

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1712-78)*

Rousseau was born in Geneva, the second son of Isaac Rousseau, watchmaker. His mother died a few days after his birth. From this obscure beginning he rose to become one of the best known intellectual figures of the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment, taking his place alongside Diderot, Voltaire and others as one of the emblematic figures of this period, for all that he came to differ violently in view from them. He died in 1778 and in 1794 his body was transferred to the Panthéon in Paris.

Rousseau always maintained that he regretted taking up a career of letters. His first love was music and he composed a number of operas in the 1740s with some success. The turning point in his life occurred in July 1749. He was on his way to see his then friend Diderot who was imprisoned at Vincennes. He read in the newspaper a prize essay question, asking whether advances in the sciences and arts had improved morals. So overcome was he by the flood of ideas that this question aroused in him the realization that he had to break his journey. The rest of his life's work was, he claimed, determined for him at that moment. Rousseau's primary claim to fame depends on his ideas about morals, politics and society. Perhaps his best-known remark is 'Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains'; this reveals his preoccupation with issues of freedom in the state.

In answer to the prize essay question Rousseau argued that men and morals were corrupted and debilitated by advances in higher learning. The goal of prestigious distinction is substituted for that of doing useful work for the good of all. This theme, of people seeking invidious ascendancy by doing others down - the effect of exacerbated *amour-propre* - pervades Rousseau's social theorizing generally. His essay, *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (1750), won the prize; related concerns shape the more profound *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* of 1755. In his most famous work of political theory, *The Social Contract* (1762), Rousseau presents an alternative approach to how we might achieve a just and legitimate civil order. All members of society should take an equal place as members of the sovereign authority and societal laws should come from the general will by which a people gives rules to itself. Only under such a system, Rousseau argues, will humankind live on equal terms bound by fraternal ties, enjoying as much freedom and rights of self-determination as is possible in a stable community. Speaking up in this way for the equal political standing of all, regardless of birth or wealth, Rousseau points the way towards the dissolution of the *ancien régime* and the emergence of more democratically based polities. Precisely what influence his ideas had on the French Revolution is impossible to determine, although his name was often invoked.

Rousseau also wrote extensively on education. In his *Émile* (subtitled *On Education*, 1762) he tries to show how a child could be brought up free of the aggressive desire to dominate others. Instead that child can be caused to want to cooperate with others on a footing of mutual respect. He hopes by this to show that his social proposals are not an unrealizable dream. In this work there are also criticisms of religious dogma and church practices which brought severe condemnation onto Rousseau. He had to flee Paris in 1762 to avoid imprisonment. This, and other related experiences, plunged him into a protracted period of mental distress in which he feared he was the object of the plotting of others. These others came to include David Hume, with whom Rousseau had hoped to find refuge in England in 1766.

Still troubled in mind, Rousseau returned to France the next year, and during the last decade of his life he wrote several works of self-explanation and self-justification. The greatest of these is his autobiography, *Confessions* (written between 1764 and 1775, published posthumously), but there are other more prolix writings. After an accident in 1776, the worst of Rousseau's mental disturbance seems to have cleared and his last substantive work, an album of miscellaneous reflections on his life, ideas and experiences (*Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, written 1776-8), has a clarity and balance which had been absent for so long.

1 Life and writings

Brought up by his father for the first ten years of his life after the death of his mother, Rousseau traced his love of republican Rome to the reading of Plutarch that he and his father used to do. This love, along with the idolization of his native Geneva, provided the inspiration for many of his political ideas. After being involved in a fight, Rousseau's father fled Geneva in 1722 and Rousseau was sent to live with his cousin not far from Geneva for a couple of years. This period in his youth is exquisitely evoked by Rousseau in Book One of *Confessions* (1764-75). When he returned to Geneva his more lowly social station became apparent and he was indentured to an engraver, Abel Ducommun, a brutal and ill-educated man.

