beings and other animals. Human souls, at least, can retain some memory of what they saw before they were embodied, and such dim and clouded memories are a source of human eros.

The image of a team of horses and charioteer suggests a structure of the soul resembling the one presented in Book IV of the Republic. In the Phaedrus, however, the parts of the soul are not given names. Instead, Socrates describes their “physical” appearance and their behavior. Perhaps the most striking claim in the palinode is that beauty is the only one of the intelligibles whose image presents itself to our bodily senses, and then only to the sense of sight. If we could literally see images of the other intelligibles, says Socrates, it would produce “terrible loves” (\textit{deinous erōtas}).\textsuperscript{20} Deinos has the same ambiguity that “terrible” does in English, for it can mean either “horrible” or “awesome.” It is therefore unclear whether Socrates is

\textsuperscript{17} Oistros, used at 240d1, is the same word used in the Republic at 577e2.

\textsuperscript{18} 241c7-d1.

\textsuperscript{19} Socrates later indicates that his first speech was incomplete, not simply false. 265e1-266b1. As in the Republic, he notes at the outset of the myth that it is a shortcut. 246a3-6.

\textsuperscript{20} 250d3-e1.
suggesting that we are cursed or blessed by the inability of our physical senses to perceive an image of any intelligible except beauty. What is pretty clear, however, is that Socrates’ claim about our unique access to images of intelligible beauty complements the treatment of the soul in the Republic. Whereas that dialogue reduces sexual eros to an animal passion like hunger and thirst, the Phaedrus presents it as the most natural source of the human inclination to take wing and soar toward what we hope will satisfy our highest desires.

In Socrates’ palinode, the eros provoked by beautiful human bodies will lead in the best and rarest case to chaste philosophic friendships, if the soul’s handsome horse and charioteer adequately subdue the ugly horse’s demand for physical gratification. In other cases, of course, other results will ensue, and the different outcomes are affected very strongly by experiences that individual souls had before they fell to earth and became embodied. This recognition of natural human diversity does not prevent Socrates from praising the struggle to tame the urge for physical gratification, even if it is not always successful, by those who are lovers of honor more than of wisdom. In a final shot at Lysias’ seduction speech, Socrates holds out a dire fate after death for those who embrace vulgar and niggardly virtues in utilitarian relationships between those who are not touched by the madness of eros.21

The homoerotic context of the Phaedrus favors the palinode’s rhetorical strategy of characterizing the madness of eros as a boon that can lead to chaste philosophic friendships or to honorable friendships in which physical gratification plays a small part. It therefore leaves the reader to wonder what adjustments, rhetorical and otherwise, would have to be made in offering appropriate praise to heterosexual eros. The New Heloise may be seen as Rousseau’s effort to provide modern readers with a kind of alternative Phaedrus aimed at those whose sexual eros is of this more common kind.

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21 256e3-257a2.
I. Eros and Marriage in *The New Heloise*

The *Letter to D’Alembert*, written in the midst of Rousseau’s work on the *New Heloise*, defends healthy bourgeois family life in a place where good fortune had established it.22 *The New Heloise* itself is a much more ambitious effort to make such life attractive elsewhere.23 If Socrates — a physically ugly man who can claim to know nothing, other than erotic things — becomes young and beautiful in Plato’s dialogues,24 Rousseau beautifies domestic pleasures through literary characters who wrestle with their own experience of eros.25 Stripped to a skeleton, here is the plot:

A young commoner is invited into the home of a Swiss Baron to serve as tutor to Julie, his adolescent daughter and only surviving child, and to Claire, Julie’s cousin and closest friend.26 Julie and the tutor fall in love, and wish to marry. Baron d’Etange is unalterably...

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23 Commentators sometimes refer to the book as *Julie* and sometimes as *The New Heloise*. The subtitle refers to the famous story of a young woman who was seduced by Peter Abelard, a medieval academic philosopher entrusted with a position in the house where she was being raised. The story has been of continuing interest primarily because of correspondence between Peter and Heloise, which the protagonists of Rousseau’s novel have read. The book also has a second subtitle, “Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps.” Rousseau says that this second subtitle was meant to warn innocent girls that they should not dare to begin reading the book. Preface, *O.C.* II, p. 6.

24 See Plato, *Symposium* 177d7-8, 198c5-199b5; *Second Letter*, 314c2-4.

25 Rousseau made an elaborate point of declining to say whether these were literary characters of his own invention, or people who actually existed and wrote the letters collected in the book. For my analysis of the implications of this pose, see Note A at the end of this paper.

26 The invitation comes from Julie’s mother, while the Baron is away on a long trip. Apparently she hopes to surprise him with the girl’s educational progress on his return. Book I, Letter 1, *O.C.* II, p. 32.
opposed, partly because of class prejudice and partly because he has promised his daughter to a middle-aged aristocrat named Wolmar, who once saved his life in battle.\textsuperscript{27}

A mutual acquaintance of the Baron and the tutor, an English Peer named Edward Bomston, befriends the couple and intercedes in their behalf with Julie’s father, to no avail. The lovers have secretly consummated their union, but Julie rejects the tutor’s proposed elopement for fear of crushing her parents. When rumors of the relationship begin to circulate in town, Julie sends the tutor away with Edward.\textsuperscript{28} Eventually, Julie’s mother discovers the affair, and dies soon afterward, with Julie fixing the blame at least partly on herself. Much as she would still like to elope, she is unwilling to risk a similar effect on her father.

Julie initially defies her father’s command to marry Wolmar, but reluctantly accedes when the Baron pleads with her to spare him the dishonor of breaking the commitment he had made to his friend. On the day of her wedding, Julie experiences a religious awakening, and the Wolmars establish a model family establishment with their children on her family estate at Clarens.\textsuperscript{29} Meanwhile, the tutor has spent time with Edward in Paris and London, and he eventually sails around the world with a British wartime expedition.

When the tutor returns to Switzerland after some eight years away, Julie confesses her premarital affair to her husband, who later confirms that he knew about it before their wedding. Wolmar invites the tutor to join them at Clarens, with the aim of curing him of his continuing passion. If cured, the former lover will be invited to serve as tutor to Julie’s two sons and the daughter of Claire, now a widow, who is also planning to join the household.

\textsuperscript{27} Wolmar was originally from Russia or thereabouts.

\textsuperscript{28} At this point, Julie knows about her father’s having offered her to Wolmar, but she does not inform the tutor.

\textsuperscript{29} The novel begins at the Baron’s home in the town of Vevey. Clarens is a country estate near a small village not far from the town.
The cure seems to have succeeded when the tutor goes to Italy to help Edward resolve some troubles in his own somewhat complicated love life. Meanwhile, the tutor has awakened in Claire a romantic passion, and Julie encourages them to wed. Before Edward and the tutor return, one of Julie’s sons falls into the cold water of Lake Geneva and she leaps in to save him. Both are rescued, but Julie contracts an illness from which she dies a few days later. In a deathbed letter to the tutor, she reports that she had never been cured of her love for him, and once again urges him to marry Claire. In the novel’s final letter, Claire tells the tutor that she will never marry him or anyone else. She urges him to return to Clarens so that together they can help Wolmar and the children continue their lives in the way that Julie hoped they would.

The Power of Julie

Julie subjugates people of both sexes, all ages, and various temperaments. Much of her power comes from what everyone recognizes as her good heart and generous disposition. The unassuming enthusiasm with which she performs her duties to others, and her many gratuitous acts of kindness, provoke universal admiration, affection, and respect. People want to be around her and are grateful for her attention. She is appealing to men, and could have the choice of many beaux. What makes her truly extraordinary, however, is the sustained intensity of affection that she provokes, especially in the novel’s other three main characters.

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30 Julie is apparently nice looking, but not a stunning beauty. In his first letter, the tutor says, “I concede that one could imagine you still more beautiful; but more amiable and more worthy of an honorable man’s heart, no Julie, that is not possible.” Book I, Letter 1, O.C. II, p. 32. Claire confirms that there are “a thousand women more beautiful” than Julie. Book II, Letter 5, O.C. II, p. 204. Before he introduced Wolmar to his daughter, the Baron told him: “She is neither a beauty, nor a prodigy of mind.” Book IV, Letter 12, O.C. II, p. 492.
The Tutor

Julie meets her tutor, who is given the pseudonym St. Preux, when she is seventeen and he is about nineteen. Their immediate mutual attraction goes unspoken for a full year until the novel opens with a letter in which he declares his overpowering passion, which he fears is unrequited. After Julie reveals her reciprocal feelings, the early parts of the novel are occupied with an ongoing struggle in which the two lovers attempt, with Claire’s assistance, to manage their budding love affair while St. Preux continues to serve as their tutor. A few months after St. Preux’s declaration, Julie arranges a secluded meeting with him and Claire, at which she bestows her first kiss. After several more months, during which St. Preux is painfully and visibly self-restrained, Julie finally surrenders herself. She becomes pregnant, but has a miscarriage after she falls while trying to escape her father’s physical wrath during an argument about her desire to marry a commoner.

Like so many other lovers, especially those who face external obstacles, Julie and St. Preux invest their relationship with transcendent significance. They are preoccupied with each other and themselves, to be sure, but they are equally intent on justifying and ennobling their pains and pleasures alike. Constantly agonizing over the tension between their inclinations and various duties by which they feel bound, they never fail in the end to put their duties first.

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31 The pseudonym was originally adopted by Claire for use in the presence of her servants. Book III, Letter 14, O.C. II, p. 332 & note *. There is one letter signed with the tutor’s real initials, but St. Preux is the only name by which he is called in any of the published letters. The word preux means valiant.

32 Julie’s pregnancy may have been part of a desperate plan to persuade her father to consent to a marriage with St. Preux, which the Baron might have found preferable to the alternative form of disgrace. Her miscarriage forces her to seek the assistance of a household servant, who reports the matter to Julie’s mother. Book III, Letter 18, O.C. II, pp. 344, 347.

33 The most important example is Julie’s decision not to elope with St. Preux. She thinks her father’s objection to the marriage is based on completely unreasonable prejudices, but she believes she has a natural duty to spare him the
From the first moment, St. Preux puts himself under Julie’s command in all matters respecting his desires, reserving only the right to argue his case when he questions her decisions. With respect to his duties, however, he insists that he must be the final judge, even if it means losing her.\(^3^4\) That insistence, of course, only makes her love him more, for they both have a passion for virtue or the noble along with their passion for each other.

After Julie’s decision not to elope, she orders St. Preux to leave, and many years of separation ensue. Through it all his love endures, even after Julie’s marriage. His passion does not subside, he shows no inclination to conquer it, and he is sometimes scolded by others for his madness. St. Preux’s enslavement to Julie does not prevent him from exercising his mind on other subjects, often very well,\(^3^5\) but his endless lovesick histrionics are painful to read and frequently pathetic. Wolmar describes him just as he looks to us: “ardent, but weak and easy to subjugate.”\(^3^6\)

With a little effort, this devastating verdict could be reconciled

\(^3^4\) Early in their relationship, for example, Julie sends St. Preux some money to use while on a trip that she has commanded him to take. He sends the money back, and she returns double the amount along with a letter in which she argues that such fastidious behavior is inappropriate. Unable to refute her reasoning, he accepts the money. Later, however, when her father decides to pay him for his efforts as a tutor, St. Preux presents arguments of his own for declining the payments, and declares that in a choice between honor and Julie, love itself would require him to give her up. Book I, Letters 15-18, O.C. II, pp. 65-69, 84-86.

\(^3^5\) St. Preux is remarkably erudite for his age, and we are continually reminded that he aspires to be a philosopher.

\(^3^6\) Book IV, Letter 14, O.C. II, p. 510.
with the long duration of St. Preux’s passion for Julie. But there must be more to his character than this. How else to account for his friendship with Edward, which began before Edward met Julie? The English lord is a manly, clear-thinking, and self-possessed individual. Like so many others, he is immediately attracted to Julie, but he also suspects that something is going on between her and her tutor. While drinking with St. Preux, Edward becomes indiscreet, and provokes an insult to his honor. The bookish tutor’s challenge amounts to a suicide mission, for Edward is known to be an accomplished duelist. When Julie learns about the coming combat, she informs Edward about her relationship with St. Preux, and throws her reputation on his mercy. Recognizing the nobility that both lovers had displayed, Edward begs St. Preux’s forgiveness and becomes devoted to the couple. He stakes half of his large fortune in an effort to facilitate their marriage, nurses St. Preux through the violent despair that follows his separation from Julie, lives with him for an extended period of time, corresponds with him about many topics when they are apart, and eventually decides to join St. Preux in the household at Clarens. It is hard to imagine that a man like Edward could tolerate as much time as he spends in St. Preux’s company without finding an interesting and elevated soul, and a brave one. Edward must have seen in Julie and St. Preux the reason for the tutor’s continuing subjection to her, without thinking him debased by it.

37 In his critique of dueling in the Letter to D’Alembert, Rousseau acknowledges that it is especially difficult to preserve one’s honor without dueling when a man has insulted one’s father, sister, wife, or mistress. O.C. V, pp. 63-64.

38 One might hypothesize that Edward did all this entirely out of regard for Julie, for whom he undoubtedly does have the greatest respect and admiration. Edward himself, however, never suggests that this is his sole motivation. One might be able to imagine that he would help the lovers elope for Julie’s sake alone, but I at least cannot imagine that he would undertake a very long and intimate relationship with St. Preux solely because of some indirect benefit it might bring to Julie.

39 This is not to say that Edward disagrees with Wolmar. In a letter written about the same time that Wolmar calls St. Preux “ardent, but weak and easy to subjugate,” Edward upbraids St. Preux in much the same terms:
Your passions, of which you were long the slave, have left you virtuous. There is all your glory; it is great, no doubt, but be less proud of it. Your strength itself is the work of your weakness. Do you know what it is that has always made you love virtue? It took on in your eyes the face of that adorable woman who represents it so well, and it would be difficult for so dear an image to allow you to lose the taste for it. But will you never love it for itself alone, and will you not strive for the good through your own strength, as Julie has by hers? . . . A woman has triumphed over herself, and a philosopher has difficulty vanquishing himself! . . . Unfortunate man! If Julie were weak, you would succumb tomorrow, and be only a vile adulterer.

Book V, Letter 1, O.C. II, pp. 524-25. Julie herself, while worrying that St. Preux must have died during his long wartime voyage, tells Claire that he will present before the sovereign judge “a soul that is weak, but healthy and loving virtue.” Book IV, Letter 1, O.C. II, p. 403.

If St. Preux’s love for Julie is exceptional, Claire’s is almost preternatural. When the tutor first arrives, the two teenagers are already inseparable friends. Far from provoking jealousy, the affair with the tutor intensifies the women’s friendship. Claire agonizes with Julie about her troubles, and becomes a devoted friend to the emotionally demanding St. Preux. With a light-hearted and sassy disposition, Claire sees herself as immune to the kind of love that so consumes her friend. She marries a nice young man named d’Orbe, whom she likes and respects, but finds herself more liberated than devastated when he dies. Claire’s regard for Julie is so strong that
she wants her more competent friend to take over the upbringing of her daughter. For her part, the little girl loves her indulgent mother, but she seems to love the sterner Julie at least as much.

Toward the end of the novel, we discover that Claire’s capacity for love runs deeper and more strangely than she knew. When St. Preux returns from his voyages, he awakens a strong passion in the young widow. Julie believes (and has long believed) that Claire’s attraction to the tutor was there from the very start, but suppressed out of deference to her friend’s. With Julie married and St. Preux apparently cured of his obsession, he and Claire look like an obvious match, especially since they are both to join the household at Clarens. Julie would like to see them wed, and Claire is open to the idea despite some serious doubts. Julie suggests the match to St. Preux, relying in part on the argument that his sexual drive will pose a continuing danger to the happiness of the household if it has no legitimate outlet.

St. Preux rejects the proposal, while acknowledging that he finds Claire both lovable and sexually attractive. Claire disquiets him as the waves agitate the surface of Lake Geneva, but Julie has gently and irretrievably carried him away, like the vast swells of the ocean,

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44 Ibid.

45 When St. Preux first returns to Switzerland, Julie finds that he has changed a lot, and mostly for the better. He is more manly and self possessed, and less intellectually arrogant. Even his looks have improved, by joining the fire of youth with the majesty of the age of maturity. Book IV, Letter 7, O.C. II, p. 427. Claire does not disagree, but she wonders whether Julie noticed that “his long sufferings and the habit of bearing them have made his physiognomy even more interesting than it was before.” Book IV, Letter 9, O.C. II, p. 437. With respect to his behavior, Claire is relieved that he has not contracted the manners of Paris, and the improvement she sees is just a shift of emphasis: “he is more grave and serious than ever.” Ibid., p. 438.

46 Wolmar appears to have been the first to voice the desirability of this marriage. See Book IV, Letter 14, O.C. II, p. 510; Book VI, Letter 11, p. 740.
to the ends of the earth. Completely confident of his ability to refrain from inappropriate conduct with anyone in Julie’s household, he is equally sure that Claire could never be happy with a husband in whose heart she would always have second place.

