A Grand Tour

In Boswell's Visit With Rousseau, a Window Into Our Contemporary Selves

Robert Zaretsky

ON DECEMBER 3, 1764, A YOUNG MAN HUNCHED over the table in his lodging in the Alpine village of Môtiers, Switzerland. Glancing frequently at leaves of paper fanned across the table on which he had already sketched his life, he was busily revising the self-portrait. He dwelt on the sorrows of his childhood, raised by a pious mother who, while inspiring him with devotion, had "unfortunately taught [him] Calvinism." More than a decade later, despite six enlightening years spent at the University of Edinburgh, the dire visions spawned by his dour upbringing still hounded him. "My gloomy ideas of religion returned, and sometimes I believed nothing at all." Bringing his letter to a close, he exclaimed: "O charitable philosopher, I beg you to help me. My mind is weak but my soul is strong. Kindle that soul, and the sacred fire shall never be extinguished."

Getting up from the table, the letter writer caught a glimpse of his visage in the room's small mirror. It was a round, pale face crowned by a thick tuft of dark hair, setting off full, red lips. He was as pleased by what he saw as by what he had written: "I shall ever preserve it as a proof that my soul can be sublime." With that, he signed the letter "James Boswell" and asked the maid to deliver it to the local philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

James Boswell (1740–1795), diarist and biographer of Dr. Samuel Johnson. Painting by George Willison, 1765. The owl above Boswell's head is either a symbol of wisdom, or suggests his delight in nighttime activities. (SCOTTISH NATIONAL GALLERY)

IN THE MID-EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, THE EUROPEAN "grand tour" was all the rage: Legions of young Scots and Brits burnished their university education by visiting the continent's great museums and ancient ruins during the day, then furnished untold sums to the local economies by visiting taverns and brothels at night.

Boswell had staked out a different itinerary, however. This is not to say he didn't drink or whore—he did to an epic degree. But, crucially, Boswell sought out not the great ruins, but instead the age's most celebrated thinkers. He had already launched this peculiar quest in Great Britain, having befriended towering figures such as Adam Smith and Lord Kames, David Hume and Adam Ferguson, David Garrick and, most famously, Samuel Johnson.

Boswell's irrepressible ego played no small part in this relentless pursuit. "I am sure I have genius," he observed, "but was at a loss for something to say, and, when I set myself seriously to think of writing, that I wanted a subject." The subject, it soon turned out, was Boswell himself: a subject he would draw and detail over the course of decades in his private journals. To be sure, the larger his collection of thinkers, the greater Boswell's sense of self-

worth. But something deeper was also at play. Boswell was not merely a celebrity seeker, but also a truth seeker.

The two great sources of truth then, reason and religion, were increasingly at loggerheads. Boswell had been raised in the dour Church of Scotland, where the worst of Scottish weather and Scottish Calvinism met to form a perfect storm of fear and trembling. The fear over the eternity of punishment never fully left him. "How it made me shudder," he told Rousseau. "I imagined that the saints passed the whole of eternity in the state of mind of people recently saved from a conflagration, who congratulate themselves on being in safety while they listen to the mournful shrieks of the damned."

Allan Ramsay, portrait of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1766. (SCOTTISH NATIONAL GALLERY)

Yet, these desolate howls were countered by the urbane voices of the philosophes declaring the good news of modernity: the rightness of reason and the pleasures of progress. These men and women did not deny that reason was variously expressed according to place and time, or that progress was a slow and uneven process. But they also believed that beneath the welter of linguistic and geographical differences, a single and unchanging set of values abided, one that reason and reflection would eventually unearth.

Boswell's problem was his inability to reconcile reason's truths with his soul's deepest needs. A rational worldview may well be liberating, but it hardly comforted his existential fears. The enlightened discourses of his age appeared to him, especially when stricken by one of his periodic bouts of melancholy, as worse than useless: "If my mind is a collection of springs, these springs are all unhinged and the Machine is all destroyed; or if my mind is a waxen-table, the wax is melted by the furnace of sorrow, and all my ideas and all my principles are dissolved, are run into one dead Mass. Good God! My friend what horrid chimaeras!" Pursued by the shadows of his Calvinist upbringing, Boswell never escaped his past and lurched uncertainly toward his future.

What to do? How to live? For Boswell, such questions were not rhetorical flourishes; instead, they were urgently real. He undertook, as a result, a pilgrimage of sorts—not to religious relics, though, but to great minds: men who treated these very questions with the gravity and insight that Boswell needed and, two hundred and fifty years later, we may well still need.

NESTLED IN THE VAL DE TRAVERS—A VALLEY FORMING a right angle to the Jura Mountains—lay the village of Môtiers. A village of 400 souls, its idyllic setting was somewhat misleading: Many of the villagers no longer farmed, having turned their energies to more profitable enterprises such as lace- and clock-making or the mining of asphalt. Môtiers nevertheless

struck visitors as a place perfectly suited for the poet of nature, Rousseau.