Restless and dissatisfied, Rousseau was more than glad to take advantage of the mischance of being locked out of the city on a Sunday in 1728. He walked away from that life, seeking the help of a Catholic priest who sent him to see Françoise-Louise de la Tour, Baronne de Warens, who was in receipt of money to secure more Catholic converts. She sent him, in turn, to Turin for instruction and Rousseau was admitted to the Church in April 1728. It is doubtful that Rousseau had any deep spiritual involvement in this process; he was more anxious to retain others' interest in him. He had a number of shortlived jobs in Turin. In one of these, he lied about stealing a ribbon and put the blame on a servant girl. This wicked deed preyed on his mind for the rest of his life.

The next year, he made his way back to Madame de Warens. He learned the rudiments of music and his passion for music was a dominant force in his life at this time. By the Autumn of 1731 he had moved in permanently with Madame de Warens. They lived a life of innocent delight for some years, she calling him *petit* and he calling her *maman*. He became her lover in 1733, although he appears never to have enjoyed this almost incestuous relationship. He read avidly during this time, laying a foundation for many of his later writings.

This idyll did not endure, however. Rousseau was displaced in Madame de Warens's affections in 1738. Considerably aggrieved, he took up the post of tutor to the two sons of Jean Bonnot de Mably in Lyons in 1740. Not an adept teacher, he gave up the post after a year determined to make his way in the larger world of Paris where he moved in 1742 (two short essays on education date from this time).

Once there, he presented a paper on musical notation to the Academy of Sciences; this was published in 1743 as *Dissertation on Modern Music*. In that year, Rousseau went to Venice as secretary to the French Ambassador. They quarrelled and Rousseau returned to Paris to resume his musical compositions. About this time he set up home with his mistress, Thérèse Levasseur, who was to be his lifelong companion. He had a number of children by her, whom he abandoned to his later shame. Rousseau had also begun to keep the company of the rising Parisian intelligensia. Diderot was a personal friend and it was while on the way to visit him during one of his periodic bouts of imprisonment that Rousseau had the experience that fixed the course of the rest of his life. The Academy at Dijon had advertised a prize essay question asking whether the advancements in the sciences and arts had improved morals. Rousseau saw this and was so overwhelmed by a flood of insights evoked by it that (he said) he spent the rest of his life trying to put into words what he had seen in one hour. Rousseau, answering the question with a firm 'No', won the prize and his essay was published in 1750 under the title *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*. He was poised to begin a new career as social critic, moralist and philosopher, but his last triumphs as a composer and musical theoretician also occur about this time. His opera *Le Devin du Village* was performed before the King at Fontainebleau in 1752 and his *Letter on French Music* (1753) created an enormous stir as part of a large-scale argument over the relative merits of the French and Italian styles.

Rousseau was soon to turn his back on Parisian society. He wrote a further, very original, essay on social questions, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755) but then withdrew to the countryside the better to meditate and write about his new concerns, attracting the scorn of many of his erstwhile friends. Around this time he returned to the protestant faith of his childhood, and reclaimed his citizenship of Geneva. The *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* has a passionate dedication to Geneva.

During the next six years, Rousseau wrote the bulk of his greatest work: his masterpiece of educational theory, *Émile* (1762); of political theory, *The Social Contract* (1762); but also a best-selling novel, *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) and a host of smaller pieces: the *Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre* (1758); the *Letter to Voltaire on Providence* (1756), the *Moral Letters* (1757-8), written to Sophie d'Houdetot with whom Rousseau was then desperately in love.

Catastrophe befell Rousseau in 1762 after the publication of *Émile*. A section of it, the so-called *Creed of a Savoyard Vicar*, was judged unacceptable by the religious authorities and out of fear of being imprisoned Rousseau fled Paris in June 1762. Unsettled years followed, mostly spent in different parts of Switzerland. Rousseau wrote extensively in defence of himself and his work during this time, including his *Letter to Christophe de Beaumont, Archbishop of Paris* (1763) written in reply to the condemnation of the *Creed of a Savoyard Vicar*; and his *Lettres Écrites de la Montagne (Letters Written from the Mountain)* (1764), a response to criticism of him made by Geneva's attorney-general. From January 1766 Rousseau spent just over a year in England at the invitation and in the company of David Hume. Rousseau, almost always a touchy and suspicious person, was at that time in the grip of a severe paranoid breakdown and he became convinced Hume was plotting to humiliate him. An account of this sorry episode was given by Hume (*A Concise Account*, 1766). Exhausted and ill, Rousseau returned to France in early 1767 and sought refuge well away from the public gaze near Grenoble where he married Thérèse.

