

A CURIOUS ABSENCE

The Documentary Art of James Boswell

PART TWO:

THE

DISCURSION

(OR IRRESPONSIBLE SPECULATIONS)

ON THE MERITS OF

JAMES BOSWELL

AS VIEWED AND COMPREHENDED

**THROUGH A SELECTION OF
AND FROM HIS WORKS**

AND THE

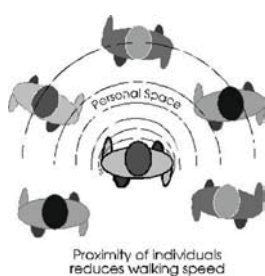
TESTIMONY OF CERTAIN AUTHORITIES,

SELECTED LARGELY AT RANDOM



The creative destruction James Boswell wrought on the biography as a form, infusing it with disciplines learned from drama, journalism, confessional and personal memoirs marks his primary contribution to Western civilisation, one that has shaped the modern method for comprehending others ever since. But as the fracas alluded to by Hibbert shows, Boswell's approach remains deeply problematic, even scandalous to some. There are no biographies like *Lol*, none so radical in form and execution. It's as if Boswell dazzled all who came after with a bravura performance only for the spectators to suffer a collective amnesia, falter and remember only half of what they saw. Or, taken another way, Boswell created something too distinctive to even contemplate copying.

Which only goes to pronounce the problem of Boswell for many, as to the exact nature of his contribution, summed up succinctly by David Daiches and answered almost as well: DAICHES. 'There are few readers of the journals who can not help feeling at some point and in some sense *de te fibula*, that the story is about themselves. But how does this relate to his consummate ability as an interviewer and 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 and exploits it.' DAICHES. (With force) '... Boswell's volatile egotistic vision cuts across 18th-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, organised, manipulated and, in *the Life of Johnson*, even suppressed them. The self was a tool at the writer's disposal.'



Daiches and Daiches hit upon the essential problem of Boswell as the use of the self and the almost 'unwriterly' approach he adopted. Daiches is also absolutely correct to reference Boswell's modernity; Boswell only really makes

sense in this era. His approach would find no real parallel until very recent times and was subsequently lost on his contemporaries, Macaulay and a good many later critics. Post-Freud, post-literary theory and post-Erving Goffmann's Seminal work of psycho Sociology *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* there is almost no excuse for NOT 'getting' Boswell (liking being a matter of taste ...). As the title of this piece suggests, it has occurred to me that Boswell's

technique had a great deal in common with those applied by modern documentary filmmakers. The foremost irresponsible speculation to be levelled here will be that as well as a Biographer, Boswell possessed all the necessary skills of a documentarian bar operating or owning a camera (not invented yet). What if we were to approach Boswell in this way?

BOSWELL. 'I would say sir, that you are clearly insane, not to mention self-indulgent.'

MILLER. 'Well Pot, you are probably right. But as I'm already ON the boil ...'

Since the 1960s documentary films have increasingly put experience on a par with knowledge – the latter being the key component of the 'classic' documentary of Grierson or mainstream television schedules where imparting information within a coherent narrative is most important. In current documentary, individual experience lends pith and fibre to our understanding of social phenomena and wider events. In the sixties small film crews captured something of their subjects through sublimating themselves and aspiring towards 'fly on the wall' insight. The emphasis on shared experience – the viewer admittedly through the restrictions imposed by the filmmaker – was the most important here. As one of documentary's greatest practitioners put it: MAYSLES. The documentary should be where you learn what it is to be human.'

Since the late 1970s experience of the *maker* has been much more central to much documentary filmmaking. The most widely known example of this would be the work of Michael Moore or Morgan Spurlock, the latter famously abusing his body in *Super Size Me* to make his point about the Big Mac. The English filmmaker Nick Broomfield (see articles in this issue) puts himself in the frame, boom mic in hand to share the experience of making the film with his larger than life subjects, and like Boswell with Johnson, his self and its travails is as important a theme as the alleged subject. If Broomfield has had a lasting effect it is to *popularly* (many in the avant-garde got there before him) establish the documentarian's position in denying objectivity in favour of a knowing and apologetic subjectivity – or what David Archibald earlier in this issue describes as intrusion and its aftershocks. Documentarians set out less to inform but reflect the reality they find themselves in – and their situation as individuals visiting said reality is all important. Theirs is a 'spliced' worldview, edited from acres of raw footage to reveal the sculpture within its geology – or perhaps more aptly, genealogy. They see themselves as imaginative artists, who work with memory (on film, or video, or digital tape) and whatever wit and wisdom they have to achieve something that goes beyond fact to some sense of a wider truth.

