

THE
PHILOSOPHERS'
QUARREL

*Rousseau, Hume,
and the Limits of Human
Understanding*

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C H A P T E R O N E

An Enlightenment Quarrel

I have the feeling that philosophy leads to sorrow.

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Mme d'Épinay

Since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium.

—David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*

March 18, 1766, was meant to be the day for thanks and farewells between Europe's two most celebrated philosophers. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was set to leave London, with his companion Thérèse Le Vasseur, for Wootton Hall, an estate deep in north England. David Hume had arranged for this asylum, as he had most everything since he had accompanied Rousseau from France to England more than two months before, when Hume had first come to Rousseau's rescue. Though he had never before met the Swiss thinker and novelist, Hume had been moved by his plight: Rousseau's writings had been burned and his life threatened in his adopted France as well as his native Geneva. As a

cosmopolitan freethinker in Calvinist Scotland and a Scottish Tory in Whiggish and xenophobic London, Hume had learned to sympathize with the persecuted. Learning of Rousseau's predicament, he had employed his considerable reputation and energy to resolve it.

Yet thanks, if not farewells, seemed the last thing on Rousseau's mind when he entered Hume's drawing room. Wearing his usual flowing Armenian caftan and tall fur cap, the Genevan turned on his host, blasting Hume for treating him like a child. Rousseau announced his discovery that the coach he and Thérèse were boarding the following day for Wootton Hall was offered under false pretenses. With Hume's acquiescence, Rousseau's patron and the owner of Wootton Hall, Richard Davenport, had paid for the chaise and, to spare the philosopher's abundant sensibilities and his meager pocketbook, had told the philosopher that a happy convergence of events meant that only a nominal fare would be charged.

This subterfuge, undertaken with the best of intentions, unleashed furies. While he might be poor, Rousseau told Hume that he preferred "to conform to his circumstances than live like a beggar on alms." Overwhelmed by the ferocity of his friend's attack, Hume, his round and fleshy face gone white, insisted upon his innocence—in vain. No less vain were his efforts to engage his friend in conversation. Rousseau gave curt replies, each time falling back into brooding silence.

This uneasy scene had lasted nearly an hour when, without warning, Rousseau leaped onto Hume's lap, threw his hands around his huge neck, and covered his face with tears and kisses. "Is it possible you can ever forgive me, my dear friend?" cried Rousseau. "After all the testimonies of affection I have received from you, I reward you at last with this folly and ill behavior. But I have notwithstanding a heart worthy of your friendship. I love you, I esteem you; and not an instance of your kindness is thrown away upon me."

Hume unraveled under this deluge of affection. As his friend clasped his neck, Hume too began to weep. Patting the folds of dark brown silk hanging limply along the man's back, Hume reassured Rousseau of his love and friendship. As Hume later confessed to a friend, "I think no scene of my life was ever more affecting."¹

And perhaps no scene in Hume's life had ever been more drastically misunderstood. After Rousseau left for Wootton Hall the next day, he and Hume would never again see each other. Within a matter of weeks, their friendship dissolved into a passionate quarrel, played out in salvos of impassioned and recriminatory letters and pamphlets. The correspondence was quickly translated into French and English, becoming a subject of intense conversation and argument on both

sides of the Channel. Europe's traditional aristocracy, and even more so the rising aristocracy of intelligence that formed the Continent's "Republic of Letters," were riveted by the feud, taking sides with a degree of conviction that the era's dynastic wars could not command. As Hume himself ruefully noted, the rise and fall of his friendship with Rousseau had made "so great a noise."

The sheer fascination with calamities partly explains the public fixation with the noisy row between Hume and Rousseau. Although of a different order of magnitude, just a decade earlier the 1755 Lisbon earthquake thus riveted the attention of Europeans. This was to be expected of a catastrophe that involved tidal waves, great fissures, raging fires, cinder-darkened skies, and vast carnage—all in a major capital of western Europe. Morbid curiosity was not the only reason for the unprecedented preoccupation with Lisbon, however. After all, there had always been earthquakes, but until Lisbon the tremors did not outrage human understanding. As Susan Neiman argues, earlier disasters—even a scant fifty years before, when an earthquake leveled Port Royal, Jamaica—failed to spark attention largely because they did not upset the moral or conceptual order of Western man. The European worldview was still rooted in a Christian understanding of Providence, whether citing God's mysterious ways or conceiving the order of the universe as having been set in motion by a clockmaker deity. But subsequent changes, especially in the intellectual terrain, made for a perfect philosophical storm after Lisbon. The event spurred a raft of essays, poems, pamphlets, and books, including an exchange between Rousseau and Voltaire and an appearance in *Candide*. All of these works raised questions concerning God's goodness and power, and, no less important, the fundamental intelligibility of the world and the human situation. As Neiman notes, the idea that the world and life "were not mysterious was a demand of reason embodied in natural religion as in other eighteenth century discoveries."²

Although it left no decaying bodies or demolished buildings in its wake, the Hume-Rousseau affair, like Lisbon, heaved critical questions to the surface of the intellectual world. Most particularly, the rift between these remarkable men posed the problem of understanding others and our own selves. Both Hume and Rousseau had devoted their lives to contributing to the great Enlightenment project of human understanding and, at the same time, challenging it. And yet not only did they come away with very different versions of what took place that evening at Hume's lodgings: it also became painfully clear that, from the outset, they never fully understood each other, or themselves.

The nature and response to the Hume-Rousseau affair, as with the aftermath of Lisbon, make sense only when set in the Enlightenment. Yet, as a theoretical concept and historical era, the Enlightenment has long meant different things to

different scholars. For some the Enlightenment captures all that is good and great about the ideas and ideals of a liberal and liberating eighteenth century. Peter Gay memorably described the Enlightenment as the “recovery of nerve,” led by heroic thinkers committed to the progress of humankind through the application of critical reason. For others, however, the Enlightenment exposes all that is wrong and tragic about the idols and ideologies of an illiberal and repressive West. From the Frankfurt theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer to postmodern critics like Michel Foucault, the absolutist emphasis on reason by Enlightenment thinkers enabled rather than challenged the hierarchical and despotic character of society and politics in Old Regime Europe. The Enlightenment, for these critics, has been a nightmare of reason from which the West has never awakened.³

For yet others, the old notion of a single, pan-European Enlightenment reduces the complexity of its history—or, more accurately, its histories. A growing number of historians have argued that there were, in fact, several national Enlightenments, ranging from the French and German to the British and Scottish, distinguished from one another by various political, social, and cultural traits. Moreover, others have identified different Enlightenments within a single country. Robert Darnton has portrayed the difficult relationship between High and Low Enlightenments in eighteenth-century France, while, most recently, Jonathan Israel has claimed that a “radical Enlightenment” led by Benedict Spinoza and Pierre Bayle in the Dutch Republic preceded the better-known, less original High Enlightenment of Montesquieu and Voltaire.⁴ In the end, there will almost certainly never be a unified field theory of the Enlightenment. But this is not a reason for disposing of the term: it is, in every sense of the phrase, easier to live with the Enlightenment than without it. As a social, philosophical, and political legacy for all who followed, as a heuristic concept for the scholars who study it, the Enlightenment is indispensable.