Julie’s illness and death drive Claire to utter distraction. Because St. Preux is away in Italy at this time, we can only guess how he would have behaved. But he could hardly have responded more extravagantly than Claire, whose entire character seems suddenly transformed. The perky and sensible friend now becomes the very picture of desolated devotion, like the most ardent lover or the fondest mother of an only child. Claire and St. Preux have both been in love with Julie, and not in entirely different ways. There has never been a suggestion of overt sexuality between the women, but it now seems clear that Julie has called forth in Claire the pleasures and the longing that only the most erotic people can sustain for long periods of time. In the letter to St. Preux with which the novel closes, Claire recognizes something that he had sensed even before Julie’s illness:

I have felt love for you, I admit; perhaps I still do; perhaps I always will; I neither know nor wish to know. This is suspected, and I am not unaware of that; I am neither sorry nor worried by it. But here is what I have to tell you and what you must be sure to remember. It is that a man who was loved by Julie d’Etange, and could resolve to marry another, is in my sight nothing but an unworthy man and a coward, whom I would hold myself

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48 The novel’s letters relate many kisses, tears, and caresses promiscuously spread among people of both sexes and all ages, which do not imply much more than hugging does in our own culture. While Claire is faithfully attending her during her final illness, Julie invites Claire to take some rest by sharing her bed, and she mentions that she knows Claire does not find her disgusting. Book VI, Letter 11, O.C. II, p. 710. Whatever this may suggest about the underlying nature of the intimate affection that the two women have openly displayed throughout the novel, it does not imply sexual contact or even any awareness of a sexual attraction.
dishonored to have for a friend; and as for me, I declare
to you that any man, whoever he may be, who
henceforth dares speak to me of love, will never in his life
do so again.49

All Claire has left is to share her grief with St. Preux, and hope to
jointly care for Julie’s father, children, and husband. “Let us gather
together all those who were dear to her. May her spirit inspire us:
may her heart unite all of ours; let us live continually under her
eyes.”50 Julie’s wish that she wed St. Preux now seems repugnant,
and she rejects it, as St. Preux had rejected it earlier. Julie has
enslaved these two so completely that it is apparently beyond her
power to set them free.51

The Husband

Wolmar is the strangest character in the book. Born into the
nobility, he is inhumanly detached from ordinary emotion. His
dominant passion is to observe and understand human beings, and
his only active principle is a natural taste for order. Finding the
Orthodox Christianity in which he was raised absurd, he became an
atheist. Further offended by the corruption and hypocrisy that he
later observed in the Roman Church (including rampant atheism
among priests), Wolmar eventually reasoned his way to agnosticism.52
So immune to the opinion of others that he does not even experience
amour-propre, he would gladly “become a living eye.”53 Tranquility,
insight, and cool judgment personified, Wolmar is a perfect opposite to the ardent, but weak and docile St. Preux.

Why would such a man marry at all? Julie, it turns out, attracted him in a way that no woman ever had, and filled him with the ambition of making her happy. The household that he and Julie establish at Clarens provides all that one would think is needed to satisfy a gentle and generous woman, and Julie recognizes this. Her one acknowledged sorrow in her marriage is that Wolmar does not share the religious beliefs and feelings that guide and support her. This communion is one that Wolmar cannot join, but he thinks there may be another way to give his wife what she needs. Julie’s religious awakening occurred when her wedding ended all hope of marrying St. Preux, and a carefully managed restoration of their friendship might give Julie the most important thing that Wolmar cannot. He knows that Julie could never love him as she has St. Preux, and he undertakes to complete her happiness by forging among them a three-way friendship in which there are no secrets because none are needed.

Julie’s death interrupts this daring project, which Wolmar seems to have undertaken without a complete understanding of Julie’s nature and predicament. It also puts an end to Wolmar’s

54 Wolmar was introduced to Julie at a time when he sensed the need for someone to comfort him in his approaching old age. Book IV, Letter 12, O.C. II, p. 492. His passion for her, he says, was provoked by seeing her affection for her father. This passion was weak, but it was also irrepressible because there were no others to counteract it. Ibid. Having gotten to know Julie, he believed “that if there was someone who could make [her] happy, it was me.” Ibid., p. 493. Wolmar does not characterize his passion or his ambition as erotic in nature. He had previously given up “idle philosophy” for a life of action, which produced an unexpected advantage: “It was to sharpen through an active life that love of order which I have received from nature, and to acquire a new taste for the good through the pleasure of contributing to it.” Ibid., p. 492. To the extent that Julie’s happiness is another such project, and to the extent that her usefulness to him is as a comforter, his love for her is akin to the love that everyone who knows her seems to have. He knows, of course, that Julie cannot love him erotically, and tells her so, ibid., p. 494, which might induce him to understate, perhaps even to himself, the extent of his erotic attraction to her.
inhuman imperturbability. His behavior during her illness and afterwards is much less openly extravagant than Claire’s, but it bespeaks a profound alteration or revelation. During Julie’s illness, Wolmar has several experiences that are new to him, which he relates in a long letter to St. Preux. He is terrified to think she might be dying, and thrown into a novel kind of agitation and anxiety when he learns that she is. He wrestles more seriously than before with her religious beliefs, and with his decision to disclose his skepticism to her.

Perhaps most significantly, Wolmar finds that amour-propre has for once flared up within himself. Finding Julie placid in the face of death, Wolmar accuses her of welcoming an escape from her marriage to him. When Julie persuades him that he is wrong, he later says in a letter to St. Preux, “[O]ften pressing to my lips her hands which I held in mine, I felt them becoming wet with my tears. I did not believe my eyes were made to spill any. They were the first since my birth; they will be the last until my death. After shedding tears for Julie, one should no longer shed them for anything.”

Julie

In her deathbed letter to St. Preux, Julie reports that she is now relieved of the salutary delusion that she had been cured of “the first sentiment that brought me alive.” Having earlier urged him to take Claire as a legitimate outlet for his sexual desires, she now realizes that it was her own weakness that she feared, not his. This announcement throws new light on a series of incidents earlier in the novel. When Julie first acknowledged her love for St. Preux, she declared that she found him sexually irresistible, and assigned him

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56 Book VI, Letter 12, O.C. II, pp. 740-41. Julie left this letter with Wolmar, and asked him to decide whether to convey it to St. Preux. Wolmar encloses it along with his own detailed description of Julie’s final days.
to protect her honor from herself.\(^{57}\) It was Julie who initiated their first kiss and who collapsed unconscious from its effects.\(^{58}\) Notwithstanding St. Preux’s palpable sexual frustration thereafter, he never lost his self control or even begged her to give him more.\(^{59}\) Julie frequently called their illicit relationship a crime, but never a sin. Just before her marriage, she suggested that they might secretly resume their affair,\(^{60}\) an offer that gave him “a sad and somber [hope] . . . because of it your attractions are tarnished and become only the more touching because of it.”\(^{61}\)
Facing death, Julie now acknowledges her own unbreakable enslavement to St. Preux:

My friend, I make this confession without shame; this sentiment which remained despite myself was involuntary, it has cost my innocence nothing; everything which depends on my will was for my duty. If the heart which does not depend on it was for you, that was my torment and not my crime. I have done what I had a duty to do; virtue remains to me without stain, and love has remained to me without remorse.

I dare honor myself on the past; but who could have answered to me for the future? One more day, perhaps, and I was culpable! What of an entire life spent with you? What dangers I have run unknowingly! to what greater dangers was I to be exposed?ο

When St. Preux returned to Switzerland after his long absence,

Rousseau the Editor calls attention to this omission by inserting a footnote in which he denounces La Rouchefoucoul’s book and suggests that Julie would never cite this author in any other circumstance. What he means, I think, is that Julie is leading up to an announcement that she will never under any circumstances marry St. Preux. Her argument for the incompatibility between passionate love and marriage implies that this is the best course for both of them. As Julie points out, Wolmar is much older than she is, and is therefore likely to predecease her. Book III, Letter 20, O.C. II, p. 374. In that event, Julie has resolved not to marry St. Preux or anyone else: “If [Wolmar] was not fortunate enough to find a chaste maid, at least he will leave behind a chaste widow.” Ibid. On its face this makes no sense, except perhaps as a precaution that Julie has adopted against the temptation to wish for her husband’s death (as Rousseau suggests in an editor’s note added to a later edition of the novel). See O.C. II, p. 1558. But that is not the reason she offers in the letter. Instead, she hopes to contribute to St. Preux’s “complete cure.” Book III, Letter 20, O.C. II, p. 374. This display of generosity both to Wolmar and to St. Preux is apparently meant to supplement Julie’s recommendation in her previous letter that St. Preux use religion to help him fully accept her secular arguments against adultery. But her offer of a supplement suggests that she does not believe that either of these aids is sufficient.

Wolmar believed that Julie was cured of her youthful passion, and he became confident that St. Preux could also be cured. What was needed, he thought, was for St. Preux to realize that the Julie with whom he had fallen in love was now but an image of a young woman who no longer existed. Their cures, which Wolmar soon decided were complete, did not consist of forgetting their early love or finding it extinguished. Rather, he believed that they could remain lovers in their hearts while now becoming only friends in fact. He may have been right about St. Preux, but he was wrong about Julie.

When Wolmar left the two alone for several days, St. Preux took Julie to remote places where he had spent time pining for her early in their relationship. This triggered thoughts of killing both himself and Julie, and he experienced a crisis that left him convinced of his cure. He also believed that Julie herself “sustained that day the
greatest battle that a human soul could have sustained; yet she triumphed."67 But we have no letter in which she reflects on St. Preux’s crisis or on her own experience that day.68

In urging St. Preux one last time to marry Claire, the dying Julie seems to suggest that St. Preux can hope to survive and fulfill his commitment to tutor her children only if he physically unites with the one person on earth who loved her as deeply as he did. Julie herself seems to welcome her own death, not as an escape from Wolmar, but as Heaven’s way of rescuing her from the carnal temptation that St. Preux will always present. We are left to wonder whether the refusal of Claire and St. Preux to marry will make Claire’s final words come true: “[H]er coffin does not entirely contain her . . . it awaits the rest of its prey . . . it will not wait for long.”69

The struggles of these four characters with eros, on which I have barely touched in the preceding thumbnails, give the story its emotional power and appeal. Along the way, we encounter a great deal of social commentary and philosophic argumentation. Much of this material resembles what Rousseau says in his own name elsewhere, especially in the *Emile*, which was published the following year. To begin exploring how Rousseau wanted to influence the thinking of his readers, let us turn to the model household that Julie and Wolmar establish at Clarens.

**Clarens**

Wolmar and Julie transform the estate at Clarens into

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68 Julie seems to have discussed this incident with Claire, but no record of it is included in the collection of letters. See Book IV, Letter 16, *O.C.* II, p. 514.

something that looks like Geneva writ small. The Wolmars are affluent, but not fabulously wealthy. The long letters describing the design and operation of the estate are filled with wonderful details about the owners’ ingenious efforts to combine beauty and utility without extravagance or ostentation. The physical changes to the property are all aimed at making the place a comfortable and enjoyable place to live, with as little regard as possible to fashion and display. Many of the changes save money, but they obviously required a considerable expenditure of thought and effort by the proprieters. The goal of these efforts is to give pleasure to the inhabitants, and nothing else. The Wolmars want to share these pleasures with their most intimate friends, but life at Clarens has no purpose beyond the pleasure of living there.

In managing the estate, Wolmar employs an economic theory that might have been drawn from Locke: “Monsieur de Wolmar contends that land produces in proportion to the number of hands that cultivate it; better cultivated it yields more; this excess production furnishes the means of cultivating it better still; the more men and beasts you put on it, the more surplus it supplies over and above their upkeep. It is not known, he says, where this continual

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70 Indeed, some passages describing Clarens are drawn almost verbatim from the Letter to D’Alembert, and Rousseau the Editor claims that he copied them from St. Preux when he wrote the Letter. Book IV, Letter 10, O.C. II, p. 456 note *. Late in the novel, Claire makes a trip to Geneva, and composes a description of the city in which similarities with Clarens can easily be detected. Book VI, Letter 5. Claire, however, does not make the comparison, and some of what she says — as in her commentary on the Genevans’ avidity for commerce and acquisition — serves to remind the reader that Clarens is not an ideal model on which Geneva is or could be based.

71 “The masters of this house enjoy a rather modest estate according to the notions of fortune prevailing in society.” Book V, Letter 2, O.C. II, p. 529. Although Wolmar was born into great wealth, he lost almost all of it because of political upheavals in his homeland, events that took place after Julie was promised to him and before he returned to take her hand. What wealth the Wolmars have comes from Baron d’Etange.
and reciprocal augmentation of product and cultivators might end.”

Thus, for example, fruit trees replace decorative plants, vineyards replace meadows, and a vegetable patch replaces a flower garden. Like Plato’s Athenian Stranger, Wolmar tries to minimize his little community’s dependence on trade. As much as possible, necessities and even luxuries are produced on the estate, or purchased locally. In a striking example, Julie doctors her homegrown wine in an effort to imitate exotic varieties that the Wolmards prefer not to import.

The more important, and difficult, aspect of Wolmar’s system involves the management of labor. Rather than leasing the land, he supervises the farming himself. For temporary and seasonal laborers, he gives a preference to local workers over itinerants, paying the market wage but adding a bonus for those who perform well. During the peak season, Julie offers a modest prize to the best employee of the week. Wolmar claims that this bonus system more than repays itself by imperceptibly making all the workers more industrious and diligent. “[B]ut as one sees its profit only with perseverance and time,

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74 Book V, Letter 2, O.C. II, pp. 548-52. Early in the novel, St. Preux takes a trip to a remote area of Switzerland, where he encounters welcoming and generous people who are largely self-sufficient. Money is scarce and the local economy appears to operate through a kind of implicit barter system. St. Preux comments, “If ever they have more money, they will infallibly be the poorer for it. They have the wisdom to sense this, and the mining of gold veins in the area is not permitted.” Book I, Letter 23, O.C. II, pp. 79-80. Rousseau’s scrupulous attention to geographic and historical accuracy in the novel — even to the point of noting errors in some of the letters — give an aura of credibility to the description in this letter and thus helps to make the later description of the economy at Clarens more believable.

75 Book V, Letter 2, O.C. II, pp. 552-53. They do not make a fetish of this preference for local products. Julie, for example, is fond of coffee, and does not deny herself this pleasure. Ibid., p. 552.
few people know how to make use of it and care to do so.”\textsuperscript{76} St. Preux believes that Julie’s contribution, which is not inspired by economic motives, is even more effective. She wins the affection of the workers by extending her own to them, for “[s]he does not believe that she can repay with money the pains taken for her, and thinks she owes services to anyone who has rendered some to her.”\textsuperscript{77}

A bigger challenge is the management of the permanent staff. The Wolmars employ about half the number of servants that they could afford, and they put a great deal of effort and attention into the managerial function. The servants are chosen carefully, watched carefully, and encouraged to remain in the service for long periods. One of Wolmar’s innovations is to give each servant who remains with the house an annual five per cent raise, contrary to the prevailing custom of paying a standard wage without regard to past services or future expectations. This, however, is only the beginning of the Wolmars’ managerial philosophy.

While various incentives may serve to align the servants’ interests with those of their masters, and thus create common interests, there is a deeper problem. “Servitude is so unnatural (\textit{si peu naturelle}) to man that it cannot exist without some discontent.”\textsuperscript{78} The Wolmars respond to this political problem with an elaborate system designed to minimize natural discontent. Two important elements of the system illuminate its character.

First, the Wolmars avoid engaging experienced servants. Instead, they look for young local people of good character and disposition, and they personally train the new hires in their duties. Experienced servants trained by others would almost always have contracted habits of resentment and contempt toward masters. Why? Because masters almost invariably underestimate the perceptiveness

\textsuperscript{76} Book IV, Letter 10, \textit{O.C. II}, p. 443.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., p. 444.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., p. 460.
of their servants, overestimate their own natural superiority, and make themselves worthy targets of disdain. The servants steal, they loaf, they lie — often provoked by the way they are treated — and such habits naturally give rise to maxims that justify a pattern of such behavior. Such maxims, moreover, naturally spread among the other servants, creating a culture of thievery, laziness, and deception.

“To have [honest domestics] one must not seek them, but make them, and only a good man knows the art of forming them.”79 Thus, the master must begin by exemplifying the virtues he wants his servants to display, for domestic servants are expert observers of vice and hypocrisy, which they have every reason to imitate. The master must also reciprocate the respect that he wants from his servants, without relinquishing his own authority. This is a delicate matter, but not an impossible task, as we can observe today in well managed military and business organizations.80

A second important element of the Wolmars’ system involves the management of relations among the servants. In poorly managed houses, the servants are constantly engaged in conspiracies against one another or against the master. This is the problem of faction, which was perfectly defined by Publius: “a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.” The solution proposed for a large republic in Federalist No. 10 — the multiplication and regulation of competing factions — is specifically rejected at Clarens,

79 Ibid., p. 468.

80 It is no accident that our business and military leaders often call their organizations families, or that the best of these leaders are often treated by their subordinates rather like parents. The existence of such examples, of course, does not imply that the techniques employed by the Wolmars have become easy to put into practice. But they do suggest that the Clarens model is not merely a fantasy dreamed up by a former footman who was frustrated with the class prejudices of the ancien regime.
but the problem is the same.81

The Wolmars begin by attempting to hire people who seem likely to get along with one another, and when irreconcilable differences appear, one of the quarrelers is dismissed. More important, the masters reward teamwork, and grant favors only when one servant makes the request in behalf of another. The servants are also rewarded for reporting injustice, but only when the witness is sure of his case, and the Wolmars will listen to complaints only in the presence of the accused. Whenever possible, they prefer mercy and correction to punishment, and the only punishment used is dismissal from the household.

