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Papers

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Introduction

It is a pleasure to again usher into print a number of the papers presented at recent Annual Seminars of The Johnson Society of Australia, as well as the text of the 2003 David Fleeman Memorial Lecture.

In general, papers are here presented in the form submitted, which in some cases varies from the texts as originally presented. However, for the benefit of scholarly readers and in the interests of uniformity of presentation, I have made efforts to verify and regularise bibliographical references, and (with the contributors' agreement) made other minor alterations and corrections.

I would like to thank the contributors for their co-operation, and particularly I need to thank Barbara Niven and those who have assisted her, for dealing with the production side of this publication.

May I say that I am anxious to maintain this modest record of our deliberations, and while I do try to track down all presenters and to extract texts from them, this has not always been possible, but anyone who has presented an as-yet unpublished paper and has the script tucked away somewhere should be encouraged to send it to me for inclusion in a future volume.

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The Johnson Society of Australia

**The David Fleeman Memorial Lecture
2003**

Boswell and Rousseau: Liberty and Duty

BRYAN O'CONNOR

The David Fleeman Memorial Lecture

The David Fleeman Memorial Lecture is presented annually by the Johnson Society of Australia in memory of the eminent British Johnsonian scholar and bibliographer who was the Society's first Patron. Each lecture is given by a distinguished academic.

The Tenth Fleeman Memorial Lecture was delivered in Melbourne in September 2003 by Dr Bryan O'Connor.

Bryan O'Connor has a PhD from Monash University, Melbourne, having in 2000 completed a thesis on James Boswell's melancholia, supervised by Prof. Kevin Hart. His research has taken him, he says, to Auchinleck in Scotland to see Boswell's bones, and to Yale University, where they keep his soul.

Having spent five solid years drowning in Boswell's massive vault of writings, Bryan now feels he belongs more to the eighteenth century than the twenty-first. He was formerly – like so many of us – a secondary school teacher. Now a self-confessed harmless drudge, he 'teaches and scribbles' for a living, as a freelance writer, speaker and teacher of business communication and creative writing, his aim being, he says, to ward off the gloom and keep the debt collectors at bay. He is based in Ocean Grove, on Victoria's surf coast.

Bryan has given a number of well-received papers at seminars of The Johnson Society of Australia. We were very grateful when, at very short notice, he agreed to give the 2003 David Fleeman Memorial Lecture.

Boswell and Rousseau: Liberty and Duty

Bryan O'Connor

Early in the morning on 3 December 1764, Boswell set out to deliver a letter of introduction to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau, then fifty-two, was living in retreat in Môtiers, a small mountain village in the territory of Neuchâtel, with his common-law wife, Thérèse Levasseur. The harassed Rousseau, author of *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), *Émile* (1762) and *Du Contrat Social* (1762), had been given protection by the Governor of Neuchâtel, Lord Marischal of Scotland, a valiant old Jacobite.

Boswell very much wanted to visit Rousseau on his travels: 'One great object which I ever had in view since leaving Britain has been to obtain the acquaintance, and if possible the regard, of Rousseau.'¹ Throughout his German jaunt in 1764, he had acquainted himself with Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse* and *Émile* so as to equip himself with good questions. As he read these works, his interest in Rousseau developed, and he was particularly moved by the 'Creed of the Savoyard Vicar': 'I was struck with its clearness, its simplicity, and its piety.' (GTI 198) He readily identified with the Savoyard's ideal of individuality, of nurturing one's conscience against submitting to the dogmas of the Church or politics.

Boswell, however, became anxious when he had learned that Rousseau was a recluse and reluctant to entertain visitors.² His anxiety was sharpened by his own troubling temperament: a compulsion to see the wild philosopher by his own merit, and not with the customary aide of a formal introductory letter. He had been issued with a letter of introduction to Rousseau by Lord Marischal, but refused to use it. 'I must have things in my own way,' he later wrote in his journal (GTI 212).³ To secure an interview, he carefully crafted a letter of introduction to spark Rousseau's curiosity. The contents of this letter are interesting. His methods to have things his 'own way' reveal remarkable powers of manipulation.

Knowing Rousseau's connection with Lord Marischal, and guessing his affection for Scots, Boswell opens his letter as a proud 'Scots gentleman of ancient family'. (GTI 213) He presents himself not as some passer-by, who wishes to visit him out of vanity, but as a man afflicted with oppressive melancholy. Although Boswell flatters Rousseau as 'Saint-Preux! Enlightened mentor! Eloquent and amiable Rousseau!', he also puffs himself up, as he figures he would be puzzled if he did not appear to be a man of 'singular merit in the eyes of Monsieur Rousseau'. (GTI 214-15) He also

judges himself to be of service to Rousseau: 'Believe me, you will be glad to have seen me. I have a presentiment that a truly noble friendship will be born today ... Though I am only a young man, I have experienced a variety of existence that will amaze you.' (*GTI* 214-15)

Boswell cunningly not only flatters Rousseau and inflates his own worth, but also ingeniously weaves the two gestures together in the form of a trial. He exalts Rousseau while at the same time baiting him with a challenge, a test to perceive Mr Boswell's merit. He shrewdly censures Rousseau on the need of recommendations:

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 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. I dare to put myself to the test. In cities and in courts, where there are numerous companies, one can disguise one's self, one can sometimes dazzle the eyes of the great philosophers. But for my part, I put myself to the severest test. It is in the silence and the solitude of your sacred retreat that you shall judge of me, and think you in such circumstances I shall be able to dissimulate? (*GTI* 214)

Boswell's letter is deliberately ambiguous: it is not at all clear who is actually being put to the test. He declares twice that his own character is on trial, but Rousseau is also being called upon to prove his expertise. An analysis of Boswell's merit necessitates Rousseau's competency to perceive it. He has ensnared Rousseau in a dare to prove his own reputation. If Rousseau denies him a meeting, then he risks the implication that he is a common man in need of a recommendation, a man not up to his reputation; or worse, a philosopher, who 'lacks penetration', who can be 'deceived' and 'dazzled' by impostors who wish to see him out of vanity. Boswell pricks Rousseau's pride, leaving his own puffed-up self-image intact, as his own merit would only be tested in an anticipated interview. Rousseau's pride, not Boswell's, is at stake. Boswell's artful letter, as he later judged, 'is really a masterpiece'. (*GTI* 212)

Boswell's letter had paid off. Over the next two weeks he scored no fewer than six visits to the sublime sage.

Rousseau later wrote that month (20 December 1764) to his friend, Alexandre Delyere, in Parma, recommending Boswell. He remarked on Boswell's peculiar letter of introduction:

I am glad that Mr. Boswell and you are to make each other's acquaintance. I think you will both be grateful to me for bringing you together. In the first letter he wrote me, he told me that he was a man 'of singular merit'. I was curious to see a man who spoke of himself in such a fashion, and I found that he had told me the truth ... I should have been interested in him even if he had not been recommended to me by Lord Marischal. (*GTI* 268)

Boswell, dressed flamboyantly in scarlet waistcoat, green camlet-lined greatcoat with fox-fur sleeves, and a gold-laced hat, hurries off to meet his Saint-Preux the same day he has delivered his letter. He visits him as man of rank.⁴ Boswell's colourful apparel is a striking contrast to Rousseau's simplicity of dress. Their attire, as we shall see, reveals more than a mere difference of taste.⁵

So the elegantly dressed Boswell, wanting to meet Rousseau on an equal footing, refuses to sit on a chair when offered, and instead chooses to take a turn around the room. He informs Rousseau that he had been given a note of introduction by Lord Marischal, but was unwilling to use it. 'I wished to have a proof of my own merits,' he proudly announces. (*GTI* 217) Boswell had actually forgotten to bring Lord Marischal's letter of introduction with him. His forgetting to bring the letter further highlights the compulsive nature of his wish to secure an interview on his own merit. It was less a conscious act of absent-mindedness than an unconscious force to do things his own way.

During this first interview Boswell is cautious. He wants to be as agreeable as possible, for fear of diminishing the inflated character he has given of himself. He wants to look dignified in his colourful regal costume, silently surveying his catch. He refrains from appearing forward, as he had done during his first meeting with Johnson. He asks few questions and allows Rousseau to talk freely on matters of politics and religion. Rousseau rants and raves about French politicians reacting unfairly to his books. He curses how easily he could disgrace them by printing their edict in the light of their own laws on equity.

Boswell's reluctance to speak ingeniously triggers Rousseau to open up and vent his spleen. He thus functions as a kind of silent therapist, allowing the sublime philosopher to divulge his grievances.

But Boswell has other things on his mind: he is anxious to know if he has lived up to the dignified character he portrayed of himself in his letter. 'Tell me, Sir, do you not find that I answer to the description I gave you of myself?' (*GTI* 219) Rousseau responds that all appearances are in his favour. This greatly

pleases Boswell. It reinforces his image that he is indeed a man of 'singular merit'. Rousseau has approved of him.

As the elated Boswell did not record all the conversation he had with Rousseau, we can be sure that what he did report interested him. Two topics particularly impressed him, and he wrote about one of them in a letter to his friend George Dempster the same evening: 'Let me assure you of one fact. The Corsicans have actually applied to Monsieur Rousseau to give them a set of laws.' (*GTI* 220) The thought of Rousseau being requested to forge laws for the Corsicans further fired Boswell's transference for him: Saint-Preux was now elevated to a god, an embodiment of the law itself. The idea of a new society founded on Rousseau's laws stimulated Boswell's appetite to later visit Corsica and meet the great Pasquale de Paoli himself.

The second and more important topic that impressed Boswell, as he records in his journal, runs like a thread throughout the rest of his five visits to Rousseau. This was the philosopher's inflamed passion for liberty and to live as a single man:

[ROUSSEAU.] 'Sir, I have no liking for the world. I live here in a world of fantasies, and I cannot tolerate the world as it is.' BOSWELL. 'But when you come across fantastical men, are they not to your liking?' ROUSSEAU. 'Why, Sir, they have not the same fantasies as myself. – Sir, your country is formed for liberty. I like your habits. You and I feel at liberty to stroll here together without talking. That is more than two Frenchmen can do. Mankind disgusts me. And my housekeeper tells me that I am in far better humour on the days when I have been alone tha[n] on those when I have been in company.' (*GTI* 218-19)

Rousseau prides himself on his lofty detachment from society, and makes no attempt to conceal his contempt for humankind. He considers himself beyond humanity. The ideal of a sublime solitary thinker above others deeply impresses Boswell, for it is taken up again during his second meeting with Rousseau, this time, however, in the character of Abbé de Saint-Pierre. Rousseau describes Saint-Pierre as 'a man who did good, simply because he chose to do good: a man without enthusiasm. One might say he was passionately reasonable.' (*GTI* 222) Rousseau continues to characterise Saint-Pierre as a man who promotes the ideal of reason for moral action, as a man who values useful professions, as a man who is a favourite with the ladies, as a man who sticks to his principles, and a man who is utterly independent. (*GTI* 222-23)⁶

The idea of being a man whose life is consistent with his principles greatly interests Boswell as it further feeds his ideal of being an independent man. During the third meeting with

Rousseau this idea is given more support. After confessing to him that he had turned Catholic with intentions of retreating to a convent in France, Boswell asks for his opinion on cloisters and penances. Rousseau responds that they are nothing but mummeries. He urges Boswell,

Do not be guided by men's judgements, or you will find yourself tossed to and fro perpetually. Do not base your life on the judgements of others; first, because they are as likely to be mistaken as you are, and further, because you cannot know that they are telling you their true thoughts; they may be impelled by motives of interest or convention to talk to you in a way not corresponding to what they really think.
(GTI 226)

Boswell is so impressed by this outburst that he asks Rousseau to guide him: ‘“Will you, Sir, assume direction of me?” ROUSSEAU. “I cannot. I can be responsible only for myself.”’ (GTI 226)

Given that Boswell had already met Johnson in London on 16 May the previous year and had requested a plan of education to help him study in Holland, this is a remarkable request. Unlike Johnson, who was only too willing to guide him with a plan, Rousseau complains that he cannot, that he can be responsible only for himself. Here the tables are turned. Rousseau's reluctance to play the therapist frustrated Boswell to the extent that Boswell demanded to see him again. ‘Yes, you will see me,’ a troubled Boswell told Rousseau when leaving. (GTI 226)

Returning to his inn, Boswell set about writing a sketch of his life, his *Ébauche de ma vie* (5 December), with a covering letter. Rousseau's reluctance to direct Boswell as a disciple made Boswell all the more determined to cough up his past. Unlike his earlier confession to Johnson, who listened to him, Rousseau foiled him, which prompted him to write his ‘Sketch’.

