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Rousseau Bicentenary

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Hardy.” Tennyson is quoted in at least three of Hardy’s novels (see Weber’s Hardy of Wessex, Columbia University Press, 1940, pages 244-245).


Hardy acquired his Eutropius in 1854 and received The King’s Henchman from Miss Millay in 1927—a span of seventy-three years. The fifty books now in the Colby Library thus cover Hardy’s entire adult career and invite closer examination by those who are interested in the formative influences that helped to shape his mind.

In addition to these books, we have Bacon’s County Map of Dorset (London, G. W. Bacon & Co., n.d.), the map which Hardy used in his Max Gate study.

ROUSSEAU BICENTENARY

Born in 1712, Jean-Jacques Rousseau first came into public notice in 1750, when he published a Discourse on the Influence of Learning and Art—the first of the works in which he expounded his revolt against the existing social order. No 1750 copy of this famous discourse is found among the treasures in our rare book room—in fact, the name of Jean-Jacques Rousseau does not appear at all (as yet! who will rectify the omission for us?) in the card-catalogue of our Treasure Room.

However, the subject of the influence of learning is certainly one in which the Colby Library Associates can be expected to take a lively interest, and the bicentenary of the publication of Rousseau’s first work was accordingly observed at the May meeting of the Associates. Professor
Rousseau's First Discourse

Our meeting here this evening is to recall a moment on a hot summer afternoon, two hundred years ago, when Jean-Jacques Rousseau, while walking on the way to the prison of Vincennes to visit his friend Diderot, first felt himself inspired with the magnificent message he was to devote the rest of his life to conveying to mankind. Tonight we are honoring the birth of an idea. On the way to visit Diderot, Rousseau stopped and rested in the shade. While reading a copy of the newspaper, the Mercure de France, his eye fell upon an article announcing a prize offered by the Academy of Dijon for the best essay on the subject: "Whether the re-establishment of the Sciences and Arts had contributed to a purification of morals." Rousseau later described what happened to him as follows:

If anything ever resembled a sudden inspiration, it was the emotion that I felt within me at reading that article. Suddenly I felt my mind blinded by a thousand lights; ideas crowded into my mind with such force and confusion that I was troubled in an inexplicable way; I felt my head whirling in a giddiness like that of drunkenness. A violent palpitation seized me, lifted up my chest; not being able to breathe while walking, I let myself fall under one of the trees along the street, and there I spent half an hour in such excitement that, on getting up, I perceived that the whole front of my jacket was wet with tears, without my having felt that I had shed any. Oh, if ever I had been able to write down but the quarter of what I saw and felt under that tree, with what clarity I should have revealed all the contradictions of the social system, with what strength I should have exposed all the abuses of our institutions, with what simplicity I would have showed that man is naturally good, and that it is by these institutions alone that men have become bad!

Encouraged by Diderot, Rousseau set about writing his essay, sent it off to Dijon, and was awarded the first prize at
a public session of the Academy, held on August 23, 1750.

When the Discourse was published, an incredible uproar arose over this thirty-page essay by an unknown writer. Some sixty-eight articles and refutations appeared, not the least of which was one by Stanislas, King of Poland. The reason for all the uproar lies in Rousseau’s eloquent opposition to the intellectual movement of the eighteenth century. He pointed out, in arguments that have never been answered, that progress in knowledge and in science does not necessarily mean an advance in morals. He warned mankind of the dangers that might come from too much knowledge.

“People!” he cried, “know once and for all that nature tried to keep you from knowledge, much as a mother takes a dangerous weapon away from her child. Know once and for all that all the secrets that nature conceals from you are so many evil things from which she protects you, and understand that the pain that you feel in trying to learn is not the least of her good deeds.”

The central idea behind all of Rousseau’s writing is that man would be happier and better if he could free himself from the cares and responsibilities of society and return to a simpler state of existence. “All is good,” said Rousseau, “in leaving the hands of the Creator; all degenerates in the hands of man.” We have Rousseauists among us today, for it is but a natural instinct with man, even in our highly civilized age, to wish for an easier and less complicated existence. How many philosophers tell us we would be better off without the frills of civilization? How many ministers warn us that money and prosperity corrupt the morals? How many serious but hysterical reformers would have us stop the progress on the atomic bomb development? Mr. de Nouilly, in his work on Human Destiny, has, by placing his trust in feeling over sentiment, by his refutation of materialism, by his escape into religion, shown the fundamental characteristics of Rousseau’s attitude toward life.