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# APPRECIATING GALL Boswell's Frank Wit

Colby H. Kullman

Whether imitating the lowing of a cow in a crowded London theatre; asking General Burgoyne for a recital of his "gallant disasters" after the General's return from America in 1778; inquiring of George III whether to call Charles Edward "Prince Charles," "the Young Pretender," or "the grandson of the unfortunate James the Second"; or drawing out Europe's illustrious skeptic Voltaire on the subject of the immortality of the soul<sup>1</sup>—there is seemingly no end to Boswell's spirited exuberance. Frederick A. Pottle maintains that "Boswell's personality is not one that permits people to remain neutral: either they dislike him or they feel a rather strong affection for him."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps one of the personality characteristics that attracts and repels most is his incredible gall. Boswell meeting the persons of the hour and asking them the most daring questions, serving as his own publicity agent while touring Corsica, courting the infamous Margaret Caroline Rudd just after Samuel Johnson had told him that any man seen with her

<sup>1</sup> James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., Together with Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides and Johnson's Diary of a Journey into North Wales*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill and rev. L. F. Powell (Oxford: Clarendon, 1934-1964), V: 396; James Boswell, *Boswell in Extremes, 1776-1778*, ed. Charles Weiss and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), 346n4; James Boswell, *Boswell: The English Experiment, 1785-1789*, ed. Irma S. Lustig and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986), 216-17; James Boswell, *Boswell on the Grand Tour: Germany and Switzerland, 1764* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1953), 292-305.

<sup>2</sup> Boswell, *Grand Tour: Germany and Switzerland*, ix.

was certainly to be ruined, and even "seducing" Rousseau's mistress Thérèse Le Vasseur who had been placed in Boswell's care by Rousseau himself—such scenes as described by Boswell readily gain our immediate attention and often survive in our memories when much else has been lost. Impudence, exuberance, arrogance, egotism, "moxie," "chutzpah," candor, nerve, gall—whatever we choose to label it, it is at the heart and soul of the unique "genius" that is James Boswell.

Often giving his own right to know the highest priority while also supporting the public's right to know, James Boswell was a first-class investigative reporter who was well aware of the news-making process. Boswell surveys the court of Frederick the Great, noting the monarch's "suit of plain blue, with a star and a plain hat with a white feather" as he walks majestic in the midst of his Prussian officers; he attends the levee of Lord Mansfield who sits "with his tie-wig, his coat unbuttoned, his legs pushed much before him, and his heels off the ground and knocking frequently but not hard against each other"; he illuminated John Wilkes as Wilkes holds a candle to show Samuel Johnson "a fine print of a beautiful female figure which hung in the room," pointing out "the elegant contour of the bosom with the finger of an arch connoisseur"; and he presents Lord Kames as a dying man extending "his cold right hand" and chucking Boswell under the chin "as if he had said, 'You're a Wag.'" Boswell is there and so are we!

Anything but naive about the power of the press, the role of the media in political socialization, and the consequences of media politics, Boswell manages to turn a part of his grand tour from 1764–1766 into a celebration of a free and brave people. Perhaps no single event in his life better shows his skill as a journalist than his 1765 journal of a tour to Corsica which was printed in 1768 as *An Account of Corsica, the Journal of the Tour to That Island; and Memoirs of Pasquale Paoli*. Although Paoli's battle was lost by the time Boswell's *Account* came into print, Boswell's book was an immediate, long-lasting success and even resulted in a nickname he was proud to own for the rest of his life—"Corsica Boswell." Dr. Samuel Johnson was quick to praise the volume when it appeared because it

<sup>1</sup> Boswell, *Grand Tour: Germany and Switzerland*, 24; James Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence, 1769–1774* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), 80; Boswell, *Life*, III: 78; James Boswell, *Boswell: The Applause of the Jury, 1782–1785*, ed. Irma S. Lustig and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 44–6.

