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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

Faculty of Law, Arts and Social Sciences

School of Education

BOSWELL AND THE EDUCATIVE SELF

BY

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ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT

This research is a disquisition upon the nature of auto/biographical identity by way of an examination of part of the life and thought of one of the most significant of biographers – James Boswell. Focussing on Boswell's private journal of his early adult and middle years, from 1762 to the late 1770s, the study extrapolates from these and other readings to bring forth aspects of Boswell which have not been previously accented.

What emerges is a complex character, in many ways both arrogant and humble, who also suffered from a debilitating mental condition, known to his century as hypochondria. This condition, which Boswell believes was inherited but to which he may have been psychologically pre-disposed owing to the affective conditions of his early years, expressed itself in episodes of gloom and despondency. In spite of these, Boswell was able to sustain his efforts in fields as varied as the personal, the social, the financial, the literary – not to mention the amatory – as part of his desire to improve aspects of his often impetuous selfhood. This impulse towards betterment was integral to Boswell's nature, as was his need to seek out a mentor on whose wisdom he could rely. Boswell's restless questing nature, with its many falls from grace, is the revelation of his early journals.

This study is essentially a re-assessment of the historical Boswell, presenting him in the light of his own understanding of himself and as such is a contribution to auto/biographical studies.

Declaration

'This thesis was submitted for examination in June 2004. It does not necessarily represent the final form of the thesis as deposited in the University after examination.'

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DEDICATION

To my two sons Joseph and Sami and the members of my extended family, all of whom have supported and encouraged me in this project.

CONTENTS

Introduction

This study of the eighteenth-century writer and diarist James Boswell sets out to apply an interpretive method to Boswell's thought and actions at selected moments in his life, as recorded in his journals. Boswell's writings, in particular his great biography, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), and his accounts of his travels in Corsica with Pascal Paoli and in the Hebrides with Johnson have ensured his permanent fame. These works have gained respect from numerous readers and critics, both contemporaneously and over the ensuing centuries. An aspect of Boswell that is somewhat less well known is the Boswell of the journals which were re-discovered only in the first decades of the last century (Pottle, 1951); (Wain, 1990). It is these writings which constitute the primary source material for my study.

Boswell maintained a journal from his late teens and throughout his life. He wrote numerous letters to friends and acquaintances. Neither the correspondence nor the journals were intended for publication. The unusual and recent provenance of the journals confers on them a particular status for they retain the freshness of texts which have not been over-exposed, and allow the possibility of the close reader emerging with new insights. The journals have been published over the last fifty years through the efforts of an editorial team at Yale University, which purchased the manuscripts in 1949. The published editions of Boswell's journals follow a chronological sequence and are titled according to the geographical location or main events of a particular period in the life, beginning with *The London Journal_1762-63*, followed by *Boswell in Holland 1763-1764*, and so on. (Works by Boswell cited in this study are listed at the end of this introduction).

This study is concerned with writings relating to Boswell's early adult and middle years, from 1762 when Boswell left for London to the late 1770s. It will draw on already published material in order to bring forth, from a novel synthesis of that material, aspects of Boswell which have not been accented before. It is the mind of the writer as revealed in these writings that is of particular interest, for Boswell does not simply document events, but above all expresses and comments on the reactions of individual mind. The study is not a work of biography in the sense that it is not concerned with presenting the entire life, nor does it intend to include the kind of

detail necessary to do that entire life justice. Although the study is narrative in form and although the moments selected follow a roughly chronological sequence in the chapter organisation, the stylistic technique is cinematic rather than literary in that from the frozen frame which is a particular life-moment for Boswell, there are narrative threads which lead both back into the past and forward into the continuity of on-going time within Boswell's life. For example, the study at one point focuses on a period in Boswell's early twenties in order to discuss his sexual behaviour in general and his interest in prostitution in particular. Boswell's sexual feelings of course preceded that moment in time which is the focus of the study, and continued after. In this sense, the examination of a period in his early twenties is like a frozen frame when taken in the context of his whole life; the questions relating to earlier sexual feelings, motivations, the recurrence of particular behaviours, etc., are the narrative threads which extend both backwards and forwards from the 'frozen' moment. With each selected facet of Boswell's character there is a strand which may be followed and these strands woven together constitute a fragmentary perception of the complexity of the man. Each strand of character has left a trace in his writings as it did in his life. It is to these traces that we can still refer. We can never re-capture the whole, but we can extrapolate from what has been left behind.

There is a dual aspect to what a diarist, such as James Boswell writes. There is the visible and tangible expression of Boswell in the printed journals. These describe events, behaviours, feelings. The text of the journals is a past-time document: everything to which it refers has already been completed in a past time and cannot be recaptured, except partially, through the words of the texts themselves and my reading of them. From the words I, as reader, can picture the events and the behaviours, but can I understand the feelings evoked? This question leads us to the second aspect of what has been left behind. In any written text there is what is actually expressed and what has been left unsaid. In a personal document such as a journal or diary, there are 'said' (written) elements which may or may not be true; there are also references to feelings and behaviours which may or may not seem part of a coherent pattern to the interpreter. To a certain extent, in extrapolating from both the said and the unsaid the interpreter is attempting to find the coherent pattern which will illuminate the individual mind in its profoundly individual nature.

The introduction examines the route taken to arrive at this destination. It is divided into three main sections: firstly, consideration of the appeal of an eighteenth-century topic; secondly, examination of the particular problems posed by the choice of an historical subject ; lastly, evaluation of the demands of the topic itself, and the decisions taken with regard to methodology.

Part I
An eighteenth-century topic

There have been significant changes in literary scholarship, both with regard to approaches to a text and in the range of critical readings of a text, since I was first a student of English literature. The emergence of new disciplines, such as studies relating to gender and ethnicity, for example, the potential application of social or psychological approaches and the evolution of computer technologies have all had their impact on the way a text may be perceived. These changes allow a multiplicity of approaches to a given text. While there may not be quite as many approaches as individuals, there do exist certainly a variety of ways of interpreting a text, as well as different philosophies concerning the significance of text itself, even before considerations of meaning.

With reference to eighteenth-century scholarship, contemporary scholars have increased the quality and quantity of information available to researchers, above all in the fields of criminality and social conditions; they have also brought to light the work of previously little-known writers, in particular female writers such as Aphra Benn, and have validated the range of possible interpretations of a text. These changes have extended the picture of eighteenth-century society and made more likely our understanding of eighteenth-century mind because they confirm the immense variety of experiences, of ways of living, and the intellectual and social range which the eighteenth-century inhabitants of Britain shared. When I was first a literary student, such a wide-ranging perspective of the eighteenth century did not appear to exist – or if it did, it was not offered to the undergraduate to whom the 'eighteenth century' appeared as a huge unenticing monolith. In contrast to the

appeal of Shakespeare's imagery, the dazzling complexity and passion of John Donne, or the powerfully poignant early texts such as The Wanderer or The Dream of the Rood, the eighteenth-century and its writers appeared dry and dusty. The impression was compounded by the fact that university English departments would, at undergraduate level, select the text for study and the critical writings to be read, and would imply the views to be held. There was certainly an eighteenth-century literary canon.

This view of the past is supported by Damrosch (1992) who, writing from a literary perspective, refers to the evolution of eighteenth-century studies since the 1960s when the notion of consensus in literary evaluation prevailed. The eighteenth century, which he typifies as standing 'as a stable and dependable icon' up to the mid-1970s, lost this seeming immutability when it became apparent that other disciplines 'offered more exciting ideas than traditional studies did.' From my experience, the notion of consensus as applied to eighteenth-century literary studies and its implications with regard to choice of text, approaches and so on, meant that my enthusiasm was in no way stimulated. To be fair, the proscription may have led others to challenge the prevailing orthodoxies (and Damrosch mentions that he flattered himself that 'at times' he was such a rebel, p.201); in my case the consensual narrowness resulted in detachment. Rousseau and Porter (1987) similarly bear witness to changes in attitude towards the eighteenth century which they express as follows:

> Fortunately, however, the last twenty years have seen a remarkable turn-about in scholarly assessment of the eighteenth century. In place of the sedate politeness of traditional history of ideas and literary history, matched by polished coffee-table books showing of the elegance of Rococco civilisation, the Enlightenment has now become a battleground once more.
>
> (p.5)

While the image used is a dramatic one it does highlight the notion of movement, change and flux which has swept away the erstwhile 'sedate politeness'.

The shift which has taken place and which causes me to be tempted into a once closed-off area is a major one. Initially, a text was read as text and meaning extrapolated from the text itself. In reviewing past attitudes, Damrosch demonstrates

how certain scholars (and he cites as an example his colleague Irvin Ehrenpreis) remained suspicious of interpretation, particularly if it went beyond the self-evident meaning of the text (Damrosch, 1992: 205). This attitude, which prevailed among some scholars into the early 1970s, clearly descends from the practice of exegesis as applied to the study of ancient writings such as Biblical texts. Although a focus on the text alone can be justified, this must, of necessity, eliminate speculation, imagination and empathy, qualities of mind which have the power to open up a text to different forms of exploration. In my view, it is the transformation of the eighteenth century as a field of study, the increased possibilities of textual interpretation, and the enabling of other disciplines to apply their eyes to the canon which have brought a new dynamism to the field. The fact that eighteenth-century texts – and literary texts in general – are open to interpretation and may be differently 'read' according to the cultural background or specialist discipline of the reader is immensely challenging. A door opens which enables the specialist to speculate outside his/her usual domain. This freedom also allows the reader to perceive the text as a living thing, not an entity frozen in time with a meaning which has already been determined long ago. The text as living thing becomes responsive to the reader as the reader is responsive to it. Meaning may emerge from this collusion.

The shift in intellectual attitudes and the opening up of what was once a segregated area are not the only reasons which led to my choice of an eighteenth-century topic. But they are, at least partially the reasons why my approach is of a certain kind which draws on other disciplines and on other aspects of my life and educational experience as part of the interpretive mechanism to apply to the topic. Boswell's journals, self-revelatory as they are, challenge a reader to approach the mind of their author with imagination, empathy and respect. It is ultimately James Boswell himself in all his irritating yet appealing complexity who has drawn me into the eighteenth century. In the non-consensual times in which we live even what constitute the start and end dates for this 'eighteenth century' remain under discussion (Lipking, 1992: 9-11). We can nevertheless confirm that James Boswell, born 1740, died 1795, lived within our eighteenth century's temporal parameters.

Part II

Particular problems posed by the choice of an historical subject

To document the life of an historical subject poses a challenge, even when there exists considerable evidence in the form of primary sources. To explore the mental processes of an historical subject poses an even-greater challenge, particularly when there exists a prior literature on that subject, as well as a certain number of primary sources.

There are two aspects of this challenge. One necessity is to face the subject with an unbiased eye and a mind freed of preconceptions. The immense difficulty of achieving this state and the desirability of doing so are features of a philosophical stance with regard to the consideration of a text (Denzin, 1989). While I understand the desirability of achieving such a state, and fully appreciate the 'open-ness' and the absence of presuppositions required to allow full access to a given text, I concede the difficulty of achieving this state and of stripping away the emotional, cultural, social and psychological baggage with which most of us are encumbered. I shall consider this aspect in greater detail in the third section.

The second part of the challenge consists in evolving a suitable methodology. In my case, the choice of an eighteenth-century subject raises issues such as the availability of background data; the reliability of such data; the difficulty of interpreting existing or new data; the existence of primary sources which may already have been well thumbed and interpreted by a variety of scholars in the field; one's own preconceptions about the individual historical figure, his work, his life, or any other aspect of his historical period. Each of these issues must be considered in order to proceed.

The journals of James Boswell may be considered personal documents in the sense that they were not intended for publication, nor were they, apart from the entries between 14 September 1762 and 4 August 1763, intended to be shared at all (Pottle, 1991: 10,11). They were primarily written as a mental discipline Boswell conceived as important, but also to record events and above all to allow him a site to analyse, comment and reflect on his experiences, reactions and motivations.

To the historian, as well as to the literary scholar and social scientist, personal documents are of huge importance because of what they can reveal about individual lives in the context of our collective past. History is no longer conceived as a source of moral instruction achieved through the contemplation of great men and their institutions; nor is it conceived as presenting a ladder of progress charting the evolution of societies. What history can now demonstrate is how ordinary lives were lived out against the background of significant events. Though the study of the mechanism of the significant events itself remains of importance, it has become clear that there is much to learn and appreciate through an examination of the detail and texture of daily life for individuals whose lives might otherwise have been overlooked (Stone, 1987). All lives are seen to have significance in opening up new vistas of understanding. The social context of a life does not, by itself, confer historical value on the life, as was previously thought. Understanding an individual life in a previous period, even if that life is set apart from the currents of major historical forces, nevertheless enriches the researcher through opening access to a wider assessment of our collective past. And individual lives are often touched at their boundaries by major significant events, even if they are not swept along by the huge currents of these events. The study of personal documents may thus shed light on the complex life of an individual at a certain historical period, and may simultaneously throw light on to the collective lives of contemporaries. Such documents enable us to learn from our past as well as about our past.

Personal documents

There are nevertheless dangers in the study of personal documents, including the temptation they offer to reconstitute the life from the available material. Even with the use of personal documents, it is impossible to reconstitute a past life in its entirety. The immense detail of each individual life means that the individual may have experienced persons, words, events, thoughts, etc., which made no impression at all or have been forgotten. In this way, the past of generations long dead is beyond recall in its entirety. (Gottschalk, 1945:8). This may seem an obvious conclusion but it is a useful reminder when embarking on the interpretation of personal documents in a historical context. It can certainly be tempting to extrapolate from the known

into the unknown; in other words, to build up conversations and reactions which were nowhere recorded but appear possible, given the existing parameters of the historian/social scientist's knowledge and the breadth of his/her understanding. There is a place for the imaginative reconstruction of past lives as contemporary biographical writing or historical fiction may demonstrate, but as Gottschalk warns, in order to be a serious work of historiography, the historian must be sure that the records used really do come from the past and that the historian's imagination is 'diverted towards *re-creation* not *creation*' (Gottschalk, 1945:9, italics in the original).

At this point, I pause to examine my own process. My task is a particular form of reconstruction in that I am perhaps 'reconstructing' motivations or causal factors; but these may not have existed at all so I am perhaps 'constructing' (creating) rather than 're-creating', in Gottschalk's terminology. But because my domain is less events than mind, less areas which provide data in a narrow sense than areas which evoke possibility, I am not entering into the task of the historiographer. Part of the approach will indeed be that of an historian, but the outcome will be non-historical in a certain sense.

What Boswell has left behind in his journals is a source which is rich in data; the data are of particular value because they are provided by a witness. These 'primary particulars' are trustworthy because of 'the reliability of the narrator as a witness of those particulars' (Gottschalk, 1945:12). Could we question the reliability of the narrator? Certainly, but we can make one or two assumptions which may lead to the conclusion of reliability. Firstly, the narrator – in this case Boswell – may be inventing, embroidering; yet, that he has done so remains as a fact, a piece of evidence. In other words, the outcome of the narrator's process exists. Because the narrator has done it and because the evidence remains, in that sense the evidence is 'reliable' even if the account is 'invented'. It remains as evidence of the way the narrator wanted to narrate. In the case of the writer of a private journal, there is an even greater chance that the narrator can be considered a reliable witness, and investigating this reliability is one of the researcher's tasks. Gottschalk implies that we can trust the authenticity of the narrator's response in the human or personal document and I accept this conclusion for the reasons stated above. It is clear that

documents not written for public consumption will reveal the private self of the individual to a greater or lesser degree. The researcher is gradually able to assess the authenticity of the response provided by comparing a variety of materials, both personal and public, which relate to the individual or to the events and persons he/she may mention.

There are other tests of reliability with regard to human documents. These are set out clearly by Gottschalk and the distinctions between each lucidly exposed. The four categories of reliability so perfectly apply to Boswell's journals that I would have been compelled to accept them, even had I not inferred internal reliability from 'internal evidence' as I shall discuss below.

Gottschalk considers why one group of human documents (for example, auto-biographies, letters, newspaper accounts) may be given precedence over another as a valid source. Boswell's journal already may be classified as autobiographical, a human or personal document likely to be highly reliable. Various other factors heighten its reliability as a document. According to Gottschalk, reliability is, in general, 'inversely proportional to the *time-lapse* (author's italics) between event and recollection, the closer a document is to the event it narrates the better it is likely to be for historical purposes' (Gottschalk, 1945:16). In the case of Boswell's journal, if we apply Gottschalk's criterion, the time-lapse is very short; Boswell wrote his journal almost daily and did his best to keep it entirely up to date. To facilitate the task of recording, he made notes in the form of memoranda and drew on these to write up the fuller account. The memoranda were written during or immediately after the event, the full account being written, in general, hours later. As Boswell's life became increasingly active and his social engagements numerous, Boswell was sometimes a day or so behind in his record and wrote far into the night on occasion to keep it up to date. Boswell was a keen recorder of detail, particularly of conversation. Some of this detail was noted down as it was observed (Pottle,1951: 11,12). Bearing in mind the short time lapse between the 'event and recollection' and the serious documentary method applied by Boswell, it is safe to conclude that, in this respect, the journal may be considered reliable for historical purposes. Gottschalk secondly points out that, as documents differ in purpose, 'The more serious the author's intention to make a mere record, the more dependable his

document as a historical source.' In this case, we may question whether Boswell's intention was to make a 'mere record'. His intention was certainly serious, but it would be difficult to argue from the evidence of the journal that Boswell was only interested in recording. Boswell is not writing his journal for the sake of history but for the sake of himself; dependability comes in this case, I would argue, from Boswell's seriousness of purpose rather than from the type of account he intended.

Another important point 'the fewer the number for whose eyes the document was meant (i.e. the greater its confidential nature) the more "naked" its contents are likely to be' (Gottschalk, 1945:16). The journal was not intended to be shared and most entries were written purely for Boswell's eyes: its contents may certainly be described as 'naked' in the sense that Boswell was always very explicit in writing about certain experiences, including his sexual ones. So naked was he in fact that the descendants who found his journals were so heartily shocked that they blacked out whole passages when preparing the journals for eventual publication (Wain, 1990: xxii-xxiv). But this is to employ the term 'naked' in a rather limited sense; Boswell also wrote openly about his experiences and feelings with regard to a whole variety of non-sexual topics. Gottschalk's point is well made and well taken.

His last category of reliability applies just as evidently to the journal. He mentions that, in general, the greater the expertness of the author in the matter he is reporting the more reliable his report. Obviously, the fact that the journal is autobiographical– written by the author about his own life – implies the author's expertness 'in the matter he is reporting', for no-one can know Boswell's life better than he.

Had we not referred to Gottschalk's criteria, what factors would have persuaded us of the journal's reliability? Firstly, the journal is known to be autobiographical and when read is clearly a first-person account. That the first person is a real individual rather than a literary persona is gradually evident from consistency within the text and the application of knowledge about Boswell as he was said to be, from other sources such as friends, personal letters, etc. Another aspect of its reliability may be its psychological consistency with regard, for example, to Boswell's well-known bouts of hypochondria. The occurrence of references to these throughout the text

together with his own commentary find a reflection in the essays Boswell wrote for publication, under the pseudonym The Hypochondriack [sic]. Some of these essays, discussed in Chapter 5, describe Boswell's experience in terms similar to those used in his private writings. These main factors – the autobiographical nature of the text and its internal consistency – already allow us to consider the text reliable and authentic, from an historical perspective. It may be said that Gottschalk's categories set a seal on the notion of reliability, making it possible to demonstrate something which is certainly often 'felt' by the researcher.

It may be argued that an already-published text such as the journal, which has gone through certain editorial processes which must have included consideration of reliability, does not need to be examined in this way. In other words, one could assume 'reliability' from the fact that the text has been edited and published by Yale University. From my point of view, I wished to take consideration of the text further than merely accepting reliability at face-value because my intention is to use the text in a particular way with a focus on considerations of meaning. Without a sound basis for conviction of a text's reliability, such as that provided by Gottschalk's criteria, one cannot proceed to extrapolate meaning with any sense of having a solid base on which to elevate the structures of interpretation. Thus, although in this case the starting point is not a manuscript text which one then subjects to a series of questions to determine reliability, the authenticated text has been subjected to some of the same questions because this process provides a solid framework for the next stage: the reading of the text. There are, of course, additional considerations. We now have an authenticated reliable text written by a 'witness' whose testimony responds to certain criteria of reliability, as we have seen above.

But what are we to do with the testimony? Firstly I wish to listen to it. Secondly, I wish to subject the testimony to scrutiny to see what can be learned from the individual words said and from those left unsaid. Thirdly, I want to consider the extent to which these words reflect the mind/life of the subject, his affective, social and cultural conditioning. Lastly, I want to examine to what extent this mind reflects the contemporaneous society and the historical situation of the subject.

Part III

The demands of the topic: determining methodology

To write about a well-known historical figure incurs its own problems. The dilemma is expressed in the following interrogation concerning the possible choices a modern biography of an historical figure might make:

> Should a modern biography of [Samuel] Johnson, for instance, place him insistently within the context of his times, the specific occasions that formed such a singular person year by year and day by day? Or should it rather portray him as a representative man, interpreting each of his peculiarities as one way of coping with the universal predicament of life?
>
> (Lipking, 1992:14)

The dilemma as framed may evoke varying responses, but one possible response - expressly because the question refers to an historical figure – is to consider a synthesis of the two approaches. Each individual exists within a certain temporal context; at the same time, the individual experiences dilemmas and life events which are of a universal nature. Although in the above instance we are considering Johnson as an example of an historical figure and although in this context the words 'singular person' have a special resonance, we should not proceed on the assumption that an historical and celebrated person such as Johnson is any more 'singular' in an existential sense than an anonymous historical figure. If we accept the singularity of individuality there is an argument for seeing each individual as being both a product of his times and a 'representative man' whose peculiarities may be interpreted as 'one way of coping with the universal predicament of life.'

This dilemma was evoked more than a hundred years earlier in the thought of Wilhelm Dilthey. In terms of available methodologies for examining personal documents – and through them, personal lives – the choices would have been severely limited had not Dilthey, in his 1803 publication of *Die Einleitung in die Gewissenschaften* (translated and republished as *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (1982)) drawn a distinction between the natural sciences and the human sciences (or studies). This distinction rested on Dilthey's perception and prime argument that the

methodology of the Geisteswissenschaften [human sciences or studies] must be different from that of the Naturwissenschaften [natural sciences]. According to Dilthey, the human studies are concerned with meaning and the natural sciences with explanation. This apparently simple distinction is a part of Dilthey's landmark theory of the *Gewissenschaften* which defined the historical orientation of the human studies and the limits of the natural sciences. (Makkreel, 1992: ix.). Why is it so important?

Firstly, the theory shifted the focus from attempts to apprehend aspects of the material world in terms of explanation or reason by pointing out that some fields of study are concerned with meaning and therefore demand a radically different approach. Dilthey predicated that, as man is himself 'a creative participant' in the historical process, he can understand and identify with his own complex socio-historical environment in a way that would be impossible for him studying his natural environment. Nature, in Dilthey's view, is the creation of 'ultimately inscrutable forces, whether natural or divine', whereas society is man's own creation (Makkreel, 1992:57). Nature is thus set apart from society in terms of its origins and its potential for human consideration. We cannot 'understand' a force not created by man, but we can formulate explanations for its phenomena. In this view, society is our world, the world we have created and the world we can understand **because** we have created it. Accepting this distinction opens the way for consideration of approaches to meaning.