As with any historical caption, *the Age of Reason* hides as much as it reveals. Certainly, enlightened men and women of the eighteenth century began to question and ultimately reject the received truths of religion and faith, church, and traditional authorities. Dissatisfied with such constraints, they turned to critical reason to realize our potential as human beings. Historians have long noted that this generation of thinkers largely distrusted overly ambitious claims for reason that they associated with seventeenth-century systematic thinkers like Descartes and Leibniz. For this new and more skeptical generation, reason divorced from experience, doubt, and experiment was as useless as church dogma in making sense of our world and our own selves. Skeptics embraced the conviction that only scientific method could penetrate the secrets of nature and lead, as the En-

glish philosopher Francis Bacon wrote in *The New Atlantis*, to “the effecting of all things possible.”⁵

Nevertheless, many leading figures of this movement insisted upon the great and good offices provided by scientific method and inductive reasoning. Despite doubts and hesitations, there was a widespread belief among the philosophes—the name given to the men and women, less original thinkers than brilliant pamphleteers and conversationalists, who identified with this intellectual movement—in the liberating power of reason. The declaration made by the Baron d’Holbach, who will play a critical role in our story, is telling:

Despite all the efforts of tyranny, despite the violence and trickery of the priesthood, despite the vigilant efforts of all the enemies of mankind, the human race will attain enlightenment; nations will know their true interests; a multitude of rays, assembled, will form one day a boundless mass of light that will warm all hearts, that will illuminate all minds.⁶

Perhaps the most famous expression of this faith in reason is the Marquis de Condorcet’s *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Human Mind*. In this credo, Condorcet declares that human reason and established fact reveal “that nature has set no term to the perfection of human faculties; that the perfectibility of man is truly indefinite; and that the progress of this perfectibility, from now onwards independent of any power that might wish to halt it, has no other limit than the duration of the globe upon which nature has cast us.”⁷ Condorcet wrote these words while in hiding from the revolutionary Terror that would eventually claim his life—testimony to his faith in reason, and, tragically, to his blindness to reason’s excesses in the course of the Revolution.

In this book we engage many of the historical and conceptual debates surrounding the Enlightenment, but we shall not try to answer them. The book is less about the Enlightenment than about a puzzling series of events that occurred within the Enlightenment. We tell the story of the brief and dramatic friendship between Hume and Rousseau, and point to the implications it may have for the Enlightenment’s conception of human reason and understanding. In order to do so, we contextualize their thought within their own lives and the world they inhabited. We do so not on the assumption that their personalities and their time determined their thought, but in keeping with how they themselves saw philosophy: as a way of life and as a form of action in the world. The rise and fall of the friendship between Rousseau and Hume, then, was a particularly dramatic, and we think revealing, example of a collision between two individuals who struggled to understand themselves, each other, and the world they inhabited together.

It was in their attitudes toward reason, the Enlightenment's key article of faith, that Hume and Rousseau, opposites in so many other ways, became odd bedfellows. With calm and deliberation, the Scot blasted our deepest convictions concerning the reasonability of trusting in reason: though we pretend that reason rules our lives, he declared, habit and passion instead inevitably hold sway. Even for the happy few ruled by the "empire of philosophy," the reach of reason "is very weak and limited." Ultimately, reason was "the slave of our passions"—a state of affairs, paradoxically, Hume welcomed rather than regretted. As for Rousseau, reason did not even merit this reduced station. Not merely weaker than the passions, reason actually made moral, social, and individual matters worse. While Hume conceded that reason was strong enough to know its limitations, Rousseau identified reason as the disease for which it pretended to be the cure.

The two philosophers took very different consequences from their critiques of reason: Hume championed the progress of the sciences and arts (though with more modest expectations than those of his contemporaries), while Rousseau questioned progress, wondering whether it was just another word for moral decay and despair. Both men, nevertheless, were and remain our most important critics of reason. The grounds for their claims against reason are complex—neither man, we will see, was an irrationalist, much less a mystic. On the contrary, their critiques of reason are models of logic and lucidity. In this regard, their relevance for our own age is clear: religious fanatics and philosophical reactionaries hounded Hume and Rousseau throughout their lives. Both men, moreover, detested the hypocrisies and hubris of the political classes, just as they decried the ways in which greed and injustice were gussied up in noble sentiments.

No less important, the ways in which these two men lived their lives—and conducted their ill-fated friendship—pose the question of the relationship between ideas and life, thinking and living. Philosophy nowadays seems to be a profession, not a discipline. Academic philosophers write on the history of philosophy or work in analytic philosophy. But as for proposing a worldview—a coherent system by which we can understand the world and our place in it—and a reworking of our selves: this is no longer common.

Philosophy has too commonly become an occupation, where "doing" philosophy is no different from "doing" physics or psychology, literature or statistics. The contrarian historian of ancient philosophy Pierre Hadot worries that philosophy in our age has become the activity of bureaucrats, whose great task is to reproduce themselves: "to form other bureaucrats, rather than form man."⁸ He has argued that ancient philosophy was not simply a theoretical discourse but also an art of living, a method for aligning our lives with our thought. Alexander Nehamas writes in a similar vein. The ancients, he declares, were onto criti-

cal matters that we have lost sight of in our age of hyperspecialization. "Theory and practice, discourse and life, affect one another," he writes, "and people become philosophers because they are able and willing to be the best human type and to live as well as a human being possibly can. What one believes and how one lives have a direct bearing on one another."⁹ Our sensibilities are attuned to these worries about how philosophy seems to have fallen, for we are shocked when we learn that a philosopher can give aid and comfort to totalitarian regimes. In the end, we are shocked that philosophers are as thoughtless as the rest of us.

While the stance that philosophy is a way of life is usually associated with antiquity, this view remained alive and well during the Enlightenment. During the eighteenth century this view was, in a sense, resurrected as men and women came to expect great things of philosophers, with faith that they would make sense of our lives. Herein lies part of the tremendous appeal of Rousseau and Hume. The fascination that their lives, and not merely their thought, exercised on contemporaries carries across the centuries. We are historically bound and intellectually indebted to both men, and it may not be too naïve to believe that the unintended lessons of their work and lives, no less than the intended, still have something to teach us.

