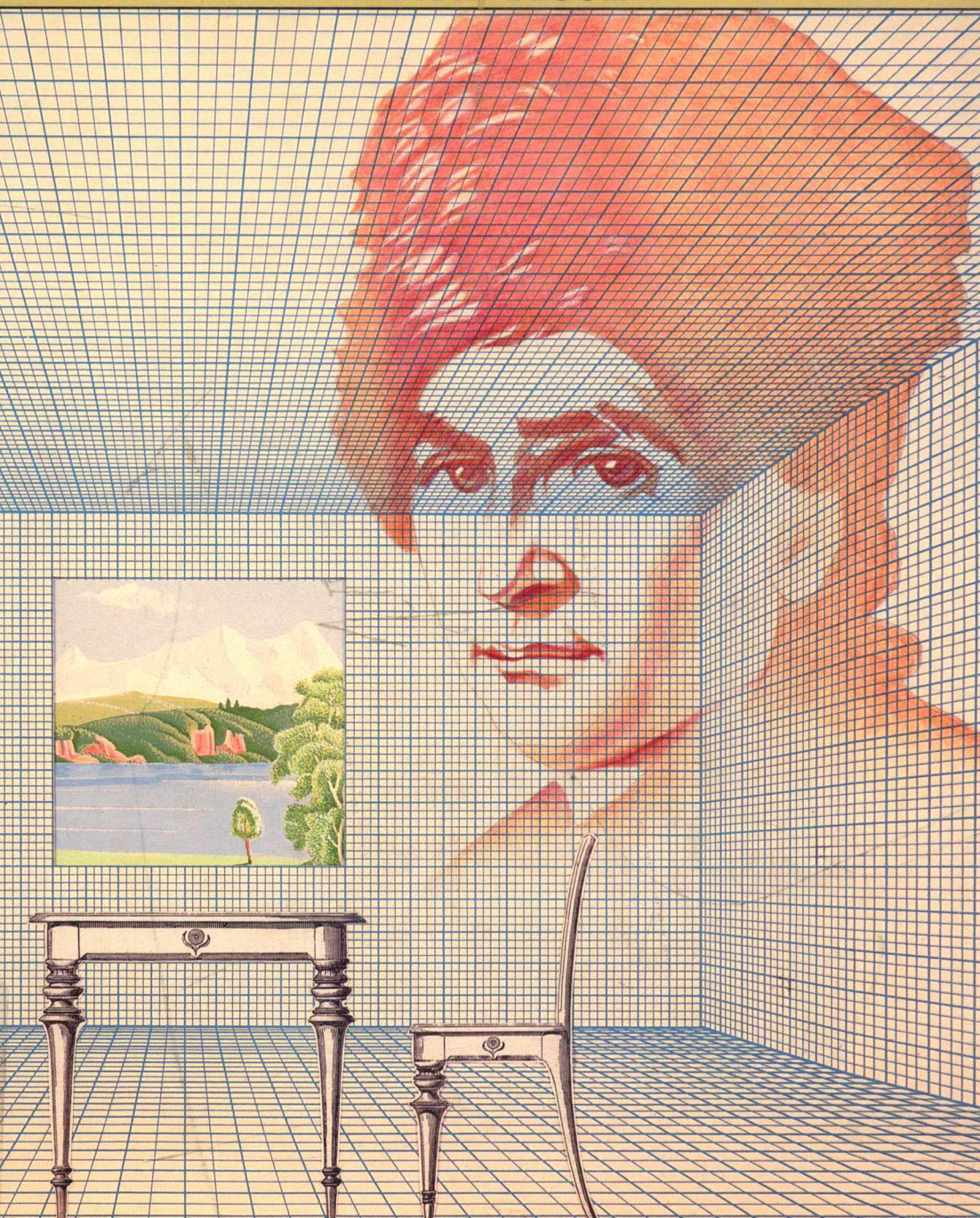


Modern Critical Views
JEAN-JACQUES
ROUSSEAU

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



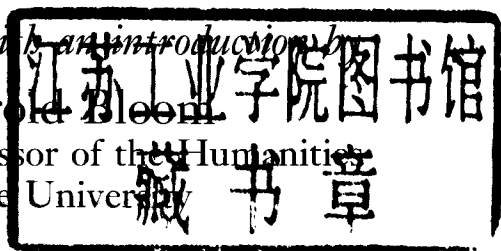
Modern Critical Views

JEAN-JACQUES
ROUSSEAU

Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

Sterling Professor of the Humanities
Yale University



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JEAN-JACQUES
ROUSSEAU

Modern Critical Views

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|----------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Chinua Achebe | Geoffrey Chaucer | Oliver Goldsmith |
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| John Berryman | E. L. Doctorow | Eugene Ionesco |
| The Bible | John Donne & the | Washington Irving |
| Elizabeth Bishop | Seventeenth-Century | Henry James |
| William Blake | Metaphysical Poets | Dr. Samuel Johnson and |
| Giovanni Boccaccio | John Dos Passos | James Boswell |
| Heinrich Böll | Fyodor Dostoevsky | Ben Jonson |
| Jorge Luis Borges | Frederick Douglass | James Joyce |
| Elizabeth Bowen | Theodore Dreiser | Carl Gustav Jung |
| Bertolt Brecht | John Dryden | Franz Kafka |
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| Sterling Brown | George Eliot | Søren Kierkegaard |
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| Italo Calvino | John Fowles | Jack London |
| Albert Camus | Sigmund Freud | Frederico García Lorca |
| Canadian Poetry: Modern | Robert Frost | Robert Lowell |
| and Contemporary | Northrop Frye | Malcolm Lowry |
| Canadian Poetry through | Carlos Fuentes | Norman Mailer |
| E. J. Pratt | William Gaddis | Bernard Malamud |
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| Alejo Carpentier | W. S. Gilbert | Thomas Malory |
| Lewis Carroll | Allen Ginsberg | André Malraux |
| Willa Cather | J. W. von Goethe | Thomas Mann |
| Louis-Ferdinand Céline | Nikolai Gogol | Katherine Mansfield |
| Miguel de Cervantes | William Golding | Christopher Marlowe |

Continued at back of book

Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best modern criticism available in English of the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Jim Swenson for his assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction centers upon the *Confessions* and follows William Hazlitt in his estimate as to the originality and historical importance of Rousseau's sensibility. Ernst Cassirer, authority upon the philosophy of the Enlightenment, begins the chronological sequence with an overview of the "question of Rousseau," in which Rousseau is judged to be the true precursor of Kant and thus a supreme philosophic example of rational insight.

Jacques Derrida, philosopher of deconstruction, follows with his famous account of the concept of the supplement, "a sort of blind spot in Rousseau's text, the not-seen that opens and limits visibility." The lyric drama in one scene, *Pygmalion*, is analyzed by Shierry M. Weber as a critical aesthetics, linking Rousseau to German Romanticism.

A Marxist reading of *The Social Contract* by Louis Althusser examines the contradictions in the "admirable 'failure' of an unprecedented theory." *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is seen by Tony Tanner as an incestuous romance, with an "unspeakable solitude at the heart of all relationships." *Emile*, Rousseau's other major novel, is judged by Allan Bloom to be a true rival to Plato's *Republic*, "which it is meant to supersede."

Jean Starobinski, in a total vision of Rousseau, presents him as the prophetic accuser of his civilization, the intimate adversary of its inadequate arts and sciences. A very different vision of reading informs Paul de Man's superb deconstruction of metaphor in the *Second Discourse*, where conceptual language is expressed as the necessary interplay of figurative and referential modes.

The *Rêveries* are studied by Eric Gans as a system in which the self as

subject is seen as the consumer victimized by the society organized supposedly to maintain him. In the critical mode of Paul de Man, E. S. Burt contrasts the processes of reading and interpretation in regard to the *Confessions's* account of the origins of Rousseau's masochism. In this book's final essay, David Marshall relates Rousseau's *Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre* to the theatrical element in all of his work, which balances spectacle and sympathy so as to achieve a new kind of autobiography.

