I

INTRODUCTION: BOSWELL'S AMBIGUITIES

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James Boswell remains one of the most fascinating and puzzling figures in literary history. Regarded at one time as a shallow egoist who succeeded by some kind of naive mimetic ability in producing one of the greatest of biographies, thus becoming an accidental genius, he is now visible to us as a much more complex and artful person whose inner tensions and contradictions are bound up with remarkable talents. The massive Boswell repository now at Yale, with its diaries, letters, notes, drafts, and other manuscripts, has yielded and continues to yield multiple new insights into Boswell's mind and art. No fully agreed synthesis has emerged. As the following pages show, it is possible to explain and evaluate Boswell and his work in many different ways and to interpret the relation between his life and character on the one hand and his literary output on the other very diversely. There is no dispute, however, about his *interestingness* or, in spite of the various ways in which his sensibility can be related to moods and fashions of his age, about his originality.

Before the publication of his journals, Boswell's fame rested almost entirely on his *Life of Johnson*, though his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson LL.D.* and, to a lesser extent, his *Journal of a Tour to Corsica* were also admired. But his diaries and the other papers now at Yale have enlarged the whole context of our awareness of the man and his complexities and enabled us to read the familiar works with new eyes. We can see him as just as brilliant in laying out his own character as he is in presenting that of another. We can see him as the great interviewer. We can see in his remarkable counterpointing of his own personality with that of others a balancing of subject and object that yields unique results. We can see him as the inveterate role-taker. We can see in his shifting moods and changing ambitions both the sensibility of his age and the special qualities of his own character. And we can see in the continuing alternation between the proud Scottish laird vaunting his high Scottish pedigree and the past glories of his native country and the passionate Londoner who relished what he called the "English juiciness of mind" as opposed to what he considered the narrow

provincialism of Edinburgh (even the Edinburgh of the Scottish Enlightenment) an illustration of the cultural schizophrenia that had been developing in Scotland ever since the Union of 1707. We can thus look at history through Boswell or at Boswell through history. Whichever way we do it, Boswell acts as an illuminator.

The paradoxes abound. Boswell the egoist continually fascinated by his own states of mind is also, as Gordon Turnbull reminds us, Boswell the lawyer who virtually destroyed his chances of promotion in the Scottish bar by his passionate identification with his clients and his inability to separate his role as legal representative from that of sympathizer and rescuer. Boswell the self-proclaimed genius could belittle or even ridicule himself in order to set off the character of a man he hero-worshiped, and he could also use his hero as fuel for his own self-esteem. Boswell the writer of the greatest biography in English is also the biographer who is incapable of real empathy with his subject but, as Greg Clingham's essay suggests, shows him off rather than enters in loving comprehension into the inwardness of his life and work. Boswell the conservative lover of Catholic and Anglican ritual is also, as Richard Sher points out, Boswell the Scottish defender of populist theology against the conservative Moderates. Boswell the spontaneous correspondent is also, as Thomas Crawford shows, the skillful manipulator of different epistolary styles that reflect not only different moods but also different orders of friendship. The list is endless. He tells us of his sexual fantasies and plannings while in a mood of pious devotion in church. We can set his perpetual worrying about the nature of God and the reality of a future state against his compulsive whoring and drinking bouts. Above all, there is the contrast between the Boswell who is at the mercy of his moods and appetites with the artist in superb control of his material who constructs, organizes, patterns, arranges, balances.

There is thus no other writer in the English language who cries out for examination by different readers from different points of view to the degree that Boswell does. His chameleon quality demands that he be looked at from different angles. Johnson himself seems to have been able to see Boswell from many points of view simultaneously. He understood his moods of melancholy, he understood the tensions in his relations with his father, he understood and encouraged and enjoyed his activities as a diarist, he relished Boswell's moods of gaiety and extrovert exuberance, he appreciated (probably more profoundly than he ever told Boswell) his religious doubts and difficulties, he was aware of Boswell's search for a father-figure and was prepared to play that role for him, he sympathized with and encouraged Boswell's feelings as a Scottish landowner with position and responsibilities, he was well aware of Boswell's manipulation of him in order to provide memorable scenes and sayings (and sometimes protested about it). In fact – and this is another paradox – the subject understood the biographer more

profoundly than the biographer understood the subject. It was part of Boswell's genius that he was able to reveal this without being fully aware of what he was revealing.