C H A P T E R T H R E E

The Great Scot

I am resolved to resist . . . any impulse towards writing, and I am really so much ashamed of myself when I see my bulk on a shelf, as well as when I see it in a glass, that I would fain prevent my growing more corpulent either way.

—*David Hume to David Mallet*

David Hume would have been well placed to warn Rousseau about Boswell's mixture of brazen innocence and disarming geniality. The two men had first met in 1757, when Boswell, scarcely seventeen and already driven by the desire to meet the great thinkers of his age, arrived unannounced at the philosopher's door near High Street in Edinburgh. Talking his way past Hume's protective servant, Peggy Irvine, Boswell penetrated into the philosopher's rooms. The portly host welcomed the young bouncer with such easygoing humor that Boswell later declared Hume to be "as affable a man I had ever met with."¹

Settled in Hume's library, the two men chatted on subjects ranging from

the nature of genius and styles of writing to the ways in which the ancients and moderns wrote history. What drew Boswell to the philosopher's door, however, was certainly less Hume's fame as the author of the popular *History of England* or the *Essays* than his infamy as a philosophical skeptic. Tormented by the terrors instilled by his Calvinist education, Boswell was perplexed by Hume's skepticism—another name, it seemed, for atheism. As in his later visits to Rousseau and Voltaire, foremost on the young Scot's mind in meeting Hume was the final disposition of his own soul. If they did speak of such matters, however, Boswell remained uncharacteristically silent in his journals. And yet he seems to refer to the subject by way of his pronounced silence about it: for after his visit, Boswell told himself that Hume was “a very proper person for a young man to cultivate an acquaintance with.”²

The propriety of Hume's acquaintance was not, however, conceded by all of Boswell's contemporaries. Or even his friends. Although Boswell eventually reconciled Dr. Johnson to his fellow Scots, whom he had long despised, there would always be one resounding exception: David Hume. The good doctor “holds Mr. Hume in abhorrence and left a company one night upon his coming in,” noted Boswell in a journal entry from 1762.³ Attracted by Hume's good cheer, Boswell was acutely aware of the dangerous possibilities of the great Scot's thought.

The son of a Lowlands barrister and gentleman who died in 1713 when his child was barely two, David Hume entered the world “uncommonly wake-minded.” While it was his beloved mother, Katherine Hume, who provided this testimony to young Davey's prodigious ways, her observation is certainly of a piece with her son's later career. As soon as he mastered reading, the boy was “seized” by the same passion for literature that had captured Rousseau, his junior by a year. His “ruling passion” was so great that, when packed off at the age of eleven to study law at the University of Edinburgh, he instead spent all of his time “secretly devouring” Cicero and Virgil.⁴

When he returned to the family estate of Ninewells in 1726, Hume had left the university with neither a law degree nor his Christian belief. The siren responsible for his spiritual deflowering was Calliope—the muse of philosophy. Once having read John Locke's study of the nature and limits of human understanding, Hume later told Boswell, he could never again follow any religion.⁵ Having painlessly shed the gloomy Calvinism of his childhood, what the young man could not so easily shake were the disquieting effects of philosophy itself.

Resettled at home, the precocious fifteen-year-old declared his independence. He disdained his late father's career: the study of law appeared “nauseous” to him. Instead, he shut himself in the family library, where he read at his plea-

sure, “sometimes a philosopher, sometimes a poet.” Being the second son of a genteel family who could expect only a meager income, Hume claimed that such a course of study made eminent sense, for both philosophers and poets seek “peace of mind, in a liberty and independency on fortune, and contempt of riches, power and glory.”⁶

Yet peace of mind was the last thing Hume found. Like Rousseau on the road to Vincennes, Hume had a philosophical rapture of sorts, in his case when he was scarcely eighteen. He compared this glimpse of a “new scene of thought” with the experiences of those French mystics whose “rapturous admirations might discompose the fabric of the nerves and brain.” This vision, he said, “transported me beyond measure, and made me, with an ardor natural to young men, throw up every other pleasure or business to apply entirely to it.” The congenial youth plunged into a nearly monastic life of study in order to explore this vista of ideas. In his self-imposed isolation Hume ushered in a nervous depression. He was soon unable “to follow any train of thought, by one continued stretch of view,” while his energy “seemed in a moment to be extinguished.” Once confident and easygoing, he had become, he said, “very uneasy to myself.” Despite the different regimens prescribed by doctors—from infusions of claret and bitters to long horse rides—Hume remained weakened for the next few years by what one specialist diagnosed as the “Disease of the Learned.” He eventually found salvation not in medical quackery but in the exercise of his own reason. More precisely—and paradoxically—Hume concluded, reason alone could not pull him out of this philosophical bog. His fragile emotional health, he realized, resulted from exclusive devotion to work and idleness. It stood to reason that reason was not enough. He concluded that he had “to seek out a more active life” that would banish the melancholy disposition into which he had fallen.⁷

Hume soon “roused” himself up. He blithely noted in “My Own Life” shortly before he died that his health had been, during this period, “a little broken.”⁸ Unlike Rousseau, Hume was far from prolix about his own mental and personal history, as evidenced by the contrast between the sheer length of Rousseau’s *Confessions* and other autobiographical writings (more than one thousand tight pages in the standard French edition of his works) and Hume’s “My Own Life” (a mere seven or eight pages). As a consequence, we have less direct evidence about the effects of Hume’s early crisis and, in general, about Hume’s internal and external life than we do for Rousseau. Hume’s great struggle appears to have left few marks apart from a thoroughly changed physiognomy. From a lanky youth of six foot, Hume changed into a robust man whose great appetite created an equally great belly that he carried for the rest of his life and which, he joked, could not, like gray hair, be “disguised with powder and pomation.”⁹ An-

other scar perhaps left by the disease of the learned was a vacant stare that unnerved friends and strangers alike, and which was to play so unfortunate a role in the collapse of his friendship with Rousseau. Still, although Hume's account of his depression suggests that the experience had left him with no more than a vast gut and a blank gaze, uneasiness over the finality of the cure runs like an underground stream through his philosophy.

Shortly before his death, Hume still recalled the dangers of a life devoted exclusively to intensive and solitary study. "Relaxation for amusement you may use (or not) as you fancy," he warned his young nephew David Home in 1775, "but that for health is absolutely necessary." To Hume's taste there was no better place for such relaxation, for health or not, than France. The modern French, like the ancient Athenians, had mastered all the arts and sciences, Hume pronounced in one of his essays, but they had also "perfected that art, the most useful and agreeable of any, *l'Art de Vivre*, the art of society and conversation."¹⁰ In 1734 France welcomed the young philosopher, scarcely recovered from his depression and determined to combine amusement with work.

