

A Letter-Perfect Jean-Jacques Rousseau

The Solitary Self: Jean-Jacques Rousseau in Exile and Adversity

Maurice Cranston
foreword by Sanford Lakoff
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REVIEWED BY
Kenneth Minogue

It is well known that a philosopher with a toothache is no more stoical than the average man. The lives of the philosophers generally show that heads in the clouds are attached to feet of clay. Nietzsche wrote about the superman but was sickly of body, feeble in love, and knew little of war. But perhaps the most notable gap between reality and philosophical aspirations is the case of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Against the fashionable society of his time, which was inordinately proud of being civilized, Rousseau juxtaposed an ideal of natural sincerity and simplicity. Yet almost the only people who were nice to him—certainly the only women he fell in love with—came from the upper strata of society. In his last wandering days, Rousseau and his mistress actually lived at times among the unspoiled rustics whom in principle he so much admired. Both in Switzerland and in England, it ended in tears—in Switzerland the natives actually stoned the house Rousseau was living in.

Philosophy and reality fitted together no better when it came to politics. Rousseau took his native Geneva as being in many ways the model of republican virtue he presented in *The Social Contract*, yet this book was banned there and he himself threatened with arrest.

His last years, from 1762 to his death in 1778, are the subject of the third volume

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of Maurice Cranston's masterly biography. It is a great sadness that Cranston died just before completing the work. Fortunately his friend Sanford Lakoff has put together the notes for the last chapter and used some of Cranston's other writings to round off the picture of Rousseau. Cranston served on the editorial board of *The American Spectator*, and readers will be familiar with his remarkable gift for lucid and sympathetic analysis of complex thinkers. Here, in *The Solitary Self*, his scholarship and lively wit bring a lost world to life.

This is a service later generations will not be able to perform for us. Most of our thoughts and hesitations will have vanished into thin air, the telephone calls forgotten, the faxes faded.

Rousseau however was one of the world's great letter writers at a time when thoughtful communication flourished. One way he earned his living was as a music copyist, and he often kept copies of his own letters, many drafted with great care. This means that his biographer can often follow day by day, the story of a life filled with conflict, and Cranston is able to cross-cut from one point of view to the other.

Expelled from France for the heretodox religious opinions of *Emile*, Rousseau found himself in 1762 living in the village of Môtiers, near Neuchâtel, in Switzerland. He was suffering from social isolation and a urinary complaint which led him to affect an eccentric form of Armenian dress. As Cranston writes:

In keeping with his philosophy of the simple life, he tried to find happiness in the society of simple people. But he failed to do so. They were too dull; the cold weather depressed him; and he felt ill.

"*Je suis froid*," he wrote in a letter to Rey [his publisher], "*je suis triste, je pisse mal*."

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At this stage of his life, Rousseau was doomed to wander from one jurisdiction—fortunately there were many in the Europe of his time—to another, because he was always at the mercy of shifts in parochial politics. Geneva wouldn't have him, he alienated people in Neuchâtel, and the authorities at Berne were determined he should go. There were always influential friends and much kindness, especially in high places, but Rousseau was too much a celebrity all over Europe to be able to find the solitude he claimed to crave. Besides, however much he might vow to keep silent, he would soon pick up his pen, and then his troubles would begin anew. He had become the catalyst for that vague sense of discontent with European life which eventually burst forth in the French Revolution.

His most famous work, *The Social Contract*, breathed the spirit of classical republicanism, and turned into a philosophical idiom his patriotic pride in Geneva and his admiration for the longevity of ancient Sparta. In a Europe of monarchies, Rousseau argued, the only legitimate government was one that expressed the general will of the people themselves. It is typical of his destiny that he was admired by the French Court, treated considerately by Frederick the Great of Prussia, and given a pension by George III of Britain. His persecutors were the citizens of Geneva, the lawyers of the French *parlement*, and other oligarchic authorities.

