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## Living with the Bible: Jean-Jacques Rousseau Reads Judges 19–21



*Abstract: Rousseau was a lifelong reader of the Bible. His prose poem ‘The Levite of Ephraim’ sentimentalizes Judges 19–21, one of the most violent passages in the Hebrew Bible. This paper examines the text of Judges itself and Rousseau’s ‘Levite’ to determine what those works say about how to read a text. For Rousseau, the Bible does not give reasons for action but helps educate sentiments in order to bring readers to defy self-interested, calculating reason.*

### 1. A BIBLICAL TALE AND ROUSSEAU’S RETELLING

Rousseau, the product of a thorough if not always strict Calvinist upbringing, was a lifelong reader of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> His prose poem *The Levite of*

The essay is dedicated to the memory of Robert Wokler. Thanks to my mother, Rochelle Kochin, my wife, Anna Kochin, Roger Masters, and the referees for comments; to Steven Lenzner for bibliographic assistance; and to Nechemiah Gordon for help on a point of biblical grammar. I would also like to thank my students in the Fall 2005 course at Tel Aviv University on gender and political thought; together we read Judges 19–21 and a number of texts by Rousseau; Adi Sharon and Liat Hanuka made particularly memorable interventions. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the 2006 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, and I owe a special thanks to my APSA discussants Natalie and Flagg Taylor and to members of the audience for their valuable responses.

References to the works of Rousseau in this paper will generally be given first in the Pléiade edition (Paris: Gallimard, 1959–1995), then usually in the English translations in Rousseau, *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, ed. Roger Masters and Christopher Kelly (Hanover and London: University Press of New England for Dartmouth College, 1995–), unless otherwise noted.

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions* 1:580, 5:485, “Ma lecture ordinaire du soir étoit la Bible”; and see also the letter from Deleyre to Rousseau, 28 February 1758 (four years before the composition of *The Levite of Ephraim*), where Deleyre writes:

*Ephraim* sentimentalizes Judges 19–21, one of the most violent passages in the Hebrew Bible. Rousseau’s basic plot closely follows that recounted in the book of Judges, but he does not hesitate to refine the biblical story with his own additions, as we shall see.

This is the tale, as the Bible has it: The Levite journeys south from the far hill country of Ephraim to Bethlehem to retrieve his concubine from her father’s house. The couple are reconciled, but the girl’s father so delights in feasting the Levite that he compels them to tarry in their return for several days. When the Levite finally insists on setting out with his concubine and servant, it is already late in the day. Unwilling to stop at the heathen city of Jebus (Jerusalem), the Levite and his entourage find themselves at nightfall in the hilltop village of Gibeah in the land of the tribe of Benjamin. They seek hospitality, but no one takes them in, until an old man comes and brings them home, a man who is himself not a Benjaminite but a member of the tribe of Ephraim sojourning in Gibeah.

The old man feasts the Levite, but while they are still at supper, a gang of thugs surrounds the old man’s house and demands that the Levite be brought out to them “that they might know him,” or, as we would say, rape him. The old man, appalled by the violation of hospitality, offers to appease the thugs by sending out his virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine. The gang is not appeased, but the Levite grabs his concubine and thrusts her out of the house and into their hands. The gang proceeds to rape and torture her through the night. At dawn, the thugs “send her on her way,” and she somehow finds her way back to the door of the Ephraimite host.

The Levite gets up to go on his way, but he is astonished (“and behold”) to see his concubine collapsed at the door, “her hands on the threshold” (Judges 19:27). He calls to her to get up and go, but she does not answer. He puts her on his donkey and continues north to his home in the land of Ephraim. When the Levite gets home, he takes a big knife of the type used for animal sacrifice, cuts her into twelve parts—by limbs—and sends the parts “throughout the entire bounded-off land of Israel” (Judges 19:29). “And everyone who saw said, ‘There has not been and there has not been seen such as this, from the day in which the Children of Israel came up from the land of Egypt until this day: Attend to this, all of you; let us take counsel and speak’” (Judges 19:30).<sup>2</sup>

“David composed the psalms of penitence in a state of malady like you, and I can propose him as an example to you, since you are reading the Bible”; in Rousseau, *The Confessions and Correspondence, Including the Letters to Malesherbes*, trans. Christopher Kelly, in “Rousseau, *Collected Writings*, vol. 5 (1995), p. 564.

<sup>2</sup> This is my translation. *Vehaya kol haro’eh ve’amar* could be rendered instead, “and everyone who sees it will say,” in which case the Levite would be anticipating the reaction. In *The Levite of Ephraim*, Rousseau does not show us the initial reaction of the

The sign of the limbs brings together “all the Children of Israel,” north and south, east and west. They gather 400,000 strong at Mitzpeh (a few miles from Gibeah) to understand what has happened. The Levite narrates the awful events, not without a certain amount of convenient emendation, whereupon the Children of Israel resolve to demand that the tribe of Benjamin yield up the gang of thugs. The Israelites then make war on Benjamin when the Benjaminites mobilize to defend Gibeah rather than deliver the evildoers.

The war is fought with difficulty, but after two days of failure amid tremendous losses, the united tribes finally succeed in crushing the Benjaminites, not just in Gibeah but in the entire land of Benjamin. Only six hundred Benjaminite males escape, and their wives and children have been slaughtered. The other Israelites are unwilling to see the tribe of Benjamin extinguished but unable to repopulate it by granting the remnant their own daughters. The narrator explains why: before the battle commenced, the Israelites took an oath at Mitzpeh not to give their daughters to the men of Benjamin (Judges 21:1). Fortunately, the Israelites find a creative way to evade the terms of the oath: they first send an expedition to slaughter the men of Jabesh Gilead, an Israelite town in Transjordan whose residents forfeited their lives and possessions for having failed to answer the call of the limbs and come up to Mitzpeh. But as the expedition slays all the men and adult women, sparing only the virgins, it returns with only four hundred brides for the Benjaminites.<sup>3</sup> The Israelites do not consider this a sufficient restoration and so counsel

Children of Israel to the sign of the limbs, nor does he show us the Levite anticipating it. In the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, however, Rousseau ascribes the speech to the Israelites themselves and not merely to the Levite’s imagination (5:377, 7:291). In this, Rousseau follows the eighteenth-century French translators Martin, Le Maistre de Sacy, and Vence as well as the Septuagint and the Vulgate; I have done so as well.

<sup>3</sup> The decision to slaughter all but the virgins of Jabesh Gilead seems to be based on the Israelites’ mistaken extension of Moses’ commands regarding the Midianite women (Numbers 31:15–17) to the Israelite women of Jabesh Gilead. Captive Midianite women who have had sexual intercourse are defiled because they led Israelite men to whore after false gods through sexual idolatry (Numbers 31:15–16, referring to the events narrated in Numbers 25:1–18). The women of Jabesh Gilead, for all the narrator tells us that the Israelites might know, are pure of the taint of bodily Baal worship. A misreading of Numbers thus motivates the slaughter of the women of Jabesh Gilead “who have known lying with a male,” resulting in a shortage of captive brides for the Benjaminites. By contrast, in the law of the beautiful captive woman (Deuteronomy 21:10–14), virginity is not required for the captive to be marriageable. The law in Deuteronomy concerns a woman captured from “your enemy,” not from “your brother” in civil war, but it might seem plausible that non-virgins taken from the sack of Israelite Jabesh-Gilead ought to be no less suitable brides for the Benjaminites than foreign captive women for their Israelite captors. The Israelites in Judges 21, however, prefer the precedent from Numbers to that from Deuteronomy.