"By a Genius" was the phrase put on the title page of an otherwise anonymous pamphlet published by Boswell in 1760, when he had just turned twenty years of age. This was partly self-mockery and partly serious. Boswell from an early age thought himself destined to greatness, though he kept changing his mind about the kind of greatness he aimed at. In February 1763 he protested in a lively letter to Lord Eglinton that he was a genius and wrote his hoped-for obituary describing James Boswell as an amiable man who improved and beautified his ancestral estate of Auchinleck, distinguished himself in Parliament, commanded a regiment of Foot Guards, "and was one of the brightest wits in the court of George the Third." Thus he looked forward to economic, political, military, and social success but, unless the notion of writer is included in "wit," not specifically as a man of letters. Yet he began writing at an early age – verses, newspaper articles, pamphlets, not to mention his journals – and maintained strong literary interests all his life. It took him a long time, though, to concede that his main role in life was to be literary. A few months before his death he wrote to his son James, "I cannot be contented with merely literary fame, and social enjoyments. I must still hope for some credible employment." He meant employment in law or politics in England. Yet he took pride in the acclaim with which his *Life of Johnson* was received. His journals, of course, remained unpublished and unknown (apart from those of his journey to Corsica and to the Hebrides with Johnson) until the present century. For all his enormous vanity, it can be said that Boswell hid his true light under a bushel.

There is something oddly dispassionate in Boswell's awareness of himself. His egotism and ambition were not ruthless forces driving him on to pursue success in a chosen career; they were products of a curiosity about himself of the same kind as his curiosity about other people. He is fully aware of the chameleon element in his own character, of his need to model himself now on this man and now on that, and he positively relishes the contradictions that he observes in his own nature. He sees himself as an actor, sometimes also as a producer, and even occasionally as author or part-author of the play in which he and his friends and associates are taking part. His passion for the stage manifested itself at an early age and, as Susan Manning makes clear in her essay, is an important clue to his character. An actor is supposed to be able to get out of himself and enter into the personality of the character he is acting. In a sense this is what Boswell often did – seeing himself as Rousseau or Voltaire before presenting himself to each of them so that he could know what aspect of him they would be most likely to respond to. When he sought Rousseau's advice or pressed Voltaire to tell him what he really believed about religion he was speaking, as it were, in each case from within the other

person's consciousness, having prepared himself by studying it and imaginatively entering into it. At the same time we can hear the note of personal anxiety in Boswell's attempt to push Voltaire into confessing to more than he believed. This emerges more clearly and more consistently in his relation to Johnson. From Johnson he wanted approval and reassurance; he would have liked (but consistently failed to receive) Johnson's approval of "patriarchal" sexual practices and he sought and obtained qualified reassurance with respect to Christianity and an afterlife. But he also tried in a way to *become* Johnson before engaging in conversation with him so that he could know to what aspects of his mind and emotions he could most successfully appeal. Yet, as more than one of the writers here argue, he never entered the totality of Johnson's self. Donna Heiland, Greg Clingham, and Marlies Danziger each illuminate in a different way some aspect of the difference between subject and object in Boswell's great biography. Some gap is of course inevitable. If A writes about B, A must clearly be distinguished from B if the account is to have any significance. Biography is not autobiography. But a biographer (or interviewer or character-sketcher) who is aware of the contradictory facets of his *own* character can make an attempt to angle those facets most consonant with the character of his subject and so be a different person, as it were, in writing about Johnson from the person he is when writing about Rousseau or Wilkes or Paoli. Consider, as Richard Schwartz does, Boswell's relation to Hume. Here there was no facet of Boswell's character other than the purely social and convivial that he could wheel into position when confronting Hume so as to penetrate the reality of Hume's character and beliefs. The dream he had in later life that told him that Hume had been only joking when professing skepticism is the measure of the gap between the two characters. Among his many selves, of which he was so conscious, Boswell did not have a self that could mesh with that of Hume. And if it can be argued that he did not have a self that could mesh with that of Johnson either, that he venerated rather than loved Johnson and showed him off rather than entered into his very self, one can only reply that here is a question of degree. In some ways – limited certainly, but real – there was a Johnsonian Boswell and it could be brought into play by Boswell for his own purpose. It cannot be said that there was in any way a Humean Boswell.

