

The Confessions of Jean Jacques Rousseau

by

Jean Jacques Rousseau

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INTRODUCTION

Among the notable books of later times—we may say, without exaggeration, of all time—must be reckoned *The Confessions* of Jean Jacques Rousseau. It deals with leading personages and transactions of a momentous epoch, when absolutism and feudalism were rallying for their last struggle against the modern spirit, chiefly represented by Voltaire, the Encyclopedists, and Rousseau himself—a struggle to which, after many fierce intestine quarrels and sanguinary wars throughout Europe and America, has succeeded the prevalence of those more tolerant and rational principles by which the statesmen of our own day are actuated.

On these matters, however, it is not our province to enlarge; nor is it necessary to furnish any detailed account of our author's political, religious, and philosophic axioms and systems, his paradoxes and his errors in logic: these have been so long and so exhaustively disputed over by contending factions that little is left for even the most assiduous gleaner in the field. The inquirer will find, in Mr. John Money's excellent work, the opinions of Rousseau reviewed succinctly and impartially. The '*Contrat Social*', the '*Lettres Ecrites de la Montagne*', and other treatises that once aroused fierce controversy, may therefore be left in the repose to which they have long been consigned, so far as the mass of mankind is concerned, though they must always form part of the library of the politician and the historian. One prefers to turn to the man Rousseau as he paints himself in the remarkable work before us.

That the task which he undertook in offering to show himself—as Persius puts it—'*Intus et in cute*', to posterity, exceeded his powers, is a trite criticism; like all human enterprises, his purpose was only imperfectly fulfilled; but this circumstance in no way lessens the attractive qualities of his book, not only for the student of history or psychology, but for the intelligent man of the world. Its startling frankness gives it a peculiar interest wanting in most other autobiographies.

Many censors have elected to sit in judgment on the failings of this strangely constituted being, and some have pronounced upon him very severe sentences. Let it be said once for all that his faults and mistakes were generally due to causes over which he had but little control, such as a defective education, a too acute sensitiveness, which engendered suspicion of his fellows, irresolution, an overstrained sense of honour and independence, and an obstinate refusal to take advice from those who really wished to befriend him; nor should it be forgotten that he was afflicted during the greater part of his life with an incurable disease.

Lord Byron had a soul near akin to Rousseau's, whose writings naturally made a deep impression on the poet's mind, and probably had an influence on his conduct and modes of thought: In some stanzas of 'Childe Harold' this sympathy is expressed with truth and power; especially is the weakness of the Swiss philosopher's character summed up in the following admirable lines:

"Here the self-torturing sophist, wild Rousseau,
The apostle of affliction, he who threw
Enchantment over passion, and from woe
Wrung overwhelming eloquence, first drew
The breath which made him wretched; yet he knew
How to make madness beautiful, and cast
O'er erring deeds and thoughts a heavenly hue
Of words, like sunbeams, dazzling as they passed
The eyes, which o'er them shed tears feelingly and fast.

"His life was one long war with self-sought foes,
Or friends by him self-banished; for his mind
Had grown Suspicion's sanctuary, and chose,
For its own cruel sacrifice, the kind,
'Gainst whom he raged with fury strange and blind.
But he was frenzied, -wherefore, who may know?
Since cause might be which skill could never find;
But he was frenzied by disease or woe
To that worst pitch of all, which wears a reasoning show."

One would rather, however, dwell on the brighter hues of the picture than on its shadows and blemishes; let us not, then, seek to "draw his frailties from their dread abode." His greatest fault was his renunciation of a father's duty to his offspring; but this crime he expiated by a long and bitter repentance. We cannot, perhaps, very readily excuse the way in which he has occasionally treated the memory of his mistress and benefactress. That he loved Madame de Warens—his 'Mamma'—deeply and sincerely is undeniable, notwithstanding which he now and then dwells on her improvidence and her feminine indiscretions with an unnecessary and unbecoming lack of delicacy that has an unpleasant effect on the reader, almost seeming to justify the remark of one of his most lenient critics—that, after all, Rousseau had the soul of a lackey. He possessed, however, many amiable and charming qualities, both as a man and a writer, which were evident to those amidst whom he lived, and will be equally so to the unprejudiced reader of the Confessions. He had a profound sense of justice and a real desire for the improvement and advancement of the race. Owing to these excellences he was beloved to the last even by persons whom he tried to repel, looking upon them as members of a band of conspirators, bent upon destroying his domestic peace and depriving him of the means of subsistence.

