Where the Body touches the Spirit: the Role of Imagination in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 'Emile: or On Education' and Christoph Martin Wieland's 'Geschichte des Agathon'

This dissertation offers a re-evaluation of the role of the imagination in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 'Emile: or On Education' (1762) and Christoph Martin Wieland's 'Geschichte des Agathon' (1794). My central claim is that both novels develop a pedagogy of the imagination in order to overcome the dilemmas of Cartesian dualism, that is, to form a beautiful soul in whom sensuality and reason, the body and the spirit, coexist in harmony. I demonstrate that both texts highlight the important but potentially damaging role played by the imagination in the development of religious thought, moral sentiments, and sexuality. The texts suggest that while a malformed imagination results in materialism, egotism, libertinism, and despotism, a well-formed imagination provides the foundation for natural religion, cosmopolitan enthusiasm, sentimental love, and a just political constitution. Consequently, I argue that for Rousseau and Wieland, harnessing the power of the imagination becomes the key to reconciling human nature and civil society.

In addition to elucidating the role of the imagination in 'Emile' and 'Agathon', this dissertation also contributes to an understanding of the intellectual affinities between Rousseau and Wieland more generally. In preparation for the comparative reading of 'Emile' and 'Agathon', I survey Wieland's private and public responses to Rousseau and contend that although the two authors differ significantly in their narrative and philosophical approach, they nevertheless share similar moral and political ideals. Both authors acknowledge the ability of the imagination to drive a wedge between the individual's natural inclinations and moral duties, causing fragmentation of the self and society in turn. Yet the imagination, the motor of cultural progress, is not only the source of man's alienation, it is also the remedy for his dividedness. If properly harnessed, the imagination can cease to be the cause of human depravity and become the basis of peaceful human relations, both at the level of the individual and that of society as a whole. In conclusion, I propose that the role of the imagination in forming the beautiful soul has consequences for the collective, and that we can read the moral constitutions of Emile and Agathon as negotiating the possibilities of various political constitutions, including that of a democratic state.

Jean Jacques Rousseau was born on June 28, 1712 in Geneva, Switzerland. Nine days later, his mother, Suzanne Bernard Rousseau, died due to complications from childbirth. His father, Isaac Rousseau, was a watchmaker who often left for extended periods of time to pursue his trade. In 1762, Rousseau published two major works, The Social Contract and Emile, or On Education. Both books were banned in France and Switzerland because
they criticized religion. Rousseau was first buried on the Île des Peupliers. In 1794, his remains were moved to the Panthéon in Paris, home to many of France’s greatest intellectuals, and were placed across from his intellectual rival, Voltaire. Study Guides on Works by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.