It might perhaps be said that Boswell's role vis-à-vis the characters he interviewed or wrote about was the very reverse of that of the "impartial spectator" that Adam Smith, whose lectures Boswell had heard in Glasgow, postulated as the theoretical arbiter of moral approval. Boswell aimed to be the *partial* spectator, not in the sense that he imposed his own interests on those of his subject but that he wanted to take his subject's part, to enter into him. And if even with Johnson he could not wholly succeed in this aim, it was nevertheless what he hoped and tried to do. Of course in a sense all human

relations are of this kind. There are few of us who do not in some degree attempt to angle ourselves towards the person with whom we are trying to relate: aggressive self-assertion is very much the exception in social intercourse. Dr. Johnson in his social relationships might appear to have been aggressively self-assertive, yet there is ample evidence that this was a superficial overlay and underneath he often was, as he showed in his *Lives of the Poets*, a man of surprisingly widely accommodating sympathies.

Boswell's procedure as a writer is far removed from that recommended by Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where the ideal artist is described as being "like the God of creation, [remaining] within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork." His is the supreme example of a refusal to withdraw from his handiwork, and it is that refusal that justifies our concern to probe the relation between self and literary achievement in his life and work. Shakespeare has invited many more critics than Boswell has done, but inquiries into Shakespeare the man, though not uncommon at one time, represent an eccentric and even unreal aspect of the Shakespearean critical tradition: overwhelmingly critics have concerned themselves with the meaning of the text or with the bibliographical questions involved in establishing the text of the plays. Boswell invites questioning in a special way. If he is not our greatest writer, he is one of our most fascinating.

There remains the question of Boswell's uniqueness. As we read his journals it sometimes appears that he is like the rest of us, only more so. His varying moods, his combination of sensuality and moral earnestness, his curiosity about himself and others, his vanity and self-doubts, his role-modelling, are all recognizable aspects of the human condition. Is it his frankness about all this that is so exceptional? Is it the abandon with which he moves from one aspect of his nature to another that is so remarkable? There are few readers of the journals who cannot help feeling at some point and in some sense *de te fabula*, that the story is about themselves. But how does this relate to his consummate ability as an interviewer and a biographer? The quality of his ability to angle different aspects of his character towards different subjects, which I have discussed, is surely highly unusual. One might say that it is not Boswell's character that is so unusual, but the way he displays it and exploits it.

It would be misleading, however, to regard this as in any way dishonest. The aspects of his character that he revolves for his own contemplation and as an aid to invoking the character of others really did exist and were not distorted in the exposure. The counterpointing of exhibitionism and sympathy is both remarkable and genuine. It was this that attracted people to Boswell. "Give me your hand. I have taken a liking to you." This famous declaration of Johnson's is only one, if the most memorable, of many instances of Boswell's capacity to attract affection. We know that his cousin Margaret loved him long before he proposed to her and that she retained

that love in spite of Boswell's regular desertions to London and of his frequent bouts of drunkenness and whoring. She could have had no more illusions about him than the modern reader of his devastatingly frank journals can have. And the modern reader of the journals is also aware of Boswell's attractiveness. We may feel distaste, disapproval, even at times revulsion, but this posturing exhibitionist, this compulsive self-examiner, this inquisitive contemplator of other people's natures, subject to periodic bouts of disabling melancholy and subject also to an almost ludicrous degree to virtually all the weaknesses of the flesh, retains – indeed compels – our sympathy.