Those of his writings that are most nearly allied in tone and spirit to the 'Confessions' are the 'Reveries d'un Promeneur Solitaire' and 'La Nouvelle Heloise'. His correspondence throws much light on his life and character, as do also parts of 'Emile'. It is not easy in our day to realize the effect wrought upon the public mind by the advent of 'La Nouvelle Heloise'. Julie and Saint-Preux became names to conjure with; their ill-starred amours were everywhere sighed and wept over by the tender-hearted fair; indeed, in composing this work, Rousseau may be said to have done for Switzerland what the author of the Waverly Novels did for Scotland, turning its mountains, lakes and islands, formerly regarded with aversion, into a fairyland peopled with creatures whose joys and sorrows appealed irresistibly to every breast. Shortly after its publication began to flow that stream of tourists and travellers which tends to make Switzerland not only more celebrated but more opulent every year. It, is one of the few romances written in the epistolary form that do not oppress the reader with a sense of languor and unreality; for its creator poured into its pages a tide of passion unknown to his frigid and stilted predecessors, and dared to depict Nature as she really is, not as she was misrepresented by the modish authors and artists of the age. Some persons seem shy of owning an acquaintance with this work; indeed, it has been made the butt of ridicule by the disciples of a decadent school. Its faults and its beauties are on the surface; Rousseau's own estimate is freely expressed at the beginning of the eleventh book of the Confessions and elsewhere. It might be wished that the preface had been differently conceived and worded; for the assertion made therein that the book may prove dangerous has caused it to be inscribed on a sort of Index, and good folk who never read a line of it blush at its name. Its "sensibility," too, is a little overdone, and has supplied the wits with opportunities for satire; for example, Canning, in his 'New Morality':

"Sweet Sensibility, who dwells enshrined
In the fine foldings of the feeling mind....
Sweet child of sickly Fancy!-her of yore
From her loved France Rousseau to exile bore;
And while 'midst lakes and mountains wild he ran,
Full of himself, and shunned the haunts of man,
Taught her o'er each lone vale and Alpine, steep
To lisp the story of his wrongs and weep."

As might be imagined, Voltaire had slight sympathy with our social reformer's notions and ways of promulgating them, and accordingly took up his wonted weapons—sarcasm and ridicule—against poor Jean-Jacques. The quarrels of these two great men cannot be described in this place; but they constitute an important chapter in the literary and social history of the time. In the work with which we are immediately concerned, the author seems to avoid frequent mention of Voltaire, even where we should most expect it. However, the state of his mind when he penned this record of his life should be always remembered in relation to this as well as other occurrences.

Rousseau had intended to bring his autobiography down to a later date, but obvious causes prevented this: hence it is believed that a summary of the chief events that marked his closing years will not be out of place here.

On quitting the Ile de Saint-Pierre he travelled to Strasbourg, where he was warmly received, and thence to Paris, arriving in that city on December 16, 1765. The Prince de Conti provided him with a lodging in the Hotel Saint-Simon, within the precincts of the Temple—a place of sanctuary for those under the ban of authority. 'Every one was eager to see the illustrious proscrip, who complained of being made a daily show, "like Sancho Panza in his island of Baratania." During his short stay in the capital there was circulated an ironical letter purporting to come from the Great Frederick, but really written by Horace Walpole. This cruel, clumsy, and ill-timed joke angered Rousseau, who ascribed it to, Voltaire. A few sentences may be quoted:

"My Dear Jean-Jacques,—You have renounced Geneva, your native place. You have caused your expulsion from Switzerland, a country so extolled in your writings; France has issued a warrant against you: so do you come to me. My states offer you a peaceful retreat. I wish you well, and will treat you well, if you will let me. But, if you persist in refusing my help, do not reckon upon my telling any one that you did so. If you are bent on tormenting your spirit to find new misfortunes, choose whatever you like best. I am a king, and can procure them for you at your pleasure; and, what will certainly never happen to you in respect of your enemies, I will cease to persecute you as soon as you cease to take a pride in being persecuted. Your good friend, "FREDERICK."

Early in 1766 David Hume persuaded Rousseau to go with him to England, where the exile could find a secure shelter. In London his appearance excited general attention. Edmund Burke had an interview with him and held that inordinate vanity was the leading trait in his character. Mr. Davenport, to whom he was introduced by Hume, generously offered Rousseau a home at Wootton, in Staffordshire, near the Peak Country; the latter, however, would only accept the offer on condition that he should pay a rent of L 30 a year. He was accorded a pension of L 100 by George III., but declined to draw after the first annual payment. The climate and scenery of Wootton being similar to those of his native country, he was at first delighted with his new abode, where he lived with Therese, and devoted his time to herborising and inditing the first six books of his Confessions. Soon, however, his old hallucinations acquired strength, and Rousseau convinced himself that enemies were bent upon his capture, if not his death. In June, 1766, he wrote a violent letter to Hume, calling him "one of the worst of men." Literary Paris had combined with Hume and the English Government to surround him—as he supposed—with guards and spies; he revolved in his troubled mind all the reports and rumours he had heard for months and years; Walpole's forged letter rankled in his bosom; and in the spring of 1767 he fled; first to Spalding, in Lincolnshire, and subsequently to Calais, where he landed in May.

