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Bruce Redford

Boswell's Fear of Death



" . . . whence this secret dread, and inward horror,
Of falling into naught?"

(Addison, *Cato* V.i.4-5)

"Without revelation it certainly is a Grand Peut-être."

(Pope, Spence's *Anecdotes*, #536)

Boswell's horror of the last is no secret to the reader of his journal, *Life of Johnson*, essays, and correspondence.¹ This "unfinished soul," as F.A. Pottle calls him, could summon up neither Cato's stoical indifference nor Pope's Socratic poise.² Yet Boswell is not ashamed: with unselective candor he records the central obsession of his life—a condition psychologists have labelled "thanatophobia."³ This consuming fear existed in direct proportion to an unsatiated appetite for experience and an endless preoccupation with the forging of a self. It represents the dark reverse of a coin whose obverse shines with buoyant sensuality. Although he may brood occasionally on death, the average person, as Paul Tillich notes, "usually is not aware of nonbeing and anxiety in the depth of his personality."⁴ Boswell by contrast spent most of his life trying unsuccessfully to keep

such fearful awareness at bay—to tame or blunt the panic that came surging up at the thought of death as potential extinction.

This essay undertakes a task as yet unattempted by students of Boswell: the sustained probing of his private neurosis through its literary manifestations.⁵ The evidence is plentiful in the extreme: one hesitates to dip a mere bucket or two into such an ocean. Yet once the available material has been thoroughly surveyed, certain revelatory scenes and documents stand out. Chief among these is Boswell's famous interview with the dying David Hume. Ernest Mossner calls this account "the most sensational 'scoop' of the eighteenth century."⁶ While the interview does indeed gratify our curiosity concerning Hume's ability to mesh human practice with philosophic theory, it tells us even more about James Boswell and his corrosive anxieties. During their momentous encounter the devout atheist and the unconfirmed believer break lances; Boswell propels himself ignominiously into the dust. The following anatomy therefore begins with a close look at the successive texts of the interview; broadens to consider other relevant documents from the Boswellian corpus; then concludes by suggesting certain lines of connection between one man's anxiety and a broad cultural shift in attitudes toward death during the eighteenth century.

The final text of "An Account of My Last Interview with David Hume, Esq." is the result of a three-stage process of revision and expansion. The visit itself occurred on 7 July 1776, a month and a half before Hume's death. Boswell wrote his first account on 29 July 1776 (Version A); embroidered it on 3 March 1777 (Version B); then added further material from memory on 22 January 1778 (Version C). The original entry numbers approximately 750 words; the second account is almost twice as long. The final additions incorporate just under 300 words.⁷

The interview can and should be read as a seamless whole. Certainly the Yale editors were justified in publishing only the later versions, for very few readers can wish to spend time reconstructing the process of composition. Yet it is only by separating the layers of text, scrutinizing successive tiers of memory, and then reassembling the whole, that one fully appreciates the extent to which Boswell's disturbance is here laid bare. The interview has aptly been called "a desperate personal experiment";⁸ it is also a self-inflicted confrontation with Giant

Despair. Driven by an obscure masochistic impulse, Boswell goes to visit Hume one Sunday morning instead of attending church: with eyes open he departs from the path of safety to do battle in the Doubting Castle of Hume's atheism. Boswell remains ostensibly in control—the confident, healthy Christian at the bedside of the dying infidel. In fact, the calm surface (a friend pays a sympathy call and masks his genuine concern with light-hearted banter) counterpoints a powerful emotional and ideological drama:

I asked him if the thought of annihilation never gave him any uneasiness. He said not the least; no more than the thought that he had not been, as Lucretius observes. "Well," said I, "Mr. Hume, I hope to triumph over you when I meet you in a future state; and remember you are not to pretend that you was joking with all this infidelity." "No, no," said he. "But I shall have been so long there before you come that it will be nothing new" (p. 12).

A flow-chart of the conversation would reveal a compulsive circling back to the same topic—one which is indifferent to the interviewee, dangerously fascinating to the interviewer. As in so many Johnsonian encounters, it is Boswell who sounds the theme: in Version A, "I know not how the subject of immortality was introduced"; in Version B, "I know not how I contrived to get the subject of immortality introduced." Hume responds with an ironically distanced autobiographical sketch. Boswell restates the question, this time with a barbed personal slant: "I had a strong curiosity to be satisfied if he persisted in disbelieving a future state when he had death before his eyes" (p. 11).

