

# A romantic Swiss abroad

Autor(en): **Buchler, Geoffrey H.**

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## A ROMANTIC SWISS ABROAD



The fact that Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) is among the greatest masters of the French language has obscured the equally important fact that he is not a Frenchman. Expressing oneself in French during the 18th century in the heyday of a French-speaking Europe was no more an evidence of French citizenship or pro-French sentiments than the growing African *francophonie* of today. And yet, Rousseau's persistent proclamation of his Genevise citizenship tends to be forgotten or shrugged off as a quaint idiosyncrasy. Did he not indeed write his famous autobiography in French? True, but so did at least two well-known Venetian gentlemen of his time, Goldoni and Casanova—moreover, these were the days when it was not even necessary to speak English to be the King of England. But King George was not a writer. Hence presumably the lesser importance of his linguistic preferences. Conversely, Rousseau being above all a writer, it is easy to understand that the language which

he used should be considered a matter of paramount importance and, since this language happens to be the one commonly used by the French, it is likewise easy to understand why they tend to consider him one of theirs. However, the essential facts are that Rousseau almost became a Frenchman, that for a number of years he earnestly wished he could, and that he spent more time in France than in any other country and would gladly have stayed there permanently had not the French police threatened to arrest him.

### The virtues of the Gallic atmosphere

There is of course nothing unusual in seeing a foreign writer take up residence in France. The practice was quite a common one, even in those days. Already, several predecessors of James Joyce and Lawrence Durrell had felt that the atmosphere of Paris suited their artistic temperament better than that of their own countries. They also found that they had become spiritually and culturally French, which resulted

for them in a feeling of greater emotional comfort. It cannot be over emphasised that this was never the case with Rousseau. By virtue of a strange paradox, the young Swiss man who for the first thirty years of his life—spent in the Republic of Geneva and the Duchy of Savoy—had nurtured the strongest pro-French prejudices, during the next twenty years which he spent in Paris and Montmorency—hardly stopped criticising the French. To their corruption, he opposed the virtues of his native country and flashed in their faces the proud title of "Citizen of Geneva". This contradictory attitude, consisting in idolising France from outside her frontiers and indicting her as soon as he was within, lasted throughout most of Rousseau's life. This may be seen as one of the foremost anomalies of his life.

When a new age of French thought and literature began during those few years before and after 1760, Rousseau's importance as its leader and prophet was clearly revealed. To study him, however briefly, is to delineate the main features of a period that may be termed pre-romantic. His significance far exceeds that of Voltaire who was by and large an ideal representative of the traditional French mind. Rationalism in Rousseau had indeed a place which must not be overlooked: he had much more of the future in him than of the past, and at the present time it has become easier to recognise in him a source of many ideas that have outlasted two centuries. With him sensibility comes decisively into its own: no longer as a secondary power gaining admission in the wake of intelligence, tolerated rather than sought, but as the chief mistress of truth and virtue to whom man owes his most precious intuitions.

Human attitudes, outlooks and temperaments will best be understood when contrasted to each other and to their surroundings, just as the mountains reveal themselves vividly and clearly because of the valleys and plains in between. Romanticism, both as an individual state of mind and as a com-

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prehensive outlook on the world, can be viewed and understood through just this sort of contrast-effect. It may safely be assumed that Romanticism is accepted as the name of a broad cultural movement of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, even though the meaning of the term will depend to a large extent on the particular individuals chosen to represent the movement.

## Rousseau's Romanticism

Was Rousseau a Romantic? The answer to this question has been frequently guessed at or assumed as part of an argument, but rarely approached critically. Apart from the blind animosity of certain critics, the main reason for the failure to understand his relationship to the movement of which he has so often and so loosely been called the father has been the lack of a working definition of Romanticism. There can be little question, moreover, that Romanticism in all its forms expressed a high regard for the individual, and the Romantics waged an incessant war against whatever tended to hinder the free development of individual talents and capacities. Speaking of the influence of the French Romantic poets, Barrès says:

*"Il semble donc qu'on peut admettre que le romantisme n'est pas tant un moment de l'histoire des idées ou une doctrine, qu'une nuance de la sensibilité qui accompagne les révolutions profondes".*

In Rousseau, this concern for the individual took the form of an emphasis on all that is most intimate and personal in life: inclination, desire, feeling and will. Indeed one might say that whatever misplaced reputation Rousseau has earned for being a "sentimentalist", it stems from his insistence on

the importance of the personal features of individual life. Likewise, his work is a philosophy of existence, because it is concerned for the status and ultimate destiny of the individual. For everyone without exception, existence must be individual or it means nothing at all. This individual nature needs only to be provided with a proper environment in order to flourish. "Oh man", he says, in the *"Contrat Social"*, "live your own life and you will no longer be wretched. Keep to your appointed place in the order of nature and nothing can tear you from it".