the Benjaminites to seize brides from the girls of Shiloh, when they go out during the vintage festival to dance in the vineyards, and carefully direct these men along the byways so as to ambush the girls without alerting their fathers and brothers. The Israelites catechize themselves to justify the virgin-deprived Benjaminites' behavior by reference to the oath and the shortage of virgins from the punitive raid on Jabesh Gilead: "You didn't give them to the Benjaminites, they took them," the Israelites propose to say, so that the fathers and brothers of Shiloh at least have the consolation that they have not broken their oath. This "rape of the Shilonite women" comes off without difficulties from any party, and "The Children of Israel then went each man to his tribe and family, and each man returned to his own allotment of land." And, in case the reader wonders, "In those days there was no king in Israel; a man did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:24–25).<sup>4</sup>

Rousseau's prose poem retells the biblical tale in four cantos: The first, after invoking "the sacred anger of virtue" in place of the Homeric Muse and setting the stage in time and place, describes the Levite's courtship of the young woman of Bethlehem, her boredom at their unvarying life of semi-marital calm amid the pastoral delights of the hills of Ephraim, her flight to her father's house, and the Levite's search for her and his success in persuading her to return with him. While Rousseau expands substantially on the original, the expansions primarily transform the severe narrative of the Bible into the lush, descriptive language of pastoral romance, such as one can already find in Hellenistic novels like *Daphnis and Chloe*. Rousseau's variations on the biblical text in the subsequent three cantos cannot so readily be reduced to a formula: The second tells the unhappy story of the attempted northward return of the Levite's party, the rape in Gibeah, and the subsequent dismemberment. The third canto relates the gathering of the assembled tribes and the war with Benjamin, while the fourth details the reconciliation with Benjamin effected through the sack of Jabesh Gilead and the rape of the maidens of Shiloh. In this last canto, Rousseau does not hesitate to introduce new characters in order to personalize the biblical narrative. In some versions of the Roman legend of the rape of the Sabine women, Sabine fathers and Roman captors are reconciled through the mediation of the once forced but now loving Sabine brides (for example, Livy 1:13). In the fourth canto of Rousseau's *Levite* it is, as we shall see, a bereft Shilonite father, "the old man of Lebonah," a Rousseauian invention, who, himself responsible for the Shilonite scheme in the first place, successfully persuades the

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Judges 19:1.

daughters to choose to accept willingly the Benjaminites who had tried to take them by force.

Despite the violence which *The Levite of Ephraim* shares with its biblical model, it is Rousseau's own favorite of his writings. In *The Confessions* he describes it as "the most cherished," *le plus cheri*, and continues, "I am sure that I have not written anything in my life in which there reigns a more moving gentleness of morals, a fresher coloring, more naïve depictions, a more precise description of local color, a more antique simplicity in everything" (*Confessions* 1:586, 5:491). In the first draft of a preface to *The Levite of Ephraim*, Rousseau says that it "will always be precious to me" and is a text "that I never reread without an inner satisfaction" (*Levite* 2:1205, 7:352).

Rousseau presents this text, obscure and until recently untranslated into English, as key to his presentation of himself, because it is in his view the most secure basis of his praiseworthiness. According to *The Confessions*, Rousseau wrote *The Levite of Ephraim* in 1762, while fleeing the officers sent by the Parliament of Paris to arrest him for the heretical opinions voiced in *Emile*. "The sole praise that I desire and that I accord myself without shame because it is due to me: In the cruelest moment of his life, he wrote *The Levite of Ephraim*." As he writes in *The Confessions*: "Gather together all those great philosophers, in their books so superior to the adversity they have never experienced, put them in a position similar to mine, and give them a similar work to write in the first indignation of outraged honor; one will see how they acquit themselves."<sup>5</sup>

*The Levite of Ephraim* sits at the intersection of four aspects of Rousseau's writing: First, it is slotted carefully into Rousseau's self-portrait in his *Confessions*. He asserts that the text is derived from his readings in Scriptures right before his flight from Montmorency. *The Levite* is therefore a slice, or limb, from the body of text that is Rousseau's written self-presentation, the body of text that his readers are to reassemble according to his own directions in order to comprehend him. On the surface, the text—and the self-praise Rousseau bestows on its basis—appears to fit oddly with his claim in *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques* that his own writings contrast with the works of the wicked, which "are filled with horrible depictions of all sorts of wickedness."<sup>6</sup> To understand *The Levite* within Rousseau's self-presentation, one has to understand how he could sensibly (at least according to his own lights) describe this text as gentle rather than vicious. One also has to understand its relation to Rousseau's

<sup>5</sup> Rousseau, *Confessions* 1:580, 1:586–587, 5:485, 5:491.

<sup>6</sup> Rousseau, *Judge of Jean-Jacques* 1:814, 1:150.

experience of his expulsion from France. The autobiographical function of *The Levite*, as a tale of unjust persecution and symbol-laden but not merely symbolic vengeance, has been explicated by Thomas Kavanagh, especially in his chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*.<sup>7</sup> That autobiographical function will therefore not be my focus here.

Second, *The Levite of Ephraim* forms a triptych with two other minor writings of Rousseau's, the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* and *On Theatrical Imitation*, since Rousseau at one time intended to publish these texts together in a slim volume and drafted prefaces to each with this project in mind. *The Levite* is therefore a crucial place to look for Rousseau's understanding of how we read, write, and speak, and how we ought to read, write, and speak.<sup>8</sup>

Third, *The Levite* is the last of three versions of Rousseau's affirmations of patriarchal right as moral duty. Responding primarily to Richardson's *Clarissa*, Rousseau presents versions of the Lucretia figure in three works: in the fragmentary play *The Death of Lucretia*; in the prose poem *The Levite of Ephraim*; and, at greatest length and in the most Richardsonian format, in Rousseau's own epistolary novel *Julie*. In all three texts, the Lucretia figure dies virtuously in obedience to—rather than in defiance of—patriarchal or paternal authority.

Fourth, *The Levite of Ephraim* is where Rousseau's theology and politics come into sharpest conflict with the dominant views of the party of Enlightenment. "Men of our days, do not malign the morals of your fathers" (2:1212, 7:356), the narrator addresses his readers. The text endorses superstitious republicanism over potentially enlightened despotism, piety as against atheism, and barbarous virtue as against what Rousseau elsewhere describes at length as the corrupt mores of civilized society—and all this in relation to a biblical text that involves gang rape, mutilation, massacre, and more rape: "What picture (*tableau*) am I going to offer to your eyes? The body of a woman cut into pieces, her torn and palpitating limbs sent to the twelve Tribes.... Let us dare enter into those details and go back to the source of the civil wars which caused one of the Tribes to perish and cost the others so much blood" (2:1209, 7:353).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Kavanagh, *Writing the Truth: Authority and Desire in Rousseau* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Kavanagh, "Rousseau's *The Levite of Ephraim*: Synthesis Within a 'Minor' Work," in Patrick Riley, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> C.N. Dugan and Tracy B. Strong's discussion of *The Levite* is therefore appropriately devoted to putting it in the context of the other members of the triptych. See Dugan and Strong, "Music, Politics, Theater, and Representation in Rousseau," in Riley, *Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, pp. 346–354.

Because of all these intersections, the text is crucial if not central to understanding Rousseau's life, thought, and work. Yet until the flourishing of academic feminism in the 1980s, it was largely neglected: there is no discussion of it in Starobinski's *Transparency and Obstruction*, or in Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, and Derrida glosses over the example of the unlimbing in his discussion of the parallel passage in Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages*.<sup>9</sup> *The Levite of Ephraim* is cited but not discussed by Paul De Man in *Allegories of Reading*.<sup>10</sup> There are now, however, useful discussions in English: by Elizabeth Wingrove from the political science perspective; by Peggy Kamuf, a student of De Man's, and by Kavanagh, representing American professors of French literature; by Tanya Horeck in cultural studies; by the eminent Dutch narratologist Mieke Bal, ancillary to her work on the narrative of Judges itself; and by Judith Still, an English scholar of French literature, whose *Justice and Difference in the Works of Rousseau* may be the most Straussian book ever published by an English academic.<sup>11</sup>

As Horeck writes, "Recent interest in the *Levite* has something to do with its depiction of corporeal violence as writing."<sup>12</sup> That is to say, when confronted by an act of brutal violence, or at least by an artistic representation of such an act, we ask, "What does it *mean*?" We are not looking for a theodictic answer, as was the author of the book of Judges, or for a psychological or psychoanalytic one, as people did until twenty or thirty years ago. We want a logical answer, an answer at the level of the *logos*, something that elucidates what the perpetrators' act of violence was "trying to say," or rather—since murderous violence works in a semi-permanent but degrading material medium, as writing uses paper and ink—what this act of violence was trying to *write*.