With these and many other such devices, the household staff come to see their own interest in that of the proprietors. This is partly because the masters’ interests largely appear as the common interest, and partly because service in such a system is more pleasant than alternative employments. Those who are capable of experiencing the pleasures of such a community dread expulsion, and thus are least subject to the discontent that is inseparable from subordination.

Many eighteenth century readers of The New Heloise would have had household staffs, and the novel contains a wealth of shrewd suggestions about their proper management. What makes the portrait of Clarens appealing, however, is its emphasis on the pleasure that Wolmar takes in establishing order and harmony, and on the pleasure that Julie takes in caring about the servants themselves. It is only through this combination that the portrait becomes at all believable, and we are not encouraged to think that either Julie or Wolmar could have made it a success without the other.

81 “It is a great error in domestic as in civil economy to attempt to combat one vice with another or form between them a sort of equilibrium, as if what saps the foundations of order could ever serve to establish it!” Book IV, Letter 10, O.C. II, p. 461. This is St. Preux’s opinion. Rousseau’s political writings suggest a somewhat more complex and qualified view of civil economy. See, e.g., Nelson Lund, “Rousseau and Direct Democracy (with a Note on the Supreme Court’s Term Limits Decision),” Journal of Contemporary Legal Issues 13 (2004): 459-510.
We might call the philosophy of Clarens domestic hedonism rightly understood. If the attractive picture in *The New Heloise* were to draw the imitative efforts of some affluent Europeans, it is easy to imagine real improvements in their lives, and in the lives of their servants. If that was Rousseau’s intention, the plethora of practical and concrete details with which the picture is filled would seem to be a necessary complement to the pleasures it evokes. I have given only a few examples of these details, and readers bent on making use of them would not be spared from challenges in adapting the Wolmars’ model to their own circumstances. But they are given a great deal more than platitudes, abstract theories, and pretty pictures.

**Religion**

Clarens looks like a perfectly happy community, and Wolmar appears perfectly content with his life there. Julie, however, is not. In order to see why, let us return to the day of her wedding.

In a long letter to St. Preux afterward, Julie describes the history of their affair as she now sees it. Reprising what we heard many times before, Julie says that her fall was made possible by St. Preux’s noble devotion both to her and to elevated ideas drawn from the authors to whom he introduced her. In the early letters, these authors seemed to be primarily ancient pagans and Italian love poets.82 This calls attention to something that was missing in their early struggles with their erotic attraction to each other. They never spoke of seeking assistance from the teachings of religion, or mentioned that fornication is considered a sin by their church. Now we get an explanation. St. Preux had “nourished [Julie’s] mind with the great ideas of religion,” but in such a way that they believed that they were lifting themselves toward the Supreme Being through their own efforts.83 “[W]e said to ourselves, while deploring our weaknesses:

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82 To be fair, Julie was apparently introduced to Italian poetry by her late brother before she encountered St. Preux. Book I, Letter 52, *O.C.* II, p. 143.

at least he sees the bottom of our hearts, and we were more tranquil because of it.\textsuperscript{84}

Upon entering the church on her wedding day, still completely in love with St. Preux and apparently still hoping somehow to continue their affair, her soul is suddenly terrified in that solemn setting. She is then struck by the sight of Claire and d’Orbe sitting together, and she resolves to imitate their unerotic marriage. Secluding herself for a time after the ceremony, Julie now concludes that she previously “had certain maxims for believing and others for acting,” leaving her “devout in Church and a philosopher at home.”\textsuperscript{85} As this and other formulations suggest, St. Preux and Julie had substituted the voices of reason and their inner feelings for the teachings of the faith in which they had been reared.

Without referring to those teachings, Julie now concludes that her conscience dictates that she replace St. Preux with Wolmar in her heart, and through this recognition she feels herself reborn and at the beginning of a new life.\textsuperscript{86} Some of the reasons offered by her reoriented conscience have to do with the importance of marriage in maintaining a civil society, but she places those reasons in the larger context of God’s will. She now concludes that only the Eternal Being “gives a purpose to justice, a basis to virtue, a value to this short life spent pleasing him . . . . and even if the immense Being with which [a heart penetrated by these truths] occupies itself did not exist, it would still be good for [such a heart] to ceaselessly occupy itself with them in order to be the master of itself, stronger, happier, and wiser.”\textsuperscript{87} Much of the rest of the letter is an attack on the “philosophers” who counsel that adultery is harmless so long as it goes undetected, and the tone suggests that she is trying to persuade St. Preux to reorient his conscience as she has hers.

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., p. 357.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., p. 355.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., pp. 358-59.
This letter comes barely half way through the novel, and all that follows is connected with Julie’s effort to replace St. Preux with Wolmar and God. Julie, we eventually learn, does everything in her power to find happiness at Clarens. She finds ways to enjoy everything about her — her husband and children, her friends and servants, the beauties of the setting, and the work required to keep this wonderful community humming. St. Preux notes that Julie would be miserable in a country with an oppressive political system, and Julie herself reflects on how blessed she was by fortune or providence. Book V, Letter 2, O.C. II, p. 532; Book VI, Letter 11, O.C. II, pp. 723-24.

She is also a shrewd hedonist. Clarens, for example, has a special garden and a private family dining room, sparingly used, that have been artfully designed to provide secluded and especially pleasant respites from the ordinary bustle of life on the estate. Even in the carnal matter of eating, which she loves, Julie rations the consumption of her favorite foods (such as coffee) with the sole purpose of increasing the total amount of pleasure that she can extract from them.

St. Preux accounts “with precision” for the happiness of the Wolmar household by saying that “there they know how to live.” It bears emphasis that this is the knowledge of living in this world, and pursuing the pleasures of this world. Both of the Wolmars do many things that are good for other people, but Wolmar stresses that doing such things is to his economic advantage, as in paying good servants more than they would be paid by other masters. For her part, Julie stresses the pleasure she takes in doing good deeds. Life at Clarens is assigned no purpose beyond the happiness of those who own and manage it.

Julie still has two sources of dissatisfaction, and they are closely related. First, having become devout, she finds that she does not know how to love God because she does not know how to have direct contact with him. “I find myself in a sort of dejection, and if I

88 St. Preux notes that Julie would be miserable in a country with an oppressive political system, and Julie herself reflects on how blessed she was by fortune or providence. Book V, Letter 2, O.C. II, p. 532; Book VI, Letter 11, O.C. II, pp. 723-24.


dared judge others by myself, I would fear that the ecstasies of mystics come less from a full heart than an empty brain. . . . unable to contemplate [divine majesty] in its essence, I contemplate it at least in its works, I love it in its blessings; but in whatever manner I get myself there, instead of the pure love it demands, I have only a self-interested gratitude to offer it.”

Second, she is horrified by Wolmar’s inability to share her devotion. She expects a completely happy afterlife, but she also expects that this will be denied to her husband. Even here on earth, where the great harmony of beings speaks of God with a voice so sweet, Wolmar “perceives nothing but an eternal silence.”

Religion, which is the source of this estrangement from Wolmar and of her fears for his fate, also gives her strength to bear the suffering they cause her. But the suffering is there.

Julie’s heart, or her hungry desire, drives her toward God. Her reason recognizes that she cannot reach him in this life, which is why she suspects that mystical ecstasy requires an empty brain. The resulting erotic tension is persistent but it is not debilitating, as her love for St. Preux so often was. Her turn toward religion was prompted by a desire to imitate Claire’s unerotic marriage, and she seems quite content in her own unerotic relationship with Wolmar, except for the fact that he cannot share her religious eroticism. For all her success in mastering the knowledge of how to live in this world with Wolmar, Julie is deeply uneasy.

After St. Preux’s return to Clarens, and the cure he undergoes with Wolmar’s help, he believes that he can find happiness in this world. Indeed, he thinks that he has found it in his chaste new life with Julie and her family. He no longer experiences the violent love of the past, except when he is outside Julie’s presence and thus not so easily reminded by her impeccable behavior that she is now

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Madame de Wolmar.\textsuperscript{93} St. Preux is also less troubled by religion than Julie. He shares her belief in God, and in nature’s evidence of God’s work. But they have one disagreement, concerning Julie’s insistence that prayer is a necessary part of her religion.

According to the man whom Claire and Julie have often referred to (frequently with gentle mockery) as “the philosopher,” prayer should be unnecessary because God must have given us the ability to see what we should do and believe, and to act accordingly. In moderation, prayer may be a useful tool for reminding oneself of those beliefs and duties, but it risks becoming a substitute for effort and self discipline. Julie’s lengthy reply acknowledges the risk, and expresses the expectation that her friends will keep her from falling into this error. She dismisses the significance of the theological question by saying that it makes no difference whether prayer causes God to help her or helps her to help herself. She cannot know which it is, and she doesn’t care so long as she gets the assistance she seeks.\textsuperscript{94}

Here near the end of the novel, Julie claims to have finally solved the problem of suffering amid so many pleasures and reasons to be happy. Prayer, in which she indulges only as an occasional “recreation” rather than as an obsessive vocation, enables her to feel some direct contact with God that goes beyond the evidence of his existence in the objects of the senses. These brief interludes bring her comfort and the strength to return to daily life with more cheer and concentration on its pleasures. During the months since St. Preux’s return to Clarens, he and Edward have persuaded Julie that her husband cannot be damned by God for his lack of religious belief. Because Wolmar lives exactly as her own religious beliefs counsel men to live, even to the extent of desiring to share her beliefs, it is impossible that God would punish him for his inability to see what God has left him unable to see.


\textsuperscript{94} Book V, Letter 8, \textit{O.C. II}, p. 699.
Julie still wishes to convert Wolmar, but now it is not in order to save his immortal soul. Instead, she wants to give him what she believes is indispensable for happiness in this life, and she means to do it by making herself an example of what Christianity can accomplish. She has thus taken up the same project that Wolmar adopted for himself: to bring happiness to one’s spouse.

Early in the letter that contains these new revelations, Julie describes a scene in the private dining room. Surrounded by her father, husband, children, Claire, Edward, one favorite servant, and St. Preux, she feels that she has nothing left to desire. “I live at once in all those I love, I am sated with happiness and life; O death, come when you wish! I have no more fear of you, I have lived, I have anticipated you, I have no new sentiments to experience, you have nothing more to steal from me.”95 This rather cheery formulation is followed a few pages later by a fairly long passage in which she contends that human happiness is a kind of self contradiction: “One enjoys less what one obtains than what one hopes for, and one is happy only before being happy.”96 Since her marriage, and since St. Preux’s return, this paradox has become acutely personal:

I see around me only grounds for contentment, and I am not content. A secret languor insinuates itself into the bottom of my heart; I feel it empty and swollen, as you used to say of yours; my attachment for all those who are dear to me does not suffice to occupy it, it retains some useless strength with which it knows not what to do. This sorrow is bizarre I concede; but it is not less

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96 Book VI, Letter 8, O.C. II, p. 693. In an early letter, written after she and St. Preux have exchanged their declarations of love and before their first kiss, Julie professes herself perfectly happy, but she does not expect it to last. The future she foresees offers either the agony of separation or a marriage to St. Preux in which she fears whether “the excess of happiness might not soon be its ruin.” Book I, Letter 9, O.C. II, p. 51.
real. My friend, I am too happy; happiness wearies me.  

Julie’s new project, converting Wolmar to Christianity for the sake of his happiness on this earth, will apparently require more drastic measures than she has employed so far. Nor is this the only project she has in view. Notwithstanding St. Preux’s firm resolution not to marry Claire, which was supported by seemingly conclusive reasons in the letter to which she is replying, Julie tells him that she has not given up on her plan to see them joined.

Shortly after writing this letter, Julie leaps into the cold lake to save her son, and contracts the illness from which she will die. Wolmar’s detailed description of her final days emphasizes her calmness in the face of death and her solicitous concern for all those around her. As his own fear that she is seeking to escape him confirms, much of her behavior also suggests that she welcomes death and may even be deliberately seeking to succumb.

Beyond this, Julie’s final days offer the picture of a secular Jesus, complete with echoes of Christ’s words and a wildfire rumor that she has miraculously revived after having been pronounced dead. One striking example comes in her final interview with her pastor, who knows her well and is aware that she has had some views at variance with the doctrines of her church. Consistent with his office, he urges her now to embrace all those doctrines. What follows is an eloquent sermon in which Julie emphasizes that any theological errors she has committed will be forgiven by God. In her suffering, she lacks the strength to reconsider conclusions to which

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97 Book VI, Letter 8, O.C. II, p. 694. At the end of this passage Rousseau the Editor drops a note in which he says, “What Julie! also some contradictions! Ah! I rather fear, devout charmer, that you are not, any longer, very much in accord with yourself! Besides, I confess that this letter looks to me like the swan’s song.”


99 A different and in some ways more important symbolism may lie in a resemblance between the circumstances of her death and those of Socrates. For further discussion, see Note C at the end of this paper.
she had given much thought when her reason was sound and vigorous. Adopting new beliefs in the face of death and in submission to authority would be an insult and a betrayal. At the end, the pastor himself is converted: “I expected to instruct you, and it is you who instruct me. I have nothing more to say to you. You have the true faith, which makes one love God. Take with you this precious repose of a good conscience, it will not deceive you; I have seen many Christians in your state, I have only found it in you alone.”

Transformations

For all his frequently hyperbolic praise of Julie, St. Preux is not far off when he says that Julie’s life is “a unique example, which few women will want to imitate, but which they will love despite themselves.” In order to guess what effects Rousseau might reasonably have hoped to have on the many readers who must have loved Julie during the years when the novel was popular, it is helpful to focus on the effects that Julie hoped to have in death on those who had loved her in life.

She could very reasonably have expected Wolmar and St. Preux to raise her sons according to the principles she had already been
following. Those principles closely resemble the ones that Rousseau would soon set forth in much more detail, and in his own name, in the *Emile*. Apart from the substantive similarity, there is a striking plot parallel between the two books. In the *Emile*, a fictional Rousseau takes on the role of tutor at a young age out of friendship for Emile's father. But the reader is given no reason to believe that a man with the talents that the fictional tutor displays would willingly devote two decades in the prime of his life to educating one boy of an undistinguished nature. In *The New Heloise*, it is Wolmar who conceives the project of entrusting the education of his sons to St. Preux, and St. Preux has come to regard Wolmar as a friend as well as a benefactor. It is Wolmar, however, not St. Preux, who exhibits the extraordinary intellectual gifts of Emile's tutor, and St. Preux seems capable only of reducing Wolmar's thoughts to a more systematic written form.\textsuperscript{102}

We are compelled, I think, to assume that Wolmar will continue to be the indispensable guide who will teach St. Preux how to educate his sons all the way to adulthood. *The New Heloise* thus provides a more plausible explanation than the *Emile* for the execution of a great educational undertaking. Wolmar will provide the theory, and St. Preux will do the work. Most importantly, this division of labor is sanctioned by Julie’s wishes, and made possible and desirable by the love that she has inspired in both men. If you can believe in such love, you might be able to believe that a Rousseauan natural education could actually be undertaken.

Claire, we recall, has a daughter whose upbringing she wished to entrust to Julie. During her final illness, Julie explains to Claire the principles on which a girl should be educated. We are not told anything about these principles except that they differ from those applicable to boys. In the *Emile*, of course, we learn what Rousseau’s principles of female education are and how they differ from those used in educating Emile. One striking formal difference is that the fictional girl who is raised to make a suitable mate for Emile is

\textsuperscript{102} See, e.g., Book V, Letter 8, O.C. II, p. 612.
educated by her parents, not by a tutor. The mother has the leading role, but her parents together offer the model for the kind of life she is led to desire. This raises some questions. Can Claire, who considered herself an incompetent mother, now raise her daughter without assistance, after having been given the theory of female education by Julie? Or does the daughter require a father who is married to her mother?

Notwithstanding Claire’s firm resolution in the novel’s final letter to reject any suggestion of a marriage to St. Preux, I think we are allowed to suspect that she may change her mind. Her whole life has been shaped by the impossibility of maintaining an exclusive relationship with Julie. Claire herself had been willing to marry D’Orbe, and had initially been open to Julie’s proposal that she marry St. Preux. Julie had emphasized that it is wrong to stubbornly adhere to vows of celibacy when circumstances change. And now they certainly have changed.