"rose out of your (Boswell's) own experience and observation."<sup>4</sup> In quest of General Pasquale de Paoli, his pursuit would probably be admired by the best of today's investigative reporters for nothing could keep him from his trophy—not sore feet or rustic men, not the risk of being captured by pirates or arrested as a spy, not two hundred miles of formidable terrain—mountains, forests, waterfalls, and streams. Far from depressing him, the adventure enlivened his spirits, setting his romantic soul aflame amidst the company of Corsican peasants who were fighting for their freedom. Even General Paoli's initial suspicion was no barrier to this eager, enthusiastic, irrepressible young Scotsman who had "gall" enough to stage many an audience with the celebrities of his day.

By Boswell's account of their first meeting, Paoli, "hardly saying a word," walked "backwards and forwards through the room" all the while looking at Boswell "with a steadfast, keen, and penetrating eye, as if he searched my [Boswell's] very soul."<sup>5</sup> Seeing it fit to defend the inclusion of such seemingly little circumstances as a part of his approach to biography, Boswell quotes the wisdom of Johnson's Rambler in the introductory pages of his *Life of Samuel Johnson*:

There are many invisible circumstances, which, whether we read as enquirers after natural or moral knowledge, whether we intend to enlarge our science or increase our virtue, are more important than public occurrences. Thus Sallust, the great master of nature, has not forgotten in his account of Catiline to remark that "his walk was now quick, and again slow," as an indication of a mind revolving something with violent commotion.<sup>6</sup>

Boswell's adherence to this doctrine of minute particularity, recording "the spark that adds something to the general blaze," continually gave life to his investigative reporting. By the time Boswell leaves Paoli and Corsica, he has established a life-long rapport and friendship with the Corsican General, having properly interviewed Paoli while simultaneously confiding the

<sup>4</sup> Frederick A. Pottle, *James Boswell: The Earlier Years, 1740-1769* (London: Heinemann, 1966), 361-2.

<sup>5</sup> James Boswell, *Boswell on the Grand Tour: Italy, Corsica, and France, 1765-1766*, ed. Frank Brady and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw Hill, 1955), 362.

<sup>6</sup> Boswell, *Life*, I: 32.

darkest secrets of his soul, recording in his journal, "I was, for the rest of my life, set free from a slavish timidity in the presence of great men, for where shall I find a man greater than Paoli?"

When reporting the truth about a person with whom he is an intimate friend, Boswell's "honesty" knows no bounds. The published results are certainly newsworthy, but do they come from a candid friend or impudent scoundrel? What would Samuel Johnson have thought of Boswell's discussion in the *Life of Johnson* of his convulsive muscular contractions, palsy-like shaking, body-rolling, breath-blowing, superstitious movements, and strange mutterings? Is there raw impudence or journalistic professionalism in Boswell's precise delineation of the "aweful, melancholy, and venerable Johnson" laughing uncontrollably over Langton's will: "And then burst into such a fit of laughter that he seemed almost in a convulsion; then in order to support himself he laid hold of one of the posts which were then at the side of the pavement and bellowed forth such peals that in the dark silence of the night his voice resounded from Temple Bar to Fleet Ditch."<sup>1</sup> How would Johnson, called by Boswell the "Sword of Goliath" and a "Hercules who strangled infants in his cradle," have reacted to the following animated portrait of himself eating?

I never knew any man who relished good eating more than he did. When at table, he was totally absorbed in the business of the moment; his looks seemed riveted to his plate; nor would he, unless when in very high company, say one word, or even pay the least attention to what was said by others, till he had satisfied his appetite, which was so fierce, and indulged in with such intenseness, that while in the act of eating, the veins of his forehead swelled, and generally a strong perspiration was visible.<sup>2</sup>

Since dress is of no consequence to the effect Boswell desired to achieve in this full-faced portrait, the usual details concerning such matters as the dressing of Johnson's hair or the style of his neckcloth are omitted. Instead, riveted eyes, swollen

<sup>1</sup> Boswell, *Grand Tour: Italy, Corsica, and France*, 190.

