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The Boswellian Hero

The twentieth century thinks of James Boswell as a diarist, a writer whose major subject, pursued indefatigably through the thousands of pages of his private journal, was his own life. Boswell’s great biography of Johnson, of course, is still regarded as his finest achievement, but since the recovery of his journal, even that has been seen in a new light: "the Life of Johnson, in the years when Boswell knew him, is essentially a part of this Journal . . . The Johnson-record flows in and out of the personal Boswell-record and is not different in kind. The vast, bracing difference is the subject matter." Almost inevitably, such an observation suggests a certain way of reading the Life of Johnson, one which, in emphasizing the personal journal as the source of the published biography, focuses on the autobiographical aspect of Boswell’s narrative. With an inevitable result: the reader begins to see the Johnson of the Life only as another of the innumerable cast of characters who populate Boswell’s vast journal; as an inhabitant, that is, of Boswell’s world.

But the Life of Johnson is only incidentally an exercise in Boswellian autobiography. Boswell is present during a good deal of the story, of course, for he is as much a character in it as Burke or Reynolds or Goldsmith, but it is always clear to us that the young man who comes down to London from Edinburgh in his twenty-second year, and whose annual pilgrimage to the metropolis becomes a regular feature of his later life, has entered a world that revolves around Johnson, that is dominated by Johnson, that in some essential respects can even be said to be identified with Johnson. It seems just as obvious that Boswell’s conception of his own work sprang from a certain high notion of Johnson as a public character, and that the impulse behind the Life is the very opposite of the private or autobiographical. "However inferior in its nature," Boswell observes at one point, the Life of Johnson "may in one respect be assimilated to the Odyssey. Amidst a thousand entertaining and instructive episodes the hero is never long out of sight . . . and HE, in the whole course of the History, is exhibited by the


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Author for the best advantage of his readers." Such a remark suggests, if nothing else, a concern with the hero as a public figure.

When we consider the Life of Johnson along with the two other major narratives Boswell published during his lifetime, the comparison with Homeric epic suggests a good deal more. The Tour to Corsica, which is the story of Boswell's encounter with the Corsican leader Pascal Paoli, and the Tour to the Hebrides, which is the story of his Highland journey with Johnson in 1773, are usually classified as travel books, but both are really books about heroes, men who represent what Carlyle called "superior natures," and whose moral nature Boswell found a matter of considerable fascination. When the three narratives are taken together, a striking conclusion begins to emerge: behind Boswell's portrayal of Paoli and his two portrayals of Johnson there lies a single conception of heroic character, one which reaches beyond the particular narrative situation to a final vision of man's dilemma in the modern world. It is this conception I have in mind when I speak of "the Boswellian hero"—as we speak of "the Byronic hero," meaning not Manfred or Don Juan or Childe Harold specifically, but the idea of anguished and alienated humanity that lies behind all three.

Boswell's great subject is the hero in an unheroic world. To speak of the Boswellian hero is really to speak of a certain dramatic situation that is explored in a different way in each of his three narratives, one which takes the simple figure of the hero as the symbolic focus of larger and more complex moral concerns. We get a clue to this situation in the now commonplace observation that the Samuel Johnson of the Life and the Tour to the Hebrides seems at times like a seventeenth-century being, someone living spiritually in the age of Milton and Hobbes and Browne and existing only uncomfortably in the intellectual climate of the eighteenth century, and a similar suggestion lies behind the comparison, so obvious to most contemporary readers of the Tour to Corsica, between Paoli and the heroes of Plutarch's Lives. But the idea of the hero as a man living out of his time is only the beginning of Boswell's theme, for in developing a complicated appeal to the conventions of heroic literature and to a certain myth of the heroic past, each of his narratives also dramatizes the character of an age which has placed men like Johnson and Paoli in spiritual isolation.