Crossing the Channel, Hume went straight to Paris, where he called on family and friends. Short of money and durable connections, however, he was forced to reverse the usual path of worldly and ambitious pilgrims by quitting the capital for the provinces. A year's stay in Rheims in the heart of the Champagne region helped him polish his French, but finding even that provincial city too expensive, Hume next moved to La Flèche, a town in the Loire Valley. His choice was not arbitrary. A sleepy backwater, the town did not tax his lean purse. Equally important, La Flèche was home to a Jesuit college whose library admirably served Hume's purposes. Over the college hovered the spirit of its most famous graduate, René Descartes, who had left the school more than a century earlier, resolved to throw off the useless learning he had acquired there through the unorthodox method of locking himself up in a warm room, only to emerge with the Archimedean point of modern philosophy: "I think, therefore I am." For the next two years, Hume made his life in this small town nestled in the heart of vineyards, where he read, wrote, and occasionally chatted with the locals and the Jesuit fathers. All in all, it was an idyll that contained little drama or adventure but was the setting for the composition of one of the most unsettling works in the history of Western thought, the *Treatise of Human Nature*.

Like Rousseau's writings, which embraced the scientific approach and critical spirit of modern philosophy only then to turn them back against philosophy and its fruits, Hume's *Treatise* reflects the enlightened spirit of the principles of science yet veers in directions that seemed perverse to the faithful in the congre-

gation of philosophers, as well as subversive to the faithful in the choir of the religious.

On the one hand, Hume's book reflects the confident spirit of the Enlightenment. In the introduction he rehearses the usual modern philosophic tropes: he finds the foundation of existing philosophic systems "weak"; he complains of the "present imperfect condition of the sciences"; instead of progress in learning, disputes reign among the learned. Then, like Descartes, Locke, and others before him, Hume resolves to put science on a firmer footing by acquainting us with the "extent and force of human understanding." By taking careful inventory of our minds and reviewing the list of ideas delivered by experience, we will be able to make progress precisely because we will understand the sources and—no less important—the limits of human understanding. Paradoxically, by recognizing the limits of human understanding the horizon for the advancement of knowledge will be limitless. "Here then is the only expedient, from which we can hope for success in our philosophical researches," he explains at the outset of the *Treatise*: "to leave the tedious lingering method, which we have hitherto followed, and instead of taking now and then a castle or village on the frontier, to march up directly to the capital or center of these sciences, to human nature itself; which being once masters of, we may every where else hope for an easy victory."¹¹ Flush from his anticipated victory, Hume says he will prosecute the war by turning his sights and his method of "experimental philosophy" to moral and political subjects. His ambition is nothing less than to be the Newton of the mental and moral universe.

Hume's march on the capital of the sciences, however, resulted in a conquest that may have seemed more like a Pyrrhic victory to his fellow warriors in the cause of Enlightenment. After he had successfully stormed the citadel of human nature, Hume's readers discovered what had so unsettled the young philosopher. Far from finding the commanding force of reason, they instead discovered that reason was severely constrained in its power. What we thought we understood about the world through reason turned out to be illusory. More unsettling still, what we thought we understood about ourselves, our very "selves," was wrong.

Hume illustrated these disturbing conclusions by considering a parlor game. "Here is a billiard-ball lying on a table," he announces, "and another ball moving towards it with rapidity. They strike; and the ball, which was formerly at rest, now acquires a motion. This is as perfect an instance of the relation of cause and effect as any which we know, either by sensation or reflection. Let us therefore examine it."¹²

This commonplace example of the predictable motion of billiard balls then

swerves in an uncommon direction. No matter how far we lean over the table, how closely or carefully we fix our eyes on the balls, we will not have the “impression” of cause. Following Locke’s empiricism, which holds that all knowledge derives from sense experience, Hume leads us into an impasse that his predecessor seems to have overlooked. There is nothing, he observes, in the sensory world that constitutes the cause of the moving billiard balls. We never have the “impression” of a cause for the good reason that cause is not material. We never see, hear, or touch a cause; instead, we have only a series of contingent impressions. Hume asks us to break the images of billiard balls flitting before our eyes into a succession of separate frames, like the figures a child draws in the edges of his notebook before flipping the pages to entertain himself with this crude animation. On the first page, we see one ball moving toward a second ball; on the second, the moment of contact; and on the third, the second ball moving in turn. Yet nowhere on any of these pages, and certainly not in the space between them, is there a “sensible interval.” No matter how much we ruffle the pages or hold them to the light, cause is absent—and there is no point in seeking it.

If cause is not to be found in the sensible world, why do we speak about it as if it *did* exist? Hume replies that experience is, well, the *cause* of our unfounded but essential belief in cause. Every causal act carries the idea of contiguity—namely, a temporal link between two events that seem invariably to follow one another. Experience tells us that when struck by a moving billiard ball, the second ball will move at a certain speed and in a particular direction: “After the discovery of the constant conjunction of any two or more objects, we always draw an inference from one object to another.” Hume concludes that our abiding faith in cause and effect is not shaped by reason; rather, it arises from an all too human source: habit. The imperative of the laws of nature, of supposedly necessary connections like cause and effect, “exists in the mind, not in objects.”¹³ Without the unthinking habit into which experience tricks us, we could not function in the world. Having reduced the moving picture of our experience into the separate frames of which it is composed, and realized that one image does not necessarily lead to the next, we nevertheless have no choice but to flip the pages and watch the show.

“Tis in vain to rack ourselves with *farther* thought and reflection,” Hume advises us with the assurance of someone who has been to the edge of the abyss and back: “We can go no *farther* in considering this particular subject.”¹⁴ Yet he does go farther, underscoring the fine mess in which reason finds itself with regard to the very object we thought we understood best: ourselves. The difficulty in the admonition inscribed on the Temple of Delphi, embraced by philosophers ever since Socrates, had always seemed to reside in the subject’s arduous task of

self-knowledge, not in first locating the self. “Know thyself”? Well, if I do not yet know *who* I am, I at least know *that* I am, standing somewhere in there, minding the operations of my mind. Yet Hume questions the very assumption that there is a “self” to know.