Rousseau inaugurated a new epoch with his cult of the instinctive (le "sentiment individuel"), by his imagination and dreaming, by his passion for life, by his ideal of a simple life, by his dislike of contrived social etiquette and by his belief in a righteous heart.

Surprisingly, Rousseau began writing late in life. His need for self-expression was accidentally awakened. His first *"Discours"*, published in 1750, on science and arts is a rhetorical piece of work, supporting a paradox with all the zeal of a genuine conviction. This essay established his name. Nonetheless, far more important was the *"Discours sur l'inégalité"* where in spite of his emotional strain, he advocated, as one of the *"philosophes"*, notions of reform that kept step with the theories of the *"Encyclopédistes"* but which were bolder than anything to which they would subscribe. In his *"Lettre à d'Alembert"* the rift became more evident. He attacked freely the abstract spirit of philosophical argument and furthermore revealed his Protestant and Genevese education in an effusion of moralising.

## Co-existence of Rationalism and Idealism

The full flood of sentiment is let loose at last by Rousseau in his *"Nouvelle Héloïse"*, a long novel in letter form in which Richardson's influence is marked. The death of the heroine is protracted to almost as long an episode as that of Clarissa Harlowe. Passion, frankly depicted, is transmuted into pathos, and the individual's right to happiness emphatically sacrificed to stern notion of duty. This book opens upon the grandeur and freshness of the Swiss setting, and the worship of a purity that dwells in the sanctuary of the hills adds a touch of poetry to the appeal of romantic landscapes. It also gave Rousseau a standing and prestige that the derision of his foes and his own erratic career could never destroy.

Only a year later, in 1762, *"Le Contrat Social"* appeared as an attempt at liberating the principles and rights upon which society rests from the obscurities and traditions which had more or less been purposely allowed to cling

to them. His scheme was not the fabric of a disembodied intelligence. Flashes of prophetic insight played over problems that are still, and more than ever, with us. This book, which is his masterpiece, still has a substantial interest. And yet the most daringly clear insight into the sensibility of human nature finds its posthumous footing in Rousseau's *"Confessions"*, written between 1764 and 1770 and published after his death. As an autobiography, it throbs with emotions that equal anything which the egoism of the next century was able to achieve. Apart from the light shed on Rousseau's personality, the most attractive feature of the work is the manner in which sights and impressions are recaptured with all the poetry and freshness of youth. Prone to a certain dogmatism, envy and spite, but to a large extent his own enemy, he magnified the sinister intents of his adversaries and believed himself the victim of a perpetual conspiracy. That he should have quarrelled with David Hume during a stay with him in England (a story not included in his *"Confessions"*) makes sad reading in any biography and serves only to illuminate his morbid sense of persecution. There never was a clearer example of a man dogged by his own faults of character and prone to inevitable clash of temperaments.

## A creative loneliness

The mood is very different in the pathetic complement to the *"Confessions"*, the *"Rêveries d'un promeneur solitaire"*, Rousseau's last unfinished piece of work. A kind of resignation here replaces the anxiety of self-defence. The solitary still depicts himself as a bewildered soul, but he can derive some pleasure from the memories of the past and find innocent joys in the rambles of a botanist through meadows and fields. Vain are the cures of the *"philosophes"* for the ills of life. Their reasonings strike cold despair into the heart and leave a dry taste in the mouth. For Rousseau the only salvation lies in the renunciation of desire. Thus his chastened soul at the bitter end of his struggle drew near the mystical secret of true wisdom and overshadowed the teaching or his disciple Senancour. In these pages his message as the prophet of a new spiritual faith assumes its real significance.

As a rational thinker Rousseau moved in a static, mechanistic world. As an artist he turned his back on the past and lived in a dynamic and organic Cosmos. He spoke with the voice of the apostle and the poet, and it is in the infectious harmonies of his impassioned language that he appears to us as the founder of a school and the precursor of the Romantic period.

(Geoffrey H. Buchler)