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Allan Ingram

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudeseccossaises/3227>

DOI: 10.4000/etudeseccossaises.3227

ISSN: 1969-6337

Publisher

UGA Éditions/Université Grenoble Alpes

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 March 2001

Number of pages: 7-20

ISBN: 978-2-84310-198-4

ISSN: 1240-1439

Electronic reference

Allan Ingram, « The Vision at Slains Boswell's Supernatural Encounters », *Études écossaises* [Online], 7 | 2001, Online since 29 March 2018, connection on 08 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudeseccossaises/3227> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudeseccossaises.3227>

The Vision at Slains Boswell's Supernatural Encounters

On Tuesday 24 August 1773, Boswell and Johnson, by the special invitation of the Hon. Charles Boyd, called for the afternoon at Slains Castle, near Aberdeen, on the outward leg of their Hebrides tour. Lord Erroll, the 15th Earl, dining away from home, they were nevertheless pressed to stay by Lady Erroll and by Mr Boyd, his lordship's brother, both to attend Erroll's return and to spend the night at Slains. After a visit to the Buller of Buchan – described by Johnson in his *Journey* as «a rock perpendicularly tubulated, united on one side with a high shore, and on the other rising steep to a great height, above the main sea»¹ – and conversation with Mr Boyd – he «was out in the year 1745-1746. He escaped and lay concealed for a year in the island of Arran»² – the Earl finally returns. «I was excessively pleased with Lord Erroll», reports Boswell.

His stately person and agreeable countenance, with the most unaffected affability, gave me a high satisfaction. There is perhaps a weakness, that is to say, more fancy or warmth of feeling than is quite reasonable in me, but there is much pleasure arising from it. I could with the most perfect honesty expatiate on Lord Erroll's good qualities as if I was bribed to do it. His agreeable look and softness of address relieved that awe which his majestic person and the idea of his being Lord High Constable of Scotland would have inspired.

ALLAN INGRAM
*University of Northumbria at
Newcastle.*

1. Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (London, 1775); ed. R.W. Chapman (London: Oxford University Press, 1924; 1970 edn), p. 17.

2. James Boswell, *Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D. Now First Published from the Original Manuscript*, ed. F.A. Pottle and C.H. Bennett (London: William Heinemann, 1936), p. 70. Subsequent quotations are from p. 74-75.

His lordship not only «said grace both before and after supper with much decency», but also «told us a story of a man who was executed at Perth some years ago for murdering a woman, who was with child to him, and a former child he had by her». The man's hand was first cut off. «He was then pulled up. But the rope broke, and he was forced to lie an hour on the ground till another rope was brought from Perth, the execution being in a wood at some distance – the place where the murders were committed. “There” said my lord» – apparently without humour – «I see the hand of Providence». «I was», adds Boswell, «really happy here». He expands, displaying some of

his favourite topics, and most characteristic touches: «I saw in my lord the best disposition and best principles; and I saw him *in my mind's eye* to be the representative of the ancient Boyds of Kilmarnock». They drink, are accompanied to their rooms, and Boswell is reminded by the Earl of his old acquaintance with Boswell's father, and pressed to pay a return visit.

With the exception of the mention of his father, with whom Boswell's relations were at best ambiguous, at worst stormy³, the event is conspicuously guaranteed to produce satisfaction. All of Boswell's leading instincts are brought into play: monarchy, family, heredity, property, stability, respect, imagination, drink and executions. But as always in Boswell, everything has more than one edge. The utmost satisfaction can turn, with the snuffing of a candle, to dreariness and death.

I had a most elegant room. But there was a fire in it which blazed, and the sea, to which my windows looked, roared, and the pillows were made of some sea-fowl's feathers which had to me a disagreeable smell. So that by all these causes, I was kept awake a good time. I began to think that Lord Kilmarnock might appear to me, and I was somewhat dreary. But the thought did not last long, and I fell asleep.

