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REFLECTIONS

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# Rousseau and the Ideology of Liberation

Few scholars deny the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) on modern Western ideas, from Marxism to educational theory, even as arguments persist over exactly what he gave us. Part of the problem comes from Rousseau's style. Believing himself incapable of cold, systematic thought, he relied on personal insight, intuition, and the powerful "impression of the moment." Critics accused him of inconsistency. But the Geneva-born writer who conceived both the "noble savage" and the "social contract" insisted upon the underlying unity of his work. Here, political philosopher Maurice Cranston agrees, as he describes Rousseau's life and two of his major preoccupations—music and civil society.

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*by Maurice Cranston*

Rousseau has returned in recent years to public esteem. Between the two World Wars, he was condemned by Right and Left alike, seen as the forerunner at once of fascism and of communism, an enemy of science and of reason, responsible for both the excesses of romanticism and the horrors of the French Revolution.

But fashions change, in philosophy as in clothes, and events have conspired to make many of the main themes of Rousseau's writings disturbingly topical.

The invention of nuclear weapons has undermined faith in the benevolence of science; the pollution of nature by industry has made many people question the benefits of technology; the enlargement of bureaucracy has thwarted men's hopes of participatory democracy. We are

acutely aware today of problems that Rousseau in the 18th century was almost alone in discerning.

This renewed popularity has its negative aspect: There is a danger of Rousseau's being transformed again from a philosopher into an ideologue, the prophet of the alienated, the inspiration of revolutionary yearnings. Ironically, this is just the impact that Rousseau wished not to have. He sought not to propel men forward to revolution but to urge them to retrace their steps and to recover the moral virtues that had been valued in the ancient world.

Rousseau was born in Geneva—the city of John Calvin—in 1712; his mother having died after his birth, he was brought up by his father to believe that the city of his birth was a republic as splendid as ancient

Rome, and that it was surrounded by decadent kingdoms.

Rousseau senior had an equally glorious image of his own importance. After marrying above his modest station as a watchmaker, he was led into trouble with the civil authorities by brandishing the sword that his upper-class pretensions prompted him to wear, and he had to leave Geneva for good. The boy Rousseau remained behind in Geneva for six years as a poor relation of his dead mother's family, patronized and humiliated until he, too, at the age of 16 fled to live the life of an adventurer, and a Catholic convert, in the decadent kingdoms his father had taught him to despise.

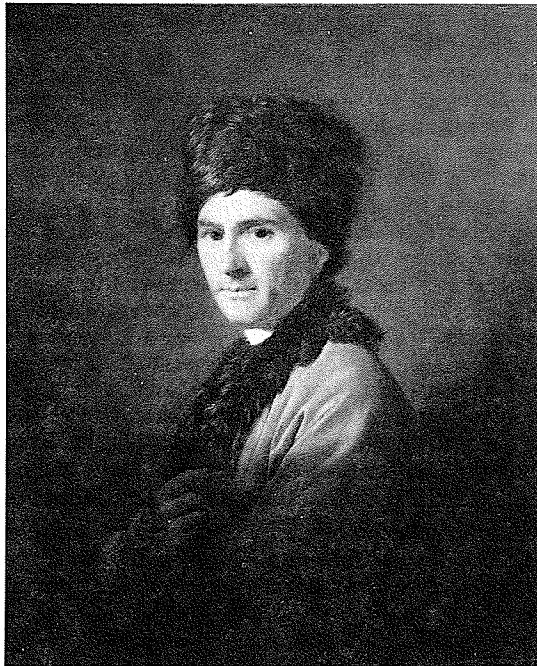
He was fortunate in finding in Annecy, in the kingdom of Sardinia, a benefactress named Madame de

Warens, who not only provided him with a refuge in her home, and employment as her steward, but also furthered his education so that the boy who had arrived on her doorstep as a stammering, unschooled apprentice developed into a philosopher, a man of letters, and a composer, and, what is more, into one who was able to propel philosophy and the arts into new channels.

The Madame de Warens who thus transformed the adventurer into a philosopher was herself an adventuress. A Swiss convert to Catholicism, she had stripped her aristocratic husband of his money before fleeing to the kingdom of Sardinia with the gardener's son to set herself up in Annecy as a missionary, persuading young Protestants to obey Rome.