Similarly, Boswell's journals were the bedrock of



almost all his greatest writing, mined repeatedly for the *Account of Corsica*, *Tour of the Hebrides* and the *Loj*. He was a splicer; an editor of the raw footage of his daily memoranda and his less polished journals. And there is of course that important qualifier of being thematically concerned with real subjects and events, with representing actuality rather than creating an alternative that exists exclusively within the confines of a book (though Boswell's Johnson very much approaches such a status on occasions).

We can also return to the Daiches' discussion of Boswell's modernity. The critic Daniel Joseph Signal's definition of modernism might as well be a description of Boswell's journals or his *Loj*: SIGNAL. 'The celebration of the animal component of human nature, the quest for spontaneity and authenticity, the desire to raze all dualisms and distinctions ... the quest for "wholeness", the effort to expand consciousness and discover new modes of experience.' Documentary is a modernist art because it holds to the belief that art is within life and continuous with it – so that the notion that fiction is imaginative and non-fiction is mere reporting can – must – be discarded.

Johnson himself advocated the close study of humanity in one of their earliest meetings: JOHNSON. '[T]here is nothing too little for so little a creature as man. It is by studying little things that we attain the great knowledge of having as little misery and as much happiness as possible.' BOSWELL. (writing in the front page of his journal) 'I shall be on my guard to mention nothing that can do harm. Truth shall ever be observed, and these things (if there should be any such) that require the gloss of falsehood shall be passed by in silence.'

What exactly does this apparent commitment to truth and falsehood in the space of a few clauses mean? He means of course, that he will edit out rather than lie. Incidentally, here is the schema the Maysles brothers set for themselves in the early 1960s:

1. Distance oneself from a point of view.
2. Love your subjects.
3. Film events, scenes, sequences; avoid interviews, narration, host.
4. Work with the best talent.
5. Make it experiential; film experience directly, unstaged, controlled.
6. There is a connection between reality and truth. Remain faithful to both.

Elements of this schema emerge everywhere in Boswell – the gift for capturing sequences and events is one of the distinguishing features of the *Loj*. A documentary quality suffuses the book and is obvious in his *Tour of the Hebrides*. In the *Tour* Boswell matched Johnson's scientific survey with an engrossing study of a big personality stranded in alien lands. In the *Account of Corsica* the documentary parallels run deeper, comprising an informative survey of the island followed by a lively interview with the Corsican leader, General Paoli. What is most entertaining about Boswell – and what is most enduring – is that he shows, rather than tells events even at the cost of oversight, or more often, his own dignity.

Edited by Frederick Pottle, *The London Journal 1762-63* is part of a constant stream of journals produced by Boswell throughout his life, followed by his light-hearted European journals, and the post-matrimonial angst of his journals in the 1770s (published by Pottle and Rykskamp as *The Ominous Years*). In Holland we enjoy his ingenious approach avoiding actually studying any law, consorting instead with Voltaire, Rousseau and other continental Enlightenment superstars. The dour Edinburgh journals offer an invaluable insight into the gloom his home city brought upon Boswell, the extent of his lack of confidence, his second-guessing, his masochism and his withering awareness of his faults – in short, precisely why he felt the need to escape south at every opportunity. Light once again follows shade in the form of the London-Lichfield journal, which includes a scurrilous morsel of early reportage in the form of an interview between Boswell and the notorious femme fatale, Caroline Rudd. These are but a portion of the vast archive that has amassed since the Boswell papers were discovered at Malahide Castle in the 1920s and which, alongside the established works, provide an insight into how Boswell worked, through experience, dialogue and crisis.

I. EXPERIENCE

Boswell's *London Journal* represents some of his finest work, as lean and hungry as its author (not wobbly of bottom at this point ...) and perhaps one of his more profound achievements in depicting the human condition – that is, his own. Pottle describes the Journal as halfway between the obsessive detail of Pepys and the self-exploratory angst of the *Confessions*. It is more sophisticated than most diaries acquiring in places



THE AUTHOR TALKING ABOUT HIMSELF YET AGAIN!



I WAS THINKING OF DOING A SHORT STRIP TO ACCOMPANY THIS ALREADY **RAMBLING** ESSAY, DRAMATISING PARTS OF THE LONDON JOURNAL, BUT I'VE BEEN BEATEN TO IT BY **ROBERT CRUMB...**



SO - I'M NOT GOING TO COMPETE WITH THAT -

< BUT IT WOULD HAVE BEEN **GREAT!** >

< HOW DO I LOOK? >



the depth and richness of a novel – a putative portrait of the artist as a young Cham.