Contents

Editor's Note	vii
Introduction	1
<i>Harold Bloom</i>	
The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau	5
<i>Ernst Cassirer</i>	
That Dangerous Supplement . . .	39
<i>Jacques Derrida</i>	
The Aesthetics of Rousseau's <i>Pygmalion</i>	65
<i>Shierry M. Weber</i>	
<i>The Social Contract</i> (The Discrepancies)	83
<i>Louis Althusser</i>	
Julie and "La Maison paternelle": Another Look at Rousseau's <i>La Nouvelle Héloïse</i>	119
<i>Tony Tanner</i>	
The Education of Democratic Man: <i>Emile</i>	149
<i>Allan Bloom</i>	
The Accuser and the Accused	173
<i>Jean Starobinski</i>	
Metaphor (<i>Second Discourse</i>)	195
<i>Paul de Man</i>	
The Victim as Subject: The Esthetico-Ethical System of Rousseau's <i>Rêveries</i>	215
<i>Eric Gans</i>	

Developments in Character: Reading and Interpretation
in "The Children's Punishment" and "The Broken
Comb" 245

E. S. Burt

Rousseau and the State of Theater 265

David Marshall

Chronology 285

Contributors 287

Bibliography 289

Acknowledgments 299

Index 301

Introduction

William Hazlitt, in my judgment still Rousseau's best critic, insisted that the Genevan moralist's sensibility was far more vital than either his Enlightened reason or his Romantic imagination. Finding less Negative Capability in Rousseau than in any comparable figure, Hazlitt cheerfully praised him for the gusts of his Egotistical Sublime. Rousseau's intense passion for himself was seen by Hazlitt as the necessary prelude to the French Revolution, carried out by men and women who had learned from Rousseau to give their self-love primacy over the claims of society, history, and tradition. In Hazlitt's shrewd insight, the Jacobin sensibility, which transformed societal tyranny into personal insult, owed everything to the tormented sensibility of that unique individual, Rousseau.

Praising the *Confessions* as a veritable Bible of revolution, Hazlitt saw in Rousseau the Romantic Prometheus, kindler of revolt against the sky-gods of Europe. With an English Dissenter's irony, Hazlitt wrote in praise of Rousseau, yet with distaste for a temperament both heroic and "morbid." Hazlitt's ambivalence towards Rousseau is roughly akin to his attitude towards Wordsworth. Each seemed to Hazlitt a true Original and so a prophet of literary rebellion, but both were judged to be egomaniacs, though only Wordsworth had betrayed the Revolution.

Rousseau to this day reads very differently to Anglo-American critics than he does to Continental exegetes. Except for the *Confessions*, he is read neither widely nor deeply in the contemporary English-speaking world. Allan Bloom, attempting to revive *Emile*, compares it to Plato's *Republic* as a survey of the entire human condition. These, he says, are "books for philosophers," but since we live now in a literary culture, not a philosophic one, I surmise that *Emile* is not likely to be revived. The *Nouvelle Héloïse* is more available to our sensibility and I am surprised it receives so little attention these days. The *Confessions*, though, are a crucial element in our literary culture, and have established the mode for modern autobiography.

Rousseau's *Confessions* indeed seem to me the inevitable link between Montaigne and our Montaigne, Freud, who has systemized self-reflection for us.

J. H. Van den Berg, in his *The Changing Nature of Man*, says of Rousseau that "he was the first to view the child as a child, and to stop treating the child as an adult," but remarks of him also that he was culpable for "pushing the child away." Van den Berg locates in *Emile* the invention of the trope of psychic "maturation," and so ascribes to Rousseau the authorship of adolescence as such. That may be partly an ironic tribute on Van den Berg's part, yet to me it seems accurate. Before Rousseau, where are we to find representations of adolescence? If we combine Hazlitt and Van den Berg on Rousseau, then there is a close relation between the new sensibility of a rebellious self-love, and the new crossing or transition of adolescence, and it seems plausible that one consciousness should have invented both. Psychosexually, the Rousseau of the *Confessions* never does make it out of adolescence, while the universalizing of his Egotistical Sublime is necessarily at the center of his autobiography.