Yet, it so happened that Rousseau, the author of the novels *Julie, or the New Héloïse* and *Emile*—both paeans to the sublime majesty of the Alps—was less than thrilled by the view. A resident of Môtiers since mid-June 1762, he informed his former protector, the Duc de Luxembourg: "Grand though the spectacle is, it seems rather bare. The mountains slope steeply and show gray crags in many places, and the darkness of firs breaks the gray with a cheerless tone."

Perhaps Rousseau's eye had grown jaundiced because the Duke had failed him as a protector: Just weeks before, the philosopher had to flee Paris for his life. The French Parliament had condemned *Emile*—which, along with *Julie* and *The Social Contract*, Rousseau had miraculously written over the course of sixteen months—and ordered it to be burned outside the Palais de Justice. The backlash, engineered by hardliners within the Church, was inevitable: The section of the novel known as "The Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar" denied every dogma they held dear. Not only does the vicar dismiss the doctrines of revelation, miracles, and original sin, and denigrate the role played by priests, he also questions Christ's very divinity.

For the vicar, nature alone is divine. The mountains and meadows, like the prompting of our conscience, is all the revelation we need. The rest, when it comes to religious faith, is worse than superfluous—it is destructive. Religious doctrines lead not to God, but instead to oppression and war. The vicar thus urges Emile: "View the spectacle of nature; hear the inner voice. Has God not told everything to our eyes, to our conscience, to our judgment? What more will men tell us?"

Any thought Rousseau gave to returning to his native Geneva quickly dissolved with the news that the city's Calvinist elders, as irate as their Catholic foes in Paris, had also condemned *Emile* to the flames. (For good measure, they also torched *The Social Contract*.) Europe's most influential and celebrated writer had thus succeeded in the redoubtable task of uniting, if only on the subject of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Catholics and Protestants, monarchic France and republican Geneva.

Indeed, these weren't the only odd bedfellows Rousseau drove to the same mattress. The Enlightenment felt as menaced as did the Church by Rousseau's work. In his *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau dismissed the Enlightenment as a new kind of obscurantism, its convictions misguided and its goals catastrophic for humankind. Reason, Rousseau announced, is little more than the tool of desire, pursuing ends that can never be reached. Instead of representing progress, this mad effort to fulfill our desires drives us from nature (now despoiled) and our natural selves (long since repressed). As for civilization, rather than the source of our happiness, it is little more than a hall of mirrors where appearance reigns and misery abounds.

How did we wind up here? Proposing a thought experiment, Rousseau leads us back to an age where we lived alone and in nature. *L'homme sauvage* knew needs—food, shelter, and sex—but he did not know himself. How could he, if he did not know language or society? Instead, natural man—to use Rousseau's gendered term—knew only the brute sentiment of his existence, one pinned entirely to the present moment. The past was as unthinkable as the future for this creature. With alarming eloquence, Rousseau described the world of our dim and dumb ancestors: "There was neither education nor progress; the generations multiplied uselessly. And since everyone always started at the same point, the centuries passed by in all the crudeness of the first ages; the species was already old, and man remained ever a child."

Why alarming? Because Rousseau announces that everything we thought to be true was false. Alarming because we find natural man was happy precisely because he was unaware of himself and others; alarming because this state of ignorant bliss could not last; alarming in its consequences for Rousseau's enlightened contemporaries.

Lodged in our nearly imperceptible stumble toward society is the fatal moment when we

exiled ourselves from paradise. Men began to associate with other men and gathered around trees to dance and sing. At first the dancers and the dance are indistinguishable, but there comes the moment of self-awareness. "Each began to look at the others and to want to be looked at himself, and public esteem had a value. The one who sang or danced the best, the most beautiful, the strongest, the most clever, or the most eloquent became the most highly considered—and this, then, was the first step toward inequality and at the same time toward vice."

Humankind's descent from that distant fire to Facebook was merely a question of millennia. The moment we caught sight of ourselves in the reflection of the other's gaze, we could never again go back to an existence shaped by the fulfillment of needs, not desires, and natural goodness not yet corrupted by society. Unable to think of others without thinking of ourselves, or our own selves only through the eyes of others, we are forever a work in progress. Our passion to perfect ourselves runs roughshod over our reason, bending it toward its own ends—ends that, by their very nature, are endless. Thus, Rousseau laments, the "human race, debased and dispirited . . . brought itself to the brink of its ruin."