One cannot help but be impressed by Hume's patient resolve: he remains courteous throughout yet absolutely unbending. The dying philosopher will allow Boswell to ask these impertinent, intimate questions because he senses the desperation that prompts them. At the same time he will not spare his interlocutor pain by feigning, evading, or muting the fact of the matter as he perceives it: "I asked him if it was not possible that there might be a future state. He answered it was possible that a piece of coal put upon the fire would not burn; and he added that it was a most unreasonable fancy that we should exist forever" (p. 11).

Boswell in turn dashes himself repeatedly upon the rock of sceptical tranquillity. And so finally the bell rings, the pugilists retire to their separate corners, and the match ends in an apparent draw: "Mr. Lauder, his surgeon, came in for a little, and Mr. Mure, the Baron's son, for another small interval. He was, as far as I could judge, quite easy with both. He said he had no pain, but was wasting away" (p. 14). Boswell ends Version B with tight-lipped understatement: "I left him with impressions which disturbed me for some time" (p. 14).

In general Boswell's *post mortem* accretions are designed to compensate retrospectively for his poor showing on the spot. Several of the additions in Versions B and C sharpen the combative edge of the exchange: "I was like a man in sudden danger eagerly seeking his defensive arms" (p. 12). Boswell the narrator, would-be defender of the faith, gives Boswell the quaking interviewer a more active, confident role. The questioner of the later versions presses Hume harder, makes more pointed remarks and even quotes Johnson's opinion of the philosopher to his face:

I somehow or other brought Dr. Johnson's name into our conversation. I had often heard him speak of that great man in a very illiberal manner. He said upon this occasion, "Johnson should be pleased with my *History*." Nettled by Hume's frequent attacks upon my revered friend in former conversations, I told him now that Dr. Johnson did not allow him much credit; for he said, "Sir, the fellow is a Tory by chance." I am sorry that I mentioned this at such a time. I was off my guard . . . (p. 13).

But is Boswell truly sorry? After all, when the pistol misfires, try to knock your opponent down with the butt.

Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross has observed the same kind of hostility, bred of frustration and fear, among medical and theological students who have helped her to interview dying patients:

Many a student appearing for the first time has left before the interview was over. Some were finally able to sit through a whole session but were unable to express

their opinions in the discussion. Some of them have displaced all their anger and rage onto other participants or the interviewer, at times onto the patients. The last has occasionally happened *when a patient apparently faced death with calmness and equanimity while the student was highly upset by the encounter*. The discussions then revealed that the student thought the patient was unrealistic or even faking, because it was inconceivable to him that anyone could face such a crisis with so much dignity.¹⁰ (my italics)

The parallels with Boswell's behavior during the interview and for many years afterward could scarcely be more pronounced. The desperate hope that Hume was actually "faking" leads ultimately to his dream of 10 January 1784, in which the reading of a private diary reveals that the apparent sceptic had in reality been a closet Christian. "But after I awaked, it [the dream] dwelt so upon my mind that I could not for some time perceive that it was only a fiction."¹¹ Wish-fulfillment can go no further than this.

Lest we feel sympathy for a man who after all is mortally ill, Version B emphasizes Hume's perverse strength of conviction: Boswell alters "he is really improperly and impolitely positive in incredulity" in the original journal entry to read, "he was indecently and impolitely positive" Only in Version B does Hume smile "in ridicule of this [notion] as absurd and contrary to fixed principles"; only in Version B is Boswell "persuaded from what he now said, and from his manner of saying it, that he did persist in disbelieving a future state" (p. 11). Hume's more aggressive stance matches the interviewer's own: absent from the original journal entry is Boswell's firm statement, "But I maintained my faith."

While Boswell the Christian protagonist advances to centerstage, Boswell the narrator gives way to woeful commentary from the wings: "I however felt a degree of horror, *mixed with a sort of wild, strange, hurrying recollection of my excellent mother's pious instructions, of Dr. Johnson's noble lessons, and of my religious sentiments and affections during the course of my life*" (p. 12). The italicized phrases represent additions to the original account. Their effect is to intensify the impression of psychic dissonance, of self-inflicted distress, and

of the role reversal that has taken place: ironically enough, it is the dying man who subdues the healthy warrior. Furthermore, such pathetic asides enforce a pair of disturbing contrasts: between Hume's wretched physical appearance and his mental tranquillity; between conversational tone and "aweful" substance. "He was quite different from the plump figure which he used to present Mr. Hume's pleasantry was such that there was no solemnity in the scene" (pp. 11-13).

