

Annals by John Hope Mason

Rousseau in England

On January 15, 1766, the *London Chronicle* announced: “On Monday last arrived in town the celebrated Jean-Jacques Rousseau . . . [who] has been brought into much trouble and vexation, both in Switzerland and in France, for having ventured to publish, in many works, his sentiments with a spirit and freedom which cannot be done with impunity in any kingdom or state except this blessed island.”¹

Two days later the *Westminster Journal* recorded his arrival “in this city, to shelter himself from the persecution of the numberless bigots of the Continent.”² Shortly after, another contributor to the *London Chronicle* praised his *Discours sur l'inégalité*, expressed some reservation about *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (which “did more honour to his genius than his phi-

losophy”), and observed that “his native city thought proper . . . to banish him, and, after wandering from state to state, exclaiming at the prejudice and malice of mankind, half a philosopher and half a humorist, dressed in an Armenian habit, and mistaking novelty of opinion for justness of thinking, he has at length thought proper to end his days . . . in this land of boasted liberty.”³ England’s liberty was “boasted,” because unlike France (and elsewhere) its monarchy was not absolute, its press was free, and its degree of religious toleration was comparatively high.

Rousseau had had a reputation in Europe since the publication (in 1760) of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (soon translated into English), and then (two years later) of *Emile*. The latter, however, contained an account of “natural religion” that praised the teaching of the Gospels,⁴

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1 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Correspondance complète*, ed. R. A. Leigh (Geneva: Institut et musée Voltaire, 1965–1998), XXIX, 296.

2 *Ibid.*, XXIX, 295.

3 *Ibid.*, XXVIII, 352.

4 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. B. Gagnebin et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 1959–1995), iv.629.

but attacked the idea of divine revelation⁵ and described the life and death of Jesus as those not of “God” but of “a god.”⁶ This led to its immediate condemnation by both the Sorbonne and the Paris Parlement, and the latter issued a warrant for his arrest. The obvious refuge for him was Geneva, where he had citizenship; but the city-republic was no more amenable to the “*Profession de foi*” in *Emile* than were the authorities in Paris. In addition, the *Contrat social*, his tract on republican government, published almost simultaneously in Amsterdam, contained a chapter on civil religion in which Rousseau attacked Christianity for having become in practice a “violent despotism,”⁷ which only preached “servitude and dependence”;⁸ in other words, it was incompatible with republican freedom and participation. The Genevan authorities announced that he would be arrested if he set foot in the city. (This proclamation had a political dimension, since Rousseau was allied with those citizens who were resisting their exclusion from office by the prevailing oligarchy.)

He took refuge instead in Môtiers, a village in the province of Neuchâtel, then under the protection of Frederick II of Prussia. There he found a new stability – delighted by the countryside, and soon busy in defending first *Emile* (his *Lettre à Christophe de Beaumont* [1763]) and then his Genevan compatriots (in his *Lettres de la montagne* [1764]). His household consisted of his companion Thérèse and his dog Sultan, described (one time he went missing) as “a little

brown dog, with short ears and a short curled tail,”⁹ and dismissed by Hume as “no better than a collie,”¹⁰ but to whom Rousseau himself was very attached. “His affection for that creature,” observed Hume, “is beyond all expression or conception.”¹¹ (And it was indeed one of the few successful relationships of Rousseau’s life.) It was at Môtiers that Rousseau began wearing an Armenian caftan, partly for medical reasons (he had a constriction of the urethra, which meant he had to use catheters), and partly because, in the words of the first page of his *Confessions*, “I am not made like anyone else I have seen. I dare to suppose that I am not made like anyone else who exists. If I am no better, at least I am different (*Si je ne vaut pas mieux, au moins je suis autre*).”¹²

The rural idyll at Môtiers did not last. The religious issue was raised again, this time by the local pastor, and the vehemence of the pastor’s opposition eventually led some of his congregation to throw stones at the house where Rousseau and Thérèse were living, after a particularly hostile sermon one Sunday. It was this incident that then led to Rousseau being invited to England.

This came about through the good offices of an elderly Scotsman, George Keith, a Jacobite refugee who had had to leave the British Isles after the failure of the Jacobite Rebellion of 1715. He was subsequently appointed by Frederick the Great as Governor of Neuchâtel and in that capacity had given Rousseau refuge. It was then in the company of Keith’s fellow Scotsman, David Hume, then

5 Ibid., iv.607–608.

6 Ibid., iv.626.

7 Ibid., iii.462.

8 Ibid., iii.467.

9 *Correspondance complète*, XXIX, 1.

10 Ibid., XXVIII, 114.

11 Ibid., XXVIII, 204.

12 *Oeuvres complètes*, i.5.