By drawing a distinction between the natural sciences and human studies, Dilthey made possible the elaboration of a new theory of psychology which was descriptive rather than explanative, and which could be applied in human studies:

> According to Dilthey, inner experience (*innere Erfahrung*) possesses an initial intelligibility. To suppress this would be to destroy the source from which we derive the meaning of socio-historical, as well as individual experience. Admittedly, inner experience is limited in scope by personal dispositions and presuppositions. Such individual perspectives need not be denied, but through reflection their horizon of meaning can be shifted so as to

be made more and more encompassing.
(Makkreel, 1992:54)

This approach validates 'inner experience' precisely because it is individual. It validates inner experience as applied by the individual to derive meaning from his or her own socio-historical experience, and as applied by the individual to derive meaning from a socio-historical experience not his or her own. In other words, the inner experience can become the tool used by the interpreter to derive meaning. But this process of seeking to achieve 'understanding' should not imply the application of skills which are non-intellectual in contrast to the intellectual process which is 'explanation'. Makkreel is at pains to emphasize that

> Understanding should not be characterized antithetically as a product of mere feeling or empathy. Lived experience does provide an immediate sense of the whole, but understanding, in appealing to all the powers of the psyche, does not overlook the intellectual process.
>
> (Makkreel, 1998:80)

The reference to the involvement of 'all the powers of the psyche' reminds that mere feeling is not enough, for the intellectual process is not to be overlooked. Similarly, the historical past cannot be grasped 'by mere seeing, but only by analysis' (quoted by Makkreel, 1992:54, from his translation of Dilthey, GS, I, 94). What the historian needs is 'an insight into the nature of psychic experience which can help him grasp and analyze the dynamics of the original drama that mere eyewitness reports either veil or ignore'(Makreel, 1992: 55). Thus, Dilthey argues the primacy of insights into the nature of psychic experience as an historical tool, in effect, the primacy of a particular form of imagination, while Gottschalk warns of the dangers of applying too much imagination to a reading of historical events. Yet these views are not so different, for Dilthey implicates 'all the powers of the psyche' in the kind of insight he means, in other words an insight which is not bereft of intellectual vigour, and Gottschalk, in warning the historian against too much imagination, is also supporting the notion of an intellectual framework for the reading of historical events.

In Dilthey's view it is only the application of this psychological insight which can illuminate the individuality of human experience. It is not enough merely to consider

the archival evidence of an historical figure because such material fails to account for or describe what might have been the inner drives of this figure. Imagination must be allied with an appropriate psychological insight. The application of this psychological insight allows us to comprehend the socio-historical mind in relation to the society of which it is a part. If society is our world, as Dilthey expressed it (and in contrast to nature which is alien to us), we need to understand that society. Because the individual is a part of that society and that on-going historical process, only he is psychically equipped to understand it. This position empowers the individual interpreter at the same time that it reminds of the breadth of experience, range of skills and depths of psychological insight which are needed to extrapolate meaning, and in particular from a text created more than two centuries earlier.

If we are the makers of our own personal history, we are at the same time the interpreters of what we have made, through our perusal of texts, including literary texts. The complex problem of understanding literature, as apart from its aesthetic aspect, was expounded by Eagleton (1976) when he explicated the theoretical bases explored by various writers from Hegel, Marx and Engels onwards. Clearly, the importance of historical understanding is paramount, but Eagleton adds an extra dimension, reminding us that a literary work was created within and as part of a certain social process, and that understanding literature 'means understanding the total social process of which it is a part.' He goes on to refer to literary works as 'forms of perception, particular ways of seeing the world; and as such they have a relation to that dominant way of seeing which is the "social mentality" or ideology of an age' (1976:5-6). What Eagleton does not specifically mention is the **individual writer** who expressed the perception, who reflected, in fact, to a greater or lesser extent, the ideology of an age, the 'social mentality'. Likewise in an earlier passage, Eagleton defines Marxist criticism as having as its aim to explain the literary work more fully, 'and this means a sensible attention to its forms, styles and meanings. But it also means grasping these forms, styles and meanings as the products of a particular history' (1976:3). The point is very clearly made – the moment in the historical process, the ideology of an age – have a profound impact on the literary work created. But what is most striking is that throughout this discussion the

language used is detached from the notion of an individual producer (artist or writer). What we are discussing instead is the **product** 'of a particular history'. Whereas Dilthey placed the individual psyche at the heart of creativity/ power of imagination, Eagleton invokes forces expressly outside the psyche which he seems to perceive as the creative engine. For him, '... individual psychology is also a social product' (1976:7) which is true, of course, when we consider the power of environment and nurture to mould and to bend individual mind. But this view does not take account of the possible texture of individual mind in its drive to create. The dominant way of seeing of a particular period will of course filter down through the layers of that society to the various individuals; but the writer **of works of a certain quality** has a perception that is greater than the dominant ideology. For example, in the case of Boswell one could assume that it is the power of the dominant ideology which brings forth his desire to shine in his society, but other aspects of his behaviour reflect his individuality as divorced from mere social product.

Like Dilthey, Eagleton situates the individual as both within the social process and as representative of that process. The work of literature, through its author, is 'a way of seeing the world'. However, the implications of Dilthey's position are to place emphasis on both the quality of the interpreter's inner experience and the capacity of that interpreter to bring to the task an insight into the nature of psychic experience such that he/she can 'grasp and analyze the dynamics of the original drama'. These high demands imply the complex amalgam of skills and aptitudes needed to respond to an auto/biographical/historical task. This position answers the interrogation posed by Lipking at the beginning of this section by coming out firmly in support both of a synthesis of capabilities and a synthesis of perceptions. With regard to consideration of Boswell and his journals, there is no doubt that there is much to adopt from Dilthey. I have highlighted in my discussion the aspects of his thought which I find most stimulating and useful and which, I believe, I have to some extent drawn on.

Writing just over one hundred years after the appearance of Dilthey's *Einleitung*, W.M. Runyan's work extended the psychological approach to life histories pioneered

by Dilthey (and of course, Freud, but from a different perspective). His work, *Life Histories and Psychobiography in Theory and Method* (1984) suggested other possible methodologies and explicated some of the decisions I had already made. Both Runyan's definition of the focus of his study as on 'The understanding of life histories as they are encountered in a variety of contexts, ranging from clinical case histories to psychobiographical studies of historical figures' (Runyan, 1984:13), and his statement of objectives as 'to explore principles and procedures in the study of life histories, with the intent of providing more secure methodological and conceptual foundations for the study of lives' (Runyan, 1984:4) accorded with my own interests and with a Diltheyian approach. With regard to his focus, the interest lies in his concern with the variety of contexts for life histories because selecting the context is a major decision with regard to any life-writing. In fact, because of my desire to select material for examination and present it in an episodic framework rather than a carefully structured 'life' framework, I rejected both the case study and the strictly biographical approach. I have also rejected the psychobiographical study as an inappropriate format at the present time, demanding as it does, according to Runyan's definition, 'the explicit use of systematic or formal psychology in biography' (Runyan, 1984:202), tools I do not feel I command. On the other hand, I have made what Runyan would call 'implicit use of common sense psychology', particularly in attempting to establish causal links for certain behaviours. Runyan's intent to provide 'more secure methodological and conceptual foundations for the study of lives' is clearly an important goal, and accords well with Dilthey's insistence on intellectual rigour as being a major element in the overall application of inner or lived experience.

Runyan usefully draws attention to the problem of evaluating a range of explanations for a single event, using the example of Van Gogh's removal of his own ear. He is able to put forward thirteen possible explanations for this event, and through his evaluation of each one demonstrates the need to 'critically assess the plausibility of alternative explanations and then to examine the extent to which the remaining explanations supplement or conflict with one another' (Runyan, 1984:43). This demonstration illustrates how some explanations may more readily be accepted or

rejected, according to internal evidence. With regard to a personality as complex as Boswell the reminder to consider alternative interpretations/explanations is apposite. There are additional problems in this domain when the subject of the enquiry is an historical figure. Firstly, there is no chance of interrogating the subject. Secondly, there may be a lack of information about the early years of the subject which might have provided information helpful in evaluating later behaviour. Thirdly, other witnesses may be lacking; in the event of the existence of other witnesses contemporaneous with the subject, their testimony must first be tested for reliability. In spite of these difficulties it is still possible to put forward explanations as long as each one is assessed for its likelihood, given the already-existing information about the subject.

As a means of testing an hypothesis, Runyan suggests 'a tree of explanatory inquiry' which can be used to illustrate a particular research dilemma. The trunk of the tree represents the question or puzzle, each limb represents an answer or hypothesis, and smaller branches of the limb represent tests of that particular hypothesis or conjecture (Runyan, 1984:47). This device facilitates the clear emergence of an hypothesis, expressed visually. Such a 'tree of explanatory inquiries' was used in, for example, my consideration of Boswell's interest in prostitution, in the first chapter, and of his psychological need of a mentor, explored in the second.

Were I to place Boswell in the psychoanalytic spotlight , it is clear that some aspects of his character may be defined as pathological (his frequent recourse to prostitutes, followed by illness and guilt; his extreme depressions, bouts of self-hatred and gloom). The theory of narcissism, elaborated by Freud, re-defined and extended by later practitioners during the last century, offers a possible context for the understanding of some of the personality defects afflicting Boswell. I am inclined to accept Heinz Kohut's concept of 'secondary narcissism' which implies the inability to progress along the path of moderated self-love, resulting from what Kohut calls 'narcissistic wounds' often occasioned by parental neglect or abuse (Holmes, 2001:8-9). Boswell was significantly emotionally abused by his father who had very

low expectations of him and treated him more or less as an imbecile, fearing he may turn out to be like his deranged brother. Boswell, from the evidence of his journal, had great difficult in achieving a 'moderated self-love', veering from arrogant posturing to abject self-hatred with little evidence of a solid midpoint between the two. In the case of narcissistic wounds the individual lacks external validation of their narcissism and is obliged to fall back on self-love 'so that at least a modicum of hope and motivation may survive' (Holmes, 2001:9). Boswell did not experience infant days of love and admiration; he learnt early to earn kindness from his rather distant mother by feigning illness, but he never managed to earn his father's approval, whether child or man. His life was to a certain extent an attempt to navigate a course which would allow the survival of motivation and hope.

This study of James Boswell and the educative self synthesises a variety of approaches. As well as drawing inspiration from the work of the scholars discussed in detail above or referred to in the body of the text, the study is also informed by my own readings in literature, history and psychology over a period of years, my own experience of individuals, and the socio-historic mind over a period of years and in a variety of contexts and geographical and temporal settings. I have come to the conclusion that the stripping away of presuppositions is ultimately a sterile exercise destined to seal off the resonances of a text for ever. If our human condition is to exist as a social being, having access to language and thought, for what reason would we attempt to exile ourselves from what language does best, which is resonate? To void ourselves of all that has formed us intellectually and socially and confront a text with our mind as empty and blank as a white sheet is to deny that text survives because it is above all a meeting place.

Runyan comments that the optimal biography:

> will often be an integrative or synthetic one, which recognises and takes into account a variety of more particular perspectives, weaving them into a more comprehensive and multifaceted representation of the life.
>
> (Runyan, 1984:36)

This study, although it is not, of course, a biography, does involve a novel synthesis of elements which may result in the emergence of a more comprehensive and multifaceted representation of James Boswell than has yet been undertaken by writers more focussed on Boswell's literary genesis.

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Chapter 1

Temptation and its Outcome

When Boswell arrived in London in November 1762, he was about to become a father. By late November, news came from Edinburgh of the birth of his son Charles to Peggy Doig, who was probably a servant. At the time, Boswell little knew that the child he was already making plans for was to die less than two years later, in February 1764, before Boswell had had a chance to see him.

With no way of knowing what the future held in this respect, Boswell had already, before leaving Edinburgh, made money available for the care of Peggy Doig and the child, and an arrangement for the child to be baptized. John Johnston, Boswell's friend and confidant, and the recipient of the London Journal (hereinafter Journal), had been designated godfather (Pottle, 1991: 325[1]).

These events, not in themselves unusual for a period when illegitimacy was wide-spread and infant mortality high, are nevertheless revelatory of the character of James Boswell and of his difficulty in managing his sexual life. Boswell was only twenty-one when he became a father. Not unusually, there was no talk of marriage, but the fact that Boswell took pains to make a financial arrangement for Peggy Doig and the child before leaving for London indicates that Boswell had a sense of responsibility. That he took pains also to make sure that the child was baptized and nominated one of his own closest friends as godfather confirm Boswell's desire to have his child accepted within the community of God and man, and his expectation that he would long be involved in the upbringing of this child. We may say that he did what any decent man would do but which many men did not. In this account of the events leading to the birth of a baby to a woman of lower social class, we are already faced with the contradictions in thinking of a young man who was frank enough to admit in his Journal entry of 28th July, 1763, after mentioning that 'Peggy Doig, the mother of my little boy, is in town', that he had seen her and 'advised her not to fall into such a scrape again', afterwards adding, 'I really don't know how to talk on such a subject, when I consider that I led her into the scrape'. Boswell

[1]Pottle's information, which is not documented in the Journal, is found in Boswell's letters to Johnston. As Johnston is at this time the only reader of the Journal, it is clear that Boswell did not need to refer to it in these accounts.

clearly knows which side of the line he should be on in terms of behaviour; why he continually crossed it is one of the questions I shall try to answer.

There is every evidence, particularly from his Journal, that Boswell was a man with a strong sexual appetite. Stone (1977) took the trouble to quantify Boswell's numerous sallies into the field of love. The catalogue of pursuits and affairs Boswell carried out between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine included: making three women of quality his mistress; having a brief but passionate affair with the lifelong mistress of Rousseau; keeping at least three lower-class women as mistresses; having sexual relations with well over sixty prostitutes all over Europe; suffering from at least ten outbreaks of gonorrhoea before his marriage and several after (1977: 575). Boswell actively sought out sexual partners from his late teens onwards. For men of his social class, opportunities for sexual expression before marriage were limited in general to women of a lower social rank, such as servants or prostitutes, or to married women who may be available. Boswell's association with a woman outside his social class was therefore not unusual; what was unusual was the way he dealt with the relationship.

In admitting that he himself had led Peggy Doig into 'the scrape', Boswell is taking upon himself the role of sexual predator which society had assigned to him as a male. It is significant that he used the phrase 'I led', assuming, through the use of that particular verb, his relation of power to the other person in the affair. And yet, spontaneously, Boswell had advised her 'not to fall into such a scrape again', which implies his primary and inherent feeling that Peggy 'had fallen' into something (as if by accident and without agent). The admission 'I led her' is a secondary thought, following the first and coming after reflection. In these words Boswell expresses the complexity of male/female relations in the mid-eighteenth century, relations that, in his case were further complicated by class issues. The language used by Boswell in referring to his meeting with Peggy Doig suggests a confusion of roles: Boswell both 'led' Peggy Doig and now wishes to 'advise' her; he is both perpetrator and protector, both roles placing Peggy Doig in the subordinate situation of one who is either 'led' or 'advised'(or protected). The concern expressed by Boswell appears

genuine and I examine this whole issue here partly to open up consideration of Boswell from a different point of view. Boswell was not anything as simplistic as an eighteenth-century rake, even though he occasionally strikes a pose as a Man of Pleasure. He was evidently, as the Peggy Doig episode confirms, a man with a sense of moral responsibility even though it had emerged after the act of conceiving the child, not before. At base, stripped of social class and left only with gender, Boswell was an impetuous young man with a young man's urgent sexuality. In a twenty-first century context, the quantity and extent of Boswell's sexual activity is not unusual, but in his own century, given the huge constraints and the difficulties of egalitarian sexual expression, Boswell becomes what appeared to his contemporaries as unusually active, and to both past and present commentators as unusually careless of the dangers to his health and person which random sexual activity automatically involved.

By the end of eighteenth century, the demographic picture of England had altered dramatically: about a third of the English already lived in towns, a proportion more than eight times as high as in Russia, for example, at the same period (Anderson, 1985: 58). These towns, defined as settlements of some 2000 people, had continued to expand from 1700 when they held only some 17 per cent of the population. London, in 1700, had a population of more than half a million people; one hundred years later, this figure had doubled to make London the most densely populated city in Europe, a city now 'over ten times larger than the second city in England' (Black, (2001: 115). The city expanded both demographically and in size; one commentator refers to a growth in population between 1700 and 1820 from approximately 674,000 to 1,274,000, while 'its area increased to around twelve square miles (Henderson, 1999: 1).

In addition to its size, London's importance in other spheres was considerable. There had been an enormous growth of the city's trade and London was also the centre of government, the law, of finance and consumption. Another important factor which attracted lively minds, among them men like Boswell, was London's dominance of the world of print, a centre of news, opinion and fashion. London already possessed

a number of newspapers, small magazines and the technical possibility through its print resources of putting together at speed news-sheets and 'opinion' publications of all sorts, attractive to writers, politicians and wits as affording a fast medium for the communication of opinion, and the dissemination of political comment.

London was at the same time a significant influence on notions of urban life and also 'posed the greatest problems of law and order and social conditions' (Black, 2001:116). As the largest city in Britain, such problems were magnified. Like other cities and towns, London was not automatically a place of prosperity for all incomers and many of those who had fled the unemployment of the countryside were obliged to turn to crime, prostitution and begging in order to survive (Anderson, 1985). The numbers of these destitute people were not counted for official records as they had neither fixed abode nor did they pay taxes. It was therefore difficult to be certain in what kind of numbers they existed in a city such as London. One estimate puts the figure for the poor in London in 1797 as 'about one-eighth of the population' (Doyle, 1992:130).

Urban poverty in its turn led to high numbers of abandoned children as parents deserted children they could not afford to keep. In 1772, in Paris, for example – a city smaller than London – the number of foundling children received into foundling institutions had doubled from the 3,000 foundling children taken in a century earlier. The 1772 figure of 7,676 foundlings represented 40 per cent of children baptized in the city. Many of these abandoned children were doubtless the result of prostitution, which was 'a major industry of larger towns and the most obvious way for a poor or underpaid woman to earn badly needed money'. Prostitutes in London in the 1790s were estimated at over 50,000, and at between 20,000 and 25,000 in Paris a decade earlier (Doyle, 1992). Henderson (1999) implies that the number of prostitutes in London was lower than was popularly believed at the time, and probably lower than the 50,000 quoted above when he writes that estimates of the number of prostitutes operating in the capital varied widely with 20,000, 30,000, or 40,000 'all being cited with equal confidence' (Henderson, 1999: 178). Henderson himself declines to give a figure. Interestingly, the word 'prostitute' was not used in any legal documents (i.e. public acts) until 1822; until that time the women were usually referred to as 'disorderly', a code word for prostitute (Henderson, 1999: 194). This, and the fact

that the women who engaged in prostitution had often come from low-paid work in the clothing industries and sometimes returned to other forms of work after a period of prostitution and in some cases married, would presumably make it difficult to evaluate numbers with any degree of certainty. The high number of prostitutes, as Doyle goes on to point out, resulted not only in unwanted or abandoned children, but also in high rates of venereal disease, which 'ravaged European cities in the late eighteenth century as never before' (Doyle, 1992: 131).

Venereal disease was something Boswell feared but frequently fell victim to (Pottle, 1950). The usual treatment, mercury, was quite dangerous but appears to have been effective. Other medicines were available for the less well off; the very poor, usually the prostitutes themselves, once infected could turn to the parish for assistance as one of the sick poor whom the authorities were obliged to relieve under the Elizabeth Act of 1601 (Henderson, 1999: 39). In spite of this threat – and the threat of pregnancy – few of the prostitutes Boswell encountered carried condoms. Boswell, however, frequently did. Condoms, which had been available in London since the late sixteenth century, were at this time made of sheep's bladder 'and secured to the wearer by a silk ribbon tied around his scrotum ' (Henderson, 1999: 41). In the 1740s it was a Mrs Lewis who mainly manufactured and sold condoms from her shop in St Martin's Lane, 'although Boswell purchased his from Mrs Phillips of Half Moon Street which appears to have acquired the monopoly some time in the 1750s' (Henderson, 1999: 41)

This populous, bustling and dynamic city was the environment, which was to enclose Boswell when he arrived there in November 1762, full of hope for the future and newly released from his father's tutelage. The excitement of the city was soon upon him. As he arrived at his first London lodging, the Black Lion Inn, Water Lane, Fleet Street, on 19th November, 'the noise, the crowd, the glare of the shops and signs agreeably confused me. I was rather more wildly struck than when I first came to London.' After dinner, he was 'all in a flitter at having at last got to the place which I was so madly fond of, and being restrained, had formed so many wild schemes to get back to. I had recourse to philosophy, and so rendered myself calm'.

'Rendering himself calm' was a major need of Boswell's as a man whose emotions were easily stirred. By the following day, moving to his friend Douglas's in Pall Mall where he was to stay until he found his own lodgings, Boswell felt himself 'bold, easy and happy'. He had a short moment of uneasiness from feeling no 'amazing difference' between his existence now and 'at Edinburgh', but the good mood endured through the next day, a Sunday, on which Boswell took in prayers and a sermon at Mayfair Chapel and three separate social calls, before returning to drink tea at Douglas's and then go on to search for his first love, a Miss Sally Forrester, to whom, Stone (1977) reminds us, Boswell had lost his virginity at the age of twenty in March 1760. Boswell needed female companionship, even more vital in a new city, but although he does not state what his intentions were, it seems likely that, had he found Miss Forrester, he would have made every attempt to renew any previous intimacy. Unfortunately, he failed to find out any information about her and went on to call for another acquaintance, Miss Jenny Well in Barrack Street, Soho. He was unsuccessful there too and was constrained to meditate on the change that had taken place over the last two years and removed these two young ladies whom he had formerly seen 'in all the glow of beauty and admiration', and who now were 'utterly erased or worse'.

By the 25th November, the high spirits Boswell had managed to sustain since his arrival in London had deteriorated. He had felt rather 'low-spirited' the previous evening and it may have been these low spirits, which made him have a bad dream, and left him in a worse state. The dream was that his friend Johnston did not care for him and, when coming to see Boswell off on a long journey, 'left me before I got away'. This dream reflected a real situation which Boswell had experienced just before his departure from Scotland. Johnston had in fact failed to see him off. In a Journal footnote, Pottle recounts that Boswell's deep distress at this event is referred to in Boswell's unpublished letters (Pottle, 1991: 49). The dream, which must have reminded Boswell of his friend's real life dereliction of duty – although of course he cannot comment on it in his Journal as Johnston is its reader – had a marked effect on Boswell's mood. He became 'very gloomy. I thought London did me no good. I rather disliked it; and thought of going back to Edinburgh immediately. In short, I was miserable.'

Whether this gloom was a direct cause or not, Boswell began to focus on the fact that he had now 'been some time in town without female sport'. Determining to have nothing to do with whores as 'my health was of great importance to me', he accordingly sets off to visit a girl with whom he had previously had an intrigue in Edinburgh. Alas, when he tries to obtain his 'former favours', he is refused. Boswell is dismayed. 'I was really unhappy for want of women.' It is this no doubt which drives Boswell to the Strand, that tempting thoroughfare which was to play quite a role in Boswell's London life. There he picks up a girl and although he is clearly quite desperate, he remembers his own health concerns. Finding that neither he nor she possesses any 'armour' (Boswell's word for a prophylactic sheath or condom) which could protect him from venereal disease, Boswell manages to hold back and 'had command enough of myself to go without touching her'. He is very aware of the danger he has escaped and even resolves, 'to wait cheerfully till I get some safe girl' or is liked 'by some woman of fashion'. We shall later see to what extent Boswell was able to keep his noble decision.

These first London days, as written up in the Journal, are amazingly frankly described by Boswell. Firstly, we see his almost boyish delight at having arrived in London, a place he has long waited to reside in. Secondly, the Journal shows his determination to act correctly, hold himself in check, and be, in effect, a more considered kind of person. Thirdly, we can see how quickly the buoyant mood can change and swing into its opposite. Did Boswell's mood change because, as he mentioned in the Journal, he was beginning to find Mrs Douglas tedious, or was it caused by the dream he had about Johnston the following night, or occasioned by some kind of cyclical flux?

Fourthly, we see Boswell's searching out a sexual partner, a search that is, in this case perhaps, connected to his feelings of despondency. In spite of this, Boswell managed to control himself and remember the health dangers inherent in the act. Finally, these first Journal pages also reveal where Boswell looks for sexual partners: servants; prostitutes; women of fashion (probably married); past loves from any of these categories.

