

THE PHILOSOPHY OF ROUSSEAU.

Professor Hendel, of McGill University, has done a service to all students in once more calling attention to the work and philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau. Justly has it been said that the Genevan is one of those authors whom we can never wholly afford to forget. Rousseau has been called a romanticist, a revolutionary, a creature of sentiment, an incurable egoist, and many other hard names. As Professor Hendel aptly remarked, the readers of Rousseau's work either become fools or fanatics in respect of their laudation of his material, or otherwise, the condemnation of it, and the author himself as one who drank and was made drunk by the cup of sensibility drained to the bitter lees. Assuredly there were heights and depths in the contour of the landscape Rousseau traversed, and these he has frankly set down in literary form. But the sedgy puddles and the purple patches found at the lower level of his writings ought not to hinder us from recognizing that the stress Rousseau places upon subjective feelings has its significance for our own age. He was the "short abstract and chronicle of his time," and it has been noted that it is impossible to understand ourselves or the great changes which have taken place during the past century without some reference to the influence wielded by the author of the "Confessions" and the "Social Contrat." When we have judiciously sifted the material and separated chaff from wheat there still remains a winnowing that has its value and imparts nutriment to the inquiring mind. It is quite astray to pretend that Rousseau merely advertised his singularity and had no philosophy to proffer his fellows. In the first place, he held strongly that the personal equation is the real metre of a man's life and fortunes. The "ego" is worth more than all the rest of the universe to each of us. Rousseau would never have conceded to the theory, so prevalent in these days, that because the material universe is so big and the star cycles so vast, puny man is overwhelmed by the grandeur of the planets. The mechanic notion of the cosmos never mastered his own soul. Professor Edward Caird says that, to Rousseau, the outside world was little more than the impersonal Greek chorus as compared with the drama enacted within his own nature. Did not Goethe say something of the same kind in speaking of man's relationship to the external sphere of things? The Genevan could very well have adopted the phrase Shakespeare puts into the mouth of Richard III.—

"My Conscience hath a thousand several
tongues,

And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain."

Hume testified that the sensibility of Rousseau "rises to a pitch beyond what I have seen any example of"; a thing to be noted carefully in these days when the theory is revived that we are all the hapless puppets of fate.

Rousseau was a revolutionist. He preached the simple life. He envisaged what a modern French writer calls the Upper Garden, remote from the din of the world. The delight in natural beauty is the source of many of the richest passages in his works. It is a pity he did not betake himself more convincingly to the path he pointed out. But the suggestion remains, and with it the wholesome protest against an artificial and over-elaborated mode of existence. Nor should it be forgotten that Rousseau insisted that the centre of social and civilized life is to be found in the family circle. The altar of the "social contrat" is the hearthfire tradition. He believed in the primal charities. Consideration for man as man strongly marks his writings. "I hate this rage to destroy without building up," he once said. The good man arranges all things with respect to the good of the whole. The bad man arranges the whole universe with respect only to himself. This is the dominant note of the philosophy of Rousseau. That he fell short of it is no reason his writings should be left to the dusty shelf. In Professor Hendel's verdict that, in spite of all defects, there is still much profit to be gained by perusal of Rousseau's pages, we entirely concur.