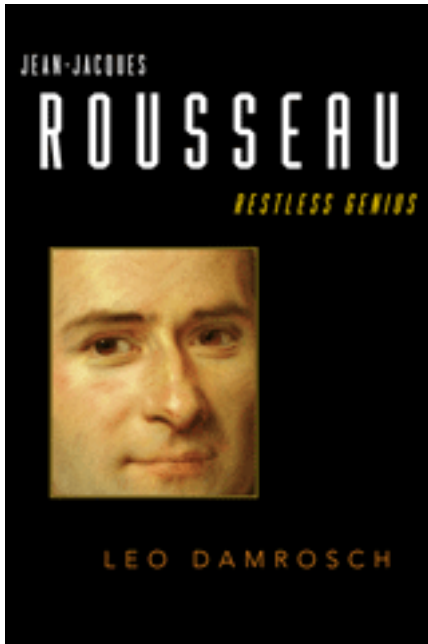


Press Release



Jean-Jacques Rousseau

by Leo Damrosch

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"Leo Damrosch not only helps us understand Rousseau, his loves and his hates, his genius and his foolishness. He makes us see Rousseau. And, as he shows again and again in this immensely enjoyable and fast-paced story, that is Rousseau's special and permanent fascination — because when we see him, we are seeing ourselves." — Louis Menand

"Where Damrosch truly excels is in not only masterfully explaining the originality and meaning of *Emile*, *The Social Contract*, and the *Confessions*, but in relating those works to their author's conflicted, contradictory psyche . . . In vividly delineating the sage's final decades for the first time, Damrosch has performed a signal service." — *Publishers Weekly*

"A vigorous, lucid biography of perhaps the most influential thinker of his day, with plenty of juicy gossip about his extracurricular life." — *Kirkus Reviews*

About the Book

Motherless child, failed apprentice, autodidact, impossibly weird lover, Rousseau burst unexpectedly onto the eighteenth-century scene as a literary genius who would change the course of human history. His writing, as Leo Damrosch masterfully shows us, electrified readers from the start.

No student in the United States finishes high school or college without reading at least one of Rousseau's major works: *The Social Contract*, one of the greatest works on political theory, a direct catalyst for the French Revolution and an influence on the American Founding Fathers; *Emile*, a groundbreaking and still controversial work on education; and the *Confessions*, a book that invented the genre of introspective autobiography, now known as memoir.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius is the first single-volume biography of Rousseau to be published in English for the general reader. It is also the first to illuminate the last decade of his life, a time when his psychological complexity and strangeness came to the fore yet his intellect and creative powers triumphed over his difficult, paranoid temperament. During those ten years, he finished the *Confessions*, wrote the *Dialogues*, or *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques*, which he tried in vain to place in the Notre-Dame cathedral for safekeeping, and began writing *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*.

Damrosch has written widely on eighteenth-century writers. One of the great strengths he brings to this biography is in discussing Rousseau's most important books as truly alive works of genius. He moves seamlessly from Rousseau's extraordinarily original writings to the tumultuous life that produced them. Using Rousseau's own words and those of others who knew him, he creates a portrait of a genius who came to regret that he had ever published a word, who sent his own children to a foundling home at birth, and who yearned for something deeper than mere success, which he achieved and then rejected.

Damrosch writes in his introduction, "As powerful as Rousseau's legacy as a thinker has been, it is still more his example that has influenced those who have come after, including many who never read him.

"Beneath all the issues of evidence and interpretation lies the deepest issue of all, Rousseau's personality and its relation to his achievement. He stands as the type of the lonely and questing spirit, but loneliness is not necessarily attractive, and many people have found his personality exasperating. Yet it is precisely from his disappointments, frustrations, and psychic conflicts that his deepest insights emerged, and his writings rise like mountain peaks above the routine of daily living.

"He was a prodigious genius, but for many years his genius was deeply buried, and his struggle to understand and liberate it was inseparable from the insights he gave to the world."

About the Author

Leo Damrosch is the Ernest Bernbaum Professor of Literature at Harvard University. He has written widely on eighteenth-century writers.