As Boswell adds in the published *Journal*, Lord Kilmarnock was also out in 1745. He failed to escape, unlike his son, and «was beheaded on Tower Hill in 1746». The published version contains one other change to this paragraph: «I saw, in imagination, Lord Erroll's father, Lord Kilmarnock' replaces Boswell's fear that he might be about to see a ghost⁴.

Boswell, all his life, was fascinated by executions, and equally suffered excruciatingly from the fear of ghosts, so much so that, as he wrote in the sketch of his life that he sent to Rousseau in 1764 (wrote, but then excluded), «Terribly afraid of ghosts. Up to eighteen could not be alone at night⁵. Often the two impulses coincided. In London, in 1763, he visits Newgate, to «see prisoners of one kind or another». One is Paul Lewis, a «genteel, spirited young fellow' who is called «Captain», «just a Macheath' and shortly to be executed for robbery. Boswell cannot resist visiting Tyburn next day to witness the event, «although I was sensible that I would suffer much from it». In particular he «wished to see the last behaviour of Paul Lewis». He does, from «a scaffold very near the fatal tree», is «most terribly shocked, and thrown into a very deep melancholy». That evening, «as night approached», he finds «gloomy terrors

3. See, for example, Allan Ingram, «Political Hypochondria: The Case of James Boswell», in *Cycnos*, 16, 1 (1999): *Conservatismes anglo-américains XVIII^e et XIX^e siècles*, ed. Gilbert Boniface, p. 1-17.

4. James Boswell, *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (1785), ed. R.W. Chapman (London: Oxford University Press, 1924; 1970 edn), p. 226.

5. See Peter Martin, *A Life of James Boswell* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), p. 35.

came upon me so much... that I durst not stay by myself; so I went and had a bed (or rather half a one) from honest Erskine, which he most kindly gave me »⁶. At other times, an execution can have a quite contrary effect, as in Turin in January 1765:

I set out at eleven. As I went out at one of the ports, I saw a crowd running to the execution of a thief. I jumped out of my chaise and went close to the gallows. The criminal stood on a ladder, and a priest held a crucifix before his face. He was tossed over, and hung with his face uncovered, which was hideous. I stood fixed in attention to this spectacle... The hangman put his feet on the criminal's head and neck and had him strangled in a minute. I then went into a church and kneeled with great devotion before an altar splendidly lighted up. Here then I felt three successive scenes: raging love – gloomy horror – grand devotion. The horror indeed I only *should* have felt ⁷.

What at one time can produce gloom, dreariness, sleeplessness and dread is also capable of stimulating devotion, religious awe, and even love – though in Turin Boswell is thinking more of the Countess of Scarnafigi, with whom he has just failed to conduct a liaison, than about the Almighty. Equally, the terror of ghosts can arise simply from a turn in the conversation, as in London in March 1763 during an evening with the Kellies and the Erskines, an occasion when Boswell is already «most miserably melancholy »:

I stayed supper, after which we talked of death, of theft, robbery, murder, and ghosts. Lady Betty and Lady Anne declared seriously that at Allanbank they were disturbed two nights by something walking and groaning in the room, which they afterwards learnt was haunted. This was very strong. My mind was now filled with a real horror instead of an imaginary one. I shuddered with apprehension. I was frightened to go home. Honest Erskine made me go with him, and kindly gave me half of his bed, in which, though a very little one, we passed the silent watches in tranquillity. (p. 237-238)

6. James Boswell, *Boswell's London Journal 1762-1763*, ed. F.A. Pottle (London: William Heinemann, 1950; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 274-276.

7. James Boswell, *Boswell on the Grand Tour: Italy, Corsica and France 1765-1766*, ed. Frank Brady and F.A. Pottle (London: William Heinemann, 1955), p. 43.

While an execution is unambiguously real, which for Boswell is one of its attractions, an opportunity to watch a live individual passing out of the world, his imagination is also aroused by the «real horror » that is a convincingly «strong » ghost story, or by a credible setting – the fire, the smell, the sound of waters, memories of Jacobitism and execution – in which a ghost, with every reason to return, might plausibly appear.