The hero in a world where heroism is possible exists within a community of shared belief, for his personality and his actions always give expression to certain values which, taken together, sustain the society

from which he has emerged. His role is thus ultimately symbolic, which is why we usually think of the hero as a literary rather than a social or historical figure. As Northrop Frye has observed, the hero in this situation is a leader: "he has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours, but what he does is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature. This is the hero of the high mimetic mode, of most epic and tragedy, and is primarily the kind of hero Aristotle had in mind." But while social criticism of the hero may form the actual subject of epic and tragedy, as when we find Achilles sulking in his tent or Antony abandoning the concerns of empire for Cleopatra, the idea of a dynamic relationship between the hero and a unified society is always retained. When Aristotle said that Homer makes men better than they are, Thomas Edwards explains, he did not mean better ethically or morally, "but in their fuller representation of capacities that in other men remain undeveloped, unexpressed—in short, more potent."

In the epic, perhaps because it is the earliest literary form, we see the relationship between the hero and society as a paradigm of unified concern (tragedy, on the other hand, is usually about the breakdown of this relationship). But while in the epic "the preservation of an ordered society is the highest good and the goal towards which the hero's physical and intellectual discipline is bent," it is also true that the society has in an important sense created the hero. In defending his society against monsters or foreign enemies, or in leading his companions to a new city or back to an ancestral home, the epic hero symbolizes an idea of

3. It is important to distinguish here between "society," meaning the immediate human community whose ethical and religious values the hero shares, and the more modern concept of nation or state. As H. M. Chadwick shows in The Heroic Age (Cambridge, England, 1912), the commitment of the epic hero is most often to an idea of personal glory rather than to any idea of national honor. But this devotion to personal glory is one of the central values of his society.

4. For the historian, of course, the concept of the hero is more limited, and emphasizes the single man's power over events rather than his moral or ethical character. In fact, as Sidney Hook has argued in The Hero in History (Boston, 1955), the concept of the historical hero is basically amoral.


human potential open to any man who exists in a community of shared conviction, for "so long as one lives within an accepted structure of belief and value, he follows customary lines without raising fundamental questions, and human energy flows unimpeded into activity." Heroic literature dramatizes an idea of individual freedom arising from social coherence, and it is this, as much as its portrayal of great actions, which appeals to the imagination of ordinary men.

When a society feels itself to be disintegrating, there is thus a nostalgia for heroes which is also a nostalgia for the community of shared belief. When we see Matthew Arnold, for instance, excluding *Empedocles* from his collected poems because it pictures a situation in which "suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done," or urging modern poets to form their imaginations on "the great works of Homer, Aeschylus, and Virgil," to choose as their subject "some noble action of a heroic time," we are seeing a longing for that symbolic union of individual and society which he has found in ancient literature. A similar nostalgia lies behind J. S. Mill's plaintive wish that modern education would imitate the simpler pedagogy of a time when old romances "filled the youthful imagination with pictures of heroic men," which is really a wish that modern society could recreate itself (with due concessions to change) in the image of the heroic age.

In its purest form, of course, this nostalgia for the heroic past is a late nineteenth-century development, one which followed the decline of the Romantic myth of the free self, and which lasted until Existential thought gave a new form to questions about the relationship between self and society. During this period, even when the hero is left out of the picture, we see a continuing nostalgia for the spiritually coherent world which was assumed to have produced him. "If the London merchants of our day competed together in writing lyrics," laments Yeats in his *Autobiography*, "they would not, like the Tudor merchants, dance in the open street before the house of the victor; nor do the great ladies of London finish their balls on the pavement before their doors as did the great Venetian ladies, even in the eighteenth century, conscious of an all-enfolding sympathy." This is the other side of Yeats's obsession with heroic myth, with Cuchulain and Oisin and the rest, and even of his half-tragic hope, as an Irish nationalist, that Irish art


could once again create a world in which hero and bard and peasant were at one.