"Such were the errors and faults of my youth. I have related the story of them with a fidelity that brings pleasure to my heart." That beginning of the final paragraph of *The First Part* of the *Confessions* is not exactly Rousseau at his worst but it does indicate his splendidly outrageous tendency to forgive himself everything, once he has confessed his guilt. John Calvin's reaction to his fellow Genevan's Romanticized sense of election would have been strenuous, and I delight to imagine Calvin and Rousseau confronting one another at the tomb of Farinata in Dante's *Inferno*, where the earlier heretic stands upright and proud, "as if of Hell he had a great disdain." But not even Farinata or Calvin is as massively self-assured as Rousseau. Here is a grandly outrageous moment from Book Twelve of the *Confessions*:

I must leave nothing unsaid. I have never concealed my poor Mamma's vices or my own, and I must show no greater favour to Thérèse. However warm a pleasure I take in honouring a person who is dear to me, I still do not wish to disguise her faults, if an involuntary change in the heart's affection is truly a fault. For a long while I had observed a cooling off on her part. I was aware that she no longer felt for me as she had done in our good days; and I was the more conscious of the fact because I was as fond of her as ever. I was once more in the predicament which I had found so uncomfortable with Mamma; and in Thérèse's case it was no less uncomfortable. Let us not look for supernatural perfection; the case would be the same with any woman upon

earth. The attitude I had taken with regard to my children, logical though it had seemed to me, had not always left me easy in my mind. While thinking out my *Treatise upon Education*, I felt that I had neglected some duties from which nothing could excuse me. So strong did my remorse finally grow that it almost drew from me a public confession of my fault at the beginning of *Emile*. The allusion, indeed, is so clear that after such a passage it is surprising that anyone had the courage to reproach me. My situation was, however, at that time still the same, or even worse, because of the animosity of my enemies, who wanted nothing better than to catch me at fault. I was afraid that I might repeat the offence and, not wishing to run the risk, preferred to condemn myself to abstinence rather than expose Thérèse to the risk of finding herself in the same condition once more. I had noticed besides that intercourse with women sensibly aggravated my complaint. The compensatory vice, of which I have never been able entirely to cure myself, seemed to me less deleterious. For this dual reason, therefore, I had formed resolutions which I had sometimes only imperfectly kept, but in which I had been persisting with more success during the last three or four years. It was from the beginning of that time that I had noticed a cooling in Thérèse. She persisted in her attachment to me, but it was out of duty, not out of love. This naturally diminished the pleasure in our relations, and I imagined that, relying as she could on my continuing to look after her, she might perhaps have preferred to stay in Paris rather than wander about the world with me. However she had shown such grief at our separation, had extracted such emphatic promises from me that we should come together again, and had expressed her desire so strongly since my departure both to the Prince de Conti and M. de Luxembourg, and far from daring to speak to her of separation I scarcely had the courage to think of it myself; and once my heart had told me how impossible it would be to do without her my only thought was to call her back at the earliest possible moment. I wrote to her to start, and she came. It was scarcely two months since I had left her, but this was our first separation for many years. We had felt it most cruelly, both of us. How violent was our first embrace! Oh, how sweet are the tears of joy and affection, and how my heart feasts on them! Why have I been permitted to shed them so seldom?

I hardly know which to prefer, Rousseau's "Let us not look for supernatural perfection," in regard to poor Thérèse, of whom he was "as fond . . . as ever," or his surprise "that anyone had the courage to reproach" him for abandoning his own children, once he had almost confessed his "fault." How intensely his heart feasted upon "the tears of joy and affection" we need not doubt. The great Rousseau was certainly no hypocrite; he was merely a sacred monster, peculiarly pernicious for his women. For literary power in self-representation, for originality in sensibility, for strength of influence upon what came after—for all of these, the *Confessions* are beyond comparison with any possible rival in eighteenth-century literature, whatever any of us may choose to think of Rousseau as an individual.

