

Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Romantic Roots of Modern Democracy

[Synopsis: The argument of this essay is that the defining moment in the life of the Western world was the profound shift in thinking from the Classical and Christian mode that had informed our civilization for almost two millennia, to the secular Romantic one which has characterized the West ever since. It is impossible to understand modern totalitarianism, democracy, or Rousseau himself unless we see that while he was certainly an architect of the Romantic sentiment, he was riding a wave of revolutionary sensibility that began in the Reformation and continues unabated. In Note 3 to this essay Canadians will be particularly interested to see the firm evidence of Rousseau's thinking in the work of former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, something revealed here for the first time.]

Political theorists have paid too little attention to the role of literature and the arts in the shaping of political ideals, and of no period is this more true than Rousseau's. This is a great shame, for "conceptions of the nature and purpose of art closely parallel man's conceptions of himself and of his destiny,"^[1] and they speak to us in ways far more compelling than abstract theory can do. Critics, when trying to trace the cause of modern political evils, often say "It's Rousseau's fault." And in a sense that is correct. But it is more correct to say that the fault lies in a whole complex of newly popular ideas (only later described as "Romantic") that were already working powerful changes on the public mind through art, literature, and poetry. So while it is true that the entire modern democracy movement has been indelibly shaped by the ideas of Rousseau, that is mostly because he so effectively articulated the assumptions rising in his time and gave them enduring political expression. They were ideas about the nature of freedom and democracy that were transformed, and used (or misused) by others, such as Robespierre, in ways that surely would have shocked Rousseau. But it is for this reason they must be studied, for Rousseau's political ideas were at once idealistic, mystical, and collectivist, and they became dangerous during a time of social upheaval in the hands of people who had lost all perspective on the true nature and history of democracy and who therefore succumbed to its considerable powers of collective mystification. My fear is that in a new time, during a new chaos, we may again be seized by this process as have so many past enthusiasts of democracy, and like them impose a tyranny in its name. The ground is fertile, and the ideas so popular in Rousseau's time have not only sprouted once again, but have mutated into the even more dangerous - because less obvious - hyperdemocratic form. In a hyperdemocratic society the power appealed to in the name of the people is no longer sought within them as a product (really, an interpretation) of their collective will. Rather, it resides increasingly outside them in a cluster of disembodied concepts which, while ostensibly a logical extension of democratic theory, in practice are empty categories soon filled with particular meanings by experts who then may use them against the moral body of the people.

Rousseau's most important political treatise was **The Social Contract** (1762), and I see it as the political matrix and symbol of the much wider and more significant shift in ideas about the nature of reality, the self and politics in all of Western history. For the decades that followed the 1760s were a kind of crossover point between the prior Classical (or so-called "neoclassical") and Christian ethos, and a new, quite opposite rebellious movement we have come to call "Romantic," which was really an anti-Classical and anti-Christian set of ideas that will be my focus here.

We know that the Romantic attitude has always been around. It was detected long ago in the works of ancient thinkers such as Longinus. But in the struggle for dominance it has always lost out to the Classical and Christian viewpoint. It was not until the Reformation's emphasis on individual authenticity and personal divine insight became slowly secularized that conditions became congenial to a modern resurgence of the modern Romantic ideal. It was an ideal that came to full political blossom in France about twenty years after Rousseau's death in a riot of abstract reasoning during the French Revolution, by which time he had already been canonized as the high priest of democracy.

What is of interest is the profound connection between this Eighteenth century Romanticism, the democracy-madness that it fuelled, and how this combination radically altered our contemporary ideas about self, sin, and politics. Who are we? What is the source of evil? How shall we live together? For although Rousseau's political influence - so deep that the Jacobins clung to his words as a kind of political religion - was soon dampened by the failure and chaos of the French Revolution, its spirit has risen repeatedly in countless revolutions around the world. Indeed, Rousseau's formulations, twisted and modified, have been used to justify everything from the despotisms of Marx, Lenin, Hitler, Mussolini, and Castro, who are on record as repeatedly and sincerely insisting their movements were "democratic" in a much higher sense than our own. Even the Hippie movement of the 1960s was a romantic movement that fanned the flames of radical democracy across American campuses through such groups as SDS (Students for a Democratic Society).^[ii] The French riots of May 1968 were similar. As for Canada's welfare statism? We know that Canada's former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau had a boutique intellectual fascination with Rousseau and repeatedly used the latter's favorite term, "la volonte generale" (or its variant, "the national will") to justify his socialism to an uncomprehending nation.^[iii]