In the quiet of his study, in daylight, Boswell wrote a *Hypochondriack* essay on executions, published in May 1783, though most of it had appeared originally in the *Publick Advertiser* for 26 April 1768 as a letter from «Mortalis» describing the executions of Benjamin Payne, the highwayman, and the attorney-forger James Gibson, respectively referred to throughout by Boswell as «Payne» and «Mr Gibson». Confessing (in 1768, then) his frequent attendances («I myself am never absent from any of them»), he describes the progress in his reactions:

When I first attended executions, I was shocked to the greatest degree. I was in a manner convulsed with pity and terror, and for several days, but especially nights after, I was in a very dismal situation. Still, however, I persisted in attending them, and by degrees my sensibility abated; so that I can now see one with great composure, and my mind is not afterwards haunted with frightful thoughts: though for a while a certain degree of gloom remains upon it⁸.

Ideally, the execution will help to teach us how to die, to prepare us for our own end, «that alarming scene of quitting all that we have ever seen, heard, or known». Therefore, observes «Mortalis», «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». In this enterprise, the end of «Mr Gibson» was model: «He took leave of his friends, stepped out of the coach, and walked firmly to the cart»; he «never once altered his countenance. He refreshed his mouth by sucking a sweet orange»; «He appeared to all the spectators a man of sense and reflexion, of a mind naturally sedate and placid. He submitted with a manly and decent resolution to what he knew to be the just punishment of the law». In short, «from first to last, his behaviour was the most perfect that I ever saw, or indeed could conceive of one in his unhappy circumstances». No fear of ghosts from being a spectator at such a death – quite the contrary: the danger of the kind of «dreary» emotions that Boswell was to experience at Slains is explicitly ruled out. As «Mortalis» signs off: «I wish, Sir, I may not have detained you too long with a letter on subjects of a serious but I will not say of a gloomy cast, because from my manner of viewing them I do say that they become matters of curious speculation, and are relieved of their dreary ideas».

8. James Boswell, *Boswell's Column 1777-1783*, ed. Margery Bailey (London: William Kimber, 1951), p. 345. Subsequent quotations p. 345-346.

In earlier essays of the series, however (but written, of course, later than the «Mortalis» letter), Boswell has other observations and reflections concerning death and dying that indicate the temporary nature of «Mr Gibson's» example. In the fourteenth number, published in November 1778, and on the subject of death, he confesses:

Neither in my apprehension can any man whose mind is not naturally dull, or grown callous by age, be without uneasiness when he looks forward to the act of dissolution itself. A Hypochondriack fancies himself at different times suffering death in all the various ways in which it has been observed; and thus he dies many times before his death. I myself have been frequently terrified, and dismally afflicted in this way; nor can I yet secure my mind against it at gloomy seasons of dejection⁹.

Gibsons fade, Lewis and Payne also have lessons to teach, as do all those other dreary «quittings» that «The Hypochondriack» has «observed», both in their reality and in his own after imaginings, whether solitary with the sea roaring or sharing a bed with the solidly «honest Erskine». Again, in the sixteenth number, the third of three consecutive essays to deal with death, he observes that «Night is universally the season of terroure», and continues: «All my readers, especially my own brethren, who have laboured under Hypochondria, have experienced how direful the thought of Death is when one lies awake in the middle of the night»¹⁰. When he writes, then, in the second *Hypochondriack*, in November 1777, on the subject of fear, it is to declare that «Of all the sufferings to which the mind of man is liable in this state of darkness and imperfection, the passion of fear is the severest»¹¹. Fear, writes Boswell, is «unavoidable by rational beings, who know that many evils may probably, and some must certainly befall them», but he also includes amongst his examples the schoolboy in Robert Blair's *The Grave*, «Whistling aloud to bear his courage up», adding «The boy was very much frightened; but being ashamed of his fear, affected a lively and gay indifference». He concludes, soberly: «But my intention when I sat down to write this paper was to caution my readers against the indulgence of unnecessary and excessive fear, which at times afflicts most men, but more especially a hypochondriack». He quotes *Macbeth*, «present fears are less than horrible imaginings», lists those events – «Sickness, poverty, and the loss of our dearest friends and relations» – which are likely to «prove more mild in reality than in fancy»,

9. James Boswell, *Boswell's Column 1777-1783*, p. 87.

10. *Ibidem*, p. 95.