First, Julie is dead. This dissolves Julie’s tie to St. Preux. It also prevents Claire from maintaining her friendship with Julie, and perhaps also the friendship with St. Preux that derived from her relationship with Julie. Second, Julie’s death has imposed on Claire the duty to reassume responsibility for her daughter’s upbringing. If, as Claire believes, her daughter’s appropriate “tutor” is gone, and she herself is naturally unfit to raise the girl well, she is going to need a substitute for Julie. The most reasonable substitute is an adoptive

103 See, e.g., Emile, O.C. IV, pp. 739, 754-58.


105 A subtle hint at the direction Claire’s thinking may take is provided by an incident shortly after Julie’s death. Wolmar is worried that she is not eating, and even more worried when she appears in the dining room but sits in a chair away from the table. Suspecting the cause for this caprice, he has a setting laid out at
father, and St. Preux is the only plausible choice. 106

While Julie was alive, his refusal to consider marrying Claire made perfect sense. The nature of their relationship had always revolved around the love they each had for Julie. This three-way friendship would have been radically altered, almost certainly for the worse, if St. Preux had taken on the obligation to love Claire as his wife. St. Preux himself thought that the insuperable obstacle was his inability to love Claire as he had loved Julie. But Claire’s final letter does not say that it is St. Preux’s love for Julie that continues to make him ineligible for marriage. It is rather his having been loved by Julie. She goes on to say that she will never marry anyone else either, a resolution that must therefore have a different source than Julie’s love for St. Preux. Claire’s vow of celibacy does not quite add up, except as a violent response to the trauma of Julie’s death.

Perhaps Claire will soon die of grief, as her last letter suggests she will. That same letter, however, also contemplates that she and St. Preux will devote themselves to carrying out their duty to care for Julie’s immediate family. If Claire survives her grief, could she simply ignore Julie’s final wish if she sees that her independent duty to her

Julie’s usual place. Claire now allows herself to be led to the table, where she is careful to take her place without crowding the phantom diner. As she is about to start eating, however, she asks why there is a setting at an unoccupied place, and promptly leaves the room. The next day, Wolmar dresses her daughter in Julie’s style of clothing and seats the child in Julie’s usual place. Claire seems to understand the point, and when her daughter accurately mimicks Julie’s manner of speech, Claire bursts out laughing and begins to eat with gusto. This is not quite a cure, however, because Claire keeps eating past the point that is healthy after such a prolonged fast, and has to be restrained before she makes herself sick. Book VI, Letter 11, O.C. II, pp. 738-40. This scene suggests that her daughter can help her recognize that she must begin attending to her own needs. It also suggests that doing so in a moderate and healthy way will be difficult, though perhaps not impossible, and that it will require assistance.

106 When St. Preux first spent time with Claire and her daughter, he perceived the same shortcomings in Claire’s maternal behavior that Julie had observed. And, like Julie, he was quick to point them out. Book IV, Letter 9, O.C. II, p. 438.
own daughter requires that the child have a father? And would she then not also conclude that the truly dishonorable course for St. Preux would be to pretend that either of them would be false to their feelings for Julie in marrying each other?

If this analysis is correct, it is Claire rather than Julie whom *The New Heloise* offers as a model to women living in the cultures where Rousseau hoped to find an audience. Claire has erotic longings that she knows cannot be fulfilled, involving both Julie and the St. Preux who fell in love with Julie rather than with her. She also has erotic longings for the living St. Preux, whom she expects to return from Italy. Even if he can never love her as he loved Julie, neither can she love him as she loved Julie.

It is not impossible to imagine that Claire and St. Preux could learn the hedonistic philosophy of domesticity that Wolmar and Julie had adopted at Clarens. And perhaps they could practice that philosophy without seeking a cure for the love that first brought them together. In this way they differ from Julie herself, and their new situation could be a gift that Julie has given them with her death.

If Rousseau hoped that his readers would want Claire to find her way through such reasonings, he imposed on them the need to think it through for themselves. Caring about Claire’s fate could stimulate the reader’s thoughts, but anyone who reasoned as I have suggested would not be likely to think there are no implications outside the novel. If such thoughts were to reverberate in the lives of some readers of *The New Heloise*, Julie might have her most important effects.

**Rousseau’s Audiences**

Rousseau’s novel probably enjoyed its greatest popularity among women, which might seem easily explained. *The New Heloise* is a tear jerker, and who but women go in for that sort of thing? The book is also a vivid portrayal of romantic love involving a woman more notable for her inner beauty than for ravishing good looks. Atop this obvious appeal to the fantasies of a wide range of readers, we
have a heroine who thoroughly dominates everyone around her, while remaining supremely feminine. What more could the ladies want?

Even a casual glance at the tastes of our own time would seem to confirm this diagnosis of the novel’s success. There is, however, one discordant note. Some of the most important women among whom Rousseau’s work was popular, those of Parisian high society, were also targets of stinging criticism within the novel. One of these ladies noted the paradox, and resolved it by saying that other women “praise [Rousseau] with enthusiasm, although no Author treats them with less respect. . . . he has mentioned them with contempt, but with an air of passion, and passion excuses everything.”

As plausible as they sound, neither the explanation of the novel’s popularity nor the resolution of the paradox seems quite right. The critique of Parisian women comes after St. Preux has been sent away from Vevey in response to Baron d’Etange’s explosive rejection of the proposal that a commoner marry his daughter. By this point in the book, readers who can do so have fallen in love with Julie, and have allowed her tutor to follow her into their hearts. In this context, we learn that Edward has taken St. Preux to Paris, and introduced him to high society.

Julie’s tutor writes back to her with a characteristically Rousseauan description of the falseness and superficiality of social life in this world, to which she responds skeptically. Julie likes what she knows about France, including its hospitality to foreigners like St. Preux, and she suspects him of hastiness and lack of generosity. She also pointedly notes that St. Preux had neglected to say anything about the famous women of Paris. St. Preux has thus been subtly warned that Julie wants the whole truth about these women, not just

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an analysis of their shortcomings or slanted comments emphasizing their inferiority to her.

St. Preux rises to the challenge, beginning with an extended and withering description of the way of life he has observed. Fashion rules all, but fashion is not merely ridiculous. It has an ugly underlying logic that he relentlessly exposes. The ladies of the highest classes, for example, want to set the styles rather than follow them. They do not go in for lavish costumes as in other countries, in part because they might easily be matched by the wealthy bourgeoisie. In fact, these arrivistes do imitate whatever comes into vogue at Court, which presents a problem for women who want to flaunt their social superiority. Clever solution: the upper classes opt for low necklines, heavy makeup, and a shameless demeanor. Women who are not cocooned in the aristocratic milieu, and must sometimes encounter the public, would find it dangerous to adopt such a provocative pose. “So it is that ceasing to be women, for fear of being indistinguishable from other women, they prefer their rank to their sex, and imitate whores, so as not be imitated.”

In terms familiar from the Letter to D’Alembert, though with more detail, St. Preux emphasizes that these women avoid the company of their own sex, and seek instead to surround themselves with male courtiers. Not surprisingly, it appears that these women are sexually promiscuous.

All that I could put together [from what I was told] is that for most women the lover is like one of the house servants: if he does not do his duty, one dismisses him and takes on another; if he finds something better elsewhere or wearies of the job, he quits and one takes on another. It is said that some are capricious enough even to try out the master of the house, for after all, he is still a kind of man. This whim does not last; when it is

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over one chases him away and one takes on another, or if he is obstinate, one keeps him on and one takes on another.\textsuperscript{109}

Even if this tableau is exaggerated — and St. Preux obviously does not perform field experiments — it seems clear that a reputation for living such a life is prized. The reader is left to infer that deserving such a reputation would not add much disgrace to desiring it, and that it might be even more pathetic to want the reputation without wanting to deserve it.

That point comes out indirectly in the sequel. St. Preux goes on to relate how he discovered that the shocking spectacle of these society women is not the whole story, or its most important part. First, he tells about a stay in the country to which he and some other newly arrived provincials were invited by a group of Parisian ladies. At first it appeared that the purpose of the trip was for the women to amuse themselves by mocking and toying with some country bumpkins. But when the fellows proved too insensitive to be embarrassed, let alone capable of responding with amusing repartee, the women finally gave up. Reduced to acting naturally, they proved to be intelligent and sensible conversationalists. “I deplored, in judging the women of this country better, the fact that so many amiable persons lacked reason only because they did not want to have any.”\textsuperscript{110}

Nor was this all. During the trip, the young hostess sometimes secreted herself to respond when correspondence was delivered. St. Preux at first assumed that these disappearances were occasioned by some tawdry affair she was conducting. It turned out, however, that in fact the lady was the target of petitions from peasants in the neighborhood who had learned of her willingness to serve as their protector from misfortune and injustice.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., p. 272.

Astonished by the revelations on this trip, St. Preux began looking more carefully at these bizarre and unnatural women. What he found, he says, is that their repulsive poses are the means by which they rule the accommodating men around them. In an implicit echo of St. Preux’s comment about Parisian women mimicking the appearance of prostitutes, he notes that the whole merry charade is characterized even by frankness and an absence of self-deception: “[I]t is no less essential in French gallantry to scorn women than to serve them. This scorn is a kind of prerogative that impresses them; it is a testimony that one has lived with them enough to know them. Anyone who respected them would be a novice in their eyes, a paladin, a man who has known women only in Novels. They judge themselves with so much equity that to honor them would make one unworthy of pleasing them.”

Underneath their masks, however, St. Preux finds them more interesting. Put them in situations where sexual posturing is not expected or efficacious and they display considerable reason, humanity, and good judgment, and even a capacity for genuine friendship. “In a word, if they displease me in all that characterizes their sex which they have disfigured, I esteem them for relations with ours that do us honor, and I find that they make a hundred times more men of merit than amiable women.” St. Preux has nothing nearly this good to say about the men who serve them.

Rousseau the Editor adds a note at the end of this letter, in which he doubts that such women will be pleased at being granted qualities they scorn while being denied the only ones they consider important. Might such a comment not be expected to provoke intelligent readers to resist confirming such doubts? In this same

111 Ibid., O.C. II, p. 276.

112 Ibid., O.C. II, p. 278.

113 The targets of St. Preux’s observations, male and female alike, might be cut more sharply by Julie’s subsequent response, in which she chides him for wasting his intelligence and time with meeting and thinking about such people, some of whom on a lark would later lure him unawares into a brothel. Book II,
letter, moreover, St. Preux condemns literature that portrays French women as they affect to be, and suggests that “Novels are perhaps the last source of instruction remaining to be given to a people so corrupt that every other is useless to it.”114 In what might serve as an apt description of The New Heloise itself, St. Preux goes on to wish that the composition of such books would be undertaken only by “authors who would not be above the frailties of humanity, who would not at once show virtue in Heaven beyond the reach of men, but make them love it by depicting it first as less austere, and then from the bosom of vice know how to lead them imperceptibly to it.”115 In the French original, as in this English translation, the reference to men can be understood to include women. What it cannot possibly refer to is women alone.

As this passage suggests, the novel should not be without a male model. I believe this model is a St. Preux who returns to Clarens and marries Claire.116 A man who read this novel all the way to the end, without helplessly snickering or being bored to tears, might well resemble St. Preux in several ways. He could be bookish and romantic, an intellectual who craves more than erudition. His intellectual eros and his sexual longings may have been hard to disentangle. Perhaps he had already been infatuated with someone

Letter 27. But readers who could be wounded by Julie’s disdain must already have begun to feel that they deserve it.


115 Ibid.

116 Even more so than Julie, Wolmar is a freak of nature. A normal reader would easily see the impossibility of becoming like him, even in the unlikely event that one thought it would be desirable to do so. Another possible model is the manly Edward Bomston, who resolves in the end to relinquish his power in the House of Lords, to live outside his homeland, and to adopt a life of celibacy. Rousseau deliberately chose not to develop this character as fully as he might have. See “The Loves of Milord Edward Bomston,” O.C. II, pp. 749-60 (suppressed excerpt originally written for inclusion in the New Heloise). Whatever kind of alternative might be offered by Edward, Rousseau decided to keep the spotlight focused much more intensely on St. Preux.
unattainable. Such a reader could easily be or become what we now call a public intellectual: articulate and well informed, ambitious to persuade others to his view of things, concerned to make the world a better place, but without the talents and inclinations that lead to politically active lives or to the life of true philosophy. This is a type that was already becoming significant through the French Enlightenment, and it is a type that is even more influential in our own time.

The end of the novel must have left such a reader intensely curious about St. Preux’s response to Julie’s death. After all that he has survived, it is hard to believe that he would kill himself or die of grief. Notwithstanding his vacillations and endless outpourings of self pity, he has always managed to fulfill what he saw as his duties, including his duties of obedience to Julie. St. Preux would have to feel an obligation to return to Clarens and serve as tutor to her sons and adopted daughter. But would he also feel obliged to marry Claire?

I believe he would, but I also think that Claire would have to take the lead. Before Julie’s death, St. Preux had two main reasons for rejecting the notion of marrying Claire. First, Julie had always been the cause and central element in the friendship between himself and Claire. Marriage with Claire would necessarily draw both of them away from Julie by setting up a new and independent relationship with each other. This is something that St. Preux did not want, and might not have been able to tolerate. Second, he knew he could never love Claire as he did Julie, and he saw only misery for Claire in having a husband whose heart belonged to someone else.117 Julie’s

117 When Julie first proposed to St. Preux that he consider marriage to Claire, she placed an important qualification on her suggestion: “She loves like Julie, she must be loved like her. . . you would want no part of a happiness that would come at the cost of hers; let your heart be worthy of her, or let it never be offered to her.” Book VI, Letter 6, O.C. II, p. 671. Because St. Preux responded that he could not love Claire in this way, it is striking that Julie does not abandon her plan to see them wed. Whether it was part of a design or not, Julie’s death is perhaps the only thing that would make it possible to imagine that an obstacle considered decisive by Julie and St. Preux alike could be removed.
death and final wishes remove nearly all the force from the first objection. Claire can remove the second objection, but St. Preux cannot. If Claire can overcome her unreasonable belief that having been loved by Julie disqualifies St. Preux from honorably marrying Claire, St. Preux’s second objection is also removed.

St. Preux has always put Julie’s wishes ahead of his own desires, except when he thought that doing so would be dishonorable. Julie’s final wish is that he marry Claire, and the only real obstacle is Claire’s feeling that he would dishonor Julie by marrying her. Claire can remove that obstacle if she decides that her duty to her daughter requires her to accept a husband in whose heart she will always have second place. If she can do that, as I think she might, St. Preux should be capable of imitating Wolmar at least to the extent of taking a wife whose own heart could never belong entirely to him.

If I am right in suggesting that reflective readers are invited to think seriously about the likely future conduct of Claire and St. Preux, Julie’s seductive story is more than the honeyed lip on a cup of medicinal discussions of such matters as marriage, household management, and religion. Different readers, of course, will find their reflections taken in different directions, and the most intellectually erotic readers may find themselves carried to places that this novel does not insistently invite them to explore. But any reader who can love Julie could hardly come away without a heightened appreciation for the beauties and pleasures of domestic life, and for the challenge of finding them.

II. Guardian Politics in The Deer Hunter

Universal Pictures’ The Deer Hunter is not about the Vietnam war. The film makes no statement about the justice or prudence of our participation in that conflict. Instead, it reminds us that most Americans — soldiers and civilians alike — gave little thought to the

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great questions of foreign policy raised at the time. And it dares to suggest that they are not to be despised for that.

This seeming indifference to large issues of political morality probably accounts for much of the hostility that critics expressed toward the film when it was released. But if we refuse either to disregard this indifference or to be prejudiced by it, we can find our way through the film’s deeper exploration of the grounds of political morality.

Though The Deer Hunter is set in an era that viewers in 1978 all remembered vividly, we see in it almost nothing of what that era is most famous for. The film begins by focusing on three young Americans as they prepare to serve in the Army during the late 1960s. It shows a few startling scenes from their experiences in Vietnam, and examines the aftermath of their service. But the fall of Saigon is the only historic event that plays a part in the film. No politicians appear or are mentioned, we hear nothing of the anti-war protests or other civil disturbances of the time, and the film’s notorious Russian roulette sequences have no known basis in fact. The Deer Hunter makes us think about politics and war and our country. But because it addresses these issues only indirectly, and because of its odd juxtaposition of wrenching violence and unfashionable sentiment, the film left many early viewers shocked and a little disoriented.

The film’s protagonist, the deer hunter, is named for the Archangel Michael, leader of the army of heaven, who is also a healing angel and takes the souls of the dead with the Guardian Angel. As we shall see, this deer hunter’s name suits him well.

At many points in the film, Michael reminds us of a typically American hero, who is perhaps most familiar from films like

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119 Those who did not live through this period of our history may not be aware that significant numbers of the most privileged Americans expressed considerable hostility toward the servicemen who fought the war at the direction of our civilian leaders.
Casablanca. The everyday manners of this figure are cynical, independent, and somewhat disreputable. In fact, as we learn, he has his own moral principles and is prepared in extraordinary circumstances to sacrifice his own pursuits for the common good. Reluctant to become the hero of others, he always becomes the guardian of decent people when they truly need him. As in Casablanca, this character is often presented in his maturity, where he provokes admiration and respect. The Deer Hunter is unusual because it examines the difficulties of his genesis, and thus brings a special clarity to the complexities of his relations with the people who rely on his virtues.