Like everything else, however, large movements of ideas are subject to fashion and the pressure of social and moral correctness. Over long periods of time in a kind of reaction to each other they tend to transform and then reappear. Thus to understand Rousseau and his Romantic period (as well as our own) we first need some appreciation of the Classical and Christian ethos he struggled against, why it bugged him so much, and what made his ideas a rebellion that refuses to go away.

Modern Classicism ~ The glory of the Classical period was its rediscovery of ancient thinkers and authorities long considered suppressed by medieval Christian Europe, who partly due to the invention of printing had become suddenly available to a broader public. Once crystallized, this re-birth (or Renaissance) of learning became retrospectively characterized as a *new* "Classical" (or "neoclassical") period that emerged in the mid-Seventeenth century, peaked in the mid-Eighteenth, and began its decline in Rousseau's own time ... weakened because of attacks from people such as him. During the peak of neoclassicism, the philosophy, drama, poetry, epic themes and rigorous thinking of the most important Greek and Roman thinkers claimed a virtual dominance of the European mind, especially in France.

Interestingly, across the channel, classical thinking had less of an influence due to the existence of Shakespeare's wonderful work, which defied classification and due to its

powerful effects made even great neoclassical dramatists seem quite secondary. For us, Racine is no match for Shakespeare. Even in England, however, the new rationalism of the ancients was widely felt. For example, whereas in 1650 most standard moral references in England were to the Christian Bible, by 1700 during the so-called “Augustan Age” of England (so named after the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus who was responsible for Rome’s “Golden Age” in arts, letters, and politics), people referred as much to classical authors such as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Pliny for guidance and standards of every sort.^[iv] It was all part of a slow turn away from Biblical and toward secular classical authority. A plane ride over any European capitol, or over Washington D.C. will reveal lots of faux-Roman architectural monuments built during the Eighteenth century to honour the classical ideal.

Neoclassicism quickly became typified by a veneration of logic and cool reasoning in philosophy, by wit, taste, and decorum in the arts, and by a general agreement that as the highest and best forms of these things had already been created by the ancients and were unlikely ever to be surpassed, modern thinkers and artists could attain to the same greatness by understanding the rules, techniques, and procedures that made this success and greatness possible. This meant that in all things social, artistic, philosophical and moral an authority or standard reigned that was *external*. The Locus of Reality, we might say, lay outside and above the individual.^[v] This ideal of external authority extended especially to morality, to the belief that human beings are creatures of two natures, a lower and a higher, part natural, or animal, part human and rational. What distinguished humans from animals is their power of control over their own animal nature. As the great Harvard Scholar Irving Babbitt put it in his book **Rousseau and Romanticism**, “If man is to become human he must not let impulse and desire run wild,” but must ever submit to Aristotle’s Law of Measure. This insistence on control, self restraint, and proportion in all things, “is rightly taken to be the essence of ... the classical spirit in general.”^[vi] Accordingly, the French neoclassical dramatist Jean Racine (1639-1699) felt obliged to follow the ancients and write his plays in controlled rhyming couplets, scrupulously observing the three “classical unities” of time, place, and action (meaning, the dramatist should never distort the realistic time period of a play, mix different imaginary locations, or offend with illogical or grotesque actions).^[vii] Famous English neoclassic poets such as John Dryden (1631-1700) and Alexander Pope (1688-1744) just as slavishly followed pre-set classical rules of poetic diction and form. This all sounds petty now, but it ran deep enough that a schoolboy would get a cane over his knuckles for not learning such forms and rules by rote. (From what I’ve seen of modern high-school poetry, this may be something we ought to bring back!) At any rate, what matters is that the whole fuss over neoclassicism was due to a single underlying idea - one frankly still difficult to refute: *that for all things there logically can be only one best way which it is the duty of the thinker, the writer, the artist, and the citizen to discover*. The ancients had shown the way, and therefore their work should be imitated. Imitation, or *Mimesis*, as Aristotle called it, was central. Key to the psychology of the time therefore was the widely accepted assumption that all personal expression had to be subordinated to, and controlled by some higher rule, form, ideal, or behaviour. To learn math you memorize and practice the rules. To learn the sonnet form, how to fence, how to reason morally, or how to eat, you study the great poets, fencers, thinkers, and etiquette writers.