His *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* argued that modern Europeans had lost the integrity and sincerity of their less self-conscious ancestors in the state of nature. Rousseau changed the direction of European self-criticism away from morals and religion towards society and culture. He judged modern society in terms of an ideal, found it wanting, and historicized this idea as “nature,” thus turning human history into the familiar pattern of decline and fall. His most famous utterance—“Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains”—appeals to just this pattern. Man was (in some sense) by nature good, but had been corrupted by society. Rousseau was thus at the root of the fatal modern obsession with personal authenticity. In his episto-

lary novel *La Nouvelle Heloise* he seemed to be liberating passion from the constraints of duty, just as in his musical disputes with Rameau he championed melody and feeling against classical disciplines. A celebrity in his lifetime, Rousseau became no less than a cult soon after his death, and many of the French revolutionaries idolized him. There is no doubt he was a dangerous man, and conservatives such as Burke and Dr. Johnson loathed him.

They loathed him because he taught his readers that their discontents resulted not from their own character but from a bad social system, which could be transformed by a politically engineered change of lifestyle. A century before, Pascal had remarked that all the troubles of the world resulted from the fact that human beings could not sit still. At levels both shallow and profound, Rousseau initiated the passionate mass political activism that has made modern times so “interesting” in the Chinese sense. No wonder many French revolutionaries carried his works, like a little red book, in their pockets. They wept as they read his inspiring words—but it did not stop them from using the guillotine.

Rousseau was both supremely passionate and devastatingly rational. He claimed in *The Confessions* “that I am like no one in the whole world”; his passions often overflowed into weeping, and his life is a saga of disillusionment with friendships from which he often demanded too much. “Is it not amusing,” he wrote to an ally in his campaign against the oligarchy in his native Geneva, “that it should be I who has to make reparations for the affronts I have received?” He was often indignant at the way in which his friends could not forgive him for the sufferings *they* had caused *him*. His touchiness about being helped financially was a source of continuing misunderstandings, and they culminated in the saddest episode of his later life: the quarrel with David Hume.

Here were the two great philosophers of their period, both cutting against the grain of the Enlightenment, both celebrities in the dominant French world of the time, each respectful of the other. Women

friends, of whom Rousseau had many, advised him to end his wanderings from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and settle in England where he would be free from persecution, even though (as he remarks in *The Confessions*) he “had no natural love for England.” Hume was keen to help. But a jokey piece of mockery by Hume's friend Horace Walpole offended Rousseau, by suggesting that he actually welcomed persecution. Misunderstandings arose from the white lies told by Hume to conceal how much Rousseau was being helped. In England he fell into a degree of resentment little short of paranoia, even fearing that he would be arrested by the British authorities.

Yet he always stops short of being an entirely absurd figure. As Cranston points out, Rousseau did indeed have enemies. Voltaire devoted much time to undermining him, writing to d'Alembert that the “monster” had brought all his troubles on himself and adding: “Personally I regard him simply as the dog of Diogenes, or rather as a dog descended from a bastard of that dog.” Hume had himself been warned by Holbach that helping Rousseau was a dangerous business: “You do not know your man. I tell you plainly that you are nursing a viper in your bosom.”

Yet Rousseau could be very charming, and he was (like Hume) a great success with women. He was a kind of epistolary flirt, and most of the women he liked stayed loyal for life. “Although they had never had the affair that Mme. de Boufflers, with her singular liking for sleeping with philosophers, seems to have hoped for,” as Cranston writes of one friendship, “they behaved like former lovers—sparing, bickering, and quarreling but still somehow concerned about each other's happiness.”