Boswell gives his Journal a satisfyingly tight framework in the fruitless quest for a commission with the Palace House Guards, which gradually recedes into the background and is abandoned long before its end. The scheme was never likely; Lord Auchinleck scuppered the scheme by offering no money to buy a commission and made his enmity towards anyone who aided his son absolutely clear. But the adventure is not so much a fool's errand as an excuse for Boswell to reacquire himself with the London literati he had met on his mad, unauthorised sojourn to London two years previous (during which he toyed with Popery to the extent of taking up Holy Orders, in descending order of sincerity). He *must* have known, deep down, that with no money he had no hope with a military currently demob happy after war with France.



Boswell was 22 and had yet to fall under Johnson's spell (or as Pottle notes Johnson under his – it was the older man who made the first overtures).. The effect is somewhat liberating. Without that great obstruction, we see other characters of the literati in sharper relief – Sheridan, Goldsmith, Garrick and MacPherson – and see how *Boswell* reacted to them, and they to him. He records, obsessively, his own behaviour – how he talked at a gathering, whether he was sufficiently manly, how his demeanour reflected on his character. He sought out as wide an experience as was possible, consorting with merchants, drinks in seedy taverns, attends cockfights and generally follows wherever his penis leads him, some of which would have been sufficient to bring scandal upon the house of Auchinleck. Was this kept strictly private? Posthumously it was, but the journal was *written* with a wider audience in mind, taking shape as a series of quartos dispatched with assiduous regularity to his confederate John Johnston in the Scottish Borders.⁶

Johnston, easily one of Boswell's most reliable cronies, kept his weekly reading strictly under wraps, but not long after Boswell left for London, another friend,

William McQuhae, showed a segment of his equally frank *Scottish Journals* to a friend who promptly communicated the details to another, and so snippets of Boswell's undignified behaviour travelled along the Scots claret-vine to Lord Auchinleck – a calamity worsened when a Jedburgh newspaper published excerpts from Boswell's letters replete with various indiscretions, edited with tabloid precision into their most salacious particulars. Boswell's elder's response is appended in the Penguin edition: AUCHINLECK. (With a terrier-growl) 'Be more on your guard for the future against mimicry, journals and publications ...'

It is probably quite fortunate that Old Auchinleck never had to contend with the blog – goodness knows what his son would have thought fit for *Myspace*. We know of course, that Boswell took Johnson's advice over his father's, leaving an invaluable if salacious document of mid-18th-Century London, and, with Johnston eagerly awaiting each weekly dispatch, a conscious exercise in literary performance that feared few taboos. Boswell is often at his most creative in dealing with subjects most would have left unrecorded – which are of course, the most instructive, in an entry from the 10th May 1764:

At the bottom of the Haymarket I picked up a strong, jolly young damsel, and taking her under the arm I conducted her to Westminster Bridge, and then in armour complete did I engage her upon this noble edifice. The



whim of doing it there with the Thames rolling below us amused me very much. Yet after the brutish appetite was sated, I could not but despise myself for being so closely united with such a low wretch.

Such a psychological map to the past provides enough fetish, fantasy, hypocrisy and self-loathing to keep feminists and Freudians busy for years. Boswell's is a constructed and constricted view of London augmented by a satisfying depth of focus that (literally)

⁶ JOHN JOHNSTON OF GRANGE was a fellow student of Boswell's, one of his longest serving and most loyal intimates and one of the multitude of Johnstons dotted around Annandale, Dumfriesshire and Eastern Galloway. Pottle describes him as a Boswell without the vivacity or ambition, content to pursue an obscure legal practice and fulfil his duties as a Border Laird. He was a mirror opposite with one exception – both men shared a tendency for melancholy and self-castigation.



puts flesh on to abstract historical facts. Those who have ever wondered at the vehemence of John Wilkes (a good friend of Boswell's) in christening the Scots 'The very Bastards of Creation' need only acquaint themselves with Boswell's London to comprehend to just what extent the place was lousy with Scots (and Irishmen) on the make everywhere. His two closest companions in London were George Dempster (a Scots MP) and Andrew Erskine (son of a Jacobite noble). Long before Bozzy arrived, the Celtic fringes had been woven into a powerful network laced throughout the English capital, so much that Boswell begins to take measures to avoid too much 'Scotch' company.