It is likely that the idea of writing a ‘Sketch’ of his life germinated out of the ideas Boswell picked up from Rousseau. Fortunately, Boswell was mesmerised by Rousseau's revolutionary thoughts on education, religion, and raising children. Rousseau was one of the first pre-Freudian thinkers to emphasise the importance of childhood experiences as meaningful events determining adult psychical life. These ideas prompted Boswell to focus on his own childhood experiences as possible reasons for his own condition. But Boswell was only partially aware of their import: he hoped Rousseau would fathom their deeper meanings to explain his confusion. It is for this reason that his ‘Sketch’ is a unique and remarkable document narrating significant moments of his childhood and adolescent years.

At noon on 14 December, Boswell returns to Môtiers to hear Rousseau's response to his ‘Sketch’. As Rousseau is in pain

(he is using a urethral probe), he can only see Boswell for a few moments:

[ROUSSEAU.] 'I have read your Memoir. You have been gulled. You ought never to see a priest.' BOSWELL. 'But can I yet hope to make something of myself?' ROUSSEAU. 'Yes. Your great difficulty is that you think it so difficult a matter. Come back in the afternoon. But put your watch on the table.' BOSWELL. 'For how long?' ROUSSEAU. 'A quarter of an hour, and no longer.' BOSWELL. 'Twenty minutes.' ROUSSEAU. 'Be off with you! – Ha! Ha!' Notwithstanding the pain he was in, he was touched with my singular sally and laughed most really. He had a gay look immediately. (*GTI* 247)

Rousseau's good humour suggests his genuine affection for his spirited visitor; and Boswell, as usual, continues to haunt him with his anxious question on his ability to be a great man. Rousseau's initial response, here, is of interest as it brings to light Boswell's excessive want: for if Boswell thinks 'it is so difficult a matter' to make something of himself, then this suggests that he is troubled by an unconscious force that inhibits his aim to be an advocate, laird, or citizen of Scotland. Rousseau is aware of Boswell's privileged background, intelligence, wealth, and the opportunities available to him. Given these advantages, Boswell's anxiety to make something of himself is thus unreasonable. It is as if he yearns to be someone or something beyond any position in society to which he is entitled. He returns at four that afternoon to resume his questioning:

[BOSWELL.] 'Is it possible to live amongst other men, and to retain singularity?' ROUSSEAU. 'Yes, I have done it.' BOSWELL. 'But to remain on good terms with them?' ROUSSEAU. 'Oh, if you want to be a wolf you must howl. – I attach very little importance to books.' BOSWELL. 'Even to your own books? ...' ROUSSEAU. 'When I put my trust in books, I was tossed about as you are – though it is rather by talking that you have been tossed. I had nothing stable here' (striking his head) 'before I began to meditate.' (*GTI* 247)

Once again Boswell raises his fundamental question: is it possible to enjoy singularity as well as remain on good terms with others? And though Rousseau answers yes, he believes it comes at a cost: one has to howl like a wolf in the social world in order to be heard among the masses, in order to retain singularity. Rousseau thus highlights a darker side of man: man not only has the capacity to become a noble thinker but also a savage wolf in company. In order to retain singularity, then, Rousseau favours a contemplative life rather than a savage life in the public sphere. Furthermore, he warns Boswell that, as his publications exposed him to the fangs of others, an excessive need of social company and talk will similarly maul him. Instead, he urges his guest to meditate more to fortify his mind, to listen to his inner voice of

conscience, and not be goaded by the views of others. Boswell is confused, but he is not about to abandon company or books so that he can meditate more:

BOSWELL. 'But you would not have meditated to such good purpose if you had not read.' ROUSSEAU. 'No. I should have meditated to better purpose if I had begun sooner.' BOSWELL. 'But I, for example, would never have had the agreeable ideas I possess of the Christian religion, had I not read "The Savoyard's Creed".' (GTI 247)

Boswell here has cleverly caught Rousseau in a paradox: how can one learn to meditate without having some prior understanding of it? In other words, the idea of meditation, of listening to one's inner voice of conscience, for him, is impossible without having first been introduced to the idea of it.

Yet, in spite of questioning Rousseau's solipsistic thinking, Boswell, in fact, has another aim: to undermine any moral or political system grounded on certainty, so as to pave the way for a deeper want. He casually declares his moral uncertainty before expressing his more pressing wish:

[BOSWELL.] '...Yet, to tell the truth, I can find no certain system. Morals appear to me an uncertain thing. For instance, I should like to have thirty women. Could I not satisfy that desire?' ROUSSEAU. 'No!' BOSWELL. 'Why?' ROUSSEAU. 'Ha! Ha! If Mademoiselle were not here, I would give you a most ample reason why.' BOSWELL. 'But consider: if I am rich, I can take a number of girls; I get them with child; propagation is thus increased. I give them dowries, and I marry them off to good peasants who are very happy to have them. Thus they become wives at the same age as would have been the case if they had remained virgins, and I, on my side, have had the benefit of enjoying a great variety of women.' (GTI 247-48)

Boswell comes straight to the point here. He unmasks his pathological want-to-enjoy, that is, a gluttonous want-to-enjoy all women for himself. Rousseau's jocularly betrays his amazement at Boswell's request. Yet Boswell is earnest, and after he enumerates a number of reasons to justify his urge, Rousseau responds more seriously:

ROUSSEAU. 'Oh, you will be landed in jealousies, betrayals, and treachery.' BOSWELL. 'But cannot I follow the Oriental usage?' ROUSSEAU. 'In the Orient the women are kept shut up, and that means keeping slaves. And, mark you, their women do nothing but harm, whereas ours do much good, for they do a great deal of work.' BOSWELL. 'Still, I should like to follow the example of the old Patriarchs, worthy men whose memory I hold in respect.' ROUSSEAU. 'But are you not a citizen? You must not pick and choose one law here and another law there; you must take the laws of your own society. Do your duty as a citizen, and if you hold fast, you will win respect. I should not talk about it, but

I would do it. – And as for your lady [the married Jean Heron], when you go back to Scotland you will say, “Madam, such conduct is against my conscience, and there shall be no more of it.” She will applaud you; if not, she is to be despised.’ BOSWELL. ‘Suppose her passion is still lively, and she threatens to tell her husband what has happened unless I agree to continue our intrigue?’ ROUSSEAU. ‘In the first place, she will not tell him. In the second, you have no right to do evil for the sake of good.’ BOSWELL. ‘True. None the less, I can imagine some very embarrassing situations. And pray tell me how can I expiate the evil I have done?’ ROUSSEAU. ‘Oh, Sir, there is no expiation for evil except good.’ (GTI 248)

Rousseau appears here to be espousing a more conventional conception of morality than he did previously: he urges Boswell to do his duty as a citizen of Scotland as well as follow his personal conscience.

Yet Rousseau’s idea of morality is more radical than at first seems, for he does not interpret Boswell’s intrigue as a transgression of the laws of marriage; he views it as an evil act against an inherent sublime good. For the noble philosopher, Boswell has not sinned against his fellow countrymen; he is guilty under the ever-watchful eyes of his own internal conscience. Rousseau, in fact, is grounding the ability to do evil or good on pure free will, on radical choice; he rejects penances, and other forms of punishment, in order to atone for guilty acts. For him, the only amends for evil is to choose to do good. Boswell, however, finds this idea of expiation ‘a beautiful thought’, but favours a more orthodox belief of penance:

Nevertheless, I maintained my doctrine of satisfaction by punishment. Yes, I must ever think that immutable justice requires atonement to be made for transgressions, and this atonement is to be made by suffering. This is the universal idea of all nations, and seems to be a leading principle of Christianity. (GTI 248)

Boswell’s belief in ‘satisfaction by punishment’ reveals that he has not taken up Rousseau’s idea of ‘expiation of evil’ by choosing to do good. Unlike Rousseau, he struggles to maintain external Christian doctrines or supports to regulate his behaviour; he prefers the idea of being guilty under the eye of God, to endure a period of penance, and be absolved of his transgressions. However, though he believes in the Christian doctrine of ‘satisfaction by punishment’, he is still in need of a plan to determine his direction in life:

BOSWELL. ‘Upon my word, I am at a loss how to act in this world; I cannot determine whether or not I should adopt some profession.’ ROUSSEAU. ‘One must have a great plan.’ BOSWELL. ‘What about those studies on which so much stress is laid? Such as history, for instance?’ ROUSSEAU. ‘They are just amusements.’ BOSWELL. ‘My

father desires me to be called to the Scottish bar; I am certainly doing right in satisfying my father; I have no such certainty if I follow my light inclinations. I must therefore give my mind to the study of the laws of Scotland.’
ROUSSEAU. ‘To be sure; they are your tools. If you mean to be a carpenter, you must have a plane.’ (*GTI* 249)

Given Rousseau’s ideal of a contemplative life, he oddly discourages Boswell from studying history (and, presumably, other philosophical and moral topics), which he deems a mere ‘amusement’, and encourages Boswell ‘to hold fast’ to the profession that is decreed for him – the law. Boswell, however, recoils from such a path that is destined for him. He bemoans: ‘I do not get on well with my father. I am not at my ease with him.’ (*GTI* 249)

Boswell appears to associate the law with his father. His aversion to the law springs from his uneasy relations with his father. It is as if he perceives the law to be his father’s territory, his father’s profession, or his father’s desire, a desire that he finds difficult to assimilate. In other words, Boswell mistakenly imagines his father to be more than a mere representative of Scottish law. He thinks of his father as an embodiment of the law itself; that his father, far from sacrificing pleasure, actually gratifies personal enjoyment at the expense of the proper public law. Boswell thus fails to distinguish between his father as a person and his father as a judge. It is as if by studying the law, his father’s profession, he thinks he would be sacrificing his enjoyment directly to his real father and not to the impersonal law itself.

Yet Boswell also feels that it is ‘right’ to satisfy his father, so as to ground his ‘light inclinations’ on a path of certainty. He is caught, then, in a kind of imaginary deadlock with his father: he resists his father’s desire, which he perceives to be the law, yet also desires to assimilate it. Rousseau counsels Boswell around this impasse by suggesting a shared activity that would lessen his tension with his father:

ROUSSEAU. ‘To be at ease you need to share some amusement.’ BOSWELL. ‘We look after the planting together.’
ROUSSEAU. ‘That’s too serious a business. You should have some amusement that puts you more on an equal footing: shooting, for example. A shot is missed and a joke is made of it, without any infringement of respect. You enjoy a freedom which you take for granted. – Once you are involved in a profession, you must keep on with it even though another, and apparently better, should present itself. If you keep changing, you can achieve nothing.’ (*GTI* 249)

Rousseau’s advice illustrates his perceptive understanding of Boswell’s predicament. He understands his troubled relations with his father to stem from feelings of inferiority. He is locked in an unequal rivalrous relationship with his father, so a shared

activity of shooting game, with near hits and misses, would help to balance the relationship. If Lord Auchinleck misses a shot, then he would appear less omnipotent in Boswell's eyes. Perceiving his father's inadequacies, Boswell would feel less inferior.

Rousseau also expresses here a less radical idea of freedom than is usually attributed to him. He alleges that freedom comes with obligations – implying, therefore, that it is only within the bounds of his profession that Boswell will enjoy the freedom to achieve something. Boswell, however, remains silent during Rousseau's counsel; it is not clear what impression it has made upon him. His silence perhaps suggests he wants a more radical form of freedom than freedom within the limits of a profession.

Boswell departs from Rousseau with elevated feelings: he has secured a dinner invitation with him the following day. The next morning, 15 December, he rises with a renewed zest for life; he is feeling euphoric. His joy, however, appears to originate less from what he has learned from his enlightened mentor than from being acquainted with him. He celebrates his triumph in befriending the sublime sage in his journal:

Gods! Am I now then really the friend of Rousseau? What a rich assemblage of ideas! I relish my felicity truly in such a scene as this. Shall I not truly relish it at Auchinleck? I was quite gay, my fancy was youthful, and vented its gladness in sportive sallies. I supposed myself in the rude world. I supposed a parcel of young fellows saying, 'Come, Boswell, you'll dine with us today?' 'No, gentlemen, excuse me; I'm engaged. I dine today with Rousseau.' (GTI 251)

Boswell's spirits are the result of his inflated vanity from befriending the illustrious Rousseau. He preens himself in his awareness of being the personal friend of the celebrated philosopher. He even entertains a fantasy of snubbing a dinner with his friends 'in the rude world' for a dinner engagement with his Saint-Preux on the Alps. It is clear that Boswell's elation chiefly arises from knowing, being accepted, approved, and loved by Rousseau.