<sup>2</sup> Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 188-9.

<sup>3</sup> Boswell, *Life*, II: 60; III: 7; and I: 468.

veins and strong perspiration dominate the image of Johnson as he gives his complete attention to the business of eating. As an afterpiece, Boswell notes that the overall appearance of Johnson satisfying his fierce appetite "could not but be disgusting" to "those whose sensations were delicate." In some of his character portrayals, Boswell finds it helpful to use a particular portrait as an illustration of an important psychological principle or character trait. Here he observes that such behavior at the table was "doubtless not very suitable to the character of a philosopher, who should be distinguished by self-command." As far as Johnson himself was concerned, Boswell owned that "though he could be rigidly *abstemious*, [he] was not a *temperate* man either in eating or drinking. He could refrain, but he could not use moderately."<sup>10</sup> In questing for "truth," has Boswell abused friendship and decorum?

As an investigative journalist whose curiosity knows no bounds, Boswell dares to ask the questions others are perhaps thinking but too timid, too polite, or too well-bred to ask. When he meets Voltaire in 1764, he seeks to draw out Europe's resident skeptic on the subject of immortality of the soul. On the evening of 28 December 1764 when Boswell was twenty-four and Voltaire seventy, the two spent a good part of an evening by themselves in the drawing-room of Voltaire's estate in Ferney with a great Bible spread before them. "If ever two mortal men disputed with vehemence, we did," Boswell records.<sup>11</sup> During the heated combat of minds, Boswell finds his understanding confounded by Voltaire's daring bursts of ridicule. Standing like "an orator of ancient Rome," Voltaire becomes increasingly agitated until, with his aged frame trembling beneath him, he cries, "Oh, I am very sick; my head turns round," as he gently lets himself fall upon an easy chair. Once he recovers, Boswell resumes the conversation. With a changed tone, now serious and earnest, Boswell demands of him "an honest confession of his real sentiments"—and gets it!

He gave it me with candour and with a mild eloquence which touched my heart. I did not believe him capable of thinking in the manner that he declared to me was

<sup>10</sup> Boswell, *Life*, I: 468.

<sup>11</sup> Boswell, *Grand Tour: Germany and Switzerland*, 293.

"from the bottom of his heart." He expressed his veneration—his love—of the Supreme Being, and his entire resignation to the will of Him who is All-wise. He expressed his desire to resemble the Author of Goodness by being good himself. His sentiments go no farther. He does not inflame his mind with grand hopes of the immortality of the soul. He says it may be, but he knows nothing of it. And his mind is in perfect tranquility."<sup>11</sup>

Deeply moved and also sorry for Voltaire, Boswell doubts his sincerity, calling to him with emotion, "Are you sincere? are you really sincere?" Answering with, "Before God, I am," Voltaire exclaims, "I suffer much. But I suffer with patience and resignation; not as a Christian—but as a man."<sup>12</sup>

Could any investigative journalist have been more pleased with such success? It is difficult to disagree with Boswell's statement that a journey from Scotland to Ferney would not have been too much to pay to obtain such an interview. Boswell's account of the whole conversation that evening is preserved in a letter to his dear friend William Johnson Temple. That publication is on Boswell's mind, a fact which underscores his journalistic intentions, is obvious for he tells Temple:

I look upon it [the conversation] as an invaluable treasure. One day the public shall have it...Our important scene must not appear till after his death. But I have a great mind to send over to London a little sketch of my reception at Ferney, of the splendid manner in which Monsieur Voltaire lives, and of the brilliant conversation of this celebrated author at the age of seventy-two. [Frederick A. Pottle notes that Voltaire was actually only seventy at this time.] The sketch would be a letter, addressed to you, full of gaiety and full of friendship. I would send it to one of the best public papers or magazines. But this is probably a flight of my over-heated mind. I shall not send the sketch unless you approve of my doing so.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Boswell, *Grand Tour: Germany and Switzerland*, 293-4.

<sup>12</sup> Boswell, *Grand Tour: Germany and Switzerland*, 294.