Chargé d'affaires at the British Embassy in Paris, that Rousseau came to London. Hume had a high regard for Rousseau's achievements, describing him as greater than Socrates,¹³ and he took an immediate liking to Rousseau in person: "I love him much . . . I think I could live with him all my life in mutual friendship and esteem."¹⁴

Rousseau's arrival in London aroused huge interest, which was not to his taste, nor indeed that of Sultan who (disoriented by the unfamiliar environment) ran away on several occasions, though never lost for long. Hume wrote of Rousseau, at this time,

[He is] endowed with a lively imagination and . . . a singular simplicity of manners. [He] is indeed a perfect child in the ordinary occurrences of life. This quality, joined to his great sensibility of heart, makes him be easily governed by those who live with him, . . . his maid in particular, . . . [and] his dog also has great influence with him . . . He would not stay in London above a fortnight . . . [and] of the great variety of scenes which I propose to him, the most solitary, the most remote, and the most savage place is always that which he prefers.¹⁵

Initially, that place was to be Wales; but then Rousseau was invited to use a house in Derbyshire, on the edge of an area of great natural beauty – the Peak District. In late March he, Thérèse, and Sultan moved there. The conditions seemed ideal and spring would soon arrive.

At this point, however, disaster struck. A letter published in the *St. James Chronicle*, ostensibly from Frederick of Prussia, offered Rousseau asylum in Berlin and

every possible assistance in making him as miserably unhappy as he could want to be. Now it was true that Rousseau was prone to a degree of hypochondria, but (as it was once observed)¹⁶ he was also the worst kind of hypochondriac – namely, the one who is really ill (as Rousseau was, the result of uraemia infecting his kidneys). The depiction of him as an inveterate misanthrope infuriated him. He assumed that Hume was behind it. In fact, it had been written by Horace Walpole, a fluent French speaker and a frequent visitor to Paris. There, he had gotten to know various former friends of Rousseau, who were no longer well disposed toward him, and who delighted in telling Walpole how impossible Rousseau was – *un homme ombrageux*, moody, difficult, and paranoid. This inspired Walpole to write the fake letter.

When Rousseau learned about it he accused Hume of being its author. This led to a bitter quarrel between them, one that was then revealed to the world with the publication of their respective accounts. Less than six months after Hume had brought Rousseau to England – captivated by his personality and originality – Hume was reported as calling the latter "the blackest and most atrocious villain that ever disgraced human nature."¹⁷

Rousseau had first made his name with a prize-winning essay on the subject (set by the Academy of Dijon) of whether "the revival of the arts and science (i.e., the Renaissance) had contributed to the improvement of morality."¹⁸ When he

16 Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1967), 185.

17 *Correspondance complète*, XXX, 22.

18 *Oeuvres complètes*, iii.1.

13 *Correspondance complète*, XXVIII, 114.

14 *Ibid.*, XXVIII, 203, 290.

15 *Ibid.*, XXVIII, 308 – 309.

published the essay, he added two words to this question, making it an essay on whether the Renaissance had improved “or corrupted” morality. His point was that this revival had done more harm than good. In so doing, he acknowledged that he was confronting head-on “all that is currently held in esteem.”¹⁹

In adopting this position, he was following a long line of critics of intellectual and cultural achievement, beginning with the Cynics Antisthenes and Diogenes, best known in Seneca’s *Epistle* 88, and present in a number of Renaissance texts by Philip Sidney, Erasmus, Montaigne, and others.²⁰ It also had affinities with the Roman republican distrust of literature and philosophy. Rousseau’s initial inspiration for his essay – his *illumination* on the road to Vincennes – was the republican moralist, Fabricius, who attacked painters, sculptors, poets, and dramatists for their extravagance, self-absorption, and general lack of concern for the *res publica*, and condemned Roman society as a whole for being more concerned with aesthetic activity than moral integrity.²¹

Behind the eloquent attack in the first *Discours*, however, was something more than a historical tradition; there was also a deeply personal crisis. Rousseau had come to Paris to make his name as a writer and composer, but he had found only frustration and disappointment. His play *Narcisse* was accepted for performance at the Comédie-Italienne, but production was endlessly delayed. A worse setback occurred with his opera *Les Muses galantes*, extracts of which had

been performed privately (in 1745). Rameau heard some of the score and attacked it with “brutality” and “rage”; as Rousseau informed a friend, “I have never seen so much conspiracy and animosity.”²² He had supposed, as an honest Swiss, that success came simply with high achievement, “but I have learnt that other talents are necessary which I neither can have nor want to have.”²³

Rameau’s jealousy was not the only thing Rousseau learned from this incident: “The very rage of my enemies made me aware of my strength; without their jealousy I would still not be aware of my ability to combat them.”²⁴ In other words, competition and ill will could be productive. This experience was confirmed a few years later when Diderot asked him to contribute articles on music for the *Encyclopédie*. Rousseau had no great desire to undertake this work, but he saw it as an opportunity to get his revenge on Rameau. That bad feeling was fruitful: hatred could be stimulating; as La Rochefoucauld had observed, “*Il y a de méchantes qualités qui font de grands talents.*”²⁵ The voice of Fabricius condemning Rome was the voice of Rousseau condemning himself. The Dijon academy asked whether the revival of learning and culture since the Renaissance had improved morals. Not only had they not done that, they could not do that.

