JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU—MORALIST AND REFORMER

By W. M. Conacher
ROUSSEAU is an immortal who wears well for the problems which occupied him are with us still. He first blew the trumpet of democracy and also provided socialism with some of its choicest texts. In the matter of faith he was also the first of the modernists and to him was meted out his own prescription for heretics — that they should be escorted to the borders of the country. He is called the father of Romanticism, which Irving Babbitt seems to consider his chief offence, but surely the *fine fleur* of Romanticism is that noble cabbage rose which we now label Victorianism. He too gave us the key of the fields, urging a return to the simple life. He was the apostle of a new education and his ideals have come nearest to realization in the little red schoolhouse, where Miss Watson nurtured the young ideas of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. For good or ill he has cast his shadow wide across the nineteenth century; among those who have sat at his feet are Kant and Goethe, Robespierre and Robbie Burns, Ruskin and Tolstoi, Lincoln and Whitman, Victor Hugo and Karl Marx.

Every generation interprets him again and it is not surprising that two recent criticisms* are so different that they do not seem to be dealing with the same man. Professor Hendel looks on Rousseau as a great moral teacher and considers him to be essentially a Platonist. He shows great

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*Rousseau, Moralist, by Professor Hendel (Macmillan).

*Three Reformers, Luther, Descartes and Rousseau, by Jacques Maritain (Sheed & Ward).*
ingenuity in tracing much of his dogma and dicta to Plato, but is less successful in demonstrating Rousseau's actual acquaintance with the original. No doubt Jean-Jacques took Lami for his mentor and Lami recommended the study of Plato, but Rousseau's own account of his studies at Chambéry evokes the picture of a student handicapped and uneven in his work, a mind of genius no doubt, but with the equipment and in part the judgement of a half-educated school boy. Certainly there is a gap between the Rousseau raw from the country and the Rousseau who held his own in the circle of the Encyclopædists, but this gap may well have been filled up by that veneer of culture which, according to Taine, was the essence of eighteenth century classicism, and above all by that power of assimilation which is the special property of genius. To build up his ideas he plunders all minds which are sympathetic or merely useful, whether Plato or Plutarch, Montaigne or Hobbes, Locke or Pascal, and even Robinson Crusoe! But always he is the brilliant amateur rather than the continuer of any school.

Perhaps it is because he recognizes that a moralist should preferably be moral, that Mr. Hendel passes so lightly over many of Rousseau's faults, and even accepts Rousseau's own rather arrogant justification of these faults.

Quite different is Jacques Maritain's treatment of Rousseau, reformer. The axe is laid at the root of the tree and it is a formidable weapon he employs. He finds fault impartially with Jean-Jacques' philosophy, his reasoning and his character. His doctrine of natural goodness is founded on a faulty definition of nature. When he proclaims his own natural goodness and airily states that though he might be 'guilty' he was never wicked, Rousseau diminishes Christianity because he eliminates the need of grace. Equally it is a poor substitute for the doctrine of original sin to lay the blame of one's offences on society. Rousseau, says Maritain, is incap-
able of reform because he is totally devoid of will, and lives only in a world of illusion and dreams, only attaining to ‘a mimicry of sanctity’ at a moment when under the stress of malady and persecution ‘the moorings of sanity had parted’.

This comes near enough to Dr. Johnson’s uncompromising verdict. “He was a scoundrel, sir, who deserved to be, as he was, chased out of society.”

One is inclined to ask whether there is not a *via media* between these two views and whether Rousseau’s significance does not lie elsewhere. Is his influence on religion after all of so much importance, and is it necessarily all to the bad? If so one would expect M. Maritain some day to deal as faithfully with Châteauneuf and as he has done with Rousseau, and Châteauneuf, the Oxford Movement, Newman—is it not all part of the same drift? When he is dealing with politics or education it is his fruitful ideas, his great sayings which have had more influence than any system which he tries to work out. Indeed systematic thought is where he is weakest, as he confesses himself. His peculiar quality lies in this, that although he begins by taking part in the abstract discussions so dear to the eighteenth century, he changes the character of those discussions because he substitutes for the abstract man a fable of man; he puts his profession of faith in the mouth of an individual and finally he personifies in himself all the victims of the social injustice of the age. He is a poor reasoner though endowed with plenty of common sense, but though his arguments are often sophistry, he has that faculty of ‘enthusiasm’ the lack of which made the eighteenth century so dead and so dull. To blame him for the excesses of the Revolution, as is so often done, and at the same time to give him no credit for the wider horizon of the nineteenth century is simply monstrous.