11. *Ibidem*, p. 26. Subsequent quotations p. 28-30 and p. 30 n. 2.

and advises: «This reflection should make us less affected by the thoughts of their happening to us». But «happening» was originally written as «appearing» and corrected at the end of the succeeding essay in December. Events «happen», but Lord Kilmarnock, Paul Lewis and things in rooms in Allanbank «appear». This was not what Boswell intended to develop from the whistling schoolboy. Nevertheless, he ends the essay with a powerful statement of the fear-weary mind, anticipating evils it thinks will «happen»: «They will come loaded with additional darkness from the clouds of imagination, and if the mind be weakened, and worn by fanciful sufferings, it will be less able to bear a severe shock than if it met it with that sound vigour which is produced by security and happiness».

A sharp reminder of the reality of Boswell's state of imaginings, at its worst, comes in a letter to one of his oldest friends, William Johnson Temple, written in the summer of 1775: «While affected 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»¹². Religious belief was always a sensitive area for him. He yearned for that «security and happiness» that a steady and rational belief could bring him, even though he sought it often, as he remarks in the *London Journal*, through «the most brilliant and showy method of public worship»¹³ – or else through the mental excitement of a public execution. Yet his religious core, as he frequently acknowledges, and as frequently regrets, remains, instinctively and superstitiously, kirk. Again, in the *London Journal*, visited by James Webster, son of the Edinburgh minister, he finds his spirits «sunk... a little»

as he brought into my mind some dreary Tolbooth Kirk ideas, than which nothing has given me more gloomy feelings. I shall never forget the dismal hours of apprehension that I have endured in my youth from narrow notions of religion while my tender mind was lacerated with infernal horror¹⁴.

He is, he asserts, «surprised how I have got rid of these notions so entirely», and declares: «Thank God, my mind is now clear and elevated. I am serene and happy. I can look up to my Creator with adoration and hope». Yet the narrowness of his Presbyterian upbringing is something he returns to persistently in his journals, and which reappears to threaten his mental security throughout his life, so much so that he even feels it necessary, as a father of by then three young children, to ensure that

12. James Boswell, *The Correspondence of James Boswell and William Johnson Temple 1756-1795*, ed. Thomas Crawford, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), vol. I, p. 394; also quoted in James Boswell, *Boswell: The Ominous Years 1774-1776*, ed. Charles Ryskamp and F.A. Pottle (London: William Heinemann, 1963), p. 158 n. 9.
13. James Boswell, *Boswell's London Journal 1762-1763*, p. 80.
14. *Ibidem*, p. 128. Subsequent quotation p. 128.

«some *fear*» is mixed early in their minds, otherwise «I apprehend religion will not be lasting»:

I told them in the evening so much about *black angels* or *devils* seizing bad people when they die and dragging them down to hell, a *dark* place (for I had not yet said anything of *fire* to them, and perhaps never will), that they were all three suddenly seized with such terror that they cried and roared out and ran to me for protection¹⁵.

He can still, though, refer to his own childhood fears with real feeling, remembering, when seeing the removal of Newgate prison during his London visit of 1778, «The relief *now* was as when I used to say to myself when a child, “The *Devil’s Dead*”¹⁶. He can also, so many years later (for example in September 1778), be «uneasy sleeping in solitude» and therefore «have an unwillingness to go to bed»¹⁷.