At a certain point we see this nostalgia, which began by finding in heroic literature a symbolic refuge from modern anxiety, being transformed into an actual myth of the heroic past. Though the beginnings of the myth go back to the Renaissance—it is ultimately a response to the dilemma introduced by the Renaissance idea of the individual as a separate force in society—it is again something which attains its most characteristic form in the nineteenth century. Like all myths, it uses an imaginary past to explain an otherwise confusing present: the notion that the possibilities of heroic action were actually greater in the primitive villages of ancient Greece or Scandinavia than in post-Romantic England is one that never needs to be proved objectively, for it does not arise to fulfill the demands of objective truth. The theme is one we see again and again, for instance, in the novels of George Eliot, where the disembodied idealism of a major character conflicts tragically with the unheroic reality of the present age. "A new Therese will hardly have the opportunity of reforming a conventual life," says Eliot at the end of Middlemarch, "any more than a new Antigone will spend her heroic piety in daring all for the sake of a brother's burial: the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is for ever gone."

The myth is ultimately one of decline, the spiritual decline which was supposed to have accompanied material progress, and it seized upon the hero mainly as the symbol of a lost potential for noble action. Thus Carlyle, in a series of lectures about great men, feels compelled to begin with an indictment of his own time: "this, for reasons which it will be worth while some time to inquire into, is an age that as it were denies the existence of great men; denies the desirableness of great men." Carlyle's lecture on Johnson in Heroes and Hero-Worship is a typical product of his eccentric genius, but it is indirectly a brilliant commentary on one of the major themes of Boswellian narrative. For Carlyle came to Johnson through Boswell, and the lecture in Heroes is really about the Johnson he discovered in the pages of the Life. No one since has perceived so clearly the fatal disparity between Johnson's character and that of his age:

The Eighteenth was a Sceptical Century, in which little word there is a whole Pandora's Box of miseries. Scepticism means not intellectual Doubt alone, but moral Doubt; all sorts of infidelity, insincerity, spiritual paralysis. Perhaps, in few centuries that one could specify since the world began, was a life of Heroism more difficult for a man. That was not an age of Faith,—an age of Heroes! The very possibility of Heroism had been, as it were, formally abnegated in the minds of all. Heroism was gone for ever; Triviality, Formulism and Commonplace were come for ever.
In place of retrospective denunciation, of course, Boswell gives us a fully-dramatized picture of the unheroic present, but his judgment of the eighteenth century provokes a similar dismay. The world Boswell describes is one in which intellectual doubt seems to have changed suddenly and mysteriously into moral doubt, and where spiritual paralysis has become the price of that noble scepticism which was to have set men free. The picture is bleak, and it embodies a profoundly conservative response to the invisible forces of what we now call Enlightenment rationalism, for if some took this as the time when Reason, in Wordsworth's phrase, seemed intent on making of herself a prime enchantress, it was left to others to see the enchantment in its evil aspect. Boswell was one of these, and his vision of the age tends to isolate the later eighteenth century as the time of spiritual crisis, and to view men like Johnson and Paoli as figures imprisoned by the age. "I have lived," Johnson will say in the Life, "to see things all as bad as they can be."

Boswell's portrayal of the later eighteenth century, in fact, tends to make the age into a kind of anti-Enlightenment, from which the only refuge is the memory of a nobler past. This is not quite the myth of the heroic past I have spoken of previously, for it arises less from romantic nostalgia than from a sense of present crisis; but it is a related idea, and resembles the nearer past Burke appeals to as a witness against his own barbarously "rational" age: "men were not then quite shrunk from their natural dimensions by a degrading and sordid philosophy, and fitted for low and vulgar deceptions. . . . This was reserved to our time, to quench the little glimmerings of reason which might break in upon the solid darkness of this enlightened age." Under the name of philosophy, of course, Burke is referring to the deified Reason of the French Revolution, just as Boswell is when he speaks in the Life of "that detestable sophistry which has been lately imported from France, under the false name of Philosophy, and with a malignant industry has been employed against the peace, good order, and happiness of society" (i. 11-12). But the goddess Reason is only the final symbol of the forces which have made the age a time of invisible strife.