When we first meet Michael, we are confronted with a natural leader. He is more talented than those around him, and more reckless. But the skill and daring with which he drives his magnificent ’59 Coupe de Ville show us that his talents and his inclinations have few outlets better than those he can find at the wheel of his automobile. He lives in a rather ordinary working-class community in Clairton, Pennsylvania, where most of the men work in the steel mills, and most of the women stay in the background.

The mills themselves appear as a kind of earthly hell. The flames, the roaring noise, and the men’s protective garments convey a little of the sense of modern warfare. But while war is the true earthly hell, life in the mills is routine, depressing, and without the fascination that real violence and sudden death can bring. In the background, the steeple of the Russian Orthodox Church soars above the residential part of town with cool, distant grace. Early in the film, we enter the church to watch a wedding that is truly majestic in its setting and forms, but the magnificence of the ceremony appears slightly comic because religion is so small a part of the lives of the participants. The bride is pregnant, the bridegroom’s mother is distraught, the priest is a cipher. Michael himself is openly amused by the rituals of piety, and he appears truly interested only in the maid of honor, Linda, who is also his best friend’s girl.

Young and restless, Michael is eager to escape the suffocating life that Clairton and the mills impose. But he lacks the licentious
and childish impatience for which so many of his contemporaries of
the 1960s are still remembered. In the past he has lived for his
occasional hunting trips to the mountains, and now he has enlisted
in the Army. He wants adventure and challenge, but he betrays no
desire to rebel against Clairton or to cut his ties with the town. The
Army promises him a respectable way out of his dreary and grimy
home.

Michael’s maintenance of his ties with Clairton is emphasized
by the fact that two of his friends have enlisted with him for the war.
Like him, they seem motivated by restlessness. This desire for
adventure is a private passion, and to pursue it is to risk the
protection and supports that we find in social life. These men hope to
reduce that risk by leaving Clairton together and maintaining their
friendship in the Army. In this they are doing nothing unusual or
hard to explain. But they encounter unforeseen troubles in the war,
and Michael’s response to these troubles has a significance beyond
any issues specific to the war in Vietnam.

Michael in Clairton

The film opens on the wedding day of Stevie, one of the
enlistees. As they are leaving the mills that morning, Michael
proposes that he and his friends go on one last deer hunt before the
departure for Vietnam, and he gives an odd reason for the proposal.
Upon noticing an atmospheric phenomenon in which a kind of halo
appears around the sun, he says: “Holy shit! You know what that is?
Those are sun dogs... It means a blessing on the hunter sent by the
Great Wolf to his children... It’s an old Indian thing.” This casual
paganism is the first sign of how very different Michael is from those
around him.

That afternoon, Michael talks about the hunt with his
roommate, Nick. Nick has also enlisted in the Army, and he appears
a little scandalized that they are discussing the hunt just before
Stevie’s wedding. In the course of the conversation, Michael makes an
attempt to state who he is. He firmly asserts his preference for the
mountains over the town, and he vehemently asserts the importance of killing a deer with one shot. According to Michael, this is the right way to take a deer, and the failure to accept the principle indicates a lack of manly stature: “Two is pussy. . . ‘One shot’ is what it’s all about. A deer has to be taken with one shot. I try to tell people that, but they don’t listen.” Nick indicates that his own interest in the “one shot” ethic has declined and that he has grown fonder of the natural beauties of the mountains. Nevertheless, Michael insists that their other hunting companions are defective: “They’re all assholes. I mean, I love ’em, they’re great guys, but without you, I’d hunt alone. Seriously, that’s what I’d do.” Nick calls Michael a “control freak,” without explaining how Michael’s desire for control is excessive. Michael responds by saying, “I just don’t like no surprises.”

This scene foreshadows two of the major themes of the film: the ambiguity of Michael’s relationships with his friends and the question of his own principles. Quite clearly, he does think of his hunting companions as friends, but it seems that only his relationship with Nick makes his friendships with the others possible. Michael treats Nick as an equal because Nick has accepted the “one shot” ethic. And yet, Nick is apparently not content that just the two of them should hunt together, so Michael tolerates the presence of the inferior hunters for Nick’s sake. Though Michael wishes to treat Nick as his equal, Nick is less committed than Michael to the “one shot” ethic and more emotionally dependent on those who do not accept it at all. Michael seeks to overlook this difference between himself and Nick, for he apparently believes that they are or can be equals in friendship if they maintain their allegiance to a common principle. Only later do we discover how crucial the dissimilarity between them is, but we are enabled here at the beginning of the film to see that it exists.

As Michael originally states the “one shot” principle, it appears to be a statement of the right way to hunt. His commitment to it appears as a striving for excellence, here for the hunter’s excellence. His vehement statement of the principle suggests that only ignorance or self-indulgence could account for the failure to adhere to it. If this is so, Nick’s characterization of Michael as a “control freak” is misleading because it tends to confound excellence with power, self-
control with control over other living beings. Nevertheless, Michael shows that he shares Nick’s confusion when he replies: “I just don’t like no surprises.”

Michael’s description of himself is not quite right. One who dislikes surprises does not find his greatest satisfactions hunting wild game in the mountains. And one who wants to avoid surprises surely does not volunteer for hunting’s great counterpart, war. Michael may believe that he wants to do away with surprises, he may believe that he seeks power or control in the broadest sense. But if what he is truly seeking is excellence, he is a better man than he knows and so should prove able to learn. Before the film ends, Michael learns a great deal indeed.

During the subsequent hunting trip, Michael shows that his commitment to a standard of excellence is no mere private passion. A small base fellow named Stanley has forgotten to bring an essential piece of equipment, and he now expects to borrow Michael’s spare. Stanley has a long history of such irresponsibility, and Michael refuses to lend him the gear. Stanley gets out a small revolver and insults Michael’s manhood by commenting on his unaggressive behavior towards women. Michael, who happens to be holding his rifle, takes a cartridge from his pocket and very forcefully says: “Stanley, see this? This is this. This ain’t something else. This is this. From now on you’re on your own.” Michael slams the round into the chamber, and the conflict continues until Nick finally intervenes by chiding Michael for his stubbornness and giving Stanley Michael’s spare equipment. Michael angrily raises his rifle and fires into the distance. Just before the argument, Michael had noticed a deer running through the brush. No one else was watching.

“This is this” means first that weapons have purposes. They have their proper uses, for example in hunting deer, and they have their typical abuses, as Stanley’s behavior vividly illustrates. Michael must sense that this does not apply only to weapons. Perhaps he sees it most clearly in weapons because they are such temptingly versatile tools, but the aggressive way he drove his fancy Cadillac is enough to remind us that an instrument’s proper use is not always so easy to
see. Unlike most people, Michael insists on this standard of what is proper when he can discern it and seeks it when he cannot. The insistence is shown to us here at the beginning of the film. His seeking will be the spring of his later education.

Michael’s speech to Stanley has a further meaning implied in the conclusion, “From now on you’re on your own.” Those who are too ignorant or self-indulgent to confront the world as it is become irresponsible. Like Stanley, they tend to become derelict and apt to damage themselves and others. As a result, such people force others to take responsibility for them. Michael would refuse to tolerate Stanley’s negligence, but Nick interferes. To prevent the group from breaking into factions, Nick has to deflect Michael from the natural course of his principled intolerance. In frustration, Michael appears to violate his own principle by firing his rifle without a target. Were it not for his friendship with Nick, Michael might become a solitary hunter. As we shall see, it will be hard for him to become anything else.

During the film, Michael becomes larger. By the end, he would no longer insist so harshly on the “one shot” ethic and he would not make such truthful but difficult assertions as “This is this.” But though he does undergo an education, the film presents no educator. Nowhere in The Deer Hunter is there any man better than Michael or any indication that such a man could exist. His great triumph lies in his later mastery or education of himself, but the film leaves no doubt that he is superior to ordinary men from the beginning.

From the first, Michael is highly spirited. He is eager for war, sure of his strength, and remarkably capable of doing without the company of women. But in addition to this raw virtue, Michael has a drive to understand what he sees and hears. An example of this drive occurs at the wedding reception when Michael and the other enlistees, fairly drunk and full of bravado, encounter a stranger wearing the Green Beret. Michael inquires about Vietnam, Nick expresses his eagerness for danger, and Stevie echoes Nick’s sentiments. When the soldier snubs them by refusing to say anything but “Fuck it,” Michael begins repeating the formulation in different
tones of voice, as though he is trying to discover what it means: “Fuck it. . . Fuck it.” Finally, in a simultaneously challenging and curious tone, he asks: “Fuck who?” While Nick and Stevie seem surprised and worried, Michael seems almost intrigued. He is eager and indelicate enough to interrogate a veteran about his experiences, so he must have some of the illusions common to spirited men who have not seen combat. We would expect someone as combative as Michael to respond to the man’s rebuff with mere anger or perhaps with self-confident amusement. But Michael wonders about the meaning of the man’s behavior.

It is rare to find a man as self-assertive as Michael and also so ready to learn. The film offers no explanation for the cause of this superiority and so encourages us to infer that it has come about by nature. This breach of etiquette may explain some of the hostility with which the film was greeted by sophisticated critics.

Stevie, the boy who marries just before leaving for war, is the most ordinary of the three main characters. He has no great strengths or failings, no burning passions or remarkable idiosyncrasies. He is decent, but ineffectual — a natural follower and indeed a natural loser. He loves his fiancée and insists that she loves him. However sincere he may be, his hopes seem a little pathetic since he has never slept with this girl who he knows is pregnant. Stevie appears to be her dupe and perhaps also the dupe of the child’s father. Later we learn that the father is almost certainly Nick. In war, Stevie proves incompetent, unlucky, and weak. Michael repeatedly must save his life, and at least once, Michael has to take a terrible risk with his own life in order to rescue Stevie. Stevie loses an arm and both legs in the war, and even after they return to America, Michael has to carry him from the deadening comfort of the V.A. hospital and force him to rejoin the town. Time after time we are reminded that merely decent people cannot take care of themselves.

Someone might protest against the harshness of this view. But though the film does expose Stevie’s shortcomings, it leads the viewer to see a problem rather than an indictment. Stevie’s weakness comes so sharply into focus because his decency has insufficient support in
the institutions of his community. The weakness of those institutions is the great problem raised by the film’s treatment of Stevie.

The film opens with a tanker-truck rolling into Clairton at dawn, reminding us that the towns of this country are connected to one another by close ties of economic interdependence. But besides this, what signs of a national community can we find in the film? We see a football game on television and we hear popular music on jukeboxes. There is also a veterans’ organization, whose only role in the film is to provide the hall where the wedding reception is held. These shared amusements mark the people of Clairton as typically American, and they are typical, too, in their limited curiosity about the nation’s public affairs. Working people, without much schooling, they do not have much leisure or incentive to enlighten themselves about the world beyond their city. America’s political institutions encourage this insularity. With our complicated federal system and our traditions of local independence, we have long inclined toward the sort of provincialism that we see in Clairton. The fact that this narrowness so often seems benign does not imply that the nation as a whole is particularly well ordered. And recollections of the 1960s should be enough to remind us that the strength of the nation’s social fabric cannot be taken for granted.

Still, Clairton is supplying three volunteers for the government’s war. Obviously, then, the people here must feel that they belong to the nation and that they owe her their allegiance. But the United States has always been too large and too diverse and too young to draw its greatest strength from patriotic sentiment. At the wedding reception, the bandleader introduces the three young men who are leaving “to proudly serve their country.” Everyone listens in respectful silence, and afterwards they cheer. But none of the volunteers ever indicates that his enlistment has been motivated by a sense of duty or political responsibility. Patriotism lives in Clairton, but the people seem not to be formed by it any more than by discussion of the affairs of the day. And again, we can easily remind ourselves that patriotism did not exactly flourish during the 1960s in America’s more enlightened and cosmopolitan cities.
Our political tradition has seldom sought the sort of national enthusiasm to whose absence the film directs our attention. In this country, we have expected political liberty to bring the greatest possible freedom from government intrusion into our private affairs and voluntary social activities. This proud tradition of individuality and local independence has always acknowledged that direct national needs are the rightful concern of the central government, and accordingly we hear of no draft-dodging in Clairton. But the cultivation of citizens and human beings has not been regarded as the necessary or proper concern of the government, except through the local public schools. Moral education has been left largely to the church and family, and it is there that we must look for the institutional underpinnings of the decency that Stevie represents.

The looming presence of the Russian Church in Clairton reminds us that Christianity is a religion with universal claims. It addresses us from beyond all political horizons and promises to provide a moral framework that is both loftier and more solid than that provided by any merely political order. But the church in Clairton fails miserably at its first task: helping its adherents to see the world as coherent and ultimately benign. Stevie’s mother is extremely distraught about the behavior of her son, who is marrying a pregnant girl and volunteering for war. Just before the wedding she approaches her priest as he mechanically prepares the altar for the service, and tearfully appeals to him: “I do not understand, Father. I understand nothing anymore. Nothing. Can you explain? Can anyone explain?” The priest stiffly embraces her, and mumbles something that the viewer of the film cannot make out. Whatever it was, it does not appear to have been particularly compelling.

What little family life we see in The Deer Hunter is a mess. Stevie and his mother are without a common ground of discourse, so they only quarrel. Nick’s girlfriend is beaten by her drunken father. Stevie’s wife goes quietly mad while he is away in the Army. Neither Nick nor Michael seems to have any family at all. Early in the film we see Stevie instinctively reaching for the stability of family life: deprived of the psychological protection that a strong home offers, he anxiously tries to establish a family of his own. But his attempt is
doomed. He seems to believe that a ceremony is sufficient to establish a marriage, for he leaves for war a day or so after the wedding. But even without his fantastic misjudgment, the prognosis for his marriage would be very bleak. His bride’s pregnancy directs our attention to the disorder in the social institutions that surround and affect the family. A leading purpose of the institution of marriage is to fix responsibility for the care of children. When we see a man like Stevie desperately undertaking responsibility for some other man’s child, we have to conclude that the private behavior of women has broken loose from restraints that are needed in any healthy political community.

We might believe that Stevie is just being generous if we were given any indication that he had much chance of finding a more respectable wife. Since we are not, we have to see his marriage as a futile gesture against the social disintegration that began to become evident in the nation at large during the years when this story takes place. Because it points so clearly at the weaknesses of the family, church, and government, the film implies that those institutions are not likely sources of the social re-integration that is so obviously desirable. And the film does not suggest that men like Stevie are plausible agents of improvement.

Unlike Stevie, Nick is neither ineffectual nor desperate. And unlike Stevie, he is quite handsome and graceful. We have seen that he is not as emotionally self-sufficient as Michael, and neither is he as competent. Michael accomplishes feats with his car that Nick did not think possible. Nick loses to Michael at pool, and Michael takes the buck that we see them tracking together. More important, Nick is more irresponsible than his friend. We can see this most clearly in their relations with Linda, Nick’s girl.

As we observed earlier, Michael’s attention at the wedding is directed most forcefully at Linda. His face shows neither lust nor flirtation. He looks intently and thoughtfully at her, as though he is powerfully aware of some ignorance or other defect in himself. This expression comes to his face again when he sees her at the reception. To their surprise and embarrassment, Nick encourages them to
dance together. We see right afterward that Nick did this in order to free himself to pursue a sad and lonely looking girl nearby, and we see him cut short an earnest male friend in order to toy with this vulnerable girl. While Michael is with Linda, he seems uneasy with himself in a way we have not seen before — he appears caught between his attraction to her and his loyalty to Nick. He has been drinking, and just as his attraction to Linda seems about to win out, Nick interrupts them and she hurries out of the room.

Unlike Michael, Nick treats Linda carelessly, as though she is merely one of several goods that he wants but by which he does not want to be confined. After the disturbing encounter with the Green Beret, he proposes marriage to her, but when she eagerly accepts, he qualifies the proposal so severely that it becomes merely hypothetical. Disappointed, she remarks: “Anything that goes through your mind comes out of your mouth.” After the reception, Nick tells Michael of his attachment to Clairton and his fear of not being able to return there from the war. We can guess that his attitude toward Linda is similar. He wants what she offers and he fears losing her forever, but he desperately wants something more. And he senses that Michael can lead him to a better life than Clairton and Linda promise. Were it not for Michael, Nick might attempt, like Stevie, to arrange for a comfortable and regular existence. But in the presence of Michael, *even* Stevie is drawn away from Clairton to the war.

Though Nick’s behavior toward women is more obviously irresponsible than Stevie’s, Nick also senses more clearly the real difficulties of doing well. We saw before that Stevie’s decency is bound up with his weakness and blindness. Nick, on the contrary, is strongly aware of the dangers of leaving Clairton and Linda. While alone with Michael after the reception, he proclaims his love for the town and asks Michael to promise not to leave him in Vietnam. In order to permit Nick to keep his pride after such a humbling request, Michael replies with a casual formulation: but his tone of voice is quite solemn: “Hey Nicky, you got it.”