The expansion of Version A into Versions B and C constitutes a deliberate exercise in the rewriting of history. Boswell mingles chronicle with polemic and confession; he tells his story, then compulsively retells it, yet the raw materials stubbornly resist harmonious design. Dissonance and tonal ambiguity creep in everywhere, until the composer himself is reduced to whistling in the dark:

I must add one other circumstance which is material, as it shows that he perhaps was not without some hope of a future state, and that his spirits were supported by a consciousness (or at least a notion) that his conduct had been virtuous. He said, "If there were a future state, Mr. Boswell, I think I could give as good an account of my life as most people" (pp. 14-15).

Version C ends on this precarious note. To call it even partial reassurance would be, like Boswell, wilfully to misread the evidence.

The composity interview with Hume forms a stressful counterpart to the exuberant meeting with Voltaire in 1765. On that earlier occasion the youthful Boswell remained in charge, at least rhetorically—confident of his position, and secure in his narrative art. His long report to Temple rapidly becomes a performance about a performance, with Boswell playing the roles of stage manager, chief antagonist, playwright, and chorus:

At last we came upon religion. Then did he rage. The company went to supper. M. de Voltaire and I remained in the drawing-room with a great Bible before us; and if ever two mortal men disputed with vehemence, we did. Yes, upon that occasion he was one individual and I another. For a certain portion of time there was a fair

opposition between Voltaire and Boswell . . . Temple, was not this an interesting scene? Would a journey from Scotland to Ferney have been too much to obtain such a remarkable interview?¹²

By 1776 Boswell's grasp and his gusto have slackened: no longer is there "a fair opposition" between the combatants. The second and third texts of the interview show him struggling *post facto* to win control over the man Hume and over his own Humean scepticism; to achieve and maintain confidence, at least of narrative voice; to score a retrospective victory; to convince himself that he had not been so weak. The disturbing effect of the resultant palimpsest derives in large measure from the sense of implicit power play complicated by the mechanisms of self-punishment. Boswell's account of his Sunday expedition into the den of empirical uncertainty has a nightmarish quality, as if the dark fantasies of a dream were being obsessively replayed.

In the autobiographical sketch designed for Rousseau, Boswell describes the religious roller-coaster trip which had convulsed his childhood and adolescence:

My mother was extremely pious. She inspired me with devotion. . . . But unfortunately she taught me Calvinism At last my governor put me in love with heaven, and some hope entered into my religion Unluckily a terrible hypochondria seized me at the age of sixteen. I studied logic and metaphysics. But I became a Methodist. . . . At eighteen I became a Catholic My Lord --- made me a deist. I gave myself up to pleasure without limit My principles became more and more confused. I ended a complete sceptic O charitable philosopher, I beg you to help me. My mind is weak but my soul is strong.¹³

Such a case history of doctrinal upheaval offers among other things a recipe for enduring scepticism. As Frederick Pottle shrewdly concludes, "Authority that does not claim infallibility may be respected and may be practically efficacious, but when the principle of infallible authority has been accepted and then rejected as an illusion, all moral authority becomes subject to

sceptical scrutiny."¹⁴ After Boswell's abrupt deconversion from Catholicism, intellectual uncertainty wars ceaselessly with emotional need. The reassuring voice of dogmatic comfort can never drown out the persistent whispers of subversive doubt.

Boswell was fond of quoting to his most intimate friend, the clergyman W.J. Temple, a hortatory couplet from Pope's *Essay on Man*: "Hope humbly then; with trembling pinions soar; / Wait the great teacher Death, and God adore!" (i.91-92). In a letter dated 3 September 1780 he observes: "We must be content to 'wait the great teacher Death, and God adore!' . . . I comfort myself with the Christian revelation of our being in a state of purification, and that we shall in course of time attain to felicity."¹⁵ Yet such comfort is always short-lived, for reasons that Boswell makes painfully clear. His confession to Temple complements and enriches the *précis* sent to Rousseau:

What variety of woe have I not endured! Above all, what have I not endured from dismal notions of religion! I need not remind you of the several changes which I have undergone in that respect. I will never disguise my fluctuations of sentiment. I will freely own to you my wildest inconsistencies. I thought myself an unshaken Christian. I thought my system was fixed for life. And yet, my friend, what shall I say? I find myself perplexed with doubts . . . I have a sceptical disposition. I would impute it to a disordered fancy; for I see strong proofs that Jesus Christ had a divine commission. My misery is that, like my friend Dempster, I am convinced by the last book which I have read. I have a horror at myself for doubting thus. I think of death, and I shudder.¹⁶