Where better to escape such ruins than Môtiers? Forgotten in these craggy expanses, Rousseau could return to the bliss of that earlier world. *Hélas*, the world would not leave Rousseau in peace. For that matter, neither could Rousseau leave the world alone. He could not stop writing that he should never have become a writer, could not stop pulling others to him to say he wished to be left alone, could not stop declaring his indifference to a public he had so skillfully created in his own image, or tell these legions of admirers that he was the most misunderstood of men.

Indeed, ever since Rousseau's arrival in Môtiers, an insistent stream of visitors wound its way to the ramshackle wood house where he and his companion Thérèse Le Vasseur rented the upper floor. Many came simply to gaze upon the author of these works—readers, Rousseau muttered, who had not read his books and had too much free time on their hands. Or there were cases like the Baron de Sauttern, a dashing Hungarian officer who struck up a quick friendship with the usually reticent philosopher. The two men shared many walks and conversations—that is, until the baron bolted town after having impregnated a local girl. Only then was it discovered, much to Rousseau's chagrin, that Sauttern was neither an officer nor a gentleman, but instead was simply Jean-Ignace Sauttermeister von Sauttersheim, a government clerk who had fled Prague just steps ahead of a pack of creditors.

But Sauttersheim's disguise hardly shocked the good folk of Môtiers, by then accustomed to the sight of Rousseau walking through town garbed in a lilac-colored, fur-edged robe and matching hat. The exotic costume had prosaic origins: suffering from a urinary-tract problem, Rousseau found the robe, dubbed as an Armenian caftan, easier to negotiate than breeches during his forays to the chamber pot. At the same time, he began weaving silk lace, which he offered to local brides in exchange for the promise that they would breast-feed their infants. (Given the frightening mortality rate of infants farmed out to wet nurses, Rousseau's gesture was odd, but also deeply humane.) Exhilarated by his new self-image, Rousseau exclaimed to one of his many female correspondents: "I have thought as a man; I have written as a man and I have been called bad. Well, now I shall be a woman."

Gender and garb notwithstanding, Rousseau remained Jean-Jacques, the author of *Julie* and *Emile*, for his enamored readers. In the weeks leading to his assault on the reluctant recluse, Boswell had plunged into Rousseau's great epistolary novel. While crossing the German archipelago of independent states and kingdoms, the Scottish traveler spent his evenings reading *Julie* and its tragic tale of undying love unfolding against mountains as massive as

the class differences that separated Julie and Saint-Preux. The language galvanized the melancholic youth: "Rousseau gives me an enthusiasm of feeling which I thought was all over with poor melancholy Boswell. Thus agitated my heart expands itself & feels the want of an object to love."

But Boswell, no doubt inspired by Saint-Preux's self-denial, was in no hurry to find such an object. His thoughts wandering along sensual and illicit paths one night in Saxony, he recalled the goal of his travels: "I swore solemnly neither to talk as an infidel nor to enjoy a woman before seeing Rousseau."

Boswell's reading of *Emile,* in particular the profession of faith, helped as well. As with *Julie*, the effect was immediate: "I was struck with its clearness, its Simplicity and its Piety." Indeed, that clearness revealed that Christians had need of neither the Church's teachings nor Enlightenment's teachers; that they needed only their inner sentiment, which they could hear if they only learned to listen (preferably in nature); that one's conscience, unlike the words of others, never deceives; and that it speaks not in religious dogma or philosophical treatises, but through nature. Of course, that same clearness also made Rousseau persona non grata in Paris and Geneva, as well as a magnet for those disenchanted equally with the institutions of religion and reason.

Understandably, Boswell's anxiety was great. Finding his room too small, he threw on his overcoat—its green fabric setting off his scarlet-and-gold-laced coat and hat—and flung himself toward the forest. The pensive youth found himself "surrounded by immense mountains, some covered with frowning rocks, others with clustering pines, and others with glittering snow." Inevitably, not only were Boswell's eyes colored by Rousseau's sensibility, but his mind was also filled with the philosopher: "I recalled all my former ideas of J.J. Rousseau, the admiration with which he is regarded over all Europe, his *Héloïse*, his *Emile*: in short a crowd of great thoughts."

Buoyed by these thoughts, Boswell returned to the inn to find a reply from Rousseau: He would be glad to receive the visitor, but given his poor state of health, the visit had to be short. Shuddering at the word "short," Boswell again barreled out of the inn and straight to Rousseau's lodging. Out of breath, he was met at the door by le Vasseur, who led him up a winding and dark staircase to the kitchen; moments later, Rousseau stepped into the room from the facing door, his caftan trailing along the wooden planks, as if he had just woken from an afternoon nap. (Indeed, Boswell thought the hat was a nightcap.) Rousseau invited his guest to promenade in the kitchen, and thus began the first of five improbable visits Boswell made over the next several days.

