1

Legends of the Fall

His last writings are the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. Each reverie is identified as a promenade, so that, he tells us, they are "a faithful record of my solitary walks and of the reveries which fill them." (CW8.9, OC1.1002) They are the walks of a man "alone on earth" (CW8.3, OC1.995), in which, as he says, "I will apply the barometer to my soul." (CW8.7, OC1.1000–1) The last – the tenth – is unfinished, a walk from which he does not return. In the five volumes of his collected works, it occupies two pages. And yet I exaggerate only slightly in saying that my aim in this book – in this journey that I invite you to take with Jean-Jacques Rousseau – is to understand that final promenade, why it says what it says, why it does not say what it does not say. To reach that walk will be my end, as it was his end. It is fitting that we should begin by joining Rousseau on another walk.

He is in Paris, a man of thirty-seven with literary and musical aspirations as yet unfulfilled, an associate of the intellectuals whom we have come to know as the *philosophes*. He is a collaborator with Denis Diderot, who had embarked on the great project of his life, the *Encyclopedia* that was to synthesize the knowledge and outlook of the Enlightenment. Diderot's skeptical writings having led to his brief and quite comfortable imprisonment in the chateau of Vincennes, Rousseau undertook frequent walks from Paris to visit his friend. I shall let Rousseau tell the story.

That year 1749 the Summer was excessively hot. From Paris to Vincennes adds up to two leagues. . . . The trees on the road, always pruned in the fashion of the country, gave almost no shade; and often exhausted from the heat and fatigue, I spread out on the ground when I was not able to go any farther. I took it into my head to take some book along to moderate my pace. One day I took the *Mercury of France* and while walking and glancing over it I fell upon this question proposed by the Academy of Dijon for the prize for the following year: *Has the progress of the sciences and arts tended to corrupt or purify morals?*

At the moment of that reading I saw another universe and I became another man. (CW5.294, OC1.350–1)

Thus the account in his autobiography, the *Confessions*. In his *Second Letter to M. de Malesherbes*, Rousseau continues,

I let myself fall under one of the trees of the avenue, and I pass a half-hour there in such an agitation that when I got up again I noticed the whole front of my coat soaked with my tears without having felt that I shed them. Oh Sir, if I had ever been able to write a quarter of what I saw and felt under that tree, how clearly I would have made all the contradictions of the social system seen, with what strength I would have exposed all the abuses of our institutions, with what simplicity I would have demonstrated that man is naturally good and that it is from these institutions alone that men become wicked. Everything that I was able to retain of these crowds of great truths which illuminated me under that tree in a quarter of an hour has been weakly scattered about in my three principal writings. (CW5.575, OC1.1135–6)

The first of the three works to which Rousseau refers is the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, in which he responds to the question that triggered his illumination – whether the progress of the arts and sciences has corrupted or purified morals – and which, winning the prize of the Academy of Dijon, brought him instant notoriety. The second is the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, his great work of philosophical anthropology that is the main concern of this first chapter. And the third is the *Emile*, Rousseau's study of the education of the individual, which will provide the themes for the second chapter.

"Has the restoration of the Sciences and Arts tended to purify or corrupt Morals?" (CW2.4, OC3.5) "Corrupt" is Rousseau's addition. The Academy of Dijon asked whether the restoration of the sciences and arts had tended to purify morals. In the first sentence of his *Discourse* Rousseau rephrased the question as a choice between alternatives: purification or corruption? In his account in the *Confessions* (quoted earlier), Rousseau amended the question yet again in reordering the alternatives: to corrupt or to purify morals. The idea of corruption, at most implicit in the Academy's question, becomes Rousseau's guiding thread. Faced with the issue, his response was immediate: the moral qualities thrive in simplicity, both material and mental, but the arts and sciences bring complexity, luxury, and with luxury, dissoluteness. In the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, Rousseau focuses on the habits of life that accompany learning and culture, the decline of the martial virtues, the increase in material needs. But his deeper concern is with the changes that occur in human beings as they develop the capacities needed for the progress of the sciences and arts – as they become reasoning and reflective beings. And this concern brings us to the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. Addressing his fellow men, Rousseau proclaims: "O Man . . . here is your history as I believed to read it[1] . . . in Nature, which never lies. Everything that comes from Nature will be true; there will be nothing false except what I have involuntarily put in of my own." (CW3.19, OC3.133) And what he reads is the beginning of humankind in solitude, and the gradual emergence of society; our history is that of a solitary creature becoming social. It is this progression that Rousseau identifies as corruption.

