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A philosopher who wrote with passionate eloquence about the heart and the human condition.

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By Michael Dirda  
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*JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU*

*Restless Genius*

By Leo Damrosch

Houghton Mifflin. 566 pp. \$30

The thinkers who matter are those whom the world can't agree about, and usually the more a writer, philosopher or artist polarizes opinion, the better for all of us. In modern times probably no genius of the Western world still ignites such passionate controversy as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Only Marx, Nietzsche and Freud -- in many ways, his successors -- come even close.

Why is this? Because Rousseau blew up the edifice of 2,500 years of classical and Christian thought about the fundamental nature of the soul and society. Until Rousseau, nearly everyone agreed that humanity was by nature sinful and vicious, and that the state, religion and other social structures imposed a needed order on our conduct. Without higher authority to moderate passions, men and women would spend their short, nasty and brutish lives like jungle beasts. From religion and education, we learn self-control and the ways of righteousness; from the laws and customs of society, we are shaped into good and useful citizens.

Not so, said this political visionary: "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." Our natural impulses are healthy and good; it is society that makes us wicked. Where once we lived in harmony with ourselves and with the world around us, now we dwell in a snake pit of appearance and inauthenticity, of competitiveness and conspicuous consumption, of inequality, prejudice and pervasive baseness. Our institutions and governments disfigure and corrupt everything they touch. We long for happiness, without recognizing that it is the system we live under that taints our souls and leaves us alienated, despairing and hungry for something we cannot even name.

How did we go so wrong? In the myth or thought experiment that Rousseau offers in his discourse *On the Origin of Inequality* (1755), he concludes that the serpent in the garden was nothing less than Reason. When people lived unmediated existences in accord with Nature and themselves, when they dwelt like Peter Pan in a perpetual present, they found life simple, fulfilling and harmonious. But on some evil day, one man began to compare himself with another. This led to reflection, self-awareness and eventually competitiveness, then to specialization and a division of labor to maximize individual strengths and weaknesses, and before long the floodgates were opened to envy, accumulation and excess. The clever soon exploited their fellows, stockpiled provisions and gained superfluous wealth -- and these inevitably needed to be protected by guards, by armies, by laws and statutes. And so paradise was lost.

And lost forever. Rousseau says there's no real going back. Recorded history is essentially the story of our degradation. But we can and should still strive to ameliorate inequities; we just might establish kindlier small city-states (he thought of Geneva and Corsica) where governmental regulation could be minimized and civic life made human-scaled, but, most of all, we can liberate ourselves.

Rousseau's contemporary, the arch-conservative Edmund Burke, labeled him "the Socrates of the

National Assembly" (that is, of the hated French Revolution). Come the 20th century, this radical thinker had grown into the great beast of all who revere traditional institutions, worship in established churches and either fear or exploit the common man. Yet no one, of whatever political or philosophical persuasion, would deny how deeply Rousseau's sensibility pervades the past 250 years, from the poetry of the Romantics ("One impulse from a vernal wood/May teach you more of man . . . ") to the slogans, pop songs and lifestyles of the 1960s: Drop out, "Let it be," back to Nature, hippies, communes, self-realization. Yet Rousseauian ideals also lie behind our unabated, unassuaged longings to live more humanely in a bureaucratic, technological and often unjust world. Even the staunchest meritocrat or most self-satisfied scion of inherited wealth must find it hard to discount the truth of the discourse on inequality's final ringing lines: "It is manifestly against the Law of Nature . . . that a handful of men wallow in luxury, while the famished multitudes lack the necessities of life."

Such thrilling emotional language has always contributed to Rousseau's powerful appeal. Contrary to a widespread misconception, many philosophers have also been superb prose stylists -- just think of Plato, Hume or William James -- but this largely self-educated former valet may be the finest of all. Rousseau actually had to beg his readers to disregard his "beau style" and just pay attention to his ideas. But this is impossible. His sentences are musical and absolutely limpid, at once classically balanced yet intimate, oracular and confessional. One is simply swept along, no matter what the subject.

So when Rousseau decided to write about two highly moral lovers, the result was *Julie, or The New Heloise* (1761), the most popular novel of the 18th century. When he published *Emile, or On Education* (1762), a Utopian pedagogical treatise, mothers turned it into a bible of child-rearing. (For instance, largely because of Rousseau, upper-class women began to breast-feed, rather than wet-nurse, their children.) And when Jean-Jacques finally decided to relate the story of his own checkered past, his *Confessions* (1782) established the modern autobiography and, to this day, remains the genre's unsurpassed and supreme achievement.

