Political Hypochondria: The Case of James Boswell

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Political Hypochondria: The Case of James Boswell

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Boswell yearned for most of his life for a political career, attempting to achieve office both through his own efforts and through the patronage of others. His own political views were those of an orthodox, at times extreme, Tory. Their origins, however, were complicated and involved Boswell's own attraction to feudal lairdship in a romanticised Scottish past, as well as stresses and rivalries with his own Whig father. Moreover, his Torysm was also complicated by his sense of personal unworthiness, deepened by his doubts over succeeding his father as laird of Auchinleck. These fears in their turn were sustained by, and encouraged, his temperamental hypochondria, with its self-contempt and visions of futility. Political success would have given a measure of stability, and would have been a proof of worthiness, both for himself and for his father. As it was, his faith in land, order, male succession, political office were undermined by self-doubt, changeability, failure, fear of failure: political hypochondria.

On 9 November 1790, Alderman John Boydell gave a "magnificent feast" at the Guildhall on the occasion of his installation as Lord Mayor of London. Among the guests were William Pitt, at the height of political power, and still only thirty-one, and James Boswell, fifty years old, a martyr to drink and dissipation, and profoundly disappointed of the success at the English Bar for which he had moved from Edinburgh to London some four years earlier. With the *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* already published in 1785, and *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D* widely promised, Boswell had acquired considerable literary notoriety, but yearned still for political advancement, in which cause he had been plying Pitt with correspondence since around 1784, at the very beginning of his pre-eminence, most of which, after the first approach, had gone unanswered. With a characteristic lack of self-effacement, Boswell engineered himself into entertaining Boydell's guests with an after-dinner song, written by himself — "two stanzas of eight verses each, with a repeated chorus of four verses" — entitled "William Pitt, The Grocer of London" which, according to one account, he sang "no less than six times," "partly volunteering and partly pressed by the company." Pitt, apparently, "sat as silent and unbending as a statue" until, after the sixth rendering, he "was obliged to relax from his gravity, and join in the general laugh at the oddity of Mr. Boswell's character." While the performance, unsurprisingly, made no impact, or at least no beneficial impact, in terms of Boswell's political career, he seems to have regarded it with a degree of poetic pride, for it was published as a broadside a few days later, and also printed in both the *St. James's Chronicle* and the *Edinburgh Advertiser*, with the title *William Pitt, The Grocer of London, An Excellent New Ballad, Written by James Boswell, Esq. And sung by him at*

Guildhall on Lord-Mayor's Day, 1790; When, after the Alarms of War interrupting our Commerce, an honourable Peace was announced.[1]

The incident is typical of Boswell not only in terms of its uninhibited self-promotion. Throughout his life his relation to power, especially to the power he saw inherent in specific individuals, was complicated by his attraction to those possessed of authority, and in some cases therefore with the potential for doing him good, and at the same time his deep-seated resentment at being always the courtier, never the courted. At its most blatant, he attempts to woo Pitt by slighting him as the grocer of London, hoping that his own oddly winning personality will eventually make Pitt at worst laugh, at best offer him a place. At its saddest, it is Boswell's petulant silence in Edinburgh during the last months of Johnson's life, sulking because Johnson will not, before it is too late, acknowledge Boswell's claims and right to temperamental melancholy. At its most absurd, it is Boswell at the head of the mob that broke his own father's windows in Edinburgh in 1767 because he failed to illuminate them in celebration of the legal victory in the Douglas Cause. Reverence for a series of superior individuals, including his father Lord Auchinleck, Johnson, the Corsican leader Pascal Paoli, Rousseau, and Voltaire, a belief in order and in subordination in government, and reliance on achieving personal political advancement through the usual channels of patronage and favour, have to be set against his capacity to mock or offend those whom he revered, his espousal and practice of individual liberty, his youthful friendship and correspondence with John Wilkes, including the submission of an essay for publication in *The North Briton* (which was rejected),[2] and his hypochondria. None of these factors make Boswell's conservatism a simple matter of political belief, though in fact his political stances are relatively simple to itemise, as he did himself on several occasions. In the "Memoirs of James Boswell, Esq." that he wrote anonymously for *The European Magazine* in May and June 1791, mainly in order to promote *The Life of Johnson*, he states explicitly of himself:

> Upon all occasions he has avowed himself to be a steady Royalist; nay, has had the courage to assume the title of *Tory*, protesting, that since his present most gracious Majesty's generous plan of annihilating the distinction of political parties has been frustrated, and there are some who keep up the cant appellation of *Whigs*, the true friends to the constitution in Church and State should meet them with the opposite name, as *Tories*.[3]

Equally, in his *Hypochondriack* essay "On Subordination in Government," published, again anonymously, in *The London Magazine* for April 1779, he declares:

> For my own part, after having read a good deal, and observed more; after having, in the heat of youth, glowed with the animation of resistance, to enjoy which we are too ready to imagine grievances, and entertain apprehensions of oppression by those who rule over us, as Don Quixote fancied foes for the pleasure of combating them, I feel myself more and more convinced of the excellence of monarchy, limited and tempered as it is in our fortunate constitution.[4]

As a conventional Tory, Boswell believed in government, in the constitution, and in loyalty to church and to a limited monarchy. He stood as Tory parliamentary candidate for Ayrshire in 1784, having prepared the ground for himself with the two editions of his *Letter to the People of Scotland, On the Present State of the Nation* in 1783 and 1784, but lost. He upheld, in his second *Letter to the People of Scotland*, of 1785, their constitutional right to retain their fifteen legal Lords of Session, as established by the Union, against attempts by the new

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[1] Details and quotations from F. A. Pottle, *The Literary Career of James Boswell Esq.*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929, pp. 141–144. Referred to from now on as *LC*.