Rather surprisingly M. Maritain says that a psychoanalysis of Rousseau would be invaluable. Any such operation
would surely reveal that the dice were loaded against him from the very first. Even Arnauld said of Phèdre that she was ‘une âme à qui la grace manquait’.

Let us see how near Rousseau is to that state. First for his parentage. His father made a marriage, necessarily hasty, with a sister-in-law and a few years after departed to be Watchmaker to the Seraglio of the Grand Turk. What a calling! He returned, fathered Rousseau, whose mother died shortly after, and the infant was brought up by Tante Suzon. The father’s contribution was to read romances with the child till cock-crow. Hence a spoiled child with nerves shattered from the start. Hence the world of illusion in which he lived. Then the truculent father got himself banished from Geneva. He left his children in their relatives’ care but took with him their mother’s wedding portion. What a parent! Yet Rousseau always condoned his father’s conduct. As with the father of Le Petit Chose failings were swallowed up in the feeling expressed by Ah, c’était un homme. There Jean-Jacques is then with the aunts and Uncle Bernard and Pastor Lambercier in that presbytery with the portraits of all the Popes. There he has his first experience of injustice, of sensuality, his first book learning and his first taste of the toil of daily labour which this idling apprentice speedily renounced.

And here a word must be said of the scene in which this child of nature was reared, for it is indeed an earthly paradise. Imagine a large diamond ace laid on its side, its southern point being the Mont Blanc. Its north-west faces the Juras, the north-east the beginnings of the Oberland. From east to west stretches for sixty miles the sickle of Lac Léman, issuing from the wide gorge of the Rhone valley. South of the eastern end of the lake the mountains frown darkly behind Meillerie, but their morning crests are relieved by the silvery glitter of the sun on ice and snow. At the western end of the lake the mountains have fallen back to the middle distance, giving
place to pastures, vineyards, orchards, gardens, where vegetation is ripe and luscious as in a green house. Broad is the lake, mirroring the deep blue of the sky. As you climb the slope toward the Juras, higher and higher over against you towers the Mont Blanc, in the evening a deep ruddy copper dome. This was the playground of the youthful Jean-Jacques. Small wonder that in this Eden he forgot the primal curse, the need of toil with the sweat of the brow. This was the landscape where was nurtured the faith expressed in the Profession of the Vicaire Savoyard. This was the lake across which the frenzied St. Preux looked at the white wall where lay his lost love. Here Jean-Jacques drank in the love of nature which he gave as a new gift to aftertime.

Everybody knows how Rousseau broke his apprenticeship and, a merry vagabond, took to the open road. In these wander years he is a Gil Blas of real life. He becomes converted to Catholicism to gain a piece of bread. He is sheltered by the easy-going Mme. de Warens, who whatever her faults deserved her title of "Maman" for she mothered him and gave him his chance in life. He was continually taking jobs and losing them, toujours un lacquais, he says bitterly, but like Gil Blas he learnt that to be lacquais might be the entrée to a career, as tutor, secretary or steward. He was often shown real kindness, he abused it and missed his chances, returning always to the haven with Maman. When he found that he had been supplanted in her favour, he set to work at his books and laid the solid base to his education.

Then furnished with introductions and with a musical invention he hoped to exploit, he came to Paris to seek his fortune. His introductions are useful, but he does not make the best use of his openings, witness his post with the Minister to Venice. A Jesuit who is interested in him bids him cultivate the ladies. He is gauche and clumsy, he mistakes Parisian courtesy for a conquest. He is mortified when asked to supper
to find that it is in the kitchen. He calls three times a week on one grande dame. He is over-polite and over-blunt. Yet he gets some kind of a footing. He is recognized as a man of parts and he has also ses beaux yeux. It is the age when an aristocratie désœuvrée has made a hobby of culture, and aristocratic doors open easily to him. Indeed the kindness that Rousseau so often experienced suggests either a very attractive personality or that society was wronged in the scathing attacks which he makes upon it.