The tide of public opinion was slowly turning, and in 1770 he returned to Paris very much a celebrated figure and object of curiosity, even though he was banned from writing and speaking on controversial matters. Despite his grave mental distress, Rousseau had, from around 1764, been working on his great autobiography, *Confessions*. He completed part one by 1770. He gave some private readings of parts of the text; these also were banned. Other personal works occupied the bulk of the last decade of his life. There is an extensive essay in self-justification and defence, *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues* (1772-6). Its completion was marked by another episode of desperate mental anguish as Rousseau attempted to place the manuscript on the altar at Notre Dame. Later in 1776, returning home from a walk, Rousseau was knocked down by a dog. This accident seems, miraculously, to have cleared his mind and his last work, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1776-8) has a simplicity and clarity of manner missing from the writings of the preceding years.

Not all his work was in self-vindication however. He wrote at length on the political problems of Poland (*Considerations on the Government of Poland* (1769-70); he prepared a *Dictionary of Music* (1767) and he botanized extensively, also writing some short works on botany (*Elementary Letters on Botany and Dictionary of Botanical Terms*, uncompleted). He died at Ermenonville in June 1778, outlived by Thérèse for twenty-two years.

It is useful to give more information about Rousseau's life than is usual for most philosophers or political theorists, since so much of his work arises from events in his life or is directly about himself. This is, however, not so true of his principal works of social and political theory, just because they are works more purely of theory. They provide the most solid basis for Rousseau's reputation, and an account of these follows.

2 Works leading up to *The Social Contract*

From 1750 onwards, Rousseau developed increasingly deeper and more sophisticated ideas about the origin and nature of the condition of man in society and about what could and should be done to ameliorate that condition. His discussion of these themes in his first serious work, *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, is fairly shallow. He argues that increasing scientific knowledge and refinement of arts and letters does not at all produce an improvement of morals either in individuals or in society at large. On the contrary, such sophistication is the offshoot of luxury and idleness and it has developed principally to feed people's vanity and desire for ostentatious and aggressive self-display. All these features work against the moral virtues of loyalty to one's country, courage in its defence and

dedication to useful callings. Rousseau allows for the fact that there are a few people of genius who genuinely enrich humanity by their ideas. But the majority of us are not improved, but harmed, by exposure to the 'higher learning'.

This essay attracted considerable notice and a number of replies, to which Rousseau responded with care. But he did not continue immediately with his works of social criticism. His musical interests intervened, although with some of these his social and moral ideas became entwined. In his *Letter on French Music* (1753), Rousseau criticizes French music as monotonous, thin and without colour because the spoken language (in which all music is rooted) is thus also. This is because, as Rousseau explains in his *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (1755-60, but never completed), the French language has been shaped by the imperatives of calling for help and controlling other people, which require harshness and clarity above all else. In warmer southern climes it is the sweet accents of love and passion which colour the language and hence the supremacy of Italian opera. Thus social and political demands shape even the nature of music, according to Rousseau. Effective government also requires sharp, impressive utterance, he maintains, and it is to the origin and function of government that Rousseau turns in his so-called second *Discourse*, the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality*, to give it its full title. This is a very substantial essay and one of Rousseau's most important works.

