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JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

*Reveries of the  
Solitary Walker*

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*Translated with an Introduction and Notes by*  
RUSSELL GOULBOURNE

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

have been no more able to trouble my peace of mind with all their plotting than they are able to trouble it from now on with all their triumphs; let them enjoy my humiliation as much as they want, they will not stop me from enjoying my innocence and living the rest of my days in peace in spite of them.

## SECOND WALK

HAVING therefore decided that I would describe the habitual state of my soul in this, the strangest position in which any mortal can ever find himself, I could conceive of no simpler or surer way of carrying out my plan than by keeping a faithful record of my solitary walks and the reveries that fill them when I let my mind wander quite freely and my ideas follow their own course unhindered and untroubled. These hours of solitude and meditation are the only time of the day when I am completely myself, without distraction or hindrance, and when I can truly say that I am what nature intended me to be.

I soon felt that I had waited too long to carry out this plan. My imagination, already less vigorous than it once was, no longer bursts into flame in the way it used to upon contemplating the object that inspires it, and I become less intoxicated by the delirium of reverie; now there is more recollection than creation in what my imagination produces, an apathetic listlessness saps all my faculties, and the spirit of life is gradually dying within me; my soul now struggles to spring forward from its decrepit frame, and were it not for the hope I have of the state to which I aspire because I feel entitled to it, I would now exist only through memories. So, if I am to contemplate myself before my decline, I must go back at least a few years to the time when, losing all hope here on earth and finding no more sustenance left on earth for my heart, I gradually became used to feeding it with its own substance and seeking out its nourishment within me.

This practice, which I became aware of all too late, proved so fruitful that it was soon enough to compensate me for everything. The habit of turning in on myself eventually made me insensible to my suffering, and almost made me forget it altogether, and so I learnt through my own experience that the source of true happiness is within us and that it is not within men's ability to make anyone truly wretched who is determined to be happy. For four or five years I had regularly enjoyed the inner delights that loving and

gentle souls find in contemplation. These transports of delight and ecstasy which I sometimes experienced when walking on my own were pleasures which I owed to my persecutors: without them, I would never have discovered or known the treasures that I bore within me. Surrounded by such riches, how could one possibly keep a faithful record of them? I wanted to remember so many sweet reveries, but instead of describing them, I relived them. Remembering this state recreates it, and one would soon lose all knowledge of it if one were to cease feeling it altogether.

I experienced this during the walks I went on following my decision to write the sequel to my *Confessions*, in particular during the walk I am about to talk about, in the course of which an unexpected accident interrupted the flow of my ideas and sent them off, for a time, in a quite different direction.

After lunch on Thursday 24 October 1776, I went along the boulevards as far as the rue du Chemin vert,\* which I followed up to the heights of Ménilmontant, and from there, taking the paths across the vineyards and meadows, I crossed the delightful countryside that separates Ménilmontant from Charonne, and then I made a detour and came back across the same meadows but by a different path. I enjoyed walking through them, feeling the same pleasure and interest that agreeable landscapes have always given me, and stopping from time to time to look closely at some plants amidst the greenery. I noticed two which I saw quite rarely around Paris but which in this area I found to be growing very abundantly. The first is the *picris hieracioides* of the Compositae family,\* and the other the *bupleurum falcatum* of the Umbelliferae family.\* This discovery delighted and distracted me for a very long time, until I discovered a plant that is rarer still, particularly on high ground, called the *cerastium aquaticum*,\* which, in spite of the accident that happened to me later that day, I later found in a book I had been carrying with me and which I placed in my collection.\*

Finally, having examined in detail several other plants I saw which were still in flower and which, in spite of their familiarity, I still enjoyed looking at and cataloguing, I gradually gave up these minute observations in favour of the no less agreeable but more affecting impressions that the scene as a whole made upon me.