The notion of a powerful, hungry minority well equipped to suck up the fat of England, from newly demobbed soldiers to the Earl of Bute is inescapable. The journal is a fascinating case study of the phenomenon and those involved in it – Eglinton, Dempster, Bute, Jacobite émigrés and of course, Boswell himself – and their determination to learn to insinuate themselves into English public life and take whatever it had to offer. Boswell's patronage of the beefeater clubs and chop-houses seems emblematic of this process, as demonstrated in this excerpt from 15 December 1762:

The enemies of the people of England who would have them considered in the worst light represent them as selfish, beef-eaters and cruel. In this view today I resolved to be a true-born Old Englishman. I went into the City to Dolly's Steak House in Paternoster Row and swallowed my dinner to myself to fulfil the charge of selfishness; I had a large fat beefsteak to fulfil the charge of beef-eating; and I went at five o'clock to the Royal Cockpit ... and saw Cock Fighting for about five hours to fulfil the charge of cruelty.



Boswell's record of 1760s London is full blooded and truthful precisely because his own sensitivities and appetites are everywhere layered into the account – as Daiches put it, his self as his tool, or his pen as his lens,

so that camera-like. Perhaps the most interesting strand in the journal, save Johnson's entry into Boswell's life, is the dalliance with the actress Miss Lewis or 'Louisa', a frank account of love and sexuality that cuts through Victorian occlusions to describe a very modern, very adult arrangement. It was an affair that suited Boswell – it kept him away from prostitutes and indulged his more picaresque fancies over the Christmas period.⁷

It ended with a clap between the legs and two-guineas in an envelope, a sum Louisa borrowed during their involvement. The affair presents Boswell at his most and least attractive; the tenderness, the 'dear diary' giddiness of the early moments are very endearing, even though we sense impending doom; the gonorrhoea as is only natural, changes the mood and tone very suddenly, and the rancour of the last meeting, where Louisa protests her 'innocence' of having been with another man, is uncomfortable to read:

BOSWELL: Madam, I much wish to believe you. But I own that I cannot on this occasion believe a miracle.

LOUISA: Sir, I cannot say more to you. But you will leave me in the greatest misery. I shall lose your esteem. I shall be hurt in the opinion of everybody, and in my circumstances.

BOSWELL: (To himself) What the devil does the confounded jilt mean by being hurt in her circumstances?

This is the grossest cunning. But I won't take notice of that at all

– Madam, as to the opinion of everybody, you need not be afraid. I was going to joke and say that I never boast of a Lady's favours. But I give you my word of honour that you shall not be discovered.

It is worth noting, as does Pottle in his introduction, that Boswell would often go many nights without updating his journal, settling for hastily sketched notes to be fleshed out in night-long sessions. The Louisa episodes are a prime example of what effect this approach has; Boswell retroactively weaves a narrative tension into the 'plot', centring (as is only natural) on his misgivings, dropping subtle hints of the doom to come.

⁷ LOUISA. Pottle's index to the Penguin edition provides a handy schematic of the entire affair:

Lewis, Mrs (Louisa), actress, JB to call Louisa in journal, 110-111; receives JB 111; JB visits 114-15; JB's increased feeling for, 115; JB discuss love with, 120-121; JB anticipates delight with, 122; JB lends two guineas to, 123; disregards opinion of world, 125; discusses religion with JB, 126-7; JB entreats to be kind, 127; uneasiness of discourages JB, 130; JB declares passion for, 133; promises to make JB blessed, 133; JB sees every day, 135; JB talks freely of love connexions, 138; JB promises to support child should one be born, 139; makes assignation with JB, 141; consummation with JB interrupted; JB likes better and better, 146; JB's felicity delayed 151; to stay with JB Wednesday night, 155; agrees to go to Hayward's with JB, 159; account of her birth, unhappy marriage and separation, 159-60; spends night with JB at Haywards, 161-164; JB has tea with, 166; JB afraid of a rival, 168-9; JB feels coolness for, 169; reads French with JB, 170; JB resolves to keep affection for alive, 173; JB incredulous at infection from, 180; JB enraged at perfidy of, 182; JB discusses infection with and takes leave of, 183-5; JB asks his two guineas back, 199; returns JB's guineas, 211 ...



While Louisa was no saint she merits some sympathy; she does not hesitate or vacillate in returning Boswell's money to him when he asks and seems genuinely distressed at losing him. While gonorrhoea has a normal incubation of less than a fortnight, it is possible that either Louisa or Boswell were asymptomatic, a condition where symptoms do not show for up to a year – in which case, Louisa need not have been unfaithful (stating that she had not been with any other man for at least six months).