We shall sit with Rousseau under the tree on the way to Vincennes, and learn our history. But before we do so, I want to insert a further word of anticipation. I have mentioned the *Reveries*, his last writings, where he begins with the words "I am

[1] Bush et al. translation, "it to read"; French "*la lire.*"

now alone on earth. . . . [I] the most sociable and the most loving of humans." (CW8.3, OC1.995) He is the social creature become once more solitary, writing "my reveries only for myself" (CW8.8, OC1.1001) and asking, "But I, detached from them [all other men] and from everything, what am I myself?" (CW8.3, OC1.995)[2] From reading the history of humankind in nature to applying the barometer to his soul, from learning how humans became social to finding himself become solitary – this is the journey we are about to take with Rousseau.

Why take this journey? One answer would be that Rousseau, whether telling us of our history or of his own condition, whether examining the social contract or writing his confessions, illuminates one of the deep and enduring themes that troubles both our social thought and our social practice – the relationship between individual and community. But for the most part I shall let that illumination emerge implicitly. Another answer appears in my title for this first chapter, "Legends of the Fall." The history Rousseau recounts is more than a story of social transformation, and with it the development of reason and reflection. Above all it is a moral history, of loss of innocence and descent into corruption. It expresses, almost for the first time, the angst that has become familiar to us who inhabit the modern world – a sense of isolation from others and alienation from society coupled with nostalgia for a past perhaps remembered, perhaps imagined. And this moral history poses for Rousseau the problem that informs all of his further writings – can paradise be regained? He will look for the redemption of human beings, in the education of the individual, collectively in politics and in the education of the citizen, and – finally – personally, in his own experience, and in love.

But enough of anticipation. Let us now begin at the beginning – with our earliest human ancestors, as Rousseau depicts

[2] "myself" added to Butterworth tr.; Fr. "*que suis-je moi-même?*".

them. Each had an instinctive concern for self-preservation, the most primitive form of what Rousseau calls *amour de soi*, but this gave rise only to very simple desires and needs – for food and drink, for shelter from inclement weather, intermittently for sex. And each was naturally self-sufficient, able to provide for his few needs through his own efforts. Rousseau postulates no *social* desires or interests, nothing that would bring human beings together except in the brief coupling of sexual intercourse. To be sure, from this coupling the female found herself from time to time with a child, but our ancestors were more robust, matured physically more quickly, and underwent a much simpler and briefer mental development. To satisfy their needs, the first humans required little memory, even less foresight, and only a limited awareness of their environment. And given their small numbers and the abundance of the earth's provisions, their reasoning was as limited as their awareness. Their simple ends were readily secured without any complex calculation of means.

Although they lacked sociability, their instinctive concern with preservation was moderated by "a natural repugnance to see any sensitive Being perish or suffer, principally those like ourselves." (CW3.15, OC3.126) This repugnance, which Rousseau calls pity or commiseration, varies in strength with the extent of identification with the sufferer. Before human beings learned to reason, this identification was direct, but when reason develops, it "turns man back upon himself, . . . [and] separates him from all that bothers and afflicts him." (CW3.37, OC3.156)