Hume’s skeptical analysis does not lead to the destination we recognize as our own selves, but instead ushers us into a hall of mirrors from which there is no exit. “For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception.” To insist that we can glimpse our selves in the buff, stripped of particular perceptions or emotions, is as nonsensical as asking our shadows to stand still while we step back better to observe them. Hume’s world reveals that everything we thought to be solid and constant in regard to ourselves constitutes little more than evanescent stages with phony characters. Indeed, Hume compares the mind to a kind of theater “where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations.”¹⁵

Just who or what is viewing this ghostly Kabuki play is a question Hume does not address. Instead, he invokes his earlier answer to the conundrum of causation: our mind, not nature, assures the continuity of our selves. Thanks to the resemblance of various experiences in our lives, we come to believe in the existence of a single mind and a unified self. Identity is little more than a “quality” that we attach to sundry perceptions “because of the union of their ideas in the imagination, when we reflect upon them.”¹⁶ Yet this union no more exists in the external and objective world than does causation. Both are happy conceits of human nature.

Such, then, was the “new scene of thought” that had appeared in the theater of Hume’s young mind, both elevating his ambition and plunging him into depression. While Hume’s radical skepticism would eventually unsettle academic and religious establishments, for the moment it disturbed only its young practitioner. This unease pervades the passage at the end of book one of the *Treatise*, where Hume contemplates the wreckage he has wrought of our everyday assumptions. “This sudden view of my danger strikes me with melancholy; and as ’tis usual for that passion, above all others, to indulge itself, I cannot forbear feeding my despair with all the desponding reflections, which the present subject furnishes me with in such abundance.” Tinged with personal confession, Hume’s description of the isolation of melancholy is also evocative of his analysis three decades later of what he saw as the philosophical delirium into which Rousseau’s own reflections on the self—and himself—had led him: “I am first affrighted and confounded with that forlorn solitude, in which I am placed in my

philosophy, and fancy myself some strange uncouth monster, who not being able to mingle and unite in society, has been expelled [from] all human commerce, and left utterly abandoned and disconsolate.”¹⁷

If Hume flirted with the potentially debilitating introspection more characteristic of Rousseau, and if he anticipated the Romantic sensibility more usually associated with his future friend, he nonetheless steps back from the precipice to which reason has led him. And his cure for this philosophical melancholy is as stunning as the unexpected cause of the disease, in part owing to its faux-naïveté. Although reason cannot dispel the clouds of skeptical doubt, nature can and nature does. “Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium.” With a shrug of his great shoulders, Hume abandons his unsettling reflections: “I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours’ amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.”¹⁸

Reason thus is not made the handmaiden to faith, according to the medieval scholastics, nor does it become faith’s master, as affirmed the philosophes. Instead, it is made subservient to nature. And faithful to his analysis, Hume does what nature demands. He leaves the dark theater whose images move in strobelit procession, rubs his eyes to accustom them to the daylight, and steps into everyday life. What Nietzsche later said of the Greeks applies to Hume: he is superficial because of his profundity.

Massive manuscript in hand, Hume bade farewell to France in the summer of 1737 and left for London. After a difficult search that lasted a year, he finally engaged a publisher, and his work appeared in February 1739. After presenting copies to his London friends, he headed northward to a home he had not seen in five years to await his anticipated fame.

*“Never literary attempt was more unfortunate. . . . It fell dead-born from the press, without reaching such distinction, as even to excite a murmur among the zealots.”*¹⁹ Such, according to Hume, was the welcome given to his *Treatise*. Rarely in the history of philosophy has so seminal a work been so indifferently welcomed. The general silence that greeted the *Treatise*’s publication taught Hume the limits of philosophical indifference: “How happens it that we philosophers cannot as heartily despise the world as it despises us?”²⁰

Yet he persevered. Perhaps recalling his own remark in the beginning of the *Treatise* that philosophical works were written in language too “abstruse” for most readers, the young philosopher concluded that his book’s failure “had pro-

ceeded more from the manner than the matter.”²¹ How could he not have such suspicions when even his friend and elder cousin, the jurist and philosopher Lord Kames, accepted Hume’s *Treatise* with trepidation: “I’ll do any thing to oblige you. But you must sit by and try to beat your book into my head.”²² A decade later, Hume would recast the philosophy of the *Treatise* into the more accessible *Enquiries*, but in preparation for that task the ambitious young man reassessed the strategy he employed for satisfying his yearning for literary fame.

Hume’s literary success came from refashioning his own role as an author. Rather than struggling to explain the admittedly abstruse conclusions of his reasoning to an abstract and unknown audience, Hume began by thinking of the reader himself. Or herself. Intent on gently bringing both gentlemen and gentlewomen to philosophy, Hume adopted a more popular style for his thought. In a fashion, then, Hume anticipated Rousseau’s own decision to write a novel, but whereas the author of *Julie* hoped to inspire his readers to resist the corruptions of the city and citified philosophy, the future diplomat conceived his new authorial role as a kind of ambassadorship from the realm of philosophy to a wide readership.

Hume’s self-appointment as emissary between the “learned” and the “conversable” worlds was announced in his *Essays, Moral and Political*, the first installment of which appeared in 1741. “I cannot but consider myself as a kind of resident or ambassador from the dominions of learning to those of conversation,” he explained, “and shall think it my constant duty to promote a good correspondence betwixt these two states, which have so great a dependence upon each other.” The division of the world between these two parts has been a great defect of the age, Hume complained. Without recourse to the literary, historical, and philosophical subjects explored in the world of learning, what is left for residents of the world of conversation but trifling subjects? On the other hand, the world of learning has suffered “by being shut up in colleges and cells, and secluded from the world and good company. . . . Even philosophy went to wrack by this moping recluse method of study.” Here we see traces of Hume’s own experience as a youth. Philosophy, he declared, must seek out the experience to be found in common life and conversation.²³

Hume’s ambassadorial communications took the form of essays. Originated in the late sixteenth century by Michel de Montaigne, imported to Great Britain and adapted by Francis Bacon, then popularized by Addison and Steele in the early eighteenth century, the essay allowed its practitioner to sketch a subject, developing his thoughts in a seemingly casual and even conversational manner. This proved an ideal medium for Hume. He was soon writing on a wide array of subjects, ranging from politics and economics to love and marriage, supplying the drawing rooms and clubs of Britain with a steady stream of talking points for

thoughtful conversation. Commencing his ambassadorship with fifteen essays in the first edition of 1741, Hume nearly doubled his offerings in the next edition, published the following year, and then added as many again in 1752. By midcentury he had written a sufficient number of essays to fill three volumes.