Furthermore, it is worth taking into account that for all Boswell's outrage his wounded sincerity seems less impressive to those of us who have read, just a few pages before, an account of a dinner party where he sets a wealthy aristocrat firmly in his crosshairs as a delectable – and advantageous – liaison, only days after his congress with Louisa. In these episodes Boswell divests himself of the extraordinary privilege of the writer and takes up the mantle of Everyman. Honest readers will recognise how typical the trajectory of the whole affair is and that the famous Boswell selfishness is here, nothing unusual or aberrant. Boswell simply lays claim to the same double standards to which males of his time felt entitled. And he makes us experience and feel it along with him, (seemingly) hiding nothing of himself, including his own second-guesses over his conduct. We acquire more than just an academic knowledge of the libertine and his tendencies, but also that grail of non-fiction, understanding and even empathy with it – because reading it touches upon our own Cro-Magnon capacities.





II. DIALOGUE

From the very beginning, Boswell's art was one of conversation – not so much his own, as in his ability to stimulate and then later evoke it. Boswell's gift for dialogue is legendary; until quite recently he was remembered as 'The Stenographer', magically capable of remembering every single word he heard only to scandalously broadcast it to all and sundry. This was a misapprehension cultivated early on, even when Johnson was still alive as demonstrated in a cruel snatch of gossip provided by Fanny Burney from a dinner party she and Boswell attended: BURNEY: 'His eyes goggled with eagerness; he leant his ear almost on the shoulder of the Doctor; and his mouth opened to catch every syllable that he uttered; nay, he seemed not only to dread losing a word, but to be anxious not to miss a breathing.'

It is now known that Boswell only very rarely took notes during a meeting with the Doctor (an accusation levelled by the one-time friend, latter-day enemy Mrs Thrale) and that his dialogues were in fact a combined creative and mnemonic effort. Boswell was freakish in his recall; he was also assiduous when back in his chambers, feverishly writing out the particulars of the conversation in shorthand, to later work them up into a believable synthesis of the actual talk.

In short, he edited and spliced. He also made Johnson a good deal more polished and sonorous in everyday speech than was likely – a quipping machine never lost for the correct word. The *LJ* dialogues are of course the most famous and the signature of the book and its author; but the dialogue form was something Boswell spent a great deal of time experimenting with and perfecting in the *London Journal* and then 10 years later, in the 1772 journals. Early dialogues from the *London*

Journal can be broadly separated into two types: the proto-Johnsonian snippets of banter between himself and his cronies and the outwardly more banal and pointless, yet strangely more profound *Dialogues at Childs*.

The first meeting with Johnson oddly enough, takes no dialogue format but is continuous prose with direct speech inserted into the flow of the sentences, rather than the famous NAME IN CAPS. 'speech' approach in the *LJ*, which gives the text a pleasingly heterodox texture and allows the past to invade an abstracted present with often visceral intensity. Other literary chinwags, as in this conversation between Boswell, Goldsmith and the actor Robert Davies appropriately takes on a form borrowed directly from drama:

GOLDSMITH: Have you seen *Love in a Village*?

BOSWELL: I have. I think it is a good, pleasing thing.

GOLDSMITH: I am afraid we will have no good plays now. The taste of the audience is spoiled by the pantomime of Shakespeare. The wonderful changes and shifting.

DAVIES: Nay, but you will allow that Shakespeare has great merit?

GOLDSMITH. No, I know Shakespeare very well. (Here I said nothing, but thought him a most impudent puppy.)

But Johnson remains throughout the *London Journal* fully embedded in the main text. It is as if Boswell wants to hug Johnson close within his words, as well as in other things. This choice of textual format demonstrates a young writer playing with his options, in art as in life. But it is important also, because these dialogues were meant to be read, not performed and thus their textual arrangement speaks to something of



their author's meaning and emphasis.

The *Dialogues at Childs* recur throughout the *London Journal* and range from a mere two to three lines to long pieces of 'reportage' that capture something of the mood and opinion of average Londoners. Pottle describes a *Dialogue* thus: POTTLE. 'No point in it: Boswell knows neither the speakers nor the patient [a physician is describing one of his cases]. But there it is, an authentic bit of the genuine conversation of nearly two hundred years ago, caught in an eternal sunbeam.' Reportage may have been foremost on Boswell's mind as he dispatched his quartos to a Johnstone eager for news from the metropolis, replete as the dialogues are with the celebrated 'juiciness' of London life Boswell savoured:

1 CITIZEN: Why here is the bill of mortality.
Is it right, Doctor?
PHYSICIAN: Why, I don't know.
1 CITIZEN: I'm sure it is not. Sixteen only
died of cholics. I dare say you have killed as
many yourself.
2 CITIZEN: Aye, and hanged but three! O
Lord, ha! ha! ha!