It is Diderot who commissions him to write articles for the Encyclopædia, on Music and Political Economy! He frequents the society of the philosophers, dines with the coterie holbachienne, with whom he afterwards has his famous quarrel. It is at this time that he forms his liaison, which lasts a lifetime, with a servant girl, Thérèse Levasseur. Her mother and family sponge on him. Though he never loves Thérèse, she ministers to his appetites and needs—he is often ailing and in need of a nurse. She even attains a sort of respectability, and Rousseau eventually married her 'in the sight of God and two honest witnesses'. Partly to maintain her respectability—one wonders he does not say to preserve her virtue—Rousseau, so he tells us, sent her five children to the foundling hospital. To-day there are various theories about the truth or falsehood of this fact, about the physical possibility of the parentage, about the existence of the children. Was it a deception of Thérèse or a delusion of Jean-Jaques? The only authority is Rousseau himself who says he told it to several people. Some of these were afterward his bitter enemies and, if they knew it, would have used it against him. It did come out but only as a rumour until Rousseau told of it in the Confessions. (His previous references to it were veiled.) Certainly Rousseau finally believed it and repented of it with bitter tears. He later gave as the reason that 'the rich had so much flour on their faces that the poor lacked bread'.
So far there has not been so much of the moralist and 'reform' has been rather talked of than put into practice. He has become more studious, more serious, and he says he no longer steals.

On the whole he has shown himself to be rather the young man of talent who comes to the capital, conscious of his gifts and of the terrible struggle to the heights. He has become a denizen of Grub Street, nursing in his breast projects which take long years to accomplish. Like La Fontaine he has solicited and secured patrons. He has also thrown away or neglected more chances than fall to the lot of most men in his position, conscious perhaps that his hour has not yet struck.

Then at last that hour came when he sent in a negative answer to the question set in a competition instituted by the University of Dijon, 'Have the sciences and the arts been beneficial or not to the human race?'

He tells us of the strange excitement that came on him when he read of the proposed Concours. It is often said that his successful essay decided his whole after attitude, fixing him in a pose he never got rid of. Lanson says all his other writings are but variations of this theme. This is neither quite true nor quite fair. The question as he read it was 'Has progress improved man?' and progress was tested then by its last and most splendid product, that brilliant French society which would not do justice to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The essay gave him an opportunity to air his grievance; it gave scope to his power of self-expression. All that he subsequently writes has an echo of it and he always writes best when his writing is personal. His immense egotism animates his indictment of society and it is here that comes in that remarkable faculty, that man in the abstract ceases to be abstract and becomes personal. So in his novel St. Preux is not only himself, he is not only the first romantic hero, he is also the type of the whole race of the underdog, pawing in vain at the closed gates of society.
On these themes Rousseau speaks with an accent hitherto unknown, with a new force and power, because so many echo his words in their hearts. Even to-day his words live. "The first man who enclosed a field and said 'This is mine' and then found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of society. How many crimes that man would have spared the human race who tore down the fence and said to his fellow-men 'Don't believe him. You are lost when once you forget that the soil belongs to no one and its fruits are for all.' Can the case for socialism, or apple-stealing, be stated more dramatically?

He became famous in a bound. Everybody wished to know him. His opera was given before the Court. He might have been presented to the King, but he was not shaved! He refused all offers to enter society, to put his neck in the yoke. He succumbed, however, at last in spite of himself. In Paris he had pined and been sick. Mme d'Epinay, a fausse grand'dame, built him a retreat on her estate some leagues from Paris. He hesitated, stipulated, accepted and was lost. Having received favours, he must pay for them. The bear must dance at command. He chafed at it, and at last was rude, ungrateful even, and the lady turned him out. He had made enemies who never forgave him.

But this sojourn at the Hermitage contained another episode of even greater significance to him. His departure from Paris had been marked by what one biographer calls a period of erotomania. He was now forty-seven—the great climacteric. He was haunted by visions of nymphs and sylphs. Perhaps as an "escape" he began to compose a novel, a love idyll between himself and the unknown goddess. In the midst of this the goddess arrived, Mme. d'Houdetot, a cousin of Mme. d'Epinay, sprightly, amiable, cross-eyed, a coquette and already provided with a lover to whom she was faithful, but willing to take long rambles through the woods with Rousseau,
to listen to his torrent of infatuated eloquence, to let him pour his tears over her hand. It was Rousseau's one real love, as fatuous as futile, but it gave reality to *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. The lover finally intervened. There were mutual expressions of esteem, great talk of innocence, and Rousseau, going back to his novel in the serener atmosphere of Mont-Louis, gave it a virtuous twist which has made it unique. In his novel the lovers are parted by a stern parent. Julie, penitent at her mother's death, which her own conduct has brought about, married at her father's dictate. St. Preux befriended by an English Milord Bompston—he lives up to his name—goes around the world with Anson. On his return he is summoned by Julie—it is her husband's desire—to live under their roof and be the tutor of her children. He will learn virtue by facing facts, by a life of diligence amid living examples of virtue and innocence. St. Preux consents and the experiment is justified. Once on the lake in a boat the lovers' feelings are sorely strained, but virtue triumphs in the end. Julie dies in the odour of sanctity, leaving her love to St. Preux, her affection to her husband.