When Burke speaks of men being "shrunk from their natural dimensions," he is perhaps to be suspected of partisan eloquence, for we do not look for an even-handed estimate of the present age in his Reflections on the Revolution in France. Yet it is precisely there that we discern the beginnings of that disenchantment with Enlightenment rationalism which became Carlyle's theme, and which was later to turn into a general anxiety about the fate of the genuine individual in modern society. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the issue is no longer partisan; it has become a defining characteristic of the time,
and usually takes the form of an epitaph for greatness: the age, as Newman says, has become "the paradise of little men, and the purgatory of great ones." Though it took nearly a century for the problem to emerge in so general and dramatic a form, this is the major theme of Boswellian narrative. Like Burke's *Reflections*, Boswell's works stand at the very beginning of a period of moral doubt that has not ended today.

For just this reason, it is often illuminating to look back at Boswellian narrative through the medium of nineteenth-century moral anxiety, for Boswell saw in his heroes' lives a drama of what the nineteenth century considered its own peculiar dilemma: "those who dwell in the tower of ancient faiths look about them in constant apprehension, misgiving, and wonder, with the hurried uneasy men of people living amid earthquakes. The air seems full of missiles, and all is doubt, hesitation, and shivering expectancy."10 Only in the *Life of Johnson*, perhaps, is the sense of present crisis this pronounced, but the metaphor gives us the essential situation of the hero in the *Tour to Corsica* and the *Tour to the Hebrides*, where Paoli and Johnson appear as men dwelling within the towers of their separate faiths. For spiritual survival in an unheroic age inevitably involves making a kind of moral sanctuary of the past, and an isolated structure of personal values takes the place of that community of shared conviction which sustained the great men of earlier times. But the concept brings with it an artistic problem—only the dreamer takes total refuge in the past, and Johnson and Paoli are both profoundly involved with the present. How, then, to turn the simple contrast between man and age into a drama of engagement, one which will show the hero, only half-conscious of his own greatness, living in a time which denies the desirability of great men?

Boswell's answer was to present the tension between the man and his age as a generic tension; that is, to continuously associate Johnson and Paoli with the high protagonists of heroic literature, and to associate their milieux with the lower worlds of the lesser literary modes (specifically, pastoral, romance, and comic novel). In Boswellian narrative the concept of higher and lower genres — similar to the one we find, for instance, in Warton's *Essay on Pope* — is converted into an internal dramatic principle. This is the principle of tension we often see at work in comic literature, as when Don Quixote rides forth full of heroic aspirations into the everyday world of sixteenth-century Spain, or Fielding describes a squabble among provincial women in Homeric language, but in Boswell it becomes a highly serious metaphor for the moral isolation of an actual great man. Though the statement demands a good

deal of elaboration, we do not go far wrong if we perceive Johnson and Paoli as high mimetic heroes existing in low mimetic worlds.

We see this association of the hero with a symbolic past in its simplest form in the *Tour to Corsica*. The *Tour* ends with Pitt’s remark that Paoli “is one of those men who are no longer to be found but in the *Lives of Plutarch*” — a remark which takes on its full significance only when we realize that Pitt knew Paoli through Boswell’s portrayal. For when it concerns Paoli, the *Tour* is a continuous invocation of the heroic past, one that can invest even the most commonplace incident with associative meaning: “having dogs for his attendants is another circumstance about Paoli similar to the heroes of antiquity. Homer represents Telemachus so attended: ὅνω χινες ἄργον ἐποντο But the description given of the family of Patroclus applies better to Paoli: ἐνεκα το γε ἀναχι τραπεζης χινες ἦσαν (197). Or which, in more direct circumstances, can move to a dramatic revelation of Paoli’s actual immersion in the heroic past, as when he spontaneously gives a catalogue raisonné of ancient heroes: ‘his characters of them were concise, nervous, and just. I regret that the fire with which he spoke on such occasions so dazzled me that I could not recollect his sayings so as to write them down when I retired from his presence. He just lives in the times of antiquity” (191).

