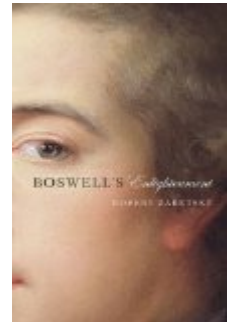




Robert Zaretsky. *Boswell's Enlightenment.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015. 288 pp. \$26.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-36823-1.



Reviewed by Richard Sher

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Commissioned by Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Red Deer College)

After the publication of his *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), James Boswell was, from a literary standpoint, a man without a project or a purpose. During the course of his fifty-odd years, he had contemplated writing literally dozens of works, but most were mere pipe dreams. Probably the only one with any real chance of being realized was an account of his days on the European continent as a young man in his early twenties, from the time he left his new friend Samuel Johnson in England in the summer of 1763, to study law in Utrecht, until his abrupt departure from Paris upon hearing the news of his mother's death in January 1766. After leaving Utrecht in May 1764, he was on the Grand Tour, through the German states, Switzerland, Italy, and France. Although in April 1778 Samuel Johnson discouraged him from writing a book about his continental travels on the grounds that he would have nothing new to say about Europe, Boswell protested that he could make his travel book entertaining, and he inserted a footnote in the *Life* affirming his intention to defy his mentor on this matter. Fif-

teen years later, he told a friend that his book of European travels was just months away from publication, and would be made delightful by its inclusion of anecdotes, letters, and conversations with the likes of Voltaire, Rousseau, and John Wilkes.

For various reasons, the projected book of European travels never appeared. In fact, there is no evidence that Boswell actually began writing it. What we have from that formative period are most of his correspondence, daily memoranda, and journal, where Boswell expressed his aspirations, confessed his sins, and recounted his adventures. This material forms the core of Robert Zaretsky's new book, which contends that "in his pursuit of Voltaire and Rousseau, Hume and Johnson, Paoli and Wilkes, Boswell was not merely a celebrity seeker--although he was that--but, for want of a better term, a truth seeker" (p. 15). The problem, as Zaretsky sees it, is that Boswell encountered different kinds of truths on his travels, and these differences bred uncertainty and anxiety. Underlying all else was fear of death, and be-

yond that of hell and damnation, with roots in his early religious upbringing at the hands of his evangelical mother. David Hume's skepticism gave these religious fears a philosophical twist, as the horrors of hell gave way to those of meaningless annihilation. The situation was further complicated by Boswell's biological and psychological make-up: his powerful sexual urges and his propensity to fall into deep and debilitating depression. Against this backdrop, Boswell's search for enlightenment was not a casual exercise in cultural sampling of the kind that the term "Grand Tour" typically brings to mind. Rather, it was a frantic quest for answers to life's most vexing questions. "Monsieur, will you assume direction of me?" Boswell asks Rousseau at the third of their five meetings at Môtiers (p. 157). It is probably safe to say that no other young British gentleman ever approached the Grand Tour with so much intensity and, at times, desperation.

In Robert Zaretsky's hands, emphasis is on the nature and significance of Boswell's encounters with a select number of individuals. There is a background chapter on young Boswell's relationship with Henry Home, Lord Kames, and one on his blossoming friendship with Samuel Johnson in London, stressing the centrality for both Boswell and Johnson of melancholia, religion, and their journals, as "the inner space where reason and faith wrestled over the meaning of death" (p. 85). The months in Utrecht are a low point for both Boswell and the book, partly because Boswell's journal from those days was lost at sea, and therefore relatively little is known about his Dutch experience, but also because Boswell seems to have been depressed for much of this period, and on relatively good behavior, reminding himself in his daily memoranda to be "*retenu*," (p. 98) or restrained and poised, and apparently taking his own advice much of the time. Yet we do know of one person who captivated Boswell in Utrecht: the fascinating Belle de Zuylen (Isabelle de Charrière), whose intelligence and free-thinking were more than the young Scot could handle; she

emerges as the only European woman who represented much more to him than a sexual conquest.