<sup>9</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 233–239.

<sup>10</sup> Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 140, cited in Tanya Horeck, *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Rose Wingrove, "Republican Romance," in Lynda Lange, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 2002). This same article appeared in *Representations* 63 (Summer 1998), pp. 13–38, and a revised version appeared in Wingrove, *Rousseau's Republican Romance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). See also Kavanagh, *Writing the Truth*; Kavanagh, "Rousseau's *The Levite of Ephraim*"; Peggy Kamuf, *Signature Pieces* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Horeck, *Public Rape*; Mieke Bal, "A Body of Writing: Judges 19," in Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); Judith Still, *Justice and Difference in the Works of Rousseau: Bienfaisance and Pudeur* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Horeck, *Public Rape*, p. 57.

In this paper I discuss Rousseau's *Levite of Ephraim* logically, or literally, notwithstanding Leo Damrosch's verdict in his recent biography of Rousseau that only in psychological interest does *The Levite of Ephraim* make up for "what it lacks in literary merit, which is pretty much everything."<sup>13</sup> To analyze the text in terms of its psychological interest would require analyzing it in terms of Rousseau's own account of the human soul—the head, the heart, and the senses.<sup>14</sup> Only once Rousseau's account of the soul was shown to be inadequate to understanding why he wrote *The Levite of Ephraim* could we safely switch to some alternative psychological theory in trying to interpret *The Levite* as a symptom rather than as a text. I am not going to venture this here.

Instead, I will treat Rousseau as one more in the unending chain of readers of the book of Judges. Rousseau rewrites Judges, I will argue, to teach his readers a lesson that, if it will not improve their morals, will at least improve their understanding of decent morals. Of course, the paradox is that for modern readers, as Rousseau well knows, the tale of Judges 19–21 appears to offer the farthest thing from an illustration of decent morals: a horrific, even pornographic depiction of the barbarous violence and fanaticism of the ancient Israelites. By contrasting how Rousseau reads the Bible with how others read it, we learn a great deal about how he wants us to read in general and to read the Bible in particular. In addition, the story of the concubine in Gibeah is a crucial text for learning how to read the Bible, for, as we shall see, the plot itself is in an important sense the consequence of the efforts of the characters to read and live with the Bible.

## 2. READING THE BIBLE AS SEEMS RIGHT IN YOUR OWN EYES

The narrative of Judges 19–21 is austere, virtually without expressed evaluation or sentiment. We can only infer the narrator's judgments from our own impression of the events described. The biblical text approaches Leo Strauss' hypothetical, value-free description of a concentration camp—it is this very austerity that gives the story its power, as Jan Fokkelman points out.<sup>15</sup> But one consequence of the austerity of the narration is that there is

<sup>13</sup> Leo Damrosch, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), p. 363.

<sup>14</sup> See Starobinski's discussion of this methodological point in relation to a different text, from Rousseau's *Confessions*, in Jean Starobinski, *The Living Eye*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. viii–ix. On the soul for Rousseau as head, heart, and senses, see Christopher Kelly, *Rousseau's Exemplary Life: The "Confessions" as Political Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 52; Jan P. Fokkelman, "Structural Remarks on Judges 9 and 19," in Michael



no agreement among readers about details we have no choice but to fill in if we wish to display the story to ourselves in the theater of our own imaginations. Does the Levite send messengers with a message or just with a limb? Who killed the Levite's concubine? The "Sons of Belial" of the village of Gibeah, as per the Septuagint, which Rousseau follows? Or the Levite, after the rape, with his knife—a possibility left open by the silence of the Hebrew text? Depending on how we fill in that detail, we are likely to come to very different answers about whether the narrator approves or disapproves of the Levite and of the resulting holy civil war, including its gentle sequels, the destruction of Jabesh Gilead and the rape of the virgins of Shiloh.

Commentators also disagree about whether the text is pro-monarchic, showing the terrible consequences when "every man does what is right in his own eyes," or an idealized description of the sacred community of the tribes' coming together to punish crime and root out evildoers.<sup>16</sup> Critical scholars of previous generations were prone to read Judges 19–21 as an attack on Saul, the Benjaminite king, whom we see in the book of Samuel ruling Israel from Gibeah and coming to the aid of Jabesh Gilead. According to that once fashionable scholarly line, Judges 19–21 disparages Saul's lineage in favor of the Davidic dynasty descended from Judah.<sup>17</sup> But however one evaluates the series of actions, the text, as Rousseau recognizes, shows Israel as effectively united—more united than it ever is in any other episode of the entire Hebrew Bible—and capable of punishing wrongdoing without a king. To engage in successful if Pyrrhic civil war, the Israelites do not even need individual military commanders, for the (third) battle of Gibeah is the only victory of the tribes of Israel where no commanders are named.<sup>18</sup>

Fishbane and Emanuel Tov, eds., assisted by Weston W. Fields, "Sha'arei Talmon": *Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1992), p. 41 n. 16. Yair Zakovitch points out that such austerity is actually more frequent in the Hebrew Bible than explicit evaluations of characters and their actions. See Zakovitch, "Through the Looking Glass: Reflections/Inversions of Genesis Stories in the Bible," *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1993), pp. 139–152, 139.

<sup>16</sup> Contrast, for example, *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), vol. 2, p. 886, with the anti-monarchic judgment of Boling in *The Anchor Bible: Judges* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), p. 293 n. 25, or the brief, clear, and compelling version of the anti-monarchic reading of all of Judges in W.J. Dumbrell, "In Those Days There Was No King in Israel; Every Man Did What Was Right in His Own Eyes: The Purpose of the Book of Judges Reconsidered," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25 (1983), pp. 23–33.

<sup>17</sup> For a favorable précis of this modern interpretive tradition, see Mark Brettler, "The Book of Judges: Literature as Politics," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 (1989), pp. 395–418, 412–415.

<sup>18</sup> Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2000), p. 276. Given the context of the

Most intriguingly, every reader of Judges needs to come to some understanding of what is at stake in the variance between the narrator's version of the events leading to the night of horror in Gibeah and the version the Levite offers to the assembled eleven tribes. The Levite does not say how the unfortunate band came to be in Gibeah, nor does he tell us that the Gibeahite thugs initially threatened to rape him. Nor, of course, does he tell the assembled Israelites that it was he, the Levite, who put out his concubine, or, in Rousseau's Homeric simile, threw her to the wolves. These differences, between the narrator's telling of the story of the Levite and the Levite's own telling, are, it is crucial to note, largely but not completely erased in Rousseau's version.

This paper will proceed on two assumptions about how to read the Bible, which Rousseau applies but which scientific biblical criticism rejects: First, the text, the book of Judges, and the Hebrew Bible as a whole are all artfully composed and edited. As I shall show, this assumption is essential to Rousseau's reading of Judges 19–21. Second, the characters in our story have also read the Bible, that is to say, the Pentateuch—henceforth, the Torah—and, to use a phrase of Moshe Dayan's, are living with the Bible.<sup>19</sup> Of course, to live with the Bible is not quite the same thing as to obey the laws of the Torah. Yet for all its crime and violence, the story of the concubine in Gibeah is not a tale of idolatry, of whoring after idols and “the daughters of the land.” It is a story about people who take their language, prejudices, values, and precedents from their own understanding of the Torah, even when their response to Torah law is to repeat the crimes the Torah condemns.