[2] See F. A. Pottle (ed.), *Boswell's London Journal, 1762-1763*, London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1950, p. 213, note 8. Referred to from now on as *LJ*.

[3] Reprinted in *LC*, p. xliii.

[4] Margery Bailey (ed.), *Boswell's Column*, London: William Kimber, 1951, p. 112. Referred to from now on as *BC*. The titles to the papers, which I retain, were in fact added by Bailey.

government, and by his former colleagues Ilay Campbell and Henry Dundas, to reduce the number to ten, and also wrote severely against any form of hasty change in laws or in constitutional principles. So, in *The Hypochondriack*, in his paper "On Change," he asserts:

> Innovations in the laws or constitution of a country are ever to be dreaded. For as the effect of all public regulations is chiefly owing to the influence of opinion and habit, and it is long before new ones can have that influence, we are not sure how they may agree with the tempers and inclinations of the people. Wise men therefore will be willing to submit to some inconveniences, rather than attempt a reformation, which, although the word by which it is expressed has acquired in our language a signification of improvement, is in reality not always for the better.[5]

Equally, "Innovations in religion are still more to be dreaded. For if there be a reverence for ancient establishments in temporal matters, there is a higher reverence in spiritual." Indeed, he summarises, "The loss of reverence is the most fatal thing thing that can happen in any society, both to general peace and particular comfort."[6]

None of this is especially remarkable. What begins to be telling is the extent to which Boswell held views that made him even more conservative than his mentors and models, more conservative, for example, than Johnson. So, where Johnson could propose a toast, "Here's to the next insurrection of the negroes in the West Indies,"[7] Boswell, after Johnson was safely dead, could write and publish *No Abolition of Slavery; or the Universal Empire of Love: a Poem*, dedicated "*To the Respectable Body of West-India Planters and Merchants*" and even quoting Ovid, "*Omnia vincit amor*" on the title-page.[8] Or again, at Slains during the tour of Scotland in 1773, Boswell, in spite of his love of liberty, descanted on his enthusiasm for feudalism, only to be undercut by Johnson's wry common sense: "I said I believed mankind were happier in the ancient feudal state of subordination than when in the modern state of independency. Mr. Johnson said, 'To be sure, the *Chief* was.'"[9]

Frank Brady calls Boswell's approach to politics conservative, idealistic and emotional.[10] Much of his conservatism, in fact, belongs here, among the images and myths of a Scottish past that he was, in 1773, displaying for Johnson's engagement and appraisal. Amongst the most persistent pictures that Boswell has of himself, that of the feudal Scots baron has the most resonance and, ultimately, attractive though Captain Macheath, for example, might be as a sexual model, especially in his London journal of 1762 and 1763, the most solid foundations in terms of his imaginative construction of himself. The manuscript *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* in particular is replete with feudal images, Boswell centre stage. In Glenmoriston he "regretted I was not head of a clan. I would make my tenants follow me. I could not be a *patriarchal* chief. But I'd be a *feudal* chief."[11] On Raasay, he "exerted [him]self in an extraordinary degree in dancing tonight, drinking porter heartily at intervals, and thinking that [he] was fit to lead on Highlanders."[12] This species of feudalism is rationalised — and such "rationalisation" has to be seen in the context of a man who styled himself "Baron Boswell" when travelling in Germany and Italy in 1764 and 1765, "Signor Baron Boswell,"[13] and who wrote from Rome to John Wilkes in 1765, "You called me 'My old Lord of Scotland,' and

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[5] *BC*, p. 324.
[6] *BC*, p. 325.
[7] George Birkbeck Hill and L. F. Powell (eds), *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL. D*, 6 vols, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934–50, revised 1964, vol. II, p. 146. Referred to from now on as *Life*.
[8] Details from *LC*, pp. 144–145.
[9] F. A. Pottle and Charles H. Bennett (eds), *Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL. D.*, London: William Heinemann, 1936, p. 77. Referred to from now on as *Hebrides*.
[10] Frank Brady, *Boswell's Political Career*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965, p. 32. Referred to from now on as *PC*.
[11] *Hebrides*, p. 103.
[12] *Hebrides*, p. 140.
[13] See Frank Brady and F. A. Pottle (eds), *Boswell on the Grand Tour: Italy, Corsica, and France, 1765-1766*, London: William Heinemann, 1955, p. 86 and note 5. Referred to from now on as *GT(ii)*.

you said I looked as if I had a thousand men at my back. Had it been your chiefest interest to make Boswell satisfied with himself, you could not have done it better"[14] — in a long section of the manuscript *Journal*, heavily revised in the published *Tour*, where Boswell compares his own Tory politics with Johnson's.