At this early stage in his life, there are at least two obvious reasons for Boswell's sexual conduct, both of which we have already referred to above. The first is Boswell's need, as a young male, for a channel of sexual expression, a need that at different moments in the social evolution of humankind has had its expression prohibited or permitted. As far as Boswell was concerned, eighteenth-century society at large could permit a young male a certain amount – even a considerable amount – of sowing of wild oats. But society in its narrower sense could permit Boswell nothing of the kind, particularly the demanding Presbyterian society to which Boswell belonged through his parents, and this denial gave rise to the second reason for Boswell's subsequent sexual conduct: the lack of a socially acceptable channel for sexual expression. In a sense, Boswell's century both seemed to grant freedom at the same time as it seemed to hold it back. As we have seen earlier, sexual opportunities were available, but could lead not only to disease but also to guilt and regret depending on the upbringing of the perpetrator.

James Boswell was the product of a strict, even austere, Protestant upbringing. His relationship with his mother was respectful but not warmly expressive on either side. He appreciated her kindness, but did not appear to experience with her that nurturing, enclosing love with its focus on individual potential which gradually evolved and which typified numerous images of motherhood. Boswell had been brought up at a time when the family rather than the individual was important at every social level. The prevalence of high infant mortality had ensured a certain ambiguity of attitude to young children. Society in general simply could not afford to consider as individual and precious beings whose young lives might easily be abruptly ended. This apparent coolness was frequently mirrored in family life in which the needs of the family, seen as a 'house' or collectivity with imperative demands of its own took precedence (Anderson, 1985). This was particularly the case in the upper ranks of society to which Boswell belonged. The family took precedence over its individual members and it was not easy, even impossible, for a child to have his/her views listened to. Along with the social construct of family as collectivity with a primordial role was a religious view of children very remote from our twenty-first century notions of innocence and purity. In their place, and particularly evident in Presbyterian Scotland, was a view of children as displaying 'in a relatively pure and

undiluted form the wickedness inherent in human nature, the taint of original sin' (Anderson, 1985: 29).

Given the prevailing social currents it was hardly unusual that Boswell, a young man of good family, should grow up feeling a certain remoteness from his parents. What exacerbated the situation was, as he wrote for Rousseau in his Sketch of the Early Life of James Boswell (hereinafter Sketch, printed in full in Wain, 1990: 1-6), on 5th December 1764, 'My mother was extremely pious. She inspired me with devotion. But unfortunately she taught me Calvinism'. In line with the view of children as being as inherently wicked as their elders, Boswell was instilled with what he described as 'the gloomiest doctrines of the system'. 'The eternity of punishment was the first great idea I ever formed. How it made me shudder. Since fire was a material substance, I had an idea of it'. Boswell, on the other hand, 'thought but rarely about the bliss of heaven because I had no idea of it'. For this reason it was neither 'real' nor appealing to him signifying only an absence of damnation and pain, rather than anything more positive. The 'bliss of heaven' was left therefore as a concept without meaning, without significance. The ultimate good was a neutral blank. To Boswell, in his early years, only the negative – the punishment and the pain of fire – resided in his mind. There was no image equally strong to balance it or to counteract it. To make matters worse, his mother believed that, in order to be saved, each individual 'must experience a strong conversion'. James was given a little book in which he could read of the conversions of very young children. One of these children was only three years old. This little book with its pious tales together with stories told him by the servants, possibly in a similar context, about 'robbers, murderers, witches and ghosts' left the young boy's imagination 'continually in a state of terror. I became the most timid and contemptible of beings', he concludes.

This was James Boswell up to the age of eight, timid, indisposed sometimes and then allowed to stay at home, treated with 'excessive attention' by his mother if he did not feel well to the extent that, as he writes so honestly, 'I preferred being weak and ill to being strong and healthy'. What James can reveal in candour to Rousseau as a young man is the fruit of his contemplation of his early years. But of course this is the wisdom of age, and the young boy could not at the time deviate from the path he had chosen as a means of surviving the complexities and vagaries of his upbringing.

It is not hard from the above to see how the timid, frightened but sometimes over-indulged child could grow up into the eager-to-please but sometimes inordinately gloomy young man. And there is more.

We have not yet spoken of Boswell's father, Lord Auchinleck, austere, demanding, ambitious for his son and, with regard to religious observance, as dutiful as Boswell's mother. Boswell always speaks of his father in the Sketch to Rousseau in terms of respect ('my wealthy father, 'my father, who is one of the ablest and worthiest men in the world') and yet the strictness of the man is clear and we know from Boswell's journals how he tried all his life to please his stern father but never could. When later in life, after the death of Boswell's mother, Lord Auchinleck remarried – a common enough occurrence in the eighteenth-century – the situation became increasingly difficult. For most of his life, Boswell was undermined by his father, treated as of little account, compelled to try to fit the mould his father had made for him, and deemed unworthy to succeed him with the title of Lord Auchinleck. In his childhood days, these strictures all lay ahead, but what James did experience was a certain dourness in everyday life, which was much exaggerated one day a week when he was 'made to remember the terrible Being whom those about me called God'. As Boswell elaborates:

> The Scots Presbyterians are excessively rigid with regard to the observance of the Sabbath. I was taken to Church, where I was obliged to hear three sermons in the same day, with a great many impromptu prayers and a great many sung psalms all rendered in a stern and doleful manner. In the evening I was made to say my catechism and to repeat psalms translated into the vilest doggerel. I was obliged by my religion 'not to do my own work, speak my own words, nor think my own thoughts on God's holy day'. I tried in sincerity of heart to conform to that command; especially not to think my own thoughts. A fine exercise for a child's mind!
>
> (Wain, 1990: 3)

Both parents were doubtless convinced that this upbringing, with its strict observance of religious form and its emphasis on a powerful and punishing God would preserve their child from sin and lead him perhaps to that sober, conformist and worthy conduct which was the achievement of his class. In fact, these gloomy despondent Sundays, redolent with 'correctness' and watched over by the 'terrible Being whom those about me called God', more likely aggravated that 'melancholy temperament' Boswell told Rousseau he was born with. He states that he does not regret being

melancholy, but he is able to observe to Rousseau the dangers in possessing such a temperament and the very careful education required in order to protect these temperaments from the dangers which beset them. In Boswell's view, 'there is danger either that they will fall into a debility which will completely destroy them, or that they will form a habit of viewing everything in such colours as to make their lives miserable' In later life, there are many instances referred to in the journals, of Boswell viewing 'everything in such colours' as to make his life miserable. He was tortured all his life by what he called 'hypochondria' which was sometimes of such an incapacitating nature that he remained low and despondent and unable to work for days at a time. He discussed this affliction with Johnson, also a sufferer, but was not always able to follow Johnson's advice to keep himself busy. It is quite possible that the early lessons in religion with their emphasis on a punishing God in an atmosphere which was devoid of hope and joy helped to form Boswell as a man who quested to find a God he felt at home with, and a father whom he could love and who could love him, as these were two aspects of his life that his early education and upbringing failed to provide. This is of course speculation, but it is noteworthy that Boswell not only tried Methodism but also Catholicism, that among the first subjects broached with both Rousseau and Johnson was religion, and that all his life Boswell sought a mentor whom he could admire and who could give him the guidance he needed. In relation to famous men such as Rousseau, Pascal Paoli and Johnson, Boswell was undeniably the disciple looking for a master and in each of these three cases Boswell asked advice and guidance. Both Paoli and Johnson remained not only friends and comrades, but also mentors of Boswell throughout their lives.

Between the ages of eight and twelve, Boswell enjoyed 'reasonably good health', and, as he described in his Sketch to Rousseau, a rather happier and lighter period in his life:

> I had a governor [tutor] who was not without sentiment and sensibility. He began to form my mind in a manner that delighted me. He set me to reading The Spectator; and it was then that I acquired my first notions of taste for the fine arts and of the pleasure there is in considering the variety of human nature. I read the Roman poets, and I felt a classic enthusiasm in the romantic shades of our family's seat in the country. My governor sometimes spoke to me of religion, but in a simple and pleasing way. He told me that if

> I behaved well during my life, I should be happy in the other world. There I should hear beautiful music. There I should acquire the sublime knowledge that God will grant the righteous; and there I should meet all the great men of whom I had read, and all the dear friends I had known. At last my governor put me in love with heaven, and some hope entered into my religion.
> (Wain, 1990: 3)

There is something touching in the 'some hope entered into my religion', and yet what his governor had told him appears to us now as both simple and basic, and above all, appropriate for a child. The governor not only has a different view of religion, he has entered into communicating this view at the child's level. It is clear from the above comments by Boswell that he at last experienced peace, pleasure and joy.

Alas, at the age of twelve, this happy situation ended when Boswell's governor was appointed minister of a parish. Boswell was given another governor whom he described thus, 'a very honest man but harsh and without knowledge of the human mind'. Boswell's education continued in this unsatisfactory way encouraging him to learn poor habits of study. For example, from that last governor, he 'got the habit of reading without any profit'.

By thirteen, and after a bout of illness, Boswell was sent to the University of Edinburgh, which he enjoyed. The place 'rather pleased' him and he had more freedom. However, although in his three years of studying languages there, Boswell attained high distinction, more difficult days lay ahead. It was at this period that Boswell became aware of his sexual desires, only obliquely referring to them in the Sketch: 'My youthful desires became strong. I was horrified because of the fear that I would sin and be damned'. The lessons of eight years earlier had prevailed and the fear of sin and damnation haunted the teenage Boswell. It was perhaps this tension, which resulted in the 'terrible hypochondria' which Boswell describes as seizing him at the age of sixteen.

This then is the child which became father to the man. By sixteen or seventeen, Boswell had experienced both the flame of desire and the anguish of his fear of sin and damnation. He had been ill on at least two occasions, which are noteworthy as

precursors of later states of mind: once, at the age of twelve, 'I was weakened in body and mind, and my natural melancholy increased', Boswell writes. 'I was sent to Moffat, the spa of Scotland'. Only four years later, Boswell is ill again with a 'terrible hypochondria'. He went back to Moffat where he describes himself as having met 'an old Pythagorean'. During this period, Boswell made some dramatic decisions: 'I made an obstinate resolve never to eat any flesh, and I was resolved to suffer everything as a martyr to humanity. I looked upon the whole human race with horror'. Somehow this despairing state passed although Boswell himself cannot explain how, 'I think by yielding to received opinions', he concludes.

By eighteen, much has changed, but it is clear that Boswell's mind and emotions are in a state of confusion. He came a Catholic, as he recounts to Rousseau. Yet only two sentences later he is mentioning how 'My Lord ... made me a deist. I gave myself up to pleasure without limit'. There is a fine bit of ambiguity here as firstly, although he told Rousseau he 'became a Catholic', there does not appear to be any evidence that he did actually complete the conversion though he certainly attended a Roman Catholic Church and took instruction in the faith. In the phrase, 'I gave myself up to pleasure', it is difficult to be entirely sure to what he is referring as the eighteenth century recognized forms of pleasure other than sexual, such as that to be found in eating or drinking or in social intercourse, or indeed, in a variety of ways which could be justified as part of the search for self-fulfillment and happiness (Porter, 1996: 3, 12, 15). Boswell follows his statement about pleasure with, 'I was in a delirium of joy'. This would certainly appear to suggest that the young man had overcome – at least temporarily – his fear of sin and damnation, but even in Boswell's one-paragraph account of events for Rousseau it is evident that just too much is happening at this period for it not to result in confusion. Boswell 'struggled against paternal affection, ambition, interest'. He also fled to London, gave himself up to pleasure, wished to enter the Guards, was taken back to Scotland where he spent two years studying Civil Law. But this volcanic period in his life seemed only to leave Boswell disturbed: 'My principles became more and more confused. I ended a complete skeptic. I held all things in contempt, and I had no idea except to get through the passing day agreeably. I had intrigues with married actresses. My fine feelings were absolutely effaced.'

This is a young man being pulled in all directions between a father's desires and his own; between career choices he had not made and those he is trying to make; and between his natural sexual feelings and his sense that these are somehow nefarious and that in this kind of indulgence, his 'fine feeling' are absolutely effaced.

Boswell, in the ensuing years, will be obliged to attempt to unravel the threads which bind him to his Auchinleck (and Edinburgh) past. He will need to free himself of his complex relationship with his father and of his constantly disappointed desire to please him. He will also have to find his own road to intellectual and creative expression, and he will need to recognise his own need for sexual expression and deal with it.

Chapter 2

Boswell's Grand Tour : The Search for a Mentor

Boswell, as he reached manhood, was an individual attempting to frame his own narrative in a society in which it seemed to have been written for him. As the son of a Scottish lawyer and landowner, it was assumed – especially by Boswell's father – that James would himself become a lawyer and eventually inherit the land which had been in his family for generations. He would fulfil his family's requirements and in time would marry and perpetuate the name. These were certainly the assumptions of Lord Auchinleck in regard to the future of his son and heir. James, however, was not the compliant son his father would have wished, but a complex individual with his own needs, and aspirations which were often – but always – so very different from those his father had for him.

As I have shown in the previous chapter, the affective conditions of Boswell's early years were austere; at the same time, family expectations were high and there was little place for tender indulgence or gentle enquiry. Already pre-disposed to gloom, by both nature and nurture, as I shall show later (chapter 4), Boswell sought ways to palliate this tendency. He quite early took to drinking and/or seeking out prostitutes as ways of overcoming negative feelings, but though these were temporarily relieved, such was his religious education that guilt usually overcame him subsequently. He could not discuss his behaviour at home although he himself was desperate to reform, nor could he easily discuss with his father his desire to leave Edinburgh for London to join the Guards rather than study Law. In fact, all these matters were controversial and although Boswell did win the battle for permission to go to London and was eventually allowed to consider the Guards as a future career, it was never easy to broach his future with his father. In the absence of a mature, reasonable, reflective and loving adult with whom Boswell could discuss his behaviour, aspirations and the dilemmas of his ardent nature, Boswell eventually sought out others to fill that role. The search for an intellectual and spiritual mentor was not necessarily a conscious one, but it is evident from the Journal writings that, in certain cases, Boswell was particularly moved to ask for answers and advice which would direct him to what he could consider a right way of living. Boswell's aspirations as he moved South from Edinburgh were to write, to have money, avoid intrigues with

women – and consequently avoid disease – to mix in high circles, to live in London, and generally be respected everywhere. This was the narrative that Boswell sought, but in reality it was very difficult for him to achieve anything like that seamless movement forward that the word 'narrative' suggests.

The difficulty lay in Boswell's own personality. When Boswell left Edinburgh for London he was on the first step to framing his own narrative, but the process of resolving crucial tensions of personality was not an easy one, and Boswell's lonely childhood left a legacy of doubt which he had to contend with all his adult life.

Boswell's first year in London was momentous in its excitement and promise. It appeared as a step towards finding a respected place in a challenging literary and social world – beyond the provincialism of Edinburgh. And then there was of course the meeting with Samuel Johnson who was later to emerge as in several ways capable of being the mentor that Boswell was seeking. Few could have surmised in May 1763 when the two men met in London that the friendship would last over twenty years until Johnson's death in 1784, nor that it would result in Boswell's great work of biography, The Life. Boswell, when he first met Johnson, was a young man of good family but of little individual distinction, particularly in the London world. He had published a few pieces of poetry and criticism, but was not in any sense 'a name'. Yet this young man became almost at once a friend of a man who was at least twenty-five years older than himself and admired in London circles for his achievement.

It is without question that the meeting between Samuel Johnson and James Boswell was of huge significance for both men. But Boswell also had encounters of intellectual and emotional significance with other eminent men, which allowed him to explore his need/desire for mentorship. Surprisingly, one of these men was the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau; another was writer and philosopher Voltaire; and a third and very important figure in his life was the Corsican general Pascal Paoli, at the time leader of the Corsican people in their revolt against Genoese rule.

The Grand Tour

Like other young men of his class, Boswell accomplished a Grand Tour of Europe. For Boswell, however, it had not proved easy to arrange. His demanding father Lord Auchinleck was loathe to let his son stray too far from his watchful eye. Agreement was only given on condition that Boswell complete a period studying law in Utrecht. In August 1763, Boswell was seen off at Harwich by the new friend Samuel Johnson and he left England with the hope of a more exciting and altogether richer life. Boswell found neither the study of law nor life in the city of Utrecht particularly inspiring, but he stuck at his studies in order to please his father. Meanwhile, he was developing other plans. If he could only complete his studies successfully, he could earn the right to travel more widely in France, Italy and Germany and there he could meet with all manner of people of distinction, both aristocrats and intellectuals. He certainly wishes to include in his itinerary Rousseau and Voltaire, both of whom lived in Switzerland, as well as an enlightened Prince, preferably Frederick the Great. The idea to visit Pascal Paoli in Corsica emerged clearly during his visit to Rousseau.

Once Boswell had earned the right to move further afield in Europe than Holland, he set about achieving his aims. Boswell travelled initially with Lord Marischal, a distinguished Scot who had many excellent contacts. When not actually travelling with him, he had letters of recommendation from Marischal and other respected travellers, to ensure that doors would be opened.

By 1764, therefore, Boswell was on the move through Europe, changing the timing of his tour and adjusting his itinerary to facilitate the meetings that he intended. Danziger (1997) notes how Boswell was willing to exert himself in order to make these meetings successful. For example, in Holland, in preparation for meeting Rousseau, he made an effort to improve his French by taking private lessons, and practised daily by writing two-page 'French themes'. This enabled him later both to converse and correspond in French. In Holland too he was reading Voltaire, and later in Germany he was studying Rousseau's work in preparation for his intended visit (1997: 35). It is evident from this dedication that Boswell took the meetings very seriously and made a sustained effort to ensure their success. He had surely concluded that if he worked to benefit from the contact with eminent minds, he

would need not only an understanding of their thought but also access to the language in which that thought was expressed. Boswell was twenty-four years old, a young man making his way forward in Europe in an unusual manner. Although scores of Britain's young men of a certain class embarked on the Grand Tour, there were certainly not many who, like Boswell, used for such a clear and ambitious purpose, designed to reflect well on himself. I share the view expressed by Danziger (1997) that Boswell 'developed distinctly cosmopolitan aspirations during his extensive three-year tour on the Continent' (p.33). These are clearly revealed in his project to meet not only with his peers as he travelled through Europe but also with some of the best and most interesting minds of the time. It is this which captured his imagination much more than the possible contemplation of a ruined temple or two. Many of the young travellers of course did use the opportunity of their Tour to visit some of the great sites of the classical world and to extend their understanding of the peoples and the cultures in which they found themselves. Another accepted part of the Grand Tour was the 'sentimental education' it afforded, either due to the travellers being far from home or to the more open – in amatory matters – societies in which they found themselves. Boswell was no exception, and it would be entirely misleading to present him as a young man merely directed towards meeting with the famous intellectuals of the day. On the contrary, Boswell had his own list of seductions and escapades with ladies both married and single. But there was much more to Boswell than the mere satisfaction of an itch; regret usually followed such episodes and Boswell would once more pause to reflect and re-establish his aims.

Meeting with Rousseau

It was Lord Marischal who wrote a letter of recommendation to Rousseau on Boswell's behalf. Boswell, however, set himself the challenge of resumé attempting to meet Rousseau without using it. He also subsequently wrote his own for Rousseau, in a Sketch of his life, prepared to excite and sustain the interest of the great man (discussed in greater detail in chapter 3). This document, which was not discovered until more than one-hundred and fifty years after its inception (Pottle (1953), constitutes an invaluable record both of Boswell's attitude to his early life and of his confidence in Rousseau, inspired by his insight into his work. The determination of the young man achieved success and Boswell was admitted into

Rousseau's presence on 3rd December 1764. It was the first in a series of meetings which Boswell's persistence and charm ensured, in spite of the ill health and somewhat reclusive nature of his host.

Boswell's life, which had not progressed particularly smoothly up to this point, had always led him to a series of questions. His relationship with his father had never been close and Lord Auchinleck was certainly not the man to turn to with a list of existential questions. Rousseau, however, was such a man – at least in Boswell's eyes. Auchinleck dealt in certainties: he was clear in his religious belief; he was clear in his professional stance and in his concepts of right behaviour; he was clear in the route he believed his son should take, into law, and in the kind of life he should lead. This rigidity of mind brooked no discussion and his clarity of vision regarding his own relation to God closed off any possibility of understanding those whose belief was less unwavering. In addition, his emotional coolness discouraged discussion. He dealt with his son James by trying to bend him to his wishes, of which pushing him into the study of law was just one example. He made it obvious that he felt James was constantly falling below his own high expectations and demonstrated his lack of trust in his son's judgement in, for example, refusing to entail the Auchinleck estate on James. He held off doing this until 1789 when James was a grown man, married and father of four children. As an additional – and bizarre – humiliation, he himself married his second wife Elizabeth (James' mother having died two years earlier) on exactly the same day as James married Margaret Montgomerie, his cousin. In spite of this demanding, uncompromising and occasionally harsh behaviour, James did respect – and probably love – his father. And he did try to please him. His private Journal is full of comments of how he wants to show his father that he can, for example, manage his money, achieve the study of law in Utrecht, be a 'good' person. Lord Auchinleck probably loved James, too; he was after all his son. But his love was stern and apparently conditional. James could not discuss his metaphysical yearnings, his attempts to understand and channel his own physicality, and his sense of being a sinner with such a father. He could not sit down and ask such a man to set out for him a right way to live because any way prescribed would completely fail to take account of the individual nature of James. For these reasons, Boswell turned to others, whose intellect, wisdom and knowledge of the world he could respect and feel attuned to. He could also feel that

certain people, because of these qualities and their experience, had an openness of mind which his father did not possess and therefore could be approached. Boswell, in a sincere and perhaps somewhat ingenuous manner, now turned to Rousseau for just such discussion and for his comments and advice.

The manner in which Boswell achieved his first meeting with Rousseau provided a splendid example of Boswell's mixture of humility, determination and arrogance. Typically, he set his sights high: as he confessed in his Journal (3 December, 1764), 'One great object which I have ever had in view since I left Britain has been to obtain the acquaintance, and if possible regard of Rousseau.' This interesting self-confidence must have sprung from somewhere for though it is not unusual for young people to hope to see or meet a celebrity, to obtain 'the regard' of that celebrity is no easy matter, nor is it perhaps often a goal. Boswell, as we know him, would feel that obtaining Rousseau's regard would reflect well on himself; it would confirm his own worth, both to himself and to the world. In fact, Boswell's Journal and his letter to Rousseau, when taken together almost imply that the contact with Rousseau is being prepared as something of a test case of Boswell's capacity to achieve such a meeting on his individual merits. It is actually of considerable importance to him to succeed in this meeting outside of the usual spheres of influence and patronage which surrounded members of this class and eased their social intercourse. For example, as part of this system, Boswell already had a letter of recommendation from Lord Marischal which he could use and which, Boswell writes, 'I was sure would procure me admission.' Boswell, however, does not plan to move with that kind of ease into the sphere of Rousseau; on the contrary, as he attributes it, his 'romantic genius ... made me eager to put my own merit to the severest trial. I had therefore prepared a letter to Monsieur Rousseau ...' Boswell, in this extraordinary way, is thus using the occasion as a means of assessing his own powers – an existential moment indeed. In order to take that risk, Boswell must have had some notion of his own capabilities and capacities. He had moved sufficiently in society to have confidence in meeting a range of acquaintances, yet he was not an experienced speaker of French and he was preparing to met a celebrated and controversial writer whose work was known throughout Europe. In having decided to proceed in this way, Boswell experienced the varying highs and lows of enthusiastic youth, as revealed in his Journal. At one moment he was full of confidence: he described his

letter as 'a masterpiece' which he would ever preserve in proof that 'my soul can be sublime'; yet once the letter was sent, 'I was filled with anxiety. Is not this romantic madness?' he asked. 'Was I not sure of admittance by my recommendation? Could I not see him as any other gentleman would do?' A moment later, his confidence is re-affirmed – 'No – I am above the vulgar crowd. I would have my merit fairly tried by this great judge of human nature...'. This is Boswell's honest position on the matter. Yet once more he doubts: 'But if he does admit me, I shall have a very difficult character to support; for I have written to him with unusual elevation and given him an idea of me which I shall hardly come up to.'