Although he exalts Rousseau as his mentor, he also wishes to be on an equal footing with him. His manner during his final interview is notably different from his previous visits; he is a more daring, critical, and challenging visitor. Yet, though Boswell's forthrightness sparks a few heated moments during the visit, it does not dampen Rousseau's liking for him; on the contrary, it increases Rousseau's affection. From the moment Boswell arrives at noon for dinner, he is a more relaxed and inquisitive guest. He initiates the conversation by asking Rousseau why his *Émile* appears to be without a father:

ROUSSEAU. 'Oh, he hadn't any. He didn't exist.' It is, however, a real pity that Monsieur Rousseau has not treated

of the duties between parents and children. It is an important and a delicate subject and deserves to be illustrated by a sage of so clear a judgement and so elegant a soul. (*GTI* 252)

Boswell's appraisal of Rousseau's *Émile* sets the underlying theme for most of the visit: he raises the 'important and delicate subject' of the duties between a son and father or, more generally, between ideas of liberty and authority in many different forms. His, and Rousseau's, thoughts on these ideas flicker out during the twists and turns of their conversation. Topics range from Johnson on innovators to the customs of eating, from over-familiarity to the need of respect, from the limits of despotism to the character of cats, dogs and hens, and, finally, from Boswell's playing with time to his love of mimicry. All these subjects reveal Boswell's core thoughts on liberty and authority.

Boswell begins by introducing Rousseau to the character of his other great mentor:

I gave him very fully the character of Mr. Johnson. He said with force, 'I should like that man. I should respect him. I would not disturb his principles if I could. I should like to see him, but from a distance, for fear he might maul me.' I told him how averse Mr. Johnson was to write, and how he had his levee. 'Ah,' said he, 'I understand. He is a man who enjoys holding forth.' I told him Mr. Johnson's *bon mot* upon the innovators: that truth is a cow which will yield them no more milk, and so they are gone to milk the bull. He said, 'He would detest me. He would say, "Here is a corruptor: a man who comes here to milk the bull."' (*GTI* 252)

In this short sally, Boswell exposes one of his principal characteristics: his sport of pitting one man against another. In this case, the authority of the Tory Johnson is played against the innovator Rousseau. His fondness for this sport led him more than once into a heated situation. It is one of his chief modes of enjoyment; a morbid trait that appears to be beyond his powers of tact, as it, at times, not only made him unpopular, but also sabotaged longer-term goals. But it also had an important function for him. His inclination to swat one man's idea against another is a means for him to neutralise the persuasive force of an idea itself. By this method, Boswell could retain his singularity, his Cartesian subjectivity, by remaining in uncertainty. He refuses to surrender to the persuasive force of any one governing idea.

Boswell also appears to be aware of his own rash behaviour, for he regrets his unconscious burst. Immediately after his quip, he writes, 'I had diverted myself by pretending to help Mademoiselle Le Vasseur to make the soup.' (*GTI* 252) He thus shows his want to be out of the way, to cool the uneasy tension in the air he had created.

Soon dinner is served, and Boswell, forgetting himself, becomes ceremonious with an irritated Rousseau. He offers his host a helping from a dish. Rousseau is piqued and chides Boswell for being formal: 'I should like every one to be his own master, and no one to play the part of host. Let each one ask for what he wants; if it is there to give, let him be given it; otherwise, he must be satisfied without. Here you see true hospitality.' (*GTI 253*) Boswell airs his reservations regarding such hospitality, thinking it might lessen respect: 'In England, it is quite a another matter. They do not want to be at ease; they are stiff and silent, in order to win respect.' (*GTI 253*) Rousseau, however, defends French informality and dignity, believing it to be a 'more refined form of self-esteem' than the English idea of reserve. (*GTI 253*)

So Rousseau promotes ideals of autonomy and French casualness, and Boswell upholds ideals of English restraint and reserve to retain respect. English formality is set against French liberty. Boswell probes further by asking his host if he wants to be respected:

ROUSSEAU. 'Yes, I confess that I like to be respected; but only in matters of importance.' BOSWELL. 'You are so simple. I expected to find you quite different from this; the Great Rousseau ... expected to find you enthroned and talking with a grave authority.' ROUSSEAU. 'Uttering oracles? Ha! Ha! Ha!' BOSWELL. 'Yes, and that I should be much in awe of you. And really your simplicity might lay you open to criticism; it might be said, "Monsieur Rousseau does not make himself sufficiently respected." In Scotland, I assure you, a very different tone must be taken to escape from the shocking familiarity which is prevalent in that country ... Should I not be justified in forestalling it by fighting a duel with the first man who should treat me so, and thus live at peace for the rest of my life?' ROUSSEAU. 'No. That is not allowable. It is not right to stake one's life on such follies ...' BOSWELL. 'If you were in Scotland, they would begin at the very start by calling you Rousseau; they would say, "Jean-Jacques, how goes it?" with the utmost familiarity.' ROUSSEAU. 'That is perhaps a good thing.' (*GTI 253*)

Rousseau appears to have the stronger case against English formality. English reserve and honour are oppressive, and indeed dangerous, beside French informality and liberty. Yet Boswell is about to reveal another card to support the need of reserve: the dangers of liberty for all leading to excessive familiarity:

BOSWELL. 'But they [the Scots] would say, "Poh! Jean-Jacques, why do you allow yourself all these fantasies? You're a pretty man to put forward such claims. Come, come, settle down in society like other people." And they would say it to you with a sourness which I am quite unable to imitate for you.' ROUSSEAU. 'Ah, that's bad.'

There he felt the thistle, when it was applied to himself on the tender part. It was just as if I had said, 'Hoot, Johnnie Rousseau mon, what for hae ye sae mony figmagairies [whims]? Ye're a bonny man indeed to mauk siccan a wark; set ye up. Canna ye just live like ither fowk?' It was the best idea could be given in the polite French language of the rude Scots sarcaistical vivacity. (*GTI* 253-54)

Boswell has cleverly, and enjoyably, turned the cards on Rousseau's promotion of liberty: liberty among the 'rude' classes effectively leads to collective oppression of singularity, that is, individual liberty. Boswell's victory over Rousseau propels him to endorse a harsher form of restraint:

BOSWELL. 'I have leanings towards despotism, let me tell you. On our estate, I am like an ancient laird, and I insist on respect from the tenants.' ROUSSEAU. 'But when you see an old man with white hair, do you, as a young man, have no feelings at all? Have you no respect for age?' BOSWELL. 'Yes. I have even on many occasions been very affable. I have talked quite freely with the tenants.' ROUSSEAU. 'Yes, you forgot yourself, and became a man.' BOSWELL. 'But I was sorry for it afterwards. I used to think, "I have lowered myself."' ROUSSEAU. 'Ha! Ha! Ha!' (*GTI* 254)

Rousseau's retort here, about Boswell's forgetting himself and becoming a man, reveals the distinction he maintains on being a titled role player and being a man. He encourages Boswell to shrug off empty airs of being an ancient laird and affirm the real 'man' beneath. Boswell, however, considers such an act as lowering himself. Yet his 'affable' occasions, talking 'quite freely with the tenants', also display his joy in socialising with his subjects on his estate.

Here we can distinguish between Boswell's two distinct forms of enjoyment: his wish to enjoy life as a single man and his wish to enjoy life as a titled role player. He wants to enjoy being an ancient laird as well as a noble man of singular merit. His self-contentment revolves around both poles, and, not surprisingly, so does his anxiety: his conscience, or want of respect, reproaches him for not upholding his title of an ancient laird, yet his yearnings for singularity also plague him. In other words, he feels guilty for dropping his pretensions and becoming a man, and guilty for abandoning his singularity by taking up his role as laird. Boswell, governed by two incompatible wants, cannot make up his mind.

Perceiving Boswell's shaky leanings for despotism and respect, Rousseau continues his case for friendship and liberty:

ROUSSEAU. 'Do you like cats?' BOSWELL. 'No.' ROUSSEAU. 'I was sure of that. It is my test of character. There you have the despotic instinct of men. They do not like cats because the cat is free and will never consent to become a slave. He will do nothing to your order, as the

other animals do.' BOSWELL. 'Nor a hen, either.' ROUSSEAU. 'A hen would obey your orders if you could make her understand them. But a cat will understand you perfectly and not obey them.' BOSWELL. 'But a cat is ungrateful and treacherous.' ROUSSEAU. 'No. That's all untrue. A cat is an animal that can be very much attached to you; he will do anything you please out of friendship. I have a cat here. He has been brought up with my dog; they play together. The cat will give the dog a blow with his tail, and the dog will offer him his paw.' (GTI 254-55)

Rousseau's test of character here further proves Boswell's need to have things his 'own way', his anxious need to be master of the situation. His guest dislikes cats because they are, more or less, a non-responsive animal, that is, an animal with a will of its own. It is not so much the cat Boswell finds distasteful, but the cat's pure *will*. In other words, a cat has little respect for its master, it is reluctant to be controlled by others or determined by rules. Boswell's later cruel treatment of Jachone, a mastiff Paoli presented him with, clearly demonstrated his dislike of an animal's will. Moreover, his trouble in forming proper relations with people is not simply the effect of his antipathy to the collective will of others, but also the individual liberty of a person, especially the will of a woman.

The conversation turns to Boswell's anxious thoughts regarding sensibility:

BOSWELL. 'Suppose you were to walk in upon a drinking-party of young folk, who should treat you with ridicule, would you be above minding it?' ROUSSEAU. 'It would put me out of countenance. I am shy by nature. I have often, for example, been overcome by the raillery of women. A party such as you describe would be disagreeable to me. I should leave it.' I was comforted to find that my sensibility is not despicable weakness. (GTI 255-56)

Boswell is pleased to find that his mentor's ease would also be irked in such a situation, that he would experience 'disagreeable' feelings if ridiculed. Rousseau, accordingly, admits to his feelings of sensibility. Surprisingly, then, having just learned that his host is also a man of delicate feeling, Boswell pricks Rousseau's poise by mentioning Monsieur Voltaire's dislike of him. The discussion turns sour and Boswell is told to 'go away' (GTI 256). But, as usual, when Boswell finds himself in a warm situation, he reveals his ingenious powers to cool the heat he creates. Full of confidence, he refuses to leave:

BOSWELL. 'Not yet. I will leave at three o'clock. I have still five and twenty minutes.' ROUSSEAU. 'But I can't give you five and twenty minutes.' BOSWELL. 'I will give you even more than that.' ROUSSEAU. 'What! of my own time? All the kings on earth cannot give me my own time.' BOSWELL. 'But if I had stayed till tomorrow I should have had

five and twenty minutes, and next day another five and twenty. I am not taking those minutes. I am making you a present of them.' ROUSSEAU. 'Oh! You are not stealing my money, you are giving it to me.' He then repeated part of a French satire ending with 'And whatever they leave you, they count as a gift.' BOSWELL. 'Pray speak for me, Mademoiselle.' (To Rousseau.) 'I have an excellent friend here.' ROUSSEAU. 'Nay, but this is a league.' BOSWELL. 'No league at all.' Mademoiselle said, 'Gentlemen, I will tell you the moment the clock strikes.' ROUSSEAU. 'Come; I need to take the air after eating.' (GTI 256-57)

Boswell cleverly bargains with Rousseau on the value of time. He weighs the time he has left with Rousseau against imagined times of future visits. Yet he catches Rousseau off guard, as Rousseau has not entertained, let alone consented to, possible future dates. Boswell's generous gift of anticipated times is valid only if Rousseau had previously agreed to them. Boswell bases his case on a presumption of a number of envisaged visits; a boldness which, once more, displays his vanity.

However, his ingenuity here, in playing with time, also points to another level in which his conceit is expressed: for it is not simply Rousseau's refusal to give him 'five and twenty minutes' of his time that unnerves the vain Boswell, but also the restrictions of clocked-time *per se*. He perceives clocked-time as a representative of fate or necessity. From this perspective, Boswell steals anticipatory time from fate to give to Rousseau in the present. His ability to reflect on time here reveals a remarkable skill not only to detach himself from the constraints of time, but also to manipulate time for his own ends. Or, to put it another way, far from being blindly governed or enjoyed by clocked-time, Boswell struggles to make time, fate, work for him.