A concern with one's preservation, and a repugnance for suffering, do not in themselves distinguish human beings from other animals, which, following the Cartesian view, Rousseau represents as self-sustaining mechanisms. He represents human beings also as such mechanisms, but distinguishes them from other animals as possessing two unique characteristics – free will, and "la faculté de se perfectionner" (OC3.142), the faculty of self-perfection, or perfectibility. Free will is no doubt presupposed

by but plays little active part in Rousseau's argument, but perfectibility is central; indeed, without perfectibility there would be no moral history of humankind for Rousseau to recount. As he insists, it is the "faculty which, with the aid of circumstances, successively develops all the others, and resides among us as much in the species as in the individual. By contrast an animal is at the end of a few months what it will be all its life; and its species is at the end of a thousand years what it was the first year of that thousand." (CW3.26, OC3.142) Perfectibility, and its moral consequences, thus apply to both the individual person and the human species. And as we shall see, the moral consequences tend to be negative. Indeed, the price human beings pay for their perfectibility is shown in Rousseau's famous remark at the beginning of the *Social Contract*, that "Man was/is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." (CW4.131, OC3.351) For in Rousseau's account of the history of the human race, in perfecting itself humankind loses its natural liberty, so that the species, which once consisted of free individuals, is now made up of slaves, and each contemporary human being, who is himself or herself born to be free, comes to share his fellows' chains.

But we have yet to review our history. Perfectibility was only latent in our earliest ancestors. They lived in what Rousseau describes as the condition of natural liberty. Liberty here has nothing to do with the free will that Rousseau ascribes to humans, but rather with the adequacy of each person's powers to meet his or her needs and desires. In *Emile*, he writes, "Your freedom and your power extend only as far as your natural strength, and not beyond. All the rest is only slavery, illusion and prestige.[3] . . . The truly free man wants only what he can do and does what he pleases. That is my fundamental maxim." (Bl.83–4, OC4.308–9) Our ancestors thus were free, but unaware of their freedom, since they had not developed the capacity to reflect on their

[3] Bloom tr., "deception."

condition. Nothing drove them to reflect, and humans, like all animals, are naturally lazy, doing no more than their needs and desires require. Perfectibility remains latent so long as natural powers suffice to meet equally natural needs.

Rousseau contrasts the liberty that lies in the harmony of power and desire with three alternative conditions: slavery, illusion, and prestige. Each of these is a way of being unfree, a way in which one's powers fail to be adequate to meet one's needs. In tracing the course of human development, we should be able to understand how slavery and prestige come to replace natural liberty. But what of illusion? We might intuitively suppose that it renders a person unfree by depriving him of a true awareness, whether of his powers, his needs and desires, or his circumstances. But as our journey continues, in later chapters we shall find that the role of illusion is in fact much deeper, and its relation to liberty less straightforward, than a simple contrast would imply.

Before concluding this retrospective look at human origins, we need to note what may at first seem but one further detail. Rousseau says, "Man's first sentiment was that of his existence, his first care that of his preservation." (CW3.43, OC3.164) Preservation has figured centrally in his account of human and indeed of animal nature; one might easily overlook reference to a sentiment about which at first nothing more is asserted than its original presence. But the sentiment of existence is at the core of Rousseau's understanding of his fellows and of himself; the individual is revealed in how he senses his existence. Indeed, we might say – although this is to interpret and not to quote Rousseau – that perfectibility manifests itself in the unfolding of the sentiment of existence.

Rousseau has described our Eden, but it is an unconscious Eden, its inhabitants free, but with no awareness of their freedom, happy, but only in not knowing their misery (v. OC3.283), "stupid [and] limited." (CW4.141, OC3.364) He tells us little

about how our ancestors came to leave it – population increased gradually, and so resources once abundant became scarce; humankind spread over the face of the earth, and so some came to inhabit less clement regions. These changes have no direct effect on needs and desires; rather, they affect the adequacy of human powers to meet those desires. Greater awareness of circumstances, increased memory and foresight, more sophisticated instrumental reasoning, all became necessary to survive in straitened circumstances. Other animals would perish, unable to adapt, but perfectibility manifests itself in newly realized mental capacities.