*A portrait of Rousseau painted in 1766 by Allan Ramsay for English philosopher David Hume. When the two philosophers later quarreled, Rousseau complained that the painting made him look like "a Cyclops."*

*National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.*



Her morals distressed Rousseau, even when he slept with her, but she had remarkable taste, intelligence, and energy, and she brought out in him just the talents needed to conquer Paris at the time when Voltaire had made radical ideas fashionable.

Rousseau reached Paris at the age of 30, and he quickly rose to fame as a member of that group of intellectuals who are known as the philosophes and who were reforming, iconoclastic pamphleteers as much as they were metaphysicians.

#### From Idol to Hermit

Rousseau, the most unconventional of them all in his thinking, and the most forceful and eloquent in his style of writing, was soon the most conspicuous. His music, full of novelty, attracted the admiration of King and court; his writings, full of daring, made him the idol of the salons. But something in his Calvinist blood rejected worldly glory, so that as soon as he won it, he began increasingly to retreat from society into an almost hermit-like life with his illiterate mistress, Thérèse Le Vasseur, whose five children (whom he believed to be his) he dispatched at their birth to an orphanage.

The society that Rousseau attempted to reject, like the larger world of 18th-century Europe, was a progressive one. The great *Encyclopédie*, which Rousseau's best friend Denis Diderot edited, and for which he himself wrote many articles, was fully and enthusiastically committed to the doctrine of prog-

ress in technology, art, commerce, and industry. "Science will save us" was the motto not only of Diderot but of all the philosophes who dominated the Enlightenment.

#### Civilization's Discontents

But it was a motto with which Rousseau could not remain comfortable. At the age of 37, while walking to Vincennes to visit Diderot (who had been imprisoned on charges of irreligion), Rousseau had what he called an "illumination."

Rousseau says it came to him in a terrible flash that the arts and sciences had corrupted—not improved—men's morals, and he promptly lost all faith in progress. He went on to write his first important work, the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1749), in which he argued that the history of culture had been a history of decay.

This *Discourse* is by no means Rousseau's best work, but its central theme was to inform almost everything else he wrote. Throughout his life, he kept coming back to the idea that man is good by nature but has been corrupted by society and civilization. Rousseau did not mean that society and civilization were inherently bad but rather that both had taken a wrong direction and become harmful as they had become more advanced and sophisticated.

This idea in itself was not unfamiliar. Many Christians, especially Catholics, deplored the direction that European culture had taken since the Middle Ages. Disapproving

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*François-Louise de La Tour, Baronne de Warens (1699–1769), was 29 when she first took in the 16-year-old Rousseau. Only two years before their meeting, she had converted to Catholicism and left her husband. The oil portrait was executed around 1730; the artist is unknown.*



*Musée Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Genève.*

of modernity—the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the rise of science—they shared the hostility toward progress that Rousseau expressed, though very few shared his belief that man is naturally good.

But it was just his belief in natural goodness that Rousseau regarded as the most important part of his argument. He may well have received the inspiration for it from Madame de Warens, for although that unusual woman had become a communicant of the Catholic Church, she transmitted to Rousseau much of the sentimental optimism about human nature she had learned from mystical German Pietists who had taught her as a child.

At all events, this idea of man's natural goodness, as Rousseau developed it, set him even further apart

from both the progressives and the reactionaries. Even so, he remained for several years after the publication of his first *Discourse* a close collaborator with Diderot, and one of the most active contributors to successive volumes of the *Encyclopédie*.

Rousseau's specialty in the *Encyclopédie* was music. It was in this sphere that he first established his influence as a reformer, although scholars seem to have forgotten the importance his musical writings had at the time they were published.

Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782) contains a paragraph that has puzzled many readers: "In 1753, the *parlement* of Paris had just been exiled by the King; unrest at its height; all the signs pointed to an early uprising. My *Letter on French Music* was published, and all other quarrels were

immediately forgotten. No one thought of anything but the danger to French music, and the only uprising that took place was against me. The conflict was so fierce that the nation was never to recover from it. . . . If I say that my writings may have averted a political revolution in France, people will think me mad; nevertheless, it is a very real truth."

#### On the King's Side

It is ironic that the philosopher most often blamed for the French Revolution should have seen himself as a man who prevented a revolution, but there is no reason to think him mad for making the claim.

Already by 1753, the various political and social conflicts within France that were to burst out in the great revolution of 1789 were simmering beneath the surface. The attempt of Louis XV to dissolve the great chamber of the Paris *Parlement* and replace it with a Royal Chamber met with such furious resistance that the capital appeared to many responsible observers to be on the brink of a rebellion.

