**Romain Rolland (1866-1944)**

Writer, professor, musicologist, biographer, essayist, novelist, playwright, great letter writer and diarist, mystic in search of a pacified world and of a heroic heart, Romain Rolland has profoundly marked the first half of the 20th century.

A talented piano player in his youth, Romain Rolland entered the Ecole Normale Supérieure in 1886, defended a dissertation on the *Origins of Modern Lyrical Drama* (*Les origins du drame lyrique moderne*)*,* and went on to teach art history and musicology at the Sorbonne. In Rome, he met Malwida von Meyensburg (a former friend of Nietzsche and Wagner) who accelerated his debut in literature. While he initially wrote theater plays, his first success would come from the ten-volume novel *Jean-Christophe,* published between 1904 and 1912: through the life of a young and enthusiastic German musician with a French first name, he depicted, in great detail, two rival societies under the threat of war.

Rolland settled in Geneva where he published a collection of articles entitled *Above the Battle* (*Au-dessus de la mêlée*) in which he tried to articulate a reconciliatory argument for every camp, while also criticizing the warmongering postures of both socialists and Christians. These texts led to his award of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1915, which he received with the hope that, in accord with his pacifist goals, humanity would become “a symphony of great collective souls”.

In a similar fashion in 1919, he redacted the *Declaration of Independence of the Spirit* (*Déclaration de l’indépendance de l’Esprit*), which encouraged intellectuals to define a free way of life beyond nations and classes. Settled in Switzerland, he corresponded with Freud, notably on the “oceanic feeling” (a hypothetically universal psychological feeling of religion), inspired by spiritual Indian traditions. In a biography published in 1924, he also sought to make known the thought of Gandhi, who expressed, according to Rolland, “great patience and great love.” Three years later, he was invited by his disciple and friend Stefan Zweig to celebrate the centenary of Beethoven’s death – a musician he would study his entire life.

Although not a member of the Communist Party, he sympathized with it, progressively radicalizing his socialist conceptions and publicly defending the Russian direction of the Party; he retraces this evolution in his second *roman-fleuve*: *The Soul Enchanted* (*Les Âmes enchantées*). This commitment to the left allowed him to become a protective figure of the French Popular Front(*Front populaire*) before he retired to Vézelay in 1938. He spent the whole war in isolation, working on his *Memoires* and on a tribute to Charles Péguy that would be published posthumously. In 1940, he got back in touch with another catholic thinker, Paul Claudel, who did not manage to transform Rolland’s mysticism into Catholicism. The “great task” of Romain Rolland had, in his own words, been “purely religious.”

*References and further readings:*

*List of important works:*

* *Amour d'enfants* (1888)
* *Les Origines du théâtre lyrique moderne*. *Histoire de l'opéra avant Lully et Scarlatti* (1895)
* *Saint-Louis* (1897)
* *Vie de Beethoven* (1903)
* *Le Théâtre du peuple* (1903)
* [*Jean-Christophe*](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Christophe_(roman)) (1904-12).
* [*La Vie de Tolstoï*](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Vie_de_Tolsto%C3%AF) (1911)
* [*Au-dessus de la mêlée*](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Au-dessus_de_la_m%C3%AAl%C3%A9e_(texte)) (1915)
* *Salut à la révolution russe* (1917)
* *Pour l'internationale de l'Esprit* (1918)
* *Colas Breugnon* (1919)
* *Liluli* (1919)
* [*Déclaration de l'indépendance de l'Esprit*](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C3%A9claration_de_l%27ind%C3%A9pendance_de_l%27Esprit) (1919)
* *La Révolte des machines* (1921)
* *L'Âme enchantée* (1922-1933)
* *Gandhi* (1924)
* *Compagnons de route* (1936)
* *Inde : journal (1915-1943)*
* *La Cathédrale interrompue* (1943-45)
* *Péguy* (1945)

*Selected translations to English:*

* *Richard Strauss & Romain Rolland; correspondence,* together with fragments from the diary of Romain Rolland and other essays, introduction by Gustave Samazeuilh. Edited and annotated with a preface by Rollo Myers, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1968
* *Jean-Christophe,* introduction by Louis Auchincloss, translated by Gilbert Cannan, New York, Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1996.

*Critical works:*

* Stefan Zweig, *Romain Rolland: the Man and His Work,* translated by Eden and Cedar Paul, New York, Thomas Seltzer, 1921
* Bernard Duchatelet, *Romain Rolland tel qu’en lui-même,* Paris,Albin Michel, 2002