If the characters in the tale of the concubine in Gibeah read and live with the Torah, then the Benjaminites must know the story of Lot and the angels in Sodom in Genesis 19:1–11, whose language Judges 19 echoes closely. In Genesis, two angels in the guise of men are sent to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah and to rescue Abraham's nephew Lot and his family. Arriving at the city gate, they are greeted by Lot, who, thinking them men, entreats them repeatedly, despite their polite refusals, to lodge with him. They finally acquiesce, and Lot takes them home and feeds them, but before all can retire, the men of Sodom encircle Lot's house and demand the two strangers, “that we may know them.” Lot goes

preceding eighteen chapters, one scholar argues that Judges 19–21 is anti-monarchic but therefore does not really belong in Judges, which is a pro-monarchic book. Perhaps we historians of political thought have something to learn from the Bible critics: to interpret a text, first make up a theory, then obelize any portion of the text that refutes it.

<sup>19</sup> See Moshe Dayan, *Living with the Bible* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1978).

outside, closes the door behind him, and offers his two virgin daughters to the Sodomites to do with “as seems good” to them. The mob refuses the daughters and demands the strangers, but the strangers pull Lot back into the house and smite the Sodomites blind, so that they cannot break down the door.

Most contemporary readers think that Judges 19 follows from the Sodom story and that the author relies on the reader’s knowledge of that incident.<sup>20</sup> It would seem that the characters’ behavior makes sense only if they—and not just the biblical narrator—know the Sodom story; they just disagree on how to read it exactly. The thugs of Gibeah think it licenses homosexual stranger rape, and that story prompts their desire to “know” the man. In the Septuagint version of Judges 19:24, the old man begs them not to do this *rēma*, this word or saying. *Rēma* is a literal translation of the Hebrew *davar*. This translation suggests that the men of the city wish to do something they have heard said—that is, something they have heard in recitations of the Sodom story. Whereas the men of Sodom ignore Lot’s offer of his daughters and attempt to break into his house and seize the male travelers (Genesis 19:9), the men of Gibeah take the concubine and go away, since they have no spontaneous desire for the young beauty (to use Rousseau’s terms) of the Levite himself.

The aged host, for his part, understands from Genesis 19 that Lot really intended to offer his daughters to the crowd. Yet the old man offers not only his daughter but his guest’s concubine. The old Ephraimite reads Genesis 19 as implying that offering two women to prevent a violation of hospitality is a more crucial detail of how to respond to local thugs threatening to rape your male guest than whether both women are yours or whether one of them belongs to your guest. Of course, we are licensed by the narrator’s version of events to infer that the old man, having feasted with the Levite, knows his guest’s real feelings for his concubine. Moreover, unlike Lot, who is speaking hyperbolically, the men in the house in Gibeah actually partly follow through on their offer and turn over one of the women. Fokkelman comments, “under the pressures of terror and crime, good manners and morals crumble like a house of cards.”<sup>21</sup> I would argue, against Fokkelman, that what we see in the story of Judges is how what in Genesis 19 is an extraordinary, strictly verbal response to an extraordinary situation becomes, in Judges 19, an expected

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Stuart Lasine, “Guest and Host in Judges 19: Lot’s Hospitality in an Inverted World,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29 (1984), pp. 37–59; Robert Alter, “Allusion and Literary Expression,” in Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), pp. 111–113.

<sup>21</sup> Fokkelman, “Structural Remarks,” p. 44 n. 20.

and actually performed response to a familiar situation, *thanks to the influence of the text of Genesis 19*. The old man and his guest do not read the Sodom story in Genesis as we would like to believe that we would.<sup>22</sup>

With regard to this second critical assumption, that not just the narrator but the characters themselves have read and deliberately echo the language of the preceding biblical texts, Rousseau's position is much more ambiguous. There is a great deal at stake for him precisely because both the biblical text and his rewriting address the central issue of the prospects for happiness in a society governed by a law that channels—and therefore sometimes represses and even perverts—human desires. Our story is certainly an example of the disorders brought on by sexual passion, and such disorders, Rousseau suggests in the *Second Discourse*, arise “together with the Laws themselves” that regulate them.<sup>23</sup>

But what exactly does “together” mean here? On the one hand, *The Levite* is set during a period “when the simplicity of mores rendered superfluous the empire of laws.” On the other hand, the Levite refers explicitly to “the laws of the Lord” (2:1209). Should we agree with C.N. Dugan and Tracy Strong, who interpret the story as taking place “in the time before law”?<sup>24</sup> Rousseau goes so far as to claim that the tale of the Levite is a story of “unheard-of crimes” (*forfaits inouis*) (2:1208), despite the textual parallels with the Sodom story in Genesis. Yet perhaps “empire” and “superfluous” are the crucial terms: there were laws, but the empire of laws was superfluous given the true needs of Israelite society then, which is not to say that this empire was not present. This is a delicate point, especially if this superfluous empire of laws is divinely mandated. In any case, our story seems to belong to that stage of society when there are laws but no regularly appointed magistrates to enforce them, “in the days of freedom in which no one reigned over the people of the Lord.”<sup>25</sup>

In sum, to understand Judges 19–21 and how Rousseau read it, we need to establish whether the crimes and excesses in the story are due to a reading of the Torah or to a misreading, and what basis we have to distinguish between readings and misreadings. The point may become

<sup>22</sup> Similarly, when the Children of Israel ban Yabesh Gilead, using the language of Moses' war against Midian from Numbers 31:17–18, we are forced to ask whether it is the narrator or the characters who apply the language of the law of Moses to civil war, in order to determine whether such an application is to be understood as correct or perverse.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse Concerning Inequality* 3:157, in Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 155.

<sup>24</sup> Dugan and Strong, “Music, Politics, Theater,” p. 347.

<sup>25</sup> *Levite* 2:1208, 7:353; and see Rousseau, *Discourse Concerning Inequality* 3:180, pp. 175–176.

clearer if I here introduce a third reader, preaching while Rousseau was still alive but years after he composed *The Levite of Ephraim*. The story of Gibeah was used in a 1776 sermon by the great Methodist preacher (himself a former Swiss) John Fletcher to condemn a then-well-known act of defiant lawlessness:

*Certain sons of Belial*, belonging to the city of Boston, beset a ship in the night, overpowered the crew, and feloniously destroyed her rich cargo. The government... requested the unjust city to make up the loss sustained by the owners of the plundered ship, or to deliver up the sons of Belial who had so audaciously broken the laws of the land; and a military force was sent to block up the port of Boston, till the sovereign's just request should be granted. The other colonists, instead of using their interest with obstinate inhabitants of Boston to make them do this act of loyalty and justice, *gathered themselves together unto Boston to go out to battle against the sons of Great Britain*, and by taking up arms against the king to protect felons, made themselves guilty both of felony and high treason.<sup>26</sup>

Somewhere, Americans would like to believe, the Reverend Fletcher went astray in using the rape of the concubine of Gibeah to condemn the “patriots” who perpetrated the Boston Tea Party as “sons of Belial.” But can Fletcher be refuted on the basis of Scripture alone? And if he cannot, if what is at stake in the disagreement between monarchist readers of Judges such as Fletcher and republican readers such as Rousseau has to be decided by reflection on contemporary politics with the aid of abstract theories of right, and not by reflection on the proper interpretation of the Bible, what is the utility of the Bible for contemporary political thinking, whether by contemporary we mean contemporaneous with Rousseau, George III, and Samuel Adams or with George W. Bush and Pope Benedict?