It was not a rebellion to command the sympathy of Rousseau or Diderot or anyone else connected with the *Encyclopédie*. The Paris *Parlements* were judiciary bodies, not to be confused with the British legislative body of similar name. They were composed of ennobled lawyers, often more eager than the royal government at Versailles to defend the Catholic Church and suppress books of the kind that the *Encyclopédistes* wrote. Between the King and the *Parlements*, the typical free-thinking Paris intellectual was disposed to prefer the former.

But is it conceivable that a dispute about music could have diverted aggression that would otherwise have

gone into a political rebellion? Others besides Rousseau believed it. Louis Sébastien Mercier in his *Tableau de Paris* wrote: "The operatic factions made all other factions disappear." And Melchior Grimm, in his *Correspondence Littéraire*, reported that the French public was "much more interested in the quarrel provoked by Rousseau's *Letter* than by the affair of the Royal Chamber."

Culture was taken seriously in 18th-century Paris, and a quarrel about music had already been brewing when Rousseau burst into print on the subject. This dispute, known at the time as the *querelle des Bouffons*, or war of the opera companies, dated from the arrival in Paris in the summer of 1752 of an Italian opera company to perform works of *opera buffa* (hence the name "*Bouffon*") by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, Alessandro Scarlatti, Leonardo Vinci, and other composers new to France.

#### The Great Opera War

This event promptly divided the French music-loving public into two excited camps: supporters of the new Italian opera against supporters of the familiar French opera.

The *Encyclopédistes* entered the fray as champions of Italian music. And Rousseau, who knew more about Italian music than the others after the months he spent haunting the opera houses of Venice when he was attached to the French Embassy there in 1743 and 1744, and who was the principal expert on musical subjects for the *Encyclopédie*, emerged as the most forceful and effective combatant. He was the only one to direct his fire squarely at the leading living exponent of French music, Jean-Philippe Rameau.

Rousseau was quick to realize that the *querelle des Bouffons* was as

much an ideological as a musical one. This is what gave him the advantage over Rameau.

Rameau, already in his 70th year in 1752, was not only the leading composer of French opera; he was also, as the author of a *Treatise on Harmony* (1722) and other technical treatises, Europe's leading musicologist. Rousseau, by contrast, was a newcomer to music, with no professional training, no standing, and no authority. But in the end, none of these factors hindered his triumph. Rousseau entered the dispute as a reformer against a conservative, and it was as a reformer of musical taste that he made his first real mark in the world.

#### From Gods to Maids

The French opera that Rameau defended was not simply national; its music was traditional, authoritarian, academic. Its intellectual complexity had much in common with Descartes's philosophy of mathematical elaboration and rational order; its pomp expressed the self-esteem of the French kings.

Moreover, the *librettos* of French operas proclaimed the same Cartesian principles of order and the same Bourbon myth of *gloire*, the splendor of earthly princes being represented on the stage in the image of gods. Superior beings were impersonated by the actors and celebrated with the kind of music that appealed, with its intricate harmonies, to superior minds or that evoked martial feelings by the sounds of trumpets and drums. French opera spoke to the ear in the same manner in which the architecture of Versailles appealed to the eye.

In all such respects, the Italian *opera buffa* was different from the French. It was not imposing; it was

pleasing. In place of *déclamation*, it introduced arias or songs. And whereas French operatic music was both pompous and highbrow, the Italian was tuneful, simple, easily sung. The themes of *opera buffa* were domestic and familiar; instead of gods and kings, ordinary people occupied the stage.

#### Hearts Over Minds

Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona*, with which the Italian company opened their season in Paris and which Rousseau himself edited for publication in France, is about a bourgeois bachelor being driven by jealousy into marrying his maid. One can well imagine that even the plot of this opera might alarm conservatives in Paris, if such people took seriously the moral of the tale, that a maid is as good as her "superiors."

Rousseau built up his case for the superiority of Italian music over French on one central principle: that melody must have priority over harmony. Rameau maintained just the opposite.

Now this was not a mere technical point, as both disputants realized. Rousseau, pleading for melody, was asserting what came to be recognized as a central belief of romanticism: namely, that the free expression of the creative spirit in art is more important than strict adherence to formal rules and technical precision. Rameau, pleading for harmony, was reaffirming the first principle of French classicism—that conformity to rationally intelligible rules is a necessary condition of true art.