The *Tour to Corsica* gives us, in short, a hero who seems to have stepped out of the pages of Plutarch into the unheroic reality of eighteenth-century Corsica. For Paoli’s island dominion contains only the simplest of agricultural communities, sparsely-populated and in large measure isolated from the outside world. Yet Boswell finds in this isolation another kind of significance, and his portrayal of Corsican society moves always towards a symbolic association with the world of ancient pastoral, towards that myth of an irrecoverable Golden Age we discover in Virgil or Theocritus. Again, the associative process ranges from trivial incidents—“we lay down by the side of the first brook, put our mouths to the stream and drank sufficiently. It was just being for a little while one of the ‘prisca gens mortalium’ who ran about in the woods eating acorns and drinking water” (168-69) — to elaborate evocations of the pastoral ideal of virtuous simplicity and peace: “these fathers have a good vineyard and an excellent garden. They have between thirty and forty bee hives in long wooden cases or trunks of trees . . .

When they want honey they burn a little juniper-wood, the smoke of which makes the bees retire . . . . By taking the honey in this way they never kill a bee. They seemed much at their ease, living in peace and plenty” (165).

The tension between hero and milieu in the Tour is a simple one. Like the heroic age, the pastoral world is a fiction invented by poets, one which looks backward to a situation more mythic than real, and Paoli and his people appear in Boswell’s book as figures separated both by time and geography from the complicated modernity of eighteenth-century Europe. If Paoli is isolated from his society, living imaginatively in the times of antiquity and forming his mind to a glory unattainable since the days of Homer, the isolation is not a tragic one. For Boswell makes Paoli a symbol simply of unfulfilled greatness, a quality of mind and character which, denied expression in heroic action, can reveal itself only in the mystery of personality. The theme is developed more elaborately in his books about Johnson, but not until the Life, where the disparity between hero and society is so radical as to become a metaphor of spiritual isolation, do its tragic implications emerge. Paoli, the Plutarchian spirit living in a separate pastoral world, is the simplest incarnation of the Boswellian hero.

In the Tour to the Hebrides, the theme of the isolated hero is complicated by the journey-motif of the narrative, for it is not Johnson’s society which provides the setting, but the primitive world of the Scottish Highlands, where “simplicity and wildness, and all the circumstances of a remote time or place” greet a traveller from the modern age. As in the Life, Boswell often identifies Johnson with London, but here the identification has a different significance, for London in the Life is a symbol of the busy, complicated, modern world, and the immediate theater of Johnson’s painful personal drama. In the Tour, from the time when Boswell first wonders if he can get Johnson to abandon “the felicity of a London life,” to the time when he rejoices that the journey has actually come to pass — “as I have always been accustomed to view him as a permanent London object, it would not be much more wonderful to me to see St. Paul’s church moving along where we now are” (v. 347) — we see that symbolic London receding into the distance, and the forgotten society and wild landscape of the Hebrides becoming a present reality. Johnson’s Highland tour is, metaphorically, a journey into the past.

As a traveller, Johnson has thus escaped the conflict between self and society which underlies his personal struggle in the Life, and Boswell’s emphasis falls instead on that mysterious quality of mind which makes him a great man. For in leaving London, Johnson has also left
behind his fame as a philosopher and moralist, and during the journey we see him recreating in actual life the magisterial persona of the *Rambler* or *Rasselas*. It is in this light that we should take the epigraph from *Baker's Chronicle* which Boswell places at the beginning of his narrative — "he was of an admirable pregnancy of wit, and that pregnancy much improved by continual study from his childhood; by which he had gotten such a promptness in expressing his mind, that his extemporaneous speeches were little inferior to his premeditated writings" — for it is through conversation that Johnson continuously reveals the greatness of his moral vision, until, by the end of the *Tour*, we have come to assent to Boswell's portrayal of his hero as one "whose powers of mind were so extraordinary, that ages may revolve before such a man shall again appear" (v. 416).