A Conversation with Leo Damrosch

How did you come to write a biography of Jean-Jacques Rousseau?

I admired the astounding achievement of someone who began as a complete outsider, with no formal education and very little encouragement, and nevertheless developed ideas that were tremendously original and have been a major influence on the modern world. For many years I included books by Rousseau in my teaching, and I wanted to know more about him than he tells in his autobiography, the *Confessions*. I was surprised to find that there was no really adequate biography in English — no single-volume one for the general reader, and none that takes account of his full complexity and strangeness. This was a project that badly needed doing, and I couldn't resist tackling it.

How long did it take to write this book, and what kinds of research and travel were involved?

It took ten years, off and on, during which my teaching, from freshman seminars to adult education classes, gave me a sustained opportunity to explore Rousseau with other people. I didn't need to visit libraries much, because incredibly rich scholarly resources are in print and available at Harvard, where I teach, but I did enjoy going to places all over Europe where Rousseau once lived, getting a feeling for where his life was spent, and taking photos, which are included in my book.

You speak of Rousseau's "strangeness" — what do you have in mind?

Rousseau had a troubled childhood: his mother died when he was born, his father abandoned him when he was ten, and he ran away from a hated apprenticeship. He became a very complicated person, affectionate and charming, but he was also shy, suspicious, and quick to take offense. If you want to use psychoanalytic terms, he was narcissistic and masochistic, and in his later years he was subject to paranoid delusions that a secret plot was being waged against him. His love affairs were unsatisfactory, and his friendships always tended to break down. But he knew all that. An essential aspect of his greatness is his unsparing search into the causes of his own anxieties and failures.

Why does Rousseau get under the skin of many readers?

I suppose you mean readers of the *Confessions*, which is probably the best-known of his books. Well, he sometimes sounds self-righteous, and as soon as he reveals some misdeed he starts explaining it away — most notoriously his failure to explain why he consigned his children to a foundling home as soon as they were born, over the protests of their mother. William Blake said that the book is really an apology and not a confession. But I think that if you really listen to Rousseau, it's the pain and guilt and self-knowledge that come through more than the self-justification. He's not someone you'd want for a roommate, but that's true of most great geniuses.

What surprised you the most about Rousseau?

I think it was realizing how deeply paranoid he became in the last ten years of his life and yet how lucid and wise his writings remained during that time. He found a way to compartmentalize his obsessions and set them to one side, to make a space in which he could actually lead a happy and productive life.

What do your students seem to respond to the most?

Students whose main interest is political science are excited by the clarity and sweep of Rousseau's thinking about society. Science students seem especially drawn to his philosophical thinking; among other things, incidentally, he was deeply interested in botany. Musicians are fascinated by his thinking about the sources and power of music — Rousseau was a composer and a highly skilled writer on music. And literary students are drawn to the very novelistic narration of the *Confessions*.

What are Rousseau's most important legacies for Americans?

Two things, I think: the deep conviction that even if every society embodies inequality and even if we don't know how to get rid of it, it's still unacceptable; and the conviction that each of us has a deep authentic self to which we need to be true. In the book I contrast Rousseau with Benjamin Franklin, his exact contemporary, who saw politics as compromise and the self as an other-directed social organism. I think contemporary American culture is split right along this divide: we talk the Rousseau line, but we live the Franklin life. When we talk about getting in touch with our true selves or being what we were meant to be, we're talking like Rousseau. When we commit ourselves to careers or strive to be "team players," we're living like Franklin.

Which is your favorite of Rousseau's books, and why?

It's hard not to name the *Confessions*, which literally created the genre of modern autobiography, but by now, having worked through every week and month of Rousseau's life, I'm maybe too close to that. I'd have to say that my favorite is the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, the first of his major works, which is astonishing in its depth and freshness. It's a critique of modern civilization that opens a path leading straight to Marx and Freud and countless others. The greatest of Rousseau scholars, Jean Starobinski, said that the immense echo of those words has kept on expanding in time and space.