At this moment, Michael’s dilemma becomes more clear. As we know from Stanley’s insults on the hunting trip, Michael does not
pursue women in the careless way that Clairton’s customs encourage. But his reluctance to pursue Linda stems mainly from the conflicting claim of his friendship with Nick. This suggests that Michael has a normal male attraction to women, which he restrains because of competing duties or inclinations. When we recall that he would rather hunt alone than with men he disdains, it appears that he is seeking in human relationships primarily the equality that might foster sharing of the best experiences. The experiences that now seem most important to him are hunting and its great brother, war. Michael knows that his attraction to these pursuits is essentially male, and he curbs his attraction to women for the sake of those pursuits and his friendship with Nick. As his promise to Nick reveals, Michael is ready to commit himself to that friendship as firmly as one would commit oneself to marriage.

But Nick’s need to hear Michael make the promise reveals the difficulty with Michael’s implicit reasoning. Nick shows here that he is very dependent on Michael’s strength, so it is unlikely that they will prove equal in war or able truly to share its experiences. It therefore might make sense for Michael to reconsider the subordination of his interest in women. By the end of the film, he does so. But it is a mark of his character that he refuses to accept the implications of Nick’s inferiority as easily as this argument suggests that he might.

**Michael in Vietnam**

At the end of the hunting trip, the men return to a tavern that one of them owns. The hour is late, they are tired and alone with each other. The tavern owner, an overweight man who sings in the church choir and believes he is too unhealthy for military service, plays a Chopin nocturne at the piano. The music soothes them all and provides a moment of peace between the hunt and the coming trip to war. With an unforgettable rudeness, the film cuts suddenly to a deafening, fiery helicopter assault on a Vietnamese village. This transition vividly suggests the painful and exhilarating shift that soldiers experience when they truly leave civilized life by going into battle. Michael’s education begins here in Vietnam.
At the scene of the assault, we find Michael lying amid the rubble and corpses. Apparently he has been injured in a fire fight, and is just now regaining consciousness. As he comes to, he sees a solitary enemy soldier hunting for survivors. Finding some civilians hiding in a bunker, the soldier throws a grenade in among them. By chance, one woman survives and emerges with a child in her arms. As she runs from the bunker, the soldier coolly guns them down. While this is happening, Michael grabs a flamethrower and charges him. Though too late to save any of the civilians, Michael sets the killer afire. Though the soldier has just signaled to some other troops, Michael pays no attention to his own safety. Now in a frenzy, he shoots the enemy again and again, even after the monster is obviously dead. Michael’s anger and disgust seem to have taken control of his conduct.

As in the scene where he responds to Stanley’s misuse of weapons, Michael loses some of his own self-control when faced with what he finds repulsive. But here the goodness of Michael’s anger is more clear. Michael is not one of those eerie aficionados who are fascinated by the experience of war, but neither does he seek to retain the equanimity and outward dignity appropriate to most civilian situations. In this scene, Michael seems very disturbed — even slightly deranged — but the cool efficiency of the enemy soldier indicates the danger of carelessly importing moral standards from one world to another.

While Michael is engaged with the murderer, more American troops arrive by helicopter. The group includes Nick and Stevie, and they are all taken prisoner shortly thereafter. We now watch the Viet Cong torture American and South Vietnamese P.O.W.s by forcing them to play Russian roulette against each other while the captors amuse themselves by placing bets on the matches. While waiting their turns, Stevie and Nick both lose their composure. Stevie becomes hysterical and Michael tries to calm him. Nick also needs Michael’s help but he cannot speak loudly enough to ask for it. When Michael and Stevie are made to play against each other, Stevie flinches and his cowardice saves him from destroying himself, but the Viet Cong just throw him into a cage in the river to die.
Perceiving the hopelessness of allowing the games to continue, Michael conceives a bold but very dangerous scheme. He persuades Nick that they should play against each other with extra cartridges in the revolver. He hopes to find two empty chambers at the start, and then use the gun against their captors. Quite against the odds, the trick works. But Nick has to be coaxed and bullied through the game: though it is his only chance of surviving, he does not have the strength to put his life so clearly in the hands of an unfavorable chance. Michael is at least as averse to dying as Stevie or Nick, but he can play if he has to, and he can arrange an even more dangerous version for the sake of overcoming the game.

Russian roulette will become the film’s most insistent and memorable metaphor, and through it we can discover some of what Michael learns. In an obvious way, the game begins as an image of the experience of modern battle. Nearly all articulate combat veterans speak of the terrible disorientation caused by living where men die frequently, violently, and with nearly total randomness. Some men go mad, most become superstitious, and virtually all become cynical about the moral standards that regulate peacetime life. The horror of this experience seems to arise largely from the fact that other human beings are intentionally causing all this random death — and perhaps too from the soldiers’ awareness of their own active role in maintaining the hostilities that make war what it is. Russian roulette is an especially rich image because it emphasizes the participation of the victims in an activity that makes little sense in terms of their most basic self-interest. Through this metaphor, the film turns our attention away from the grand sweep of battle to the great psychological demands of combat.

Since war cannot be done away with, there have to be men who play that form of Russian roulette. The most common way to play is probably Stevie’s. Men like him can be lured or pressed into the arena, and they can be pressed and coaxed to participate up to a certain point. But once they have to face what warfare brings, they instinctively recoil and want to escape it as quickly as possible. In the terrifying moments before he has to play, Stevie screams: “I don’t belong here. . . I want to go home.” Though one’s sense of natural
justice grants his proposition and makes one wish that his desire could be satisfied, the conditions of battle usually allow very little scope for acting on such sentiments. At least in part, Stevie’s manifest unfitness for war must account for the extraordinary risks that Michael later takes for his sake. But after Stevie has been thrown into the pit, Michael orders Nick to forget about him and concentrate on the requirements of his own survival. Nick thinks that Michael is playing God, but his command has to be obeyed if Stevie himself is to have any chance of survival.

Nick seems less weak than Stevie and he has a closer friendship with Michael, so Michael chooses him to play the more difficult form of the game. In order to enable himself to go through with his plan, Michael generates a terrific, concentrated hatred towards the captors. This hatred is not pretty, but it is necessary, as we can see by contrasting it with Nick’s paralysis. Though Michael tries to bring out courage in his friend, Nick’s attention is too focused on himself to allow him either to hate or to respond calmly to the demands of the situation. Even with Michael’s encouragement, he almost fails to act. Michael’s hatred gives him the detachment from himself that is needed to perform the unnatural act required in Russian roulette.

As in the earlier combat scene, Michael’s anger is the engine of an appropriate though ugly action. Under Michael’s governance, Nick also manages to perform the necessary act, but he is obviously acting beyond his own capacities. Without Michael and the inhuman ferocity that he calls out of himself, Nick would be as helpless as Stevie. Here Michael’s spiritedness — his violent and even savage self-assertion — is irrefutably justified. It should not diminish our sense of that justification to point out that Michael’s hatred is not autonomous. His intelligence is responsible for the plan that he executes, and his savage anger is therefore directed by a superior principle. But only through his brute courage does Michael’s intelligence come to rule him. Nick too can understand what needs to be done, but only Michael’s stronger reserves of self-assertiveness and even savagery save him from falling into Nick’s confusion, self-absorption, and impotence. And lest we think that Nick is really finer or more human,
the film shows him furiously beating one of the Viet Cong corpses after the danger is past.

After their escape, the three soldiers get separated when an American helicopter tries to pick them up: Stevie falls into a river and Michael jumps off after him, leaving Nick on the chopper. Stevie’s legs are badly injured in the fall, and Michael carries him out of the jungle, leaving him with some South Vietnamese troops who have a jeep. At this point we lose sight of them both, and the film shifts to Nick’s experiences in Saigon. Several scenes take place in which Nick shows signs of intense inner disturbance — he speaks only with difficulty, weeps easily, looks twice at Linda’s picture, and imagines once that he sees Michael in a crowded bar. Finally an urbane Frenchman lures him into a house where people amuse themselves by betting on Russian roulette matches between men who play for money.

Though Nick does not see him, Michael is there watching the games. Unlike most of the other people present, Michael seems neither excited nor indifferent: his face reveals an intelligent, concentrated, absolutely serious looking. At this moment we know that he has been trying since we last saw him to understand what he has been through. As soon as he sees Nick, his concentration vanishes and he reaches toward his friend.

When Nick sees the game, he frantically interrupts it. Grabbing the revolver, he dry-fires at one of the players, dry-fires at himself, and rushes out of the building. Michael chases after, only to see the Frenchman driving Nick away in a car. With a gesture of final hopeless abandon, Nick throws a fistful of money into the air above the crowded street.

After what Nick has gone through, the sight of men taking these risks without compulsion is too much to bear. Nick’s character has always been ambiguous or undefined: in Clairton he was discontented with the goods within his reach, and yet unable to find principles or direction for himself. Like many restless men, Nick has tended to be dominated by the most fascinating influence in his
surroundings. So long as that influence was Michael, Nick might safely have looked for something better than his home town offered him. But when he faces Russian roulette without Michael’s help, Nick cannot resist its gruesome magnetism. That magnetism is founded in war’s tantalizing suggestion that nothing good can stand up in the violent onslaught of brute chance. When Nick sees Russian roulette played voluntarily in the midst of civilization, he cannot resist the implication that human life is no more than warfare, that everything is permitted, that nothing is of enduring worth.

The film later confirms this scene’s suggestion that Nick has just given himself over to a career as a Russian roulette player: from now on he will play for money and for the game itself. Like other men who become enthralled by the spirit of war, Nick will live on for awhile, but only as a kind of ghost. He becomes indifferent to his own life and his own good. He moves in our world but his eyes are open only to the incoherencies that we all naturally resist. As a human being, Nick is dead.

Unlike Nick, who is captivated by Russian roulette, Michael appears here as a student of the game. In its first use in the film, Russian roulette was a metaphor for war as experienced by ordinary men in battle. Most soldiers experience combat as something for which they are conscripted or for which they find that they have imprudently volunteered. The sight of war has its charms, but these are accessible chiefly to its observers, just as the pleasures of Russian roulette are available to the spectators who bet on the games. Seen from a distance, both follow fairly regular patterns or rules and hence have a kind of coherence along with the fascinating element of surprise. But these patterns so threaten the self-preservation of the participants that eager acceptance of life under them appears to most men in combat as prima facie evidence of insanity.

In Saigon, Michael returns to Russian roulette as a spectator, but we do not see him betting on the outcome and we see in him no love for the game he is watching. Since he has not simply turned away from the game, he must know that he may play again. Since he
betrays no desire to do so, he must also believe that playing can be justified without reference to maxims of insanity. To see war as necessary and yet not as an end in itself is easy enough for those who are not experiencing it at that moment. It is not anticipating too much to say that Michael’s special excellence is to live as a warrior without ceasing to govern himself. He differs from enthusiastic mercenaries because he does not love war. He differs from merely dutiful soldiers because he takes his bearings from himself rather than from others. We saw Michael exercising the warrior’s courage almost by nature in the first Russian roulette scene. His looks in the Saigon scene indicate how difficult it is for him to include such activity in his way of life, and the moderation he displays here enables him to appear in the film’s third and final section as the man whom justice would require to rule in Clairton.

Return to Clairton

When Michael returns to Clairton, he goes on a hunting trip with his old friends, though Stevie is too crippled to come along and Nick is missing in Vietnam. During the trip, Stanley begins stupidly threatening another man with a revolver that he seems to believe is unloaded. At the sight of this, Michael becomes very angry. He takes the pistol away, discovers that it is loaded, fires a bullet into the ceiling of the cabin, and removes the cartridges from the gun. He then chambers one round, spins the cylinder, points the gun at Stanley’s head, and pulls the trigger. The gun does not discharge.

Michael’s conduct in this third Russian roulette scene seems highly unreasonable. How could the attempt to educate a person as vile as Stanley be worth the risk of committing murder? In part, Michael’s action may be an unthinking passionate objection to Stanley’s carelessness with human life, and to that extent would seem to resemble Nick’s interruption of the game in Saigon. But what Michael does is more measured and purposeful. Unlike the players in the Saigon house, Stanley is a danger primarily to innocent people. Further, Michael is tied to most of Stanley’s potential victims, and even to Stanley himself, by some ties of friendship. And unlike Nick,
Michael does not turn the gun on himself. Above all, Michael’s act is not a *gesture*, as Nick’s is. It certainly is dramatic, but the drama points very clearly to a simple and important lesson. After Stanley survives — and the odds were quite high that he would — it is very unlikely that he will forget what Michael has taught. At least he will probably stop playing with guns, and he may even be moved to begin living in a generally more subdued and responsible way. At the end of the film, his careful treatment of Stevie’s wife suggests that he may be rising a little from his habitual petty vanity and self-absorption.

To whatever extent Stanley is improved, we can attribute it to Michael’s deliberate extra-legal coercion on the hunting trip. Michael has stepped outside the law to exercise a rule that justly belongs to him. The film implies that unless men like Michael rule, there will be no rest from the ills occasioned by the base and irresponsible. Since American institutions make little provision for such rule, private justice like Michael’s can be seen as a supplement to our officially political life. But the unlawfulness and riskiness of Michael’s open assertion of rule over Stanley remind us not to expect that such rule will ever play a powerful part in our politics. For good reason, since the dangers of trying to institute such domination are obvious. At the end of the film, we start to see Michael’s own substitute for open rule. But in order to appreciate that conclusion, we need to re-examine Michael himself.

Recall that the apparent insanity of war is most evident when one considers the threat it poses to the combatants’ self-preservation. Any justification of war requires the introduction of considerations beyond the preservation of the combatants’ lives. For *them* to accept such a justification, they have to see their self-interest in broader terms than those comprehended in self-preservation, and rarely, if ever, can their motives for fighting be quite the same as those of the military leadership or the nation as a whole. The same difficulty arises in explaining Michael’s participation in the game of Russian roulette with Stanley. From the narrow perspective of self-interest, his behavior is senseless, even demented. He has very little to fear from Stanley, and much to lose if Stanley dies by his hand. When we examine Michael’s conduct in the light of the common interest of
Stanley and his potential victims, we can see the good in what he does. But why should Michael risk himself for these others? The fact that he displays such strong anger in this scene suggests that something of his own is at stake. In order to see what that might be, we have to look once again at Michael as he is alone.

Just before the Russian roulette scene with Stanley, we watch Michael in solitary pursuit of a handsome buck. After some time, the animal stops at the edge of a clearing. Michael draws a bead on it, and we expect to see his “one shot” virtue reconfirmed. But just as he seems about to take the shot, he jerks the rifle up, and shoots over the deer. He appears agitated, and he asks in a strained voice: “Okay?” Though he seems to be talking to the deer, the question must really be addressed to himself because we then hear him answer in a long drawn-out shout: “Okay.” While the answer is being given, we do not see Michael himself but look instead at the surrounding landscape. As it sometimes happens in the mountains, the shout echoes back: “Okay.” This echo suggests that Michael finds himself in accord with nature.

Throughout the film, Michael has been a laconic man. The film’s title indicates the importance of this scene in which Michael chooses not to slay his deer, but the one word he utters offers little indication of his motive for throwing away the shot. The significance of the scene lies partly in its mystery. From this point forward, Michael’s motives are not explained to the other characters and they have to remain somewhat obscure to us, too. Fully to overcome this obscurity would require knowing all that Michael knows, and perhaps more. The film does not pretend to provide the viewer with that knowledge. But we can attempt to see why the obscurity is necessary.

If we think back to the first section of the film, we can see Michael as a kind of prisoner of his natural superiority. His dominant impulse was the masculine interest in hunting and war, and his superiority emerged in his great competence at those activities. Had he pursued his passion for the development of his masculine superiority, he might have become a solitary hunter or a mercenary soldier. Had he pursued this passion in his relations with his friends,
he would have tended to become a tyrant of one kind or another. At times his speech suggested that masculine, self-serving superiority is what he most desired: “Two is pussy. ‘One shot’ is what it’s all about . . . This is this. From now on you’re on your own.” But we never see him live as though he completely accepts his own stated principles. He is prevented from doing so by a different, and not specifically masculine, impulse: the desire for friendship, the desire to share the best activities with another human being.

Michael set aside his interest in women in order to pursue that friendship with Nick in which he hoped to share the most masculine activities. This project stopped when Nick broke under the pressure of war. One might think that this merely proves Nick’s inferiority, and that Michael should wait for friendship until he meets a man truly like himself. His failure to do so may indicate that he no longer thinks that the exercise of masculine virtue is an activity that can be shared among equals.

Is friendship then impossible for him? Michael relaxes his “one shot” ethic when he spares the deer, and he spends most of the rest of the film caring for the people of Clairton. His masculine virtue enables him to help them, but that same virtue conflicts with his decision to care for them rather than to despise or try to dominate them. The echo in the hunting scene vaguely hints that nature supports his decision, but the decision is also clearly a difficult one for him to make. And we simply do not know why he makes it. From this point forward, we must confine ourselves largely to examining the effects of Michael’s activities in his new guardian role.

When Michael puts himself in a position to kill the deer and then spares it, he enters into a peculiar relationship with the animal. While it had previously been merely a natural being, it now owes its freedom to Michael’s choice. Despite the deer’s ignorance of Michael’s responsibility for its future existence and activity, Michael now rules it in a different way than he would have by destroying it. Similarly, Michael’s rule over his Clairton friends will be much less visible to them than his direct but temporary domination over Stanley. For that reason he will be able to begin establishing a community rather than
a mere reflection of the natural hierarchy among human beings.

