

General Introduction to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

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I. The Place of the *Confessions* and *Rêveries* in Rousseau's oeuvre

Rousseau began his literary career with an eloquent denunciation of the corrupting influence of culture. Although a participant in the *Encyclopédie* (in 1749), Rousseau refuted the concept of enlightenment formulated by his fellow philosophes and challenged them on the very premise of their arguments--on the notion of progress itself. All of Rousseau's works can be seen as a development of this essential critique, as he posits a natural and fundamental goodness in humankind and locates the source of inequality and injustice in the corrosive role of society. Rousseau's works consistently denounce what he considers to be the scandal of a society that has deprived men and women of the basic human attribute that is freedom. Dispossessed of its primary characteristic, humanity is now only a deficient reflection of itself and must return to its origins in order to salvage its future. The

best institutions (political, moral, cultural, and educational) will necessarily be those that sustain human beings' freedom. In the *Contrat social* (1762), Rousseau proposes a pact based on the preservation of those natural attributes, and he suggests a form of government that guarantees freedom. Likewise, his theory of education in *Emile* (1762) is predicated on the principle of innate liberty. His indignation at the "unnatural" political order in eighteenth-century Europe led Rousseau to establish political legitimacy on the consent of the people and gave rise to his important contribution to democracy, the notion of popular sovereignty.

In addition to the concept of popular sovereignty, Rousseau is known for his lifesaving suggestion, in *Emile*, that mothers breast-feed their children instead of sending them to wet nurses; having babies suckle at breasts other than their mothers' contributed to the high rate of infant mortality in the eighteenth century. Rousseau also condemned the practice of swaddling, which he viewed as constraining the children's movements physically and compromising their freedom morally. As the author of a work on raising children, however, Rousseau later gained a certain notoriety when it became known that he had actually abandoned his own children, at birth, to orphanages. Not until the *Confessions* would Rousseau publicly reveal this fact, and

it partly explains why Rousseau felt as great a need as he does to justify himself in his autobiographical writings.

Rousseau's best-selling novel, *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), established his reputation throughout Europe as a man of feeling in an age of sensibility. His reputation would be enhanced by the autobiographical works, especially the *Confessions* and the *Rêveries*. Beyond ordaining Rousseau as the creator of a new kind of writing—which itself exemplified freedom of expression in numerous ways--these works contributed to Rousseau's legacy to the modern-day environmental, or so-called "back to nature," movement. In the *Confessions* and *Rêveries*, as well as in *Emile*, Rousseau underscores the positive influence of nature and the outdoors, which he continued to contrast with the degrading influence of culture. Thus, the beginning and the end of Rousseau's career as a writer merge and reflect the unity of his thought.

II. A Brief Chronology of Rousseau's Life

1712 – Jean-Jacques Rousseau, son of Isaac Rousseau and Suzanne Bernard, is born on 28 June in Geneva at number 40 Grand'rue. Rousseau's mother dies nine days later, on 7 July.

1728 – Rousseau, who has worked as an apprentice for an engraver since the spring of 1725, returns to the city one day after a walk. He finds its gates closed and decides to leave his native city on 15 March. A week later, he arrives in Annecy (in the French Alps) at the home of Mme de Warens, to whom he had been recommended by a pastor. After only a few days, Rousseau leaves for Turin, in the Italian piedmont region. There he converts to Catholicism and serves as a footman.

1729-31 – Rousseau comes and goes at Mme de Warens' house at Annecy. Officially, he does secretarial work and prepares medicines for Mme de Warens, but the two soon begin an amorous relationship. Rousseau moves into her house at Chambéry in September 1731.

1736 – Rousseau has his first idyllic stay at Les Charmettes, the country house just at the Chambéry city limits that Mme de Warens begins renting at the end of the summer.

1738 – Rousseau returns to Chambéry after a trip to Montpellier. He receives a cold greeting from Mme de Warens, who has taken another lover.

1742 – Rousseau reads his *Projet concernant de nouveaux signes pour la musique* in front of the Académie des Sciences in Paris and is

commended for his work. This event marks his entry into the intellectual world.

1745 – Rousseau comes to know Thérèse Levasseur, a linen maid from Orléans, with whom he will spend a great deal of his life and have five children, all of whom were turned over to orphanages. He would marry her in 1768. Rousseau meets Diderot and Condillac, and exchanges letters with Voltaire.

1750 – The Académie de Dijon awards its prize for best essay to Rousseau for his first *Discours* (on the arts and sciences), which is published at the end of the year.

1754 - Rousseau both reestablishes his Genevan citizenship and returns to his original Protestant faith.

1755 – The second *Discours* (on the origin of inequality) is published. Rousseau goes back to La Chevrette, Mme d'Épinay's place at Montmorency in the Val-d'Oise region outside of Paris, for another stay and decides to move there the following year, living in a small lodging on the property known as the Ermitage (or Hermitage).

1757 – Mme d'Houdetot begins visiting Rousseau at the Ermitage in early January. Rousseau falls in love, platonically, with the countess who partly inspires him in the creation of his fictional character Julie.

