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# *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Romantic Roots of Modern Democracy*

**William Gairdner**

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,"<sup>1</sup> 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." In a sense they are right, but it is more broadly correct to say that the fault lies with a whole complex of popular ideas (only later described as "Romantic") that were already working powerful changes on the public mind through art, literature, and poetry. While it is true that the entire modern democracy movement has been indelibly shaped by the ideas of Rousseau, that is partly because he so effectively articulated assumptions that were emerging 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 their susceptibility to use in such manner that they must be studied. Rousseau's political ideas were

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

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at once idealistic, "mystical," and collectivist. They became particularly dangerous during a time of social upheaval in the hands of people who had little perspective on the true nature and history of democracy and who therefore succumbed to its considerable powers of collectivistic mystification. There is a danger that in a period of chaos individuals may again be captivated by this appeal, as have so many past enthusiasts of democracy, and, like them, impose a tyranny in its name. The ideas so popular in Rousseau's time have not only found fertile ground and sprouted once again, but have mutated into an even more dangerous—because less obvious—hyperdemocratic form. In a hyperdemocratic society power no longer emerges from the people as a product or interpretation of their collective will. Rather, it derives increasingly from 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 may use them against the people.

Rousseau's most important political treatise was *The Social Contract* (1762), a political matrix and symbol of a wider shift in ideas about the nature of reality, the self, and politics in Western society. The decades that followed the 1760s marked a transition from the Classical or "Neoclassical" and Christian ethos to a new, quite different, and consciously rebellious movement we have come to call "Romantic," which, in its most influential strains, was really an anti-Classical and anti-Christian set of ideas that will be my focus here.

A Romantic attitude of one kind or another has always existed. It was present, for instance, in the works of an ancient thinker such as Longinus. Over the centuries, however, this attitude was held in check by a Classical and Christian viewpoint. It was not until the Reformation's emphasis on individual authenticity and personal insight into the divine had been gradually secularized that conditions became congenial to the rise of modern Romanticism. This movement blossomed politically in France after Rousseau's death when it resulted 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 here is the connection between this eighteenth century Romanticism, the democracy madness that it fueled, and how this combination radically altered Western ideas about self,

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sin, and politics, producing new answers to such questions as: Who are we? What is the source of evil? How shall we live together? 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 arisen again and again in revolutions around the world. Indeed, Rousseau's formulations, though sometimes twisted and modified, have been used to justify everything from the totalitarian visions of Marx to the political despotisms of Lenin, Hitler, Mussolini, and Castro, all of whom insisted their movements were "democratic" in a much higher sense than our own. The Hippie movement of the 1960s was a romantic movement that fanned the flames of radical democracy across American campuses through such groups as Students for a Democratic Society.<sup>2</sup> The French riots of May 1968 had a similar inspiration. So did the softer radicalism of the welfare state in Canada. We know that Canada's former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau had an intellectual fascination with Rousseau and repeatedly used the latter's favorite term, "*la volonté generale*" (or its variant, "the national will") to justify his socialism to an initially uncomprehending nation.<sup>3</sup>

Rousseau's  
persistent  
influence.

To understand Rousseau, the Romanticism he inspired and also

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<sup>2</sup> 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, Christians, and the Left* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> 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), esp. in his "Federalism, Nationalism, and Reason," based, as it is, on Rousseau's notion of the General Will (*la volonté generale*). Trudeau repeats everywhere that "the foundation of the nation is will" (187); then again, "for there is no power without will" (187); and again, "self-determination was based on will" (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 volonté generale,' as Rousseau had called it" (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" (66). And then again he mentions "the idea of a national will" (67); then again "the existence of a national will" (67, twice); and then speaks of "denying the existence of a national will" (87). At no

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our own time, we first need some appreciation of the Classical and Christian ethos against which he struggled, why it bothered him so much, and why his intellectual rebellion refuses to go away.

### *Modern Classicism*

The glory of the modern classical period was its rediscovery of ancient thinkers and authorities who were considered long suppressed by medieval Christian Europe. Partly due to the invention of printing these sources had become available to a broader public. This re-birth, or renaissance, of classical 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 by attacks from people such as himself. At the peak of neoclassicism, the philosophy, drama, poetry, and epic themes of the most important Greek and Roman writers dominated the European mind, especially in France.

Interestingly, across the channel, classical thinking had less of an influence. This was due in large measure to Shakespeare's wonderful work, which defied classification and, owing to its powerful effects, made even great neoclassical dramatists seem secondary. In the English-speaking world, Racine did not seem the equal of Shakespeare. Even in England, however, the impact of neoclassical rationalism 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" (so named after the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus who was regarded as responsible for Rome's "Golden Age" in arts, letters, and politics), people referred as often to classical authors such as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Pliny for guidance and standards of every sort.<sup>4</sup> This trend formed part of a slow turn away from Biblical and toward secular classical authority. Today, an airplane ride over any European capital, or over Washington, D.C., will reveal many architectural monu-

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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.