A few days earlier the last grapes had been harvested; the walkers from the city had already left; the peasants, too, were leaving the fields, not to return until their winter work began. The countryside, still green and radiant, though some of the leaves had fallen and it was already almost deserted, was the very image of solitude and the onset of winter. Its appearance stirred in me mixed emotions of pleasure and sadness which were too similar to my age and my fate for me not to make the comparison. I saw myself in the declining years of an innocent and hapless life, my soul still full of intense feelings and my mind still adorned with a few flowers, though these were already withered by sadness and dried out by care. Alone and abandoned, I could feel the coming chill of the first frosts, and my exhausted imagination no longer peopled my solitude with beings formed after my heart's desires. Sighing, I said to myself: What have I done in this world? I was made to live, and I am dying without having lived. At least I am not to blame, and I shall offer up to the author of my being, if not the good works that I have not been allowed to perform, then at least my tribute of frustrated good intentions, of fine feelings rendered ineffectual, and of a patience that withstood men's scorn. Touched by these reflections, I retraced the different movements of my soul during my youth, during my maturity, since I had been cut off from human society, and during the long isolation in which I am to end my days. I recalled with some fondness all my heart's affections, its attachments which had been so tender and yet so blind, and the ideas—more comforting than they were sad—which had nourished my mind for a number of years, and I prepared myself to remember them clearly enough to be able to describe them with a pleasure that was almost equal to the pleasure of experiencing them in the first place. My afternoon was spent in these untroubled meditations, and I was on my way home, very happy with my day, when in the midst of my reverie I was pulled up short by the event which I shall now recount.

At about six o'clock in the evening, I was walking down from Ménilmontant and was almost opposite the Galant Jardinier\* when the people walking ahead of me suddenly stepped aside and I saw a huge Great Dane hurtling towards me, who was bounding

along at full speed in front of a carriage\* and who did not even have the time, once he had seen me, to slow his pace or change direction. I realized that the only way I could avoid being knocked to the ground was to leap up high enough in the air at just the right moment to let the dog pass beneath me. This idea, which came to me as quick as a flash and which I had no time to reflect on nor to put into action, was my last thought before my accident. I did not feel the impact nor my fall, nor indeed anything else of what happened thereafter until I finally came to.

It was almost night when I regained consciousness. I found myself in the arms of three or four young men who told me what had just happened. The Great Dane, unable to slow down, had run straight into my legs and, overpowering me with his weight and speed, had knocked me over head first: my top jaw, taking the full weight of my body, had struck against a very rough cobblestone, and my fall had been made all the more violent by the fact that, since I was walking downhill, my head ended up lower than my feet.

The carriage to which the dog belonged followed immediately behind him and would have run right over my body had the driver not quickly stopped his horses. This is the account I learned from those who had picked me up and who were still holding me when I came to. The state in which I found myself at that moment is too extraordinary not to be described here.

Night was falling. I saw the sky, a few stars, and a little greenery. This first sensation was a moment of delight. It alone gave me some feeling of myself. In that instant I was born into life, and it seemed to me as if I was filling all the things I saw with my frail existence. Entirely taken up by that moment, I could not remember anything else; I had no clear sense of myself as an individual, nor the slightest idea of what had just happened to me; I did not know who I was nor where I was; I felt neither pain nor fear nor anxiety. I watched my blood flowing as if I were watching a stream, without even thinking that this blood was in any way part of me. Throughout my whole being I felt a wonderful calm with which, whenever I think of it, I can find nothing to compare in the whole realm of known pleasures.

I was asked where I lived; it was impossible for me to say. I asked where I was, and I was told: 'At the Haute Borne';\* the answer could just as well have been: 'On Mount Atlas'. I had to ask which country, which town, and which district I was in. But even that was not enough to make me aware of who I was; it took me the entire journey from there to the boulevard to remember where I lived and what my name was. A man whom I had never met before and who was kind enough to walk with me some of the way, on learning that I lived so far away, advised me to take a cab home from the Temple.\* I was walking very well, very nimbly, feeling no pain or injury, though I was still spitting lots of blood. But I was shivering with the cold which made my shattered teeth chatter very uncomfortably. When I reached the Temple I thought that, since I was walking without difficulty, I may as well continue on foot rather than run the risk of dying of cold in a cab. Thus I covered the half-league\* from the Temple to the rue Plâtrière,\* walking without difficulty, avoiding obstacles and vehicles, and choosing which way to go just as I would have done, had I been in perfect health. I arrived home, opened the hidden lock that had been fitted to the street door, climbed the stairs in the dark, and finally reached home, suffering no accident other than my fall and its consequences, of which I was still not even aware.