This change in Michael’s relation to the people of Clairton first emerges through the replacement of Nick by Linda as the link between Michael and the others. When Michael first returns to his hometown, he avoids a party at his house arranged in his honor. Linda has been living in the house, and he goes there after the others have left in the morning. When the two meet, there are moments of awkwardness, just as one would expect. During this first meeting, Linda brings out a sweater she has made for Nick, and she tries to see whether it could fit Michael. It is not the right size, but she is tearfully confident that she can alter it, which suggests that she does not fully grasp the unalterable differences between the two men. When Michael offers to escort her to the grocery store where she works, she reveals both her appreciation of his outward appearance and her inability to understand what lies below his surface: “Mike, you’re so weird. You’re always such a gentleman.” As they encounter old acquaintances on their walk, we learn that Michael has become a famous military hero in town.

Like Nick, Michael has been attracted to Linda from the start. Nick carried a picture of her to Vietnam, and we saw him look at it twice just before his breakdown. Michael carried the same picture, but we do not see him look at it until just before he returns to see her. With Nick missing and probably dead, Michael now tentatively begins to reopen his own relationship with her. Though we might have expected him to be offended by her confusion in the scene with the sweater, he soon chooses to offer a most generous and helpful interpretation of her ambivalence: “Linda, I just wanted to say how sorry I am about Nick. I know how much you love him. I know it could never be the same. . .” By paying this respect to the prior claims of the old relationship between Nick and Linda, Michael acts to preserve Linda’s sense of the worth of such claims. We know enough about Nick to know that he is not the source of whatever strength such claims might have. But Michael knows enough about the fragility of the bonds among human beings to be careful with those that exist.
While Nick and Michael were away, Linda lived in the house they had shared, apparently without responding to the male advances that she must have received in a culture like Clairton’s. Very soon after Michael’s return, in a tone tinged with some desperation, she proposes that they comfort each other by sleeping together. He seems unoffended, but only reluctantly allows her to accompany him to his motel room. The film seems to suggest that he tries to comfort her without accepting her offer of sex. Besides the problems that he must so clearly recognize in establishing intimate ties with people who cannot adequately understand him, Michael has just learned that Stevie is alive and back in the United States. Just as Michael seeks to help Linda preserve a healthy respect for her past love, he must recognize the possibility that she could undermine his loyalties to the friends who followed him to war.

After the hunting trip and the encounter with the deer, Michael returns to Linda and takes her for the first time to his own bed at home. After she falls asleep, he looks at the hunting trophies in his room and at the mills in the distance, and now, finally, he goes out to visit Stevie. In war, Michael was Stevie’s protector. But in civilian life, friendships between men require that the natural distinctions among them be obscured. This is what made his relations with other men so difficult before he went to war. Michael’s new friendship with Linda, which is based on the clear and acknowledged natural distinction between the sexes, allows him to begin taking care of Stevie in the artificial circumstances of civilized life. There is order in Michael’s relationships with the people of Clairton, an order made possible by his decision to relax his insistence on the primacy of his masculine, self-serving virtue.

When he visits Stevie in the hospital, Michael learns that Stevie’s wife has been receiving small carved elephants and large amounts of cash from Saigon. She forwards the souvenirs and money to her legless husband, maliciously enclosing it all in socks, and Michael immediately knows that Nick must still be alive. Though he does not tell Stevie or anyone else, he also knows that Nick must be getting the money by playing Russian roulette. Nick’s sudden ghostly intrusion disrupts the order of Michael’s relationships in Clairton.
Saigon is about to fall to the Communists and the city is afire with the frenzy of America's final evacuation. Bombardment by enemy artillery provides the flames that light the nights, and the harsh light of day exposes the desperate fever to escape among those who sense what the victors from the north will bring. Somewhere in this doomed city Nick, or what is left of him, continues to pursue his private obsession. Michael is intent on finding him, and by some miracle of cunning and daring gets into this earthly hell. He appears as resolute — almost as monomaniacal — as a man in Nick's occupation would have to be.

In the course of tracking Nick, Michael encounters the Frenchman who seduced him into his present career. During their first conversation, Michael says that he wants to find Nick in order to play Russian roulette against him. Since we know that he has no such desire, we have to wonder why he expresses it. He could as plausibly have said that he wanted to see the famous American play the game, and one would think that the European could more easily have understood such a motive. But Michael must know more about Russian roulette than we do.

The first time he played, he not only won but he overcame the game itself. We have seen him studying its mercenary variety, and we have seen him use the game as a tool of education in the United States. What began as a metaphor for war has been subtly expanded so that it points toward greater questions about the responsibilities of human beings to themselves and one another. By so mastering the game that he can play it usefully in civilian life, Michael revealed that his own relation to it is one of both aversion and attachment.

He never shows any love for this purest form of exposing one's own well-being to dark and uncontrollable forces. In this way he has shown that his early statement about his dislike of surprises has a core of truth: in his heart, Michael has remained more a deer hunter than a warrior. At the same time he appears to have concluded that bravery and skill in Russian roulette are conditions of the excellence he has always sought. He plays it not only when it is obviously necessary, but also — as with Stanley — when he sees that it can
bring some important good. In the last deer-hunting scene, Michael appeared to turn away from the solitary pursuit of his own masculine excellence. We know from his uniform that he has become a member of the Army’s elite Rangers, and the film gives no indication that he intends to leave the military now that the war is almost over.

Knowing so much about Russian roulette, or war broadly conceived, Michael has to know that Nick’s life since he disappeared will have put a great deal of distance between the two of them. We see him taking great risks to find Nick, and he must know that he will have to take greater risks to bring Nick back. Michael has gone into hell after his friend and he must somehow foresee that he is going to have to play yet another round of Russian roulette before he returns.

When Michael finds him, Nick shows no recognition. He is intent on the present, and but for the strange fact that he sends elephants and his winnings to Stevie’s wife, he seems to have lost all touch with his past. In a desperate attempt to give Nick back his memory — to bring this shade back to human life — Michael arranges to play the next game against him.

When he first came into the house where Nick plays, Michael had been visibly distressed to see another player kill himself. Finding Nick about to play a match, Michael tried to stop him. “Don’t you recognize me? Hunh? Don’t you recognize me? Hunh? Nicky, I love you, you’re my friend. What’re you doing?” When this fails, Michael arranges to take the place of Nick’s opponent in the game, and continues trying to talk him back to himself. “We don’t have much time. We don’t have much time. . . Don’t do it.” When the spectators have finished placing their bets, Nick still has not heard Michael. Nick takes the first turn, and the hammer drops on an empty chamber. Since mere speech has failed, Michael picks up the pistol and asks, “This what you want? This what you want?” After saying sadly, “I love you, Nick,” Michael’s face twists up with a terrible dread that we have seen in no professional Russian roulette player. He puts the revolver to his head and pulls the trigger. Again, the weapon fails to discharge. But Nick remains oblivious to Michael’s efforts to reach him. As Nick picks up the gun again, Michael grabs his wrist, sees
track marks on his arm, and begins talking urgently of home, of the trees and the mountains. Now at last, what Nick would most remember about Michael returns to him: he says, “One shot,” laughs softly, and blows his brains out. Screaming with grief, Michael grabs the corpse and starts shaking it in an instinctive effort to bring it back to life.

This scene invites us to interpret it in terms of Michael’s love for Nick. That love is surely what enables him to risk himself in the game. But what is the basis and framework of the love? Michael must know how small are the chances that Nick could be retrieved from the living death in which he finds him. By virtue of what principle did he take upon himself with no visible hesitation this illicit 12,000-mile trip to hell in search of a man who is not sane enough to return by his own will? And by virtue of what principle does Michael risk Nick’s life and his own in the round of Russian roulette they play?

In this scene, love is the passion that carries Michael through the hardest part of the game, just as hatred or anger carried him though the previous games he played. But in no case do these passions simply rule Michael’s conduct. In the other games, Michael was moved by a justification for his participation. Here the only discernible justification for the risks he takes is the old promise he made to Nick not to leave him in Vietnam. By holding himself and Nick to that promise, Michael affirms the gravity of a human relationship to which he has committed his word. He thus establishes the superiority of the relationship implied by a promise over either of the human beings who participate in that relationship. We see in this last Russian roulette scene how much Michael dislikes what he has to do: not once does he seem tempted to protect his own human feelings with callous notions about imperatives of abstract duty. Still, he does set the authority of his promise above himself and others, and he thereby brings that authority into being. *The Deer Hunter* thus suggests that love and decency would not exist as goods were it not for this harsh — and painful — insistence on self-respect.

As we saw before, Michael’s earliest and highest hopes have not been met: he has not found his equal and has not found perfected
friendship. Nor has his struggle against the rule of chance in human affairs been wholly successful. It would be hard to imagine a man who takes firmer responsibility for himself and for his own activity. Because of this he can be said to have done about as much as one can do to prevent chance from living within oneself. But in order to achieve this victory, he has had to live where chance does virtually rule. In the film, this is presented through his experience of war, but the contrast between him and the two friends who join him there shows that what distinguishes him in the end is his understanding of what war reveals about himself and others. To reach that estimation of men, Michael has had to take enormous risks and exercise great courage and sound mindedness. Men with his natural talents and inclinations are rare to begin with, and they are more likely than most others to die in battle. The blessing of his survival will enable him to help others more than they can fully appreciate.

The story ends in Clairton. After Nick’s funeral, his friends go to the old familiar tavern to have breakfast alone together. The scene is similar to the one just before the first transition to Vietnam. But this time it is day, now there are women present, and one of the group is very conspicuous by his absence. While in the kitchen preparing the food, the tavern owner tries to choke back his tears by humming and singing a little of “God Bless America.” In the earlier tavern scene, the orderly motion of his music helped provide a moment of peace between the excitement of the raucous wedding reception and that of the looming experience of war. Now, however, the pain that Nick’s death has brought seems as likely to break out in violent weeping as in the reconciliation of song. Sensing that a critical moment is at hand, Linda begins to sing with a shaking voice: “God bless America/Land that I love . . .” Nick has lost his life, Linda and the others have lost him. This prayer, with its patriotism and its assumption about the cosmic supports for patriotism, might allow those present to believe that these sacrifices were worthwhile. But their hesitation to join in the singing betrays their uncertainty.

One man can ease those doubts. Michael once said that the other men in this scene were “assholes,” and there is nothing to indicate that they have changed much during the film. Michael has
always been skeptical of piety, adhering to a pagan hunting religion if to any at all, and nothing in the film indicates that he has found in the world the coherence that could make the assumptions underlying this song even remotely plausible. Whatever Michael may once have felt toward the others, and whatever he may now believe about the world, he quietly joins in the quiet singing. During the song, his attention seems directed mainly at Linda, as hers is at him. Whether they see it or not, however, he performs the function of a priest for them all.

Michael has always had a natural air of authority, and now his credentials are strengthened by the fact that he has been with open eyes where none of them could go. By quietly joining in, he shields the others from despair. And he does so without rubbing their faces in his superiority. He bestows on them what freedom they are capable of, much as he did for the deer he spared in the mountains. The image of the deer should remind us that one of the dangers he protects them from is his own ability to dominate them by the force of his will.

At the last moment, Michael reminds his friends — and us — that the reconciliation provided by the song is a little too easy. At the conclusion of the singing, Michael raises his glass and says: “Here’s to Nick.” By reminding the others of the importance of keeping the memory of the friend who died, Michael tries to prevent the others from going too far into the refuge of comforting sentiment, and thus imposes on them at least a little of the difficult work of cultivating the grounds in which they might grow beyond what Clairton had seemed to offer them. They respond by repeating the toast in unison, and the film ends. Michael knows how costly this communion has been, and how fragile are the supports that make it possible. His work has only begun, and may never be completed. But if the audience gains a greater understanding of the deer hunter and of his relationship with the rest of us, the film has grown beyond mere entertainment.
III. Conclusion

There are many obvious differences between *The New Heloise* and *The Deer Hunter*. The settings and subject matter could hardly be more dissimilar. By its nature, moreover, the film is more like the plays that are criticized in the *Letter to D’Alembert* than like the novels that the *Letter* treats as promising vehicles of education. When *The Deer Hunter* was released in 1978, it presented a spectacle that encouraged passive absorption and perhaps a painful catharsis, during which one could not pause for reflection or review. Subsequent analysis, moreover, was dependent on one’s fallible recollections.\(^{120}\) More important, Rousseau’s novel is a mature work of one of Western civilization’s greatest minds. *The Deer Hunter* is a commercial collaboration created by a large group of people, and the man held most responsible for the outcome has had no other comparable successes.\(^{121}\) If the film is a kind of accident, it is a happy one, but there is no reason to suppose that it was shaped by anything like the philosophic depth that Rousseau brought to all his published writings.

Another significant difference between these two works of art makes them useful complements. There are no bad people in *The New Heloise*, as Rousseau the Editor makes a point of emphasizing in his final footnote.\(^{122}\) Beyond this, there are barely any displays of

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\(^{120}\) New technologies have made the study of films much easier than it was when *The Deer Hunter* first appeared. At that time, the only way to see the movie again was to find a theater that was showing it. When I began this analysis shortly after the film’s release, the obstacles to writing carefully about a movie were brought home to me with some force. Novels, by way of contrast, lend themselves more naturally to reflective study, and to shared reflective study. Rousseau could therefore hope that spouses would read *The New Heloise* together, “drawing from it a new courage to support their common labors, and perhaps new views that will lead toward making them useful.” Second Preface, *O.C.* II, p. 23.

\(^{121}\) Primary credit for the film has generally been assigned to its director, Michael Cimino. None of the movies he directed after 1978 has been a commercial success, and those I have seen do not appear to have been unjustly neglected.

\(^{122}\) *O.C.* II, p. 745 note *.
raw thumos in the novel. Even the quarrel between Edward and St. Preux is pretty subdued, and almost comical. Edward is drunk when he triggers the dispute, the duel must be postponed when he sprains his ankle while rushing to fight, and Julie uses the dispute to make the men better friends than ever. Rousseau’s novel presents a world in which the great obstacle to virtue, and in many ways its source, is eros. Thumos does not appear as a significant obstacle, or as the source of a competing claim to the name of virtue.

*The Deer Hunter* offers a striking contrast. The bad people in the film are conspicuous and unforgettable. The most prominent are Linda’s drunken and abusive father, the enemy soldier whom Michael kills in the first battle scene, the Viet Cong torturers, and the urbane Frenchman who seduces Nick into playing Russian roulette for money. Except for the irascible and contemptible Stanley, the villains all seem beyond redemption. While thumos is everywhere, eros is largely confined to the shadows. Apart from Linda, the women in the film are not particularly appealing, and the interest they attract from most of the men could charitably be described as superficial.\(^{123}\) Linda herself has a certain resemblance to Julie, for her appeal arises primarily from her sweetness, not from exceptional physical beauty or animal magnetism.\(^{124}\) But she does not provoke anything like the furious passion of St. Preux in Nick or Michael, and the little world in which she lives does not regard her as anything special. From the beginning of *The Deer Hunter*, virtue is understood as manliness, and competence in manly activities. This is the alternative that is omitted

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\(^{123}\) Stanley, for example, is consumed with feeding his amour-propre by bedding as many women as possible. Stevie, as we have seen, is apparently willing to marry almost anyone who will have him. Nick (played by Christopher Wolken) is the most strikingly attractive male character in the film (softer and more youthful looking than Robert De Niro’s Michael), and Linda is the prettiest girl we see in Clairiton. But Nick is at the very least ambivalent about marrying her, and he fathers a child with the much plainer girl whom Stevie weds.

\(^{124}\) Linda is played by Meryl Streep.
Edward is the most manly character in the novel, but even he is domesticated, so to speak, by Julie. After she persuades him to forego the duel with St. Preux, Edward never again displays real anger and he never again attempts to impose his will on anyone. Instead, he becomes extraordinarily generous with his money, his time, and his attention. Eventually Edward loses all interest in exercising the political power that has come to him through his birth. Although he is sometimes stern with St. Preux, it is always for the sake of helping his friend live up to their shared understanding of virtue. As they understand it, virtue consists of mastering oneself in accordance with reason.

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126 For Rousseau’s hope of finding an audience in the provinces, see Second Preface, O.C. II, pp. 22-23.

127 Noting that the early parts of the novel might cause an austere man to throw the book down in anger, Rousseau says that he would not complain of an injustice, and that he himself might have done as much in that man’s place. First Preface, O.C. II, p. 6.
however, the people we meet there have a need for friendship and community that is not so different from what we see in the characters Rousseau imagined. Just as Julie would be miserable in such a world,\textsuperscript{128} neither could she subjugate the people in it through the attractive power of her natural goodness. Michael might be able to dominate most of the people around him, through his natural aggressiveness and superiority, but he needs a reason to bother with them. By the end of the film, he seems to find that reason.

In some ways, Michael bears a resemblance to Claire. His most important relationship at the outset is with a friend of his own sex. For the sake of his relationship with that friend, he represses his interest in the one woman who interests him the most. Just as I suggested earlier that Claire might finally decide to marry St. Preux after Julie’s death, I think it likely that Michael will marry Linda after Nick’s death. That decision, I believe, would be considerably easier for Michael than for Claire, in part because Michael and St. Preux resemble each other in a way that neither of them resembles Claire.