Boswell was, at the time he sent the letter on, 3rd December 1764, newly arrived at the inn at Môtiers, the village in which Rousseau lived. He intended to wait for a reply, ready at a moment's notice to proceed to Rousseau's side if the appropriate answer came. The letter which Boswell addressed to Rousseau, in French, was cleverly written. As well as presenting himself as a 'Scots gentleman of ancient family', it briefly summed up his European travels to date. With regard to the character of the letter-writer, Boswell presented himself as 'a man of singular merit, as a man with a feeling heart, a lively but melancholy spirit. Ah, if all that I have suffered does not give me singular merit in the eyes of Monsieur Rousseau, why was I made as I am?' The reference to suffering was clearly intended to stir Rousseau's interest. Further, Boswell had another psychologically adept means of pricking Rousseau's curiosity through a certain kind of flattery. He turned on its head his determination to approach Rousseau as an individual without the support of letters of recommendation:

> Do you ask if I have recommendation? Surely you do not need them? In the commerce of the world a recommendation is necessary in order to protect people who lack penetration from impostors. But you, Sir, who have made such a deep study of human nature, can you be deceived in a character? I think of you thus: excepting for the incomprehensible essence of the soul, you have a perfect knowledge of all the principles of body and mind, of their movements, their sentiments; in short, of everything they can do, of everything they can acquire which truly affects man as man. And yet, Sir, I dare present myself before you.
>
> (Pottle, 1953: 214)

This mixture of flattery, ingenuousness and bravado has its charm and Boswell, who has carefully thought out the letter and worked through several drafts (Pottle (1953)),

now adds further inducements to the carefully composed text. He refers with tact and apparent concern to the fact that Rousseau is 'often indisposed', presenting himself as possessing such a simplicity and cordiality 'that may help you forget your pains.' Secondly, he again presents himself as of interest because of his own experiences: 'I find myself in serious and delicate circumstances concerning which I eagerly hope to have the counsel of the author of the *Nouvelle Héloïse*...'. Could Rousseau turn away such a man? He certainly could not. When Boswell returned to the inn after a half-hour walk by the river to prepare himself 'for the great interview' he hoped for, it was to find an answer from Rousseau. It met Boswell's carefully written missive with an appropriate tone of honesty and a touch of humour: 'I am ill, in pain, really in no state to receive visits. Yet I cannot deprive myself of Mr Boswell's, provided that out of consideration for the state of my health, he is willing to make it short.'

There followed the first of a series of meetings recorded by Boswell in his Journal. As reported by Boswell, the more personal note develops in the third meeting, on Wednesday 5th December 1764, when Boswell tells Rousseau that he had turned Roman Catholic. In return Rousseau recounts how he was Catholic in his youth but changed back again and was readmitted to the Protestant faith. Something his attitude provokes Boswell's response:

> I stopped him in the middle of the room and I said to him, 'But tell me sincerely, are you a Christian?' I looked at him with a searching eye. His countenance was no less animated. Each stood and watched the other's looks. He struck his breast, and replied, 'Yes. I pique myself upon being one'...
>
> (Pottle, 1953: 225)

This scene signals the opening of discussion of a topic Boswell is very keen to discuss. The description of each watching 'the other's looks' invokes an image of two males circling each other to determine what to trust. From what followed at that same meeting, it is clear that Boswell had decided he would trust Rousseau and move the conversation forward into a personal domain. First, he asks Rousseau whether he suffers from melancholy and confesses that he himself does so. Then he asks how he can be happy, having 'done so much evil.' Rousseau advises him to begin life anew, but not to trust to men's judgments, 'or you will find yourself tossed to and from perpetually'. He sagely goes on to warn Boswell that such people giving advice

'may be impelled by motives of interest or convention to talk to you in a way not corresponding to what they really think.' This comment prompts Boswell to ask directly for what he really wants. 'Will you, Sir, assume direction of me?' In this, Boswell shows no awareness either of the huge demand he is attempting to put on Rousseau, nor of any prior demands on Rousseau which may take precedence. He is amazingly single-minded and essentially selfish. It is as if he had travelled to Môtiers to ask that very question. Yet this is a genuine and open expression of Boswell's very real desire for guidance. Although much of his writing implies self-belief (his first letter to Rousseau is 'a masterpiece'), he is aware that his life lacks an over-arching framework and that some of the time he is swept forward or back by emotional currents he seems unable to control. Rousseau's response is a disappointing but frank, 'I cannot. I can be responsible only for myself.' But Boswell is determined to keep the question open.

In reaction to Rousseau's rejection viva-voce, Boswell determined to turn to other means of securing the advice he sought. Deciding that Rousseau might pay greater attention to the written word, Boswell spent the ensuing hours drafting redrafting the eloquent Sketch of my Life (see Chapter 1, page 9) which he was to use to secure Rousseau's advice. Pottle (1953) notes that the Sketch filled 'fourteen quarto pages of the same size as the contemporary journal', and that 'Boswell also preserved two outlines, an incomplete first draft and various rejected leaves' (p.228). In addition, Boswell also wrote a covering letter to Rousseau, and a short letter to his friend John Johnston, mainly to boast of meeting with Rousseau and to exclaim enthusiastically, 'He has enlightened my mind. He has kindled my soul.' This fever of writing took place between leaving Rousseau, possibly about noon (as Pottle surmises, p.226) and six o'clock when, Boswell's Journal tells us, '... I set out', and gives same idea of what Boswell was capable of in an exalted and purposeful mood.

This letter to Rousseau expresses two affirmations of great interest: the first says, 'You will see me, and I shall go out from your retreat into the world with two or three simple and noble principles, and I shall be a man all the rest of my days.' What I believe is expressed in these words is the hope that Rousseau, having read the Sketch, will see Boswell, and as a result of his deepened understanding of Boswell will be enabled to formulate and pass on the 'two or three noble principles' for which

Boswell so fervently wishes. The poetic 'I shall be a man all the rest of my days' is an expression of Boswell's yearning towards an absolute and idealised state of being ('a man') he is not sure he can achieve. It is a theme which recurs as Boswell attempts to reconcile the opposing forces in his nature. This affirmation also expresses Boswell's confidence in Rousseau's capacity to provide answers, to be that person who passes on 'noble principles' and this confidence in Rousseau is confirmed in the second affirmation: 'I could trust you with anything.'

The sentence is written in the context of Boswell's entrusting some pieces of writing by Belle de Zuylen (whom Boswell had known and admired in Holland) now revealed to a third party for the very first time. ('You are the only one to whom I have shown her papers'). The trust is therefore particularly linked to Boswell's forwarding of these personal possessions but may also extend to the personal material which is to be entrusted to Rousseau in the Sketch, a major part of which contains Boswell's account of his love affair with a Scottish lady who had 'married a gentleman of great wealth'. The trust that Boswell puts in Rousseau does not simply extend to Boswell's confession of his relations with a woman whose 'father had heaped kindnesses on me' and whose husband 'was one of the most amiable of men', but also to Boswell's feelings of guilt at maintaining such a relationship over a period of time and during the woman's marriage. In the recounting of this relationship we see the extent of Boswell's trust as he reveals to Rousseau 'a record of all the evils I have done'. Now he stands truly exposed he asks the question that haunts him, 'Tell me, is it possible for me yet to make myself a man?' The question seems to imply, 'Do you think I can rise above these terrible sins and change myself into something decent, something worthy?' In effect, into a man. This is what Boswell really wants from Rousseau – a means of establishing his worth as an individual in spite of having fallen below the norms he himself has established. That he should place this huge responsibility on a celebrated writer he barely knows is quite extraordinary and implies the depth of Boswell's need.

It was almost ten days before Boswell and Rousseau met again on 14th December 1764, and Rousseau was very ill. He nevertheless saw Boswell briefly and allowed himself to be questioned by the eager young man. His first response was, 'I have read your Memoir. You have been gulled. You ought never to see a priest.' To

Boswell's question, 'But can I yet hope to make something of myself?', Rousseau replied, 'Yes. Your great difficulty is that you think it so difficult a matter ...'. In effect, although it was agreed that Boswell would come back later and although there were other meetings and questionings, these succinct answers sum up Rousseau's position. His mind cut through the cloudy nature of Boswell's anxieties and his comments were unequivocal. For example, '... You have no right to do evil for the same of good', in response to Boswell's worry that the married Scottish lady from whom he had separated might, upon his return, attempt to blackmail him by threatening to tell her husband into continuing the liaison. Also, in response to the question, '... how can I expiate the evil I have done?', Rousseau replied firmly, 'Oh, Sir, there is no expiation for evil except good'. Rousseau did present to Boswell certainties for uncertainties and Boswell accepted them but did not necessarily absorb them, though he took pains to record them and did not react to them at the time, as the conversations recorded in the journal show.

On 15th December, the time came to part and the farewell was warm on both sides. In Boswell's words, 'Monsieur Rousseau embraced me. He was quite the tender Saint-Preux. He kissed me several times, and held me in his arms with elegant cordiality. Oh, I shall never forget that I have been thus.' To Boswell's question about whether he could be sure he was held to Rousseau by a thread, even if of the finest. 'By a hair', Rousseau replied, 'Yes. Remember always that there are points at which our souls are bound.'

Although Rousseau had refused the responsibility of directing Boswell, he had nevertheless given him time, energy and interest when he himself was unwell. He responded to all of Boswell's concerns and did in fact remain the Sage, giving advice about God, about a future profession, about social mores, about being a citizen, about books, and so on. To Boswell's comment, 'I do not get on well with my father. I am not at my ease with him', Rousseau sagely pointed out, 'To be at ease you need some amusement ... that puts you more on an equal footing.' Boswell had found a man worthy of his respect and trust. The success of this encounter must have encouraged Boswell as he continued his travels.

With Voltaire in Ferney

From Geneva, on 24th December, Boswell took a coach to Ferney, 'the seat of the illustrious Voltaire', whom he hoped to meet. This time he did avail himself of a letter of recommendation from Constant d'Hermenches (Colonel Constant, who had acted in plays in Voltaire's theatre in Lausanne and corresponded with Voltaire). Although Voltaire's footman is very much annoyed at being disturbed, 'Voltaire did eventually appear and Boswell notes, 'He received me with dignity.' The conversation between the two was lively and witty but alas, did not last long and Monsieur de Voltaire did not dine with the rest of the guests. Boswell, being the ardent character he was, wanted more, and he very quickly worked out a way of acquiring it. Boswell had got on well with Voltaire's niece, Madame Denis, who did 'the honours of his house' (just as he had made an ally of Thérèse Le Vasseur, Rousseau's housekeeper). Now, on 25th December, he wrote a lively letter to Madame Denis, 'begging to be allowed to sleep a night under the roof of Monsieur de Voltaire.' This direct and spontaneous appeal met with a surprising response: Voltaire himself wrote the answer, 'in the person of his niece, making me very welcome.' Boswell spent an entertaining evening, refusing to go into dinner with the other guests so that he could spend time alone with Voltaire. He wrote, in his account to Temple, 28th December:

> I returned yesterday to this enchanted castle. The magician appeared a very little before dinner – But in the evening he came into the drawing room in great spirits. I placed myself by him. I touched the keys in unison with his imagination. I wish you had heard the music. He was all brilliance. He gave me continued flashes of wit.
>
> (Pottle, 1953: 285)

Boswell mentions in his journal having written particulars of this conversation to Temple and having made notes of it on 'a separate paper', as was his custom. Usually, he would have written up the full conversation from his notes, but unfortunately, neither this nor his conversation during his subsequent meeting with Voltaire on 29th December have been written up. The notes suggest the conversations were lively, energetic, witty, covering many topics of mutual interest but in none of these did Boswell refer to his own personal dilemmas, nor did he

question the seventy-year-old about his. Boswell left his meetings with Voltaire a happy man, quite dazzled with his success. He noted enthusiastically in his Journal of 29th December,

> But am I not well received everywhere? Am I not particularly taken notice of by men of the most distinguished gender? And why? I have neither profound knowledge, strong judgement, nor constant gaiety. But I have a noble soul which still shines forth, a certain degree of knowledge a multiplicity of ideas of all kinds, an original humour and turn of expression, and, I really believe, a remarkable knowledge of human nature.
>
> (Pottle, 1953: 296)

In spite of the slightly overblown nature of Boswell's expression, he is right in his estimation of himself. These qualities – his noble soul, his multiplicity of ideas, his original humour and turn of expression – endeared him to others of creative mind who were capable of hearing an original voice such as Boswell's. In this spirit, Boswell was happy with the thought of moving on now to Italy where his plan to make the acquaintance of Paoli in Corsica was to evolve.

Boswell and Corsica

The issue of Corsica had become a part of the discourse between Rousseau and Boswell by virtue of a coincidence of timing. When Boswell called upon him, Rousseau had only recently received a letter from a Corsican officer in the French Army Mateo Buttafoco*, asking Rousseau to come to Corsica and draw up a constitution for the island, which had long been in a state of armed revolt against the Republic of Genoa. Under the leadership of Pascal Paoli the island had virtually established its independence at this period and Rousseau had commented, in his *Social Contract*, that there was only one country left in Europe that was capable of sound legislation, and that was Corsica. It is likely that it was this comment which prompted Buttafoco's invitation. Paoli, though he did not ask Rousseau for 'a constitution' did second the invitation for him to come to Corsica, probably in the hope of securing some assistance from Rousseau as historian and propagandist (Pottle, 1953: 221).

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* Pottle refers thus to Buttafoco; Rousseau, in his letter of 30th May 1765, refers to Buttafoco as Captain of the Royal Italian Regiment.

Boswell was heartily thrilled both to meet Rousseau and to learn that the Corsicans had applied to 'Monsieur Rousseau', and immediately wrote to his friend George Dempster (3rd December 1764) to tell him so:

> Dempster, I have been with him. I have been most politely received ... I must not pretend to give you in a hasty letter an idea of our conversation. Let me only assure you of one fact. The Corsicans have actually applied to Monsieur to give them a set of laws. He has answered, 'It exceeds my power but not zeal.'
>
> (Pottle, 1953: 220)

The link between Rousseau and Paoli established by Rousseau's interest in the Corsican situation* encouraged Boswell to think of making his way to Corsica to meet this famous man. Boswell asked Rousseau for a letter of recommendation to assist him in his visit. He had already left Switzerland and had determined that even if the desired letter failed to arrive, he would travel on to Corsica without it. The letter reached Boswell in Florence. Rousseau wrote to the point:

> To confine myself to what is immediately pressing, the recommendation which you ask for Corsica: since you have a desire to visit those brave islanders, you may enquire at Bastra for M. Buttafoco, Captain of the Royal Italian Regiment;* his house is at Vescovato, where he resides pretty often. He is a very worthy man, and has both knowledge and genius; it will be sufficient to show him this letter and I am sure he will receive you well, and will contribute to let you see the island and its inhabitants with satisfaction. If you do not find M. Buttafoco and will go directly to M. Pascal Paoli, General of the nation, you may in the same manner show him this letter, and as I know the nobleness of his character I am sure you will be very well pleased at your reception. You may even tell him that you are liked by my Lord Marischal of Scotland and that my Lord Marischal is one of the most zealous partisans of the Corsican nation. You need no other recommendation to these gentlemen but your own merit, the Corsicans being naturally so courteous and hospitable that all strangers that come among them are made welcome and caressed.
>
> Rousseau to Boswell, Môtiers, 30th May 1765. Received 11th August 1765 in Florence. Boswell's translation. (Pottle, 1955: 121)

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*Writing to his friend Alexandra Deleyre after Boswell's departure from Môtiers, Rousseau expressed his views on Corsica thus:

Je ne suis pas tout à fait de votre avis sur l'mpossibilité de donner une bonne institution aux Corses, et je ne crois point quil soit necessaire d'y employer le fanatisme. Loin de penser, qu'il ne faille point se meler des affaires des hommes, pour n'avoir point de reproche à se faire, Je pense au contraire qu'on se prepare au très grand on neglige de faire le bien, ou du moins d'y tacher avec quelque espoir de réussir. Mais ce n'est pas le moment de parler de tout çela, et les Corses ont aujourdhui autres choses à faire que d'établir l'Utopie au milieu d'eux.

Môtiers, 20th December 1764.

Copy made by Boswell and printed for the first time in Pottle, 1955: 317.

This generous letter facilitated Boswell's contact with the island. His visit to Corsica resulted in his popular *Account of Corsica, Journal of a Tour to that Island and Memoirs of Pascal Paoli* (hereinafter *Corsica*), which he wrote on his return to Great Britain, and published in 1768. In *Corsica*, Boswell opens by explaining his interest in the island:

> Having resolved to pass some years abroad for my instruction and entertainment, I conceived a design of visiting the island of Corsica. I wished for something more than just the common course of what is called the tour of Europe; and Corsica occurred to me as a place which nobody else had seen, and where I should find what was to be seen nowhere else, a people actually fighting for liberty and forming themselves from a poor, inconsiderable oppressed nation into a flourishing and independent state.
> (Pottle, 1955: 156)

These introductory words, honest as they are, imply the attraction of the exotic, in this case the island of Corsica and the Corsican nation which was in what might be perceived as a state of transition from oppressed people into nation state. The attraction was towards something more primitive, earthy and unfinished, something considered authentic in contrast to what was daily experienced in highly urbanised societies such as existed in London and Paris. For Boswell, as for others of his century, the appeal of Corsica was linked to an idealised view of the innocence and purity of the simple life as lived by the peasant – the rural poor – (compared to the criminalized life of the contemporary urban poor). It is clear from Boswell's opening comment that part of the lure was actually to witness something that was in process and which could be witnessed nowhere else: 'a people actually fighting for liberty and transforming themselves from a poor, inconsiderable, oppressed nation into a flourishing and independent state.' The Corsicans therefore were seen as oppressed, poor, and resisting outside forces, all of which suffering could be conceived as noble and consequently ennobling. A small Mediterranean island thus became of interest containing as it did perhaps some of the last 'noble savages' of Europe. Boswell journeyed to the island from Leghorn in October 1765. The success of his later account of his visit bears witness to his contemporaries' eagerness likewise to experience what was wild and remote.

The development of an individual voice

Meeting with Paoli was considerably more daunting than meeting with Rousseau. It was not just that Paoli was a leader of men, a General who had been elected to this post in 1755 at the age of twenty-nine. Now approaching forty, Paoli was a man of action compared to Rousseau, but also, as Boswell found out, a man of wide culture and a reflective turn of mind.

These qualities were not, however, the first observed by Boswell when he found himself face to face with the General. He was impressed by the physical presence of Paoli as much as by his intense regard, describing the meeting as follows:

> I found him alone and was struck with his appearance. He is tall, strong and well made; of fair complexion, a sensible, free and open countenance, and a manly and noble carriage. He was in his fortieth year. He was dressed in green and gold...
>
> He asked me what were my commands for him. I presented him a letter from Count Rivarola, and when he had read it I showed him my letter from Rousseau. He was polite but very reserved. I had stood in the presence of many a prince, but I had never had such a trial as in the presence of Paoli. I have already said that he is a great physiognomist. In consequence of his being in continual danger from treachery and assassination, he has formed a habit of studiously observing every new face. For ten minutes we walked backwards and forwards through the room, hardly saying a word, while he looked at me with a steadfast, keen and penetrating eye, as if he searched my very soul. (*Corsica*, pp.68-69).

This portrait provides us with an early example of Boswell's skill as a recorder and portraitist. In it he conveys simultaneously what he observed and his emotional response to it. The physical details, such as 'tall, strong and well made' add to the reader's picture of the man, whereas observations such as 'polite but very reserved' and descriptions such as 'looked at me with a steadfast, keen and penetrating eye' express something of the essence of Boswell's interlocutor. Boswell is intricately involved in this presentation, too: throughout the writing, the Boswellian 'I' and 'me' constantly punctuate the objective portrayal, insistently reminding the reader that we are seeing, in this case, Paoli, as seen by Boswell (the ***physical*** portrait); Paoli in relation to Boswell (the ***relational*** portrait); Paoli in reaction to Boswell (***reactive*** portrait), and Boswell experiencing Paoli (***experiential*** portrait). In this paradigm,

Boswell is at the centre; he is both observer, commentator, and the receptor of the effect occasioned by the 'other'.

This method of writing is entirely typical of Boswell; it allows him to capture passing moments and convey the quality of the experience. A similarly vivid example of Boswell's evocative capacity is found in the quotation referred to earlier in which Boswell is interrogating Rousseau about whether he is a Christian (Wednesday 5th December 1764):

> I stopped him in the middle of the room and I said to him, 'But tell me sincerely, are you a Christian?' I looked at him with a searching eye. His countenance was no less animated. Each stood and watched the other's looks. He struck his breast, and replied, 'Yes. I pique myself upon being one'...

Here again we see the ***relational*** portrait ('I looked at him with a searching eye'); the ***reactive*** portrait (His countenance was no less animated'), followed by a ***physical*** portrait which in this case, in a dramatic configuration, presents the two men as seen by Boswell ('each stood and watched the other's looks'). The captured moment is further enlivened by dialogue which heightens its immediacy and veracity. Because Boswell is not a detached observer but 'in the picture' himself, a reader can experience something of the significance of the moment to Boswell. This technique of enabling the reader to empathise with Boswell's empathy, and his capacity to remember and recreate conversations are aspects of Boswell's writing, which continued to undergo technical improvement until his last great work *The Life*, some thirty years later.

Other factors may have contributed to the effectiveness of these portraits: firstly, Boswell has been writing regularly for a number of years, both his own private Journal and a considerable number of letters to friends and acquaintances as well as notes and memoranda. He is refining his skills as he writes. Secondly, in the case of the Paoli portrait in particular, Boswell was thoroughly keyed up before meeting the General. He had conversed with various of the islanders since arriving in Corsica and this had greatly heightened his idea of Paoli, 'they having represented him to me as something above humanity.' He was deeply anxious lest he should 'sink to nothing before him.' Thirdly, and most importantly, Boswell was not then writing for publication. His meetings with Rousseau were documented in his private journal

and recounted in letters to friends; similarly in regard to his meetings with Voltaire, and although he took notes of his conversations with Voltaire intending to write them up in full, there is no trace of his having done so. The description of the first meeting with Paoli, on the other hand, became part of his published *Account of Corsica.* It is, in consequence, more perfectly realised than other contemporaneous portraits.

That Boswell was set to admire Paoli is apparent from the manner of describing him at the first meeting: the stature, the physical presence, the reserve, the keen evaluating eye. As he began to know Paoli better, this admiration emerged more fully. Boswell was exceptionally well looked after, dining and supping constantly with the General, as he said; he was visited by all the nobility and attended by a party of guards whenever he wanted to make a tour. As time passed it was clear that this was no ordinary man, no ordinary general even, but a man of great distinction who constantly exercised his mind on a wide variety of issues and who could respond to the twenty-five-year-old Boswell's need to discuss what McLaren (1966) has typified as 'The three subjects which haunted him – unchastity, the truth of the Christian faith (in particular the possibility of the claims of the Catholic Church), and his constitutional bouts of introspective melancholy, then known throughout Europe as the 'English malady' (p.14).

Boswell, in need of a wise father because his own was unapproachable, did talk to Paoli about all the above subjects and he noted with admiration that Paoli's 'notions of morality are high and refined, such as become the Father of a nation.'

Boswell's journal of his tour to Corsica is a lively account of conversations and discussions which illustrate the minds of both men, and of anecdotes of Corsican life and of Paoli's dealings with his people. Moving away from the rather more pedantic and 'scientific' travel accounts of earlier writers with their focus on flora and fauna, Boswell's account of his travels was innovative in that it placed the individual traveller at the heart of the account. Brady and Pottle (1955) express the view that in part the subject matter of *Corsica* was 'dictated by Boswell's purpose at the time of its publication in 1768' (p.154) and that in response to changes in the political situation between Boswell's leaving Corsica and 1767 when *Corsica* was being written, Boswell's first important published work was 'a finished piece of

propaganda' (p.154). While siting the genesis of *Corsica* in a particular context, these writers do however recognise that 'Human and not physical nature' was Boswell's object. All Boswell's journal writings indicate his interest in human nature, whether his own or that of others. It is not in this that Boswell was original but in his elaboration of a method which allowed him to project his own unifying vision of the Corsican struggle through his depiction of the people and their leader. Curley (1991) goes further in his estimation of the importance of this text, arguing that the final autobiographical portion of the book (that which includes the *Memoirs of Pascal Paoli),* 'provided Boswell with the narrative model for his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1786) and *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791)' (p.90). The skill with which Boswell wove his meetings with Paoli into a portrayal of both Paoli and his people – and of course himself – ensured success. Boswell is present in *Corsica* as the traveller, the one who sees, experiences and reflects the experience. In this personal presence, which brings the focus of the travel account onto individual experience rather than onto objective contemplation of phenomena, Boswell was as innovative as Sterne whose *Sentimental Journey* (1768) uses a profoundly individual voice –albeit a fictionalised one – as a means of establishing complicity between narrator and reader.