This analytic bulletin, written at the age of twenty-three, never ceases to apply. During the entire span of his adult life, Boswell vibrates between states of religious tranquillity, even exaltation, and spells of tormented questioning. Sadly, the sceptical night thoughts overshadow the periods of calm equilibrium. Pieced together with sympathetic care, the relevant materials (journal entries, letters, and essays) compose, to borrow a Dickensian phrase, "The History of a Self-Tormentor."

Boswell devoted three essays in his monthly *Hypochondriack* series (November 1778-January 1779) to the subject of death.

As philosophic meditations in a Johnsonian vein, these, essays are negligible, even trite; as public expressions of deeply private fears, they confirm the evidence of journal and correspondence alike. The guiding theme throughout the three instalments is a commonplace of the Christian homiletic tradition: "The thought of Death should have a salutary influence upon our temper and manners."¹⁷ Boswell stresses the "aweful anxiety" that arises, or should arise, at the thought of death:

It is in vain for the sophist to argue, that upon the supposition of our being annihilated, we shall have no affliction as we can have no consciousness. For all but very dull men will confess, that though we may be insensible of the reality when it takes place, the *thought* of it is dismal But no body can be *certain* of annihilation; and the thought of entering upon a scene of being, altogether unknown, which *may be* unhappy in an extreme degree, is without question very alarming (i.201).

He goes on to suggest "three ways in which the fear of Death may be escaped or alleviated":

Insensibility . . .—Attention in a strong degree to some other object—And a Religious Exercise of all the Faculties and Affections The third way . . . is the only way which a wise man would wish to follow; the two former ways being no better than being blind-folded, that one may not see a precipice down which he is to fall, or being deafened by the noise of drums or shoutings, that one may not hear the approach of a ruffian who is to assassinate him (i.209-10).

In the third essay Boswell further stresses the importance of "Religious Exercise": "by a proper preparation for it [Death], we may render it less hurtful, both with respect to our concerns in this world, and those in the world beyond the grave. I would not indulge the thought of death to excess; but as Dr. Young counsels us, would 'Give it its wholesome empire'" (i.216). The superficiality of Boswell's recommendations and his cliché-ridden prose betray a fundamental lack of conviction. Here the Hypochondriack, in short, is trying to argue himself out of his

fear. The blend of quotation and pious reflection resembles nothing so much as the schoolboy in Blair's *The Grave*, "Whistling aloud to bear his courage up" as he walks through the churchyard at night. Significantly, Boswell quotes this very line in his *Hypochondriack* essay "On Fear" (November 1777), then appends what, viewed as literary criticism, can only be called a fatuous remark: "The boy was very much frightened; but being ashamed of his fear, affected a lively and gay indifference" (i.113). Applied to his own precarious control in the essays on death, this observation rings pathetically true.

At the end of the second essay in the *Hypochondriack* series, Boswell recommends to his readers "*Erasmus de praeparatione ad mortem*, an excellent performance of that great man, which I have long thought of translating into English" (i.212-13). Boswell was not the first admirer, or the first prospective translator, of Erasmus' treatise. A discourse in the medieval *ars moriendi* tradition, it was written in 1553 at the request of Thomas Boleyn, Earl of Wiltshire and father of Anne Boleyn. Catherine of Aragon derived consolation from it shortly before her death. Thomas More may well have read the work in prison. English translations appeared in 1538, 1543, and again in 1706.¹⁸

In his treatise Erasmus distinguishes four kinds of death: natural, which separates the soul from the body; spiritual, which separates God from the soul; eternal, the result of natural and spiritual death combined; and *mors transformatoria*, which separates the spirit from the flesh. Every Christian should strive to die this fourth kind of death: those who have accomplished a personal *mors transformatoria* during life do not fear its end. Yet nothing short of absolute submission to the will of God can bring about the requisite separation of spirit from flesh. According to Erasmus, the individual Christian must cease from all doubts and questioning. He must make a true *sacrificium intellectus*:

Verum, quemadmodum cum peccatis luctandum non est, sed ab horum consideratione ad Christi gratiam avertendus est animus, ita cum Satana non est disputandum, sed impia suggerenti dicendum: '*Abi retro, Satanas*; mihi phas non est dubitare de iis, quae Spiritu Sancto docta tradidit ecclesia, et satis est tenere fide, quod ingenio non assequor.¹⁹