My wife's cries\* when she saw me made me realize that I was more injured than I had thought. I spent the night still not knowing or feeling the full extent of my injuries. This is what I felt and discovered the next day. My top lip was split open on the inside right up to my nose, while the skin on the outside had protected it more and had stopped it from tearing apart completely; four teeth had been knocked in on my top jaw; all the part of my face around my top jaw was extremely swollen and bruised; my right thumb was sprained and very swollen; my left thumb was badly injured; my left arm was sprained; and my left knee was also very swollen, and I was unable to bend it properly because of a big and painful bruise. But in spite of the great knock I had taken, there was nothing broken, not even a tooth: such good fortune was almost a miracle given the fall I had suffered.

This is a very faithful account of my accident. In just a few days

the story spread across Paris, but it was changed and disfigured so much that it became quite unrecognizable. I should have known that this would happen; but to it were added so many bizarre circumstances, it was accompanied by so many vague remarks and omissions, and people spoke to me about it in such a ridiculously discreet manner that all these mysteries unnerved me. I have always hated shadows;\* they naturally inspire in me a horror that has been in no way diminished by the shadows by which I have been surrounded for so many years. Of all the extraordinary events of this period I will mention only one, but one typical enough to give a sense of the others.

Monsieur Lenoir, the police lieutenant general,\* with whom I had never had any dealings, sent his secretary to find out how I was and urgently to offer me favours which, in the circumstances, did not seem to me particularly helpful as I recovered. His secretary did not fail to urge me very insistently to take up these offers, even going so far as to tell me that if I did not trust him, I could write directly to Monsieur Lenoir. His great eagerness and the air of secrecy that he created convinced me that there was, hidden beneath it all, some mystery which I sought in vain to make sense of. This was more than enough to scare me off, especially given the state of agitation which my mind was in on account of my accident and the ensuing fever. I became preoccupied with a thousand worrying and sad conjectures, and I analysed everything that was going on around me in a way which smacked more of the delirium brought on by a fever than of the self-possession of a man who is no longer interested in anything.

Another event succeeded in completely upsetting my peace of mind. Madame d'Ormoï\* had been pursuing me for several years, though I had never worked out why. Her pretentious little presents and her frequent pointless and unpleasant visits were a clear enough indication that there was a secret aim behind it all, though they never revealed to me what it was. She had spoken to me about a novel which she wanted to write and present to the Queen.\* I had told her what I thought of women writers.\* She had given me to understand that the purpose of her project was to restore her fortune, to which end she required a protector; I had nothing to say

in reply. She told me subsequently that, having been unable to gain access to the Queen, she had decided to offer her book to the public. There was no longer any point in my giving her advice which she did not seek and which she would not in any case have followed. She had talked about showing me her manuscript beforehand. I asked her not to do so, so she did not.

One fine day during my convalescence I received a copy of her book from her, all printed and even bound,\* and I found in the preface such crude praise of me, so clumsily inserted and in such an affected manner that I found it quite unpleasant.\* The kind of crude flattery that was expressed there was never a sign of true kindness, about that my heart could not be wrong.

A few days later, Madame d'Ormoï came to see me with her daughter.\* She told me that her book was causing a great stir because of a footnote;\* I had hardly noticed this note when I flicked through the novel. I reread it once Madame d'Ormoï had left, I examined the way it was phrased, and I believed I found in it the reason for her visits, her honeyed words, and the crude praise in her preface, and I decided that it was all designed to incline the public to attribute the note to me and, consequently, to direct towards me the blame that it could bring upon its author, given the circumstances of its publication.