Boswell had once observed of himself: "I have the art to be easy and chatty." His art certainly worked wonders with Rousseau: Within minutes, the voluble Scot was punctuating his conversation by grasping the hand and grabbing the shoulder of his surprised, but curious, host. Rousseau repeatedly insisted the visits be short, but for naught: Resolute and relentless, Boswell pursued questions great and small, philosophical and personal. From the quackery of doctors ("I have given up doctors") to the greatness of Samuel Johnson ("I should like to see him, but from a distance, for fear he might maul me"), to the evils of society ("I live here in a world of fantasies, and I cannot accept the world as it is") and the uselessness of history ("It's a mere amusement"), Rousseau replied to Boswell's increasingly frantic volleys of queries. Though fatigued by Boswell, Rousseau was also intrigued: He invited the Scot to stay for dinner during the last visit. Over a simple, well-prepared meal of beef, turnips, and white wine, Rousseau practiced the egalitarianism he preached in his works. When Boswell asked if he could have a second serving of a dish, his host replied: "Is your arm long enough?"

But behind the scattershot of questions lay, for Boswell, a single target: how to secure his faith in the age of reason. Convinced Rousseau alone could set his soul at ease, Boswell invariably bent the conversations in that direction. At a pivotal moment, as Rousseau recounted his youthful coming and going between Catholi-

cism and Calvinism, Boswell interrupted him: "But tell me sincerely, are you a Christian?" Clearly, Boswell's doubts had been raised by the swirl of controversy over Rousseau's writings. Taken aback, his host stared at him, struck his fist against his chest, and declared: "Yes. I pique myself upon being one." The Gospels, he continued, were a source of great comfort. Yet, just as the Savoyard vicar affirmed nothing less—and nothing more—so, too, with Rousseau: Faith has nothing to do with the mummeries of priests and philosophes. But, demanded Boswell anxiously, what about the expiation of my sins? His dark eyes fixing his febrile guest, Rousseau was matter-of-fact: "Do good. You will cancel all the debt of evil."

Transfixed by Rousseau's words, Boswell blurted the question he no doubt meant to ask from the beginning: "Will you, Sir, assume direction of me?" Boswell of course meant spiritual direction, and a surprised Rousseau begged off: He was too ill for such a task. Besides, he added, "I can be responsible only for myself." In effect, this was the same answer Rousseau had given Boswell at the dinner table. When he asked if he could take a second serving, the canny host replied: You're on your own.

After dinner, as Boswell prepared to leave the house and make his way to the nearby town of Yverdon, he sought reassurance from Rousseau that their meeting would endure. Pulling a hair from his head, he asked: "Can I feel sure that I am held to you by a thread, even if of the finest? By a hair?" Did Rousseau smile? Or stare hard? All we know, according to Boswell, is his reply: "Yes. Remember always that there are points at which our souls are bound." Overwhelmed, Boswell bellowed "Bravo!" and declared: "I shall *live* to the end of my days." To which Rousseau responded: "That is undoubtedly a thing one must do."

Once back in London, during a conversation with Johnson, Boswell mentioned Rousseau's name. His older friend erupted in anger and dismissed the writer of the *Discourse* as "a very bad man." Though Boswell dared not defend Rousseau to the glowering Johnson, the outburst rankled him: While he had little patience with Rousseau's critique of society, Boswell believed his faith was authentic. Recreating this moment many years later in *The Life of Johnson*, Boswell recalled his own response to the "Profession of Faith": "I cannot help admiring it as the performance of a man full of sincere reverential submission to Divine Mystery, though beset with perplexing doubts."

In the end, perplexing doubt was the life Boswell not only brought with him to Môtiers, but also left with. The impress left by Rousseau's words faded as quickly as did the sight of the Alps as Boswell wound his way through Italy. Once there, when not treating himself to visits to the ancient sites, he was treating himself with mercury after his many nocturnal visits to less reputable attractions. "Dissipation and profligacy . . . renew the mind"—these lines, as plentiful in his Italian journal as truffles after a rainy day in Lombardy, persist to the end of Boswell's journal and his life. No less persistent were his doubts over the value and ends of his life: "Futurity is dark," he confessed to his journal many years later.

In the end, Boswell did live to the end of his life. We all do, of course. Did he manage, though, to live his life as the wild philosopher saw fit? No more so than the rest of us do, no doubt. Who among us has not been hounded by the "black fiend" of melancholy, harassed by a sense of professional failure or harried by persistent thoughts of death? Or, for that matter, not insistent on the need for enduring meaning or illumed by moments of beauty in the world and with friends? In the end, Boswell differs from most of us only insofar as he was so honest in these fears, so keen on connecting with others and so skilled at describing it all. Perhaps this is why he commands our attention: Though 250 years old, Boswell is our gifted contemporary. In his brilliant self-portrait, we see, for better and worse, our own selves. And we read him because, like him, we must live our lives to the end of our days. ◘