How far is dependence on the self a trustworthy road to literary excellence in biography and autobiography? Boswell's dependence was far from consistent or naive; as Marlies Danziger shows, in his *Life of Johnson* he counterpoints self-display and self-restraint and can in various ways and for various purposes subsume personal feeling in abstract generalization. It can also be argued, as Joan Pittock suggests, that Boswell's volatile egotistic vision cuts across eighteenth-century critical conventions and strikes a curiously modern note. Part of the answer to my question lies in the fact that Boswell was not in fact crudely dependent on his own egotistical responses, but selected, organized, manipulated and, in the *Life of Johnson*, even suppressed them. The self was a tool at the writer's disposal. This may seem very like the Romantic view of literature as personal confession, with its dependence on individual sensitivity and its tendency to view literature as the record of those "spots of time" (in Wordsworth's phrase) in which the writer's awareness is suddenly enlarged. But Boswell's practice was really very different. To see the self as the writer's tool rather than the writer's guide is very much an eighteenth-century view, one associated principally with Sterne, who of course had considerable influence on Boswell's writing. Further, the self – as much modern criticism holds – can be a critical and exegetical device for interrogating the literary text and extracting new meanings from it: it is, one might almost say, the essential tool of de-constructionalism, enabling the critic to extract new meanings from old texts and allowing him to proclaim the endless diversity of potential interpretations. In this sense the "death of the author," that by now hackneyed phrase of modern criticism, is the birth of the dominating critical self. The integrity of the literary text dissolves before individual scrutiny into whatever meanings the mind and sensibilities of the scrutineer can, in the light of his own mental and emotional history, discover in it. The self has really come into its own.

But this is hardly Boswell's critical method. He was enough a man of his age to believe in objective critical standards, and for all his relish of the individual and the eccentric there is no evidence that as a literary critic he disagreed with Johnson's view that "just representation of general nature"

was the object of literary fictions. Further, though he loved to record the specific and the individual, Boswell, well grounded as he was in the Latin classics and in the view that they were indeed classics, never questioned the notion of a literary canon or entertained the belief that the meaning of great literary works was infinitely variable – or even that there could be any serious doubt about what truly great literary works were. Nor did he regard literature, as he seems to have regarded music, as simply a mood-inducing device. So, although he may evoke special sympathies among adherents of recent critical fashions, Boswell can hardly be regarded as one of their founding fathers.

Nevertheless Boswell does sound an especially sympathetic chord among modern readers. Now that we know him so well, and can see how he used his self both in autobiographical and biographical writing, we can see that in spite of his eighteenth-century habits and standards, he does stand somewhat outside the spirit of the age. For the self that he exhibits exceeds its function as a writer's tool and reaches out beyond the limits of the consciousness of any given age to make contact with very different consciousnesses.

There is one way, however, in which he speaks very much for his own time and place: that is as a Scotsman of the generations immediately after the Union of 1707. There is no need to rehearse again Boswell's ambivalence about Scotland, his mixture of pride and shame at being Scots, his anxiety to speak in standard southern English, and all the other apparent inconsistencies and contradictions in his attitude to his native country and his own people. This, however, is less unique than some critics have realized. The national trauma with which the Scottish people faced the fact that their own Parliament had voted itself out of existence in an "incorporating union" with England and the complex of attitudes that it bred can be documented in innumerable instances. David Hume, who regarded the Scots that he spoke (but did not write) as a "very corrupt dialect" of English, was nevertheless a proud Scot who manifested his patriotism in many ways, not least by settling in Edinburgh during the latter part of his life. Robert Burns both wrote anti-Union songs and defended the Union, he voiced both Jacobite and Hanoverian sympathies, and at different times expressed anti-English Scottish nationalism and British loyalty. The accommodation of British loyalty and Scottish feeling, now known as "concentric loyalty," went on apace throughout eighteenth-century Scotland, to culminate in Walter Scott's combination of passion for the Scottish past and commitment to British progress and modernity. It could be argued that the ambivalence reflected in these attitudes represented more than the consequences of the Union of 1707 and that, as Gregory Smith argued long ago and as the modern Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid enthusiastically reaffirmed, the Scot throughout history has always had a divided self, and as a result from