This combination of Classical and Christian models (sometime called Christian Platonism by scholars) meant that all should be governed by the good, the beautiful, and the true. Human reason was expected to pierce through the flux and confusion of conflicting particulars, and especially the deceit of the passions, to grasp what is universal. People were expected to mirror such truth in their lives and work. The *One*, legible in universal law, general truth, order, and social unity, was hence superior to the *Many*, all too visible in partial laws, particular truths, disorder, and social disunity. Self-control was expected to trump self-expression.

Suffice it to say that after more than a century of this correctness and decorum, which had a thorough social power equivalent to the regime of “political correctness” under which we presently cower, oppression and staleness filled the air. For correctness, as Babbitt put it, soon “became a sort of tyranny.”^[viii] Poetic, dramatic and artistic knock-offs of the classical masters were soon ridiculed as empty of meaning, but pale shadows of the greats. Energetic young minds soon began a new and restless search for “originality.” Thus in a kind of recoil, individual creativity and impulse again began to surface, and voices long suppressed, scorned, and mocked as unruly, were heard anew. Fresh blades of grass began pushing through the intellectual and moral asphalt. The Romantic impulse was emerging.

The Romantic Revolution ~ The word “romantic” is derived from Latin and originally denoted wild fictions and highly emotional or scary stories told in old dialects. The first influential use of the word *romantique* was ... by Rousseau himself in 1777, and as it happened he became the prototypical French Romantic in his own person. Raised by relatives from a young age, Rousseau soon became a kind of literary vagabond, a man definitely original, wild, and emotionally unstable, who ended by fighting with almost every important person in his life, most of whom he accused of betrayal (though some, indeed, betrayed him). In modern parlance, he was a man hurting all the time, and was considered half-crazed most of his life.^[ix] But he had a beautifully clear literary style and wrote books that excited whole generations. In his novels and political writings can be found every Romantic assumption and value that framed his thinking, and ours, about democracy.

The Romantic movement in England, which had early roots in the widely influential sentimentalism of the Earl of Shaftesbury, was formally announced by the Preface to Wordsworth’s **Lyrical Ballads** of 1798, and petered out by 1830, finally overtaken by a tougher realism in fiction, art, and politics. In France, however, where classicism had been stronger, the Romantic recoil began earlier, entered much more into political dispute than in England, and was soon summed up by one wit as ... “all that is not Voltaire,” (as English Romanticism was all that was not Pope). The clash between Voltaire and Rousseau was more than a conflict of personalities, however. It was a “clash between two incompatible views of life,”^[x] and just as Voltaire symbolized the older view, Rousseau symbolized the new. His thinking, especially as seized upon by his radical followers was used to repudiate utterly the Classical and Christian traditions and all they stood for. It was Rousseau’s Romantic view of “democracy” and the “General Will” that so deeply inspired the Jacobins of the French Revolution, an event

that must be seen as the ultimate political expression of the prevailing Romanticism. What then, did the typical Romantic believe?

Let's start with what it meant to be an informed and admirable person of the highest order. Whereas for Voltaire, genius was a matter of judicious imitation of the techniques, principles, and authority of the masters, for Rousseau the prime mark of genius was precisely the refusal to imitate.^[xi] The Romantic seemed to enjoy spurning the general and the universal and sought instead what is particular and unique, longing for experiences flooded with the genuineness of strong emotion.^[xii] He got high on poetry. In place of cold reason he chose personal imagination and "fancy;" individual sense, instead of common sense. To abstract general rules about "Man" and manners (such as overflowed Alexander Pope's long, stultifying instructional poem, *Essay on Man*) he preferred the living, unpredictable individual, longed for the fascination of complex sensual experiences, and the deeply-rooted feel of distinctive national cultures. Nuts to the general and the universal, was the feeling on the street. The English poet William Blake felt this drive for the particular so strongly he waxed positively unpoetic, declaring that "to generalize is to be an idiot."^[xiii] Ralph Waldo Emerson, his American prose counterpart, chirped up with a similar memorable line when he declared, "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds."