Shelley, who revered Rousseau above any other writer between Milton and Wordsworth, nevertheless rendered a Dantesque judgment upon the author of the *Confessions* in his great death-poem, "The Triumph of Life." Rousseau appears with the grand disdain for Hell of Farinata, but also with a pride wholly his own, the pride of a sensibility that knew itself to be absolutely original and inevitably epochal:

Before thy memory
 I feared, loved, hated, suffered, did, & died,
 And if the spark with which Heaven lit my spirit
 Earth had with purer nutriment supplied
 Corruption would not now thus much inherit
 Of what was once Rousseau—nor this disguise
 Stained that within which still disdains to wear it.—
 If I have been extinguished, yet there rise
 A thousand beacons from the spark I bore.—

ERNST CASSIRER

The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau

I shall speak of the question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Yet the very formulation of this topic implies a certain assumption—the assumption that Rousseau’s personality and world of ideas have not been reduced to a mere historical fact that leaves us no further task but to comprehend it and describe it in its simple actuality. Even today, we do not think of Rousseau’s doctrine as of an established body of single propositions that can be easily recorded and fitted into histories of philosophy by means of textual reproduction and review. True, that is how innumerable monographs have described it; but compared with Rousseau’s own work all these accounts seem peculiarly cold and lifeless.

Anyone who penetrates deeply into this work and who reconstructs from it a view of Rousseau the man, the thinker, the artist, will feel immediately how little the abstract scheme of thought that is customarily given out as “Rousseau’s teaching” is capable of grasping the inner abundance that is revealed to us. What is disclosed to us here is not fixed and definite doctrine. It is, rather, a movement of thought that ever renews itself, a movement of such strength and passion that it seems hardly possible in its presence to take refuge in the quiet of “objective” historical contemplation. Again and again it forces itself upon us; again and again it carries us away with it. The incomparable power which Rousseau the thinker and writer exercised over his time was ultimately founded in the fact that in a century that had raised the cultivation of form to unprecedented heights, bringing it to perfection

From *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, translated and edited by Peter Gay. © 1954 by Yale University Press.

and organic completion, he brought once more to the fore the inherent uncertainty of the very concept of form. In its literature as well as in its philosophy and science, the eighteenth century had come to rest in a fixed and definite world of forms. The reality of things was rooted in this world; their worth was determined and guaranteed by it. The century rejoiced in the unmistakable precision of things, in their clear and sharp outlines and firm boundaries, and it viewed the faculty of drawing such precise boundaries as the highest subjective strength of man and at the same time as the basic power of reason.

Rousseau was the first thinker who not only questioned this certainty but who shook its very foundations. He repudiated and destroyed the molds in which ethics and politics, religion as well as literature and philosophy were cast—at the risk of letting the world sink back once more into its primordial shapelessness, into the state of “nature,” and thus of abandoning it, as it were, to chaos. But in the midst of this chaos which he himself had conjured up, his peculiar creative power was tested and proved. For now there commenced a movement animated by new impulses and determined by new forces. The aims of this movement remained, at first, in the dark; they could not be characterized in abstract isolation or anticipated as settled and given points of destination. When Rousseau attempted such anticipations he never got beyond vague and frequently contradictory formulations. What was settled for him, what he grasped at with the fullest strength of thought and feeling, was not the goal toward which he was steering but the impulse which he was following. And he dared to surrender to this impulse: he opposed the essentially static mode of thought of the century with his own completely personal dynamics of thought, feeling, and passion. His dynamics still holds us enthralled today. Even for us, Rousseau’s doctrine is not the object of mere academic curiosity nor of purely philological or historical examination. As soon as we cease to be content with examining its results and, instead, concern ourselves with its fundamental assumptions, his doctrine appears rather as a thoroughly contemporary and living means of approaching problems. The questions which Rousseau put to his century have by no means become antiquated; they have not been simply “disposed of”—even for us. Their *formulation* may frequently be significant and comprehensible only in a historical sense: their *content* has lost nothing of its immediacy.

That this should be so is in a large measure the result of the ambiguous portrait that purely historical inquiry has painted. After the most thorough research into biographical detail, after the countless investigations into the historical background and sources of Rousseau’s doctrine, after the pene-