Boswell, at the age of twenty-five, had powers of mind and heart – not to mention pen – which made him an eloquent traveller. His account is focussed on people rather than landscapes and it is this which brings to life his six weeks in Corsica and his meeting with the extraordinary General. When the time came to say farewell, Boswell expressed his feelings thus: 'From having known intimately so exalted a character, my sentiments of human nature were raised ...' And he concludes, ' ... I was for the rest of my life set free from slavish timidity in the presence of great men, for where shall I find a man greater than Paoli?'

This expression of sentiment was no empty rhetoric; on his return to England Boswell took up the standard for the Corsican cause, to the extent that he became known as 'Corsica Boswell'. But his attempts to involve the British government in Corsican affairs met with failure, and by June 1769 Paoli was on board an English ship bound for exile in Britain after the French had successfully overwhelmed Paoli's forces.

Willey (1940) has suggested that, on approaching the eighteenth century, we are, broadly speaking, confronted with 'a steady decline in what has been called the tragic sense of life' (1940: 10). Subsequently, documenting the evolution of thought in the early and middle years of the century, Willey concludes 'Most of the English writers of the time felt that they were living in an age of enlightenment' (p.45). In Boswell, it appears to me that the tension between the tragic sense of life and the feeling of living in an age of enlightenment is unresolved. This tragic sense of life is apparent in Boswell's episodes of profound gloom and despondency; his pre-occupation with death; his incapacity to sustain his better self. The feeling of living in an age of enlightenment emerges in his curiosity, his open-ness, his desire to see for himself; his huge moments of energy and determination which resulted in *The Life* and in his two famous travel accounts, as well as in the achievement of his journals. It is above all the spirit which carried him through his Grand Tour with its stimulating meetings and its confirmation that he was indeed a 'fine fellow'.

Chapter 3

Prisons, Prisoners and Executions

James Boswell, son of Alexander Boswell, Lord Advocate of the Edinburgh Justiciary and himself future Laird of Auchinleck, nevertheless had, it appears, a commoner's sympathy for the sufferings and legal embroilments of ordinary folk such as soldiers, drunkards, forgers and those who ate at inns without the wherewithal to pay their bills. How else can we explain his strenuous activities on behalf of such as these, or his extraordinary efforts to save the life of one John Reid, sheep-stealer, which fully occupied him for over seven weeks in the summer of 1774?

Boswell took his first case as a qualified lawyer in Edinburgh in 1766 when he was engaged in the defence of John Reid, charged with sheep-stealing. Boswell's efforts on the man's behalf had the happy result for Reid that he was eventually discharged as not guilty. This seemingly unimportant first success for Boswell was to haunt him eight years later when John Reid was again arrested on a similar charge, and Boswell was once more pressed into the defence. This time, in spite of all Boswell's efforts and his intense concern, Reid was sentenced to the gallows. Further efforts in the form of a petition for the lesser sentence of transportation also failed, and although the execution was delayed by fourteen days, it did eventually take place on 21st September 1774. Boswell was devastated. Although he had fully expected that the sentence would be maintained and had even warned Reid not to raise his hopes when the petition for transportation was being submitted, he had nevertheless convinced himself that what he perceived as the man's innocence in the face of the charge against him would prevail. In this Boswell's idealism deceived him, the law being a powerful force which may move against the innocent as against the guilty.

John Reid was not the first client of Boswell's to be sentenced to death. Nor was he the first whose execution was witnessed by Boswell. Other early cases included Hay, a soldier implicated in a drunken assault and the theft of a watch; Raybould, a forger; William Harris of Ayr, another forger. All were defended by Boswell before

the Court of Justiciary in Edinburgh. Given the proliferation of such apparently small cases and the rigidity of the law whereby a certain outcome was more or less predetermined, Boswell was involved in defending what were in effect lost causes. Aptly summed up as 'common criminals, the unfortunate, the desperate, the clearly guilty and imminently threatened with the pains of law' (Wimsatt, 1959 *Defence*, p.xvi), these clients nevertheless engaged Boswell's sympathy and efforts on their behalf. These went as far as repeated visits to prison, lengthy courtroom sessions, visits as the sentenced awaited execution, Bible readings, and sincere and passionate exhortations to repentance. Boswell, it can be seen, was working outside the boundaries of professional advocate and extending his role to that of social worker, prison visitor, chaplain and priest. This kind of deep involvement in the fate of members of the criminal classes absorbed his time and his emotions and could not fail to gain him a reputation as a kind of 'self-appointed public defender' (Wimsatt, op.cit.).

I will argue that the choice of cases and the manner in which he handled them are entirely consistent with Boswell's character, his inner motivation and the intellectual and spiritual springs of his being. He need not be considered odd or unusual either in making the choice of this form of legal work, or in attending the execution both of those he had defended and of those with whom he had no particular connection other than the human.

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Historians presently disagree as to the extent of criminality in the eighteenth century. In the absence of reliable archival data, two views prevail: one, that there was a vast criminal class; two, that there was 'little professional crime in our period' and few traces of a criminal class or criminal subculture 'at least outside the capital' (Sharpe, 1984: 119-120). Yet despite a lack of concordance on statistical evidence it is clear that there was a perception on the part of the public that crime and criminal activity were everywhere. As one commentator points out:

> The notion of a widespread criminal class stealthily at work throughout the land, a furtive and nefarious mirror image of the frightened hard-working citizen, was a very potent idea in eighteenth century popular imagination (Bell, 1991: 15).

As we know from our own day, a society's perception of what the French call 'l'insécurité' and we call crime can strongly motivate that society to take restrictive measures in order to protect what it perceives as its own vulnerability. A climate is thereby created in which changes in the law may more easily be introduced. This behaviour of the legislature may in its turn generate a perception that it reflects an increase in criminality. As Bell (1991) notes: 'It is obvious that the greater the number of laws, and the greater the severity with which they are enforced, the more crimes will seem to have been committed' (p.16). Here the important word is 'seem', for society's notion of its own vulnerability or invulnerability is based on a certain number of intangibles, among them hearsay and rumour. Eighteenth-century society as a whole clearly agreed on the importance of protecting property. The fact that the death sentence could be considered appropriate punishment for theft of goods is testimony both to a strong urge to protect property and to society's acceptance of the death sentence (or transportation) as a final solution to the problem.

Hay et al (1975) points to a redefining of crimes during this period, rather than a multiplication of crimes, or evidence of an actual increase in crime in the purest sense. In other words, one-time innocent activities, such as use-rights in common woods, or perquisites in industry were redefined as crimes by, in Hay's words, 'a property-conscious oligarchy' (1975: 13). His analysis, supported by documentation of crimes and sentences, confirms that all crimes relating to property carry a sentence of death or transportation at this period. The chipping away of old privileges such as the right to cull wood or to keep and use small left-overs from piece-work resulted in numerous statutes to protect the new rights, often imposing the sanction of death. Hay cites Radinowicz (in *History of English Criminal Law 1948-1968)* as suggesting that between the years 1688 and 1820 the number of statutes grew from 50 to over 200 (Hay, 1975: 17), whereas Ignatieff (1978) notes the increase in the number of crimes bearing the punishment of death 'from about 50 in 1688 to about 160 by 1765', concluding that they had reached 'something like 225 by the end of the Napoleonic Wars (1978: 16). It is Hay who sums up these changes: 'In a mood of unrivalled assurance and complacency Parliament over the century created one of the bloodiest criminal codes in Europe' (1975: 19). Whether this code, the so-called

Bloody Code, evolved as a response to a surge in crime is debateable. New penalties certainly occasioned a need for explanation and one explanation could easily appear to be the increasing depravity of the people and/or the rise in commerce and in the type of goods it could purchase which introduced an additional temptation. Hay (1975) reminds of the difficulty of an absolute answer: 'whether there was any increase in the amount of theft per capita is the subject of current research' (1975: 23).

Whether crime itself – or merely the legal process – multiplied during this period, it is evident that there was a huge interest in both crime and the criminal on the part of the reading public. This is attested to in the number of crime-related descriptions in the press, such as criminal biographies, court reports, dying speeches, ballads, broadsheets, case histories and all sorts of writing about the laws and law-breakers. To this collection, Boswell himself contributed, writing letters to the press, or adopting – as he did in the case of John Reid, for example – the voice of the condemned criminal. At the same time, literature in the form of the first imaginative fiction to explore character, reflected this preoccupation in works such as *Moll Flanders, Clarissa, The Beggars' Opera.* The range of material available for the reading public mirrored the general preoccupation of society. Boswell, as a member of that society, was professionally and personally interested in the outcomes of the law.

There is no doubt that penalties for those who transgressed the law – witness the Bloody Code – were harsh as one can see from merely looking at a few of Boswell's unsuccessful clients, the charges against them, and the outcome. Thus we can note that robbery and forgery were both capital offences, as of course were assault and murder. Sometimes, criminals suffered the disputably lesser punishment of transportation, but as the thinking behind the promulgation of severe penalties was that they were to discourage the would-be criminal, there was little hesitation in invoking the ultimate sentence. This sentiment behind the practice of the law is expressed in what I take to be the representative words of no less a figure than Alexander Boswell himself, representative of his country's legal establishment as Lord Advocate, and of his country's landed class through his birth and position as Laird of Auchinleck.

As the trial of John Reid drew to a close and the jury declared his guilt, Boswell attempted to hold up matters by asking the court to delay pronouncing sentence for a few days 'as he would endeavour to show that a capital punishment should not be inflicted' (Edinburgh Advertiser, 2nd August 1774, quoted in *Defence*, p.266). Lord Auchinleck made reply to this in the terms hastily recorded by Boswell as follows:

> Auchinleck: I'll own that I think theft by our law a capital crime, more especially as here, where 'tis a grex*; were it not so, farmers would be in [a] miserable situation. If nineteen not capital, a hundred not, and there would be an end of that useful business ...

There follow further points put by other members of the legal team. The Justice-Clerk then continues:

> Justice-Clerk: Your Lordships have a point of law fixed since the Monarchy, that theft [is] capital. It would then be improper and even indecent for the Court to delay upon the relevancy. All your Lordships agreed that theft [is] capital, and indeed [it] would hurt my mind to think that a grex should not be capital. So judgement should be given]
>
> Auchinleck: Tis a disagreeable part of our office to pass sentence of death on any man. But so are mankind made that it must be. This man [was] before us before, and all of us [were] called on in [the] course of our duty to declare that the verdict was contrary to the evidence. Now we have from a most respectable jury a verdict finding [him] guilty of [the theft of a] grex. Were he to get off, [he] would go on. His former escape emboldened [him]. We have no choice. I propose that on Wednesday, etc ...
>
> *Defence*, p.267.

From the above it is clear that there is no way that Auchinleck and his fellow judges would deviate from treating this type of theft as a capital offence. There is agreement on that point, particularly because the theft in question is of a grex. The punishment is clearly seen as a deterrent. Auchinleck invokes the panel's (the defendant's) previous escape from punishment ('This man [was] before us before, and all of us [were] called on in [the] course of our duty to declare that the verdict was contrary to the evidence'). His view is that a second escape would only encourage the man to continue in his ways. ('Were he to get off, [he] would go on. The former escape emboldened [him]') Auchinleck is thus clear in his conscience. He concludes, before pronouncing sentence, 'We have no choice'. What he has

* A flock. In this case, nineteen sheep had been stolen.

done, however, is to invoke the man's past trial and the previous accusation against him. The fact of Reid's past was explicitly brought up by Boswell early in the proceedings in order that Reid's history should not be used against him. Auchinleck agreed to Boswell's plea that 'what is ancient' should not be discussed in these words:

> Auchinleck: As to habit and repute, it is not a crime in our law. It is a misfortunate thing when a man has it, but a man cannot be punished for having a bad character ...
>
> *Defence*, p.253.

The court all agreed and Boswell then moved that the time under consideration should be restricted to the period since 1766 (the time of the first trial).

Unfortunately, this notion of the man's past had ineluctably been introduced into the trial. Firstly, all had heard Boswell's discussion of the point and the judges' agreement. Subsequent witnesses brought by the prosecution mentioned that John Reid had for several years 'been suspected of sheep-stealing' or had the reputation of a sheep-stealer. This confirmed in the jury's mind a notion of probability, particularly when the first part of the charge – that of stealing sheep – could not be proven, all the evidence being circumstantial. Reid himself claimed that he had purchased the sheep from William Gardner. It was proposed to call this man as a witness but as he was himself at the time a prisoner in the Tolbooth at Stirling, convicted of stealing a piece of scarlet cloth from a shop in Falkirk, and sentenced to transportation, he did not attend the trial. The moot point is whether Boswell could have called him but feared his evidence would convict Reid. There was no evidence of a conclusive nature that Reid himself had stolen the sheep. Furthermore, as the Lord Advocate pointed out, if Gardner had stolen the sheep and sold them to the panel, the panel had nevertheless failed to bring forward any evidence of this. In the absence of proof that Reid had purchased or received the sheep from Gardner, the presumption was that the theft had been carried out by Reid. Whatever pleading was put forward by Boswell, however it may have been stated by the Lord Advocate that 'if this man is not guilty of the actual theft, he is an innocent man', the court-room discussion, the witnesses, the summing up all played their parts in building up a picture in the minds of the jury and Reid was accordingly found guilty.

Although Scotland had its own sophisticated legal system, derived from quite different sources than those of the corresponding system in England, Cameron (1983) indicates that it was only after the Union of 1707, and more particularly with the elimination of the Jacobite threat and 'the end of heritable jurisdictions in 1747', that the Westminster Government through its firm control of all Britain was able to endow the Scottish legal system with the sanctions it required to operate effectively (Cameron, 1983: 42). In Scotland, as in England, the theft of sheep was considered a capital offence; as the panel had already been tried for a similar offence – even if that previous occasion were not taken into account – the probability that the panel would re-offend made the capital sentence inevitable. Like his counterparts in London, the avenue open to Boswell was now a petition for transportation, which at that time meant transportation to the American colonies. As in English law, there were some discretionary powers available and there was always a chance that a capital sentence might be commuted. As Hay (1975) ponders, 'We have yet to explain the co-existence of bloodier laws and increased convictions with a declining proportion of death sentences that were actually carried out' (p.23). It appears, from all evidence, to have been fairly random who received a royal pardon and who did not. According to Hay (1975) roughly half of those condemned to death in the eighteenth century did not go to the gallows 'but were transported to the colonies or imprisoned' (1975:22). Ignatieff (1978) writing on the issue of punishment notes a discrepancy in sentencing whereby one person, for a lesser but similar offence, may receive, for example, a longer sentence of transportation than another (p.20). The same writer also draws attention to his estimate that by the late 1760s transportation to the American colonies 'for terms of seven years, fourteen years or life accounted for 70 per cent of all sentences at the Old Bailey' (Ignatieff, 1978: 17). In the light of these variable outcomes, both Reid and Boswell had perhaps some reason to place a last hope in the vagaries of the judicial system.

As previously mentioned, Boswell was known for his adoption of desperate cases; he was in fact sought out and requested particularly on account of this reputation, either by the accused themselves or by his own associates. Boswell, for all his respect for title and monarchy, was a man of feeling. His sensibility is apparent everywhere in his journals in the intensity of his passions and pleasures, as it is in

their counter-side, his melancholy or 'hypochondria'. His account of his visit to Corsica revealed the extent of his sympathy for and understanding of a perceived underdog as he wrote of the Corsican people's struggle for liberation from the Genoese, under the leadership of Pascal Paoli. Unexpectedly, perhaps, the spirit of revolution lay dormant in James Boswell, a man of intense emotional and intellectual passion concealed by a repressive layer of Scottish Presbyterianism, the power of which was aggravated by an unbending father and an austere upbringing. Though rebellion simmered under the surface, it was exceedingly difficult for a young man of Boswell's background openly to challenge his father and it wasn't until Boswell had managed to negotiate for himself a European Grand Tour in exchange for legal studies in Utrecht that he began to expand his intellectual horizons. He met with cultures which operated quite differently to his own; he mixed with a wide variety of people; he used different languages; he read; he studied; he even had affairs. And everywhere he went, he was welcomed and well received. Samuel Johnson, whom Boswell had met only months before his own projected departure, was left behind, but he knew that Johnson was his friend. Other eminent men such as Voltaire and Rousseau, not to mention Paoli, received him and discussed with him as an equal or friend. Boswell developed in this more sophisticated society in which he was freely enabled to express himself.

Standing in a Court of Law at the age of twenty-six, it would be hard for Boswell not to note the disadvantage in which the law placed the less fortunate in society by virtue of the technicality of its language and the closed nature of the legal circle – by which I mean the fact that the only 'outsider' in the small group of initiates who make up the trial team is the panel or defendant himself.

Boswell's concern to defend these defenceless – and perhaps indefensible – cases was further complicated by the presence of Boswell's father at the top of the legal hierarchy. A large part of Boswell's growing up had been engaged in the seemingly futile struggle to 'better' his father, whether by contesting his insistence that his son should study law, contesting his desire for Boswell to remain in Edinburgh, contesting his coldness and his rigour. There seemed no way that Boswell could please this demanding man, but once Boswell had taken up the law, one wonders if the opportunity to spar with his father in the confined situation of a courtroom

appealed. Stronger than this possibility, I believe, was Boswell's sense of humanity. He did indeed identify with those he defended. He literally 'felt for' them. He was a man of great sensitivity with a strongly empathetic aspect to his character, an aspect which enabled him to write his most celebrated work, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, but also enabled him to write letters on behalf of simpler folk or write their story, as it were, in their own voice. Just as Boswell remarked that in being around Johnson he had absorbed 'the Johnsonian aether' which enabled him to write in his own voice, so in the case of people like John Reid, Boswell could 'suck up' something of their spirit (he used the term himself) and transform it into written expression. From the evidence of the journals, as well as letters to his friend John Johnston of Grange, it is clear that Boswell was sincerely committed to the cases – and the people – he undertook to defend. Nowhere is this more evident than in the cse of John Reid because it is so well documented both in the journals, in letters and in the records of the Court itself.

On 1st August 1774 began the criminal trial of 'John Reid, flesher, lately residing at Hillend, near to the west bridge of Avon, in the parish of Muiravonside and shire of Stirling' (*Defence*, p.249). According to Emsley (1997), most of the cases brought before the assizes and at quarter sessions between 1750 and 1850 were face-to-face confrontations between the prosecutor and the accused. Occasionally the accused said nothing at all, and the defence was frequently no more detailed than a denial of the charge and a succession of character witnesses' (p.193). It was not until the nineteenth century that this type of confrontation was gradually replaced by a confrontation between lawyers acting for the prosecution and the defence (Emsley, 1997: op.cit). The slightly more sophisticated proceedings of the eighteenth century Edinburgh courtroom, with its preponderance of representatives for the prosecution, did not, from the outset, appear to encourage hope for the accused. Four senior judges presided over the proceedings and four 'procurators' for the prosecution were arrayed on one side of the bar: these were James Montgomery of Stanhope, Esquire, His Majesty's Advocate; Mr Henry Dundas, His Majesty's Solicitor; Mr William Nairne and Mr Robert Sinclair. On the other side of the bar stood 'Procurator in Defence, Mr James Boswell, Advocate', alone. Boswell's colleague, Andrew Crosbie, who had worked with him on the first John Reid case in 1766, had this time refused to be involved in the trial in any public way although he was ready to assist

behind the scenes. Thus it was that only Boswell stood with the solitary figure of the panel, John Reid.

The indictment set out in considerable detail the crimes of which John Reid was accused and included various strands of circumstantial reasoning which led to his being that day in the dock. In essence the crime of which Reid was accused was of the 'theft or reset of theft' of nineteen sheep which were the property of one Alexander Grey. The various pieces of circumstantial evidence mentioned in the indictment included such details as the finding of at least three of the said sheep 'in a park' near to Reid's house where they had been put to graze, and two of said sheep, dead and skinned but still with heads intact in Reid's 'flesh-house or booth' where he usually killed sheep. These sheep were all found and identified by Alexander Grey himself who had suspected the accused. Reid, through his Advocate Boswell, denied the evidence against him, claiming that, 'if he has been so unlucky as to have sheep found in his possession which were stolen, he solemnly swears that he did not know them to be so....' (*Defence*, p.252 quoted from the *Scottish Record Office*). The scene was thus set for a confrontation, it being obvious that the finding of sheep on Reid's premises and his claim that he had acquired them legitimately placed Reid in a delicate situation, particularly as the sheep had already been recognised by Grey and as Reid's own claims may be hard to prove; the fact that it was not three or four sheep but nineteen which had disappeared would complicate matters even further, as would he reputation of the panel.

In the event, Boswell worked strenuously but in vain to save Reid from the gallows. I have earlier referred to some of the legal steps taken by Boswell, such as petitioning for the capital sentence to be changed to one of transportation; as well as engaging in professional support in this way, Boswell engaged in more personal ways to alleviate Reid's situation. He visited him in prison many times; he talked with him and heard from Reid himself the story of his undistinguished life, his pride in his ancestry, the Reids having been at Muiravonside for three hundred years, Reid believed; and his attachment to his family whom he wished to be present at his execution. These personal details touched Boswell, and the wish that Reid's family should attend the execution disturbed him. 'To hear a man talk of his own execution gave me a strange kind of feeling' (30th August 1774, in *Defence*, p.299).

Boswell had already decided to have a portrait painted of John Reid 'as my first client in criminal business and as a very remarkable person in the annals of the Court of Justiciary' (29th August 1774). Two days later Boswell refers to being desirous of having Reid's picture done '*while under sentence of death*' (italics in the original). This phrase hints at Boswell's motivation, his desire to capture the expression of the condemned man, perhaps the very essence of the condemned man at the moment that he was *under* sentence of death.. He even expressed his anxiety that the painting should be completed before any change came in Reid's situation. Boswell and Reid were awaiting the outcome of Boswell's petition for transportation at the time, and Boswell was worried that if 'respite' was to come in the meantime the painting would lose its authenticity. He expressed it thus, '[I] was therefore rather desirous that, in case a respite was to come, it should not arrive till he had sat his full time'.

Boswell's comments reveal his desire to capture a moment in time through the medium of painting. It is not just any moment in time that he wants to record either; it is a moment in which the subject is under huge stress, a moment of crisis. That is why he so urgently wants the painting to be completed before there is any change in – or alleviation of – Reid's situation. Boswell's interest in extreme moments in an individual's life was similarly reflected in his attendance at criminal executions which I shall discuss later. The portrait of Reid was finished on 31st August 1774. No change in Reid's situation had been forthcoming and Boswell pronounced it 'a striking likeness, a gloomy head'. Later in the same diary entry he described how '[w]hen it was finished and hung upon a nail to dry, it swung, which looked ominous, and made an impression on my fancy'.

