

Chapter 3

The Education of the Reader in *Emile*

Rousseau's treatise *Emile, or On Education* promises to be of particular interest in examining how he educates his reader. The author himself considered *Emile* to be his "greatest and best book" (*Dialogues, CW*, 1:23). Yet, curiously, *Emile* has received disproportionately little attention from scholars compared to his other works. Perhaps this relative inattention is due either to the content of the work or to its form, or perhaps to both. As for the content, on the one hand, the title announces a pedagogical treatise, and that is how *Emile* has often been read, often narrowly so. On the other hand, *Emile* contains far more than pedagogical advice and in fact ranges over a vast array of subjects, from moral psychology to religion to the education of females to politics, and this very complexity and variety have impeded global interpretation of *Emile* and encouraged scholars to take up in piecemeal fashion the subjects it treats. As for the form of the work, its hybrid genre as both treatise and novel, or treatise-novel, has perplexed readers and reinforced the partial approach to interpreting its contents. Over the course of this chapter and the following three, I examine how the form and content of *Emile* work together to educate the reader. In this chapter I investigate some of the narrative strategies Rousseau employs to challenge the reader to adopt a new perspective on human nature, to come to see the children before his eyes as corrupt and artificial and to see Rousseau's imaginary pupil as somehow true or real.

The title promises an educational project, and the work delivers on that promise, for it is indeed devoted to raising an imaginary pupil from before birth to adulthood in accordance with Rousseau's principle of the natural goodness of man. Yet *Emile* is nonetheless as much, if not more, an education of the reader in that same system. In fact, Rousseau himself denied that *Emile* was intended to be an educational treatise, at