trating analysis of his writings that has extended to every detail, we should expect that clarity would have been achieved at least in regard to the basic characteristics of his nature or that a consensus would prevail concerning the basic intention of his work. But even a glance at the Rousseau literature disappoints this expectation. Particularly in recent years this colossal literature has been increased by several important and voluminous works. But if we look at these works—if we compare, for example (to mention only the most important names), the most recent account of Rousseau in Albert Schinz's book, *La Pensée de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Paris, 1929), with the accounts by Hubert and Masson—the sharpest conflict in interpretation becomes obvious at once. This conflict is not confined to details and nonessentials; it concerns, rather, the fundamental conception of Rousseau's nature and outlook. At times, Rousseau is portrayed as the true pioneer of modern individualism, a man who championed the unfettered liberty of feeling and the "right of the heart" and who conceived of this right so loosely that he completely abandoned every ethical obligation, every objective precept of duty. Karl Rosenkranz, for example, holds that Rousseau's morality "is the morality of the natural man who has not raised himself to the objective truth of self-determination through obedience to the moral law. In its subjective capriciousness it does both good and, occasionally, evil; but it tends to represent the evil as a good because the evil supposedly has its origin in the feeling of the good heart." But it is precisely the opposite reproach which is usually leveled against Rousseau, certainly with no less justice. He is seen as the founder and champion of a state socialism which completely sacrifices the individual to the group and forces him into a fixed political order within which he finds neither freedom of activity nor even freedom of conscience.

Opinions concerning Rousseau's religious beliefs and orientation diverge as widely as those concerning his ethical and political beliefs. The "Profession de foi du vicaire savoyard" in *Emile* has been most variously interpreted. Some have seen in it a high point of eighteenth-century Deism. Others have called attention to its close ties to "positive" religion and have laid bare the threads which connect this "Profession" with the Calvinist faith in which Rousseau grew up. And the most recent comprehensive account of Rousseau's religion, in Masson's *La Religion de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, does not flinch from the paradox of fitting Rousseau's religious feeling and outlook entirely into the sphere of Catholicism and of claiming him for it. According to Masson, there exists a real, deep, all-too-long neglected connection not only between Rousseau and religion but between Rousseau and the Catholic faith.

The attempt to measure Rousseau's world of ideas by the traditional antithesis of "rationalism" and "irrationalism" results in equally ambiguous

and uncertain judgments. That Rousseau turned away from the glorification of reason that prevailed in the circle of the French Encyclopedists, that he appealed, instead, to the deeper forces of “feeling” and “conscience”—all this is undeniable. On the other hand, it was precisely this “irrationalist” who, at the height of his struggle against the *philosophes* and the spirit of the French Enlightenment, coined the phrase that the loftiest ideas that man could form of the Deity were purely and exclusively grounded in reason: “Les plus grandes idées de la divinité nous viennent par la raison seule.” Furthermore, it was this “irrationalist” whom no less a man than Kant compared with Newton and called the Newton of the moral world.

If we consider these divergences of judgment, we will immediately recognize that a true elucidation of Rousseau's nature can neither be gained nor be expected from these categories. We can achieve it only if we turn once more, untouched by all prejudgments and prejudices, to Rousseau's work itself—if we let it come into being before our eyes in accord with its own inner law.

However, such a genesis of his work is not possible unless we trace that work back to its point of departure in Rousseau's life and to its roots in his personality. These two elements—the man and the work—are so closely interwoven that every attempt to disentangle them must do violence to both by cutting their common vital nerve. True, it is not my purpose to maintain that Rousseau's world of ideas lacks independent meaning apart from his individual form of existence and personal life. It is rather the opposite hypothesis I want to defend here. What I shall try to show is this: that Rousseau's fundamental thought, although it had its immediate origin in his nature and individuality, was neither circumscribed by nor bound to that individual personality; that in its maturity and perfection this thought puts before us an objective formulation of questions; and that this formulation is valid not for him or his era alone but contains, in full sharpness and definiteness, an inner, strictly objective necessity. But this necessity does not stand immediately before us in abstract generality and systematic isolation. It emerges very gradually from the individual first cause of Rousseau's nature, and it must first, as it were, be liberated from this first cause; it must be conquered step by step. Rousseau always resisted the notion that a thought could have objective value and validity only when it appeared from the outset in systematically articulated and armor-plated form; he angrily rejected the idea that he should submit to such systematic compulsion. Rousseau's objection holds in the theoretical as well as in the practical spheres; it holds for the development of thought as well as the conduct of life. With a thinker of this sort the content and meaning of the work cannot be separated from the