When Boswell visits Germany, he is disappointed in his efforts to meet Frederick the Great, whose combination of skepticism, despotism, and nation building signified a particular variation of Enlightenment. He must make do with two lesser lights: in Berlin Frederick's advisor, the Scot George Keith, Earl Marischal, and in Brunswick the court chaplain, Johann Friedrich Wilhelm Jerusalem, whom Zaretsky likens to "a Prussian Frances Hutcheson" (p. 134). In Potsdam he reads Thomas Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind*, and that refutation of Hume's skepticism on the basis of "common sense" brings him a lift and even, Zaretsky suggests, accounts for his sudden discovery of himself as a unique individual, writing to a friend with impressive resolve that "I must be Mr. Boswell of Auchinleck and no other" (quoted on p. 139). A more cynical interpretation would hold that this was just Boswell in his manic state of mind, rather than in the throes of a life-changing moment of self-realization grounded in philosophy. In the next chapter, Boswell encounters Rousseau and Voltaire, separately of course, as the two philosophers were then at war with one another. Early in *Boswell's Enlightenment* the story is told of the sixteen-year-old Boswell shouting from the top of Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh: "Voltaire, Rousseau, immortal names!" and this episode prepares the reader for the forcefulness with which he later pushes his way into the company of both men, sometimes violating the rules of polite etiquette in order to make them take note of him and field his endless barrage of questions about right conduct and belief. Celebrity seeking or truth seeking? Zaretsky is surely correct that with Boswell these are not mutually exclusive categories.

In Italy Boswell is drawn to the English libertine and radical John Wilkes and the French atheist Alexandre Deleyre, who show him yet another side of the Enlightenment. He contracts scurvy

and his first case of gonorrhoea since London, experiences bouts of depression (as always), and has an affair with the wife of the mayor of Siena. After failing dismally in his attempts to seduce several aristocratic women in Turin, he writes in his journal: “O Rousseau, how am I fallen since I was with thee!” (p. 186). Yet rather than continue his decline, Boswell discovers a way out of his misery and confusion. Under the spell of Rousseau, he commits himself to the cause of Corsican independence and locates a hero in the Corsicans’ leader, General Pasquale Paoli. His journey to the interior of Corsica not only starts his lifelong friendship with Paoli but also lays the foundation for his *Account of Corsica* (1768), which would bring him his first taste of literary fame. Boswell had continually been advised by his father and others to keep active during bouts of depression, and championing Corsican independence turns out to be the way that this very private goal could be achieved on the European tour, in a manner that also fit with Enlightenment principles such as liberty and justice.

Boswell’s Enlightenment is breezily written and therefore makes for easy reading, and the topic is good fun. But the book’s stylistic strengths also make for its main weaknesses. Is it helpful to give us sentences such as the following, in an attempt to explain Rousseau’s second discourse: “Humankind’s descent from that distant fire to Facebook was a question of millennia, not maybes” (p. 152)? More seriously, instead of developing its analysis in a rigorous manner, the book settles for an impressionistic approach, often relying on secondary sources and generally skimming the surface rather than exploring the interior. Topics on the European tour that are worthy of deeper probing, such as Boswell’s extraordinary encounter with Rousseau, are treated superficially. The last chapter of the book, on Boswell’s life after the European tour, reads like an afterthought, and I found myself wishing that, instead of dealing hastily with a few events from the period after his return to Britain in 1766 (his marriage

in 1769, his deathbed interview with Hume in 1776, his *Hypochondriack* series of magazine articles from 1777 to 1783), the author had addressed the broader significance of the European tour for understanding what Boswell was all about. In the end, like Boswell after his meeting with Voltaire at Ferney, one puts down *Boswell’s Enlightenment* wishing that more substance had been provided.

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