Rousseau shows in *The Levite of Ephraim*, and gives a crucial place to this in his autobiography, that he too is attempting to live with the Bible, that is to say, he is taking or adapting his models for emulation from the Bible. Here it is important to note with Starobinski that for Rousseau, “self-awareness is intimately associated with the possibility of becoming someone else.”<sup>27</sup> The contemporary feminist Bible scholar J. Cheryl Exum writes that “By presenting models of acceptable and unacceptable

<sup>26</sup> John Fletcher, “The Bible and the Sword, or the Appointment of a General Fast Vindicated” (1776), in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), pp. 570–571.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Starobinsky, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 7.

behavior for men and women—by encoding messages to men and women about sexual transgression and sexual limits—[the stories in Judges] shape and perpetuate gender roles and expectations.”<sup>28</sup> If Rousseau is emulating anybody in his autobiographical writings, it is the Levite, by telling his story before the world, taking care to disperse the pieces of that story while demanding that they be brought together in order to be read so that the reader will be moved to avenge the injustice done to their author.<sup>29</sup>

Yet we have to ask what it means for a contemporary of Voltaire and a contributor to the latter’s *Encyclopedia* to live with the Bible. Rousseau himself, of course, holds no brief for the special authority of Scripture, since, as he explains in the name of the Savoyard vicar in *Emile* and in his own name in *Letters Written from the Mountain* and elsewhere, he rejects the miracles that could be the only sign of super-rational authority.<sup>30</sup> Since for Rousseau the Bible has no special authority over unaided human reason, only by cultivating one’s reason can one distinguish between readings and misreadings of the Bible, between the patriot preacher’s reading of Judges and John Fletcher’s, between what we regard as a proper moral reading of the Sodom story and the readings of the thugs of Gibeah and the old Ephraimite. What then does reading the Bible add to that cultivation?

The parallel question about Rousseau’s own counter-biblical canon is the central question of *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques* and the *Dialogues*. Is it sufficient to read Rousseau in order to understand him, or must this reading be supplemented with knowledge of his person? Rousseau famously tries to give us this personal knowledge through *The Confessions*, the *Dialogues*, and the *Reveries*, but those, too, are texts we have to know how to read.

<sup>28</sup> J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narrative*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplementary Series* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1993), pp. 163, 171–172.

<sup>29</sup> Kavanagh, “Rousseau’s *The Levite of Ephraim*.”

<sup>30</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 4:605–629, 635–636, pp. 293–309, 313–314; Rousseau, *Letters Written from the Mountain*, in Rousseau, *Collected Writings*, vol. 9; *Letter to Beaumont*, *Letters Written from the Mountain*, and *Related Writings*, ed. Christopher Kelly and Eve Grace, trans. Christopher Kelly and Judith R. Bush (Hanover and London: Dartmouth College and University Press of New England, 2001), second and third letters, 3:723–754, 9:162–184; Rousseau to Françières, 15 January 1769, 4:1146–1147, in Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 284–285.

### 3. ROUSSEAU'S ROMANTICIZATIONS

Rousseau romanticizes the story of the Levite and his concubine, literally. After the fashion of the early modern novelists (*romanciers*), he uses Homeric tools to tell his story: There is the pastiche *Iliad* invocation of wrath (2:1208); and the similes of the Cyclopes of Mount Etna (2:1213), the men of Gibeah falling upon the concubine like wolves descending on a sheepfold from the Alps (2:1214), and the dead, like locust's shells, scattered on the beach at Eilat (2:1217–1218); and even the somewhat notorious image of the cannonballs (2:1221). Rousseau is aware, as these examples show, that Homeric similes are frequently drawn from a world that is not that of the heroes of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and so he tells a biblical tale using metaphors from the world of classical Greek and Roman literature and even from the world of the eighteenth century.

Moreover, Rousseau turns the affair of the Levite and his concubine into a romance. Every reader of Judges wonders why the Levite is said to have a concubine, since he is not recorded as having a wife. In the Hebrew Bible, a concubine (*pilegesh*) generally means a wife of lower status than other wives. It therefore sounds as odd in Hebrew that the Levite has a concubine but no wife as it would be in English to say today that an unmarried man has a mistress.<sup>31</sup>

Rousseau's explanation is unique among readers of the text, and it makes up in ingenuity what it lacks in plausibility, for he relates the story in Judges to the law given to the daughters of Zelophehad ("Salphaad") in Numbers (27:1–11, 36:5–12). Normally, a father of sons and daughters passes his land only to his sons. Under the law given through Moses to the daughters of Zelophehad, daughters inherit land when there are no sons. Yet since tribal membership follows the male only, heiresses are forbidden to marry outside their tribe, so that their inheritance will not pass outside of the tribe. We must read Judges with Numbers, and we have to read Judges on the assumption, Rousseau suggests, that the characters in Judges also have read or know the laws of Numbers.<sup>32</sup> In

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Rousseau, "Who other than me can honor as his wife (*honoré comme sa femme*) the one whom I received a virgin?" (*Levite* 2:1210, 7:354). In attempting to win back his concubine, the Levite offers to honor her as his wife but not to take her as his wife: a careful ambiguity. The Levite's maintaining this woman without the form of marriage, in Rousseau's retelling, obviously echoes Rousseau's relationship to Thérèse, not least because he could not marry her legally in France because of her Catholic birth and his Protestant confession.

<sup>32</sup> Here the discrepancies between the two versions of the note on Numbers (see 2:1209 n. c) do not affect the matter decisively.

Rousseau's account, the girl of Bethlehem in Judah outranks the Levite. She has a claim to land, while he and his sons and daughters are barred from any such inheritance.<sup>33</sup> She is a young woman of Judah, who belongs to the people of Bethlehem, while he is a Levite, who belongs nowhere except as a servant in the House of the Lord, who may even live in a tent, and therefore dwells almost as a stranger in the land of Ephraim.<sup>34</sup>

Since Rousseau wants to romanticize the relationship between the girl and the Levite, he must deal with the seemingly unromantic answers the biblical text offers to two crucial questions: why (and how) the concubine left the Levite, and how she came to be "thrown to the wolves." At the beginning of the narrative, the Hebrew text says *vatzineh alav pilagsho*, "she whored against him" (Judges 19:2), and readers—at least since the translators of the Septuagint—have been puzzled by the obvious question: If she was unfaithful to him, how could he want her back? (The Levite's subsequent conduct certainly gives us serious reason to doubt whether he genuinely cherishes her.)<sup>35</sup>

Some manuscripts of the Septuagint thus render the verb *vatzineh* (and she whored) as *eporeuthē*, "she went away from him," and Rousseau himself follows this objection to taking the Hebrew in its usual literal sense, even though eighteenth-century Protestant French translations (like the

<sup>33</sup> Judith Still gets Rousseau's application of Numbers half right (Still, *Justice and Difference*, p. 151); in Rousseau's account, the Levite is forbidden to inherit from the girl, as a Levite and a stranger to the tribe of Judah, but (*pace* Still) the prohibition presumes that her inheritance cannot be impeached by her relationship to the Levite.

<sup>34</sup> The Levite's claim to status in the Hebrew text at Judges 19:18, "*et bet YHWH aniholech*," that "I frequent the House of the Lord" (changed from continuous into present by Martin as *maintenant je m'en vais à la maison de l'Eternel* and similarly altered by both Le Maistre de Sacy and Vence), is elided by Rousseau into "now we seek a hospice of the Lord" (*maintenant nous cherchions l'hospice du Seigneur*) (Levite 2:1213, 7:357). Only Mieke Bal's reading of Judges resembles Rousseau's in claiming that the girl is a concubine not because she lacks the status to be a wife but because the Levite lacks the status to be a proper husband. Bal, too, thinks the woman is a concubine not because her status is low but because it is elevated. In Bal's account, the *pilegish* of the book of Judges (in her view, "concubine" mistranslates) is what she calls a patrilocal wife, who normally lives with her father and entertains her husband only on occasional visits. Judges 19–21 is in part the story of how the Levite's scheme to take her out of her father's house permanently and make her, notwithstanding, an ordinary wife results in her death. See Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

<sup>35</sup> See *inter alia* Nahmanides on Genesis 19:8: "And the host and the guest both desired to save the man by means of his concubine, because a concubine is not a man's wife, and she had already whored against him"; Lillian R. Klein, "A Spectrum of Female Characters in the Book of Judges," in Brenner, *Feminist Companion to Judges*, p. 29. In *Emile et Sophie*, Sophie is resolute in denying Emile any reconciliation after she is unfaithful to him.