Ghosts, inevitably in this context, are ambiguous. At best, their existence is confirmation that «annihilation» need not be dreaded: there is, after all, a future state. But this is poor comfort when the nature of that state, or of the individual soul’s place in it, is rendered terrifying without being rendered certain. The possibility of a «horrible state of being», even of being dragged to «a *dark* place», is always there. Boswell sought confirmation of ghosts, and of the whole realm of the supernatural, therefore, as both a positive and a negative reassurance, not least through the views of Johnson. At one point in the *Life*, in fact, there is a footnote acknowledgement, made by Edmond Malone for the 1799 edition, as to why ghosts are so often a feature of Johnson’s conversation:

As this subject frequently recurs in these volumes, the reader may be led erroneously to suppose that Dr Johnson was so fond of such discussions, as frequently to introduce them. But the truth is, that the author himself delighted in talking concerning ghosts, and what he has frequently denominated, *the mysterious*; and therefore took every opportunity of *leading* Johnson to converse on such subjects¹⁸.

On this occasion, on 15 April 1781, Johnson is «led’ into discussing «apparitions», observing (in remarks confirmed by the journal for this day):

A total disbelief of them is adverse to the opinion of the existence of the soul between death and the last day; the question simply is, whether departed spirits ever have the power of making themselves

15. James Boswell, *Boswell Laird of Auchinleck 1778-1782*, ed. J.W. Reed and F.A. Pottle (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), p. 164.

16. James Boswell, *Boswell in Extremes 1776-1778*, ed. C. McC. Weis and F.A. Pottle (London: William Heinemann, 1971), p. 282.

17. James Boswell, *Boswell Laird of Auchinleck*, p. 20.

18. James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed. G.B. Hill, rev. L.F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934-64), vol. IV, p. 94 n. 2.

perceptible to us: a man who thinks he has seen an apparition, can only be convinced himself; his authority will not convince another¹⁹.

Boswell himself, who, in spite of his lifetime of horrible imaginings, is not known ever to have seen a ghost, would have preferred a rational persuasion, one way or the other, from the master of the rational. Instead, Johnson proceeds to inform the company of «being *called*», «a thing», says Boswell, «of which I had never heard before» (the journal, slightly differently, reads «which I never heard before was common»), which is «hearing one's name pronounced by the voice of a known person at a great distance, far beyond the possibility of being reached by any sound uttered by human organs». Boswell's clerk, James Brown, reports Boswell, had been «called», from a wood near Kilmarnock, by his brother in America, «and the next ships brought accounts of his death»²⁰. Johnson himself, it emerges, was «called»: «Dr. Johnson said, that one day at Oxford, as he was turning the key of his chamber, he heard his mother distinctly call – *Sam*. She was then at Lichfield; but nothing ensued»²¹.

This is as close as Boswell gets to any testimony from Johnson as to personal experience of the supernatural: it was something, but hardly enough. On other occasions, therefore, Johnson either leads, or is led, into discussion of a variety of topics and events touching upon supernatural issues: of the reported appearance of Johnson's own cousin, Parson Ford; of the appearance of a ghost to a girl in Newcastle, which had been credited by John Wesley (to whom Boswell subsequently sought a letter of introduction from Johnson in order to question him on the subject); of Clarendon's account of the ghost of Sir George Villiers²²; all fascinating and informative, but, for Boswell, inconclusive. It is in this context that their visit to the Hebrides in 1773 takes its place, for Boswell's anticipation at Slains is not an isolated incident, but one of a series of interests and expectations, in both men, for their experience of the Highlands and the Hebrides. For Johnson, to witness and enquire among a people, particularly on the islands, whom he regarded as living in a state close to primitivism was an opportunity for observing not only a style of existence but a state of mind, one in which superstition, charms and a belief in second sight were still current, even though the «various kinds of superstition which prevailed here, as in all other regions of ignorance, are by the diligence of the Ministers almost extir-

19. James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, vol. IV, p. 94; also *Boswell Laird of Auchinleck*, p. 325.

20. —, *Boswell Laird of Auchinleck*, p. 325.

21. —, *Life of Johnson*, vol. IV, p. 94.