the beginning manifested the "Caledonian Antisyzygy," a yoking of opposite extremes, "the sudden jostling of contraries." Boswell, it might be thought, is too individual a case to be diagnosed as an example of this characteristically Scottish psychological phenomenon, which in any case is not explained simply by being defined and named. Further, there was mental disturbance in Boswell's heredity: his own brother John had to be confined for long periods of his life, and Boswell himself admitted that his family were either "all crack-brained" or were "remarkable for genius and worth" but afflicted with a cast of melancholy of the kind that often accompanies genius. It is however worth remembering that in the multiple self that Boswell drew on so remarkably in both autobiography and biography there was something akin to what has often been observed as characteristic of the Scottish personality. It was a Scot, James Hogg, who in his *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* first explored the phenomenon of the divided self, and it was another Scot, Robert Louis Stevenson, who gave it its most popular expression in his account of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Boswell meditating sexual adventures while in a mood of pious devotion in church could perhaps be seen as a prime example of the Jekyll-and-Hyde syndrome.

With reference to Boswell's feelings of Scottish patriotism, it should be noted that his interest in freedom for Corsica was connected in his mind with a sense of Scotland's wars of independence against the English kings Edward I and II. It is remarkable that he should have used as epigraph to his *Account of Corsica* the most ringing sentence from the Declaration of Arbroath, the famous letter sent to the Pope by the Scots barons in 1320 containing a classic statement of the case for Scottish independence. The statement, so often quoted by Scottish historians and politicians today, was not well known in Boswell's time, but Boswell ferreted it out and displayed it proudly. His mixture of feelings with respect to Corsica, Scotland, and England was an early indication of his inner complexities. It is perhaps worth noting that the phrase "mixture of feelings" was used by Walter Scott to describe his own emotions in presenting his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* to the public. Boswell's many-faceted self can thus be ranged historically with other examples of divided Scottish characters.

However we look at Boswell, we are left with a set of paradoxes. It is perhaps for the psychologist to attempt a real explanation of those paradoxes, but the biographer, the social and cultural historian, the literary researcher, and the literary critic can help to show what it is that has to be explained and what value-judgements seem in the end to be indicated. But in fact there is no end: questions answered bring new questions to the fore, and Boswell remains, as he would have liked to remain, a compulsive object of curiosity.

Part I

BOSWELL AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SCOTTISH CULTURE

2

BOSWELL AND THE RHETORIC OF FRIENDSHIP

Thomas Crawford

In an important essay Bruce Redford touches on one of the most intriguing aspects of the Boswell problem: "the question of literary alchemy – life into art, art into life, a life in art – and the nature of Boswell's own transformational powers. In the hands of a master, the familiar letter creates an autonomous verbal universe, a true literary system that achieves, both formally and ontologically, the status of *poetic* reality – at once internally consistent, vital, and self-supporting." Such mastery entails rhetoric of an essentially *literary* kind, deployed to foster an illusion of talking, whose effect is to create letters which are at one and the same time counters in an exchange and units in whole correspondences which are *romans fleuves*. It implies the art of the miniaturist, who cultivates "Jane Austen's one small square of ivory" and takes infinite pains on a limited scale.[1] But for Boswell, life came first; his aim as a writer was to reflect and heighten events which had spontaneously happened in life, or which he had originated or stage-managed in life. This is as true of his letters as of any other part of his *œuvre*. In this essay I shall not be concerned, in the main, with Boswell's correspondence with heroes and great men, but with his letters to three friends who were more or less his equals and contemporaries – the Hon. Andrew Erskine, John Johnston of Grange, and William Johnson Temple.

THE ERSKINE CORRESPONDENCE

Boswell's letters to Erskine employ on the whole a more self-consciously "literary" rhetoric than those he wrote to Temple and Grange, and yet they fit in perfectly with the reality of their relationship as it comes out in the *London Journal*.

> We were in a luscious flow of spirits and vastly merry. "How we do chase a thought," said Erskine, "when once it is started. Let it run as it pleases over hill and dale and take numberless windings, still we are at it. It has a greyhound at its heels every turn." (*London Journal*, February 14, 1763, p. 189)