King James) translate the Hebrew of Judges 19:2 literally.<sup>36</sup> In Rousseau's version, the young girl left the Levite out of boredom, "perhaps because he left nothing for her to desire" (2:1210).<sup>37</sup> We usually think of Rousseau as a preacher of feminine mystery and male openness, but here, as in the relationship of Julie and Wolmar, male openness leads to female ennuï.<sup>38</sup> To preserve female desire, men must be open but reserved, apart, as in the famous dance of the regiment of Saint-Gervais in the *Letter to D'Alembert* (5:123–124 n., 10:351 n.). But at least in Rousseau's version the concubine was not unfaithful to him: having left, she returned, still chaste, to her father's house.

Why, then, does she agree to return with the Levite to the hills of Ephraim? In the Hebrew, he travels to Bethlehem to speak to her heart; that is, as Mieke Bal points out, to her reason.<sup>39</sup> Hence the servants and the donkeys: the Levite, notwithstanding his landlessness, intends to make an impression, as Bal suggests, of material adequacy. Yet while according to the Masoretic Hebrew text the concubine ushers the Levite into her father's house, the narrative never shows him actually speaking to her, as contemporary feminist scholars have noted.<sup>40</sup> In Rousseau's version, "the daughter's heart is touched by the return of her husband." The return itself is wordlessly sufficient to win her back, and she herself never speaks in the entire text.<sup>41</sup> To provide an occasion for sentiment, Rousseau introduces into the separation scene a mother and sisters (2:1211–1212,

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Martin's version of Judges 19:2, *mais sa concubine paillarda chés lui*; *Sainte Bible*, trans. David Martin, rev. Pierre Roques (Basle, 1744). The Catholic translators Le Maistre de Sacy and Vence both have *sa femme le quitta*; I have seen a 1739 Cologne version of Le Maistre de Sacy, but Vence only in an 1828 Paris reprint (*Sainte Bible de Vence en Latin et en Français* [Paris: Mame et Delaunay-Vallée and Méquignon-Havard, 1828]). Earlier French Catholic translators, I am told, follow the Alexandrian Codex of the Septuagint, which in place of *eporeuthē ap autou* ("she went away from him") reads *orgisthē autōi* ("she became angry with him"). On the textual problem and its apologetic causes, see George F. Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1895), pp. 409–410; Wingrove, "Republican Romance," p. 342 n. 31; Kavanagh, "Rousseau's *The Levite of Ephraim*," p. 417 n. 9.

<sup>37</sup> Rousseau may owe something on this point to Josephus' retelling of Judges 19–21, also somewhat romanticized; see Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities* V, 137.

<sup>38</sup> See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie* 2:689, 6:566, cited in James Swenson, *On Rousseau, Considered as One of the Authors of the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 140.

<sup>39</sup> Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, p. 90.

<sup>40</sup> Danna N. Fewell, "Judges," in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *The Women's Bible Commentary*, exp. ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998), p. 81; cf. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narrative* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

<sup>41</sup> Rousseau, *Levite* 2:1210, 7:355; see also Still, *Justice and Difference*, pp. 142–143.

7:355–356): There cannot be brothers, of course, according to Rousseau’s explanation of her status as concubine.

How does the nameless girl get tossed to the wolves? In the Hebrew text, she is offered by the host, together with his daughter, and she is put out by her husband/owner/master.<sup>42</sup> In Rousseau’s text, the Ephraimite host offers only his daughter, and it is to protect the host’s daughter rather than himself that the Levite silently discharges his concubine. George F. Moore, writing a century ago, comments on the original that “The Levite gives up the woman to save himself. To us this seems quite as bad as the conduct of the mob in the street; but nothing indicates that the author felt it merited condemnation or contempt.”<sup>43</sup> The indication Moore misses is the fact that the Levite lies to the assembled tribes about what happened: Rousseau, as we shall see, modifies his lie, while putting an oath in the mouth of the Levite that he is speaking the truth.<sup>44</sup> We might also wonder how Moore knows the narrator disapproves of the conduct of the mob outside the house.

Having been raped and tortured, the concubine collapses at the old man’s door, her hand on the threshold. The Levite, unknowing, wakes up and is ready to move on: he gets up to go, without a thought for her.<sup>45</sup> Opening the door to leave, the Levite sees her lying there and calls to her to get up. She does not answer—in the Greek (followed by the Latin, the 1599 annotations to the English Geneva Bible, the French versions of *Le Maître de Sacy* and *Vence*, and the respectable commentators), because she is dead. By refusing to say she is dead, the Hebrew text (followed by the Protestant French translators such as David Martin as well as the King James version) forces us to see events through the eyes of the Levite: He does not know that she is dead.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, as Schneider expounds the text:

The point that is clear by the way this verse is narrated is that the man did not express any remorse nor did he feel responsible for her plight. He made no attempt to save her from the fate to which he threw her. There is no indication that he would have sought her out had she not been lying there. He felt no need to “talk to her heart,”

<sup>42</sup> See Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, on the use of these terms for the Levite in his relationship to his concubine/wife in Judges 19–20.

<sup>43</sup> Moore, *Judges*, p. 418.

<sup>44</sup> Rousseau, *Levite* 2:1216, 7:359; Bal, “Body of Writing.”

<sup>45</sup> See the Hebrew critical commentary *Olam HaTanach* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 1994) on Judges 19:27; Pamela Tamarkin Reis, “The Levite’s Concubine: New Light on a Dark Story,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 20:1 (2006), p. 142.

<sup>46</sup> See Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, p. 190.

or even ask her how she was. It is difficult to assume that he had intended to find her to woo her back for the joy of her company all along. In fact, the quickness with which he threw her to the mob almost seems to indicate that it was an opportunity he was seeking.<sup>47</sup>

This, harsh as it is, is the plain, literal meaning of the Hebrew text (the *pshat*).

In Rousseau's retelling, the Levite tries to comfort her. Seeing she is dead, "[h]e finished these words ready to follow her, and survived her only in order to avenge her" (2:1215, 7:358). In this version, the Levite indeed follows his concubine in death—he is romantically stuck on her still. The question is, to what end does Rousseau retell the story so romantically, rather than tell his own appropriately edifying romantic stories, as he had already shown he could do in *Julie*?

Rousseau's most manifest romanticizing departure from his biblical source is, as stated, the tale of the maiden Axa and her lover Elmacin with which, in the fourth canto of *The Levite*, he embroiders his account of the rape of the maidens of Shiloh. In the biblical text, as we saw, the Israelites plot how to excuse the rape of the Shilonite maidens should the Benjaminites be confronted by the girls' fathers and brothers, but no confrontation is depicted. Rousseau shows us the confrontation that the Israelites anticipated, and particularizes it:

Axa [the Shilonite maiden], the tender among others, in throwing herself into the arms of her mother, whom she saw run up, furtively cast her eye on young Elmacin to whom she had been promised and who came full of grief and rage to free her at the price of his blood. Elmacin saw her again, extended his arms, cried out and could not speak; the race and emotion had put him out of breath. The Benjaminite [who had taken Axa] perceived this transport; he divined all, he moaned, and ready to withdraw, he saw Axa's father arrive.<sup>48</sup>

Axa's father is, it turns out, the very old man of Lebonah (for the toponym, see Judges 21:19), who in Rousseau's version had counseled the rape of the Shilonite maidens. The old man, Rousseau tells us, "had himself chosen Elmacin for his son-in-law, but his probity had prevented him from warning his daughter of the risk to which he exposed

<sup>47</sup> Schneider, *Judges*, p. 264; see also *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 2, p. 877, on Judges 19:27–28.

<sup>48</sup> Rousseau, *Levite* 2:1222–1223, 7:365. Elmacin is about as Hebrew a name as *Julie's* Milord Bomston is English, though in his translation John Scott unconsciously tries to Hebraize it a little by adding (albeit only once) an "h" that is not in the *Pléiade*.