Noticing the bewildered Rousseau mellowing in humour, Boswell turns his charms to Mademoiselle to assist his appeal to have his 'five and twenty minutes'. The besieged Rousseau finally acquiesces in a walk – he needs some air! Out walking, Boswell continues to inform Rousseau of another talent of his, his hobby of collecting people's characteristics:

BOSWELL. 'In the old days I was a great mimic. I could imitate every one I saw. But I have left it off.' ROUSSEAU. 'It is a dangerous talent, for it compels one to seize upon all that is small in a character.' BOSWELL. 'True. But I assure you there was a nobleness about my art, I carried mimicry to such a point of perfection. I was a kind of virtuoso. When I espied any singular character I would say, "It must be added to my collection." ' He laughed with all his nerves: 'You are an odd character.' (GTI 257)

Boswell's zest for the art of mimicry exposes two important dimensions to his character: it reveals his joy in expressing

himself in a number of roles, and it discloses his desire to ground himself in a fixed role. Mimicry, in fact, for Boswell, has a self-sustaining paradoxical effect: it not only liberates him from the drudgery of a fixed responsible role, permitting him to enjoy narcissistic pleasures, but also makes him anxious for his want of a stable, respectable character. He is caught in a vicious circle: the more he indulges mimicry, the less sure he is of his own identity, which threatens him with the possibility of having no identity at all.

To avoid the terrifying prospect of having no identity, and encountering the abyss of being itself beneath the mask or character he dons, it becomes more urgent for him to search for a solid character to adopt. His need of weighty ‘manly’ figures to identify with is thus not merely to indulge narcissistic delights (‘I’m one of their friends’) as to flee from the dread of confronting the void of being itself beneath the mask of role-play.

It is getting late, and Rousseau urges Boswell to hurry as the roads to Yverdon are bad. Boswell’s ‘five and twenty minutes’ has ticked away. In the flurry to collect himself after his ‘high flow’ with Rousseau, and with the image of a long, precarious road to Yverdon, Boswell re-asks his anxious question on the path that lies ahead of him in life: ‘Do you think that I shall make a good barrister before a court of justice?’ ROUSSEAU. ‘Yes. But I regret that you have the talents necessary for defending a bad case.’ (*GTI* 257-58)

Rousseau perceives Boswell’s path in life ominously: it is to be a rocky one troubled by vanity. He laments that Boswell is capable of defending a good or bad case to further his own designs rather than the public good of Scottish justice. He was later proved right: Boswell did indeed defend a case for personal ends rather than the interests of Scottish law.

Boswell records his last interview with Rousseau with relish. As in his letter of introduction to him, he once again thinks of him as ‘quite the tender Saint-Preux’, and, as usual, he also airs his own dignity. After thanking him for his ‘great goodness’, he feels compelled to add: ‘But I deserved it.’ (*GTI* 258) Boswell thus met the sublime sage as one equal meets another and also departed from him as one equal from another. Yet Boswell lingers; he is still uneasy:

‘One more word. Can I feel sure that I am held to you by a thread, even if of the finest? By a hair?’ (Seizing a hair of my head.) ROUSSEAU. ‘Yes. Remember always that there are points at which our souls are bound.’ BOSWELL. ‘It is enough. I, with my melancholy, I, who often look on myself as a despicable being, as a good-for-nothing creature who should make his exit from life – I shall be upheld for ever by

the thought that I am bound to Monsieur Rousseau. Good-bye. Bravo! I shall live to the end of my days.' ROUSSEAU. 'That is undoubtedly a thing one must do. Good-bye.' (*GTI* 258-59)

Interestingly, then, Boswell trusts his melancholy will be lifted by being bound by a thread to the celebrated philosopher. So much for the 'careful plan of education' he initially anticipated. He imagines his bond with Rousseau will suspend his harsh self-judgement, a conscience, which, at times, condemned him as a 'despicable being' and a 'good-for-nothing creature'. The fine thread of hair is like an umbilical cord which attaches him to a sublime ideal, or maternal 'thing', to sustain him during his moments of gloom.

The theatrical tone of Boswell's departure – and indeed much of his journal writing – warrants some comment here. Boswell's dramatic style tends to undermine the sober tone of his writings. His testimonies of melancholy, self-condemnations, and request for friendship lose their weight precisely by his lofty expressions. The reader is left questioning Boswell's sincerity. How honest was Boswell with Rousseau? And how much worth did Rousseau place on Boswell's declarations?

Rousseau was aware of his visitor's thespian talents and love of liberty. Boswell had outwardly confessed his fondness for mimicry; and though he claimed to have 'left it off', Rousseau was not convinced. He still lamented that Boswell's pride and folly would hamper his ability to be a solid barrister. And whereas Rousseau perceived Boswell to be malicious, he viewed it as a harmless malice, a youthful playfulness he did not dislike. (*GTI* 258) Boswell's malice appeared more like the mischievousness of an imp than the vicious spite of a bitter adversary.

Even so, Boswell's impish playfulness would have given Rousseau plenty of grounds to suspect his sincerity. Yet Rousseau found his visitor's very playfulness endearing. Though Boswell's vanity, play acting, pomposity, and love of liberty and authority irritated Rousseau at times, the overall effect was one of charm. Boswell's inconsistency and lack of gravity made him refreshingly youthful. He was anything but a dull sycophant, quite the reverse: his feisty youthfulness must have sparked some life into the philosopher's gloomy retreat.

Whereas Rousseau warmed to Boswell, a question remains: did Rousseau take him seriously? I would answer, yes. For as parents smile at the fanciful whims of children, they nevertheless – for fear such fancies lead to harmful acts – take them seriously. Boswell's impulsive moments, like fleeing to London, switching religions, and entertaining thoughts of martyrdom and suicide,

may appear melodramatic, but they were sincere and potentially dangerous thoughts for him at the time. Rousseau took them seriously: he was only too well aware of Boswell's vulnerability. His initial response to his 'Sketch' was that Boswell had 'been gulled' or crippled by Calvinistic doctrine, which did not ground him into a life of constancy but, on the contrary, set him afloat. Boswell was like a ship without direction; he was tossed and turned in the sea of other men's opinions. Yet, unaware of his own contradiction, Rousseau took it upon himself to set Boswell on an even keel. He assumed Boswell's 'natural' destiny and encouraged him to do his duty, to be a worthy citizen of Scotland.

Although Rousseau and Boswell parted on 15 December 1764 as friends, they were two men with an irreconcilable difference: liberty was the fine thread of hair that linked them, egalitarianism the gulf that divided them. Whereas Boswell's love of liberty brought him to Rousseau, and had fired his transference to seek out the celebrated philosopher, the idea of 'liberty-limited-by-egalitarianism', however, dampened his veneration. Egalitarianism was the sword that cut the transference. Boswell's teary departure from Rousseau was perhaps deepened by this inner feeling of difference. Not only had he parted from his Saint-Preux, but the initial glow of his sublime friend on the Alps also dimmed; no longer did his mentor flash with great learning. Rousseau had inflamed him with liberty, confused him with duty, and irked him with ideas of equality. What had troubled Boswell with his father now troubled him with Rousseau. The push for equality to compromise his liberty echoed his father's earlier attempt to implant the truth to curb his will. Both failed. Boswell had still to reconcile ideas of liberty with ideas of authority. He would continue his quest elsewhere.

Notes

- ¹ James Boswell, *Boswell on the Grand Tour: Germany and Switzerland, 1764*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (London, Heinemann, 1953), 210. Hereafter cited in the text as *GTI* with page number.
- ² For a summary of Rousseau's uneasiness at Môtiers, see C. E. Vulliamy, *Rousseau* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1931), 226-44. See also Pottle's reasons for Rousseau's reluctance to entertain visitors during his retreat. (*GTI* 191-97)
- ³ Frederick Pottle's claim that Boswell 'came to see Rousseau as a disciple to a master, as a patient to a physician, in a sense as a penitent to a confessor' is only partly correct. (*GTI* 196) Boswell does not come to Rousseau as a simple disciple to a master, but also as a master to another master.
- ⁴ Fortunately for readers today, Boswell was to have this image of himself immortalised in a portrait by George Willison some months later in Rome in 1765. This painting, like his journals, was a gift to posterity. Willison's painting, *James Boswell*, is displayed in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh.
- ⁵ For a survey of how dress was an expression of rank, see Colby H. Kullman, 'Boswell's Opinions Concerning Peculiarities of Dress', *Transactions of the Johnson Society of the Northwest* 16 (1985): 32-41.
- ⁶ Rousseau had known Saint-Pierre only briefly; see *GTI* 223 n.1. It is likely, then, that his glowing references to Saint-Pierre are ideals rather than realities.

Seminar Papers

About the Contributors

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Robert Guy Kemp

is a '£10 pom' who was lucky enough to be admitted to La Trobe University as an adult student in 1979, where he developed a taste for eighteenth-century English literature. His tutors are, he says, in no way responsible for this particular offering. Robert teaches English and is an intermittent thespian.

The Man Who Could Write Anything

Reflections on Oliver Goldsmith

Jan Lowe

Oliver and Me

At the age of five, I pulled a book off the bottom of our bookshelf and read *She Stoops to Conquer*. This was my introduction to the written play, of which I had no previous concept, and I was fascinated – by the characters, the instructions that set and changed the scenes and the discovery that a story could be told through conversation. I was also quite taken with the title, which I didn't fully understand, but which seemed to be able to express two opposites – winning and losing – and yet somehow still make sense. Although I did not recognise it as such, I had also discovered paradox.

I spent the afternoon absorbed in the story (a somewhat odd but captivating one) and with a developing sense of pleasure that I had come across a new form of the written word. I carefully put the experience in a special category in my mind so that I would always have it to call on.

That's probably why I almost forgot it. For it was not until many adult years had passed and I was making my very first dip into Boswell's *Life* that I happened upon a reference to *She Stoops to Conquer*, which Goldsmith had dedicated to Dr Johnson.¹ In a rush I was taken back to the simple joy of my childhood experience. In a moment of truth I realised that I would have to track down the author who had so pleased me as a child and understand why he had been able to affect me so. Oliver Goldsmith had to be understood and put to rest.

Writer and Man

There is no doubt that Goldsmith was a clever and beautiful writer. His pen is fluid and uncomplicated and his insights are sharp and sensitive, his output diverse and prolific. In his short life (1730? - 1774)² he created a body of work that covered a wide range of subjects and employed an astonishing variety of styles. Johnson pronounced that he could write anything.³ He was a journalist, essayist, and historian. He wrote articles, letters, essays, long poems, short verse, two plays, a novel, a natural history, and a history of the world. He may have written the first book for children, *The History of Little Goody Two Shoes*.⁴ He achieved acknowledgment and respect as a writer in his own time, making more money from his writing in his short life than many other noted writers who lived for considerably longer – including Dr Johnson. He was associated with Johnson for much of his writing life and was a foundation member of the Literary

Club (*Life*, I, 318). On his death, his contribution as a writer was recognised in the epitaph composed by Dr Johnson:

Oliver Goldsmith: A Poet, Naturalist, and Historian, who left scarcely any style of writing untouched, and touched nothing that he did not adorn; of all the passions, whether smiles were to be moved or tears, a powerful yet gentle master; in genius, sublime, vivid, versatile; in style, elevated, clear, elegant ...⁵

There is little doubt that the epitaph captures brilliantly the essential beauty and elegance of Goldsmith the writer. It may be, however, that Johnson has confined his tribute to the talent of the writer for good reason. For Goldsmith, the man, was a different and more complex story. Neither elegant nor masterful in appearance or style, Goldsmith, the genius writer, was something of an absurd, irritating and bumbling man.⁶ Often making weak jokes at his own expense, it seems that he played the part of the awkward fool running on a poor script and under derelict direction. David Garrick captured the paradox with a sharp tongue disguised in fun:

Here lies Nolly Goldsmith, for shortness called Noll,
Who wrote like an angel, but talked like poor Poll.

Although this acidic verse was composed when Goldsmith still lived (but in his absence), and it may well have been partially provoked by Garrick's own considerable ego, it sits well as a complement to Johnson's evocation of the genius writer. Together, the twin epitaphs capture the essential paradox of Goldsmith – the superb writer who is apparently a fool of a man. And yet it is hard to believe that an idiot could produce the superb writing that has been a part of our literary culture for some two hundred years.