In short, the Romantic turns the Classical world upside down. He abandons self-control in favour of spontaneous self-expression, and sets out in search of his own personal nature, rather than human nature. Modern high-school students are encouraged to venture on a similar quest of the true "self" (though no one is quite certain what the self is, or how we know it is true when it is found). But it was certainly Rousseau's **Confessions** that became the prototype for the modern, smarmy, self-interested literary gush. For as an artist, Rousseau imagined himself not as a mirror, reflecting the truth of nature, but as a lamp, generating a very personal truth, shining with individual genius (which back then meant an almost mystical selfhood). Indeed, "the theatricality that was so much a part of the art of this period arises from the eagerness of the genius to communicate to others something of the amazement that he feels at himself."^[xiv] And so it was that by the end of the Eighteenth century, "originality" had become everything, and imitation nothing. Just imagine what a turnaround this was! The true artist was now expected not to mirror nature or the universal, but to indulge in a mystical inward connection with its grandness and to express its essence in an original and unique way. Sympathy, imagination, and natural instinct were now considered preferable to reason, formalism, intellectual cleverness, or correct manners. Indeed, booklearning became a bit suspect and scorned. For a Romantic, wild, even outrageous conduct was preferable to formality and convention, and original genius was said to be visible everywhere if we would but look for it, especially in the child. By now we get the point: goodness is not the reward for moral struggle, but lies readily at hand ... within ourselves, in ourselves untainted by social conventions. The reader may have guessed that this was but an updated version of the old gnostic/millenarian spirit, the old spark of personal divinity flashing once again. It was certainly an ironic perversion of our tradition because whereas what the Christianity has always admired in the child is a relative freedom from sin, "it is of the essence of Rousseauism to deny the very existence of sin - at least in the Christian sense of the word."^[xv] How extreme this

adulation of infancy became was often embarrassing. At one point Wordsworth went so completely overboard in his sympathy for this central Romantic conceit that he hailed a gamboling child as a “Mighty Prophet! Seer Blest!” By extension, the untutored adult artist was thought of as just a large child with a pencil or paintbrush, rendering an uncorrupted reality and an innocent morality. Notice here the emphasis on Adamic goodness, an image drawn from the secularization of the Christian dream of innocence. Wordsworth summed up the mood for a whole generation when he described good poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” which reads like a logo for the Bretheren of the Free Spirit. But he knew full well this was a deeply political statement, every word of which was an attack on all lovers of the Classic spirit, who despise spontaneity as erratic gushing, overflow as immature and unnecessary to moral or aesthetic purposes, and who insist that all feeling and behaviour must be proportionate to the purpose of art and life, and not powerful merely for its own sake.

Romantics soon became characterized as people ready to spurn all restraint in art and life in favour of natural self-expression. Theirs was a direct attack on the authority of Classical and Christian self-control, and they successfully worked a substitution in the mind of Western man of the Sinless, for the Sinful man model. This presumption of innocence was of enormous importance to the success of modern democratic ideology and forms its foundation. Certainly it began showing up in imaginative works everywhere: in Rousseau’s idealized “Noble Savage;” in the romanticized American Indian (James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking novels of the American West); and in the Scottish Highlander (the historical novels of Walter Scott). In modern nationalism we spy this notorious yearning for primitive roots most clearly in the poetry of Herder, who counselled the Germans to look back wistfully to the pure childhood of the whole nation, to the innocence, nobility and beauty of the *Volk*. Heil Hitler!