[the daughters] of other people.” Axa yields herself in a swoon to the Benjaminite, in obedience to the demands of what her father calls “the salvation of your people and the honor of your father” (2:1223, 7:365). Elmacin, having lost his one true love to the benevolent schemes of his would-be father-in-law, takes a most un-Hebraic vow of celibacy: “since I cannot be yours, I shall never be another’s.” Elmacin has been neglecting his study of the Torah in favor of reading *Julie*, since he is so eager to emulate St. Preux.

#### 4. HOW TO WIN FRIENDS AND INFLUENCE PEOPLE WITH A FEMALE CORPSE

With what we, in the aftermath of Rousseau, call a romantic preference for signs over words, the author would like us to believe that a visible sign could, in a healthier human condition, be self-interpreting without a verbal message. As he writes in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*: “When the Levite of Ephraim wanted to avenge the death of his wife, he did not write to the Tribes of Israel; he divided the body into twelve pieces and he sent them to them. At this horrible sight they ran to arms, crying with one voice: *No, never has anything like this happened in Israel, from the days our fathers left Egypt to this day*” (5:377, 7:291). The Levite brings (the body of) his concubine to his dwelling in the hills of Ephraim and performs what can only be called an unlimbing, as a priest does of an animal sacrifice. For this imitation of sacrifice and sacerdotal distribution of meat, the Levite uses the special knife called a *ma'achelet*, the knife last seen, as it were, in the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:9).

*Le barbare*, as Rousseau fittingly calls him, distributes the twelve portions of limb as messages to all of Israel (2:1215, 7:359). But what does this message mean, and how are we to read it? It is, without doubt, a sign that provokes an immediate reaction, as Rousseau famously notes in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (5:377, 7:291). But to what do the recipients react: the crime of the thugs of Gibeah, or “the barbarians” unlimbing?<sup>49</sup> Horeck writes that “One might say that in the *Lévite* the writing with the raped woman’s body is called upon as a necessary remedy to a critical situation, while it is itself the critical situation to which a remedy is sought.”<sup>50</sup> Mieke Bal, for her part, borrows a phrase from

<sup>49</sup> As per Horeck, *Public Rape*, p. 53; see also Alice A. Keefe, “Rapes of Women, Wars of Men,” *Semeia* 61 (1993), pp. 79–97, esp. p. 86.

<sup>50</sup> Horeck, *Public Rape*, p. 53.

Shoshana Felman, “This is a case, if there ever is one, of the scandal of the speaking body.”<sup>51</sup>

The modern example closest to the sign offered by the Levite is perhaps Fred Spear’s famous poster (see opposite p. 316 above), issued in 1915 by the “Boston Committee of Public Safety”—echoes of Robespierre and Paul Revere—as a reminder of the sinking of the *Lusitania* (see figure).<sup>52</sup>

Even if we know the context of the poster—unrestricted German submarine warfare, American entry into the war, and so on—would we know what to do in response without the word in red at the bottom?

We can imagine ourselves as young men of Boston seeing the poster and rushing to the nearest recruiter. Thanks to a certain movie about Texas and timbering equipment,<sup>53</sup> we can imagine the Levite unlimbing the woman. Yet can we imagine receiving the Levite’s message? What would it be like to receive a message in the form of a small, footless human shin, covered in dust and blood and beginning to rot?<sup>54</sup> Rembrandt sketched the Levite finding his concubine in the morning,<sup>55</sup> but the reception of the message is not a scene he thought to illustrate, nor is it listed as one of the ideas for sketches Rousseau offered his publisher when they were planning to publish *The Levite of Ephraim* with the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* and *On Theatrical Imitation* (see 2:1926). As the twentieth-century Catholic commentator Alberto Soggin puts it, “the symbolism appears to be missing.”<sup>56</sup> The unlimbing is a setting aside of language as a means of maintaining cultural order. Yet the verbiage that is repressed returns once the Israelites interpret the sign as a call to arms

<sup>51</sup> Mieke Bal, “Speech Acts and Body Language in Judges,” in Elaine Scarry, ed., *Literature and the Body: Essays on Populations and Persons, Selected Papers from the English Institute* 1986, n.s., no. 12 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 5; the reference is to Shoshana Felman, *Le Scandale du Corps Parlant: Don Juan avec Austin, ou, la Seduction en Deux Langues* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980), translated as *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J.L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, trans. Catherine Porter, 2nd ed. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>52</sup> Image from <http://exhibitions.library.temple.edu/ww1/>. I first saw this poster in Luke Sullivan, *Hey Whipple, Squeeze This: A Guide to Creating Great Ads* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1998), pp. 61, 63.

<sup>53</sup> *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, prod. Tobe Hooper and Lou Peraino, dir. Tobe Hooper, Bryanston Distributing Company, 1974.

<sup>54</sup> In the two human sacrifices in the Bible, there is no unlimbing, for such sacrifice is always to be offered whole to God (as an *ola*, or burnt offering), not divided for human use: Isaac is placed whole on the wood (Genesis 22:2, 9, 13), and the offering of Jephthah’s daughter is not depicted or even narrated (Judges 11:31, 35–40).

<sup>55</sup> Reproduced in Bal, “Body of Writing,” p. 222.

<sup>56</sup> Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary*, trans. J.S. Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1981), p. 282, quoted in Exum, *Fragmented Women*, p. 180.

against they know not what, assemble to deliberate, and only then hear the Levite's account of what he was trying to say with his concubine's dead body. The unlimbing is but a supplement to sell the Levite's false and implausible message.<sup>57</sup>

Whatever the message says to its recipients, it does assemble an audience in arms to hear the Levite. In Judges, the Levite omits the narrator's account of how he and his concubine happen to be in Gibeah. More important, he omits the fact that he himself handed her over and that he did so for fear of being raped himself. In Rousseau's version, the Levite almost bites the bullet, but not quite:

The people of the country surrounded the house in which I was lodged, desiring to commit an outrage against me and make me perish. I was forced to deliver my wife to their debauchery, and she died in leaving their hands.<sup>58</sup>

The Levite wriggles out of responsibility only as much as the passive voice permits him: "I was forced to deliver my wife to their debauchery." Yet, as Bal points out, in Rousseau's version the Levite adds an oath. He is thus not only lying but even foresworn when he claims that the men wanted to kill him, when they'd said they only wanted to rape him.<sup>59</sup>

What is of decisive importance for Rousseau, however, is not the technical question of logic, pragmatics, or linguistics about whether a visual sign can be self-interpreting without textual supplementation. Nor is he perturbed by the fact that the visual message makes it possible for the Levite's lies and omissions to be ignored. These lies, which cover up his unforgivable unmanliness,<sup>60</sup> make the moral solidarity they precipitate all the more estimable in Rousseau's view. The author turns to the Bible to uncover and then praise the conditions of society that made the unified reception of and response to the Levite's message possible. "In our day, the affair would have dragged along, been turned over to legal pleadings, to deliberations, perhaps to jests, and the most horrible of crimes would have gone unpunished," Rousseau writes (*Essay on the Origin of Languages* 5:377, 7:291). Somehow the Israelites were able to share the same sentiments in response

<sup>57</sup> Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, p. 35; Schneider, *Judges*, p. 268; and cf. Starobinski, *Transparency and Obstruction*, p. 320. The rhetorical effect of this supplementation is noted by Gersonides as the "Thirteenth Advantage" of the tale; see his commentary on Judges *in fin*.

<sup>58</sup> Rousseau, *Levite* 2:1216, 7:359.

<sup>59</sup> Bal, "Body of Writing," p. 218.

<sup>60</sup> An unmanliness manifest in the midrashic attitude toward Lot in the Sodom parallel; see Tanhuma *Vayera* 12; Nahmanides on Genesis 19:8; Reis, "The Levite's Concubine," pp. 125–146, 140.

to the ambiguous sign of the limbs and the deceptive account offered by the Levite, and thus agree on and execute a swift and united response.