In *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality* Rousseau gives an account of the 'fall' of natural humankind, its degeneration and corruption as it joins together with others to make up tribes, societies and eventually states. Natural man (the 'noble savage') left alone in his natural environment is self-sufficient, largely absorbed in present feeling without foresight or recollection, solitary, peaceable and, in fact, most often asleep. (Rousseau may well have had the orang-utan in view here.) Inclement circumstances, increase in numbers (arising from hasty couplings in the forest devoid of all the artificial trappings of romantic love), force people to live together. Sexual jealousy, the desire for domination, vindictive resentments grow up as men come to demand esteem and deference. *Amour-propre*, an anxious concern for tribute to be paid to one's status, replaces *amour de soi*, a simple healthy concern for one's own natural wellbeing. Men begin to compete for precedence and life is tainted by aggression and spite. Those who have acquired dominance then conspire together to consolidate their position. They argue that everyone needs a more peaceable and stable society, which can only be achieved through the apparatus of government, law, punishments. Thus it is that they consolidate the *status quo*, but without right or justice and acting only to perpetuate unfair privilege and the oppression of the weak.

This extraordinarily subversive essay seems to have attracted no official censure; that came later in connection with other works. Rousseau's other significant essay on political themes from this period is the so-called *Discourse on Political Economy* (1755, first published separately 1758), which began life as an entry for Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopaedia* (1751-72; see D'Alembert). A very eloquently written piece, it shows clear signs of being a preliminary study for *The Social Contract*. Much play is made with the idea of the sovereignty of all the people over themselves, expressing their legislative intent through the general will. Emphasis is laid on the need to cultivate patriotic republican loyalties in citizens if a just society of equals united by common care and respect is ever to arise and to survive. The essay ends with a discussion of taxation and fiscal issues, but the principal force of the argument lies in the discussion of the source of legitimate law in 'the people'. It is this same issue which Rousseau places at the centre of his now most famous work, *The Social Contract*.

3 *The Social Contract*

This work is generally regarded as an essential entry in the canon of classic works in political theory and as Rousseau's masterpiece. Many people read nothing else of his. This is a pity, for many of the themes in it are rendered unnecessarily hard to understand by being taken in isolation. Also, the work is in some ways poorly constructed and uses ideas drawn from different times in Rousseau's development. As he says in a prefatory note to the work, it is the only residue remaining of a project begun many years before. However, we must take the work as we find it. Its present reputation would

perhaps have surprised contemporary readers. *Émile* was considered a more seditious work; and *La Nouvelle Héloïse* regarded as the most perfect exhibition of Rousseau's genius. Certainly Hume regarded Rousseau's own good opinion of *The Social Contract* as quite absurd.

The Social Contract is divided into four parts. Roughly speaking, Book One concerns the proper basis for the foundation of a legitimate political order; Book Two the origin and functions of the sovereign body within that order; Book Three considers the role of government, which Rousseau treats as a subsidiary body in the state deriving its powers from the sovereign; and Book Four considers more issues regarding a just society, treating of the Roman republic at some length and of the functions of civil religion. It is important always to remember that the book is subtitled: *The Principles of Political Right*. Rousseau's paramount concerns are normative, with the nature and basis of legitimacy, justice and right and not simply with *de facto* political structures. A useful brief summary of the principal themes of the work is given in Book Five of *Émile*, as part of *Émile's* political education.

Rousseau argues that it is our lack of individual self-sufficiency that requires us to associate together into society. But, when we do so, we do not want to have to accept a condition of enslavement as the price of our survival. Freedom is an essential human need and the mark of humanity; mere survival without that does not constitute a human life. Rousseau holds that freedom and association can only be combined if all the persons of the association make up the sovereign body for that association, that is, the final authoritative body which declares the law by which the people wish to bind themselves. This law is a declaration of the 'general will'.

The notion of the general will is wholly central to Rousseau's theory of political legitimacy (see General will). It is, however, an unfortunately obscure and controversial notion. Some commentators see it as no more than the dictatorship of the proletariat or the tyranny of the urban poor (such as may perhaps be seen in the French Revolution). Such was not Rousseau's meaning. This is clear from the *Discourse on Political Economy* where Rousseau emphasizes that the general will exists to protect individuals against the mass, not to require them to be sacrificed to it. He is, of course, sharply aware that men have selfish and sectional interests which will lead them to try to oppress others. It is for this reason that loyalty to the good of all alike must be a supreme (although not exclusive) commitment by everyone, not only if a truly general will is to be heeded, but also if it is to be formulated successfully in the first place.