Yet self-revelation, no matter how sincere the pact to tell the whole truth and nothing but, always possesses a strategy, even an agenda. In his *Confessions* Rousseau hopes to justify his life against detractors and critics by confessing embarrassing intimacies -- for example, his painful need to constantly urinate -- and owning up to his most shameful memories, in particular the incrimination of an innocent servant girl for a theft he himself committed and the abandonment of his newborn children at foundling hospitals. But this public laceration serves a purpose: Before the judgment of God, can any of his readers maintain that their lives were any better? The *Confessions* is, at heart, an apologia.

Which is why Leo Damrosch's deeply informed biography is so welcome. Even if one knows Rousseau's extensive writing about himself -- and this includes that series of exquisite late prose-poems, the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (written in 1776) -- there is still a need for distance and for perspective, for the integration of the works with the life and the life with the times. Damrosch is an academic -- a professor of 18th-century literature at Harvard -- but he nonetheless writes for ordinary readers, with clarity, a light touch and immense zest.

Just a précis of Rousseau's life shows how remarkable he truly was, especially against the backdrop of ancien régime Europe. Born in Geneva in 1712, Rousseau was brought up by his watchmaker father, his mother having died in childbirth. At the age of 12, he was apprenticed to an engraver, soon ran away and eventually ended up hiking through much of Switzerland, northern Italy and parts of France. Along the way he encountered, like any picaresque hero, beautiful ladies, con artists, kindly priests, disdainful aristocrats. But early on he fell under the spell of a Madame de Warens, whom he called Maman and who subsequently seduced him, rather to his dismay: He says it felt like incest. Only in his thirties did Rousseau finally settle in Paris, at first aiming for a career as a musician. Though he was largely self-taught in composition (as in everything else), his opera "Le Devin du Village" ("The Village Soothsayer," 1752) proved an unexpected success (and is still staged today).

In Paris he met Thérèse Levasseur, a nearly illiterate young laundress, who ended up sharing the rest of his life. Choosing to earn his way as a copyist of musical scores, he preferred such a life of simplicity to the "slavery" of patronage. But intellectually that simple life proved abundantly rich, with time to think and time to argue with close friends whose names are now among the most honored in French intellectual history: Diderot, d'Alembert, Condillac. Then one day, on a walk to Vincennes to visit the temporarily imprisoned Diderot, Rousseau happened to see an advertisement in the *Mercure de France* for an essay contest. He entered it with his *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (1750), won and found himself

famous. He was 38, and his real career was finally beginning.

During the next dozen years, Rousseau produced all his major philosophical work, including his most famous, *The Social Contract* (1762), which argues what most Americans believe: that the people alone are sovereign, that they possess inalienable rights and that government exists to carry out the general will. But as the years went by, this upstart thinker inevitably quarreled with the shrewdest mind (and finest writer) in Europe -- Voltaire, *bien sur* -- and gradually grew apart from his old *philosophe* friends. He fell in love with an aristocratic lady, already married and with an established lover; and, as you would expect, things ended badly. In due course, the authorities decided to ban (and even burn) *The Social Contract*, so to avoid arrest Rousseau fled into exile, first to Switzerland (where his house was stoned), then to England (traveling there in the company of David Hume). He was hounded, spied upon, hunted. Yet even those with real enemies can grow paranoid, and Rousseau grew crazily suspicious of those around him. Nonetheless, he found occasional oases of tranquility in his later life and died quietly in a house near Paris provided for him by an aristocratic admirer. His last unfinished works, especially the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, show that his prose remained unsurpassed in eloquence to the very end.

But a passionate eloquence about the human heart and the human condition characterize Rousseau's writing at any point in his life. As a very young man, employed as teacher for a Lyon family, he penned a memorandum outlining his theory of pedagogy. In the middle of these proposals -- which years later found fuller exposition in *Emile* -- he pauses to ask himself what Damrosch calls "an altogether unexpected question that is prophetic of his entire life's work." Rousseau writes: "Nothing is more depressing than the general fate of men. And yet they feel in themselves a consuming desire to become happy, and it makes them feel at every moment that they were born to be happy. So why are they not?"

We still argue about the answer to that question. Whether you agree or disagree with Rousseau's view of man's natural goodness and the evils inherent in civilization, his is nonetheless a voice that simply won't go away. Why are we not happy? Why? Why? Damrosch's biography provides an ideal introduction to both this complex man and his troubling ideas. It is an important book, but also a provocative and exceptionally entertaining one.

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