Avoiding Vocation and a Lucky Landing

Indeed, it is something of a miracle that he reached this level of achievement and recognition at all. Born in a small Irish village,⁷ the fourth child and the second son of Charles and Annie Goldsmith, Oliver was to have had a modest schooling that would fit him for work in an office. Charles was a minister of the established church with little money to spare on a return of £40 a year. With financial pressures increasing, Oliver's education was relegated to a basic level and his prospects limited. However, fate, in the form of two kind and wealthy uncles, intervened following a timely display of genius by young Oliver. The family story went that aged about seven, Oliver obliged the company by dancing a hornpipe. The youth accompanying him on the violin amused himself and others by calling out that Oliver looked like Aesop dancing. Young Oliver was thick in stature and recently scarred by smallpox and Aesop had been described as short, deformed and ugly in a preface to the fables that had been

recently published.⁸ It is reported that the small boy struck back brilliantly in rhyming couplet:

Our herald hath proclaimed this saying:
'See Aesop dancing and his monkey playing.'⁹

It is said that this quick response moved his two uncles to offer substantial contributions to his education and as a result his fortune changed. In a remarkable turnaround, he was sent to school, where he would gain an education that would prepare him for eventual entrance to university (*Memoir*, vi-vii). Whether this is true, or whether Oliver's mother prevailed upon her rich brother-in-law by claiming the special talent of her younger son, Uncle Contarine, in particular, certainly provided the funds. So was set in train a path to education and the formation of a relationship that would see the older man patiently providing money on a number of subsequent occasions to assist the education and career of his nephew, Oliver.

To my mind, this provision from his uncle affirmed for Oliver that he was special and also laid the groundwork of a pattern of dependence on others – ways of being that remained fundamental drives throughout his life. At the same time the relationship between uncle and nephew was an assertion of generosity, love and belonging – and these, too, were values that Oliver held throughout his life.

Whether Contarine expected in offering this initial opportunity to be a source of such support to Oliver for the rest of his own life is doubtful, but this he certainly became. As Oliver's educational star never did quite rise, and he ran like a bull at a gate at crises, Contarine's love must have been tested. Nor, in his uncle's lifetime, did Oliver show any hope of fulfilling his early promise. On his uncle's money, Oliver did manage to complete a BA at Trinity College Dublin but he mostly turned in a fairly ordinary performance (although there were some brief flashes of brilliance) and took two years longer than normal. During his time as a student he behaved badly, resenting his status as a poorer student and the menial tasks he was required to perform to compensate for his low tuition fees. At the same time, when he did have some money it barely reached his pocket, often being spent on unsuitably lavish dinners for fellow students and tutors (*Memoir*, viii-ix). This was intended presumably to impress, but seems to have, instead, attracted derision for its showiness and transparent attempt to buy popularity.

On leaving Trinity, Oliver applied to train for the Church. He was not accepted – possibly the fact that he chose to wear red breeches to the entry interview (*Memoir*, v) deliberately conveyed the message that he was not exactly the sort of person the Church had in mind. Working unhappily as a tutor, he actually amassed a

small amount of money which he decided to use to seek his fortune in America. After missing a ship to America, and gambling away money that the reliable Contarine had provided to launch him on the study of law, he went to Edinburgh to study medicine. After two years of abysmal academic results, he gave this away and set off for medical studies in Leyden, before dropping all pretence at formal scholarship and wandering Europe, largely on foot, purportedly playing his pipe for supper and bed.

In 1756, when his benefactor Contarine died, Goldsmith, in his early twenties, was forced to London to find some means of livelihood. This proved something of a challenge for a man who had become the champion of false starts. He had not pursued a career in the church, nor as a tutor. He had not studied the law, nor had he acquired a medical diploma. He had not embarked for America, let alone found his fortune there. And yet he had been given the opportunity to do any one of them. Later, Johnson noted the limited knowledge of his fellow writer and friend when he said, 'It is amazing how little Goldsmith knows.' And:

His genius is great, but his knowledge is small. As they say of a generous man, it is a pity he is not rich, we may say of Goldsmith, it is a pity he is not knowing. He would not keep his knowledge to himself. (*Life*, II, 26)

On the other hand he had gambled, drunk alcohol in excess, wandered, played his pipe, talked and argued, and lurched from one scrape to another. He had no ongoing means of livelihood. He was hopeless with money, regularly in debt and close to imprisonment on a number of occasions. He was ridiculously, if endearingly, generous to those in need.

Reaching London, Goldsmith worked in various jobs – as an apothecary's assistant, where he put in a rather poor performance; and as an editor, which he did well but not necessarily on time. When an old friend provided him with the means, he set up practice as a physician. It is hard to believe that with his medical studies unfinished he actually knew what he was doing, but with the wisdom of hindsight, we would probably regard all physicians at the time as quacks. This work provided little remuneration. He had, he said, 'an extensive circle of patients, but no fees.' (*Memoir*, vi) Desperate for a livelihood, he turned to writing, at last. It is enough to make us sigh with relief – not because he managed his life any better from this point on, but because he was, at last, taking a course that would see him doing that which he did best: gliding his pen across the page.

He churned out letters, articles, verse and commentaries. He wrote for periodicals and papers. Histories were good money earners and academic quality and accuracy was not a big issue, and he produced a number of these, many of which have not

stood the test of time. It was a further bonus to discover that he was an excellent plagiariser.¹⁰ Writing under pressure, he was happy to lift passages from other texts, such as the *Encyclopédie Française*, from which he transposed large tracts for his natural history, and Voltaire's letters, which served him well in the *Letters of a Chinese Gentleman* – better known as *The Citizen of the World* – featuring the 'Man in Black' (usually thought to represent Goldsmith himself). He felt no need to acknowledge his sources.¹¹ It is of interest that Dr Johnson was definitely onto him when he said:

He had, indeed, been at no pain to fill his mind with knowledge. He transplanted it from one place to another; and it did not settle in his mind; so he could not tell what was in his own books. (*Life*, II, 405)

True Life and Tall Stories

As I read about Goldsmith's life I became puzzled by the seemingly high level of consensus on the significant (and mostly outrageous) incidents in Goldsmith's life amongst his biographers. I also noticed that there did not seem to be a biography that did much more than weave a story around these incidents. Although I did find some writers who were less sympathetic to Goldsmith the man, I searched in vain for any hint of difference or diversity in the telling of his life's tale. Book after book repeated the stories with little variation. How could this be so? Colourful characters excite disagreement amongst contemporaries, not to mention historians, about the course of their lives as well as their basic strengths and weaknesses. But not so Oliver Goldsmith, it seemed.

I had read and re-read the main events recorded of his life, and precisely because they were identical I had perversely developed an underlying doubt as to their accuracy and truth. It is a similar experience to re-hearing gossip that is supposed to come from another reliable source, and the words and language of the account are exactly the same as when you heard it the first time. You know it is recycled, and are wary about believing it – however juicy. With the suspicion lurking I set about tracking down sources. This proved difficult, as many writers did not seem to find footnoting necessary – but I came up with an answer that should not have surprised me.

I considered how the stories of Goldsmith's exploits always formed part of the explanations of his disappearance and failure to do what was expected. He did not go to America because he missed the boat; he arrived home penniless and late because he had given away all his money and found himself 'trapped' at the place of a friend; he could not return review copies of books because he had pawned them to buy a suit to appear at a medical exam (which he failed). This is a picture of a hopeless victim who

cannot think beyond the present. But might they not also be the tall stories of a man whose biggest challenge was coping with himself, who regularly dropped out of sight and manufactured preposterous tales to cover his wayward behaviour?

The stories are in many cases indeed preposterous and have difficulty surviving the simplest credibility test – what about the one where he misses transport from England because the ship is becalmed? How unfair that the winds should come up while he is away from the port and the ship take off. Rather than being evidence that Goldsmith was a hapless victim, I think that the stories attest to Goldsmith's propensity to simply make it up when he has pushed himself into a corner. So he wove stories about his life based on half-truths to explain embarrassing incidents, to make excuses for unscheduled absences, to cover his failure to meet expectations and his desperate reliance on the good will of long-suffering relatives and friends. What's more, he seemed to be able to tell these stories in a way that made his associates shake their heads and wonder at the human gullibility of their friend. A smart tale-spinner knows that the essence of a good story is to catch the sympathy of the hearer by exposing himself to ridicule.

But if these are tall stories, how have they maintained their purpose and standing for so long? The answer came to me. Goldsmith steadfastly refused to authorise the writing of his biography in his time, but he agreed to allow Thomas Percy, another member of the Literary Club, to record his recollections.¹² Needless to say, it is here that all the major incidents (subsequently repeated) appear. Is this a clever piece of insurance against his life being unravelled in a far less attractive way, when he was no longer here to give the spin? Whatever it was, it answered my question: writers were agreeing with each other because they were simply using the same source. The source was probably Goldsmith himself. There is, of course, nothing wrong with this – except that the creator may have been one of the greatest tale spinners of all time.

Man and Beast

Yet why a man with such talent chose to live his life in this self-denying and destructive way defies understanding. He had been saved from a dull life as a clerk and given opportunities to explore and develop his considerable intellectual and creative capacity. But he consistently chose to squander them, sometimes doing brilliantly but often struggling to make an average living. He even managed to be in Edinburgh at the centre of the Scottish Enlightenment for two years and show no awareness of its existence, let alone its significance. How could this be?

It seems to me that an explanation of these quirks and failings lies in the notion that Goldsmith consistently saw himself as an outsider. As a young boy in Ireland he saw the immediate social effects of the enclosures, where English landlords forced the locals off the land and the social disruption that followed was devastating for many. In *The Deserted Village* Goldsmith not only mourns the loss of the village culture but conveys the powerlessness of the villagers to save that which is dear to them.

He later expresses some of these themes positively in his endearing work, *The Vicar of Wakefield*. But note that it is the simple honest Vicar who is duped by the more sophisticated characters – perhaps a reference to Goldsmith’s own gullibility as well as his capacity to play on the gullibility of others to respond to a story that is told against the author.

Similarly, his attendance at university was in a low status role and when he subsequently went on the ‘grand tour’ it was on foot. From this we have *The Traveller*, for which we are grateful, but we should note that the observations made throughout this long poem are possibly only ones that can be made by a visitor, an outsider providing commentary on the particular national characteristics of each country:

I have endeavoured to show, that there may be equal happiness in states that are differently governed from our own; that every state has a particular principle of happiness; and that this principle in each may be carried to a mischievous excess.¹³

In a sense Goldsmith’s real life began in London. Once he started writing, he seemed to be quickly recognised by printers and the like for his capacity to churn it out, and his publication of *The Traveller*, *The Deserted Village* and *The Vicar of Wakefield* eventually brought him fame. But he was nervous about his social acceptance, highly anxious in many of his exchanges with his colleagues in the Literary Club and envious of Johnson’s success. Being a successful writer and being recognised by others did not take away his essential sense of being on the outside. Boswell informed Dr Johnson that,

... our friend Goldsmith had said ... that he had come too late into the world, for that Pope and other poets had taken up the places in the Temple of Fame; so as but a few at any period can possess poetical reputation, a man of genius can now hardly acquire it. (*Life*, II, 189)

So perhaps the image that remained at Goldsmith’s centre throughout his life was indeed that of ‘Aesop’ – an ugly man who told very good stories.

Silly and Sound

We who read Goldsmith, however, love him dearly for both his writing and his foibles and silliness. Indeed his work is imbued with a sense of the man. *She Stoops to Conquer* has a silly and improbable plot, many of the characters are fools, there are no resounding truths, but we love its good rollicking fun. We still love the Vicar for his wholesome values and *The Deserted Village* still appears from time to time on school curricula, expressing a loss that is currently being expressed by many rural communities in Australia today.

We also respond to Goldsmith's clever management of perspectives. *She Stoops to Conquer* is all about how our perspectives are changed by where we sit. Goldsmith consistently and effortlessly turns the view around. In 'An Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog', for example, the twist of perspective which results in the dog dying as a result of biting the man (rather than the opposite) is delightful, not only because it is cheeky but also because of the smooth turnaround of the perspective which is natural and flowing, but still a surprise. Similarly, 'The Double Transformation – A Tale' presents the paradox of the beautiful wife who becomes more beautiful to her husband as she becomes disfigured.

I think that the exquisite execution of the tension between changing and opposing perspectives, which characterises much of Goldsmith's work, must result from the experience of being an outsider in life.

Likely and Unlikely

Not only has Goldsmith stayed with us across the centuries, he has the capacity to be quoted in the most unlikely places. I give two examples.

In June 2002, I was listening late at night to the ABC music show 'The Planet', as a haunting version of Barbary Ellen was played. At the end, the compere, Lucky Oceans, announced that many important people had appreciated this beautiful ballad, including 'Oliver Goldsmith who had been moved to tears'. (Although I felt that Oliver himself was personally speaking to me across the grave, Lucky Oceans was not as impressed. Despite the invitation from the ABC to e-mail the compere about the details of the CD cover he was reading from, I received no response – the moment was to remain between Oliver and me.)