22. —, *Boswell in Extremes*, p. 339-340, 286-287 and 342-343.

pated»²³. The second sight, in particular, that «impression made either by the mind upon the eye, or by the eye upon the mind, by which things distant or future are perceived, and seen as if they were present», is given close attention, with «Mr Boswell's frankness and gaiety» capable of making «every body communicative» so that «we heard many tales of these airy shows, with more or less evidence and distinctness»²⁴. If Johnson's statements against the phenomenon are harsh -

Strong reasons for incredulity will readily occur. This faculty of seeing things out of sight is local, and commonly useless. It is a breach of the common order of things, without any visible reason or perceptible benefit. It is ascribed only to a people very little enlightened; and among them, for the most part, to the mean and the ignorant²⁵.

- nevertheless his conclusion is inconclusive, and even sympathetic: «To collect sufficient testimonies for the satisfaction of the publick, or of ourselves, would have required more time than we could bestow... I never could advance my curiosity to conviction; but came away at last only willing to believe»²⁶. Johnson's «ourselves», however, rather understates Boswell's own readiness to believe both second sight and other evidences of the supernatural they encountered during the trip, and indeed to take them most seriously, notwithstanding his «frankness and gaiety».

At the end of the published *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, and writing therefore some time in 1785, Boswell makes a retraction from the degree of belief he afforded the second sight, back in the autumn of 1773, after the completion of the tour.

I own, I returned from the *Hebrides* with a considerable degree of faith in the many stories of that kind which I heard with a too easy acquiescence, without any close examination of the evidence: but, since that time, my belief in those stories has been much weakened, by reflecting on the careless inaccuracy of narrative in common matters, from which we may certainly conclude that there may be the same in what is more extraordinary²⁷.

Nevertheless, the fact is that Boswell perambulated the Highlands and islands as predisposed to accept superstitions and the supernatural as he was to indulge in reveries of feudalism, clan loyalties and memories of 1745. Stories are collected in his journal and reproduced almost word for word in the published *Tour*:

23. Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, p. 97.

24. *Idem*.

25. *Idem*, p. 99.

26. *Idem*, p. 100.

27. James Boswell, *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1785), p. 424.

Mrs Mackinnon, who was a daughter of old Kingsburgh, told us that her father was one day riding in Skye, and some women who were at work in a field on the side of the road told him they heard two *taisks*, that is, two voices of persons about to die; «and what,» said they, «is extraordinary, one of them is an *English taisk*, which we never heard before». When he returned, he at that very place met two funerals, and one of them was of a woman who had come from the mainland and could speak only English. This, she told us, made a great impression upon her father ²⁸.

He becomes, as at Slains, personally caught up in the supernatural milieu. After a sea journey from Skye, he is «glad to get safe home, for some of the boatmen, whether in earnest or not I cannot tell, said, before we took boat, that they heard an English ghost cry; and my superstition and fear are both easily excited»²⁹. At Cawdor he tells the company of his recent dream in which he had seen «my little daughter dead» and that he «should not be easy till I got a letter», adding:

I thought it best to mention it to several people, because it made a strong impression upon my mind, and in case it should unhappily prove true, I might have witnesses to attest what I said. Yet I can hardly have any pretence to the second sight, being no Highlander. However, as others have had strange supernatural communications, I knew not but it might be my case ³⁰.

More in the Slains pattern, he cuts short his piety at the chapel at Inchkenneth because «a tremor seized me for ghosts, and I hastened back to the house»³¹. Or, as Johnson put it, writing to Hester Thrale, his tongue in both cheeks: «The Chappel is about thirty eight feet long, and eighteen broad. Boswel, who is very pious, went into it at night to perform his devotions, but came back in haste for fear of Spectres»³².