Faith and charity, argues Erasmus, are more important than the sacraments and priestly comfort in achieving an exemplary death. At the same time, he does not slight the importance of such external aids to holy dying as contemplation of the images of saints and recitation of scriptural passages. Boswell had originally been drawn to the treatise because of this attitude to sensual stimuli: "I then began in the library to read Erasmus *De Praeparatione ad Mortem*, which I have long intended to read and translate, from the satisfaction which I had many years ago in reading a little of it, where he recommends pictures of pious subjects to dying people."²⁰ What appeals to Boswell in his ceaseless attempt to remove the sting from death is the idea that sensual pleasures can ease the way to the eternal abolition of human sensuality. Even at the very last, we are licensed, even urged, to continue the gratification of eye and ear.

When Boswell finishes reading the entire treatise, his reaction alters: "There was much unction in it, but also more weakness than I expected to find. But perhaps I considered as weakness that meek submission of reason to divine faith which religion requires, and from which I am too much estranged by being accustomed, as a practical lawyer, to continual close controversial reasoning."²¹ This statement of motive seems more than a little disingenuous: it was not Boswell's professional background but his rampant egotism that blocked such a "meek submission." His disappointment results from the inescapable import of Erasmus' treatise: that man must trample on pride of intellect and heart before he can live a good life, or make a good death. We must, says Erasmus, avoid despair on the one hand and arrogance on the other. And this Boswell could not do. Accordingly the treatise ceased to comfort. Could the drama of public executions teach a compensatory *ars moriendi*?

Paul Lewis, John Raybould, John Reid and a host of nameless fellow convicts: lurid execution and pre-execution scenes darken the pages of Boswell's journal. He starts his spectatorial career early in life by attending a Tyburn execution on 4 May 1763. For days thereafter "frightful imaginations" drive him to share a bed with a friend. Boswell's "gloomy terrors" at the spectre of judicial death are aggravated in this instance by the identity of the condemned man—Paul Lewis, who had become for him a Macheath-like fantasy figure. Gay's

highwayman appealed so strongly to Boswell's imagination not only because of his dashing lawlessness, glamorous raking, and polygamy, but also because Macheath had been rescued on the verge of death in an extravagantly improbable reversal of plot. It is not too much to say that Boswell hoped for a similar intervention from without—*deus* (or *artifex*) *ex machina*—when his turn came. There are limits, however, to the parallels between life and art: unlike his literary avatar, Young Lewis did not escape. Given the extent to which the mechanics of self-projection had been operating, part of Boswell died with him.

Why did Boswell inflict such pain upon himself? He attends executions as he attends the death-bed of David Hume: knowing he will singe his wings yet compelled nonetheless to circle the flame. In *Hypochondriack* No. 68, "On Executions," he undertakes an official justification of sorts:

I consider that death is the most awful object before every man, who ever directs his thoughts seriously toward futurity; and that it is very natural that we should be anxious to see people in that situation which affects us so much But dying publickly at Tyburn, and dying privately in one's bed, are only different modes of the same thing Therefore it is that I feel an irresistible impulse to be present at every execution, as I there behold the various effects of the near approach of death, according to the various tempers of the unhappy sufferers, and by studying them I learn to quiet and fortify my own mind (ii. 279-81).

Does this high-minded defense of Tyburn as "a school or a rehearsal for eternity" carry much conviction?²² More often than not, the putative cure seems only to exacerbate the disease: "At night the account of the execution of the two Perreaus affected me very much. I could not fall asleep for a long time after going to bed; and the thoughts of my own death or that of my wife or of my children or of my father or brothers or friends made me very gloomy."²³

The correlative to Boswell's interest in executions is his lifelong fascination with deathbed behavior as the ultimate test of religious or philosophic principle. The interview with Hume, though strictly speaking *sui generis*, also belongs to a general

category of anxious last-minute inquisitions. Boswell solicits an interview with Dr. Theodore Tronchin, Voltaire's private physician, to make certain that the arch-*illuminé* had not lapsed from flippancy into fear during a potentially mortal illness. He goes out of his way to visit the bookseller Edward Dilly, "fast adying" at the family home in Bedfordshire, and reports happily to Temple: "He is in as agreeable a frame as any Christian can be. Repeats the 2d paragraph of Dr. Young's second *Night*, 'Why start at death?', etc. and another passage, 'Death a subterraneous road to bliss', or some such words. I am edified here."²⁴ This is the Boswell who told Edmund Burke: "I hope I shall be Dr. Young when I grow old."²⁵ He repeatedly quizzes the aged Lord Kames, whose health is failing, about the probability of an afterlife. At times Kames reminds Boswell of his own father, "quite firm and never speculating":²⁶