On his arrival in France his restless and wandering disposition forced him continually to change his residence, and acquired for him the title of "Voyageur Perpetuel." While at Trye, in Gisors, in 1767—8, he wrote the second part of the Confessions. He had assumed the surname of Renou, and about this time he declared before two witnesses that Therese was his wife—a proceeding to which he attached the sanctity of marriage. In 1770 he took up his abode in Paris, where he lived continuously for seven years, in a street which now bears his name, and gained a living by copying music. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, the author of 'Paul and Virginia', who became acquainted with him in 1772, has left some interesting particulars of Rousseau's daily mode of life at this period. Monsieur de Girardin having offered him an asylum at Ermemonville in the spring of 1778, he and Therese went thither to reside, but for no long time. On the 3d of July, in the same year, this perturbed spirit at last found rest, stricken by apoplexy. A rumor that he had committed suicide was circulated, but the evidence of trustworthy witnesses, including a physician, effectually contradicts this accusation. His remains, first interred in the Ile des Peupliers, were, after the Revolution, removed to the Pantheon. In later times the Government of Geneva made some reparation for their harsh treatment of a famous citizen, and erected his statue, modelled by his compatriot, Pradier, on an island in the Rhone.

"See nations, slowly wise and meanly just,
To buried merit raise the tardy bust."

November, 1896.

S. W. ORSON.

BOOK I

I have entered upon a performance which is without example, whose accomplishment will have no imitator. I mean to present my fellow-mortals with a man in all the integrity of nature; and this man shall be myself.

I know my heart, and have studied mankind; I am not made like any one I have been acquainted with, perhaps like no one in existence; if not better, I at least claim originality, and whether Nature did wisely in breaking the mould with which she formed me, can only be determined after having read this work.

Whenever the last trumpet shall sound, I will present myself before the sovereign judge with this book in my hand, and loudly proclaim, thus have I acted; these were my thoughts; such was I. With equal freedom and veracity have I related what was laudable or wicked, I have concealed no crimes, added no virtues; and if I have sometimes introduced superfluous ornament, it was merely to occupy a void occasioned by defect of memory: I may have supposed that certain, which I only knew to be probable, but have never asserted as truth, a conscious falsehood. Such as I was, I have declared myself; sometimes vile and despicable, at others, virtuous, generous and sublime; even as thou hast read my inmost soul: Power eternal! assemble round thy throne an innumerable throng of my fellow-mortals, let them listen to my confessions, let them blush at my depravity, let them tremble at my sufferings; let each in his turn expose with equal sincerity the failings, the wanderings of his heart, and, if he dare, aver, I was better than that man.

I was born at Geneva, in 1712, son of Isaac Rousseau and Susannah Bernard, citizens. My father's share of a moderate competency, which was divided among fifteen children, being very trivial, his business of a watchmaker (in which he had the reputation of great ingenuity) was his only dependence. My mother's circumstances were more affluent; she was daughter of a Mons. Bernard, minister, and possessed a considerable share of modesty and beauty; indeed, my father found some difficulty in obtaining her hand.

The affection they entertained for each other was almost as early as their existence; at eight or nine years old they walked together every evening on the banks of the Treille, and before they were ten, could not support the idea of separation. A natural sympathy of soul confined those sentiments of predilection which habit at first produced; born with minds susceptible of the most exquisite sensibility and tenderness, it was only necessary to encounter similar dispositions; that moment fortunately presented itself, and each surrendered a willing heart.

The obstacles that opposed served only to give a decree of vivacity to their affection, and the young lover, not being able to obtain his mistress, was overwhelmed with sorrow and despair. She advised him to travel—to forget her. He consented—he travelled, but returned more passionate than ever, and had the happiness to find her equally constant, equally tender. After this proof of mutual affection, what could they resolve?—to

dedicate their future lives to love! the resolution was ratified with a vow, on which Heaven shed its benediction.

Fortunately, my mother's brother, Gabriel Bernard, fell in love with one of my father's sisters; she had no objection to the match, but made the marriage of his sister with her brother an indispensable preliminary. Love soon removed every obstacle, and the two weddings were celebrated the same day: thus my uncle became the husband of my aunt, and their children were doubly cousins german. Before a year was expired, both had the happiness to become fathers, but were soon after obliged to submit to a separation.