The central theme of the *Discours* was not that art corrupts but rather that artists are corrupt, not that audiences might be adversely affected but rather that aesthetic achievement is often the

19 *Ibid.*, iii.3.

20 See John Hope Mason, “Reading Rousseau’s First Discourse,” *Studies on Voltaire & the 18th Century* 249 (1987): 251–266.

21 *Oeuvres complètes*, iii.14–15.

22 *Correspondance complète*, II, 87.

23 *Ibid.*, II, 133.

24 *Ibid.*, II, 87.

25 La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes*, no. 468.

product of the least desirable qualities. Writers are animated above all, he stated, by a “*fureur de se distinguer*” – to make themselves noticed – and in the pursuit of that they care nothing for morality or the social good. What they want above all is to be praised: “*Tout artiste veut être applaudi. Les éloges de ses contemporains sont la partie la plus précieuse de sa récompense.*”²⁶ So they oscillate between a contempt for public opinion, which they must despise in order to be distinctive, and a constant attention, if not subordination, to the judgment of others,²⁷ which they must take into account in order to win the applause they crave – a double dose of bad faith.

In the course of writing the *Discours*, Rousseau had sent a letter to Voltaire in which he added after his signature, for the first time, the appellation “*Citoyen de Genève.*”²⁸ The first edition of the *Discours* had on its title page not Rousseau’s name but the words “*Par un citoyen de Genève.*” This was followed by an epigraph from Ovid: “*Barbarus hic ego sum quia non intelligor illis*” (“I am a barbarian here, because they do not understand me”).²⁹

This line was something of a leitmotif for Rousseau; he had first used it seven years earlier,³⁰ and was to use it again two years before he died.³¹ It occurs in an extended sequence of poems to which Ovid gave the title *Tristia* (*Sorrows*), because they were written in exile.

26 *Oeuvres complètes*, iii.21.

27 *Ibid.*, iii.19, 21.

28 *Correspondance complète*, II, 124.

29 *Oeuvres complètes*, iii.1. The citation is from Ovid, *Tristia*, X, 37.

30 *Correspondance complète*, I, 139.

31 *Oeuvres complètes*, i.657.

Ovid’s erotic *Ars amatoria* and some undefined ‘error’³² had caused grave offense to Augustus, and Augustus had banished him from Rome. He was sent to one of the outermost places of the empire, Tomis (now Constanza, in Romania), on the western rim of the Black Sea: a bleak and desolate place, with long cold winters (when even the sea sometimes froze)³³ and inhabited by barely civilized people – Sarmatians – who were in continual conflict with the neighboring tribe of Getae.³⁴ “Even when there is peace,” wrote Ovid, “there is fear of war”; “nothing outside [the city] is secure.”³⁵ Yet in these circumstances it was he who was the barbarian, because he was understood by no one.³⁶

What at the time of Rousseau’s first success (with the first *Discours*) had been a bold claim to individual distinction, became in 1766 an unwelcome fact of life. In England he was indeed almost a complete outsider; while he could read the language he could not speak it, nor understand it when spoken.³⁷ As a result, he was isolated to a degree that he had never experienced before. In these circumstances, almost the only solace – as it had been for Ovid in his *Tristia* – was in writing. “My muse alone comforts me,” wrote Ovid,³⁸ and it was during his seventeen months in England that Rousseau wrote much of the first

32 Ovid, *Tristia*, II, 207, and IV, 10, 90.

33 *Ibid.*, III, 10, 37–38.

34 *Ibid.*, IV, 10, 110.

35 *Ibid.*, III, 10, 65, and V, 10, 17.

36 *Ibid.*, IV, I, 87, and V, 10, 36–37.

37 *Correspondance complète*, XXIX, 162, 266, and XXX, 90.

38 Ovid, *Tristia*, IV, 1, 3, and IV, 19–20.

part of his *Confessions*. But that was not all, for this activity came to be more than consolation. As alienation may illuminate, so exclusion can bring insight; the barbarian may see what the civilized have lost sight of. The very bleakness of Rousseau's situation stimulated his memory, recapturing the time before he had a name in the world with a magically evocative account of his early life. As the rains fell around him in Derbyshire, the happy years of his prolonged adolescence and early manhood came vividly to life once more; and so when he left England the following spring, in May 1767, he did not go empty-handed.

*Rousseau
in England*