This theme is taken up in Book Two. Here Rousseau appeals to the charisma of a quasi-divine legislator to inspire people to put the good of their whole community above their own narrow selfish interest and thereby gain a greater good for themselves. In the course of this Book, Rousseau alludes to Corsica as having a people who have the sentiments and capacities to establish just laws and a good state (Book Two, ch. 10). His passing remark that 'I have the feeling that some day that little island will astonish Europe' has caused some fancifully to suppose that he foresaw the emergence of Napoléon.

Book Three of *The Social Contract* concerns the role of government. Rousseau knows that governors often rule in their own interest, not in the interests of their community. For this reason he argues that governmental functions must be thoroughly subordinate to the sovereign judgment of the people and that it is essential to adjust the form and powers of government to suit the different circumstances (size, dispersion and so on) of different states. It still surprises some readers that Rousseau has no particular enthusiasm for democratic government. Of course, the constitution and functions of the sovereign body are a different matter.

Book Four has something of a disjointed character. Rousseau discusses the Roman republic at considerable length, principally to hold it up as a model from which, in his opinion, there has been a terrible falling away. But he also discusses civil religion, arguing that divine sanctions should be joined to civil laws the better to procure obedience to them and people's loyalty to the common good of all in their nation.

Rousseau made wholly central to his vision of political right the union of free and equal men devising for themselves the laws under which they shall then proceed to live their lives as citizens one with another of their own state. In doing so he depicted a form of political community which exerts a very great appeal and influence on the modern imagination. We are still learning to live with the consequences of that appeal.

Rousseau's political concerns were not confined to theory alone. On two occasions he was approached for help with the political affairs and constitutional problems of countries. In 1764 he wrote an unfinished fragment, *A Project for a Constitution for Corsica*, in response to a plea for help and guidance from the Corsican rebels. Then again, in 1769-70, Rousseau wrote extensively on the constitutional and legislative problems facing Poland (*Considerations on the Government of Poland*) in response to a request from persons opposed to Russian domination. This work (not properly published in Rousseau's lifetime) is a substantial essay which throws a lot of light on how Rousseau envisaged his theoretical notions working out in historically specific situations. He reveals many shrewd and hard-headed practical insights.

4 *Émile* (or *On Education*)

There is some evidence that Rousseau regarded *Émile* as his most mature and well-achieved work. In his self-evaluating *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues* (1772-6) he specifies it as the book in which someone who is truly concerned to understand him will find his ideas most deeply and comprehensively expressed. Posterity has, perhaps unfortunately, not generally endorsed this evaluation.

Precisely when he began work on *Émile* is unclear, but it must have been around 1759 when Rousseau was at the peak of his creative powers. Its immediate occasion seems to have been a request from certain of his distinguished women friends to give them his advice about the upbringing of their children; and indeed, the subtitle of the book is *On Education*. However, within this framework Rousseau gives us his deepest ideas about the origins of human evil and wickedness and about the prospects for a whole and happy life.

Émile is structured as the narrative of the upbringing of a young man (*Émile* himself) who is to be spared the pain and loss of human corruption but made whole and entire by following the teachings of 'nature'. The work also includes in Book Four, a long more-or-less self-contained essay on the basis and nature of religious belief, called the *Creed of a Savoyard Vicar*. Rousseau puts his religious ideas into the mouth of a fictitious priest, although one modelled on priests he had previously known. It was this section which attracted the condemnation of the Catholic authorities and led to the burning of the book in June 1762. Rousseau then fled Paris, condemned to almost ten years of distress and displacement. He wrote at some length in defence of these religious ideas, in his *Letter to Christophe de Beaumont, Archbishop of Paris* of 1763 (see §5).