Boswell's thoughts were much on death and transformation. He was unhappy that Reid's life – which he had twice defended – should end in such a brutal and ignominious way, and thus an idea was developed, expressed in his diary just a few days earlier, to make 'an experiment on John Reid, in case he was hanged, to try to recover him' (25th August 1774). In effect, Boswell's plan was no less than a plan to resuscitate John Reid after his removal from the gallows. To the modern reader's astonishment, this plan met with support: Charles Hay and Mr Wood the surgeon

both promised assistance. Crosbie, Boswell's friend, was similarly supportive and said that he had 'lately had a long conversation on the subject with Dr Cullen'. Boswell pursued this astonishing plan with enthusiasm. Not only was Boswell ready to dabble in illegality, he was ready to tamper with 'nature'. There is no doubt that the resuscitation of an executed criminal could not easily be concealed. Had Boswell thought of the consequences? There is no indication that he had although, as time drew nearer, he was able to acquire a little more information on the procedure to adopt and gave more thought as to some simple precautions. Discussing the matter further later that same 25th August, at the home of Dr Grant, erstwhile candidate for the Chair of Physic at Edinburgh in 1761, Boswell learned that 'a man who had hung ten minutes cannot be recovered'. In spite of this, Boswell remains 'resolved that the experiment should be tried'. On 1st September, Boswell had occasion to discuss the matter again when he dined with his colleague Mr Hay. Among the company present with Mr Hay was a Doctor Monro*, with whom Boswell was later able to continue the discussion. Monro pointed out that it was more difficult to recover a hanged person than a drowned,

> because hanging forces the blood up to the brain with more violence, there being a local compression of the neck, but that he thought the thing might be done by heat and rubbing to put the blood in motion, and by blowing air into the lungs; and he said the best way was to cut a hole in the throat, the trachea, and introduce a pipe. I laid up all this for service in case it should be necessary.

Dr Monro also confided to Boswell the extraordinary information than ten or twelve of his students had already tried to recover two of Boswell's clients, John Brown and James Wilson (who where hanged on 15th September 1773) 'but had only blown their own breaths into the mouths of the subjects, which was not sufficient'.
The fact that Dr Monro's students had attempted a resuscitation, that others had asked him permission to attempt a similar resuscitation on another condemned man, that Monro had told them he would have no objection if Lord Justice-Clerk gave his consent, and that he had actually spoken to Lord Justice-Clerk on the matter and received the reply that if such a thing were allowed the 'College of Edinburgh should never again get a body from the Court of Justiciary' all bear witness to a strong current of interest at this time in the boundaries between life and death and in the

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* Dr Alexander Monro, Professor of Anatomy at Edinburgh University

possibilities of pushing aside these boundaries. A footnote to the lst September 1774 journal entry further attests to this preoccupation by noting the following:

The leading article in *The Scots Magazine* for September 1774, was an abstract of a French memoir, by M. Janin, published at Paris in 1773, 'on the causes of sudden and violent death; wherein it is proved that persons who seemingly fall victim to it may be recovered'. In 1774 the Humane Society, for the recovery of persons apparently drowned, was founded in London. (*Defence*, p.304).

Other factors besides Boswell's concern at Reid's brutal end may have encouraged him to consider the possibility of reviving John Reid. Firstly, as Linebaugh (1975) points out, there had been a number of successful revivals of hanged people during the period, some due perhaps to the fact that at Tyburn, at least, the cause of death during the first half of the eighteenth century was asphyxia, not dislocation of the spine. Linebaugh (1975) gives details of six 'revivals'. Although all were associated with Tyburn (and one, that of John Hayes in 1782, took place after the period), these events were known, recorded, and sung and written about extensively. It is certainly possible that accounts of these incidents had travelled north. In addition, Edinburgh had its own cases of attempted revivals which, as at Tyburn, were closely followed by the public. Linebaugh cites the April 1736 attempted revival of a smuggler following his hanging in Edinburgh as being the first incident which led to the Porteous Riots of that autumn (1975: 105). Such events were in the public domain. Linebaugh considers the causes and significance of the struggle of the labouring poor – of those condemned, in particular – against the surgeons' determination to obtain bodies for dissection. This struggle appears, in his view, as no less than a struggle to maintain the dignity demanded of human life and the dignity which should be accorded it in death. For, in spite of the high mortality rates of eighteenth-century London, which included high infant mortality, death by disease, cold or starvation, which might lead us to expect a generalised indifference to death, Linebaugh contends that for the people who were hanged and who went to hangings this was not the case: 'Their behaviour if anything suggests the opposite – the supreme importance of death' (Linebaugh, 1975: 102). It is, in my view, a similar regard for the importance of death and concern that the death be accomplished under optimum conditions (which allow confession and regret, for example) which guide Boswell's behaviour. Because he is convinced that Reid's death by hanging is wrongful, he

attempts to deflect Reid's fate. When Reid is about to be executed, Boswell urges him to repent, to confess. He wishes the man to die well. In the case of Reid as in the case of other criminals, Boswell is there, at the gallows, to witness the moment of death. And this is because that moment of death is of huge importance to Boswell as it was to others among his contemporaries, and particularly to the friends and relatives of the condemned.

Boswell discussed the possible resuscitation of John Reid with a number of persons, some lay, but some eminent medical practitioners with a high degree of medical knowledge and experience. Of the people Boswell refers to or quotes, none seems to have raised an ethical problem; all seem to have been interested and sympathetic even though they did not necessarily encourage Boswell to proceed but pointed out the technical difficulties. Dr Monro, in referring a similar case to Lord Justice-Clerk, had taken a sensible step, but even this high authority had not clearly stated a prohibition but had rather pointed out the subsequent difficulty of obtaining bodies (for dissection, one presumes) from the Court of Justiciary which would ensue.

Boswell continued with his plan, the details of which became more urgent when, on 18th September, he received confirmation that the petition for transportation was denied and that the execution would go ahead. Boswell busied himself in finding a house near the place of execution where John Reid could be laid for his recovery. Gradually, voices of objection were raised but Boswell decided to disregard them. One was the voice of Dr Monro's dissector Mr Wood who 'began to doubt the propriety of the scheme' but said he would still help. Similarly Mr Nasmith wrote 'dissuading me from the scheme of recovering John Reid, but did not persuade me'. In spite of this objection, Mr Nasmith later accompanied Boswell and Mr Hay in their search for a suitable house.

As the day continued, more voices were raised against the attempt, those of 'my worthy friend Grange, Mr Wood again who 'as a friend' could not but advise him against it. Some of the latter's arguments finally swayed Boswell for he writes,

> Mr Wood suggested another thought which had great weight with me. 'This man', said he, 'has got over the bitterness of death; he is resigned to his fate. He will have got over the pain of death. He may curse you for bringing him

> back. He may tell you that you have kept him from Heaven'. I determined to give up the scheme.

Mr Wood's warning and Michael Nasmith's letter together worked on Boswell and made him realize that he had only looked at the issue from one angle, his own, and had not taken into account the sentiments of John Reid himself who remained in ignorance of the whole affair, and who had – as Boswell now realized – already begun to prepare himself for death.

Boswell had been pushed into such an unorthodox route by two features of his character: his humanity, and his strongly held conviction that Reid was 'not guilty of the crime for which he was condemned and was condemned on insufficient evidence'. These are his own comments recorded in his journal as having been used in conversation on 20th September, the day before the execution, with the Reverend Doctor Dick who was to attend John Reid to his execution. The conviction of innocence motivated Boswell both during the trial and in its aftermath up to John Reid's execution. He was all the time concerned to urge Reid to repentance for earlier deeds, to urge Reid to tell the truth, and even intended to accompany Reid to the gallows so that he could receive any last-minute words, whether of confession or not. Dr Dick agreed with Boswell, declaring he had found Reid 'firm and consistent in his declaration that he was not guilty' and the Reverend Doctor Macqueen who was also to attend Reid at the execution 'was of the same opinion'. As Reid neared death, Boswell was told that Reid had something to tell him. What he confessed to Boswell was that since his trial in 1766 he had stolen a few sheep (Boswell thought he said five) of which he had never been suspected. Questioned further, he had nothing more to add, even when, dressed in the white outfit and 'high nightcap' which was the clothing for the execution, Boswell still continued to harangue him, saying, 'I beseech you let me be of some use to you for the next world. Consider what a shocking thing it is to go out of the world with a lie in your mouth. How can you expect mercy , if you are in rebellion against the God of truth?' Boswell's earnest sincerity and his strong desire for Reid to repent and to go to his death with a clear conscience are evident in these words.

Boswell's humanity as the other factor which motivated Boswell in his determination to resuscitate John Reid – and his desire to see him repent – was mentioned by Michael Nasmith in the letter he sent to Boswell to try and dissuade him from the plan. Boswell was ultimately deeply affected by this letter for he quotes it in full in his journal. In trying to dissuade Boswell, Nasmith writes: 'Humanity and a strong belief of John's innocence have already impelled you to do much for him, but let us cast our eyes forward and see what effects the attempt may have on the poor wretches who may hereafter be condemned to lose their lives'. These words helped Boswell realize that he was in error in his attempt to prolong Reid's life through resuscitation, and he relented and let Reid die as the law had intended – on the gallows.

The John Reid case provides an example of how far Boswell was prepared to go in defence of his clients; it reveals his commitment, his engagement, and his ethical stance in support of principles of justice. Because it appeared to him unjust for an innocent man to be condemned – his perception in the case of John Reid – he took it upon himself to sidestep the legal process by determining to bring the condemned man back to life. No other case occupied so much of Boswell, though other cases occasioned his efforts, his sympathy and his sharing of the final moments of the prisoner.

I have noted, in the account of the John Reid case, Boswell's desire to have a portrait of Reid painted 'while he was under sentence of death'. This desire informs us of Boswell's interest in extreme moments, moments of crisis, when the psyche may be undergoing stress or transformation. This is not of course how Boswell phrased it but he was very clear, in his explanation of his own attendance at executions, of what motivated his interest:

> I can account for this curiosity in a philosophic manner, when I consider that death is the most awful object before every man, who ever directs his thoughts seriously towards futurity; and that is very natural that we should be anxious to see people in that situation which affects us so much. It is true that none of us, who go to see an execution have any idea that we are to be executed and few of us need be under any apprehension whatever of meeting that fate. But dying publicly at Tyburn, and dying privately in one's bed <u>are only different modes of the same thing</u> [my underlining]. They are both

> death, they are both that wondrous, that alarming scene of quitting all that we have ever seen, heard or known and at once passing into a state of being totally unbeknown to us, and in which we cannot tell what may be our situation. Therefore it is that I feel an irresistible impulse to be present at every execution as I there behold the various effects of the near approach of death, according to the terms of the unhappy sufferers, and by studying them I learn to quiet and fortify my mind. (*Boswell's Column*, p.345).

These sentiments were expressed in an essay entitled 'On Executions' written under the pseudonym of The Hypochondriack and published in *The London Magazine* for which Boswell wrote a regular column between 1777 and 1783. In this essay, (No.LXVIII of May 1783) Boswell gave an account of his own interest in executions through comments introduced into the body of a piece of writing which opened with Boswell's consideration of whether society has a right to punish individuals, 'especially to the extent of death'. Two points are of importance here: one, that Boswell had a need to examine not only his own attitude towards executions, but also to consider what public purpose they serve; two, that as a lawyer involved in the practice of the law, he needed to examine the premise of the law. The essay opens by noting society's continuing enjoyment of 'spectacles of cruelty'. From this he considers the opinion of Lucretius that 'men have to behold scenes of distress that they may hug themselves in security, and relish more their own safety and ease, by comparing themselves with those who are suffering'. He notes that the Abbé du Bos (1670-1742) accounts for this desire from the 'universal wish we all have to be moved'. Having suggested a universality of interest in suffering, Boswell then refers to his own interest in executions largely examined through his citing in the essay a previously published letter of his, dated 25th April 1768, addressed 'To the Printer of the Public Advertiser'.

This letter was written fifteen years previously in his early days as a practising advocate, at a time when he was already attending public executions. From subsequent passages and the passages I have already quoted, the tone is explanatory but possibly slightly defensive as Boswell's interest in executions was not widely understood. In this letter, Boswell claims that his attendance at executions is not proof of hard-heartedness: 'On the contrary, I am persuaded that nobody feels more sincerity for the distresses of his fellow creatures than I do, or would do more to relieve them'. This could be perceived as merely a literary pose did we not already

know what lengths Boswell went to in the defence of his cases. Boswell then describes his rationale for his own attendance at executions as cited above and finally, as the letter ends, returns to the 'present' to say that he has nothing much more to add after fifteen years, 'But I cannot but mention in justification of myself, from a charge of cruelty in having gone so much formerly to see executions, that the curiosity which impels people to be present at such affecting scenes, is certainly proof of sensibility not of callousness'.

Thus Boswell explains his interest as an attempt to understand the moment of the passage from life to death. It is not the execution per se which is of prime interest but the fact that it offers the possibility for a spectator to be in a place where spectators may be denied: the actual moment of death itself, that 'passing into a state of being totally unknown to us'. It is death itself which interests and fascinates Boswell, a fact confirmed both by his having written the essay 'On Execution', as well as three other essays 'On Death' in November and December 1778, and in January 1979.

It is death Boswell fears, learning, he says, how to 'quiet and fortify' his own mind by observing the way that these 'unhappy sufferers' awaiting execution face the near approach of death. Death, as representing that moment of leaving behind not only all that is dear but all that is human is, in Boswell's view, 'the most aweful and interesting subject on which the thoughts of man can be employed'. Boswell gives us a key to understanding in these words: one whole side of his personality stands in that shadow, the need to attempt to understand suffering and what a human being undergoes in leaving it behind; at the same time his subsequent words show us the attitude which balances that darker side: 'I have always considered it as one of the wonderful circumstances in human nature, that, notwithstanding the absolute certainty with which every man knows that he is to die, so great a proportion of life is passed without thinking of it at all'.

In his best moments, Boswell could balance his hypochondria with hope. And it is this resurgence of more positive emotions which enabled Boswell to continue.

Chapter 4

Despondency

Boswell's journal contains many references to his melancholy. Sometimes it is a passing mention, sometimes melancholy is given as a reason for a change of mood or attitude. Writing to his son James Boswell on 27th October 1794, towards the end of his life, Boswell refers to his constitutional melancholy which he says 'is ever lurking about me, and perhaps I should impute to this the chief part of my unhappiness' (Wain, 1990: 376).

Considering Boswell's life conditions, there emerge three possible causes of the despair and gloom which afflicted Boswell at different moments of his life. One of these was certainly 'hypochondria', a psychological predisposition which Boswell recognised as being an intrinsic part of his make-up; another was a distinct strand of self-doubt aggravated by his father's lack of confidence in him both as his son and as a human individual as discussed in previous chapters; and a third was the character of the individual produced by the socio-historical and personal circumstances in which Boswell found himself, that is to say, the mid-eighteenth century son of well-born Scottish Presbyterian parents of high principles and high demands, at a time when strict religious observance went hand in hand with obedience to parents.

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Before examining these possible causes in detail, it is useful to consider an unusual document in which Boswell wrote about his early life and which implied the effect of certain experiences. This document is unusual in that – unlike most of Boswell's journal – it was written for a reader. The intended reader was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who had recently received the young man at his home in Môtiers, Switzerland (see Chapter 3). The Sketch of his early life was written on 5th December 1764, two days after that first meeting. It is of considerable interest because it contain Boswell's portrayal of himself.

In the Sketch, precisely as he does thirty years later in his letter to his son, Boswell refers to his melancholy as being an integral part of his constitution:

> I was born with a melancholy temperament. It is the temperament of our family. Several of my relations have suffered from it. Yet I do not regret that I am melancholy. (Wain, 1990: 1).

In this context, Boswell almost appears to be boasting of his melancholy because he sees it as '... The temperament of tender hearts, of noble souls'. Yet, he goes on to point out that such temperaments 'require a very careful education'. Two main dangers threaten such temperaments if they are **not** carefully educated: they may 'fall into a debility which will completely destroy them', or they may 'form a habit of viewing everything in such colours as to make their lives miserable'. This insight is the result of Boswell's reflection on his own case. When he goes on to refer to his own education it is to demonstrate that it was in certain ways defective and encouraged precisely that habit of viewing everything 'in such colours as to make [his life] miserable'.

Ambiguity of His Portrayal of Self

Boswell's appraisal of his upbringing and of his younger self is curious in that while presenting himself as experiencing certain emotions and displaying certain symptoms, he undermines his own depiction of himself as 'melancholic' or 'nervous' by portraying himself as having brought about the symptoms of these conditions intentionally. In the Sketch, Boswell is at the same time writing to appeal to Rousseau and appearing to strip himself bare, while simultaneously veiling the apparent revelation with a layer of self-mockery. And yet even the layer of self-mockery cannot completely alter our apprehension of what Boswell is telling us.

Boswell, for example, says that he was brought up 'very tenderly' and he ascribes to this aspect of his upbringing his mother's tendency to over-indulge him when he had an ailment of some kind, and his own propensity to prefer 'being weak and ill to being strong and healthy' because being weak and ill meant that he was not compelled to go to school. His father, not having the same tenderness of nature, was a different matter, and had to be dealt with differently. In order not to lie directly to his father, 'who had impressed upon [him] a respect for the truth', Boswell was able

to make himself ill: 'I hung my head down towards the floor until I got a headache and then I complained that I was ill.' In this way, Boswell avoided a lie.

These very early years were further complicated by the fact that his 'extremely kind' mother was also 'extremely pious' and 'unfortunately' taught him Calvinism. From this teaching Boswell absorbed gloom and hopelessness: 'The eternity of punishment was the first great idea I ever formed – how it made me shudder'. The young Boswell made other connections between his own reality and the words of the church. For example, because fire (as in the fire of Hell) was a material substance, Boswell 'had an idea of it', but as he goes on to say, 'I thought but rarely about the bliss of heaven because I had no idea of it!. This inability to imagine heaven and its bliss left the young Boswell preoccupied with the punishments of Hell, and this morbid turn was aggravated by the servants' pleasure in telling him stories about 'robbers, murderers, witches and ghosts, so that my imagination was continually in a state of terror. I became the most timid and contemptible of beings'.

The tone of this account is apparently honest and straightforward. Boswell is describing himself as he was from about the age of five to the age of eight. He continues to recount his childhood, the influences of those around him and their ideas. It is not until he describes himself at twelve that the tone shifts quite strikingly. Whereas Boswell implies that, as a very young child when first at the school, he pretended to be ill in order to be allowed to stay at home ('I was brought up very tenderly. Consequently, I began at an early age to be indisposed ...'), Boswell describing himself at the age of twelve is entirely knowing and openly reveals his own duplicity:

> In my twelfth year I caught a very severe cold. I was given a great many medicines, and my naturally weak stomach became so upset that I could hardly digest anything. I confess that the fear of having to go back to what were called my studies made me hope I could stay ill. The greatest doctors in Scotland were called in. I was naughty enough to take measure to prevent their medicines from having any effect on me. I could somehow or other control the operations of my stomach, and I immediately threw up everything they made me take. I even endured blisters, congratulating myself on not having to work. The Faculty decided that I was suffering from an extraordinary nervous illness, and I confess that I laughed heartily to myself at those consultations. I was weakened in body and mind, and my natural melancholy increased. I was sent to Moffat, the Spa of Scotland ...
>
> (Wain, 1990: 4).

To the reader it is obvious that there is an element of nervous disorder in the spectacle of a twelve-year-old deliberately making himself sick and taking measures to prevent medicines having a curative effect. While Boswell appears to mock the Faculty and the other adults taking him seriously, adult readers can see through Boswell's game of presenting himself as a cunning trickster. The key to the truth lies in, 'I was weakened in body and mind, and my natural melancholy increased', a line which signals an abrupt change of mood and which, in contrast to the previous, is presented perfectly neutrally with no overtones of self-mockery at all. So there was after all a period of real nervous illness which Boswell seems to wish to gloss over. Another aspect of the truth is seen in 'my naturally weak stomach became so upset that I could hardly digest anything'. Boswell seems to feel it is acceptable to mention this as factual reality. Whether this illness became more serious, or whether Boswell intentionally aggravated it by 'taking measures' to render the medicines ineffective we shall probably never know, but we can see that Boswell wishes to present the next stage in the illness as having been within his control. He caused it himself, is what he was saying. It is not until the admission 'I was weakened in body and mind', that we have the reverberation of an authentic statement. Boswell has now admitted that both body and mind were affected, not merely the body. This statement recalls to the reader the mind's inevitable involvement in whatever the young Boswell was experiencing. This period of illness was eventually followed by a recovery. Again, when Boswell described the recovery it is in a neutral tone which is apparently factual. When he was sent to Moffat, 'I was permitted a great deal of amusement. I saw many lively people, I wished to be lively myself, and insensibly regained my health ...'. Both the becoming ill and the recovery are dealt with briefly and without emotion.

Yet, if this first 'nervous illness' was nothing more than an exaggerated jest, a child's attempt to avoid work, what can be said of what happened some three years later when Boswell was already, at the age of sixteen, a languages student at the University where he had been since he was thirteen?

This time two causes appeared to bring about the crisis, and Boswell does not hide these: the first was that his 'youthful desires became strong'. Given the religious and social climate in which the teenager Boswell lived and had been brought up, it was scarcely surprising that the awareness of these desires caused him great distress: 'I was horrified because of the fear that I would sin and be damned'. That 'madness', he writes, eventually passed. But there was more. 'Unluckily a terrible hypochondria seized me at the age of sixteen'. Once again, Boswell went back to Moffat. Eventually, other ideas animated his mind and he made his recovery. But these, however Boswell attempts to gloss over them, were clearly the first signs of the debilitating hypochondria which was to be so important and painful a feature of his adult life. Was Boswell merely dramatizing his past to ensnare Rousseau and capture the interest of the international celebrity, or were the incidents described truly a part of his past, with the significance he, in this account, affords them?

Various factors persuade the reader of the veracity of these incidents and of the authenticity of the voice which recounts them. It could be argued that these particular moments are not relayed elsewhere in Boswell's writings, but Boswell did not, apart from on this occasion, have a need to expose them; they accomplished no purpose. On the other hand, in communicating with one celebrated for his interest in the early years of the individual and in the influences which form that individual, it is quite natural that Boswell's first approach should be to reflect on his own early 'education' (in its widest sense) and to communicate these experiences to his interlocutor with the freshness of his own understanding of them. Given that Boswell had so urgently wished to meet Rousseau, it is quite natural, within the framework of the enthusiastic and intellectually lively character that we know Boswell to have been at that time, that he should do his best to attract and maintain the interest of the great man.

In describing these moments, there is a note of authenticity in Boswell's voice in the fluency with which he describes them and in the freshness with which he contemplates them:

> ... From the age of eight to twelve I enjoyed reasonably good health. I had a governor who was not without sentiment and sensibility. He began to form my mind in a manner which delighted me.
>
> (Wain, 1990: 3)

In general, nothing in the Sketch sounds trite, re-stated, over-used or over-rehearsed. Indeed, these episodes from his childhood, particularly those relating to his intellectual development, are presented almost with a kind of wonder and candour, as if Boswell is looking at them in this way for the first time. Thus, he related to Rousseau without embarrassment his emotional journey:

> At eighteen I became a Catholic. I struggled against paternal affection, ambition, interest. I overcame them and fled to London with the intention of hiding myself in some gloomy retreat to pass my life in sadness. My Lord made me a deist. I gave myself up to pleasure without limit. I was in a delirium of joy.
>
> (Wain, 1990: 5)

Yet, as Boswell speaks we can also perceive the self-mocking tone as he moves rapidly from one stage of his changes to another, the semi-concealment which I have noted earlier – for here Boswell does not pause to analyse or reveal deep feelings, but rushes on.

I do not doubt that the episodes described in the Sketch reflect a reality experienced by Boswell. I am not here concerned with the veracity of the detail but with the authenticity of the perception. The perception is Boswell's own and must be taken with the seriousness he intended.

I consider the Sketch of great importance in allowing us to decode the inner Boswell. Of course, the Sketch was a production, a carefully chosen selection of experiences presented in such a way as to interest the reader. But that is the business of autobiography. The autobiographer is always the originator of the image purveyed to the reader. It is the reader's task to try and discern the authenticity or otherwise of the image.

Boswell, then presented himself to Rousseau; the details he selected as worthy to communicate to Rousseau give us clues as to the authenticity of the image he presented.

Readers of Boswell's journal will know that Boswell is not afraid to appear comic in public, nor is he afraid to be sometimes underestimated and judged as less than the

man he is. Such is his mood on occasion that, in particular when noting the words of his friend Johnson, he frequently appeared absurd to other members of the social group attending the same gathering, and they were not afraid to comment at once, or later in writing, on the absurdity of Mr Boswell.