1761 – *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* is published.

1762 – Two of Rousseau's works are published: *Du contrat social*, then *Emile*, which is condemned. A warrant is issued for Rousseau's arrest. He flees France for Yverdon (near Bern [in present-day Switzerland]), where a similar fate awaits him. He renounces his Genevan citizenship and, in late August, begins wearing Armenian attire

1764 – Rousseau decides to write his *Confessions*.

1765 – His house at Môtiers (Switzerland), to which he moves after Yverdon, is stoned on 6 September. He spends ten days in July on the Island of Saint-Pierre, in Lake Bienne (Neuchâtel region of Switzerland). He returns in September to the island, the setting for several reveries (*Rév.* 1040-49 [CW8:41-48]).* He leaves the island on 25 or 26 October. Rousseau returns triumphantly to Paris at the end of the year.

1766 – Rousseau begins writing the *Confessions* while he is in England.

1770 – He finishes the *Confessions* in December and begins holding private readings of his manuscript.

1772 – Rousseau starts writing the *Dialogues*.

1776 – In the early fall, he writes the first and second chapters, or Walks, of *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (*Reveries of the*

Solitary Walker). On 24 October while returning to Paris from a walk, he is run over by a Great Dane in Ménilmontant (*Rév.* 1003-6 [CW8: 10-13]). The Ninth Walk will not be completed until March 1778. The Tenth Walk is left unfinished.

1778 – The marquis de Girardin invites Rousseau to stay with him at Ermenonville, north of Paris. Rousseau accepts the offer and moves there with Thérèse. He dies at Ermenonville on 2 July and is buried on the Ile des peupliers (Island of Poplar Trees) on the property.

1782 – Moultoy and Du Peyrou publish the *Collection complète des oeuvres de J. J. Rousseau, citoyen de Genève*, containing Rousseau's *Confessions* and *Rêveries*.

1794 – The remains of Rousseau, who has become a hero to the French revolutionaries, are transferred to the Pantheon in Paris.

*References to the *Rêveries* here give the passages in both the French version, *Rév.* in *Oeuvres complètes, 1* (Gallimard, 1959), and the English version, *CW* or *Collected Writings of Rousseau, 8* (UP of New England, 2000).

III. Annotated List of Some of Rousseau's Major Works Other Than the *Confessions* and *Rêveries*

- 1750 – First *Discours*, or *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* : The essay that won the Académie de Dijon's prize and established Rousseau as an important, albeit controversial, intellectual. In this essay, Rousseau introduces his thesis that, far from perfecting humans, the arts and sciences—that is, culture and society in general—have corrupted them.
- 1752 – *Le Devin du village* : Rousseau's opera, highly successful early in his career and performed at Fontainebleau for King Louis XV, who offers Rousseau a pension. By his refusal to appear before the king, however, Rousseau gives up the pension.
- 1755 – Second *Discours*, or *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* : The work pursues the same line of thinking as the first *Discours* but elaborates on the process by which humans have fallen from an original state of goodness in nature. Inequality is traced to the first man's claim to property.
- 1758 – *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles* : A response to d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* article "Genève," in which the author proposes a national theater for the city of Rousseau's birth. Rousseau, who strongly opposes any such formal institution, considers public *fêtes* to be more virtuous and useful gatherings of citizens than plays.

1761 – *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* : An eighteenth-century bestseller that propounds the fundamental sensibility, and therefore equality, of all human beings. The novel depicts a small virtuous society or moral elite in an idyllic country setting in Switzerland.

1762 – *Du contrat social* : A portrayal of human freedom as a birthright that degenerates into dependence, if not slavery, in society. The work outlines Rousseau's notion of the general will and the democratic principle of the people's sovereignty.

1762 – *Emile, ou De l'éducation* : Part pedagogical treatise, part novel. In this work, which presents Rousseau's negative educational theory, the eponymous young protagonist is kept away from the supposedly pernicious forces of society for as long as possible through the careful guidance of his tutor. *Emile* advocates a domestic role for women, who are encouraged to breast-feed their children rather than to employ wetnurses.

Like the *Confessions* and the *Rêveries*, the following works were published posthumously:

1782 – *Lettres sur la botanique*: Eight letters written for Mme Delessert between 1771 and 1773 and before the *Rêveries*. This

work has a more scientific and pedagogical angle than its literary counterpart.

1782 – *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques, Dialogues*: Rousseau's further attempt to exculpate himself through an elaborate literary doubling of his character. Composed after the *Confessions* and before the *Rêveries*, the work presents the writer as an innocent victim, greatly misunderstood by the public, which itself is being misled by a league of conspirators. The first *Dialogue* is published in England in 1780; the manuscript in its entirety is included in the *Collection complète des oeuvres de J. J. Rousseau*, published by Moutou and DuPeyrou (1782).

NB: Material for this introduction has been excerpted, in modified format, from John C. O'Neal and Ourida Mostefai, eds., *Approaches to Teaching Rousseau's Confessions and Reveries* (New York: Modern Language Association, 2003), pp. 3-4, 137-39, 140-41.