<sup>13</sup> Boswell, *Grand Tour: Germany and Switzerland*, 294.

Styling himself "Baron" Boswell during segments of his prolonged Grand Tour, Boswell could (and did), as Frederick A. Pottle reminds us, claim that "the blood of the Bruce flowed in his veins, and on one occasion felt free to remind George III that he was his cousin."<sup>15</sup> Such swelling egoism is often beyond belief whether it be his portrait of himself dazzling the Princess of Saxe-Gotha with his flowered velvet clothes, his readiness to mention an enemy of the Pope's in an audience with the Pope, or his boldness in bidding the gracious Prince of Baden-Durlach if he might have the "Order of Fidelity" bestowed upon him.<sup>16</sup>

Sometimes when he is dealing with women, Boswell's egoism turns him into a down-right scoundrel. "Gall" is too gentle a word for such behavior. In company with Lord and Lady Kames during his Harvest Jaunt of 1762, Boswell pays a two-day visit to their only daughter Jean who had married Patrick Heron the previous year. Boswell appears to have become her lover. So much for the warm friendship he claims to have for her parents.<sup>17</sup> While in London the following year, he courts and beds the actress Louisa Lewis hoping for little more than "a winter's safe copulation." Ironically, he gets more than he bargains for when "Signor Gonorrhoea" comes calling.<sup>18</sup> Later, an impetuous twenty-four and just arrived in Turin, Italy, with "mingled feelings of awe and adulterous anticipation" (Geoffrey Scott's phrase), he courts three countesses at one time.<sup>19</sup> On his way back to England from Paris, the last leg of his Grand Tour, he escorts Rousseau's mistress and housekeeper Thérèse Le Vasseur to England and, of course, has an intrigue with her. Once again, Boswell gets his just reward when Thérèse informs him that he is "a hardy and vigorous lover," but one with "no art." On seeing him cast

<sup>15</sup> Boswell, *Grand Tour: Italy, Corsica, and France*, 8605; James Boswell, *Boswell's London Journal, 1762-1763* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Boswell, *Grand Tour: Germany and Switzerland*, xii and 181-2; Boswell, *Grand Tour: Italy, Corsica, and France*, 8701.

<sup>17</sup> James Boswell, *The Private Papers of James Boswell from Malahide Castle in the Collection of Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Heyward Isham*, ed. Geoffrey Scott and Frederick A. Pottle (Mount Vernon, New York: privately printed, 1928-1934), XVI: 304-5; and James Boswell, *Boswell: The Ominous Years, 1774-1776*, ed. Charles Ryskamp and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 186n5.

<sup>18</sup> Boswell, *London Journal*, 155-6 and 161.

<sup>19</sup> Boswell, *Grand Tour: Italy, Corsica, and France*, x.

down, she adds, "I did not mean to hurt you. You are young, you can learn."<sup>20</sup> Married to the true love of his life Margaret Montgomerie, he carelessly leaves his journal around so she can read of his exploits. Years later when Dr. Johnson warns him that anyone seen with the notorious *femme fatale* Margaret Caroline Rudd is sure to be ruined, he immediately pays court to her. Impudence. Gall. Egoism. Insensitivity. Recklessness. It fascinates some; others it repels.

At one point in his Grand Tour adventure, Boswell asks his servant Jacob to tell him his strengths and weaknesses presumably so he may become a better "baron." Such defiance of the decorum that existed between masters and servants was unheard of. Not so for Boswell. With his master pleading for honesty, Jacob criticizes Boswell for "making experiments on the lowest characters."<sup>21</sup> However impudent such a remark might be, Boswell is all-too-aware of its validity—and so are we. For example, who but Boswell would dare to dispute with galley slaves about their "easy" life?<sup>22</sup> His instinct as an investigative reporter unites with this desire to make experiments on the lowest characters as he "proceeds to one of the galleys where the slaves are mostly working in different ways in order to gain some little thing." By carefully inserting background information about the general ideas of life in the galleys which he skillfully juxtaposes to the realities of this forgotten society, Boswell builds dramatic conflict: he serves as a spokesman for the myths; they combat the myths with actualities. When Boswell boldly insists to a twenty-year slave "that after so long a time custom must have made even the galleys easy," several of 'em come about him and dispute his proposition. Playing devil's advocate, Boswell continues:

I maintained that custom made all things easy, and that people who had been long in prison did not chose to come out. "Ah," said the slaves, "it is otherwise here. It is two prisons. If we could escape, we should certainly do it. A bird shut up in a cage desires freedom, and so much the more should a man desire it. At first we shed

<sup>20</sup> Boswell, *Grand Tour: Italy, Corsica, and France*, 278.

<sup>21</sup> Boswell, *Grand Tour: Italy, Corsica, and France*, 237.

<sup>22</sup> Boswell, *Grand Tour: Italy, Corsica, and France*, 243.

tears, we groaned, but our tears and groans availed us nothing."<sup>21</sup>

The drama of the scene clearly results from the pose Boswell assumes in his attempt to draw the slaves out. The pose hides Boswell's true feelings, as his aside indicates: "I was touched by the misery of these wretches, but appeared firm, which made them not show much grief." Pleased with his performance, Boswell remarks, "Mallet, who used to joke me on being an eternal disputer, might now say, 'Baron, you dispute even with galley-slaves.'"<sup>22</sup> Extending himself beyond the narrow circle of everyday existence and into the world of the convicts at hard labor aboard prison ships, Boswell successfully unveils the group's desires and objectives, exploiting the tension he himself creates. Is not this investigative reporting at its best?

As a counselor for the defence, Boswell encounters many prisoners on a one-to-one basis where he simultaneously plays the varying roles of legal counsel, spiritual advisor, concerned friend, and curious criminologist. With accurate reportorial skills, he presents various encounters with criminals as dramatic performances. Such is the situation in the case of his client John Raybould, whom a jury had unanimously convicted of forgery despite Boswell's efforts on his behalf. On 21 February 1768, three days before Raybould was to be executed, Boswell visited his condemned client after having "dreamt of Raybould under sentence of death" the previous night. As his journal already established the basis of the relationship by recording the events of the trial, Boswell now sees fit to delineate his own motivations for the Tolbooth visit. He is depressed and hopes that his "gloomy imagination might be cured by seeing the reality."<sup>23</sup>

Having provided the necessary background for an understanding of the subsequent action, Boswell progresses from exposition to the prison scene itself. Shown up to Raybould by Archibald, "the soldier who was to be tried for murder," Boswell finds "the clanking of the iron-room floor" has a "terrible" effect on his melancholy spirit. The very sounds of the setting reinforce the atmosphere of the scene. In dramatic

<sup>21</sup> Boswell, *Grand Tour: Italy, Corsica, and France*, 243.

<sup>22</sup> Boswell, *Grand Tour: Italy, Corsica, and France*, 243.

<sup>23</sup> James Boswell, *Boswell in Search of a Wife, 1766-1769* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956), 130.

contrast to the agitated lawyer, the doomed client seems "very composed." Both figures are cast stage center as they sit beside one another for "an hour and a half by the light of a dim farthing candle." The significant trifle of the "dim farthing candle" emphasizes the idea of man's dismal, cheap, and ephemeral existence which, like the candle, can be extinguished momentarily.

As he listens to Raybould speak "very properly on religion," Boswell faithfully acts out his self-assigned role of spiritual advisor to the condemned man by reading and lecturing upon "the 4 Chapter of the 1 Epistle of John." He finds himself taking verse 18 as his main text and discoursing "on *fear* very appositively." The result proves to be a prison sermon which perhaps rivals the combined efforts of John Wesley, George Whitefield, the Rev. Mr. Vilette, and Vicar Primrose. Taking his illustration from a former client, "Robert Hay, the soldier who was hanged last year," Boswell sermonizes eloquently: "There, John," said I, 'did he lie quite sunk, quite desperate, and neither would eat nor drink, and all for *fear*, just terror for dying. But the comfortable doctrine of Christianity prevents this.'" As was so often the case, Boswell, even under circumstances so grim, delights in the quality of his performance and the state of his mind: "I was quite firm, and I was astonished to compare myself now with myself when a boy, remarkably timorous."