On other social occasions too, Boswell's best side was not to the fore: he drank too much, tried too hard to charm the ladies, and so on. Yet it could be argued that there was an aspect of wilfulness in all this in that Boswell knew what he was doing. For example, he was determined to note down Johnson's remarks and didn't care if he was mocked for it; if he wanted to drink, he drank and knew well that he might appear a buffoon. Similarly, if his desire was to charm or more than that, to seduce, Boswell knew what he intended and knew well enough the regrets that would follow.

My point is this: in the public Boswell, there is an element of the 'persona', the philandering, drinking witty male, the eighteenth-century model as promulgated by Beau Nash and lesser beaux – who typified certain socially desirable male attributes. Boswell in this mode is not particularly vulnerable; as long as he is with his peers, and acting as his peers, their words cannot damage.

Boswell reflecting on his childhood in the Sketch is another matter. However 'constructed' the account, Boswell is allowing a reader to enter into that world of the past as experienced by Boswell. The reader is being invited into contemplation of what has made Boswell the man he has become and however carefully the selection of detail has been made by Boswell, he is nevertheless drawing aside a curtain allowing the reader glimpses of the child.

In so doing Boswell becomes vulnerable and his vulnerability is apparent in the trust he puts in Rousseau to accept this portrait and value it. This perhaps also explains Boswell's self-mockery as he is aware of his own rare self-exposure. This intuitive response to Rousseau was of course the appropriate one for Rousseau continued to accept the visits of his young admirer, in spite of bouts if illness.

*

Boswell experienced all aspects of life with an intensity which in some individuals occurs particularly during puberty, but which in certain cases appears to remain a permanent feature of their character. Thus it was with Boswell. That Boswell as a young child somehow experienced the absence of hope, both personally in relation to his own life and in relation to humanity in general may predicate his later feelings of hopelessness; that he suffered from nervous illness at an early age foreshadows the erratic and sometimes painful route he followed as an adult.

According to his presentation of himself to Rousseau, James Boswell as a child had certainly been made aware early of the spiritual threat implicit in the brand of Protestantism to which his parents subscribed. The fires of hell threatened him in the future; the actual gloom of a Scottish Sunday *en famille* cast its pall over him in the present:

> ...The Scots Prestbyterians are excessively rigid with regard to observance of the Sabbath. I was taken to Church, where I was obliged to hear three sermons in the same day, with a great many impromptu prayers and a great many sung psalms translated in the vilest doggerel. I was obliged by my religion 'not to do my own work, speak with my own words, nor think my own thoughts, on God's holy day'. I tried in sincerity of heart to conform to that command; especially not to think my own thoughts. A fine exercise for a child's mind.
>
> (Wain, 1990: 3)

The religious atmosphere of the house was, to his mind, overwhelmingly oppressive, one of its worst aspects being that it was devoid of hope: 'From eight to twelve I had my first governor, and during those four years I can say that I was happy except on Sundays, when I was made to remember the terrible Being whom those about me called God'.

The gloomy, lonely world of Boswell's childhood spirituality was no doubt the crucible which produced the anxious teenager and the troubled adult.

*

There is a centuries-old tradition of Sunday religious observance in Scotland which extends not merely to attending church, but also to the ways in which the whole day should be regarded as holy. More than a hundred and fifty years after Boswell's

childhood, my grandmother, also brought up in Presbyterian Scotland, was experiencing a similarly austere Sunday. The strictly-run household was still dominated by the *pater familias* and Sunday was given over to religious observance: the entire family of eleven children and their parents and grandparents spent Sunday morning at Church and the evening was similarly occupied by family prayers attended also by the servants.

Seen in this context of a common tradition, Boswell's Sunday may not perhaps appear extreme or unpleasant, yet he writes of it as disturbing and uncomfortable. It was a day on which he was made to remember the 'terrible Being', things occurred in a 'stern and doleful manner'; psalms were 'translated into the vilest doggerel', and Boswell was compelled to try 'in sincerity of heart to conform to that command; especially not to think my own thoughts', which was clearly an absurdity. The response is all, and the description expresses Boswell's revolt.

A possible source of the austere vision of the world which permeated Protestantism in general, and Scottish Presbyterianism in particular at this time, was an important event within the Church calendar which had taken place in the previous century. The Synod of Dort (1618) resulted in the confirmation of a certain number of doctrines which, according to one commentator, may well have influenced the psychological state of later Christians. Confirmed by the Synod, which was dominated by 'right-wing Calvinists', were doctrines such as predestination not being conditional on belief, Christ's not dying for all mankind, man's total depravity, and the lack of remission of sins by contrition or confession (Ober, 1987: 228).

In this list, hope of change for the better or forgiveness was eradicated: Christ apparently had no wish to save <u>all</u> mankind, only a few; man in any case was evil, and there was no route towards reconciliation with God through contrition or confession. Acts of evil could not therefore be wiped out, and the slate was never clean. It can be seen that for the ordinary human being the only position was one of despair <u>or</u> one of unremitting breastbeating in the face of the most rigid of moral strictures.

Although strictly speaking these doctrines only applied to the Dutch Reformed Church, religious conservatives in Britain also took them to heart. Ober traces their effect on British Christians in the writing of, for example, the Reverend Thomas Shephard (1605-49) whose autobiographical *God's Plot* relates his religious struggles. Described by Ober as 'an unrelieved litany of self-doubt, feelings of inadequacy and guilt, total despair, the account of himself by an unhappy man certain of his impending doom'(1987: 228), the description of Shephard's state of mind at once reminds – almost textually – of sentiments expressed by Boswell on many occasions. Although Boswell has himself expressed all of the sentiments mentioned above, these have usually been considered to have been occasioned either by his melancholy, or by his guilt at indulging in unacceptable behaviour which fell below his own standards. Rarely are these despairing feelings attributed to the possible failure, from Boswell's point of view, of an underlying philosophical or religious framework. And this is the interesting point.

While accepting the thesis of 'hypochondria' or melancholy, which I shall discuss in greater detail below, I would argue that factors in Boswell's early life combined with that innate tendency to produce the individual whose view of himself wavered between pride at his achievement, and despair and self-doubt.

The austerity of Boswell's early years as described to Rousseau, the childhood fears which were never reassured away, the demands of his father which he could never hope to meet and who left him always feeling inadequate even as Boswell appeared to scorn these demands – such were the influences which produced the sensitive, bright young man who longed to distinguish himself in ways other than those his father had in mind for him.

Feelings of personal failure often lay under the bright tapestry of apparent social success and the ideals set by his father nevertheless lay before him even as he purported to scorn them. One aspect of his troubled moments in adult life therefore was the consequence of the affective conditions of his childhood. Another aspect was the outcome of these early – and sinister – religious influences which frightened him as a child and left him as an adult seeking that hope in the future and in the life of the spirit which some religions can inspire.

Boswell, in his account of himself, is always interested in religious thought; more than that, he is interested in God. In writing to Rousseau he described his early religious life and its failings. He described also the awakening of hope which one particular individual brought him:

> There (i.e. in the other world) I should acquire the sublime knowledge that God will grant to the righteous, and there I should meet all the great men of whom I had read, and all the dear friends I had known. At last my governor put me in love with heaven, and some hope entered into my religion.
> (Wain, 1990: 3)

And he mentions the change which occurred in him. It seems obvious that Boswell is unhappy with the religious system given to him by his parents and which caused him to suffer to such an extent that he had physical symptoms. The strictness of Boswell's upbringing did not allow him to reveal this unhappiness and so physical and nervous symptoms continued until he grew old enough to achieve a calmer psychological state. All his life, Boswell sought for answers, discussing religious questions with Rousseau, with Paoli, with Johnson, and showing in his treatment of his defendant John Reid, his concern for the man's soul and his salvation. The mystery of the moment of death fascinated him as a human being wishing to comprehend the significance of life and death, and his attendance at executions bore witness to this interest.

The thread of religious interest weaves its way through Boswell's life, but although Boswell remains a questing spirit, the early urgency concerning religious belief is later diluted. From the days of hopelessness to days when hope seemed more integrated into religious belief, Boswell sought out other churches which could enlighten him. He briefly became a Roman Catholic, as he relates to Rousseau, and for the rest of his life moved between different religious establishments – in England, frequently Anglican, – as he did between different people, listening for answers. His journal references to London Sundays reveal the diversity of the Churches he attended. The attempts to understand the nature of God never again troubled him to the extent they had done as a young boy. Boswell did achieve his own understanding and sought to apply it when faced with the illness or death of those he knew or loved.

In his extremes of 'hypochondria', religion is not necessarily his first port of call. In his essay on Hypochondria 39, Boswell opens with a quotation from a Psalm which came into mind as he was preparing to write:

'In the multitude of my thoughts within me, thy comforts delight my soul'. Boswell uses these words not necessarily as a starting point for a religious meditation for his mind does not first focus on 'thy comforts' but on the phrase 'the multitude of my thoughts'. Boswell picks out the word 'multitude' which he typifies as containing the idea of 'disorder, fluctuation, tumult.' He uses this starting point as a means of attempting to convey an image of his mental state in which thoughts in just such a tumult confound 'the mind of a Hypochondriack'. This is surely significant because the religious man in distress might be assumed to rely first or to need first the comforts of religion. Boswell, however, is so deeply involved with his state of mind that his preoccupation is to convey that to the reader – in particular as his essays on Hypochondria were actually written for the benefit of other sufferers.

In this essay, in which he writes in 'a state of very dismal depression', Boswell does allow that the only help to be had is from 'the divine comforts of religion.' He does, however, give a warning which is that the 'principles of our holy religion' should already be established in the sufferer's mind 'when it is sound and clear'. This will mean that these principles will be there to help when 'the mind is sick and distressed'. The proviso given in this case appears to suggest that Boswell may not always (or ever) have the 'principles of our holy religion' established in his mind. It is not clear from his words whether he is referring to the need to have the 'principles' established in the sufferer's mind when it is 'sound and clear' before any single attack, or whether he means that these principles should be established in some distant anterior time like childhood, when the mind is 'sound and clear' before any attacks at all have begun.

By the end of the essay Boswell has revealed to the reader that he experienced the greatest relief in this case not through God, but in the actual writing of the essay. This indicates that it is mental activity which can best alleviate this kind of suffering, as Johnson himself believed.

In considering the influence of austere religious systems in the previous section, I tried to show that Boswell's early perception of a gloomy hopeless spirituality was actually a damaging influence on his young psyche and in conjunction with other influences produced a being tending to gloom rather than to joy. It is Ober (1987) who notes that many pious men and women of the period suffered similar psychological conditions created by a climate of religious austerity. Aspirations were high, and outlets for those who did not or could not meet them were few. The oppressive weight of suffering brought on by failure was perhaps more difficult to bear because the study of mind was in its infancy. Some eighteenth century writers such as Pope and Richards were beginning to write about and explore individual states of mind, and these writers were 'not only influenced by eighteenth century psychology; they also helped to shape the way that psychology was perceived' (Fox, 1987: 12). This two-way exchange of ideas between literature and psychology/medicine and vice-versa cannot but have resulted in an intellectual climate in which 'mind' became interesting, and gradually emerged as an acceptable area of study.

Boswell was, intuitively perhaps, a part of that climate; his journal is frequently an examination of 'mind' in the sense that he examines motive as well as outcome, and he examines intention as well as feeling; his main field of interest is his own mind. Boswell's analysis of 'mind' was for himself, but both literary and medical writers expressed interest in morbid conditions of mind such as hysteria (Rape of the Lock), the effects of heartbreak (*Clarissa*), or *The English Malady,* as George Cheyne typified hypochondria or melancholia in the book of that name, published in 1733, all of which were intended for a general public. These works attest to a growing interest in aspects of mental health at a time when it had not yet become acceptable to write intimately of one's personal problems. Ober (1987) cites Thomas Gray, writing to his friend Richard West in 1742, as an early practitioner of confessional literature. Writing about his own psyche, Gray wrote: 'Mine you are to know is a white Melancholy, or rather Leucotomy' (quoted by Ober, p.250). One of the very early practitioners of the kind of writing in which the writer examines his own mind and feelings was of course James Boswell, already keeping his journal by the age of sixteen and developing his habit of analysis. I believe that in this he was a precursor of the interest in mind, and particularly in suffering mind, which flowered under the

Romantic writers and found its fullest expression in such works as Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774) and Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe* (1816).

In the eighteenth century, even contemporary writers had a problem determining in what sense certain terms relating to hypochondria were used (Fox, 1987). Thus, terms like the 'spleen' or 'vapours' or 'melancholy' might be used interchangeably with hysteria in the eighteenth century (Sena, 1987), and these were also used as synonymous to hypochondria. I will use the terms melancholia or hypochondria in the subsequent discussion.

From a selection of works in this area published in the first fifty years of the eighteenth century, it is evident that there was considerable educated public interest in diseases of the nervous system. For example, Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, Nicholas Robinson, published *A new System of Spleen, Vapours and Hypochondriack Melancholy* in 1729; Bernard Mandeville published *A Treatise of the Hypochondriack and Hysteric Disease* in 1730; and George Cheyne, a Scottish physician who moved to London, published *An Essay of Health and Long Life* in 1724 and *The English Malady* in 1733. These few works imply by their titles the prevalence of hypochondria in Britain, probably more readily among the educated than the uneducated classes. I have chosen these few titles from a longer selection referred to by both Ober (1987) and Fox (1987), as exemplifying the range of writing available at the time, and its focus. These works were frequently written by medical practitioners and thus could be taken seriously by their readers. It was however Cheyne whose book, *The English Malady*, became one of the most influential in the eighteenth century, perhaps due to some extent to the range of his celebrated friends and patients. Among the former were Swift, Pope, Gray and Arbuthnot; among the latter were Samuel Richardson, Lord Hervey and the Countess of Huntingdon (Ober (1987: 243).

In his book, Cheyne suggested more causes of hypochondria, such as the 'variableness of our weather' and 'the Richness and Heaviness of our food'. Another was the 'Humour of living in great populous and consequently unhealthy Towns' (Cheyne, ppi-ii, quoted by Ober, p.243). This causal reasoning appears admirably

sane, but alas it was not enough to effect a cure, and sufferers like Boswell and Johnson had to evolve their own means.

The literature of the period on this malady confirms its prevalence. A disease which is known, accepted and fairly widely spread amongst a certain social class achieves a certain respectability. It is perhaps even perceived as confirmation of social class or of sensibility and therefore does not need to be hidden. That literary as well as medical writers examined its manifestations confirms the class background of the sufferers. To the extent that society accepts the disease, there is a certain collusion which allows the individual to suffer from it. Thus it was acceptable in the eighteenth century to suffer from Hypochondria because other great men – such as Richardson and Johnson – did so.

Earlier in his life Boswell worried about his hypochondria and looked for means of improving his condition. It was only with time that he found ways of adjusting his behaviour *in extremis* which could eventually alleviate some of the symptoms.

In the subsequent chapter I shall look in greater depth at Boswell's own experience of hypochondria and his strategies for living with it.

Chapter Five

Hypochondria: Facing It

Boswell began writing a monthly column for *The London Magazine* in 1777. He chose as his pseudonym 'The Hypochondriack', a pseudonym redolent with meaning in a century in which many suffered the affliction. In addition, the choice had an ironic undercurrent because the author of the column was by no means easily reducible to a mere 'Hypochondriack', nor did his regular essays reflect a particular indulgence in the limited topic suggested by the name. In fact, the seventy essays Boswell published between 1777 and 1783* cover a variety of subjects, among them the great ones of perennial interest such as love (3), death (3), marriage (3), fear (1), war (1), religion (2), as well as three 'On Drinking', three 'On Living in the Country', one on 'Excess', one 'On Pleasure', one 'On Execution', and a number of others on topics which had caught the author's interest or attracted his reflection. Boswell writes only four essays on hypochondria. Why then did he write under this name?

The answer is given in Boswell's first essay in the collection, that of October 1777, where, after three pages of praise for the 'periodical paper' which, he adds, 'is truly of British origin,' he leads the reader to The Hypochondriack. This first mention, however, does not explain, it merely refers:

> .... I flatter myself that The Hypochondriack may be agreeably received as a periodical essayist in England, where the malady known by the denomination of melancholy, hypochondria, spleen, or vapours, has been long supposed almost universal.
>
> (Bailey, 1951: 23)

To extend this notion of hypochondria's prevalence in England, Boswell goes on to imply that this was so even in Shakespeare's day. He cites in evidence a passage from Hamlet where Shakespeare allows the gravediggers a reference to how young Hamlet, having been sent to England, would either recover his wits there, or if he did not it would be of little importance because, as the Clown said, "Twill not be seen in him, there the men are as mad as he' (Act 5, sc.1, line 157).

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* Edited and reprinted in 1951

This invocation of the past allows Boswell to shift again to the present and to point out that hypochondria still prevails, that it is not 'peculiar to Britain', nor is it susceptible of cure by 'medicines of a physical nature'. Boswell suggests that we try 'remedies of another kind'.

These preliminary digressions at last lead Boswell to the moment where he can explain the significance of his chosen pseudonym. It is worth noting that this long introduction to the heart of the matter is very different from the Boswell of the journal where frankness and lack of reserve in approaching all manner of issues are pre-eminent. Here Boswell appears to hover with some delicacy before confronting his reader with his intentions, praiseworthy though they be. After making clear that he is not 'at present actually labouring under that malady', Boswell comes clean::

> ... I am so well acquainted with the distemper of Hypochondria, that I think myself qualified to assist some of my unhappy companions, who are now groaning under it ... I have suffered much of the fretfulness, the gloom and the despair that can torment a thinking being; and the time has been that I could no more have believed it possible for me to write even such a paper as this, than I can now believe it possible for me to write a Spectator or a Rambler.
>
> (Bailey, 1951: 25)

And then at last to a clear statement of purpose:

> ... I shall sometimes apply myself immediately to the distemper; but my general purpose will be to divert Hypochondriacks of every degree from dwelling on their uneasiness, by presenting to them such essays on various subjects as I can furnish from my own intellectual store.
>
> (Bailey, 25)

This statement clarifies Boswell's purpose and accounts for the range of his subject matter.

But can we assume that this rather touching statement of purpose accurately reflected Boswell's genuine intention? I think that we can. Firstly, Boswell himself had many years' experience of the illness; he had discussed it with other sufferers such as Johnson from whom he accepted advice, and had mentioned his depressive tendencies to as wide-ranging an acquaintanceship as 'Zélide', an early love (see *Boswell in Holland* 1763-1764) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau ('Sketch of My Life', 5th December 1764). Boswell's communicative temperament and concern for other

human beings' predicament, as typified, for example, in his committed defence of the sheepstealer John Reid (see chapter 3) and other socially less advantaged clients, lead us to feel that Boswell's concern for other suffers of hypochondria is convincing. Secondly, Boswell admired the essay as an expressive form. He had been a very early reader of The Rambler ('Sketch of My Life') and certainly wished to prove himself in this respected form. The skill involved in handling one topic deftly in a limited space, expressing ideas of sufficient quality to interest a reader, while bringing the thought, as it were, full circle to an appropriate ending represented a considerable challenge. Another attraction of the essay form was that it allowed the lively-minded writer virtually free rein to explore any number of topics which reflected his/her passionate interest. Boswell was that lively-minded writer and the variety of topics he addressed testify to the fact that he had plenty to say. A third reason why the essay form was an attractive one for Boswell was the discipline involved in its production. To meet constant deadlines over an extended period was yet another aspect of the challenge, particularly as Boswell viewed meeting such challenges while suffering hypochondria as therapeutic, even necessary.

It is clear from the first essay and from Boswell's address to his readers that hypochondria was a known condition, prevalent among members of the educated classes, Boswell's natural readership. The appellation, 'The Hypochondriack', therefore carried certain connotations of which Boswell, as a sufferer, was certainly aware. One contemporary assumption was that a certain level of education and an upper class background were factors common to those suffering the illness; it was also believed in educated circles not only that hypochondria was largely a male preserve and hysteria largely a female one, but also that these nervous illnesses did not affect the lower orders ((Sena, 1987). The condition of hypochondria was sufficiently known and widespread that the signature 'The Hypochondriack' would most likely attract readers who were themselves sufferers. There was literary as well as medical interest in the illness. Many books, to some of which I alluded in the previous chapter, had been written on the subject and an educated constituency was not merely aware of hypochondria, or melancholy, as posing a problem in people's lives, they were also conversant with its external manifestations: 'languor, disgust for worldly activities which charmed at other times, and the feeling of pointlessness ...' identified by Boswell in his *London Journal* (quoted by Manning, 1991: 126).

Sufferers and the general reading public would therefore have no problem with Boswell's pseudonym.

Boswell had already published four essays on varied topics in *The London Magazine* when, in February 1778, he published the first of his four essays on hypochondria. In the February 1778 essay, written in the first person like two out of the three subsequent 'hypochondria' essays, Boswell writes with wit and liveliness, following the persuasive logic typical of the essayist's art. He prefaces this essay with a quotation from Aristotle in Greek which he translates below as, 'Why is it that all men who have excelled in philosophy, in politiks, in poetry, or in the arts, have been subject to melancholy?'

While recognising that Aristotle's observation – that those who excel intellectually are prone to melancholy – is a flattering one, Boswell begs to differ and expresses doubt with regard to Aristotle's proposition that hyochondria is 'peculiarly to be found in men of remarkable excellence' on the basis that he himself had 'closely studied numbers affected with that disease'. Boswell draws the reader's attention to his own experience of hypochondria because he has a point to make: allowing Aristotle's proposition is negative for sufferers of the disease who are thereby lulled into accepting their illness when they might have prevented it, and negative also for those sufferers as individuals because they are flattering themselves with notions of their superiority. This is how Boswell expresses it:

> And I think it is of importance that the proposition should not be believed because I am certain that many who might have prevented the disease from coming to any height, had they checked its first appearances, have not only resisted it, but have truly cherished it from the erroneous flattering notion that they were making sure of the undoubted though painful characteristick of excellence...
>
> (Bailey, 1951:43)

Hypochondria, Boswell is at pains to point out, 'is incident to all sorts of men, from the wisest to the most foolish.' This caveat is clearly aimed at those readers who assume that acquaintance with the disease is evidence of exalted intellectual status. Boswell wishes to destroy any such claim to status arising merely from the fact of being affected with the disorder. As he points out, 'the distemper indubitably operates ... upon every species of matter.' This very clear statement puts Boswell

forward as a debunker, a reasoned being not taken in by fashion, and corresponds more closely to the Boswell of the journals whose frankness is a feature of his expression.

His first piece of advice is practical and relies on maintaining the analogy with fire which he has just introduced. When fire breaks out, we must act at once to prevent its ravages. The approach to hypochondria should be similar. The illness should not be allowed to gather momentum. Linking the two, he states that hypochondria as well as fire, 'may be checked if diligence, sufficiently early and sufficiently vigorous, be used.' The analogy, although understated, suggests both the possible devastating effects of hypochondria and the speed at which such an effect may be achieved. This is an authentic warning which reiterates the sentiment expressed in the admonition quoted above that many 'might have prevented the disease from coming to any height, had they checked its first appearances ...'

Here Boswell gives a genuine warning about the speed at which hypochondria, unchecked, may create ravages. At the same time, he appears to be – quite gently – deflating the ego of some readers and fellow sufferers whose symptoms may have been diminished by their assumption that their illness afflicts only the intellectually able. Boswell would certainly know from his own experience how hypochondria can take a hold. He would also, by 1778, be fully aware that even vigorous 'diligence' cannot, on occasion, prevent or stem a hypochondriac episode. Both the *London Journal* and *Boswell in Holland* bear witness to Boswell's melancholy moods and his inability frequently to change that mood even by taking a variety of different actions, from indulging in drinking and whoring, to imposing a detailed plan of work on himself.

Was he therefore mocking his reader both by attacking egos and by given out advice which he knew did not necessarily work? It seems more likely that Boswell began writing in one mood and moved on to another. For example, the tone of the opening of the essay is witty and urbane. The writer, clearly classically educated and literary, quotes Aristotle as an authority likely to be known. In pointing out that hypochondria attacks the wise and the foolish, the tone is gentle; it is the tone of one calling people to order and implicitly asking them to apply reason to their case for it

is scarcely reasonable to assume that a particular illness would affect only those of a certain intellectual and social standing. Bringing reason into the debate allows the analogy with fire, a very clear and vivid analogy which could not fail to touch readers, both sufferers from hypochondria and non-sufferers.