The essays allowed Hume to pursue by other means his war against the philosophical assumptions of his age. Rather than treating philosophy as an abstract system of thought, he embraced the classical notion of philosophy as a way of life. Thus in a remarkable four essay series on the various philosophical approaches he himself had surveyed in his youth—"The Epicurean," "The Stoic," "The Platonist," and, finally, "The Sceptic"—Hume explained how these philosophical schools represent different human character types who are drawn to the competing philosophies as ways of life no less than as ways of thought. While showing sympathy for each of the sects insofar as they appeal to the various facets of our nature, Hume gives the last word to the "Sceptic." Yet the last word is hardly simple. Instead, it sounds a note of caution about the reach of skepticism, an admonition born of Hume's own painful experience with the caustic effects of doubt. "The empire of philosophy extends over a few; and with regard to these too, her authority is very weak and limited." While philosophy is ever eager to force life to obey its dictates, it must instead be made to serve life. "To reduce life to exact rule and method, is commonly a painful, oft a fruitless occupation: And is it not also a proof, that we overvalue the prize for which we contend?"²⁴ The wise no less than the ignorant are at the mercy of human nature.

Hume brought the same commonsensical tone to essays on political subjects. Politics can indeed be a science, he declared, but it is an incremental and modest science founded upon the hard-earned historical experience with politics, ever cognizant of the inevitably flawed and nicked timber of humanity. The "first principles" of government are neither the social contracts nor abstract ideas brewed in the philosopher's kitchen but rather the practical staples of everyday life: opinion and self-interest. Of course, opinions can be fanciful and self-interest is often myopic, but proper political institutions and enlightened statesmanship can educate opinion and extend the view of interest. "Men must, therefore, endeavor to palliate what they cannot cure," Hume counseled, and they must be led "to consult their own real and permanent interests" by making them see the long-term benefits of obeying law and doing justice.²⁵

While skeptical of reason's reach in politics no less than in philosophy, Hume championed the progress in the sciences and arts that Rousseau condemned. Indeed, the essayist may have had the Citizen of Geneva's *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* in mind when he wrote "Of Refinement in the Arts," which he included in the 1752 edition of the *Essays*, published a year after the appearance

of the discourse that made Rousseau famous.²⁶ While Rousseau wrung his hands over the enervating effect of the arts on our minds and bodies and feared the incompatibility of liberty and the arts, Hume was reassured by the march of human ingenuity. Evidence abounds that industry and art are good not just for our physical and moral constitutions but also for freedom: such activities, history reveals, most often create free government. As a result, while the false “civility” of the cities appalled Rousseau, it cheered Hume. “The more these refined arts advance, the more sociable men become.” Aware of the dangers posed by excessive luxury, Hume nonetheless clung to stubborn moderation against drastic responses. Spartan cures are much worse than the Athenian disease. Far better luxury when accompanied by industry than the sloth that reigns among uncultivated individuals and societies. The true statesman must take men as they are, not as they ought to be: “He cannot cure every vice by substituting virtue in its place. Very often he can only cure one vice by another.”²⁷ These sentiments, heir to Mandeville’s infamous claim that private vice makes public benefit, and ancestor to Madison’s argument in the *Federalist* that “ambition must be made to counteract ambition” in a properly balanced political machine, are far from Rousseau’s nostalgic account of an ancient world rich in selfless virtue.

In the *Essays* and his other writings, Hume reveals himself to be skeptical of the prodigies of human nature to which Rousseau appealed as evidence for the puny soul of modern man, the “bourgeois.” For Rousseau, history demonstrates how much we have changed, to the point that we no longer believe the stories of virtuous and great-souled men of ancient times. “Base souls do not believe in great men,” he would admonish the incredulous reader of the *Social Contract*.²⁸ Indeed, Hume viewed such stories with just that skeptical attitude. “It is universally acknowledged that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations,” Hume maintains, suggesting that this human understanding got by experience serves a critical purpose. “Should a traveler, returning from a far country, bring us an account of men, wholly different from any with whom we were acquainted; men who were entirely divested of avarice, ambition, or revenge; who knew no pleasure but friendship, generosity, and public spirit; we should immediately, from these circumstances, detect the falsehood, and prove him a liar, with the same certainty as if he had stuffed his narration with stories of centaurs and dragons, miracles and prodigies.”²⁹

What must Hume have thought, then, a few years after he had made this claim, of Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality*, with its description of human nature through a portrait of a solitary man living in the state of nature, without speech or reason, curiosity or pride? While Hume left no record of his specific impression of Rousseau’s *Discourse*, we can safely assume that, for him, it shared

the “extravagance” of his future friend’s work as a whole. For Hume, Rousseau’s solitary and natural man and selfless citizen are chimerical beings, belied by historical testimony. For Rousseau, Hume is guilty of the same sin he alleges against all previous philosophers: they have falsely assumed that human nature does not change, and have failed to look beneath the artificial accretions of society. In short, for Rousseau, the philosophers “spoke about savage man and they described civil man.”³⁰ Hume, of course, was happy to be just such a civil man.

In 1751, with the success of the *Essays* having guaranteed Hume’s fame and financial security, he moved from the family estate at Ninewells to Edinburgh. Tellingly, in moving from country to town, Hume reversed Rousseau’s own course of a few years later, when, in the face of his own success, he repaired from Paris to the relative isolation of the country. For Hume, as for Rousseau’s perplexed friends, a city such as Edinburgh was “the true scene for a man of letters.”³¹

Edinburgh had not always been so true a scene. The Scottish capital and university town had been transformed over the first half of the eighteenth century from a sleepy and dank backwater into a lively—though still dank—intellectual center, the home of what came to be called the Scottish Enlightenment. Although the third-largest city of Britain, after London and Bristol, boasting a population of more than fifty thousand, the renaissance of the northern outpost was an unlikely success story. Bolted to England by the 1707 Act of Union and ridden roughshod by an inquisitorial Presbyterian Church, known as the Kirk, Scotland seemed bound for historical irrelevance. Yet a combination of industrious Glaswegian merchants and ambitious intellectuals gave the country a new vitality. Strong-willed and independent-minded men like the philosophers Francis Hutcheson and Lord Kames created a liberal and innovative intellectual climate in which the likes of David Hume, Thomas Reid, Adam Ferguson, and Adam Smith were able to breathe and flourish.