In music Rousseau was a liberator. He not only argued for freedom in music in his pamphlets, he proved the possibility of adapting the Italian style of music to the French theater in a little opera he composed him-

self: *Le Devin du Village* (1752). This work met with immense success before the royal family at Fontainebleau and with the public in Paris.

### Rousseau's Reform

It also proved an inspiration for later musicians. Christoph Gluck, who succeeded Rameau as the most important operatic composer in France, acknowledged his debt to Rousseau's teaching and example, and Mozart based his *Bastien et Bastienne* (1768) on Rousseau's *Le Devin du Village*. Rousseau had given European music a new direction: He put an end to the age of classicism and initiated an age of romanticism.

But, having composed *Le Devin du Village*, Rousseau decided to turn aside from composing music.\* He would go on writing articles about musical subjects, but his creative talents he decided to devote henceforth entirely to literature and philosophy. It was all part of his "reform" or improvement of his own character, a process that took him back to some of the austere principles instilled in him as a child in the Calvinist republic of Geneva.

The political structure of Geneva was unique in Europe, and no one can understand what Rousseau felt and said about politics without paying attention to the circumstances of the political education he received.

Since the 16th century, the town-folk of Geneva had ruled their own city, at least in principle. In fact, the people quarreled so much among themselves that upper-class families took possession of all public offices. The population was increasingly composed of French Protestant refu-

gees, and Calvin himself appeared among them at a critical moment (1541) almost as a lawgiver, elaborating for Geneva both a constitution in which democracy, aristocracy, and theocracy were curiously balanced and institutions to ensure that government was honest and private morality upheld. Calvin's Protestantism was so fanatical, however, that the Catholic cantons refused to admit Geneva to the Swiss Confederation, so the city had to remain an independent state, despite its having a population of fewer than 25,000 people.

The Genevans consoled themselves with the thought that their little city was a free republic, like the cities of antiquity, as noble and splendid as Rome. Rousseau heard a great deal of this sort of talk when he was a boy. His father, a fervent patriot, encouraged him to read Plutarch and other classical authors who proclaimed the value of "republican virtues": courage, heroism, endurance, devotion, honor. Rousseau wrote later in *Emile* (1762): "I believed myself to be a Greek or a Roman."

### A Civic Education

Rousseau seems to have been unaware when he was young that there were profound political dissensions beneath all these appearances of "Roman" freedom and splendor in the Genevan city state. Every adult male citizen—and there were about 1,500 of them when Rousseau was a boy—had, in principle, a share in the sovereignty of the republic and a right to participate and vote at meetings of the General Assembly. Yet despite Calvin's constitution, the old patriciate prevailed; all decisions were taken by the Small Council, which recruited its members exclusively from a few rich families. The

\*He did not resume composition again until later life, when he devised in collaboration with Corancez a four-act pastorate, *Daphnis et Cloé*, and dozens of fragments of vocal music.



Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Genève.

Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

The title page and an engraving from Rousseau's operetta. It was first performed before Louis XV's court at Fontainebleau in 1752. The work was well received.

constitution was a façade, although there were some citizens—including Rousseau's father—who chose not to see it as such.

There were others, liberals or champions of citizens' rights, who at different periods were openly or covertly trying to recover the lost rights of the ordinary citizens. But in the years immediately before Rousseau's birth, this liberal movement had been suppressed by the execution of its leaders, and Rousseau grew up at a time of tranquility, when the propaganda of the patrician regime went unchallenged.

Rousseau remained in most respects conservative in his politics. He kept his idealized vision of the character of the Genevan state (to which he briefly returned in 1754)

until his 50s; and then, dismayed at being attacked by the regime as a result of the publication in 1762 of both *Emile* and *The Social Contract*—books condemned in Geneva as irreligious—he criticized the government while continuing to plead for Geneva's national unity. Even in his strongest attack on the regime, his *Letters from the Mountains* (1764), a pamphlet written at the prompting of his friends in the liberal and radical factions, Rousseau condemned all factions and urged Genevans to think and act together as patriots.

Rousseau's most "revolutionary" publication, his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (1755), was dedicated to Geneva, and he always claimed that his *Social Contract* was inspired by the constitution of



Geneva. Empires, kingdoms, and principalities — institutions of the kind that were standard form in almost all parts of the world when Rousseau was born in 1712 — were truly alien to him. As a result, many of his ideas about politics seemed strange or unintelligible to others or, more often, were simply misunderstood.