For Boswell, the Hebrides journey was the opportunity to encounter, in the company of the great rationalist, all that made for the irrational in his own temperament and to which his own response was in part unashamed pride, as with his feudal and family vanities, and in part, as with his credulities and his fears of spectres, a self-conscious mix of embarrassment and sheer terror. As the incident at Slains shows, these impulses were as inextricably linked in the mesh of Boswell's emotional and spiritual resources as his «frankness and gaiety» was with his recurrent dreariness, his «gloomy seasons of dejection». For Boswell, Johnson visiting Scotland was not simply the acquisition of a windfall of biographical materials: it represented the light of English, and London, culture shining

28. James Boswell, *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1936), p. 123.

29. *Ibidem*, p. 202.

30. *Ibidem*, p. 88-89.

31. James Boswell, *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1936), p. 317.

32. Samuel Johnson, *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992-4), vol. II, p. 105.

into the dark places of kirk, of prejudice, of superstition and, in all its intricateness, of Scottishness.

The one Scot whom Johnson did not meet while in Scotland, amongst the many major and minor luminaries Boswell had lined up, was of course David Hume, even though Hume stood for many things that Boswell would most wish to have Johnson dispel. The encounter, indeed, would have brought little pleasure to either man, and Boswell was far easier feeding, during his friendship with each of them, irritating titbits of what the other thought or had said. The Hume problem, for Boswell, was virtually the negative of the ghost problem: if Hume was to be accepted, then no ghosts, no supernatural, but equally no future state, dark, light or otherwise, only the dreary prospect of annihilation. Johnson's views on Hume, as on «the mysterious», are repeatedly sought conversationally, and in any company but Hume's. Boswell was happy, in the spring of 1776, to contrive an encounter between Johnson and his political negative, John Wilkes, and to write it up lavishly for the *Life*. Something far closer to home, a meeting between two spiritual poles, could not be contemplated, was capable of destroying all that Boswell, complicatedly, held both dear and in fear.

Instead, Boswell found a substitute. His deathbed interview with Hume, on 7 July 1776, was intended to settle the issue, in his own mind, without the intervention of Johnson's formidable fire power. «I had a strong curiosity», writes Boswell, «to be satisfied if he persisted in disbelieving a future state even when he had death before his eyes»³³. As is well known, to Boswell's horror, «he did persist». Indeed, while the meeting was good-humoured and touched with pleasantry, it went, for Boswell, extremely badly from his first sight of the sick man, for Hume's appearance, between living and dying, summarised all that Boswell feared from the supernatural, and nothing that he hoped from it. While he seemed «placid and even cheerful», nevertheless what first struck Boswell was that «He was lean, ghastly, and quite of an earthy appearance». Nor did the conversation give him any gleams of hope, so little, in fact, that Boswell, writing up the interview, confesses the curious disparity between their tone and his own feelings at the time.

In this style of good humour and levity did I conduct the conversation. Perhaps it was wrong on so awful a subject. But as nobody was present, I thought it could have no bad effect. 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 John-

33. James Boswell, *Boswell in Extremes*, p. 12. Subsequent quotations, p. 12-15. For two essays on Boswell and Hume, see Richard B. Schwartz, «Boswell and Hume: the deathbed interview» and Susan Manning, «This Philosophical Melancholy»: style and self in Boswell and Hume», both in *New Light on Boswell*, ed. Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 116-125 and 126-140 respectively.

son's noble lessons, and of my religious sentiments and affections during the course of my life. I was like a man in sudden danger eagerly seeking his defensive arms; and I could not but be assailed by momentary doubts while I had actually before me a man of such strong abilities and extensive inquiry dying in the persuasion of being annihilated.

«But», adds Boswell, «I maintained my faith». But, he might also have added with hindsight, at a cost. The interview concluded, in a way that the second sight debate was not, nor the ghost debate, he leaves «with impressions which disturbed me for some time».

Bowell's «some time» was at least fourteen months. In September 1777 (and six months, therefore, after he had written an expanded version of his journal record of the interview) he raised the subject of Hume's dying state of mind with Johnson, at Ashbourne, telling him that

David Hume's persisting in his infidelity when he was dying shocked me much... I said he told me he was quite easy at the thought of annihilation. «He lied,» said Dr Johnson. «He had a vanity in being thought easy. It is more probable that he lied than that so very improbable a thing should be as a man not afraid of death; of going into an unknown state and not being uneasy at leaving all that he knew»³⁴.