Clubs and societies provided an important structure for this burgeoning class of intellectuals, and the easily sociable Hume took full advantage of the attractions afforded by the city.* He was an assiduous attendee of the Poker Club, which assembled every Friday at Fortune’s Tavern, where Hume shared his final political views and sipped his last cup of wine just eight months before his death. Another club, of shorter pedigree but greater note, was the Select Society. Founded in 1754 by Hume’s friend the portraitist Allan Ramsay, who was to play an unanticipated role in the fall of Hume’s friendship with Rousseau, the Select’s

*Paradoxically, because the sociable Hume spent so much time with his wide circle of friends, especially after he moved to Edinburgh, we have far fewer letters and other materials by which to trace his life than we do for Rousseau, who maintained a voluminous correspondence from his various places of solitude and exile.

fame grew as quickly as did the list of those waiting to join the original fifteen members. Indeed, the Select was a victim of its own success, swelling to more than a hundred members before it was disbanded in 1763, the same year Hume left Edinburgh for Paris. “Young and old, noble and ignoble, witty and dull, laity and clergy . . . are ambitious of a place amongst us,” Hume proudly observed to Ramsay in 1755, shortly after the society’s founding. The club had grown to be a matter of “national concern,” he added, pronouncing that “the House of Commons was less the object of general curiosity at London than the Select Society at Edinburgh”³²

Hume was right to crow: rarely have so many remarkable minds sat together on so regular a basis (every Wednesday) in so dim a space (the university’s Advocates’ Library). Joining Hume at the weekly meetings was his elder cousin, the overbearing Lord Kames, as well as a younger cousin, the nationalist poet and dramatist John Home, with whom Hume carried on a lifelong debate over the correct spelling of their common last name. (Hume had the last word by stipulating in his will that Home could receive his bequeathed case of claret only if he signed his name with a *u*.) Also in attendance were a group of philosophers who would come to be seen as luminaries in the Scottish Enlightenment inspired in part by Hume, including Lord Monboddo, Adam Ferguson, and, closest to Hume, Adam Smith, who commuted from Glasgow, having moved there in the early 1750s to take the chair of moral philosophy.

In addition to discussing such subjects as morals, jurisprudence, political economy, and other topics of philosophical import, the members must have first debated Rousseau’s ideas, which were then gaining prominence. For example, the eccentric Lord Monboddo had written a six-volume work on the origins of language, the argument of which in certain respects paralleled Rousseau’s own paradoxical position on the subject. After hearing Dr. Johnson ridicule Monboddo’s theories and asking whether Rousseau, too, did not “talk such nonsense,” Boswell received a characteristically lapidary pronouncement: “True, Sir, but Rousseau *knows* he is talking nonsense, and laughs at the world for staring at him. . . . But I am *afraid*, (chuckling and laughing), Monboddo does *not* know he is talking nonsense.”³³ As for Hume, while he dismissed his fellow Scot’s work, he appreciated the “diverting oddities” of the jurist’s behavior at the meetings.³⁴ Likewise, the young Adam Ferguson wrote the popular and vaguely Rousseauian *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, published in 1767, shortly after Hume’s quarrel with Rousseau and against his advice. Finally, almost twenty years before he published *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith first came to prominence as the author of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, published in 1759. Smith’s theory joined an analysis of human nature that drew largely on Hume with an account of sympathy that is as much indebted to Hume’s hints on the

subject as it is, arguably, decisively influenced by Rousseau. Smith's own appreciation of Rousseau's thought is indicated by the fact that he was among the first and most sympathetic reviewers of the *Discourse on Inequality*, publishing an account of the Genevan's work in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1756. For all his appreciation for Rousseau's critique of society (witness his discussion in book five of *The Wealth of Nations* of how to ameliorate the debasing characteristics of the division of labor), Smith joined Hume in seeing in the division of the self the root of morality and civil society, and the spur to progress, while Rousseau lamented it as our fall from paradise.³⁵

At the same time that Rousseau was plunging into the woods to examine the foundations of society through a hypothetical history of the human species, Hume was for much the same reasons immersing himself in the much more mundane task of archival research for his own history. Hume's new literary ambition happily coincided with his appointment, in 1752, as Keeper of the Advocates' Library at the University of Edinburgh. A "genteel office, though of small revenue," the position was significant for its access to a collection of more than thirty thousand volumes.³⁶ Such access was invaluable in a time before the opening of the British Museum, when important historical documents were in private collections.

Hume's *History of England* secured the foothold on fame he gained with the *Essays*. It also secured his fortune: he earned some £3,200 for the work in an age when a man could consider himself well-to-do on £80 per year.³⁷ Hume began at the end of his story, with the first volume, published in 1754, covering the reign of the first Stuarts and climaxing with the "tragic death" of Charles. The judicious tone of Hume's analysis was initially greeted with an uncertain reception in a political climate still charged with clashes between Whigs and Tories, each with their own partisan reading of the events the historian related. "I was, I own, sanguine in my expectations of the success of this work. I thought that I was the only historian, that had at once neglected present power, interest, and authority, and the cry of popular prejudices; and as the subject was suited to every capacity, I expected proportional applause," Hume later wrote; "But miserable was my disappointment: I was assailed by one cry of reproach, disapprobation, and even detestation; English, Scotch, and Irish, Whig and Tory, churchman and sectary, freethinker and religionist, patriot and courtier, united in their rage against the man, who had presumed to shed a generous tear for the fate of Charles I."³⁸ Over the next eight years, Hume made his way more or less backward through history. He completed his task in 1762, ending with the invasion of Julius Caesar and thus realizing the incredible feat of sixteen hundred years of history written in less than a decade.

As a historian, Hume offered the same ambassadorial services he had earlier provided in the *Essays*. He described this role in an essay “Of the Study of History,” where he addressed a female readership: “There is nothing which I would recommend more earnestly to my female readers than the study of history, as an occupation, of all others, the best suited both to their sex and education, much more instructive than their ordinary books of amusement.” The paternalistic tone of this essay, which he eliminated from subsequent editions, obscures a critical point: historical perspective not only readjusts a woman’s understanding of public affairs but does so for men as well. As for the ancient Roman historians Tacitus and Sallust, history writing was a tool for cultivating virtue by strengthening the reader’s desire to excel among his peers. Historians were “the true friends of virtue.”³⁹ Unlike novelists, metaphysicians, or priests, historians were rooted in the world of experience, training themselves and their readers to distinguish between the credible and incredible, the probable and improbable. Invention and fancy—the siren calls of extravagance—were thus resisted.

Hume aimed his work at the same middle-class readership that fed on Richardson’s novels as well as Rousseau’s six-part *Julie*, which was published as Hume’s six-volume history neared completion.⁴⁰ Indeed, as many tears may have been shed over Hume’s rendering of Charles I’s final moments before his execution as over the (much longer) death of Rousseau’s Julie. For Hume the reasons were clear: “I did indeed endeavor to paint the King’s catastrophe (which was singular and dismal) in as pathetic a manner as I could; and to engage me, needed I any other motive, than my interest as a writer, who desires to please and interest his readers?”⁴¹ And there is evidence that Hume’s higher goal as a professor of virtue also was met on occasion. Louis XVI reread the passage on Charles’s death on the eve of his own singular and dismal beheading by the French revolutionaries.⁴² Perhaps Hume’s account contributed to the fortitude with which Louis met his end. And James Boswell, a less resolute apprentice in virtue, reported to his journal in 1763 that he had spent the day reading the *History*, which, he wrote, “enlarged my views, filled me with great ideas, and rendered me happy.”⁴³

Despite having finally fully attained the literary fame he longed for, Hume was growing unhappy in Edinburgh. Despite its reputation for being a “new Athens” of the North, Edinburgh still revealed the influence of its more Spartan past in the form of determined Presbyterians, known as the High-Flyers, who continued to preach hellfire and brimstone. This group of stern men, spiritual kin of Rousseau’s Calvinist persecutors in Geneva, was convinced that the good people of Edinburgh were the “Heirs of Wrath.” Looking with suspicion at the capital

from their rural Lowland and remote Highland parishes, the High-Flyers detected worrisome implications for morality and religion in the new philosophy invading their native shores.