<sup>4</sup> 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), 37-64.

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ments from the eighteenth century reflecting a preference for classical models.

Neoclassicism came to be typified by a veneration of logic and cool reasoning in philosophy, here reflecting not just ancient thought but more recent philosophy, notably Cartesianism. In the arts the movement was characterized by wit, taste, and decorum. It exhibited a general presumption 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 considered *external*. The Locus of Reality, we might say, lay outside and above the individual.<sup>5</sup> This ideal of external authority pertained 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 was their power of control over their own animal nature. The great Harvard scholar Irving Babbitt wrote 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."<sup>6</sup> For example, 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. (The dramatist should never distort the realistic time period of a play, mix different imaginary locations, or offend with illogical or grotesque actions.)<sup>7</sup> Famous En-

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<sup>5</sup> 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).

<sup>6</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1991), 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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 mod-

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*Neoclassicism  
marked by  
unimaginative  
imitation.*

English neoclassic poets such as John Dryden (1631-1700) and Alexander Pope (1688-1744) also followed pre-set classical rules of poetic diction and form. This all may sound rather rigid now, but it once ran deep enough that a schoolboy would get a cane over his knuckles for not learning such forms and rules by rote. (From what this writer has seen of modern high-school poetry, this may be a standard we ought to bring back!) What matters in the present context is that the dissatisfaction with neoclassicism was due to a particular underlying idea—one still not easily refuted: *that for all things there is a best way that it is the duty of the thinker, the writer, the artist, and the citizen to try to discover.* The ancients had shown the way, and their work should be imitated. Imitation (*mimesis* in Greek) was central. Key to understanding the psychology of the time was the widely accepted assumption that all personal expression had to be subordinated to, and controlled by, some higher form, ideal, or rule of behavior. To learn math one memorizes and practices the rules. To learn the sonnet form, how to fence, how to reason, how to act morally, or how to eat, one studies the great poets, fencers, thinkers, moralists, and etiquette writers.

The neoclassical combination of classical and Christian models meant that all of life should be governed by the good, the beautiful, and the true, understood as pre-existing guides. 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 superior to the *Many*, all too visible in partial laws, particular truths, disorder, and social disunity. Self-control was expected to trump self-expression.

*Romanticism  
a recoil from  
neoclassical  
formalism.*

Suffice it to say that after more than a century of this correctness and decorum, which had a social power equivalent to the regime of “political correctness” under which we presently cower, rigidity and staleness filled the air. Correctness, as Babbitt wrote, soon “became a sort of tyranny.”<sup>8</sup> Poetic, dramatic, and artistic imitations of the classical masters were soon ridiculed as empty of meaning, as but pale shadows of the greats. Energetic young minds soon began a restless search for “originality.” In a kind of recoil, individual cre-

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eren counterpart was Louis-Ferdinand Céline. Like Rabelais, Céline was an original and prodigious inventor of language and a breaker, instead of maker, of rules.

<sup>8</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 14.

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ativity and impulse started to surface again, 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 breaking through.

### *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 in his own person the prototypical French Romantic. 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 and conspiracy (though not in every case without justification). In modern parlance, he was a man hurting all the time and was considered half-crazed most of his life.<sup>9</sup> 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 to a great extent ours as well, about democracy.

*Rousseau the  
prototypical  
French  
Romantic.*

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. By 1830 it was overtaken by a tough realism in fiction, art, and politics. In France, where neoclassicism had been stronger, the Romantic recoil began earlier and entered politics more than it did in England. French Romanticism was 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. It was a “clash between two incompatible views of life,”<sup>10</sup> and just as Voltaire symbolized the older view, Rousseau symbolized the new. His thinking, espe-

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<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 32.

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cially 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 triumphant Romanticism. What, then, did the typical Romantic believe?

*"Individual sense instead of common sense."*

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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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. Down with the general and the universal! The English poet William Blake felt this drive for the particular so strongly that he waxed positively unpoetic. He declared, "to generalize is to be an idiot."<sup>13</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American prose counterpart, though one not as easily classified, expressed a similar view in his memorable line, "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."

In short, the Romantic turns the Classical world upside down. He abandons self-control in favor 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 ven-

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<sup>11</sup> Babbitt, 34.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in David Perkins, ed., *English Romantic Writers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), 9.