The wit is almost always bone dry:

PHYSICIAN: Have you not observed a
certain gentleman with a broad backside
who frequents this coffee house, have not
you seen him clap his backside to the fire, so
as to cover it from us and almost to burn his
own clothes, if not called to?
2 CITIZEN: Why the devil is he called to?
Why not let him burn his clothes?
PHYSICIAN: That would be uncharitable.

Or even takes on a Beckettian character:

2 CITIZEN: I don't agree with him.
1 CITIZEN: Nor I, neither. He is fond of
Thomson. He says he has great force.
2 CITIZEN: He has great faults.
1 CITIZEN: Ay but great force too.
2 CITIZEN: I have eaten beef-steaks with
him.
1 CITIZEN: So have I.

A testament perhaps to the authenticity of Beckett as much as the ear of Boswell. The figure of the PHYSICIAN recurs in all but one of the *Dialogues*, and one might assume that if these *Dialogues* are authentic then the Physician and Boswell shared a daily routine and that perhaps the Physician's conversation was something Boswell paid particular attention to. This is where some background knowledge is helpful; *Childs* was located near St Paul's and was popular with physicians and merchants (the CITIZENS of the dialogues). The PHYSICIAN is thus likely to represent a number of different people, though throughout the dialogues his demeanour shows the same deadpan drollery, reminiscent of Myles nag Copaleen's *The Brother*, with the PHYSICIAN taking on a dual role as both the instigative blabbermouth and his wisely laconic disputant. We can but wonder – either way, they gave Boswell an early opportunity to sharpen his ear for dialogue and his means of recording and presenting it.

The Myles parallel can be further stretched when considering this bizarre Angelic incursion into a segment early in the journal when Boswell partakes of that indulgence endemic among sensitive young men, wondering at the nature of existence:

'... I do not know well what to
make of it. I do not rightly understand it.
GUARDIAN ANGEL: Stop. How should you?
GOD has formed men with very limited
capacities.
True. But still I cannot help
inquiring and thinking, and viewing things in
certain lights.'

The Angelic visitor may well be an avatar of the elder Boswell back in Ayrshire, praying that London generated a minimum of embarrassments. Just over a year later Boswell would attempt a rather more intricate form of Dialogue with Rousseau during his continental travels (see *The Drouth Issue 22*). Taking place over a number of meetings, it is an interesting example of a Boswell dramatisation applied to a very different creature to Johnson.⁸

In the interview with Mrs Rudd much of the interest comes not so much from the dialogue but Boswell's

⁸ BOSWELL and BELLE-LETTRES. Boswell is an interesting link in the chain between Johnson, Hume and Rousseau, the last two famous for their fractious relationship. Boswell and Hume knew each other from Edinburgh, though Bozzy's blabbermouth prompted a very famous rebuke as recorded in his journal, which prompted an insincere and ill-judged reply from Boswell.

Boswell met Rousseau in Switzerland during his troubled years, just before he fled to England to take refuge with Hume. Boswell's embroilment with Rousseau was to intensify when he was selected to escort his mistress to England – during which they were lovers. Hume wrote to Rousseau summing up the choice of companion succinctly: 'very good humoured, very agreeable, and very mad.'

As for Johnson, he approved of neither Hume nor Rousseau, regarding the latter as a charlatan. What is interesting about all three is that each, in ascending order from Hume to Johnson, were part of Boswell's endless search for father-substitutes – Hume fell between father and elder brother, while Boswell regaled Rousseau with endless questions about his correct course in life, as he had Johnson.



commentary on the conduct of the interview.⁹ His opener, describing his entry into Mrs Rudd's waiting room is a masterful piece of detailed scene setting, using objects, knick knacks and surrounding paraphernalia to build atmosphere – an examination of her bookshelf is milked for their ironic resonance, for next to a volume of Johnsonania is *The Small Talker* 'a very good novel against the practice of some men in gaining the affections of young ladies only for conquest, as they soon neglect them.'

Rudd was a career criminal, a practiced liar and possessed of considerable cunning – a real challenge for the observer of the frank and unrestrained Johnson. Boswell for his part, is scrupulously interested in how she speaks – her manners, tics and attitude is analysed just as closely as the content – and unscrupulously draws upon his own talent for play acting to elicit her responses and get in under her skin:

I begged her pardon and, with exquisite flattery, said, 'My dear Mrs. Rudd, don't talk so. Everything you have said to me till now has been truth and candour'; and I told her I was convinced she could enchant, but I begged she would not enchant me too much, not change me into any other creature, but allow me to continue to be a man with some degree of reason. I was as cautious as if I had been opposite to that snake which fascinates with its eyes. Her language was choice and fluent and her voice melodious. The peculiar characteristic of her enchantment seemed to be its delicate imperceptible power. She perfectly concealed her design to charm. There was no meretricious air; no direct attempt upon the heart. It was like hearing the music of the spheres which poets feign, and which produces its effect without the intervention of any instrument, so that the very soul of harmony immediately affects our souls.