A number of Hume's friends and members of the Select were themselves ordained in the Church of Scotland. Several of them, including the philosopher's cousin John Home, were ordained ministers who pursued secular careers, while Hume's good friend the literary scholar Hugh Blair won renown through the sermons he delivered from the pulpit of the High Church at Saint Giles, Edinburgh's largest and most prestigious church. Yet they were moderates who were convinced that reason and faith could coexist. At least to a point. The liberty to discuss any topic at the Select Society admitted two exceptions: subjects that "regarded revealed religion or which might give occasion to vent any principles of Jacobitism."⁴⁴ These urbane ministers nonetheless did not represent the silent Scotland, still attached to the harsh and unbending ways of the traditional Kirk. These were the faithful descendants of the Edinburgh officials who, scarcely fifty years before, had sentenced to death Thomas Aikenhead, an eighteen-year-old student accused of blasphemous remarks against the Christian faith. While the youth's body, strung up at "Galowlee betwixt Leith and Edinburgh," no longer cast as long and chilling a shadow on the city's denizens as it had at the turn of the century, the war between faith and reason had not yet ended.⁴⁵

David Hume's writings proved to be one battlefield on which this war was waged. The clergy's running skirmishes with the philosopher had erupted into outright hostilities when Hume, in 1748, published *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. A substantial reworking of the first part of the *Treatise*, which he said corrected "some negligences in his former reasoning and more in the expression,"⁴⁶ the *Enquiry* contained material Hume had prudently omitted from the earlier work. The suspicion of the faithful about the philosopher's sins of omission in the *Treatise* were therefore confirmed by the sin of commission with the inclusion of the chapter "On Miracles."

In his discussion of miracles, Hume made the simple claim there that we must always give greater weight to any event that seems the lesser miracle: "One should only believe in an improbable event if the alternative was to believe in an even less probable event."⁴⁷ History shows that claims on behalf of miracles—spurred as they were by superstition, desire, peer pressure, ignorance, or hypocrisy—have always been less probable than the basis for rejecting those claims. "Where a supposition is so contrary to common sense, any positive evidence of it ought never be regarded," Hume told his fellow doubter Edward Gibbon: "Men run with great avidity to give their evidence in favor of what flatters their passions, and their national prejudices."⁴⁸

Intent on preventing “demented men from doing harm to others,” the High-Flyers went on the offensive, eventually attempting to pass a resolution before the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland demanding that the church condemn with “the utmost abhorrence . . . those impious and infidel principles which are subversive of all religion natural and revealed and have such pernicious influence on life and morals.”⁴⁹ Though not named, Hume was clearly the demented infidel most on their minds. As he wrote in a jocular though uneasy tone to Ramsay: “They did not propose to burn me, because they cannot. But they intend to give me over to Satan, which they think they have the power of doing.”⁵⁰ They had, however, demonstrated the power to frustrate Hume’s candidacy for a chair in ethics at the University of Edinburgh in 1744, and once again checked him in 1752 when his name was put forward to replace Adam Smith as he vacated his chair at Glasgow. “I should prefer David Hume to any man for a colleague,” wrote Smith, “but I am afraid the public would not be of my opinion.”⁵¹

The philosopher’s antagonists—whose leader, the Reverend George Anderson, Hume referred to as the “godly, spiteful, pious, splenetic, charitable, unrelenting, meek, persecuting, Christian, inhuman, peace-making, furious Anderson”—were outnumbered by friends and admirers. Yet the dogged persistence of religious controversy had leached even into Hume’s friendships with moderates like Hugh Blair. Their disputes left Hume so “tired” and Blair so “angry” that the two friends agreed never again to discuss religion.⁵² The habitual gloom of Edinburgh began to descend like the fog over Hume, made uneasy by a growing sense of inner exile.

Hume’s professional woes chafed his deepening ambivalence: he was uncertain whether he had reached a crossroads or quite simply the end of the road.

By the early 1760s his writings enjoyed an audience exceeded in size only by Rousseau’s, and Boswell was justified in claiming that Hume was “Britain’s greatest writer.”⁵³ Yet having attained the summit, where does one next go? Not only were his great philosophical works behind him, but so too were the popular essays and historical writings. Even those works not yet in print—like the corrosive *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which Smith and his other friends prevailed upon him to keep to himself until his death—had already been written. With a self-deprecating touch, he told his old Scottish acquaintance David Mallet that he was “resolved to resist, as a temptation of the devil, any impulse towards writing, and I am really so much ashamed of myself when I see my bulk on a shelf, as well as when I see it in a glass, that I would fain prevent my growing more corpulent either way.”⁵⁴

Hume was certainly sincere in his claim that he had reached the end of his

writing life, but his bantering tone failed to disguise a deeper ambivalence. Alarming, the mist of melancholy—the paralyzing “cloud” he first knew as a youth—seemed to be gathering again on the horizon. Unlike Rousseau, Hume had little appetite for self-analysis, or at least he did not involve those around him in the activity. Yet, tellingly, he confided to a friend that he was slipping toward “a total indifference towards everything in human life.”⁵⁵ To another correspondent he owned that he had become a “recluse and ascetic, who retains no ambition, who has lost his relish for pleasure.”⁵⁶ “I never had much ambition, I mean, for power and dignities; and I am heartily cured of the little I had,” he wrote his brother in early 1761: “I believe a fireside and a book, the best things in the world for my age and disposition.”⁵⁷ Claiming to be content, Hume was in actuality spent.

Hume was ready to move on, but where and to what end? “I have been accustomed to meet with nothing but insults and indignities from my native country,” he confided to his friend Gilbert Elliot in late March 1764. Then, with a mocking air of self-importance, Hume quoted the epitaph of the Roman general Scipio Africanus: *Ingrata patria, ne ossa quidem habebis*—“Ungrateful country, you will not even have my bones.”⁵⁸ Yet when he made this aside, Hume already knew that another country—the same country that had welcomed him at the end of his first, youthful bout of melancholy—was keen to have him, bones and all, in order to express its gratitude.