For all the differences between the aspiring Swiss philosopher and the tough steelworker from Pennsylvania, both of them have seen war, and both of them have that experience to draw on as they think through the loss of the friend they treasured the most. Both of them, I suspect, have come to see new attractions in family life with a spouse as agreeable as Claire and Linda respectively, and in finding a useful place in a community that will not provide everything they desire. Some of those who encounter one or the other of these two works of art may also see such a life differently than they did before, whether or not they could ever aspire to take Julie or Michael as a model.

Great art never offers panaceas, and both of these works leave a lot for the readers or viewers to think through for themselves. I have suggested that one step in such thinking is to wonder seriously what the characters who survive at the end will do in the future. I think that step points to the bourgeois family as a source of human

\textsuperscript{128} See, e.g., Book V, Letter 2, O.C. II, p. 532.
happiness both for those of a predominantly erotic nature and for those whose most intense desires are rooted in thumos. I do not, however, mean to suggest that this need be the last step in considering the questions raised by the intriguing people to whom we have been introduced. Perhaps the next step can be found in Rousseau’s next novel, the *Emile*, which he published only a year after *The New Heloise*.

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**Note A**

(See footnote 24 above)

One striking feature of *The New Heloise* is Rousseau’s elaborate ambiguity about the authorship of the letters in the collection. A short Preface to the first edition says that Rousseau “bear[s] only the title of Editor here,” and asks: “Have I made it all up, and is the entire correspondence a fiction? Worldly people, what does it matter to you? It is surely a fiction for you.”¹²⁹ The text contains many footnotes in which the Editor assiduously cultivates this ambiguity in his comments on the actions of the characters and on what they say. Some of the comments are humorously trivial, as when he points out mistakes in grammar or usage. Others are mischievously teasing, as when he notes that some letters have been lost or suppressed by the Editor. Still others are quite substantive. The Editor sometimes says that he agrees with what a character says, and often supplies additional arguments or points out further implications. At other times, he disputes what a character says, and sometimes offers his own contrasting view. With respect to the authorship of the novel, perhaps the most comically revealing note is one in which Rousseau claims to have copied part of his own recently published *Letter to D’Alembert* from one of the letters in the collection.

After waiting to see how the novel was received by the public, Rousseau published a second preface, from which he claimed the

¹²⁹ Preface, O.C. II, p. 5.
first had been abstracted. This longer preface is introduced with a notice calling it a “dialogue or supposed Conversation.” Whether or not this is meant as an allusion to Plato, it is also a description of *The New Heloise* itself. The two interlocutors in the Second Preface are Rousseau the Editor and an unnamed “Man of Letters” who tries to dissuade Rousseau from publishing the book. One of the critic’s themes is that if the novel is a fiction written by Rousseau, it will embarrass him before the public. Although the critic approves what he sees as a didactic picture of marriage and domesticity painted in the letters, he complains that readers first have to wade through many pages of puerile ramblings, ridiculous sentiments, scandalous behavior, and preposterous acts of generosity. These latter features, says the critic, are unworthy of Rousseau’s pen and inconsistent with his previous public stances, especially in the *Letter to D’Alembert*. He concludes that if the book is entirely a fiction, it is poorly done, but adds that if the female protagonists really existed, “I will reread this Collection every year until the end of my life.” Rousseau responds with an elaborate defense of the book’s usefulness in promoting sound morals and of the literary techniques used in it, but refuses to say whether it is a fiction.

It is possible to write an epistolary novel and have it is taken as authentic by much of the public, and even to leave almost every reader at least in doubt as to whether it is a fiction. The *Portuguese Letters* is probably an example. *The New Heloise* is not. Any reader even slightly familiar with Rousseau’s previous writings (let alone with the soon to be published *Emile*) would know that he wrote every bit of *The New Heloise*. The jokes and poses in the Second Preface do nothing to undermine that conviction. On the contrary, they can only confirm it for readers who are unfamiliar with Rousseau’s other

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130 Second Preface, O.C. II, p. 29.

works.  

Why, then, all this peculiar talk about the issue of authorship? In one way, it seems to undermine the usefulness of the novel by openly discussing the author’s didactic goals and the techniques he used in pursuit of those goals. Who wants to be told that a novel he has read, or is about to read, is meant by its author to be a kind of seductive propaganda?  

A clue may emerge from two of the novel’s several express allusions to Plato. In a letter from the title character to her departing beloved, she tells him always to look into his soul for “that eternal representation of the truly beautiful, the contemplation of which animates us with a holy enthusiasm and which our passions ceaselessly soil without being able to efface it.” Rousseau the Editor drops a note saying: “The genuine philosophy of Lovers is Plato’s; while the charm lasts they never have any other. A man who is moved cannot give up this philosopher; a cold reader cannot suffer him.” Much later, the coldest reasoner in The New Heloise says the following to this same young man: “Did Plato your master not maintain that all human knowledge, all philosophy, could draw from a human soul only what nature had put there; as all chemical operations have never drawn from any composite more gold than it already contained?”

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133 Rousseau reported to one of his correspondents that while The New Heloise itself had provoked a variety of responses, the preface was universally disliked. Anna Attridge, “The Reception of La Nouvelle Héloïse,” Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century 120 (1974): 227-67, p. 234 note 10,


135 Ibid., note *.

This last quotation comes in a discussion of how to take account of natural diversity and inequality when devising an educational program for young children. In that context, an allusion to Plato’s notorious paradox of knowledge as recollection could easily ring a bell with many parents who have tried to change their children’s natures for the better. In a somewhat different way, Plato’s paradox could apply to readers of The New Heloise. If a reader’s feelings for its imaginary characters were to trigger something like the receptiveness displayed by Meno’s slave boy, such a reader might become open to the didactic messages of the novel even while knowing that the author has used seductive techniques in delivering those messages.

Other readers who love the characters in the novel may not be so easily satisfied, just as some readers who are seduced by Plato’s Socrates cannot rest content with the images and stories he frequently devises for his interlocutors.137 Such readers might be compelled to conduct their own conversation with the characters in The New Heloise, with its Editor, and with themselves. In this paper, I will suggest that one step in this direction is to imagine what further conversations the characters might have with one another after the novel ends.

Note B
(See footnote 51 above)

A strikingly large number of scholars have mistakenly asserted that the Wolmar we meet is an atheist.138 This claim is clearly

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137 Plato’s Second Letter contains a comment on the extreme difficulty of extracting the gold from living philosophic discourse, though without Wolmar’s analogy to chemical operations. See Second Letter, 314a5-7; New Heloise, Book V, Letter 3, O.C. II, p. 565.

contradicted by the text. Julie tells St. Preux that Wolmar “ceased to be an atheist only to become a skeptic,” and refers to “her husband’s pyrrhonism.”139 Perhaps the error should not be altogether surprising, for Rousseau has the Man of Letters in the Second Preface make the same mistake,140 thus calling our attention to its importance. Seriously maintaining that no god exists implies (whether consciously or not) that one can adequately account for the


139 Book V, Letter 5, *O.C.* II, pp. 589, 592. None of the commentators cited in the previous footnote discusses, or even mentions, what the text actually says about Wolmar’s views on religion. Some of these commentators also regard Wolmar as a God-like figure. E.g., Starobinski, *La transparence et l’obstacle*, pp. 137-39; Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, pp. 128-29, 136, 151; Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, p. 155. Had they not conflated agnosticism and atheism, which Rousseau’s text distinguishes, they might have avoided so simplistic a characterization. In a passage quoted by Starobinski, St. Preux tells Edward:

> A paterfamilias who takes pleasure in his house is rewarded, for the continual cares that he gives himself there, with the continual enjoyment of the sweetest sentiments of nature. Alone among mortals, he is the master of his own felicity, because he is happy like God himself, without desiring more than he enjoys: like that immense Being he does not dream of increasing his possessions but of making them truly his own by the most perfect familiarity and the most capable management: if he does not enrich himself through new acquisitions, he enriches himself in better possessing what he has. Book IV, Letter 10, *O.C.* II, pp. 466-67.

In this characteristically hyperbolic simile, St. Preux undoubtedly has Wolmar in mind as the model of a happy paterfamilias. But even the overheated St. Preux does not go so far as to say that Wolmar makes himself God’s “successor on earth” (Starobinski, p. 139), or that Wolmar “is, in fact, as Rousseau makes perfectly clear, God, and he is better and kinder than God” (Shklar, p. 128), or that Wolmar “plays the God in the little world while denying the God of the great world” (Bloom, p. 155).

world and one’s own soul through one’s own reason. If Wolmar had remained an atheist even after “plung[ing] into the darkness of metaphysics,” he would have exhibited an intellectual arrogance that could hardly reflect anything but the amour-propre and vanity from which he is said to be so remarkably free. A Man of Letters might be expected to miss the point, as so many modern scholars have.

St. Preux believes that in this darkness “man has no other guide than the systems he carries there,” which may help to explain why he embraces something very close to Julie’s deistic Christianity. Julie herself declines even “to enter into those bottomless and shoreless abysses of metaphysics.” Unlike Julie

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142 The “philosophers” whom Rousseau so often attacked throughout his writings include most authors of books of philosophy, especially but not only those of the Enlightenment. These writers are accused of being driven primarily by pride and vanity, and of typically teaching atheism. See, e.g., *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, O.C. III, p. 27; “Observations on the Response to his Discourse,” O.C. III, p. 38 note **; p. 46 note *; “Last Reply,” O.C. III, p. 73; *Discourse on Inequality*, O.C. III, p. 189; *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues*, O.C. I, pp. 967-68 (“the Frenchman” is speaking).

143 This may explain why Rousseau the Editor does not correct the Man of Letters when he mistakes agnosticism for atheism. Wolmar, however, is a regular churchgoer who confides his views only to his wife (and later to St. Preux and Edward). In order to understand him, I believe we must respect the distinction between atheism and agnosticism that he drew when he shared his thoughts with Julie.

144 Book VI, Letter 8, O.C. II, p. 699. This would help explain why Julie believes that Wolmar’s exposure to the Orthodox and Roman churches prevented him from recognizing the truth of Christianity when he finally arrived in a Protestant country. See Book V, Letter 5, O.C. II, p. 589 (“[H]e arrived there too late, his faith had already closed itself to the truth, his reason was no longer open to certainty.”)
and the young aspiring philosopher, Wolmar apparently wrestled long enough and hard enough with the question of an afterlife to arrive at what he considers an “opinion armed with a few probabilities,” and he recognizes that this opinion was not established by any proof.\textsuperscript{145}

During their marriage, Wolmar at first hid his opinions from Julie, but found such concealment incompatible with the conjugal frankness he sought. During her final illness, Julie wants to know the physician’s prognosis. Aware that the doctor holds out no hope, Wolmar is tempted to lie to her out of kindness. But he resists the temptation, reasoning that in such a matter he has no right to prefer his opinion about an afterlife, which he regards as doubtful, to hers, which she regards as proven.\textsuperscript{146} Wolmar’s candor with his wife and with himself confirms what Julie’s description of his beliefs had implied: he is free of the arrogance of an atheist.

Some scholars, and the Man of Letters in the Second Preface, maintain that Julie’s death leads Wolmar to the religious conversion that Julie hoped he would undergo.\textsuperscript{147} This claim is not supported by the text, though Wolmar does note that since Julie’s death he has repeatedly called into question his very agnosticism.\textsuperscript{148} The reader is left to wonder whether these doubts on top of doubts could lead him to the deistic Christianity of Julie and St. Preux, or something like it. There is, however, no indication at all that he could be thrown back to the atheism of his youth.\textsuperscript{149}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[146] Ibid.
\item[147] O.C. II, p. 13; Green, “Medieval and Modern Sensibility,” p. 561; Schwartz, Sexual Politics, p. 121.
\item[149] Wolmar’s lack of amour-propre may help explain why he did not remain an atheist and why he did not become a writer of books. It does not, however, explain why he plunged in the first place into what Julie and St. Preux call the “darkness of metaphysics,” or why he seems to have been content to remain an agnostic at least until after Julie’s death. I suspect that an exploration of Wolmar’s
\end{footnotes}
Note C
(See footnote 98 above)

Julie’s death comes about as a consequence of her dutiful self-sacrifice in attempting to rescue her child, and she does not put up the resistance to death that one might expect from most people who have not become extremely weakened by old age or unrelenting physical pain. In these respects, she resembles not only Jesus but Socrates, who did not resist the death sentence imposed on him by the Athenians, and even seems to have provoked it in various ways by his behavior before and during his trial.

Both analogies are of course imperfect, but they do encourage the reader to recall the novel’s most conspicuous treatment of the relation between Plato and Christianity. After Julie’s wedding, about two years pass during which no correspondence is included in the novel. Suddenly, we are presented with a letter to Edward in which St. Preux argues that people who find life as burdensome as he does should commit suicide.

St. Preux’s argument in favor of suicide is somewhat complex, but it’s foundational element is this proposition: “To seek what is good for oneself and to flee what is bad for oneself in what does not injure another, this is the right of nature.” Edward’s reply addresses St. Preux’s arguments in detail, but Edward does not challenge this fundamental proposition. In fact, in rebutting St. Preux’s impertinent invocation of Roman examples, Edward contends

thoughts about these matters, unlike the thoughts of Julie and St. Preux about God and religion, could not have been adequately conveyed to any of the other characters and therefore could not be included in the novel.

150 See Plato, Crito.
151 See, e.g., Plato, Meno 89e-100b; Apology, passim.
153 Ibid., O.C. II, p. 378.
that these men had obligations only to the Republic and that when the laws were succeeded by tyrants, “the Citizens reclaimed their natural liberty and their rights over themselves.”

St. Preux himself traces the source of the argument against a natural right to suicide back to “one of the Phaedo’s Sophisms.” According to that “sophism,” anyone would like to punish a slave whose suicide thereby deprived him of his property, and we are the property of God. To which St. Preux replies that we continue to belong to God after death, and that if we were to burden our slave with a garment that impeded his service to us, we would hardly punish the slave for casting it off in order to serve us better.

St. Preux is certainly right that the passage of the Phaedo to which he refers does not establish that suicide is impious, but he is wrong to suggest that Socrates even asserted such a conclusion. Perhaps he implicitly recognizes as much when he says: “As for the Phaedo, which has furnished [our Sophists] with the only specious argument they have ever employed, this question was treated there very lightly and as it were in passing.” Why then even bring it up? One reason soon becomes clear when St. Preux denies that “the Christians” correctly interpreted the Bible when they forbade suicide. According to him, the Bible contains no such injunction, and the ban on suicide is an alien element imported into their religion by

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156 Ibid. St. Preux says that the dialogue is also full of “sublime truths.” This may refer to the tenets of Christianity that St. Preux accepts, such as the immortality of the soul, but he also mentions one proposition peculiar to the Phaedo: “[W]hat is the principal occupation of the sage here below, if not to be focused, so to speak, deep in his soul, and endeavor to be dead during his life.” Ibid., p. 380. To the extent that St. Preux may be equating this endeavor with slitting one’s wrist, he could justly be charged with a sophistical reading of Plato.
157 See Phaedo, 61a-62c.
Lactantius and Augustine from the reasoning of the *Phaedo*.\textsuperscript{159}

Edward demonstrates that St. Preux himself has only sophistical arguments in support of his claim of a right to suicide. Edward concedes that suicide is sometimes justified, not only in circumstances like those in which Socrates and Cato were placed, but also when incurable physical pain interferes sufficiently with the operation of the faculties of the soul. He points out, however, that St. Preux never attempted to justify his own suicide as an appropriate response to his lovesickness, and he is completely convincing when he maintains that St. Preux’s suicide would injure other people, notably Edward himself and Julie.\textsuperscript{160}

Oddly, however, Edward also alludes to the *Crito* in arguing that St. Preux has an obligation to obey the civil laws against suicide.\textsuperscript{161} During this exchange of correspondence, the two men are in England, not in St. Preux’s fatherland. In that country, and presumably also in Switzerland, the laws against suicide were based on what St. Preux regards as a misinterpretation of Scripture. To the extent that such laws might have the civil purpose of discouraging behavior inconsistent with Christian doctrine, it is not very easy to see a serious injury to either polity in the suicide of a supremely obscure traveling heretic. Socrates’ decision to obey what St. Preux calls an unjust Athenian command to kill himself does offer a striking contrast with St. Preux’s abstract arguments about his natural right to suicide. But neither that decision nor the speech of Socrates in the *Crito* constitutes a refutation of those arguments.

Rousseau the Editor suspects that St. Preux wrote his long letter only in order to have it refuted.\textsuperscript{162} But the Editor then goes on

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., p. 384.


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to note that St. Preux does cite one colorable precedent, and insists that there are many examples of wise men who calmly killed themselves solely because their lives had become a burden. It seems entirely likely that St. Preux was seeking an expression of affection and concern from Edward, which he got, along with a well-deserved scolding. What he did not get was an argument against the suicide of those who are weary of life and capable of ending it in a way that confers more benefit than harm on others. That is certainly not St. Preux, but it may be Socrates and it may be Julie.