My uncle Bernard, who was an engineer, went to serve in the empire and Hungary, under Prince Eugene, and distinguished himself both at the siege and battle of Belgrade. My father, after the birth of my only brother, set off, on recommendation, for Constantinople, and was appointed watchmaker to the Seraglio. During his absence, the beauty, wit, and accomplishments—

[They were too brilliant for her situation, the minister, her father, having bestowed great pains on her education. She was aught drawing, singing, and to play on the theorbo; had learning, and wrote very agreeable verses. The following is an extempore piece which she composed in the absence of her husband and brother, in a conversation with some person relative to them, while walking with her sister—in—law, and their two children:

Ces deux messieurs, qui sont absens,
Nous sont chers e bien des manieres;
Ce sont nos amiss, nos amans
Ce sont nos maris et nos freres,
Et les peres de ces enfans.

These absent ones, who just claim
Our hearts, by every tender name,
To whom each wish extends
Our husbands and our brothers are,
The fathers of this blooming pair,
Our lovers and our friends.]

of my mother attracted a number of admirers, among whom Mons. de la Closure, Resident of France, was the most assiduous in his attentions. His passion must have been extremely violent, since after a period of thirty years I have seen him affected at the very mention of her name. My mother had a defence more powerful even than her virtue; she tenderly loved my father, and conjured him to return; his inclination seconding his request, he gave up every prospect of emolument, and hastened to Geneva.

I was the unfortunate fruit of this return, being born ten months after, in a very weakly and infirm state; my birth cost my mother her life, and was the first of my misfortunes. I am ignorant how my father supported her loss at that time, but I know he was ever after inconsolable. In me he still thought he saw her he so tenderly lamented, but could never forget I had been the innocent cause of his misfortune, nor did he ever embrace me, but his sighs, the convulsive pressure of his arms, witnessed that a bitter regret mingled itself

with his caresses, though, as may be supposed, they were not on this account less ardent. When he said to me, "Jean Jacques, let us talk of your mother," my usual reply was, "Yes, father, but then, you know, we shall cry," and immediately the tears started from his eyes. "Ah!" exclaimed he, with agitation, "Give me back my wife; at least console me for her loss; fill up, dear boy, the void she has left in my soul. Could I love thee thus wert thou only my son?" Forty years after this loss he expired in the arms of his second wife, but the name of the first still vibrated on his lips, still was her image engraved on his heart.

Such were the authors of my being: of all the gifts it had pleased Heaven to bestow on them, a feeling heart was the only one that descended to me; this had been the source of their felicity, it was the foundation of all my misfortunes.

I came into the world with so few signs of life, that they entertained but little hope of preserving me, with the seeds of a disorder that has gathered strength with years, and from which I am now relieved at intervals, only to suffer a different, though more intolerable evil. I owed my preservation to one of my father's sisters, an amiable and virtuous girl, who took the most tender care of me; she is yet living, nursing, at the age of four—score, a husband younger than herself, but worn out with excessive drinking. Dear aunt! I freely forgive your having preserved my life, and only lament that it is not in my power to bestow on the decline of your days the tender solicitude and care you lavished on the first dawn of mine. My nurse, Jaqueline, is likewise living: and in good health—the hands that opened my eyes to the light of this world may close them at my death. We suffer before we think; it is the common lot of humanity. I experienced more than my proportion of it. I have no knowledge of what passed prior to my fifth or sixth year; I recollect nothing of learning to read, I only remember what effect the first considerable exercise of it produced on my mind; and from that moment I date an uninterrupted knowledge of myself.

Every night, after supper, we read some part of a small collection of romances which had been my mother's. My father's design was only to improve me in reading, and he thought these entertaining works were calculated to give me a fondness for it; but we soon found ourselves so interested in the adventures they contained, that we alternately read whole nights together, and could not bear to give over until at the conclusion of a volume. Sometimes, in a morning, on hearing the swallows at our window, my father, quite ashamed of this weakness, would cry, "Come, come, let us go to bed; I am more a child than thou art."

I soon acquired, by this dangerous custom, not only an extreme facility in reading and comprehending, but, for my age, a too intimate acquaintance with the passions. An infinity of sensations were familiar to me, without possessing any precise idea of the objects to which they related—I had conceived nothing—I had felt the whole. This confused succession of emotions did not retard the future efforts of my reason, though they added an extravagant, romantic notion of human life, which experience and reflection have never been able to eradicate.

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