Boswell is enjoying writing; he writes also with the insight of one who has suffered the disease and who has thought about and read about it. His next reference is to the Abbé Le Blanc (Jean-Bernard Le Blanc, 1707-1781) who wrote about hypochondria in *Letters on the English Nation* (translated from his own *Lettres d'un Français sur les Anglais* (1745). Boswell uses one of the Abbé's comments to add to his own as another warning. The context is that Boswell is recognising that not all symptoms of melancholy can be easily cured, and that there are some 'degrees of melancholy' which are so excessive that they 'defy all our endeavours to remedy them.' He warns against the assumption that we can do nothing at all in those cases and above all warns against 'resigning ourselves to the mental distemper, when it vents itself in immoral acts, which a notion of our being driven about as the Demoniacs were, makes us too ready to excuse ...'. This point is clearly relevant to Boswell's own actions *in extremis* and it is interesting to note that in the public as well as the private context, Boswell recommends facing up to one's own errors. (The private context of the journals is of course the course the centre of Boswell's expressions of regret for actions undertaken.) The Abbé's own comment aptly concludes the argument and provides Boswell with an authority other than himself on whom to rely. In Boswell's words, the Abbé says, 'that people too often ascribe to disease what is in reality vice.' Like the Abbé, Boswell is concerned with the honest interpretation of one's own motives, an honesty in facing base aspects of character which Boswell, unusually perhaps, could manage as we know from his Journal writings, in which he frequently castigated himself for behaviour he perceived as below his ideal standard. This type of honesty was surely more difficult of access to people less introspective than he.

The latter part of the essay is taken up with a discussion of some of the 'infinite variety of ways', both corporeal and mental, in which hypochondria affects the sufferer, largely accomplished through references to contemporary authors such as the poet Mr Green, the publisher Mr Robert Dodsley, the writer Dr Armstrong, the

authors Thompson and Fielding, and their writings on the subject. Boswell uses these examples to explain and illustrate the illness as well as to reassure readers that their symptoms, in all their variety, are shared by other sufferers. He concludes by outlining a plan for his subsequent essays on hypochondria in which he will present his readers with some of his own 'particular observations of the effects of hypochondria.' Boswell suggests to his readers that his own observations on the illness, being the result of 'intense study of the dire disease forced upon me by sad experience' may have more meaning for them than the observations of superior writers. In this, he is attempting to draw a distinction between himself as sufferer of the illness and recorder of its effects, and 'superior writers' who may write in a literary manner of the illness – or even as part of a literary pose – without perhaps the depth of understanding of one like Boswell who has both experienced the distemper itself and studied others' accounts of it.

Thus, Boswell's first essay on hypochondria has covered considerable ground. In it, Boswell has moved from the persuasive debunking of a proposition by Aristotle, to an enumeration of hypochondria's symptoms and a statement of intent for future essays. Throughout, the reader is closely involved being addressed directly, being warned, being informed, and finally told what to expect in future essays.
In the second essay on hypochondria, of March 1778, Boswell sets out to deliver his promise but immediately meets with an obstacle: 'irresolution or the want of power over his own mind.' Boswell opens the essay on this note by saying that 'Nothing characterises a Hypochondriack more peculiarly' than this symptom. He uses this 'want of power' as the starting point because he wishes to go on to show how it makes him reluctant to fulfil his own promise, and then he intends to demonstrate how he puts into practice his own advice about overcoming such symptoms by taking action. Thus, he explains, after some digression, that he feels 'strangely averse to enter upon the fulfilment of the promise which I made in my last, to present my readers with some of my own particular observations on the effects of my hypochondria'; he promptly follows it with 'To do it however, and that <u>now</u>, in this very paper, I am resolved.' This decisive approach is, he believes, the best way to avoid succumbing to the plea of 'temporary inability'. Boswell's friend Johnson, another sufferer from hypochondria, had counselled Boswell about the necessity of steady work to overcome some of the symptoms, and Boswell did his best to follow

this advice. There were indeed moments when he, like his mentor, was unable to exert his will on the task in hand. This form of paralysis afflicted Boswell, for example, in his Herculean task of documenting and writing his *Life of Samuel Johnson*, and blocked progress sporadically. In this March 1778 essay, Boswell is demonstrating the kind of act of will required to overcome the 'want of power'. In this case, Boswell's demonstration was successful as he did complete the task he had set himself.

Another aspect of hypochondria he mentions is an extreme degree of languor that makes the sufferer reluctant to undertake every species of exertion. To remedy this – or at least to attempt to deal with its wilder excesses – Boswell has a piece of straightforward advice: one must attempt to adapt one's understanding to suit one's powers; in other words, scale down the undertaking when necessary.
Boswell sums up by invoking one of the worst symptoms of hypochondria, 'when the mind is so tender and sore that every thing frets it.' The remedy in this case is not action, but books, which Boswell describes as being able to 'afford a kindly relief.' For his own self, Boswell find that the reading of lives 'do me most good, by withdrawing my attention from myself to others, and entertaining me in the most satisfactory manner with real incidents in the varied course of human existence.'

The essay is instructive in its range of symptoms mentioned and commented on, and in the suggestions given to deal with these. This essay, like the first, is written in the first person and the reader experiences Boswell's own involvement in the topic. It is noteworthy that his intention is to assist sufferers and his calmly reasoned tone communicates itself well to the reader. Boswell is in control and is expressing that control in the organisation and coherence of the piece.

An illustration of this coherence is the opening sally in which Boswell is led to develop an analogy between the material frame encasing our soul and the case which encloses the 'curious machinery' of a watch. While a watch is shut up in its case, it is impossible to see how the machinery operates; thus it is with the operations of the mind which, in Boswell's view, may 'be very well assimilated to those of a watch.' Boswell goes on to quote an 'eminent physician in Holland' who, in response to a

question, what is the soul, answered 'C'est un ressort'. 'As the main-spring actuates the wheels, and other component parts of a watch', Boswell continues, ' so the soul actuates the faculties of mind; and as the main-spring of a watch may either be broken altogether, or hurt in different degrees, we may justly talk from analogy in the same terms of the soul.' This elaboration arises from Boswell's attempt to illustrate the unknowability of 'that power ... by which the conscious spirit governs and directs the various mental faculties.' The interesting aspect of the analogy is the part Boswell attributes to the soul as the activator of the faculties of mind. By this analogy, Boswell considers some symptoms of hypochondria as hurtful to the soul which then, by implication, is unable to set in motion the faculties of mind.

As the essay progresses it appears that Boswell is perhaps playing for time, expanding and developing his analogy in an attempt to put aside the moment when he must fulfil his promise to his readers to present them with 'some of my own particular observations of the effects of Hypochondria.' Having demonstrated the Hypochondriack's tendency to 'irresolution', Boswell does nevertheless eventually get down to carrying out his promise.

Boswell's third essay on the topic, written some two years later in December 1780, is remarkable in that Boswell writes under the impact of depression. Gone is the first person stance for a rather more austere third person statement that immediately places the reader in contact with the writer's state of mind:

> The Hypochondriack is himself at this moment in a state of very dismal depression, so that he cannot be supposed capable of instructing or entertaining his readers. But after keeping them company as a periodical essayist for three years, he considers them as his friends and trusts that they will treat him with a kindly indulgence ...
>
> (Bailey, 1951: 207)

What Boswell goes on to write is an essay which explores the symptoms of hypochondria and their effect on the sufferer. Noteworthy are Boswell's engagement with his topic and his establishment of a contract with his reader. In effect, the opening sentences of the essay which I have quoted above express that contract which is the fruit of three years' experience of that readership. This assumption of

reciprocity allows Boswell to continue writing in spite of his 'dismal depression' because he is aware that there 'may perhaps be some of my brethern just as ill as myself, to whom it may be soothing to know that I now write at all.' This then is his engagement or commitment, and the essay as a whole is a kind of test of whether the will to write can compete with and overcome the 'dismal depression.'

The essay is prefaced by a quotation from the Psalms: 'In the multitude of my thoughts within me, thy comforts delight my soul.' Boswell picks out the word 'multitude' which he typifies as containing the idea of 'disorder, fluctuation, tumult.' This selection of words expresses his state of mind in which 'tumult' epitomises the mental confusion of the sufferer from hypochondria. The use of the third person voice, largely sustained throughout this essay, is a further – and perhaps instinctive – means of conveying to the reader the hypochondriac's state of mind. It expresses Boswell's dissociation from self as he sets out various symptoms which isolate him from community.

Using all of his good will, and all of his powers of will, Boswell does successfully continue to write his essay in spite of the further symptoms he describes which might so easily have impeded him. Such symptoms are a low opinion of self, a feeling of incapacity ('his temporary dejection makes his faculties quite feeble'); in addition, 'There is a cloud as far as he [Boswell] could perceive, and he supposed it will be charged with thicker vapour, the longer it continues.' He also refers to experiencing 'an extreme degree of irritability' which makes him 'liable to be hurt by every thing that approaches him in any respect.' In this kind of state it is easy to be persuaded that his gloomy imagination's 'hideous representations of life are true.' Worst of all, 'In all other distresses, there is the relief of hope. But it is the peculiar way of melancholy, that hope hides itself in the dark cloud.' This absence of hope – here referred to as a feature of a certain type of attack of melancholy – was, it will be remembered, a characteristic of the spiritual climate of Boswell's early years, discussed in the previous chapter. Given Boswell's melancholic temperament, it can be seen how important it was for him to achieve a spiritual understanding which could afford him some comfort or certainty in these painful crises.

The enumeration of symptoms and effects is powerful and affecting; here there is no cool tone of graceful analogy for what Boswell is describing is actual and real. He is concerned only to be true to his avowed purpose of attempting to select some of the thoughts which crowd through his mind when he is thus depressed, and also to assist, indirectly, some of his brethren by the very fact of writing itself.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is in this essay that Boswell invokes the 'divine comforts of religion' as a possible means of help for the sufferer, but he does warn that the principles of religion must be already established in the sufferer's mind 'when it is sound and clear' if they are to be of any assistance during the moments when 'the mind is sick and in distress.' In other words, religious belief can only console if it is already well anchored prior to these severe moments of distress.

The fascination of this essay lies in the very honest enumeration of symptoms and their effects. Boswell does not appear to hide anything, but allows the reader imaginatively to experience the humiliation and gloom felt by the Hypochondriack as he doubts his capacities, his achievements, his relationships and his future in an alienated frame of mind in which action becomes difficult or impossible, and the small light offered by hope is barely apparent. Because of the detail and the skill of Boswell's phrasing even under duress, the reader can share Boswell's experiences and empathise with him. One aspect of Boswell's rare gift as a writer is this power to communicate intimate experiences.

The essay is, however, more than a mere catalogue of symptoms as its movement is towards resolution. Such was Boswell's engagement at the start of the essay, such were the intensity and commitment with which he wrote that, by the end of the essay, he finds himself relieved 'from the distress' under which he laboured when he began it. Thus, the essay has silently argued in favour of labour or work as a means of diverting the troubled mind; it has persuasively illustrated the power of action over languor, and has communicated a message of hope to the reader who may, if Boswell's 'sincere prayer' is effective, experience the same happy change of mood as he himself. It is significant that in the final paragraph of the essay, this change of mood accomplished, Boswell is able to return affirmatively to himself and re-

establish himself as 'I' as the disassociated self of the essay's opening has resolved itself in re-association with the writer.

Boswell's public frankness about his psychological state is unusual at a time when self-examination was not seen as a social virtue, nor was individual mind of serious general interest. Boswell was in fact ahead of his time: the private domain of his journals demonstrates his evaluation of action and reaction, motive and outcome. The Hypochondriack essays are the public domain forum which allow him to explore unusual topics in both a public and a personal voice.

The final essay on hypochondria was published in December 1782. It is very different from the previous one in that the writer straight away exults in his freedom from the 'direful malady.' The essay opens with a confident I' and is almost exuberant in tone in its opening lines:

> I have for so long a time been free of the direful malady from which the title of this periodical paper is taken that I almost begin to forget that I ever was afflicted with it; and as Philip of Macedon had one, who every morning when he awaked, put him in mind that he was a man, it may become necessary for me to be put in mind that I am an Hypochondriack.
>
> (Bailey, 1951: 318)

This unusual state, both of health and of freedom from anxiety, allows Boswell an opportunity to look at ways in which to deal with hypochondria should it occur again, and to consider some of the literature on the subject and some of the approaches of writers and medical men. Boswell is well versed in these approaches and has a certain amount of medical knowledge which, though not necessarily specialised, is however sensible and thoughtful.

The essay is prefaced by a quotation from Hippocrates, 'When the brain is quiet, then is a man wise', and some of the ideas in the essay from which the motto comes, 'A Discourse concerning Madness', are discussed in the body of Boswell's text. However, Boswell's opening consideration is for Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), 'one of the most curious books that ever was compiled', which Boswell recommends to his fellow sufferers with great enthusiasm. He is full of

admiration for the work; 'this wonderful performance' are his words, which, he says, is 'an aggregate of more variety of thinking both ancient and modern in the very words of innumerable writers, than has ever been brought together by one man.' The richness of this book resides in its detail, in the fact that it covers 'every species of melancholy, its causes and its cures minutely delineated.' Boswell is proud to admit that he has the sixth edition of the work printed in London in 1660, an edition of some seven hundred and twenty-three pages and 'seventy-eight of a prefatory address to the reader.' Boswell is not only, it seems, a bibliophile, but a man interested in his diseases. Burton's *Anatomy* was clearly still considered authoritative by educated readers like Boswell, even one hundred and sixty years after its first edition. Boswell does not, of course, take the entire volume seriously, for all its wide-ranging information, for he warns that it is 'tinctured, however, with what many would now call the superstition of the time in which [Burton] lived.' But he find the information fascinating and admires the learning of the compiler. His huge sixth edition was no doubt well thumbed and its existence is testimony to Boswell's attempts to understand and face up to his disease.

In his survey of the literature, the next text Boswell mentions is a much more recent one, published in France in 1779, and dealing with Hypochondria as 'a bodily disorder.' This French text, *Recherches sur la Cause des Affections Hypocondriaques*, is by Claude Revillon, '*Docteur en Medicine*'. Described by Boswell as 'a very ingenious little treatise', Boswell nevertheless has some reservations because it focuses on a type of hypochondria which Boswell does not consider as so serious and prevalent and he advises that 'there is too general a propensity to consider Hypochondria as altogether a bodily disorder.' In spite of this, he concurs that the work 'may be useful to many patients.'

Boswell moves on to consider some of the ideas expressed by Hippocrates in 'A Discourse concerning Madness.' Again, that Boswell is a reader of Hippocrates puts him forward as a serious researcher on the subject. He is clearly not content merely to consult contemporary texts, but has examined those of past scholars. That these texts were still considered authoritative testifies to the absence of truly modern innovative texts which could convincingly explain the origins of hypochondria. The older texts of course relied on humoral explanations to account for melancholy and in

the absence of other explanations, the concept of bodily disturbance resulting in mental state tended to dominate.

From Hippocrates' writing, Boswell discusses with the reader two types of madness distinguished by Hippocrates: that produced by phlegm, typified as 'dull madness', and that produced by bile, typified as 'furious madness.' Hippocrates recommends different medical treatments according to the type of madness. Reflecting on the two types, Boswell is moved to comment, 'But there is doubtless a madness seated much deeper, a disorder in the mind itself, which neither the most potent medicines nor most violent exercise can remove.' This 'disorder in the mind itself', is one he greatly feared for there was, in fact, madness in his family. His younger brother John was mentally ill most of his life. Samuel Johnson was similarly afraid of a descent into madness and this fear of chaos was met with the precept of diligence, also adopted by Boswell, as a means of combating the tumultuous thoughts which overwhelmed the mind during a hypochondriac episode.

Boswell's digressions in this essay are very significant as revealing how much Boswell had thought about the composition of mind, and how he also had reached a conclusion as to the composition of man:

> That man is composed of two distinct principles, body or matter, and mind, I firmly believe; and that these mutually act one upon another, is, I think very certain.

Although Boswell admits the body/mind duality and concedes their interdependence and the notions that 'body influences mind' and 'mind influences body', he cannot help observing that not all physick on the body (potent medicines ... [the] most violent exercise') can remove that 'disorder of the mind itself' which he appears to imply is of a different nature to the depression of hypochondria. He refers then to the distinction made by Dr William Battie, in his *Treatise on Madness* (1758), between <u>original</u> madness (which he considers incurable) and <u>consequential</u> madness (which may be cured). 'Original madness' is defined by Boswell, following Battie, as 'that which is owing to a fault in the first formation of the organs', while 'consequential madness' is that caused by 'some accidental hurt or disorder.' In his next comment, Boswell seems to take 'original madness' as the 'disorder in the mind itself,' whereas he assimilates 'consequential madness' with the madness defined by Hippocrates as

being disturbances in the brain caused by phlegm or bile, and in their origin similar to the 'madness' or depression which is a feature of hypochondria. Dr Battie maintains that consequential madness may be cured; Boswell has his own comment to add:

> But it will be found, upon a fair enquiry, that many cases of supervenient madness, both dull and furious, have baffled all the art and power of physick. The unfortunate incurables in St Luke's Hospital , which I have visited out of sad curiosity, are not all victims of native insanity.
>
> (Bailey, 1951: 320)

Boswell therefore disputes the curability of all cases of 'consequential' madness, a disturbing dilemma to raise surely in an essay intended to reassure the hypochondriac.

But Boswell is intellectually – and emotionally – honest. He not only states his disagreement, but also reveals that, typical of many of his time, he has visited the mentally ill 'out of sad curiosity'. This open admission of Boswell's was typical of the man. It is also typical that what in others was merely 'sad curiosity' – an end in itself – was in Boswell an opening for mental speculation as the continuation of a process of mental questioning. Just as in this essay Boswell's own observations lead him to dispute Battie's conclusions with regard to the curability of 'consequential' madness, so in a more general sense Boswell used his experiences to arrive at truths about life. As well as being an artist, Boswell had the enquiring mind of a scientist which draws on observation of the phenomena of the natural world in order to formulate laws about human kind.

In this, his last essay directly addressing the topic of hypochondria, Boswell brings the topic to an appropriate conclusion by summing up the approaches. 'All the modes of cure – exercise – medicine – amusement – study,' he advises, 'must be tried. Sometimes one will be successful, sometimes another.' This is gently reasoned advice, uncontroversial certainly, but the fruit of experience and probably all the better for that. These are modes of cure any person could attempt, relying as they do on things within reach, rather than potions or powders which must be provided by a specialist.

Boswell concludes his essay by quoting from 'some verses upon the dire disease' which he had composed some years earlier. Before opening the quotation, Boswell brings to the reader's attention that he had, in a former paper, earnestly recommended 'piety in a particular manner to those who are afflicted with Hypochondria,' adding 'And I would now enforce my counsel by the consideration that I have a belief that the malady is sometimes owing to the influence of evil spirits.' This curious rider to the earlier examination of forms and sources of madness is perhaps an indication of the failure of the science of mind to develop beyond Greek concepts of mental health and the medieval legacy of the humours as a basis for understanding disease. It also indicates the failure of the eighteenth century at this juncture to come up with a convincing explanation. Facing this silence, and having essayed a variety of approaches to understanding the onset of melancholia or depressive madness, the intelligent questioner falls back on the supernatural agency of evil spirits as being at least as acceptable as any other explanation.

Boswell's verses set love of God as talismanic in the face of the incomprehensible assault on the mind:

> .... I only kiss the rod
> With a firm faith in my eternal GOD!
> Whom I adore with a devotion pure,
> Sure he is good as of his power I am sure
> Sure that his creatures must in end be blest
> With pious hope I calm my troubled breast.
>
> (Bailey, 1951: 321)

*

Do these four essays alone justify Boswell's collection and his appellation? If anyone had a right to the pseudonym, Boswell did. His essays reveal his genuine intention to communicate to fellow sufferers, to improve their lot if possible through his own experience, and perhaps to demonstrate to his readers that some of the strategies for facing hypochondria actually worked.

For some years, Boswell had thought about the possibility of writing a series of essays as The Hypochondriack. According to Margery Bailey (1951) he had the idea

first of all 'when he was travelling in Italy in 1765.' That he brought this intention to fruition is laudable.

The collection as a whole, and the four essays about hypochondria in particular, testify to Boswell's determination, his lively mind, his active spirit and to his ability to face head on a major disability which affected his whole life, both as a writer and as a man. The active role of writer was the way in which Boswell could best face hypochondria with its ever present threat of failure and paralysis of will. Now that all his writings, whether for public consumption or private self, have passed into the public domain, his huge achievement as writer and recorder is evident and bears witness to the victory of energy and determination over despair.

* * *

'A noble soul'

The achievement of Boswell has always been difficult to assess. Standing in the way of an objective assessment is the complex personality of the man with aspects which have seemed variously at different periods over the last two hundred years to invite condemnation or amused tolerance. Yet critics of the calibre of Lytton Strachey, Thomas Carlyle and Leslie Stephen have recognised his talent. In a wonderfully eloquent sentence, Strachey (1931) sums up his attitude to Boswell's great work of biography and the individual who produced it:

> One of the most extraordinary successes in the history of civilization was achieved by an idler, a lecher, a drunkard and a snob.
>
> (Strachey, 1931: 87)

This stern judgement is however tempered some pages later by a kind of grudging admiration:

> In reality Boswell's spirit had never failed. With incredible persistence he had carried through the enormous task which he had set himself thirty years earlier...
>
> (Strachey, 1931: 96)

Given this comment regards the Boswell of *The Life*, but how much greater does his persistence seem to us now that we have access also to the thousands of pages which record his own life?

Stephen (1885) in a biographical note on Boswell focuses naturally on the details of Boswell's life but is compelled to refer to Boswell's 'incomparable skill' in setting forth 'the details of the intercourse between the two men in the most popular biography in the language', and also pauses to comment on the care taken in Boswell's will to 'secure kind treatment of his tenants.' Such comments, made before Boswell's journal and correspondence had been discovered, nevertheless demonstrate a sensitivity to Boswell's literary gifts and an awareness of the reflective side of his character.

It is Carlyle (1899b) however who, perhaps unexpectedly, sees past the well-rehearsed negative aspects of Boswell's character to the fine talent beyond. Conceding that

> The world, as we have said, has been but unjust to him; discerning only the outer terrestrial and often sordid mass; without eye, as it generally is, for his inner divine secret ... (p.76.)

Carlyle goes on to express a very high appreciation of *The Life*, 'In worth as a Book we have rated it beyond any other product of the eighteenth century'. (His essay, 'Biography' in the same volume indicates what qualities he most admires in this genre). To the amazement of generations of readers for whom Johnson represents the peak of a certain kind of achievement, Carlyle continues, 'all Johnson's own Writings, laborious and in their kind genuine above most, stand on a quite inferior level to it' (p.77).

Carlyle is able to view the achievement of Boswell rather than hover over his defects, because Boswell, 'an ill-sorted glaring mixture of the highest and the lowest' (pp.75-76), is no different from man in general. Boswell is thus, at his lowest, not significantly worse than other mortals, but by implication, at his highest, he is significantly better.

I confess to being entirely attuned to Carlyle's endorsement of Boswell the writer and his acceptance of Boswell the man. Carlyle seizes on one of Boswell's greatest attributes: his gift for keeping the past alive. Boswell has 'revoked the edict of Destiny ... so that Time shall not utterly, not so soon by several centuries, have dominion over us' (p.80). These words are a fitting eulogy to the man who, centuries before Virginia Woolf, captured the moment by writing it.

In his life, Boswell sought to live better, to work better, to write better than the day before. He constantly fell, but he constantly picked himself up. He was not so much of his time that he did not stop sometimes to question the *status quo* in, for example, his honest treatment of Peggy Doig, his defence of John Reid, his attempt to understand the mystery of death and the imaginative power of the gallows, his efforts to overcome his 'gloom'; and above all his desire to understand himself. This questing thoughtful aspect of Boswell, aside from his outwardly extrovert public self, is what may endear him to us and reflect the validity of his own perception of himself as 'a noble soul.'

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