My second example came as much as a surprise as the first. Once again, late at night, I watched an old film, *The Seventh Sin*. Based on Somerset Maugham's *The Painted Veil*, it tells the story of a young man, disappointed by his unfaithful wife, who takes

her off to disease-ridden Hong Kong. It is clear that he intends that her punishment will be to die a painful death by cholera. Instead, she sees the error of her ways and he dies of cholera. With his dying breath the man manages to say, 'The dog it was that died.' This is the last line of Goldsmith's 'Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog' – a clear reference to the fact that the tables have turned, and a delight to me to hear the reference to the turning of the tables made so simply.

Goldsmith's truths, it seems, are constantly incorporated into our daily lives. He would be absolutely delighted to know that I think this gives him a similar place to Shakespeare in his influence and capacity to hold a mirror up to human experience.

There is also something Shakespearian in the diverse audience that enjoys Goldsmith. *She Stoops to Conquer* is loved by repertory companies across the western world. As it happens, there have also been attempts beyond the western world to put it on. In 1958, Barbara Grant Nnoka, an Adult Education Officer and teacher appointed by the British Colonial Government in East Nigeria, found herself directing a production of the play because it was a set text on the curriculum based on the British secondary school system.

The students were Nigerian Africans and it is hard to believe that the play could possibly have made any sense at all. Her very funny diary entries reveal that in the end, because of the students' ingenuity in avoiding rehearsal and in generally setting up obstacles, the play was never performed. She did, however, receive a letter of apology that is worthy of a character in Goldsmith's play. I think he would have enjoyed it and I cannot resist including it here:

We are the entire pupils concerned with this recalcitrant exhibition due to our failures to attend the play rehearsals of the play, *She Stoops To Conquer*, lamently beg the honor of the Madam to understand that we have really offended her.

It has not only aroused the anger of Madam because her expensive time have been uselessly spent, but we have caused the Madam to hear false incompetent name which some people might have called her. We are indeed sorry for this and we pledge from the inmost care of our minds never to be so insubordinate any longer.

We humbly wish to pluck a mercy of Madam on us with broken spirits of punishments wish Madam to forgive us our misdeeds if this humble piece of apology meet her with a sympathetic consideration.

We are yours
Obediently
The Offenders

‘Madam’s’ diary shows that that on reading this apology she ‘... sent a note to the principal recommending clemency’. It also notes, ‘School closes tomorrow.’¹⁴

Legacy and Debt

So it is because of, rather than in spite of, his foibles, that Goldsmith has left us a lasting legacy in both our understanding of the man and of his writing. When he died it appeared to be in a typically bumbling, stubborn, and undignified way. Having fallen ill, he insisted on dosing himself with powders, and despite friends (including Johnson and Mrs Thrale) begging him to stop, he continued and probably caused his own death. So, typically, he died trying to prove himself right, but proving instead that he was wrong.

It will come as no surprise that on his death his Literary Club friends planned a public funeral. These plans had to be scaled down to a small private occasion when it was discovered that he died in debt. He died as he lived – recognised for his talent, valued for his strengths and weaknesses, not quite able to make the inside circle of fame.

Oliver and Me

When I began the journey to discover more about the writer I had enjoyed so young, I thought I would find a wit, a sharp talker and a man in charge of his world. I found instead a delightfully flawed character, who had failed in a way that I could readily understand. I discovered a brilliant writer, a sharp observer of life and a generous soul. I also found a man bedevilled by his own demons, but above all, an endearing embodiment of human paradox.

In all his failures, if I could not name myself (and I certainly could on many counts, although my mistakes have been painted in grey rather than technicolour), I could certainly name a dearly-loved rogue who has brought into my life endless joy and frustration by constantly either trying to be accepted by the important people or engaging in a colourful pretence that being an outsider is not an issue. I suspect that we all have somebody like this who brings colour and joy to our lives. I suspect, however, that none of them could write like Goldsmith.

On the matter of my early reading, while I would like to conclude that the achievement reflected on the genius of the reader, the evidence is clear that, instead, it reflects on the genius of the writer. Dr Johnson was right in pronouncing that this tall-story teller could write anything. It is equally true that anyone can read it.

Notes

- ¹ Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, ed. Arnold Glover, 3 vols (London: J.M.Dent, 1901), 41. Hereafter cited in the text as *Life*, by volume and page.
- ² Some writers put Goldsmith's birth at 1728.
- ³ 'Goldy, he could write anything.' Cited in the *Southern Johnsonian*, v.9, no.1.
- ⁴ Published in London in 1766 by John Newbery. See *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000 at <http://www.bartleby.com>. Accessed 8/5/03.
- ⁵ Johnson, Epitaph for Oliver Goldsmith (translated from the Latin), cited variously.
- ⁶ See for example, J. H. Plumb, *Dr Oliver Goldsmith(1728-1774)* <http://www.ourcivilisation.com>
- ⁷ The sources are divided between Pallas, County Longford and Elphin, County Roscommon.
- ⁸ By Archdeacon Croxall in 1727.
- ⁹ Memoir of Oliver Goldsmith, in *Poems and Plays of Oliver Goldsmith* ('Chandos Classics'; London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1889. 1v. Hereafter cited in the text as *Memoir*, by page.
- ¹⁰ For myself, working in public policy, where plagiarism is a way of life based on lifting from other public documents without acknowledgement, I do find this a very sensible approach.
- ¹¹ Michael Griffin, 'Oliver Goldsmith and Françoise-Ignace Espiade del Borde: An Instance of Plagiarism,' in *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, v. 50, 197 (1999): 59-63
- ¹² Katherine C. Balderston, *History and Sources of Percy's Memoir of Goldsmith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926).
- ¹³ Dedication of *The Traveller*, 'To the Rev. Henry Goldsmith'.
- ¹⁴ Barbara Grant Nnoka, *Oliver Goldsmith comes to Nigeria*. Website of The American Educator, http://www.aft.org/american_educator/fall2001/goldsmith, accessed 8/5/03.

“Worse than a Gaol”:

Seafaring in the Eighteenth Century

Chris Morris

A ship is worse than a gaol. There is, in a gaol, better air, better company, better conveniency of every kind; and a ship has the added disadvantage of being in danger. When men come to like a sea-life, they are not fit to live on land.

Samuel Johnson to Boswell, 18 March, 1776

Every man thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier, or not having been at sea.

Samuel Johnson, 10 April 1778

A sailor to be good for anything must be nearly mad.

Sir Edward Howard, Lord High Admiral

Let death be shared like prize money – the greater share to the officers.

British naval proverb

In *Candide* the hero visited Portsmouth and saw Admiral Byng facing execution by firing squad on board his ship and on questioning was told, ‘In this country it is thought well to kill an admiral from time to time to encourage the others.’

Voltaire, 1757

It appears to me, and I am not singular in this belief, there are very few contented sailors. They are caught young and broken in before they have reached years of discretion. All think themselves hardly used that they are not promoted sooner. I thank my good stars that I was not born to be a sailor.

Chas. Darwin on the ‘Beagle’

Thomas Woodman in a *Preface to Samuel Johnson* (1993) writes that the range of subjects on which Johnson is prepared to speak is remarkable. This range includes studying maritime navigation in order to help an aged and destitute Welsh physician, Zachariah Williams, with a preface to his book on determining longitude at sea. At a later time, after the Hebrides trip, Johnson remarked in a letter to John Taylor, ‘Is not mine a kind of life turned upside down? Fixed to a spot when I was young, and roving the world when others are contriving to sit still, I am wholly unsettled. I am a kind of ship with a wide sail and without an anchor.’

In her *Anecdotes of Johnson*, Hester Thrale claims that ‘Johnson spent a week on a man-of-war as guest of a Captain Knight, and he left appalled by the condition of a sailor’s life’. This may have given rise to his remark, ‘As to the sailor, when you look down from the quarter-deck to the space below: you see the utmost extremity of human misery; such crowding, such filth,

such stench!’ ‘No man,’ he said, ‘will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into a gaol; for being in a ship is being in a gaol, with the chance of being drowned.’ In fact, he went on to say, ‘A man in a gaol has more room, better food, and commonly better company.’

The sailor had few illusions about life at sea. He knew it involved hard work, long hours, little sleep, dreadful quarters, small wages and real peril. He could be exposed to great human cruelty and injustice at the whim of another. This sort of life no doubt led Johnson to prefer the prospect of gaol to going to sea. Yet despite all this the sailor could find something by way of soul or essence, and that was in his relationship with his ship.

The Navy of Johnson’s England was the principal instrument of British policy in a series of wars to decide whether England or France would control the seas and possess the new world and the wealth of the Indies. The corruption in the dockyards at this time was no less than it was later when Lord St Vincent, making his heroic but unsuccessful attempt to cleanse the Dockyards, wrote, ‘You may rest assured that the civil branch of the navy is rotten to the core.’

There were many ways of entering the officer corps of the navy. A boy of thirteen could be entered as a ‘servant’. A captain could oblige a friend by placing one of his boys on the ship’s books and this ‘ghosting’ meant that his ‘time’ to qualify for Lieutenant would count, even though he never went on board. Thus one child, who later became an admiral, was entered at the age of one.

At one time it was enough for a fifteen-year-old boy to present himself at the Admiralty and demand a ‘King’s Letter’ to join as an officer of the future. There was no shortage of applicants, so to be successful – as Dudley Pope has related – the wheels of patronage had to be turned and influence (albeit nepotism) counted. Yet N.A.M. Rodger, writing on the Georgian Navy, clears away many legends of life at sea as ‘a floating concentration camp’ and writes that it was an extremely efficient instrument of war, where patronage did not ignore professional skill. Only in the law, a profession of much drudgery, and in the navy, one of danger and hardship, were there many opportunities for boys of humble birth to rise to the top. For example, Johnson in a letter to Thomas Lawrence mentions Sir Charles Hardy, a career naval officer who rose through the ranks to become admiral in 1770. An example closer to home is our Captain Cook, the son of a Yorkshire farm labourer, who rose to high eminence by merit.

There was no social difference between the various ranks of young officers. In one ship in 1780 three brothers were serving, two of whom were captain's servants, and both eventually became captains in their own right. Two boys or 'servants' on Cook's first voyage reached high office. As an Admiral in 1837, Manley was the last *Endeavour* survivor and Smith retired as a Rear-Admiral in 1807.

Lord St Vincent, when asked by George III what he thought of the navy after he hauled down his flag and came on shore, replied,

It is worse your Majesty than when I first joined. The navy is now overrun by the younger branches of nobility and the sons of members of parliament. They have swallowed up all patronage and so stopped the channels of promotion that the son of an old officer has little or no chance of getting on.

Yet elsewhere we read how few of the great commanders of this age were sons of naval officers while two who were, Byng and Lastock, turned out to be notorious failures.

As I mentioned, it had long been an illegal but nevertheless common practice for captains in the Royal Navy to fictitiously enter friends' sons on their ships' books in order for them to gain nominal sea time for promotion without actually going to sea. Aristocratic captains tended to choose well-bred, moneyed officers. Once on the post captain's list without a ship, and therefore on half pay, a captain would move up automatically to admiral. For although half pay or an inactive command could not bring the benefits of prize money on which all ranks depended, it was at least an appointment and in times of peace even a sedentary occupation was better than none at all. Vice-Admiral Lord Keith, né George Elphinstone, a fifty-year-old Scot, received £64,000 in prize money after the capture of the Cape of Good Hope in 1795. His wife, Lady Hester, formerly Queenie Thrale, who had been privately schooled by Dr Johnson, was a mathematician and Hebrew scholar.

Another connection with the sea was Tetty's elder son and Lucy's brother, then at a naval college and one day to be a captain in the Royal Navy, but he was 'much disgusted' by Tetty's marriage to Johnson and was unlikely to have sought Johnson's company. On the subject of Johnsonian nautical connections, let us not forget Fanny Burney's naval brother Captain James Burney, who witnessed Captain Cook's death on his third and final voyage. I also learnt that James Burney abandoned his wife, eloped with his half sister, and wrote *An Essay by Way of Lecture, on the Game of Whist*. What did Johnson think of that? And what scope for a modern-day thesis!

The distribution of prize money just mentioned was another cause of injustice and eventually helped to inflame mutiny in the fleet. For example, an Admiral while not even present could receive £122,000 for the capture of Havana in 1769 while the seaman's share was £24 14s. When an enemy warship, merchantman or privateer was taken and sold to 'prize' agents acting for the government, the proceeds were divided amongst the successful crew, an eighth going to the admiral for that station and a quarter going to the captain. Captains could become landed gentry overnight and admirals on lucrative stations could expect to get rich.