Rousseau read this story to Thérèse and her mother who said at intervals, "*Monsieur tout cela est très beau.*" We do not know what Thérèse said but she was fairly active behind the scenes when the Houdetot episode was on. He copied one version on superfine paper for Mme. de Houdetot, who paid him for it. He also read it to the Duchess of Luxembourg, to whose neighbourhood he had now emigrated.

It was here under the Luxembourg park wall that he had his most fruitful years, the years that produced not only his novel but *Emile* and the *Social Contract*. He made his conditions with the Luxembourg family. He read to the Duchess in the morning. He only visited them in the evening when there was no company. The Duke treated him in a simple and kindly way. Rousseau shed tears at the thought of it. Indeed
this democrat at times entertained very distinguished company, Thérèse giving them strawberries and cream in the garden. To redress the balance he used to sup with the miller Pilon.

Then the scene suddenly darkened. The Emile was condemned and Jean-Jacques had to fly. It was condemned not only in France but in Switzerland, and Rousseau went on his English journey. Here his mind broke down. Hume, his host, was suspected of treachery. He came back to France his mind steadily darkening, obsessed by the fear of a universal persecution. He was in reality quite safe. He botanized in the environs of Paris, copied music for his living. At last he consented to take a shelter offered him by a kindly Marquis, and there, eight years after his return from England, the end came from a lesion of the brain. "Lift me up," he said to Thérèse. "Open the window that I may see the green. Why do you weep? I have always prayed that I may die thus. Look, the sky is clear and radiant. Heaven is opening before me and God awaits me there." Thus with characteristic piety, Jean-Jacques died.

While M. Maritain has dealt out all round condemnation, for Professor Hendel Jean-Jacques is, if not a saint, at least a worthy. Some of the spots that stain his robe have already been indicated. I would suggest that in spite of M. Maritain's reflections, Rousseau still made an all important contribution to thought and progress. For the latter he can have no part in advancing the Kingdom of God because he has no part in that kingdom. His heresies show that he is marching in the wrong direction. The condemnation of his heresies, both in sacred and secular matters, is general enough. From all quarters, from Morley to Brunetière his flaws are unerringly exposed. But something still remains and one might have expected in M. Maritain's treatment of his subject a little more largeur, one might almost say a little more charity.
JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

If one makes an attempt at an appraisal of the thought and purpose, the words and deeds of Rousseau—though space is lacking here for any examination of his works—two points emerge. The first is that while essentially a man of his time, he was also a man who stepped out ahead of his time. His contribution as a systematic thinker whether in education or religion or politics is always faulty and imperfect, and yet he both brings new ideas and a new viewpoint and approach to whatever he touches. The *Emile* is riddled with inconsistencies and absurdities, and yet contains the germ of invaluable truth. The *Profession of Faith* no apologist of Christianity would look at for a moment, and yet in a world of the dreariest materialism the great prophet of the day professes himself a believer, although the evasiveness of his words make it doubtful if he can be called a Christian. The *Social Contract* breaks down more and more as Jean-Jacques tried to elaborate it. At the end it needs to be rewritten in the light of what the author has now learned of his subject. And yet it lives by its original ideas cast in phrases that wave like banners. The 'sovereignty of the people', what does it matter if that sovereignty has no real title-deeds, when it is the sole condition that a people free and adult will accept? 'Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains'. Who at any time before was able to express a whole political theory in one burning phrase?