In the *Tour*, the association of the hero with a symbolic past becomes a matter of imaginative response, as when, for instance, we see Johnson discovering in a decayed Highland cathedral the memory of a lost medieval Christianity, and a time when faith was universal: "Dr. Johnson seemed quite wrapt up in the contemplation of the scenes which were now presented to him. He kept his hat off while he was upon any part of the ground where the cathedral had stood ... As we walked in the cloisters, there was a solemn echo, while he talked loudly of a proper retirement from the world" (v. 62). Or contemplating, in the remains of a Highland castle, symbols of a feudal world where survival depended on moats and battlements: "the old tower must be of great antiquity. There is a drawbridge, — what has been a moat, — and an ancient court ... The thickness of the walls, the small slanting windows, and a great iron door ... all indicate the rude times in which this castle was erected" (v. 119-20). Or observing, in the momentos preserved in Highland houses, relics of an age more heroic than his own: "we looked at Rorie More's horn ... It holds rather more than a bottle and a half ... We also saw his bow, which hardly any man now can bend, and his Glæmore, which was wielded with both hands, and is of a prodigious size" (v. 212).

By themselves, the ruined cathedrals and decaying castles of the *Tour* would perhaps invoke only a general impression of the remote past, but between them lies the barren landscape of the Highlands, presenting "nothing but wild, moonish, hilly, and craggy appearances" (v. 207), where a traveller discovers his own insignificance as a man: "we had many showers, and it soon grew pretty dark. Dr. Johnson sat silent and patient. Once he said, as he looked on the black coast of sky, — black, as being composed of rocks seen in the dusk, — "This is very solemn!"" (v. 257). From the time when feudal warriors fought their battles and
monks prayed in ancient cloisters here, life in the Hebrides has been a precarious enterprise, and the hostile, forbidding landscape has remained the same. In such a setting, present dissolves insensibly into past, and the atmosphere of the Tour moves towards that of romance, which imaginatively embraces both. We are often reminded, when the travellers are moving through the Highlands, of a passage from Johnson’s Journey to the Western Islands: “the fictions of the Gothic romances were not so remote from credibility as they are now thought. In the full prevalence of the feudal institution, when violence desolated the world, and every baron lived in a fortress, forests and castles were regularly succeeded by each other, and the adventurer might very suddenly pass from the gloom of woods, or the ruggedness of moors, to seats of plenty, gaiety, and magnificence.”

The affinity of the Tour with romance finally rests on this evocation of an imaginary past, one inspired by Highland scenes but actually created in the mind of the observer. For the imaginative impulse suspends any specific comparison of present and past, and demands instead the assent we give to poems and stories about older, simpler, more heroic times. Johnson’s response to the landscape and society of the Hebrides is of course more complicated than this — it includes, for one thing, a steady counterpoint of rational scepticism — but ultimately the relationship between hero and milieu in the Tour involves an idea of spiritual release: in the Hebrides Johnson can legitimately indulge a sort of romantic nostalgia for a lost world of faith and heroes, and he finds in that nostalgia an escape from his own inner conflict. If the Life of Johnson gives us a hero alienated from his own society, living in a state of partial isolation from man and God, the Tour gives us a Johnson who has moved out of the modern age into a past that is above all remote from the actual, and whose Highland journey finally becomes a metaphor of escape from self.

In the Life of Johnson, we pass into the uncompromisingly actual world of modern London. The scope of the Life is enormous, for Boswell saw in Johnson’s London a microcosm of eighteenth-century England, and his narrative embraces all of English society, from the drawing-room to the gutter: “he gave us an entertaining account of Bet Flint, a woman of the town . . . I used to say of her, that she was generally slut and drunkard; — occasionally, whore and thief . . . Poor Bet was taken up on the charge of stealing a counterpane, and tried at the Old Bailey. Chief Justice———, who loved a wench, summed up favourably, and she was acquitted. After which, Bet said, with a gay and satisfied air, “Now that the counterpane is my own, I shall make a petticoat of it”’” (iv. 103). This is the boisterous low mimetic world of Defoe
and Fielding and Smollett, a noisy world of shops and coaches and taverns, where Lord and hostler jostle each other in the dirty streets and life is gazed at through the steady medium of bourgeois consciousness. The distance between this unheroic present and a nobler past is the distance between Moll Flanders and the Aeneid.