Rousseau held that most men and women in contemporary society were corrupted and their lives deformed because of the nature and basis of their social relationships and of the civil order (see §2). That man is good by nature, but is perverted by society is perhaps the dominant theme of *Émile*. Thus, if a person is to live a whole and rewarding life they must first be protected from such damaging influences and then be given the personal resources and emotional and moral dispositions to enable them to develop in a creative, harmonious and happy way once they do enter society. The principal discussions in *Émile* are devoted to studying the deepest causes of health or sickness in human development, both those internal to the individual and those coming from external influences, at each stage in the growth and maturation of a person from infancy to adulthood.

In early life it is the tendency to imperious rage and the petulant demand for others' immediate compliance to one's wishes that must be checked. Children must certainly not be tormented, but neither must they be indulged since that gives rise to both misplaced expectations and to even less

capacity to cope with setbacks. Children need to be treated in a steady, predictable and methodical way, as if not in contact with other humans at all at first. Thus they learn to manage in a practical and efficacious way with concrete issues and not to engage in a battle of wills and in contention for dominance.

This motif of living according to nature - that is, according to the actualities of our powers and real circumstances - continues as *Émile* matures. As and when he needs to find a place for himself in society he will not try to control all that is around him and be aggrieved if he cannot as if he were a despot. Rather, he will seek to establish relations grounded in friendship, mutual respect and cooperation proper to finite and needy beings. Our capacity to feel compassion for each other and our acceptance of compassion with gratitude forms, in Rousseau's view, the fundamental basis for human union and the true explanation of the Golden Rule. Real moral demands are not imposed on us from outside, nor are they precepts discovered by reason. Rather, they express the requirements by which a bond of creative respect can be sustained between equals. This same issue of maintaining self-possession and mutual respect shapes Rousseau's treatment of marriage and sexual relations in Book Five. Such intimate union holds out the greatest hopes of human happiness, but can also lead to enslavement to the whims of the beloved. Feminist critics have found Rousseau's depiction of the character and role of *Émile's* intended, Sophie, objectionable, in that she appears to be stereotyped as largely passive and destined for traditional domestic occupations.

In the controversial material on religious belief Rousseau argues that we know God not by reason, but through simple feelings and convictions much deeper and more permanent than any theorems of reason. Such feelings teach us that the world is animated by a loving and powerful intelligence, who is God. Rousseau spends some time denouncing religious factionalism and intolerance which he sees as wholly incompatible with Christ's message of love and forgiveness. There can be no serious doubt that these are Rousseau's own thoughts. The rhetorical distance provided by the figure of the vicar is very slight.

In his deep and subtle psychological insights into the damage aggression does, not just simply to the victims of aggression, but in a complex and concealed way to the aggressors themselves, Rousseau shows the greatness of his mind in *Émile* .

5 Controversial works

Rousseau did not take the condemnation of the *Creed of a Savoyard Vicar* lightly. Almost as soon as he had settled again after his flight from Paris, he wrote a lengthy reply to the criticism of his work made by Christophe de Beaumont, Archbishop of Paris. Written in the form of a letter, Rousseau defends the fundamental tenets of his work. He has always held, he says, that man is naturally good, but corrupted by society. It is therefore a mystery why his work should only now be singled out for condemnation. He then mounts a point-by-point reply to the Archbishop's criticisms, arguing that the religion of the priests and the dogmas of the church must never be confused with the true gospel of charity and love taught by Christ. This *Letter to Christophe de Beaumont, Archbishop of Paris* was published in 1763. It ends on a note of self-aggrandizement. So far from being reviled, Rousseau says, statues of himself should be erected throughout Europe.

Just a year later, Rousseau published his extensive *Lettres Écrites de la Montagne (Letters Written from the Mountain)* . In 1763, the Genevan attorney-general, Jean-Robert Tronchin, had written in defence of the authorities in their condemnation of Rousseau's works in his *Letters Written from the Country* (hence Rousseau's oppositional title). Rousseau again replies at length, arguing that the Geneval political system had become very corrupt, but also defending once more the basic principles of his thought.