Love-hate relations were Rousseau's meat and drink. We are all, as the cliché has it, bundles of contradictions, but Rousseau took incoherence into a whole new dimension. “Explanation in biography, as in history,” Cranston wrote in an earlier volume, “*se trouve dans les details*.” In these fascinating three volumes, Cranston has brought us as close as anyone will ever get to understanding the paradoxical genius in whose shadow we still, for good and ill, live our lives. ❁

The Super Small-Sized Robert Reich

Locked in the Cabinet

Robert B. Reich
Knopf / 339 pages / \$25

REVIEWED BY
Philip Terzian

One evening I opened the door at my newspaper's offices, to step outside, and pulled in Secretary of Labor Robert Reich. He had just walked up on the other side of the door, and was about to turn the knob, when he flew into my arms. Like most people, I suppose, I was momentarily startled by the Secretary's size; but I recovered quickly enough. Now, having read his memoir, I am startled once again by Robert Reich's smallness.

I say this as one who opened this book with different expectations. Some who had read it before me were full of praise for Reich's self-deprecating stories, his sense of the absurd, above all his caustic anecdotes about President Clinton. All of these elements are present, of course, although the caustic nature of the anecdotes is slanted, and Reich settles scores with his various antagonists—Lloyd Bentsen, Lane Kirkland, Leon Panetta—in ham-fisted fashion. The self-deprecation, I regret to report, is dished up with a healthy dose of self-importance. Autobiographers who dwell on their obscurity are usually saying, not least to themselves, how significant they are.

Well, it is not difficult to see it from Reich's point of view. His sojourn in Washington is a saga of betrayal, of past hopes foundering on modern realities. He came to the capital as the senior Friend of Bill—they met on the ship transporting them to Oxford—and expected to do all the wonderful things that he and the Clintons had always talked about. But that was when Reich was kept at arm's length from the White House, shunted aside to a sec-

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ond-rank department, and shipped home to Boston at the end of four years. His disappointment about not working at the business end of Pennsylvania Avenue must have been profound. Scarcely a page goes by when he doesn't express relief that he's not on the White House staff—all those pizzas and late hours—or subject to one of the president's famous tantrums. It is not especially persuasive.

But the picture is entirely characteristic of Mr. and Mrs. Clinton, and Reich spares few details. As many have observed, the Clintons are rather like Tom and Daisy Buchanan, careless people who "smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made." Add "power" to "money," and Clinton's first term comes vividly to life. There are scenes beyond counting where Reich reminds Clinton of their shared aspirations, and Clinton, with evident sincerity, is abashed.

Then, too, there is the vision thing. Like the Bourbons, liberal Democrats learn nothing and forget nothing; and as Reich will observe, his state of mind and perception of the world was molded in the sixties.

His view of corporate America sounds like Sinead O'Connor. His attitude toward the military, and national defense, is virtually indistinguishable from that of the people who drafted George McGovern's platform. (I know because I was one of them.) His notion of the role of government in national life has not been fashionable in Washington since May 1964, when Lyndon Johnson first pronounced the phrase "Great Society" in public. In short, Reich was just the man to serve President Clinton, if Clinton had been elected in, say, 1976.

So for all of the talk about love for his family, Hillary's charm, his sons' soccer games, labor's proud history, his wife's stalwart nature, and the joys of administering OSHA regulations, Reich is a deeply embittered ex-secretary. And if these are diaries, incidentally, they are the most heavily edited, carefully updated, and self-servingly rewritten journals since Mary Chesnut's. Reich's hindsight is remarkable, and entries often end with ominous, and painfully obvious, portents. "I worry that his leadership may fail," he writes of Clinton during the 1992 campaign.

"He'll become unfocused and too eager to please." Of the ill-fated Roger Altman: "He'll surely replace Lloyd [Bentsen] at Treasury when Lloyd is ready to leave." A few days before the 1994 elections: "Disaster looms, but you wouldn't know it from here." Then, a few weeks later, Reich worries that Clinton will "seek advice from anyone he wants to hear it from.... Right now, he wants to hear it from me. But how long will this last? And who else is he secretly talking with?" (Who added "secretly," Reich or his editor? Dick Morris, of course, soon turns up.)

Yet it is Reich's sour nature that smothers each



ISMAEL ROLDAN