I know not how Lord Kames and I got upon the subject of a future state, or rather how I introduced it. I said it was hard that we were not allowed to have any notion of what kind of existence we shall have. He said there was an impenetrable veil between us and our future state, and being sensible of this, he never attempted to think on the subject, knowing it to be vain "But," said I, "we may conjecture about it."²⁷

On other visits, however, Lord Kames fails to perform on cue: "I wished much to hear him say something as a dying man. It was unsatisfactory to be with a very old man, and a judge, and perceive nothing venerable, nothing edifying, nothing solemnly pious at the close of life." Despite repeated questioning, Kames will not provide further grist for the mill: "I then fairly said, 'I believe, my Lord, you have been lucky enough to have always an amiable view of the Deity, and no doubt of a future state.' He said nothing."²⁸ And so Boswell leaves unedified.

The tragedy of Boswell's later life is that he knows what is deficient and can identify the appropriate solution, yet remains powerless to enact it. In his *Hypochondriack* No. 39, he diagnoses the problem with painful clarity and identifies a source of permanent relief:

By religion the Hypochondriack will have his mind fixed

upon one invariable object of veneration But his corrosive imagination destroys to his own view all that he contemplates Finding that his reason is not able to cope with his gloomy imagination, he doubts that he may have been under a delusion when it was cheerful; so that he does not even wish to be happy as formerly, since he cannot wish for what he apprehends is fallacious (ii. 44-46).

When in good spirits, Boswell can contemplate the prospect of death with perfect equanimity: "Beheld with solemn emotion our family vault, *my long home* [Ecclesiastes 12:5]. Was not shocked at the thought of death. Had the comfortable hope of future happiness. My mind was sound and piously calm."²⁹ In the depths of depression, however, calm assurance dissolves: "I have a torpidity of mind that I have not often experienced. I have not 'a lively hope of immortality' [1 Peter 1:3-4]."³⁰ The most vivid and concise description of his state of mind at such times occurs in a letter to Temple, 12 August 1775: "While afflicted with melancholy, all the doubts which have ever disturbed thinking men, come upon me. I awake in the night, dreading annihilation or being thrown into some horrible state of being."³²

Even when free of melancholy imaginings, however, Boswell can be caught off guard. During the course of a conversation with Bennet Langton and Topham Beauclerk,

We fell a talking of religion, and then was the most perfect contrast between Langton and Beauclerk. The one earnestly and seriously arguing for the truth of Christianity. The other with indifference and vivacity parrying every argument, or springing out of its way To see Langton's concern and Beauclerk's lively carelessness was truly comic; but I was checked from indulging it by a cold shiver of dubious speculation when I saw so acute a man as Beauclerk an infidel, and by a kind of wild regret from the supposition that so pretty a man should cease at death and his qualities be annihilated.³²

Abiretro, Satanas. Boswell is disturbed by a similar "cold shiver" during one of the most poignantly ironic scenes in the entire

journal. His six year old daughter Veronica pipes up one night from her crib: "I do not believe there is a GOD."

"Preserve me," said I, "my dear, what do you mean?" She answered, "I have *thinket* it many a time, but did not like to speak of it." I was confounded and uneasy By talking calmly with Veronica, I discovered what had made her think there was not a GOD. She told me, she "did not like to die" I impressed upon her that we must die at any rate; and how terrible would it be if we had not a Father in Heaven to take care of us. I looked into Cambrai's *Education of a Daughter*, hoping to have found some simple argument for the being of GOD in that piece of instruction. But it is taken for granted.³³

This episode dramatizes Boswell's two voices. In seeking to convince, or at least to silence, his questioning daughter, he tries to stifle his own doubts. His search for proof in Cambrai epitomizes the larger search for a bedrock of certainty, something that can always be "taken for granted." We think back to a passage from an earlier segment of the journal: "Mr. Wood raved ignorantly about the uncertainty of the soul's being immortal or immaterial. But I had not arguments ready to silence him. I must get a *summary* from Mr. Johnson."³⁴ There is no record of any such defense against the surprise ambush of an infidel sharpshooter.