And here Boswell plays the role of provocateur; then gauges the response:

'You must not be insensible,' said I, and rose and seized her silken hand, and afterwards, upon the argument being renewed a little, kissed it. This was all experiment, and she showed neither prudery nor effrontery, but the complaisance, or compliance if you please, of a woman of fashion.

What is interesting about the encounter was that Boswell was knowingly hypnotised; he knew how ill

advised the association was – and is well aware of his subject's obfuscatory technique. Nevertheless, as Pottle observes, Boswell was so caught up in using his own wiles to open her up, he dropped his guard sufficiently for fascination to give way to infatuation. As with so much of Boswell's work, his exploration of the individuals he meets and the world he sees is an exploration of his self – in this case, his (poor) level of resistance to the 'sorceress'.

There is no mystery as to how Boswell gets this information. He is acutely aware of the tactics both he and his subject are using against each other; a sort of interpersonal chess-cum-poker. The scene recalls the oft-subtle poetics of the documentary talking head, and the tactics employed by the interviewer to keep the conversation flowing and encourage more and more dramatic revelations. In the interview, the very process is in itself a performance, rather than just raw material:

I sometimes kept silence on purpose to observe how she would renew the conversation. She never let the pause be long, but with admirable politeness, when she found that I did not begin again to speak and might perhaps be embarrassed, said something quite easily, so as not to have the appearance of abruptness, to make me feel that I had stopped short, but rather of a continuation of our discourse, as if what she then said had grown out of what we had talked of before.

At the time, Boswell no doubt regarded such politics as cunning on his part; today in the era of Maysles or Errol Morris we might instead regard it as a form and part of his artistic skill in eliciting his material. Put another way, it could be understood as having a conscious understanding of his own role in creating images, in the same way Oliver Stone purposefully uses a second camera to show the sideslung viewfinder of his own, presenting the double image of Castro as he answers one of Stone's questions in *Comandante*.

Boswell's interview techniques, developed long before interviewing became a spectacle in its own right, deliberately sought to set subjects at ease and create opportunities for interesting material. He would use it on Johnson numerous times, playing the part of the buffoon the better to drop a provocative comment that would create sufficient tension to prompt another flurry of Johnsonania.

⁹ MARGARET CAROLINE RUDD. Credited with 'irresistible powers of fascination' that first drew Boswell to her (and almost tempted Dr Johnson into paying her a visit). Sisman has speculated that the notorious extortionist was the model for Thackeray's Becky Sharp. The 1776 interview was Boswell's first meeting with London's femme fatale, who had ensnared a series of rich men. Born in Ulster, she was an accomplished courtesan, forger and embezzler. She got at least two men hanged while she cheated the gallows, and following their interview, the carnally adept Rudd drew Boswell into a scandalous extra-marital affair.



III. CRISIS

Boswell's depiction of Johnson has attracted strong criticism from those academics who have indulged in the ludicrous sectarianism which maintains that the respective reputations of Johnson and Boswell can only be enhanced at the expense of the other. In his introduction to the abridged Penguin *LJ*, Christopher Hibbert gives the following example of the indignant Donald Greene's assessment of the *LJ*: GREENE. 'A collection of those entries in Boswell's diaries dealing with the occasions during the last twenty-two years of Johnson's life on which they met ... strung together with only a perfunctory effort to fill the gaps.' The amused Hibbert then relates Greene's call for Boswell's biography to be repealed (how exactly? Are we to expect public burnings?) and his accusation that Boswell is but a very minor writer, before enjoying the following escalating fulminations GREENE. (Frothing) '[W]e can presumably count on being regaled indefinitely with the details of Boswell's claps and hangovers' and then his central accusation: GREENE. (Espresso Machine ...) '[H]is much touted "hero worship" of Johnson is a mask, disguising from himself and others an unconscious wish to cut Johnson down to size and in the end, the superiority of Boswell ...'

And there again looms the Boswellian self, larger and more powerful than any Johnson. Of course, by constantly tying the fate of their man to Bozzy, this academic faction's efforts seem wholly self-defeating as long as they insist on keeping the two shackled together; they are playing into the Boswellians' hands and dangerously conflating taste with standards of scholarship and objectivity. Johnson was a writer of his time, solid, substantial yet pedantic and mannered. Boswell is a modern writer in a way Johnson never could be – and will always have a more enduring appeal because of it. While Professor Greene is in dire need of a cold shower, it is a good point that Boswell's hero worship is exaggerated, and that, ultimately, even Boswell's admirers admit that the Johnson of the *LJ* is a literary creation, in other words, a character.