These two works date from the period just after the condemnation of Rousseau's most famous works. But prior to that he had also been engaged in some controversial exchanges. In 1758 he wrote the *Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre* in which he argues that to establish a theatre in Geneva would

corrupt the honest morals and civil integrity of that city-state. This was in opposition to D'Alembert's argument, presented in an article on Geneva for the *Encyclopaedia*, that a theatre would improve the cultural life of that city. However, such sophistication is not a benefit, in Rousseau's opinion; it goes along with deceit and the abandonment of morally commendable activities. Rousseau writes with great verve in this essay, harking back to some of his themes in his first discourse, *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* .

A similar clash between urbane civilization and (what Rousseau liked to see as his own) plainness and simplicity of heart occurs in the exchange with Voltaire on the providence of God (written in 1756; Voltaire may also have been an influence on D'Alembert). Voltaire, in his poem on the Lisbon earthquake, had written scornfully of Leibnizian optimism that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Rousseau retorts that one must rest one's certainty of God's providence in feeling, not on the subtleties of philosophical reasoning. More personally, he says that it is surprising to find the wealthy and successful Voltaire complaining against God when he, Rousseau, who lives in poverty and obscurity, sees only the blessings of existence. This *Letter to Voltaire on Providence* also makes some very sharp points against religious intolerance, prefiguring the ideas of the *Creed of a Savoyard Vicar* . Rousseau's controversial writings are among his most eloquent, even though they do not generally add much to our appreciation of his overall intellectual achievement.

6 *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and other literary works

Outside the narrow circle of the intelligensia and his aristocratic patrons, Rousseau was probably best known during his lifetime for his novel of illicit passion, reconciliation and self-transcendence, *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*. At a time when works in different genres were not so sharply compartmentalized, David Hume for one saw in this novel the most perfect expression of Rousseau's genius and could not understand why Rousseau seemed to value *The Social Contract* more.

Rousseau professed himself surprised and dismayed to be writing the work. In 1756 he had turned his back on the hot-house world of fashionable Parisian society, wishing to dedicate the rest of his life to working for the good of humankind. However, as he took solitary walks in the forest of Montmorency, he became absorbed in an imaginary world of passion and illicit love. In a fever of erotic ecstasy he wrote the first of the letters between Julie, her tutor-lover Saint-Preux and her friend and cousin Claire. Saint-Preux confesses his love for Julie; a love which she tries to fend off through intimate conversations instructing him to be virtuous and pure. Of course, this does not work and she finally gives herself over to him in a passion. But her father has other plans for her. She is betrothed to the Baron de Wolmar; Saint-Preux leaves and not until much later does he return to become tutor once more, but now to Julie's two young sons. Wolmar (who has come to know of their earlier intimacy), leaves Julie and Saint-Preux alone on his model estate at Clarens. Saint-Preux confesses that he had never ceased to love Julie, but the novel ends tragically with the death of Julie, who has contracted pneumonia after having saved one of her children from drowning.

As Rousseau wrote this work nature seemed to imitate art. Sophie d'Houdetot, the sister-in-law of Madame d'Épinay whose house Rousseau was then living in, visited him and Rousseau fell in love with her. He saw in her the incarnation of his imaginary Julie. The relationship did not endure. Rousseau became morbidly suspicious that his middle-aged love was being mocked behind his back by his erstwhile friends.

La Nouvelle Héloïse was published in 1761 and was a bestseller. It is seldom read these days, except to be mined for ideas which might illuminate Rousseau's social and political philosophy. Wolmar's model estate is sometimes argued to be Rousseau's own vision of an ideal community, with rigid paternalistic control and substantial manipulation of the inhabitants by the all-seeing, all-knowing Wolmar. It is scarcely clear that this was Rousseau's intention. The fact that Julie dies, despite living at Clarens, may be taken to imply that it provides no adequate human habitation.

The rest of Rousseau's literary output is slight. It includes a number of mostly short poems, dating from the early 1740s, some plays (also mostly early), one of which *Narcissus* (Self-Lover), received performance in 1752 and for which Rousseau wrote a substantial preface explaining how his theatrical writing could be squared with his then political and social polemic against civilized letters.