For Lawrence Stone, the eighteenth century in England constitutes a major cultural watershed: as the prevailing family structure alters, so do sexual mores, religious convictions, and the social hierarchy itself. In Part IV of his pioneering study, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*, Stone posits the development of a "closed domesticated nuclear family" in succession to the "open lineage family" and the "restricted patriarchal family" of Elizabethan, Jacobean, and early Stuart England. According to Stone, "this new type of family was the product of the rise of Affective Individualism. It was a family organized around the principle of personal autonomy, and bound together by strong affective ties."³⁵

Stone associates the rise of "Affective Individualism" with a change in basic attitudes toward the death of a loved one:

But the decay of belief that every death is directly willed by God, together with the growth of a more affectionate relationship between husbands and wives and parents and children, changed the meaning of the death of a spouse or a child. Previously, death had been a highly formalized ritual, a *rite de passage* on the way to Heaven, the chief actor being the dying man, ideally repentant, resigned to God's will, and fortified by the consolations of religion. The centre of attention now shifted from the behaviour of the dying to the response of the living, for whom death was now no more than a meaningless personal bereavement, the extinction of a loved one.³⁶

In these remarks and elsewhere in his book, Stone draws extensively on the cultural mapping undertaken by Philippe Ariès, whose monumental survey of western attitudes toward death, *L'Homme devant la Mort*, locates in the eighteenth century the beginnings of "la grande peur de la mort." By the end of the century, claims Ariès, "la mort apprivoisée"—the "tamed death" of medieval culture, domesticated and absorbed into the pattern of communal life—had given way to "la mort ensauvagée"—death as phobia, the source of individual anguish and lonely terror. This "death made savage" is the direct consequence of a new, prototypically "modern" stress on individual pleasures, privileges, and emotions: "Cet individualisme de l'ici-bas et de l'au-delà paraît écarter l'homme de la résignation confiante ou fatiguée des âges immémoriaux."³⁷ Until the eighteenth century, writes Ariès,

les hommes tels que nous les saisissons dans l'histoire n'ont jamais eu vraiment peur de la mort. Certes, ils la craignaient, ils en éprouvaient quelque angoisse et ils le disaient tranquillement. Mais justement jamais cette angoisse ne dépassait le seuil de l'indicible, de l'inexprimable. Elle était traduite en mots apaisants et canalisée dans des rites familiaux.³⁸

"Mots apaisants," "rites familiaux": these are but temporary anodynes to Boswell and other victims of "la mort ensauvagée."

Professor Stone relies heavily on Boswell's journal to

illustrate his generalizations concerning the growth of affective individualism and a general release of libido among "the Quality." The same personal record might be used with equally telling effect to support Ariès' and Stone's postulation of a change in religious eschatology. Stone isolates the underlying cause of this shift as follows: "At the root of all the most significant changes of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries lies a progressive reorientation of culture towards the pursuit of pleasure in this world, rather than postponement of gratification until the next."³⁹

Immediate pursuit, indefinite postponement: at all seasons Boswell proves to be *l'homme moyen sensuel* in a distinctively modern mould: modern in his quest for self-definition, his restless sensuality, his position as nuclear *pater familias*, and his underlying scepticism. Boswell's fear of death, unlike Johnson's, has nothing to do with traditional religious anxiety;⁴⁰ it takes instead the form of dark and stifling panic. Rarely are night thoughts transmuted by prayer or cleansing meditation. It is significant that, on the day of Hume's burial, he hides in the graveyard to watch the interment unobserved, then goes straight to the Advocates' Library to read Hume's "'Epicurean,' his 'Stoic,' his 'Sceptic,' and 'On Natural Religion.'"⁴¹ The previous evening he had indulged in a particularly extravagant bout of *al fresco* copulation.

Sex and death, being and nothingness—"signes d'une angoisse fondamentale qui ne trouve pas de nom."⁴² In his recent book, *Death and the Enlightenment*, John McManners observes that "the awareness of the shadow of mortality is at the expanding centre of the human personality, the essential catalyst for the reactions creating and affirming individuality."⁴³ As Boswell grows older without growing up, that shadow ceases to catalyze. "Of comfort no man speak: Let's talk of graves, of worms, and epitaphs

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NOTES

¹ "This secret horror of the last is inseparable from a thinking being whose life is limited, and to whom death is dreadful." See *Idler* No. 103, *The Idler and Adventurer*, ed. W.J. Bate, John M. Bullitt, and L.F. Powell (New Haven, 1963), II,

315.