Noting that his sermon seems to make Raybould "wonderfully easy," Boswell casts off the role of spiritual advisor and puts on the dual part of concerned friend and curious criminologist, talking "quite freely" with John: "But John, have you no fear for the immediate pain of dying?' 'No,' said he, 'I have had none as yet. I know not how it may be at the very moment. But I do think I shall be quite composed.'" Expecting to find a condemned prisoner caught in an eleventh-hour, anguished struggle, Boswell is surprised to discover a resigned individual "much at ease." His first reaction to this unexpected behavior is to proceed with caution and skepticism; however, after steadfastly scrutinizing Raybould, Boswell feels he is "speaking truly." An amateur psychologist of some merit, Boswell is able to confirm his conclusion by observing:

One certain sign of his being much at ease was the readiness with which his attention was diverted to any other subject than his own melancholy situation; for,

when a man is much distressed, he is still fixed in brooding over his calamity. But Raybould talked of his wife's journey down in all its particulars, just as if he had been an indifferent, ordinary man.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the most curious incident in this prison scene is distinctly the product of Boswell's unique imagination and direction. Raybould tells his inquisitive visitor that "when he first came to Scotland he did not know the difference between an agent and an advocate." What dramatic potential could possibly be inherent in such a simple declarative statement? Noticing Raybould begin "to smile at his own ignorance," Boswell considers "how amazing it would be if a man under sentence of death should really laugh." If a dramatic complication aims to create a forward-straining tension, then this passage is an excellent illustration of the technique. "With the nicest care of a diligent student of human nature," Boswell "as decently as possible" first smiles "as he [Raybould] did." Before long the two of them are laughing together. Perhaps Boswell's reaction of "How strange!"<sup>27</sup> is the only possible one to such a scene?

Surely a man who disputes with galley slaves would have no difficulty arguing an issue with a forger of bank notes. Such is Boswell's next ploy. To Boswell's very calmly questioning "whether a man dying of sickness or one in his situation" is worse off, Raybould say, "one in his situation." Countering his "philosophical" adversary, Boswell argues that "the one dying of sickness" is worse, because "he is weakened and unable to support the fear of death," whereas one in his situation is "quite well but for the prospect before him." He fails, however, to convince his opponent, who "maintains his proposition" because, he says, "the man weakened by sickness" is "brought to a state of indifference."<sup>28</sup>

As the scene evolves from sermon to discussion to laughter to debate, the tone varies accordingly—solemn, reflective, comic, philosophical. Diverse as such subject matter might appear, it does have a certain organic unity which binds it together into a single, coherent dramatic scene. Given the eccentricities of the agitated Boswell and the composure of the

<sup>26</sup> Boswell, *In Search of a Wife*, 131.

<sup>27</sup> Boswell, *In Search of a Wife*, 131.

<sup>28</sup> Boswell, *In Search of a Wife*, 131.

convicted Raybould, the series of actions is probable and the thoughts, credible. If any confusion remains at the end of the scene, perhaps Boswell's concluding overview offers a solution to the problem for it is truly "a curious scene."

Three days later when Boswell witnessed Raybould's execution, he recorded that he "felt very little." What an ironic epilogue to the previous drama! Had the ease and composure of the condemned man actually soothed Boswell's own troubled soul?

Whether Boswell's amazing "chutzpah" is that of an impudent scoundrel, candid friend, curious criminologist, or performing egoist, it is clear that the investigative reporter in him is always close at hand turning actual experiences and live interviews into fascinating material meant for private and sometimes public consumption. Like it or despise it, incredible gall is at the heart and soul of the unique genius that is James Boswell.