Yet the Life also gives us a hero who, in his moral and intellectual nature, is superior to such a world. Again we come to the principle of generic tension: when Boswell compares the Life to Homeric epic, or invokes Plutarch as a biographical model (i. 31), he is calling to mind a conception of heroic character shaped by high mimetic convention, and from the beginning of the Life we see Johnson’s “extraordinary powers of mind” being translated into an abstract idea of greatness, one which is described in language appropriate to the reality of an earlier age: “Johnson did not strut or stand on tip-toe: He only did not stoop. From his earliest years, his superiority was perceived and acknowledged. He was from the beginning, Αυξιαντον a king of men (i. 47). Boswell’s larger portrayal of Johnson’s character must, of course, earn our whole assent — to describe the half-blind son of a poor provincial bookseller as a “king of men” is otherwise to risk a collapse into the mock-heroic — but it is finally his invocation of an older heroic ideal which gives it moral substance. From Johnson’s youth in Lichfield to the final days in London, with the crisis “fast approaching, when he must ‘die like men, and fall like one of the Princes’” (iv. 399), we perceive his resemblance to the noble protagonists of epic and tragedy.

The tension between hero and milieu in the Life includes elements of both comedy and tragedy, but the comic vitality of Boswell’s greatest scenes forms only a basic counterpart to the theme of tragic isolation. For the low mimetic world of the Life is also the one described in Bertrand Bronson’s Johnson Agonistes, a world caught up in a process of desperate change, where philosophes like Hume and Voltaire and Rousseau supply momentum, and are joined by the multitude of tributaries, the freethinkers, and levellers, who all sweep giddily toward the cascade of the 90s.”12 The Life shows us an age where “the gallantry and military spirit of the old English nobility” has shrunk into low commercialism — “Why, my Lord, I’ll tell you what is become of it; it is gone into the city to look for a fortune” (ii. 126) — where “love of liberty” as an abstract doctrine masks a dark threat of social anarchy — “I believe we hardly wish that the mob should have liberty to govern us. When that was the case some time ago, no man was at liberty not to have candles in his windows’” (iii. 383), where sceptics like Hume

and atheists like Holbach have undermined the very foundations of religious faith, — in short, where "old opinions, feelings — ancestral customs and institutions are crumbling away, and both the spiritual and temporal worlds are darkened by the shadow of change."13

The Life is partly the story of Johnson’s heroic resistance to these invisible forces of moral anarchy, of course, but its larger theme concerns the cost of such resistance to mind and soul. The fierce wit of Johnson’s attacks on the philosophes and freethinkers of the Life, for instance, has a kind of desperation about it, for his impassioned orthodoxy is finally an attempt to discover certainty where there is only doubt. When the illusion fails, there is paralysis and isolation, revealing the Johnson who once describes himself as a "solitary wanderer in the wild of life, without any direction, or fixed point of view: a gloomy gazer on a world to which I have little relation" (i. 277). The theme of Johnson’s melancholy in the Life thus begins in its portrayal of a world which has lost the spiritual coherence that gives meaning to activity and certainty to belief — "when I survey my past life, I discover nothing but a barren waste of time, with some . . . disturbances of mind, very near to madness, which I hope He that made me will suffer to extenuate many faults" (iii, 99) — and where the existence of the hero turns into the inner struggle which Boswell describes so movingly: "his mind resembled the vast amphitheatre, the Coliseum at Rome. In the centre stood his judgement, which, like a mighty gladiator, combated those apprehensions that, like the wild beasts of the Arena, were all around in cells, ready to be let out upon him. After a conflict, he drove them back into their dens; but not killing them, they were still assailing him" (ii. 106).

The affinity of the Life with formal tragedy lies in the story of Johnson’s personal struggle and the concept of spiritual isolation which lies behind it, a concept large enough to embrace even the typical image of Johnson, all “vigorous intellect and lively imagination,” dominating some animated social scene. For company and talk are Johnson’s constant escape from inner conflict — "the great business of his life (he said) was to escape from himself" — and even his moments of most brilliant conversation represent the efforts of a mind that has won only a temporary compromise with despair. The darker side of the hero’s existence is revealed in his Prayers and Meditations, and in drawing on them in the course of the narrative Boswell returns again and again to the same theme — "what philosophick heroism was it in him to appear with such manly fortitude to the world when he was inwardly so

distressed!" — until we perceive the pathos that surrounds even the
great conversational scenes of the Life, and the spectre of isolation that
lurks behind them all. From the beginning, Boswell's conception of the
hero contained a potential for tragedy, but only in the Life does he
emerge as a genuinely tragic figure.