##### 5. SENTIMENTS OF DUTY

Obviously enough, Rousseau sentimentalizes the story of the Levite, his concubine, what happened to them, and what happened as a result. The austere narration of Judges arouses complex sentiments in the reader, and Rousseau articulates (his version of) them. To give a simple example: The men of Gibeah are merely “sons of Belial” in the Hebrew text (Judges 19:22), a phrase whose etymology is unknown to contemporary Semitic philology. The rabbis speculatively read *belial* as *bli ol*, without the yoke of the law, no doubt relying upon the same tradition that the Septuagint follows in translating the Hebrew as *paranomoi*, “outlaws,” and that appears in the glosses given by both Le Maistre de Sacy and Vence as *sans joug*.<sup>61</sup> Yet Rousseau speaks of them as “without restraint, unbridled, without reserve... without justice and without shame” (*Levite* 2:1213, 7:357). The question of the toughs’ relation to the law, raised by the parallel to Genesis 19 and by the Septuagint, Rousseau leaves undiscussed.<sup>62</sup>

Rousseau’s sentimentalization of the story serves to explain the emergence of a categorical imperative. So he glosses the second oracle: When, after the failure of the first day of battle, the Israelites ask the Lord, “Shall I once again approach to do battle with the sons of Benjamin, my brother?” the Lord says only, “Go up to fight him,” but Rousseau adds to the divine command the force of the categorical imperative: “Does your duty depend on its outcome?” (2:1218, 7:361). Similarly, he forces a disjunction between duty and inclination in the tale of Axa (2:1223, 7:365). As in the parallels in *Julie* and in the fragmentary play *The Death of Lucretia*, “duty” is doing what your father tells you to do, as if Richardson had thought Clarissa should stop writing whiny letters and marry Solmes.

By the end of Rousseau’s prose poem, the duty to obey the law of the Lord is humanized into the duty to obey the will of the father, and then depersonalized and exalted into categorical duty. All this is appropriate enough in a retelling of a story about how men act when each does what he sees as right (*hayashar*, not *hatov*, or “the good”).<sup>63</sup> For Rousseau’s

<sup>61</sup> See *Babylonian Talmud*, Sanhedrin 111b; and Moore, *Judges*, p. 419.

<sup>62</sup> Rousseau may be expanding on Martin’s rendering of *b’nei belial* as *hommes fort corruptus*; the Basle 1744 printing of Martin I have consulted, however, cross-references Genesis 19:4.

<sup>63</sup> *Mais chacun faisoit ce qui lui sembloit être droit* in the Protestant Martin’s version, though the Catholics Le Maistre de Sacy and Vence render it *mais chacun faisoit ce qu’il*

colleagues and enemies in the party of Enlightenment, the objection to biblical religion is its frequent indifference to even the most fundamental elements of human well-being.<sup>64</sup> For Rousseau, to live with the Bible—having rejected its claims to special revelation—is to emulate the God of the Bible in chastening the human pursuit of self-interest with categorical commands. What we learn from reading the Bible with Rousseau is that sentiments, and sentimental literature, are invaluable, precisely because of their power to move us to do what we think is right without regard for what we think is good.

Cassirer is thus correct to distinguish between the sentiments Rousseau wished to cultivate and the easy inclinations of social man to his own comfort and status.<sup>65</sup> But what is to be cultivated is not, *pace* Cassirer, the pure morality of reason but rather respect for and obedience to the arbitrary, subjective whims of those to whom we are bound by familial or civic affections. Duty, in Rousseau, is not so much the voice of morality as the voice of identity, as when Julie is torn between her inclination for St. Preux and her sense of herself as her father's daughter. Julie's father, the Baron D'Étange, is governed by aristocratic prejudice rather than by calculation when he forbids St. Preux and forces Julie into the arms of Wolmar. Yet it is the very fact that his action is motivated by prejudice that makes him worthy of Julie's obedience, even if she must sacrifice her happiness and that of her lover.<sup>66</sup> Axa likewise compels herself to remain with her Benjaminite captor, contrary to her inclination for Elmacin, out of a daughter's respect for her father's honor and out of an

*lui plaisoit*, notwithstanding the Vulgate's mention of right, *sed unusquisque quod sibi rectum videbatur hoc faciebat*.

<sup>64</sup> See Mark Hulliung, *The Autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), ch. 1, "The Virtue of Selfishness"; Graeme Garrard, *Rousseau's Counter-Enlightenment: A Republican Critique of the Philosophes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), pp. 74–76.

<sup>65</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. and trans. Peter Gay (1954; reprint, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 96.

<sup>66</sup> See, e.g., Rousseau, *Julie* 2:350, 6:288. I was led to this formulation by Alessandro Ferrara, *Modernity and Authenticity: A Study of the Social and Ethical Thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 103–105, though Ferrara for his part treats the matter of whether Julie is obliged to obey her father as if it were a question of her abstract moral duties and her love for St. Preux as expressive of her identity, whereas I would argue that impersonal morality (and, for that matter, Christian doctrine in Rousseau's time and now), is, if anywhere, on the side of marrying according to one's free choice. It is not impersonal but filial duty, acted on in a way impersonal morality would reject, that leads Julie to obey her father and marry Wolmar. Since she sacrifices inclination and happiness for duty in marrying Wolmar, we should not be surprised that their marriage fails and that the perfection of life at Clarens turns out to be a sham. Yet we must also recognize that Julie's failure to find happiness with Wolmar does not in itself refute her sacrifice; rather, that failure is the content of her sacrifice.



Israelite's superstitious reverence for the salvation of Israel as requiring a full complement of twelve tribes (*Levite* 2:1223, 7:365). Such sacrifices are not renunciations of one's freedom, voluntary self-enslavements of the sort Rousseau condemns as inherently self-contradictory in *The Social Contract*, but free acts of renouncing inclination for duty.<sup>67</sup>

The terrible price that the Israelites, the Benjaminites, the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead, and the maidens of Shiloh pay to belong to the people of the Lord is not, Rousseau wants us to see, a decisive argument against obeying categorically those who claim to speak in the Lord's name. He writes in *Emile* that "irreligion—and the reasoning and philosophic spirit in general—causes attachment to life, makes souls effeminate and degraded, concentrates all the passions in the baseness of private interest, in the abjectness of the human *I*, and thus quietly saps the true foundations of every society" (4:633 n., trans. Bloom 312 n.). Religion, as preservative of social bonds, still "spares more blood than fanaticism causes to flow."<sup>68</sup> True "*douceur de mœurs*," the "gentleness of morals" that Rousseau sees depicted in *The Levite of Ephraim* (*Confessions* 1:586, 5:491), comes not from urbane sophistication but from the sentimental softening of our all too easily hardened selfishness.

Our trouble, Rousseau forces us to recognize in *The Levite of Ephraim*, is that while revealed religion may on the whole be a good bargain, even when the solidarity it effects is purchased at the price of horrific violence, this bargain is unavailable to his readers. Thanks to our sophistication, Rousseau argues in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, no convincing fanatic today can successfully call upon *us* to kill or be killed in the name of God—whatever savages may still skulk beyond the pale of enlightened civilization (5:409–410, 7:317). Rousseau observes this modern gentleness of mores not in complacency but in disgust. Unlike his counter-Enlightenment successors Maistre and Heidegger, Rousseau thinks no God will save us from our inability to obey. Nor is he for the violence of holy civil war. The author of *The Levite of Ephraim* merely wishes us to learn by reading the Bible not to confuse our inability to commit ourselves to a god, a father, or a fatherland with liberation from these bonds, whether for the service of ourselves or of humanity.

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<sup>67</sup> Rousseau, *Social Contract*, trans. Gourevitch (see note 30 above), book 1, ch. 4, 3:356, p. 45.

<sup>68</sup> Rousseau, *Discourse Concerning Inequality*, trans. Gourevitch, 3:186, p. 181, quoted in Garrard, *Rousseau's Counter-Enlightenment*, p. 77.