Johnson's response would seem to put Boswell's dilemma in a nutshell. He had spent much of the intervening months suffering from the repercussions of David Hume, initially indolent, «heavy at heart», and hypochondriac³⁵. By mid-July he was «sadly low-spirited», and only on 10 August (still fifteen days before Hume was actually to die) does he record that «My shock from having been with David Hume was now almost cured», though he also reveals that «While uneasy from David Hume's conversation, I read part of his worst essays in the Advocates' Library, from a kind of curiosity and self-tormenting inclination which we feel on many occasions»³⁶. Still, though, the effects persist: he and Grange visit Hume's burial site; they read more of his essays; he writes of his interview to Mrs Thrale, wishing «to hear Dr Johnson upon this»;³⁷ he is by turns outrageous and dejected. He speaks with the Auchinleck minister, John Dun, who reassures him «as to a future state»³⁸. But Hume does not go away. In March 1782, in his *Hypochondriack* essay

34. James Boswell, *Boswell in Extremes*, p. 154-155.

35. *Ibidem*, p. 15-16.

36. *Ibidem*, p. 17, 21.

37. *Ibidem*, p. 28 n. 1.

38. *Ibidem*, p. 32.

on religion, he is still working over the same ground, trying to hide the faultlines:

I myself visited a celebrated infidel when he was dying, and when I tried to raise the pleasing hope of a future state, he said, «You never see it but through the medium of Tartarus, or Phlegethon, or Hell». I concluded that he must in his early years have had the idea of Religion so associated with that of misery, that he was instigated to exert himself against it as an enemy, without ever having candidly examined if it might not be a friend. A friend he would have found it³⁹.

Boswell aspires to the role of comforter, secure in religious certainty, but can do so only by rewriting a past that persistently reasserted itself, troubling the surface of «The Hypochondriack's» serenity.

Such reassurance as Dun, and even Johnson, might offer could only ever be temporary. Boswell was haunted by Hume as vividly as he feared the appearance of Lord Kilmarnock. If Hume was correct, he would not reappear, no matter how much his dying aspect had startled Boswell; yet Boswell would desperately have wished for Hume's reappearance, as providing a fearsome confirmation unavailable from the words of a minister, or a sage. In March 1778, in London with his fellow advocate Andrew Crosbie, with whom he had travelled from Edinburgh, Boswell raises once again the subject of ghosts.

Crosbie has a vigorous mind. He was when young afraid of ghosts. He forced himself first to be alone in dark rooms, and afterwards actually lay for some part of the night upon a tombstone in a churchyard, till he got quite the better of his timidity. He assured me he was not afraid of death. But I could not believe him, and told him he did not think of it⁴⁰.

Boswell, «who was very pious», could never have so settled the matter. Everything in his hypochondriac being forbade it, his beliefs, his desperation for confirmation and his terror at finding it.

The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D. was published on 1 October 1785. Boswell's reaction to the appearance of *The Picturesque Beauties of Boswell*, by Thomas Rowlandson, in May 1786, was to welcome a renewal of interest in his book, which was then awaiting its third edition. Rowlandson's elaboration of what was seen «in imagination» at Slains, however, is a shrewd encapsulation of the most deep-seated

39. James Boswell, *The Hypochondriack*, p. 274.

40. —, *Boswell in Extremes*, p. 219.

instincts of Boswell's life. Lord Kilmarnock, in the complete garb of a Highlander, a radiant axe where his head should be, surmounted by a bonnet, pulls back the curtain of the bed. A terrified Boswell, his hair on end, his nightcap six inches above his head, clutches at the lower sheets, lifting them to reveal a chamberpot, next to which is an open diary. Heredity, executions, ghosts, death, and writing of it: Boswell's supernatural encounters.