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ture on a similar quest for the true “self” (though no one is quite certain what the self is, or how we know it is the true one when it is found). Rousseau’s *Confessions* became the prototype for the modern, smarmy, self-interested literary gush. 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—a word that at the time implied 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.”<sup>14</sup> So it was that, by the end of the eighteenth century, “originality” had become everything, and imitation nothing. The true artist was now expected not to mirror nature or the universal, but to cultivate a mystical inward connection with the grandness of nature 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, book learning became a little suspect or was even scorned. For a Romantic, wild, even outrageous conduct was preferable to formality and convention, and original genius was said to be everywhere if we would but look for it, especially in the child. By now we get the point: goodness is not the result of moral struggle, but lies readily at hand, in ourselves untainted by social conventions. This may be viewed as merely an updated version of the old gnostic/millenarian spirit, the old spark of personal divinity flashing once again. It was certainly a perversion of the older Western tradition because, whereas Christianity has seen in the child 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.”<sup>15</sup> For Rousseau, the child is born good. In Ro-

*Easy genius,  
easy morality.*

<sup>14</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 51.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 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 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), 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 laments that ordinary Christianity has destroyed the unity of the state by commanding man to render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s and

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manticism this adulation of infancy often became so extreme as to be embarrassing. At one point Wordsworth went so far in embracing this conceit that he hailed a gamboling child as a "Mighty Prophet! Seer Blest!" By extension, the untutored adult artist was thought of as a large child, representing an uncorrupted reality and an innocent morality. We have here the image of Adamic goodness, a secularization of the Christian dream of innocence. Wordsworth summed up the mood for a whole generation of "free spirits" when he described good poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." He knew full well that this was a deeply political statement, every word of which was an attack on lovers of the classical 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.

*Self-control  
attacked.*

Romantics soon became characterized as people ready to spurn all restraint in art and life in favor of natural self-expression. Theirs was a direct attack on the authority of classical and Christian self-control. In the mind of Western man they successfully substituted the idea of the Sinless Man for the idea of the Sinful Man. This presumption of innocence was of enormous importance to the success of modern democratic ideology; in fact, it forms its foundation. Examples of innocence showed up everywhere in imaginative works: Rousseau's idealized "Noble Savage," the romanticized American Indian (as in James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking* novels), and the Scottish Highlander in the historical novels of Walter Scott, etc. In modern nationalism we spy the yearning for primitive roots most clearly in the poetry of Herder, who counseled Germans to look back wistfully to the pure childhood of the whole nation, to the innocence, nobility, and beauty of the *Volk*.

We can thus discern the emergence of three closely connected themes: first, the modern democratic idea of the inherent nobility of the "primitive" individual (which was not a part of the ancient no-

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unto God the things which are God's, thus causing a perpetual rift or split loyalty between God and society. Walsh, however, 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, which is what the French Revolution quickly produced.

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tion of democracy, but is of modern post-Christian origin), second, the glorification of the unspoiled common "people,"<sup>16</sup> and, third, a yearning to achieve social perfection through a restoration of "the state of nature." The key to understanding the political importance of the Romantic impulse, however, is to see that it was at bottom a general 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."<sup>17</sup> The politics of democratic revolution in France was an early and specific practical instance of avoiding the real problem of evil. The Voice of the People became not merely the voice of God, but God himself. We arrive at a theorem that states that, if man is inherently good, sin must come either from his ignorance or from bad social and political influences outside himself. The ancient internal dualism of good and evil warring in the heart of man is replaced by a new, external dualism between a pure, sinless man and a corrupt, fallen society. It was this substitution in the very heart of Western life that permitted the flourishing of a modern progressivism that is distinguished from all earlier forms by its radical emphasis on *reforming society instead of the self*. The precise starting point of this progressivism is self-divinization, and its sweeping utopianism can be seen as inspired by anger against God for allowing evil in the world, a mistake that it becomes man's moral duty to correct. Babbitt put his finger on the deepest motive behind this modernity when he said that "faith in one's natural goodness is a constant encouragement to evade moral responsibility" and is "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."<sup>18</sup> The result in modern

*Sinless man,  
fallen society.*

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<sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 44

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 155

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democratic theory is the naive idea that from the pooled votes of more free citizens will arise more goodness and truth.

In retrospect, the Romanticism here described seems to be the dividing line in the history of the West between almost two thousand years of classical and Christian civilization, and the anti-classical and anti-Christian European thinking that took its place. This change in the view of man and society is apparent in the contrast between different conceptions of the state of nature in social-contract thinking. The Christian Thomas Hobbes said that in the state of nature we are so egotistical and prone to conflict that a peaceful social existence requires a controlling dictator sovereign. The post-Christian Rousseau said that in the state of nature we are innocent and good and that in society we need only the proper political mechanism for achieving agreement on all things. His views have prevailed, essentially because they are more flattering of man.

Romantic thinking of the type represented by Rousseau produced a tightly linked 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 rest in important respects on the Romantic spirit, which, in politics at least, has become a modern secular expression of the ancient millenarian impulse to produce the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.