One of the most important of these ideas was Rousseau's concept of freedom, which meant something different to him from what it meant to almost everyone else. People who talked about liberty in France or England or America meant the rights of the individual to do what he wanted to do, provided it was lawful; freedom was freedom from the constraints of the state. For Rousseau, freedom was the freedom the people of Geneva had obtained when they acquired sovereignty in the 16th century.

#### Modern vs. Ancient Freedom

Benjamin Constant (1767–1830), a fellow Swiss (though from the canton of Vaud), said Rousseau did not understand “modern freedom” but always thought in terms of “ancient freedom”—freedom as it was known in Greek city-states or the Roman republic, when freedom meant not “being allowed to do what you want to do” but “participating actively in the legislation of the city.”

Constant suggested that Rousseau was ruinously misguided in trying to revive this ancient concept of freedom. If the state were thought of as something that expressed one's will, then one would have no motive for working to diminish the activity of the state and might well want to enlarge it. Constant feared that freedom—which was seen by those who thought of “modern freedom” as

limiting the powers of the state for the protection of the individual—was a cause that would be abandoned by people who thought of freedom on the model of “ancient freedom,” and whose purpose was simply to make the state their own.

#### “Face-to-Face Society”

This is a fair criticism. For Rousseau, the political independence of Geneva was a good thing, though its small size made it vulnerable in international politics. Rousseau considered Geneva's size its merit. For only in a small community, in a “face-to-face society,” could all the citizens meet to make the laws they lived under, and, hence, if we follow Rousseau's conception of freedom, it was only in a small community that men could experience freedom.

The theory of freedom that he developed in depth in his *Social Contract* was simply not applicable to the large empires and kingdoms within which most Westerners lived. It could not apply even to Venice, which had grown from a city to the size of a small empire. It made no sense at all in France, where the population was 25 million.

And yet the French and others feasted on Rousseau's ideas.

David Hume, who became first a friend then an enemy of Rousseau, carried Rousseau's objections to the sovereignty of reason to their logical conclusion. Immanuel Kant, who knew Rousseau only through his books, recognized him as the pioneer of the intuitive sort of ethics that he himself developed into a formidable philosophical system. G. W. F. Hegel also admired Rousseau; indeed, German idealism, no less than German romanticism, looked on Rousseau almost as its founder.

Outside the realm of philosophy,

Rousseau did more than any other single writer to alter people's ways of thinking and feeling: He changed parents' attitudes to their children; he introduced warmth and demonstrativeness in personal relations that had hitherto been governed by "classical" ideas of restraint; he made religious sentiment more acceptable than religious dogma; he inspired men of all classes with a new passion for liberty. Few of them saw what Constant saw, that when Rousseau wrote of *liberté*, he meant something sharply opposed to what their own philosophers meant by *liberté*. It seems equally improbable that Rousseau's readers really grasped what he meant by *égalité*, another word that he propelled into the forefront of ideological language.

His *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* was a masterpiece of speculative anthropology. It followed up the argument of his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* by developing the proposition that natural man is good and by tracing the successive stages by which man has descended from primitive innocence to sophisticated corruption. Remarkably, in fewer than 100 pages, Rousseau outlined a theory of evolution that prefigured the discoveries of Darwin, opened new channels for the study of linguistics, and made a seminal contribution to political and economic thought.

#### **In the Beginning**

He began his inquiry by noting two kinds of inequalities among men: The first were natural inequalities arising from differences in strength, intelligence, and so forth; the second were artificial inequalities deriving from the conventions that governed society. It was the inequalities of the latter sort that he proposed to inves-

tigate in order to determine whether they were ethically justifiable.

Adopting what he considered the properly "scientific" (i.e., historical) method, he tried to reconstruct the first phases, or pre-history, of human societies. He suggested that original man was not social but solitary, and to this extent Rousseau agreed with Thomas Hobbes's account of the state of nature. But against the English pessimist's view that the life of man in such a state must be "poor, nasty, brutish and short," Rousseau claimed that original man, though admittedly solitary, was healthy, happy, good and free. The vices of men, Rousseau claimed, dated from the time when each entered into society and began to compare himself with his neighbors, to compete and covet, and to desire to dominate.