So we can see three themes emerging, one from the other: first is the modern democratic idea of the inherent nobility of the “primitive” individual (which we saw was no part of the ancient ideal of democracy, but only of the modern post-Christian one), then the glorification of the unspoiled common “people,”^[xvi] and finally a yearning to achieve in real society a social perfection in a so-called “state of nature.” The key to the political importance of the Romantic impulse, however, is to understand that it was at bottom a general moral technique for escaping the problem of personal sin, “a rebound from the doctrine of total depravity that was held by the more austere type of Christian.”^[xvii] The politics of democratic revolution in France became its first specific practical instance during which the Voice of the People became not merely the voice of God, but God himself. Thus we arrive at a theorem which states that if man is inherently good, then sin must come either from his ignorance, or from bad social and political influences outside him. In other words, in place of the ancient internal dualism of good and evil warring in the heart of man, we have a new, external dualism between pure sinless man and a corrupt fallen society. It was this substitution in the very heart of Western life that permitted the flourishing of modern progressivism which is distinguished from all earlier forms by its radical emphasis on *reforming society instead of the self*. Its precise starting point is an assumption of self-divinization and its radical utopianism can be sourced in a violent anger against God for allowing evil in this world which it then becomes the logical and moral duty of men to eradicate. Babbitt fingered

the underlying mechanism of this modernity when he said that “faith in one’s natural goodness is a constant encouragement to evade moral responsibility;” and further, he called this “the most alluring form of sham spirituality that the world has ever seen - a method not merely of masking but of glorifying one’s spiritual indolence.”^[xviii]

The result in modern democratic theory is the almost hysterically naive idea that from the pooled votes of more free citizens will arise more goodness and truth. In retrospect, this brief Romantic outburst in the history of the West seems to be the dividing line between almost two thousand years of Classic and Christian history, and the anti-Classical and anti-Christian European thought that took its place. This change in character is clearly revealed in the opposing political theories of the state of nature. The Christian Hobbes said in the state of nature we are rotten and so we need a controlling dictator. The post-Christian Rousseau said in the state of nature we are innocent and good and therefore require only a mechanism for total agreement on all things. His views have prevailed because they are essentially more flattering. Romantic thinking produced a chain of ideas, from glorification of the child and natural goodness, to glorification of the common people, to glorification of democracy as the collective self-expression of goodness. That is why we may say that modern democracy and its progressivism rests on the the Romantic spirit, which in politics at least became a modern secular expression of the ancient millenarian impulse to produce the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

^[i]From Walter Jackson Bate, **From Classic To Romantic** (New York: Harper, 1946), p.1., a book that concisely and elegantly presents the complex ideas that underlay this momentous shift in European consciousness of reality.

^[ii]Damning insights into the student radical democracy movement of the 1960s may be had from Peter Collier and David Horowitz, **Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts About the Sixties** (New York: Summit Books, 1989), and Stanley Rothman and S. Robert Lichter, **Roots of Radicalism: Jews, Christian, and the Left** (New Brunswick, USA: Transaction Publishers, 1996).

^[iii]Although Trudeau seldom refers to Rousseau by name we can see the ghost of Rousseau in Trudeau’s first collection of essays, Federalism and the French Canadians (Toronto: Macmillan, 1968), especially in his "Federalism, Nationalism, and Reason," based, as it is, on Rousseau's notion of the General Will (la volonte generale). Trudeau repeats everywhere that "the foundation of the nation is will" (p.187); then again, "for there is no power without will" (p.187); and again, "self-determination was based on will." (p.184). And finally, an international order would be founded on "the free will of the people," "willing their way toward statehood." On page 195 he repeats the phrase "will of the people" four times in one paragraph.

At the end of his career, in Pierre Trudeau Speaks Out On Meech Lake (1990), he seems obsessed with Rousseau's notion of the General Will. He says that sixty years of Canadian federalism from 1927 forward strove "to create a national will," or, "une volonte generale,' as Rousseau had called it" (p.45); this Canadian Will would be a "body of beliefs" - beliefs in fact designed by Trudeau and his colleagues, and later entrenched in his Charter in 1982. He complained that "with Meech Lake there is no national will left" (p.66). And then again he mentions "the idea of a national will" (p.67); then again "the existence of a national will" (p.67, twice); and then speaks of "denying the existence of a national will" (p.87). At no point, however, does Trudeau adequately distinguish between a national will of a purely majoritarian nature, and Rousseau’s mystical General Will. It is uncertain that he knew the difference.