A captain needed money and credit to provide his accoutrements and it paid to be rich. Once at sea, a captain's lifestyle reflected his standing; he could bring anything he liked on board and some cabins were veritable palaces, laden with silver, silks and art works, their tables groaning with delicacies. No wonder that some captains were guilty of exaggerated caution and were known to slip out of a line of battle to avoid risk of damage. Incidentally, more ships-of-the-line-of-battle (hence 'battleships') were wrecked, ran aground or burned during this period than were knocked out by enemy action. 'Killed in action' did not account for more than about three per cent of wartime fatalities. The real killers were disease and accident. Though there were rules governing the qualifications of surgeons, they were not strictly observed. The case is recorded of one doctor in charge of French prisoners, who by his practice of bleeding and forced evacuation 'killed more Frenchmen than all the commanders in the navy put together'.

Lieutenants and above received their commissions from the Admiralty, while midshipmen and petty officers earned their ranks at the captain's pleasure. Warrant officers were appointed by the Navy Board, the all-embracing administrative arm of the service governing supply and logistic requirements, and open to much graft.

A contemporary account of a midshipman's berth spoke of

... the lingering effluvia of red herrings, bilge water and fried onions together with the airless stench of the place, dispelled what little appetite he might have brought to the repast spread upon a greasy tablecloth consisting of small beer, mouldy sea-biscuit and beef-steak. In every corner reigned confusion; a heap of soiled clothing, naval half-boots, wet towels ... on the shelf that ranged the walls was a miscellany of plates, glasses, books, cocked hats, dirty stockings, tooth-combs, a litter of white mice and a caged parrot.

On the Bark *Endeavour* in 1768, cabins for the officers measured six feet by five feet, with a deck height of four and a half feet.

The seamen who worked the ship were a mixed lot who often came to sea quite unwillingly, but there were others who made the sea their lives' work in the same way as the officers. These were mostly the skilled professional class: the quarter-masters, the ropemakers, carpenters, armourers, the coopers, the caulkers; sailmakers, signalmen and even the cooks! On the other hand, the men who manned the guns and managed the sails and rigging were drawn from every source; they were taken off merchant ships, seized in ports and 'pressed' into service at the point of a cutlass.

In time of war, impressment of men and property for the defence of the realm was legal and commonplace, until abolished in 1815. Warrants to press men were issued, and the naval gangs to whom the duty fell to execute them prowled wherever seafaring men were found. They haunted the seaport towns, they lay in wait along the approaches, they cruised in tenders to intercept the home-coming merchant ships. The merchant seaman in the outward-bound ship was immune, but the wretched fellow returning from a voyage might be wrenched from his ship when in sight of the very shores of England, without seeing his home, for service abroad from whence he might not return for years – if at all. Be it noted our hero Cook impressed men on his voyages to fill vacancies.

Soon after Francis Beaufort, as a fifteen-year-old, joined his first naval ship, a seaman was 'seized to a grating' and given a dozen lashes for drunkenness. It was to be the first of many floggings he witnessed – many at his own order – and the sight always affected him (as his biographer Nicholas Courtney relates). A captain generally only condemned men to lashes up to a dozen at a time for small offences. But some captains flogged men as punishment for simple inefficiency, and major offences under the articles of war could result in three hundred lashes delivered in batches. Punishments of up to a thousand strokes were not unknown for repeat offenders or mutineers – with little chance of survival.

Anyone sentenced to more than a hundred lashes might be flogged around the fleet as an example to others. John Knyveton made a log entry of a flogging: 'that the court being merciful the man was given only a hundred lashes and now lies in the sick-bay in a stupor, his two floggings having taken most of the flesh off his back so that the spine and ribs are exposed.' And in another case a young deserter was flogged around the fleet, receiving

twenty lashes from each ship. After five ships he was insensible and was plied with rum to rouse him to take further punishment. By the ninth ship he was dying with backbone and ribs bare. At the eleventh he was no more and they bore him ashore and buried him, as was the custom, in the mud below the tide mark, with some grumbling from the sailors told off to wash down the boat, at the muck in it. The cat-o-nine-tails used for floggings was a heavy knotted rope named for the number of its cords and the cat-like scratches it left on a man's back; it was kept in a canvas bag, hence the phrases 'let the cat out of the bag', and 'not enough room to swing a cat'.

The men lived and slept among the weapons and gear of the long decks. The mess tables were fixed between the guns and pulled up to beams when not in use. The men ate in groups of six, seated on their sea chests, and slung their hammocks just fourteen inches apart. The regular victuals included hard biscuit (often full of weevils), salt beef, salt pork, dried peas, oatmeal, coarse sugar, rancid butter, and cheese. The quality varied from fair, through bad, to shocking, but the rationing was strict and few went hungry. By the end of the eighteenth century, citrus fruit was much in demand to keep scurvy at bay. Beer and rum generally took the place of drinking water and the daily allowance of rum was generous – half a pint to a quart of water. Originally it was given neat but later it was diluted with cask water, a recipe that became known as 'grog' after the green grogram cloak Admiral Vernon wore.

Oatmeal porridge known as *burgoo* was introduced to the navy by Rear-Admiral Sir Cloudesly Shovell, who lost his life and the lives of most of his fleet when he ignored warnings and led the ships under his command to their doom on the rocks in the Scilly Isles in 1707. He is buried in Westminster Abbey and in former days the face on the marble effigy was stained with tobacco juice sprayed by sailors who did not like burgoo!

The lives of fishermen and merchant sailors were hard enough, but it was better than life on a man-of-war, where the food was foul and scanty, the pay uncertain and irregular, the attention to health nil and the discipline of iron. The good Admiral Vernon, who suffered in the reign of George II for being the sailors' outspoken friend, declared, 'Our fleets are defrauded by injustice, manned by violence and maintained by cruelty.'

British naval seamen dressed as they pleased until 1857, within the choice afforded by the slops chest or the bumboat in harbour. Some wore bonnets of straw or beaver hats. They knotted kerchiefs round their necks, wore brass-buttoned blue jackets and flowered waistcoats. They wore their hair in shoulder

length trusses gathered at the back with a ribbon. Some trousers were knee length or French-style pantaloons striped red or blue. They went barefoot except in cold weather and had no foul-weather gear other than canvas aprons. Toilets were holed planks extending from the bows, exposed in every sense and still called the 'heads' to this day.

The Board of Admiralty then consisted of seven 'Lords Commissioners for Executing the Office of Lord High Admiral of Great Britain and Ireland'. In the eighteenth century it was usual for civilians to outnumber the admirals, though these civilians were not men with any special knowledge – or indeed any knowledge at all. For the most part, once a man was appointed to the Board he could treat it as a sinecure. Hence the verse:

The law doth punish man or woman
That steals the goose from off the common,
But lets the greater felon loose,
That steals the common from the goose.

By the eighteenth century, sea battles were often formalised affairs in which a clean-cut victory could only be achieved with difficulty. Opposing fleets faced each other in perfectly formed lines, sometimes as much as five miles long, waiting the chance to break the enemy's line with a thunderous broadside. The battle might be preceded by days of manoeuvring to gain the advantage wind and position, guided by complex flags and fire signals from the commanding admiral. The ships themselves were positioned according to rates – a first rate ship had more than ninety guns, a second more than eighty, and so on, while the lighter frigates hovered in the rear. War had become a game, played for the game's sake by professional gentlemen.

In the century of so-called Enlightenment, an uncompromising sea battle was a horror unsurpassed by modern machine warfare. The grappling of two matched warships alongside each other was like a collision of over-crowded poor-houses, whose lousy, half-starved and choking inmates fired cannon point-blank through the windows at each other. Men literally shot each other to pieces, slipping and falling in the gore. The carnage did not occur miles away, but where you stood: a messmate suddenly fell headless at your feet or a powder boy spun in uncomprehending annoyance on one leg while an iron ball splattered the other leg along the deck. The women aboard were caught up in it too; an officer wrote,

Our wounded are in general dreadfully mangled. One of the men's wives assisted in firing a gun alongside her husband, though frequently requested to go below, but she could not be prevailed upon to do so until a shot carried away one of her legs and wounded the other.

There were nineteen different orders required to load the big guns for the first time, starting with the injunction to ‘take heed’ to the last command, ‘Fire!’ Dudley Pope tells how, in the excitement of the approaching battle, the men forgot their misery: snatched up by press gangs or shipped over like cattle from Ireland, jollied along by men who had served at sea for years, ill-fed, rarely paid – often two years in arrears – and living in conditions little removed from those from a gaol, but infinitely more perilous.

Yet merriment surfaced, as evidenced by Mathew Flinders writing in his day-book when H. M. Sloop *Investigator* crossed the equator,

In order to give the ship’s company a day’s amusement, I permitted the ceremony of shaving and ducking ... to be performed in its full latitude. At the conclusion, they had as much grog given them as they could drink, the ship having been previously put under snug sail.

Darwin on the *Beagle* wrote in his diary that ‘on Christmas Day the men went on the rampage, the whole of the day had been given up to revelry, at present there is not a sober man in the ship which is in a state of anarchy, one day’s holiday has caused all this mischief’. After such fun, Fitzroy restored discipline by ordering the flogging of several ringleaders once they were at sea.

On Christmas Day 1768, Cook wrote, ‘The people were none of the soberest,’ while Banks of the same day wrote, as an outsider lacking some of the rapport, ‘... all hands got abominably drunk so that at night there was scarce a sober man in the ship, wind moderate thank god or lord knows what would have become of us.’

Captain Cook wrote of the ordinary seamen who sailed in *Endeavour*, ‘They have gone through the fatigues and dangers of the whole voyage with that cheerfulness and alertness that will always do honour to the British Seaman.’ Cook’s ships were clean and his crews well cared for; he never lost a man to scurvy. After two years at sea, Cook arrived in Batavia – on the first voyage having lost just eight men out of the ninety-four people who sailed from England. Yet their satisfaction was short lived, as malaria and dysentery was rife at Batavia and twenty-eight more men died before *Endeavour* reached home.

The incidence of scurvy was imperfectly understood even in Cook’s time, notwithstanding his use of citric acid, bark, sauerkraut and other home remedies; he tried, but never convinced himself of their efficacy. Yet as early as 1593 the utility of citrus fruits had been noted, but a preoccupation with other theories such as the airs or some miasma persisted. After all, it

was not until 1912 that experiments in isolating ascorbic acid proved the deficiency of Vitamin C to be the answer.

Floggings were accepted when, as in Cook's case, they had to be given as part of that inevitable system of discipline binding both captain and men in the safety and battle-worthiness of the ship. And men so punished by Cook were later promoted by him for efficiency.

It has been held in defence of captains of that time – commanding as they did the scum from the assizes, the refugees from justice, and the miserably impressed flotsam of the villages and towns – that the exercise of such discipline was forced on them if mutiny were to be avoided. The fleet was no stranger to single-ship mutiny. In the West Indies during 1797 the crew of H.M.S. *Antoinette* had killed their captain and first officer. Before that summer of discontent was done, H.M.S. *Hermione* was to enact the very epic of bloody mutiny.

Her commander was Hugh Pigot, one of the most brutal captains afloat, in an age full of them. One of his able seamen was flogged eight times in ten months. Pigot killed at least two men with the cat. After three successive whippings, one fatally injured man lingered in pain for eighteen weeks. The end began when Pigot sent the topmen aloft to take in sail; they heard the dreaded cry, 'I'll flog the last man down!' Three youths lost their footing and fell to the deck, at the captain's feet. Pigot looked at the dying youngsters and shouted, 'Throw the lubbers overboard!' A moan of disbelief went up and the bosun's mates were sent up to 'start' the men with knotted hempen ropes.

Fourteen topmen were heavily flogged the following day. By nightfall, a meeting took place and at midnight the sentry was felled and ten men kicked down the captain's door. Pigot fought hard and cut some of his attackers with his dirk, but weakened from hacks in a dozen places, he fell to the blood-slippery deck. He lurched to his feet and asked for mercy but was run through by the marine sentry's bayonet with the reply, 'You showed no mercy yourself!' They kicked out the stern windows, took hold of Pigot and heaved him into the warm dark seas, still shouting. By this time the wheel had been gained and the first lieutenant also thrown overboard followed by six more officers piked to death and cut down. 'Hand the buggers up!' 'Launch the buggers!' was the cry. There appears to have been no political or economic reason behind this mutiny – was one needed?