² Frederick A. Pottle, *James Boswell: The Earlier Years 1740-1769* (London, 1966), p. 53. For a discussion of Pope's careful staging of his deathbed, see Morris R. Brownell, "Like Socrates': Pope's Art of Dying," *SEL*, 20 (1980), 407-23.

³ See G.S. Hall, "Thanatophobia and Immortality," *American Journal of Psychology*, 26 (1915), 550-613.

⁴ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, 1952), p. 68. For a sensitive application of Tillich's three types of spiritual anxiety to Samuel Johnson, see Max Byrd, "Johnson's Spiritual Anxiety," *MP*, 78 (1981), 368-78.

⁵ The only connected discussion of this topic occurs in the fine introduction to *Boswell in Extremes*, ed. Charles M. Weis and Frederick A. Pottle (New York, 1970), pp. xv-xix.

⁶ E.C. Mossner, *The Forgotten Hume* (New York, 1943), p. 181.

⁷ Version A is quoted from the MS Journal. Versions B and C appear in *Boswell in Extremes*, pp. 11-15. Parenthetical references will be to this edition. All quotations from the Boswell Papers are printed with the permission of Yale University and the McGraw-Hill Book Company (William Heinemann Ltd.).

⁸ *Boswell in Extremes*, p. xv.

⁹ *Boswell: The Ominous Years*, ed. Charles Ryskamp and Frederick A. Pottle (New York, 1963), p. 12.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York, 1969), p. 27.

¹¹ *Boswell: The Applause of the Jury*, ed. Irma S. Lustig and Frederick A. Pottle (New York, 1981), pp. 176-7.

¹² Quoted in *Earlier Years*, pp. 188-9.

¹³ *Earlier Years*, pp. 2-6.

¹⁴ *Earlier Years*, p. 53.

¹⁵ *Letters of James Boswell*, ed. C.B. Tinker (Oxford, 1924), II, 306.

¹⁶ To Temple, 22 May 1764; *Boswell in Holland*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (New York, 1952), p. 252.

¹⁷ *The Hypochondriack*, ed. Margery Bailey (Stanford, 1928), I, 218. Subsequent references, all to this edition, are placed parenthetically in the body of the essay.

¹⁸ See the excellent introduction by A. Van Heck to his edition of the treatise in *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera Omnia* (Amsterdam and Oxford, 1977), V, 1. Also Nancy Lee Beaty, *The Craft of Dying* (New Haven, 1970), p. 56 n. 5.

¹⁹ Van Heck, ed., p. 384.

²⁰ Journ. 31 Oct. 1778; *Boswell: Laird of Auchinleck*, ed. Joseph W. Reed and Frederick A. Pottle, 1977, p. 37.

²¹ Journ. 1 Nov. 1778; *Laird of Auchinleck*, p. 39.

²² *The Applause of the Jury*, p. xvii. See also *Earlier Years*, pp. 371-2.

²³ Journ. 22 Jan 1776; *Ominous Years*, p. 223.

²⁴ Tinker, ed., II, 285.

²⁵ Journ. 31 March 1783; *The Applause of the Jury*, p. 90.

²⁶ *The Applause of the Jury*, pp. 22, 37.

²⁷ *The Applause of the Jury*, p. 36.

²⁸ *The Applause of the Jury*, p.43.

- ²⁹ *Laird of Auchinleck*, pp. 443-4.
- ³⁰ *Laird of Auchinleck*, p. 412.
- ³¹ Tinker, ed., I, 239.
- ³² *Ominous Years*, pp. 92-3.
- ³³ *Laird of Auchinleck*, pp. 150-51.
- ³⁴ *Ominous Years*, p. 52.
- ³⁵ Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York, 1977), p. 7.
- ³⁶ Stone, pp. 246-7.
- ³⁷ Philippe Ariès, *L'Homme devant la Mort* (Paris, 1977), p. 199.
- ³⁸ Ariès, p. 398.
- ³⁹ Stone, p. 232.
- ⁴⁰ See Jean H. Hagstrum's now classic essay, "On Dr. Johnson's Fear of Death," *ELH*, 14 (1947), 308-19.
- ⁴¹ *Boswell in Extremes*, p. 27.
- ⁴² Ariès, p. 399.
- ⁴³ John McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 1981), p. 2.