The situation of the hero in Boswellian narrative, then, is symbolically
the situation of man living in an age where reason has gone to
war with faith, where abstract theories of social progress have triumphed
over an older wisdom of tradition and continuity, and where society
has become the enemy of the free self. In conceiving of his heroes as
figures associated with a past in which individualism was possible, Bos-
well was again anticipating an idea which would not fully emerge until
the nineteenth century; for, as J. S. Mill would argue in On Liberty,
"in ancient history . . . and in a diminishing degree through the long
transition from feudality to the present time, the individual was a
power in himself; and if he had either great talents or a high social
position, he was a great power. At present individuals are lost in the
crowd." Yet if Paoli and Johnson represent superior natures cut off
from an older community of shared belief, they are a long way from
the modern anti-hero, groping his way around in a world of relativism
and meaninglessness, for in Boswell the memory of a nobler past is
still close enough to offer a kind of moral refuge, and to remind the
modern age of what it has lost.

This is what allows Boswell, even while he is exploring the theme
of spiritual isolation, to portray Paoli and Johnson as exemplary figures,
oberving certain conventions of encomiastic form that go back to
Plutarch. For Boswellian narrative retains the ethical emphases of
classical biographical writing, which conceivied of history as philosophy
teaching by examples. Or even, as Dryden argued in a neoclassical essay
on Plutarch, as something superior to philosophy, for "there is nothing
of the tyrant in example, but it gently glides into us, is easy and pleasant
in its passage, and in one word reduces into practice our speculative
notions."

Thus Paoli becomes a type of the stoic hero, embodying an
ethical ideal otherwise to be found only in books: "it was impossible
for me, speculate as I pleased, to have a little idea of human nature in
him." And thus Boswell speaks of Johnson, in the Tour to the Hebrides,
as "one whose virtues will, I hope, ever be an object of imitation," and
in the Life offers his hero's "strong, clear, and animated enforcement of
religion, morality, loyalty, and subordination" as a moral antidote to
the false philosophy imported from revolutionary France.

I, 81.
Even here, however, we meet with the familiar principle of generic tension, for the encomiastic premise makes sense only in a moral context which permits emulation, and in Boswell this is already a thing of the past. Boswell manages to retain the ethical emphases of ancient biography only because he portrays his heroes as men who do in a sense exist in the past, operating within a structure of personal belief which is the private equivalent of the large moral unity which sustained earlier great men. Thus we have, in the *Tour to Corsica*, the Paoli who “just lives in the times of antiquity”; in the *Tour to the Hebrides*, the Johnson for whom Jacobitism and feudalism and medieval Christianity still exert something of a romantic appeal; and, preeminently, the hero of the *Life of Johnson*, whose Toryism and religious orthodoxy and monarchical principles lock to a past that exists only in the imagination, and which becomes the besieged fortress of his separate faith.

Boswell’s conception of the hero contains a fatal irony, for no system of personal values can replace the spiritually coherent world of the past. Paoli and Johnson are great and admirable men, but only a generous and hopeful self-delusion stands between them and the unheroic present, as when Paoli pretends that a character formed on Plutarch and Livy is wanted in the modern age, or Johnson that his lifelong contest with “Whiggery” is still a real and equal contest, something actually being decided in the world beyond his perceptions. For both, this private structure of belief is only an illusory affirmation of self—the refusal of a great nature to give in to the unheroic world. This is why Carlyle saw Johnson as a hero, and why the eighteenth century responded so eagerly to Paoli, the incarnation of an ancient heroic ideal. In the end, the Boswellian hero is only a character in a larger drama of the self, one in which life itself becomes, in Pater’s words, “the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of the world.”

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