The second point is his reintroduction into literature of what Pascal calls the detestable *Moi*, and here the one important thing is the degree of his sincerity. Here Taine has a luminous phrase when he says that Rousseau *prenait ses résolutions pour des actes et le rôle qu'il se donnait pour le caractère qu'il croyait avoir*. Though this is quite true, yet in his writings, where the individual wishes to deceive, the artist redresses the balance and we know him in spite of himself. How to account for this dual identity. In France Rousseau was the first pure creative force for well nigh a century and
the creative force does not quite know how to expend itself. He concerns himself with the abstract discussions of the day—religion, education, politics—and his performances, as at the Lausanne concert, are not perfect and often genius has to seek to cover up professional deficiencies. But as at the Lausanne fiasco there was, so he says, one air which charmed all hearts, so there is one motif in his writings which gives harmony and conviction to the whole. It is when he brings himself into the picture, when he sees the problem through the spectrum of his own nature. When he speaks of his imagination, as he does in referring to those lost leaves of the _Confessions_, he means rather the complete sympathy which gave life to his descriptions and experiences of the past, but in the ensemble the great work of his imagination is where he isolates and detaches that part of himself and presents it as the representative man. It is in _L’Inégalité_ that this first comes out. Are we to say that the bondage was not bitter, are we to say that the world is not hard? It is in _La Nouvelle Héloïse_ that in a parable, a fiction, we have his most piercing cry. For all its absurdity and prurience it is as potent as Burns’ _A man’s a man for a’ that._

It is when he comes to his apologia, his confessions, that he seeks to identify himself with the victim of oppression, to justify himself by imputing his sins to society and make his character fit his selected rôle, and it is here that the strain is apparent. That he is not quite satisfied is clear from the sequel _Jean-Jacques jugé par lui-même._

There is the material here for a great spiritual autobiography and such indeed are the _Confessions_. But here again comes in the clash of his dual nature, the artist and the individual. “You shall see here,” he tells his readers, “the truth told more fully than it was ever told before. At the end who can say I was a better man than Jean-Jacques?” But who is the man that makes this confident boast? A man who does
not know himself. A man in whom there has always been a conflict between the real and the imaginary. A man who has been exposed to sickness and strain and has been saddled with a conscience never quite clear. He might, he says, have settled down to a quiet life as a village craftsman, have married a country girl and been happy and 'virtuous'. But the urge was irresistible to be himself and he broke under the strain. He is the victim of the artistic temperament which means finally that in the struggle between the individual and the artist the mind or genius can only develop at the expense of the character. There is not enough vitality to go round and the artist triumphs at the expense of the man.

This is why you have in his confessions what might be called hypocrisy, but which is really self-dramatization, the pose which the artist imposes on the individual which yet he betrays in the written word. A feature of this is the reform which takes so long to materialize, symbolical of which again is the boasted independence, so long a pose, which can only be maintained on condition of Thérèse receiving presents at the back door. Even in his dealings with Lord Keith there is still a touch of this. The same inconsistency overflows into his novel. St. Preux may be a hero, but he starts off as an utter cad. Yet Lord Bompston of glorious memory, though he must have been conscious of the cad, befriended and was sorry for St. Preux. So Rousseau too wins our sympathy. We see in him a type we know so well, something of La Fontaine or Goldsmith, how much more of Burns! We read the Confessions and are conscious first of a spoiled and irresponsible child. We are amazed how much he carried these qualities on into manhood. We wince at some foulness or some falsehood so glibly told. As we read we realize that youth has slipped away, that Jean-Jacques, though he has never grown up, is no longer young, that he is constantly ailing, that hypochondria and a want of mental balance are
beginning to reveal themselves, that though many in all walks of life love him and show him kindness he talks constantly of his enemies, that the word 'virtue' is almost an obsession for he knows it is something he has lost, and for all his talk of virtue there move beside him two ugly figures he will never shake off. We come to the last phase when he is worn out with the strain of creative effort, with persecution and disease—it is now he says that children shun the old because they are so ugly. We read the pages of his last apologia, with its patches of sunset glory showing out amid the ominous black clouds of a mind that is plunging into darkness, and at the end it is impossible not to judge him with all the charity we possess.

"Who is a saint if my husband is not?" said Thérèse. Saint indeed he is not, but rather sinner who all along has kicked against the pricks, but how in his own heart he has read the hearts of men! What power that changed all the after current of events and of thought! Supposing that we ask if there is one righteous man whom he has helped to form? What if that man be Tolstoi, who revered him, and said that he too knew all the temptations and errors of Jean-Jacques!