And now we begin to approach the fundamental ambiguity at the heart of human perfectibility – the ambiguity that Rousseau recognized in denying that our progress in culture and knowledge brings moral progress in its train. Perfectibility first affects our cognitive capacities. But its effects extend further, to our affective capacities, and also to our moral capacities. Let us take these in turn. Perfectibility expands our awareness, but this expanded awareness reveals new objects, not only to our intellect, but also to our appetites. It expands our deliberations, but these expanded deliberations reveal not only new ways of satisfying existing appetites, but also new ways of directing and developing those appetites. Our appetitive capacities, just as our mental capacities, are perfectible; their scope is not limited to its original extent. And so we find ourselves, not only with new understandings, but also with new prospects and new concerns.

In seeking better ways of satisfying existing needs and desires, we find also new desires and passions that demand satisfaction. And so human beings find themselves on a treadmill; each step that they take toward restoring the balance between their powers and their desires leads them to new desires and passions that dislocate the balance. Once human beings sense themselves as unfree, in the grip of desires that they cannot satisfy, then their attempts to free themselves, even if successful in terms of their

original concerns, put them in the grip of yet further desires. If we think of human history as beginning with the first imbalance between powers and needs that deprived human beings of their original liberty, we must ask if the further course of human history reveals some point at which the balance is restored, and with it liberty, or reveals instead a progressively increasing imbalance that drives human beings further and further from the prospect of freedom.

But the course of human history is not simply an interplay, however complex, of an increasingly perfected understanding and an increasingly expanded appetite. As human beings become aware of their surroundings, they also become aware of their fellows. Leaving aside that aspect which is relevant only to sexual gratification, Rousseau relates awareness of one's fellows to a twofold concern. On the one hand, there are those occasions, originally rare, in which common interest invites each to seek and rely on the assistance of others. On the other hand, there are those occasions, originally rarer, in which competitive interest leads each to suspect and endeavor to overcome others. Both cooperative and competitive interests invite individuals to make comparisons between themselves and others – to recognize those respects in which each is or may be useful to his or her fellows, and those in which each is or may be harmful. And in these comparisons we find the origin of our moral sensibilities.

Rousseau represents this as the conversion of *amour de soi* into *amour propre*. *Amour de soi(-même)* is no more than the care each person – indeed, each animal – has for its own preservation. It is a love centered on the self and addressed to its natural needs; it involves no awareness of others, much less comparison between self and others. But as awareness of others develops, this self-love is transformed into *amour propre*, a love centered on the relation between the self and others and addressed to comparative advantage. As Rousseau treats it in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, it is a "relative sentiment, artificial and born in

Society, which inclines each individual to have a greater esteem for himself than for anyone else." (CW3.91, OC3.219) In his first mention of it, he claims that *amour propre* "inspires in men all the harm they do to one another" (ibid.), but as we shall find, its moral status proves more complex than this purely negative judgment would suggest. The extensions and transformations of *amour propre* lie at the heart of Rousseau's redemptive quest.

Amour de soi is linked to our sentiment of existence. As long as it alone holds sway, each person unreflectively senses his existence in himself. But as it comes to be transformed into *amour propre*, each senses his existence not in himself, but in his relation to those whom he perceives as other. It is the regard that others have for me, their concern with my power, or their contempt for my lack of power, their valuing or disdaining my assistance, their fearing or ignoring my opposition, that form the basis of my own self-conception. I am no longer psychologically self-sufficient, and so no longer free; I seek the recognition of the other that confers prestige. But this loss of freedom depends on distinguishing self and other, and Rousseau does not suppose that the earliest social relationships rested on this distinction.

In the early stages of human history, the need to cooperate in order to satisfy increasingly expansive desires under increasingly adverse circumstances led to the formation of small groups, based on family relationships. Rousseau believes that these groups brought stability to human affairs, that each group was able to establish self-sufficiency without coming into frequent conflict with its neighbors. Within the horizon set by the group, the balance between powers and needs was restored; each could expect the resources of the group to be available to meet his needs and desires, and each could recognize those resources as generally sufficient. Thus although each individual was materially dependent on the fellow members of his family group, Rousseau supposes that psychologically each individual did not experience his condition as one of dependence, and so of lack