7 Autobiography and other personal works

The last ten or so years of Rousseau's life were primarily given over to the writing of works of autobiography and other substantial essays of self-explanation and justification. These were presaged in his four *Letters to Malesherbes* written in 1762, just before the catastrophe of the banning of *Émile* and *The Social Contract*. Malesherbes, although official censor and likely to be suspicious of Rousseau's subversive ideas, in fact took a highly intelligent and sympathetic interest in his work. Rousseau became fearful that the printing of *Émile* was being held up by Jesuit plotting. Through Madame de Luxembourg, Malesherbes was contacted and able to put Rousseau's mind to rest. Rousseau expressed his gratitude by writing to Malesherbes four semi-confessional letters, setting out the principal events of his life and trying to make his motives and character plain to Malesherbes. Rousseau writes that he is not a misanthrope; he seeks the country only because he can live there more freely and fully as himself. He wants, in fact, nothing more than to serve humankind, but he can best do this by keeping himself apart and not getting embroiled in quarrels and back-stabbing.

Around this time Rousseau began to assemble materials towards writing an autobiography. He worked on and off at this until 1767, by which time part one of what we now know as *Confessions* was completed. This still extraordinary work of self-disclosure and candour is one of the most remarkable books ever written. It includes some beautiful writing about childhood and about his travels, but also revelations of a most intimate and shameful kind. Part one covers the period up to 1741-2, when Rousseau left Madame de Warens to make his way in Paris. Part two (1769-70) is less successful. Rousseau's morbid fears sometimes surface here as he describes the events of the years 1742-65, including his foolish passion for Sophie d'Houdetot, the writing and publication of *Émile*, and so on. The book breaks off in 1765, just as Rousseau is about to leave for England in the company of Hume, there (he believed) further to be ensnared. As the revelation of the quality of being of another human soul, *Confessions* is almost without equal.

Another lengthy work of self-explanation is *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues* (published, like *Confessions*, posthumously). This is in three parts, cast in the form of dialogues between 'Rousseau' and 'a Frenchman', who together try to delve beneath the surface to find out the true nature of 'Jean-Jacques', the real Rousseau. The innumerable lies put about regarding Jean-Jacques are considered and exposed in the first part; in the second, a visit is paid to him and his true character is revealed; in the third part, a careful reading of his works is made and their true meaning explained. Although sometimes obsessively detailed and very repetitive, this work has considerable interest for the light it throws on Rousseau's own estimate of his achievement. The overall tone is, it is thought, marred by lengthy self-justification.

Rousseau's last work of self-accounting is *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (left unfinished at his death). Cast in the form of 'Walks', it comprises a series of reflections, ideas and meditations which supposedly occurred to Rousseau as he went on his perambulations in and around Paris. Rousseau returns to special moments in his life - his love for Mme de Warens; the episode of the stolen ribbon; his 'illumination' on the way to see Diderot. But he also reflects for one last time on some of his major intellectual preoccupations - on the depth of *amour-propre*; on the sources of malice and on the nature of happiness. There is a clear steadiness of vision which pervades this work which contrasts markedly with the often distressed and distressing writing of the preceding five years.

After his death, Rousseau's grave on the Île des Peupliers at Ermenonville became a place of pilgrimage for Parisians and Rousseau was embraced as one of the great sons of France. His influence remains very great, not only because of his political writings which have become part of the permanent canon of works in political theory, but also because of his more imponderable effect on sensibility and attitudes.

His love of nature and stress on the value of the simple life, as well as his far-reaching explorations of his own character and feelings, make him a central figure in the development of romanticism. The emphasis in his educational writings on discouraging the coercion of the child into tasks which are apparently pointless, undoubtedly influenced the work of Montessori and A.S. Neill (see Education, history of philosophy of). Even Rousseau's musical writings and compositions, seldom studied these days, made a marked impact on the history of opera in particular. His place as one of the major figures of Western civilization is secure, even though he can still attract violent differences of opinion.

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List of works

There is no complete standard English translation of Rousseau's works. The most ambitious undertaking (edited by Masters and Kelly) is still in progress. It is listed here with two French editions of Rousseau's complete works, followed by selected works in French and English and individual works in English.

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