I had no means of scotching this rumour or the impression which it might create, and all I could do was not to encourage it by allowing Madame d'Ormoï and her daughter to continue their pointless and very public visits. To this end I wrote the mother the following note:

Rousseau, since he does not receive authors, thanks Madame d'Ormoï for her kindnesses and asks her not to honour him with any further visits.

She replied with an apparently polite letter, but one written in the same way as all those written to me in these circumstances. I had barbarously plunged a dagger into her tender heart, and I should realize from the tone of her letter that, since she had such strong and sincere feelings for me, she would not be able to bear this break without dying. So it is that decency and honesty in

all things are awful crimes in the world, and I would strike my contemporaries as being wicked and ferocious, even if my only crime in their eyes were that I was not as false and as treacherous as they are.

I had already been out several times and I even walked quite often in the Tuileries,\* when I gathered from the surprise shown by many of those who met me that there was yet another story about me of which I was unaware. I finally learned that the rumour going around was that I had died from my fall, and this rumour spread so quickly and so persistently that more than a fortnight after I had learned of it, the King\* himself and the Queen spoke of it as if it were a certainty. The *Avignon Courier*, as I was generously informed, in announcing this happy news, did not fail on the occasion to give a foretaste of the tribute of insults and indignities being prepared in my memory for after my death in the form of a funeral oration.\*

This news was accompanied by a yet more extraordinary event which I only found out about by chance and of which I have been unable to discover any details. It is that at the same time a subscription was opened to pay for the publication of any manuscripts left in my house. From this I gathered that a collection of fabricated writings had already been prepared precisely in order to attribute them to me immediately after my death: for the idea that any of my real manuscripts would actually be published faithfully was the kind of stupidity which no sensible man could possibly entertain and which fifteen years' experience have guarded me against all too well.

These observations, made one after another and followed by many others which were no less surprising, once more terrified my imagination, which I had thought was deadened, and the dark shadows which were insistently piled up around me revived all the horror that they naturally inspire in me. I exhausted myself trying at length to make sense of it all and trying to understand mysteries which have been made incomprehensible to me. The only unchanging outcome of all these enigmas was the confirmation of all my previous conclusions, namely that, since my own fate and that of my reputation had been fixed by the concerted efforts of the whole

of the present generation, nothing I could do could save me from it, since it is utterly impossible for me to entrust anything to future ages without its first being passed through the hands of those that have an interest in suppressing it.

But this time I went further still. The accumulation of so many chance events, the honouring of all my cruellest enemies, favoured, as it were, by fortune, the way in which all those who govern the country, all those who control public opinion, all those in authority, and all those in positions of influence seem to have been hand-picked from among those who have some secret animosity towards me, in order to play their part in the general conspiracy, this universal consensus is too extraordinary to be purely coincidental. One man refusing to be a part of it, one turn of events going against it, or one unforeseen circumstance creating an obstacle to it would have been enough to bring it all crashing down. But every will, every twist of fate, and every change in fortune has consolidated this work of men's hands, and such a striking combination of circumstances, which has something of the miraculous about it, convinces me that its complete success must be written among the eternal decrees. A great number of different observations, both in the past and in the present, convince me of this view so fully that from now on I cannot help regarding as one of Heaven's secrets, impenetrable to human reason, the very plot that hitherto I envisaged only as the fruit of the wickedness of men.

This idea, far from being cruel or heart-wrenching, consoles me, calms me, and helps me to be resigned. I do not go so far as Saint Augustine, who would have been content to be damned, if it had been God's will.\* My resignation comes from a less disinterested source, it is true, but for all that it is no less pure and indeed more worthy in my opinion of the perfect Being whom I adore. God is just; he wants me to suffer; and he knows that I am innocent. This is why I am confident: my heart and my reason cry out to me that I shall not be disappointed. So let men and fate have their way; let us learn to suffer without complaining; everything will in the end find its proper place, and sooner or later my turn will come.