#### **After the Fall**

Thus Rousseau exonerated nature and blamed society for men's vices. Passions, which hardly existed in the state of nature, developed in society. It was "the calm of their own passions and their ignorance of vice" that preserved savages from evil. Society began when man started to build huts, facilitating cohabitation. Later, from cohabitation there arose the habit of living as a family and associating with neighbors. "Nascent society," as Rousseau called it, was good: It was the golden age of man. But it did not last. Neighbors started to compare their achievements, and this "marked the first step towards inequality, and at the same time, towards vice."

Men started to demand consideration and respect: Their innocent self-love became a culpable pride, as everyone wanted to be better than everyone else. The institution of property marked another decisive



*From Genève: Images du passé—Images du présent by Pierre Bouffard, © Editions Pharos.*

*An anonymous pencil drawing of Geneva in the late 18th century. The first Rousseau to live there, Didier, arrived with other Huguenot refugees in 1549.*

step toward modern inequality. In the primitive state, according to Rousseau, the earth belonged to everybody or to nobody, but the invention of agriculture led to claims for the rightful ownership of the piece of land that a particular farmer had cultivated. Thus was introduced the "fatal" concept of property, which in turn entailed institutions of law and government.

Rousseau lamented the rise of property: "What crimes, what wars, what murders, what miseries, what horrors the human race might have been spared if someone had pulled up the stakes and filled in the ditch crying out to his fellow men: 'Beware of this impostor: you are lost if you forget that the fruits belong to all, and the earth to no one.'"

This is inflammatory language, and one can readily imagine that

such passages from Rousseau excited revolutionaries such as Robespierre and Lenin. But Rousseau was not in fact recommending that his contemporaries "cry out" the appeal. He never suggested that this appeal would have any relevance whatever to any other time than at that moment marking the passage from "nascent society" to "civil society."

"Civil society," said Rousseau, came into being to serve two purposes: to provide peace for everyone and to ensure the right to property for anyone lucky enough to have possessions. Securing tranquility, it enables the rich to enjoy their riches at the expense of the poor (in the context of civil tranquility). But it does not ensure happiness for either.

The savage, according to Rousseau, has only to eat, and he is at peace with nature "and the friend of

all his fellow men." Man in civil society is never happy because he is never satisfied. Society leads men to hate one another in proportion to the conflict between their interests, and "the universal desire for preference for oneself makes all men enemies."

It will be noticed that Rousseau treated the inequality between men as one of the characteristics of society, but he did not treat it in isolation. He saw it as one feature of a longer process, the progressive alienation of man from nature and innocence. He was certainly not pleading for equality to be introduced into modern society, since he made it plain enough that inequality lay at the very roots of society as such.

Nevertheless, in the "Dedication" that he wrote for the *Discourse on Inequality* in order to offer it to the "Republic of Geneva," Rousseau made clear what sorts of equality—and inequality—were desirable in a well-ordered state in the modern world. The arrangement he praised in Geneva was similar to that which Plato demanded for his ideal republic—namely, one whereby the best men were in the highest places. Referring to ancient Rome, "that model for all free Peoples," he went on to congratulate Geneva for having its wise men as its magistrates.

There were no "egalitarian" sentiments in Rousseau in the sense in which egalitarianism featured in later ideologies. He did not even hold with Jefferson, who was certainly in-

fluenced by Rousseau, that "all men are born equal." He held that they *were* born equal just as they *were* born free. But that was a long time ago. As to the measures of equality and liberty that men might be able to recover, Rousseau was nowhere very encouraging.

Having rejected the doctrine of progress, he could hardly believe that time would bring improvement. He left that optimistic thought to the more superficial *Encyclopédistes*, to philosophers such as Voltaire. Rousseau had no desire to tell people what they wanted to hear. He wanted to tell the truth. He believed that *civil* liberty, as distinct from a general liberty, and *civil* equality, as distinct from social equality, could be obtained in a genuinely republican state, but that such a state could only exist on the strength of the moral virtues of its citizens.

Man lost his natural goodness by entering into society, and to overcome the distinctive passions that society breeds, men must acquire virtues; every man must teach himself to be as disciplined, brave, upright, honest, and patriotic as the ancient Romans.

In his writings on music, Rousseau unveiled the smiling face of romanticism, its promise of freedom from all external constraints that bind the voice of the heart; in his writings on politics, he showed us the stern face of romanticism, its demand that a man who is not subservient to others fiercely govern himself.



Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.