[iv]See Steven N. Zwicker, "England, Israel, and the Triumph of Roman Virtue," in Richard H. Popkin, **Millenarianism and Messianism in English Literature and Thought 1650-1800** (New York: E.J. Brill, 1988), pp.37-64.

[v]For an examination of the concept of a shifting Locus of Reality and its role in various literary and critical movements, see William D. Gairdner, **The Critical Wager** (Toronto: ECW Press, 1982).

[vi]Irving Babbitt, **Rousseau and Romanticism** (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1991), p.16. Originally published in 1919, this is surely one of the best general treatments of Rousseau and the efflorescence of the Romantic impulse and the political assumptions that arise from it. Certainly it is a book that ought to be more widely known among political scientists.

[vii]There is an argument that the unfolding of modern French civilization was determined by the national choice made to follow Racine and the classical imitative spirit and logic, rather than Rabelais and the spirit of originality, whose modern counterpart was Louis-ferdinand Celine. Like Rabelais, Celine was an original and prodigious inventor of language and a breaker, instead of maker of rules.

[viii]Irving Babbitt, **Rousseau and Romanticism**, p.14.

[ix]An unflattering biographical essay which explores the political ramifications of Rousseau's life is found in Paul Johnson, **Intellectuals** (New York: Harper and Row, 1988). Johnson delights in highlighting the contradictions and inconsistencies of his various subjects to show that the sincerity of the work is belied by the insincerity of the life.

[x]Cited in Babbitt, **Rousseau and Romanticism**, p.32.

[xi]Babbitt, p.34.

[xii]Many Romantics saw themselves as radical traditionalists reviving the genuineness, spirituality, and fervour of the Medieval period, which they imagined as a time of acute emotion, high mythology, naturalness and candour, magic, religious passion and crusades, and of course a time of romance, chivalry, and courtly love. King Arthur and Guinevere, St. George of the Cross, bold knights, slashing duels, great honour and undying love spring to mind. For an intense overview of this mood, see J.L.Talmon, **Romanticism and Revolt** (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1967), especially Chapter V.

[xiii]Cited in David Perkins, ed., **English Romantic Writers** (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), p.9.

[xiv]Babbitt, **Rousseau and Romanticism**, p.51.

[xv]Babbitt, **Rousseau and Romanticism**, p.52. Babbitt hints that Rousseau did entertain the idea of evil, and that is true. He often alludes to the struggle for truth and the good within the self. But for him evil comes not from sin but from succumbing to particular selfish interests over those of the whole people, from a preference for one's particular will rather than the for the general will. He proposes a "civil religion" or, as David Walsh puts it in **The Growth of the Liberal Soul** (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1997), p.166, "a naturalized form of Christianity that will supersede the denominational presentations." Rousseau's Christianity is in fact a form of Protestant Deism that seeks a "pure and simple religion of the Gospel," to worship God in the heart. Rousseau sorrows that ordinary Christianity has destroyed the unity of the state by commanding man to render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and unto God the things which are God's, thus causing a perpetual rift or split-loyalty between God and society. However Walsh overlooks the fact that the period of absolutism against which Rousseau rebelled had for the most part ended this distinction. The church came to heel under the absolutism of monarchs. What Rousseau wanted was a democratic absolutism to take its place. That's what the French Revolution quickly became.

[xvi]The Romantic primitivism idea surfaced once again with a vengeance in the twentieth century, stimulated by such as the German neo-romantic poet Herder, and the subsequent Nazi glorification of the German *Volk* (the people). Much of the German anger at the Jew arose from the conviction that Jews simply refused to become true Germans and clung to their own heritage. Modern German political romanticism was a purist search for origins and roots that was millenarian in character. Hitler repeatedly referred to himself as a democrat, and his movement as a replication of the spirit of the French Revolution. His mythology of the Third Reich descends directly from the theological work of the Thirteenth century mystical millenarian Joachim of Flora, who predicted that the “third age” would be the “age of the spirit” and social perfection.

[xvii]Babbitt, **Rousseau and Romanticism**, p.44

[xviii]Babbitt, **Rousseau and Romanticism**, p.155