Creating a character from a real person is a concept that presents all sorts of questions and even ethical issues. Johnson, we know from the wider material available to us, was a much more complex and sensitive individual than the roaring Cham of the *LJ* – though the cartoonishness of Boswell's depiction can be overstated. But it is the *LJ* Johnson that is most vivid, precisely because Boswell created a wholly memorably character from the raw material of his personality.

Documentary filmmakers do this all the time – it is commonplace to hear them speak of the people in their films as 'characters' as if they had invented

them themselves. Of course, in a way they do – they selectively film and edit their subjects into what we see on the screen. Editing can do a great deal to recreate a real person as something entirely different – exhibit A being any example of reality TV – but the notion of the character is often achieved while the crew is still filming. A savvy director will – with varying degrees of subtlety – attempt to draw out behaviours and responses that will give the best material for editing.

Many documentarians have their roots in psychiatry or the social sciences where they picked up the necessary skills of observation, subtle manipulation and analysis. The Maysles brothers' first film studied Russian Psychiatric hospitals and drew upon the psychiatric notion of 'character', described in Freud's *Wolfman* casebook in terms of how resistant an individual is to therapy. The brother's sought out crisis situations, as in their *Salesman*, where a Bible pedlar comes to realise he is losing his touch, or *Meet Marlon Brando*, where the actor is beset by questions on all sides. The challenging moment engrosses the subject, leaving them less aware they are being watched and thus, revealing their true character. In Europe, filmmakers such as Rouch or Marker had developed their own crisis structure in *Verite* cinema, seeking to create or prompt a crisis to test their subject's character. The approach of most non-fiction filmmakers tends to fall somewhere between these two stools.

Likewise with Boswell, famed for his ability to prompt the most memorable conversation out of his Johnson. The charge of manufacture is one the Johnsonians might well level at Boswell, but it was manipulation to heighten an aspect of Johnson's reality for the purpose of engaging the reader, rather than create a falsehood.

Boswell's provocations could be as small scale as introducing a subject of conversation. Rousseau was mentioned more than once. In the *London Journal* Bozzy watched as his friend Dempster mentioned Rousseau to Johnson and took in the vehemence of the Cham's reaction: JOHNSON. 'Rousseau and all these people who deal in paradoxes are led away by a childish desire of novelty.' Knowing and noting this reaction to the challenge of Rousseau's ideas, Boswell stores it amongst his kindling and deploys it a few years later, raising the issue of the happiness of the 'savage':

JOHNSON. 'No sir, you are not to talk such paradox ... Lord Monboddo, one of your Scottish judges, talked a great deal of such nonsense. I suffered *him*; but I will not suffer *you*.' – BOSWELL. 'Sir, but does not Rousseau talk such nonsense?' JOHNSON. 'True sir, but Rousseau *knows* he is talking



nonsense, and laughs at the world for staring at him.'

And then there were the introductions; Boswell took genuine pleasure in bringing people into contact with each other who were often very different, but whom he had an instinct might get on, and was genuinely pleased when they did. But he also appreciated the material. The summit between Johnson and Wilkes – so diametrically opposed in politics – is one of the juiciest moments in the *Loj*. Here it is described in the *Lichfield Journal*, in an almost touching dinner-table scene:

Mr. Wilkes was at great pains in helping him with some fine veal. 'Pray give me leave, Sir – It is better here – A little of the brown – Some fat, Sir – A bit of the stuffing – Some gravy – Let me have the pleasure of giving you some butter – Allow me to recommend a squeeze of an orange – or the lemon perhaps may have more zest.' 'Sir, Sir, I am obliged to you, Sir,' cried Johnson, bowing and turning his head to him with a look for some time of 'surlly virtue', but in a short time of complacency.

But for the use of crisis, nothing comes close to the *Tour of the Hebrides*, Boswell's grand act of showmanship in depositing the Johnsonian behemoth in the Scottish wilderness, surrounded by wild, noble prospects and knit-browed Presbyterians. Of course, he took it all in his rolling stride, as this episode of Highland manners shows:

This evening one of our married ladies, a lively pretty little woman, good-humouredly sat down upon Dr Johnson's knee, and, being encouraged by some of the company put her hands round his neck and kissed him. 'Do it again,' said he 'and let's see who will tire first.' He kept her on his knee for some time, while he and she drank tea ... To me it was highly comick to see that grave philosopher – the *Rambler* – toying with a Highland Beauty! But what could he do?