About one-quarter of the crew had carried the ship, and My Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty pursued *Hermione* with unsparing relentlessness to bring the mutineers to spectacular execution. They collected forty-one non-participants from the

ship's company, pardoned them and set them the task in pairs of tracking down their shipmates throughout the naval ports. Six months after Pigot's death the first mutineer was hanged and gibbeted. Within a year, eleven men had been hanged and others sent to Botany Bay for life. The twelve-year-old son of the cook was spared, much to the annoyance of the presiding Admiral. Soon other cadavers were on display at Gallows Point. Nine years after the mutiny the yellow flag was broken out again at Plymouth and the twenty-fourth guilty *Hermione* mutineer hauled up to the yard-arm.

I have spent some time on this not because of the drama, but because the official view prevailed that there was more merit in stopping a conspiracy than in taking an enemy ship by force. The fear of mutiny was very real and hardly surprising when you think where the men came from and how they were treated.

By 1796, the Admiralty was warned that the Channel Fleet was increasingly discontented at not being paid – some seamen were owed two or three years' back-pay and the navy office admitted that at the end of that year the total arrears owing to seamen amounted to £1,408,720. An able seaman was paid about £14 a year and these rates had not changed since Cromwell's day, which accounted for one of the principal grievances behind the mutinies of 1797 – after which the AB's pay rose to £20 a year. Horatio Nelson described the seamen under his command as 'finished at forty-five, doubled-ruptured, raw with scurvy and racked with pains after every meal.'

In an age of enlightenment and imperialism, unsuspected by government and unparalleled in history, the seamen of the Grand Fleet and the North Sea Fleet went on strike. About half the lower deck, joined by the marines, hauled down the royal standard and the union jack and the admirals' pennants. On more than a thousand vessels the flag of defiance was raised, oaths of fidelity were sworn and His Majesty's officers were deposed. These wretched outcasts of society established the first government based on universal male suffrage that Britain had ever seen, ashore or afloat.

With increasing confidence, the ships' companies elected 'speakers' who were to transform ship democracy into a fleet republic. In a handful of days, a naval peasantry traversed political ground that the nation had not crossed in a millennium, derived from laws and precedents from the United States Congress, the French Assembly, the Irish underground and the forbidden British reform societies.

The red flag of the English mutineers later became the flag of the Paris communes and the Russian revolutionists:

So raise the scarlet standard high;
Beneath its shade we'll live or die.
Though cowards flinch and traitors sneer
We'll keep the Red Flag flying here!

Today, this is seldom sung other than at meetings of under- paid university lecturers, practitioners in advertising or café latte socialists.

Since the men were not allowed shore leave to go home – despite the fact that many of them had not been on dry land for three years – wives were obliged to journey to the ports to join them on board during the ship's stay. Even on the high seas in the midst of war, women accompanied the King's vessels; a woman gave birth on *Goliath* during the battle of the Nile.

In the navy the most common and mildest swear word was *bugger*. Nonetheless, homosexual acts were capital offences, like cowardice or mutiny. Apparently, in the main, sodomy was overlooked – but in one case a military trial was ordered of two men who were found sharing a berth, and thought to be muttering sedition, the greater crime. This was enough for them to be declared guilty and hanged. The crewmen who presented a petition for mercy were hanged as well. Cook twice lashed seamen for attempting this offence.

Cook didn't spare the lash – before the first voyage was over Cook would flog one in five of his crew, about average for eighteenth-century voyages, and on the third voyage twice this, so don't get the idea he was a soft humanitarian – far from it, but he didn't stint sailors the most treasured salve of all – alcohol. A pint of rum was allowed a day, often mixed with beer; nevertheless, he noted with some surprise 'that certain of his crewmen were more or less drunk every day'.

It has been claimed that the sailor was always making games of his work with an enthusiasm that bred unthinking efficiency. For him in that age there was no overtime or extra pay; but he could and did take pride as a bonus in job satisfaction and he was child-like enough to make the system work.

The Georgian plutocrats invented a character for the British sailor – mentally inferior, simple, jolly, and loyal. He was by nature lazy, so a rope knout was used to send him up aloft. He was improvident, therefore pay only indulged his weakness. He was a drunkard, so he must not be allowed ashore. He was a child who looked to his captain and the admiral for fatherly admonition.

In conclusion, when speaking about sea matters of Johnson's time, we cannot forget the sad occasion of which Johnson wrote to Boswell, in October 1774, drawing attention to an account in a

newspaper of a boat upset between Mull and Ulva, in the Hebrides, in which many passengers were lost. Among them was young Donald Maclean of Coll. Both Johnson and Boswell, no doubt, recalled the drama of a year earlier, when 'Young Col' saved their lives, finding a haven in a similar storm and making Boswell think he was of use – hanging onto a rope that really served no purpose other than diverting his fear: while all the time Johnson had been quiet and unconcerned, lying on a bed below with a greyhound at his back keeping him warm.

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Boswell and Johnson, Inverted

Robert Kemp

What a piece of work it is! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form, in moving, how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world!

Shakespeare on man, yes: but how well it applies to the Internet! This particular work of creation has been with us a mere fifteen years, yet the whole sum of human knowledge is potentially here at the touch of a button. However, most people have a somewhat cavalier attitude towards it. We ought to be able to rely on the information we have committed to its memory; sadly, we can't, because we who control the programming are ourselves imperfect. The only real, comprehensive truth to be found on the Internet is in the 'adult' porno sites. Enter the word *knickers*, for example, into the search engine and you will be amazed at the detail of the 110,351 (or so) results that follow, which in turn lead you open-mouthed into worlds beyond imagination. On a more mundane level, we should be able to program into it our deepest thoughts and feelings for the enrichment of humanity. But we don't.

At the same time as we misuse or fail to take full advantage of the Internet, we expect it to do more and more incredible things for us. The latest is the inverter. Any word-processor operator knows you can press the key F8 to get an inversion of type. Evidently the experts have been working on this to not only obtain new and mind-opening readings of pretty well everything, but also to lend legitimacy to the 'Insert' button on the right of the keyboard which hitherto we have all been too terrified to use. This is now to read 'Invert'. I am fortunate indeed to have been chosen to try out this latest system add-on.

Once pressed, the Invert button almost literally turns not just the *image* but the actual *content* of the matter on your screen inside-out, back-to-front and upside-down. An entry for *Adolf Hitler*, for instance, has the Führer still alive, in charge of a world where the children sing Wagner some of the time; where the men attend rallies most the time; and where the women are required to produce babies all of the time. A sub-entry here for chicken blintzes or bagels elicits not merely an astonished 'Your entry fails to reveal any matches' but also an almost immediate breaking down of your front door and the end of your time at the keyboard.

For people like us with aesthetic interests, the sheer extent of the treasures to be found is almost overwhelming. Take architecture. Enter *Sydney Opera House* and the original unfolds,

just as Utzon designed it, to be capable even of staging opera. The Melbourne Federation Square's inverted first match reveals the old Gas and Fuel Building which, despite its faults, had at least *some* sense of purpose and dignity; its second inversion displays, not surprisingly, *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot.

Which leads to the Western canon; for the *litterateur* – what wealth! From *Beowulf* which being inverted becomes *Peter and the Wolf* we go right through to the lyrics of the late John Lennon, some of which now begin to make sense: 'Ooblah dah, ooblah dah, ooblah dah, dah' becomes 'Half a League, Half a League, Half a League on(ward)'. And, of course, we may read anew his neo-Enlightenment *cri de coeur*, 'All we are say-yin/ is: Give the police a chance.' Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky* begins, 'It was brilliant and the garden groves/Were all covered in dew and spider webs.' Similarly, much of Swift and Blake (even James Joyce and Patrick White), inverted, is intelligible; and Samuel Becket's celebrated play *Godot Nous Attend* or *Godot is Waiting for Us*, about two successful businessmen pulling off a complex company merger and finally *going off somewhere*, is a revelation.

For us here in this room it may pay to type in *Samuel Johnson*. The prompt, inverted, will ask 'Did you mean Samuel Doctor Johnson or Samuel Taylor Coleridge?' I think I was the first to select *Coleridge* and got the complete *Kubla Khan* of some six hundred lines, the inverter not having recognised the Person from Porlock. Once seen in its entirety, it was a flawless work – unique – a masterpiece. Its imagery, its lyricism, its expression made it the very quintessence of poetry. In my opinion, it was a work of genius unparalleled in the history not merely of literature, but of all the arts. I say *was* because, in my haste to obtain a print-out, I accidentally pressed the delete button and irretrievably expunged from the memory bank all but the original fifty-odd lines. Silly me!

Having reached the Johnson site you will find his novel *Salessar* – a story about a brother and sister who, together with a man named Claim, leave their home where they are happy and content only to find even more happiness and contentment in the outside world. Also you will discover the poem *The Wish of Human Vanities* which begins

Let observation with constricted view
Survey our world from Yarra South to Kew
The verities are Chardonnay and lattes
Our stock portfolios and really good parties.

and ends,

For all like us our lives will be for ever
No need have we for talent or endeavour.

But the work which I wish to discuss today is the invertedly remarkable *Johnson's Life of Boswell*. Here Johnson traces the great man's life from his birth in Scotland in 1740 until his own death in 1784. It is a monumental piece of writing which, when in book form, will extend to some fifteen hundred pages and will furnish literary societies such as ours with material for many years to come. I can only give you a taste of it now and hope you will order, as it were, the full meal later.

In the early chapters we meet Boswell's family and learn a little about the youngster's childhood. His first meeting with Johnson was in 1745.

JOHNSON: A fine lad indeed, you are, Sir. At five years of age, what think you of your toys? BOSWELL: Toys? No, Sir. These are real soldiers. JOHNSON: How so, Sir? BOSWELL (not directly answering the question): The dreadful calamity of war and its consequent miseries should be averted by all civilised nations. JOHNSON: Indeed, Sir. Yet there is an outbreak at Culloden at this very minute. BOSWELL: Sir, but Scotland is not, and never will be, a civilised nation, and so is of no consequence. JOHNSON: Can I quote you on that? BOSWELL:

And so it goes on for ten or more pages.

Samuel Richardson's somewhat racy novel, *Pamela*, though published in the year of Boswell's birth, didn't come into his hands until he was barely sixteen.

JOHNSON: Have you read the work? BOSWELL: Sir, it is a book to read, but not to read *through*. JOHNSON: Then may I have back the copy which I lent you? BOSWELL: No, Sir. For the parts I have read, I wish to read through once more – again and again.

Some fifteen years later, the friendship firming, the two men are at a theatre in London's Haymarket.

JOHNSON: What think you of the redhead over there? BOSWELL: Sir, there is more artifice in that than in the whole of Versailles. JOHNSON: But royal, nonetheless. BOSWELL: Sir, royal as may be, but loyal I think not. JOHNSON: Is there then a difference? BOSWELL: Royalty is a virtue inborn while loyalty has to be learned; that, Sir, is the cornerstone to life.

Boswell entered into much correspondence which illuminates the character of this eighteenth-century sage.

London, February 7, 1766. To Alastair Macdonald, Host of The Boar's Head, Sauchiehall Street, Edinburgh.

Sir – My recent visit to your hostelry has left me without one tartan slipper. I am of the belief that I left it where I had my tartan bed. Please arrange its dispatch to me by the next stage. I am, Sir, your most absolute superior, James Boswell.

Many other gems of literature of this nature are scattered throughout the text.

In 1776 there was a declaration of unity and independence by the settlers in the Americas. Boswell was much affected by this and would discourse expansively on the subject in the coffee houses.

BOSWELL: It is a curiosity of numbers in which the sum of the parts will amount to less than the whole. JOHNSON: Surely, Sir, it shall be of great economic benefit to the peoples of the several colonies. BOSWELL: A sweater cannot be knitted out of the wool of a horse. JOHNSON: A horse may rear if it be shorn. BOSWELL: Sir, it may, but it may not rear children. Certain it is, these united states will come to naught and there's an end on't. Why are you writing all this down? JOHNSON: I write to show you right. Have another cappuccino.

13 December, 1784. BOSWELL: You are not well, Sir. JOHNSON: My time is come. BOSWELL: Should you not be making a note of some of the last words you shall hear me utter? JOHNSON: My ink is all but dry. BOSWELL: 'A man's ink being dry/ Yet still can he try/ Before his soul fly/ His loved ones all cry/ And leave not one eye/ Unreddened. Goodbye.' An epitaph for you, Sir, and a very fine one, do not you agree? JOHNSON (having laboriously inscribed this on the bed sheet)

So, using the break-through new technology, we can use the Internet intelligently, after all.

As I said earlier, I can merely whet your appetite with an introductory, but, I hope, seductive account of Johnson's extraordinary biography and I suggest you purchase and study it when it is finally published. In the meantime, if you can afford to install an inverter, you will be able to download it from the 'net; the website address is: www.Boswell/bigtalk/johnson.com (capital B, lower case J).

Thank you.

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