The passage in question is inserted in the account of Monday 13 September, while Johnson and Boswell are at Kingsburgh, on the Isle of Skye, having just heard from Flora Macdonald herself the history of Prince Charles Edward's escape from Scotland — Johnson sleeping the previous night in "the very bed in which the Prince lay."[15] "Mr. Johnson," declares Boswell, "is not properly a *Jacobite*. He does not hold the *jus divinum* of kings. He founds their right on long possession, which ought not to be disturbed upon slight grounds." At the same time, Boswell and Johnson "are both *Tories*; both convinced of the utility of monarchical power, and both lovers of that reverence and affection for a sovereign which constitute loyalty." Boswell, however, has "all that Mr. Johnson has, and something more, for my high notions of male succession make me mount up to distant times." Indeed, "male succession," for Boswell, is the impediment to his supporting the house of Stuart. "I might," he says,

> fix my eye at the point of James IV, from whom my ancestor Thomas Boswell got the estate of Auchinleck, and look no further, had I a line of males from that Prince. But Queen Mary comes in the way; and I see the sons of Lennox on the throne.

In short, he finds the Stuart family's right to the throne "very casual and artificial," and, in particular, "I find not the firm feudal hold for which I wish and which my imagination figures."[16]

That imaginative figuring, and its unusual potency when cast in a Scottish light, drives Boswell's conservatism. In 1773, while making the tour with Johnson, he had not yet succeeded to the Auchinleck property. Nor had he in 1780, when in his *Hypochondriack* essay "On Living in the Country" he concluded what is basically just a series of loosely linked quotations from Dryden, Milton and Horace with a heartfelt celebration of the state of being a "master of land":

> There is a feeling of dignity and consequence in being master of land above any thing else. It is the natural dominion of man over the earth, granted him by his Almighty Creator, and no artificial dominion is felt like it. What is the first minister of state in London, personally, when compared with a duke, or an earl, a knight, or a squire, the lord of a manor, and a proprietor of extensive domains in the country?

That "feeling" generates in Boswell an imaginative engagement with the prospect of land ownership, charged with all the powers of feudal chiefdom that had made his Hebrides tour so personally and politically satisfying:

> He who is master of land sees all around him obedient to his will, not only can he totally change the face of inanimate nature, but can command the animals of each species, and even the human race itself, to multiply or to diminish, to continue or to migrate, according to his pleasure. Limited as he is by our government, and our laws, he is very essentially the arbiter of happiness and unhappiness over a district.[17]

When he wrote this paper, "Baron Boswell," just short of his fortieth birthday, was still to wait another two years for the death of Lord Auchinleck and to become, in reality as well as in imagination, a "master of land."

On 7 March 1762, some five months after reaching the age of majority, Boswell, under pressure from his father, had signed a deed of renunciation of his birthright. As Frank Brady puts it, the deed confirmed the male succession as articulated in Lord Auchinleck's marriage

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[14] *GT(ii)*, p. 73.
[15] *Hebrides*, p. 160.
[16] *Hebrides*, pp. 162–163.
[17] *BC*, pp. 196–197.

contract of 1737, "but treated Boswell personally as incompetent."[18] Because the deed was accompanied by a document executed by Lord Auchinleck himself, allowing his son £100 a year, it is clear that effectively Boswell had sold his inheritance back to his father. Brady speculates on the degree of bluff that was probably involved on Lord Auchinleck's part, pretending to possess legal powers of disinheritence that his son was unable to confirm, but anxious to free his estate from the prospect of its devolving onto an eldest son who, through his overspending, promiscuity, drunkenness and, in particular, his fondness for publication, had already become an embarrassment to him. On Boswell's part it is clear that he felt he had gained considerable financial independence from the deal. Both sides, in some sense, were satisfied. But equally it meant that "Baron Boswell" of only two years later was a baron with neither title nor estate to inherit, and that his youthful behaviour had provoked his father into this public and legal declaration of his unworthiness as first male in the line of succession.

Boswell suffered a further public and family humiliation in the summer of 1769 when, himself involved in the courtship of his cousin, Margaret, he was obliged to witness Lord Auchinleck, widowed since 1766, courting their relation Elizabeth Boswell. The weddings, pointedly, took place on the same day, 25 November (though the contrivance was probably Boswell's rather than his father's), and were reported in the *Scots Magazine*:

> At Edinburgh, Alexander Boswell, Esquire, of Auchinleck, one of the Lords of Session and Justiciary, to Miss Betty Boswell, second daughter of John Boswell, Esquire, of Balmuto, deceased.
> At Lainshaw, in the shire of Ayr, James Boswell, Esquire, of Auchinleck, advocate, to Miss Peggie Montgomerie, daughter of the late David Montgomerie of Lainshaw, Esquire.[19]

As Boswell saw it, there could have been no more unambiguous demonstration of his father's continuing lack of confidence in his son or, fearing as he did the possibility of a second line of inheritance, in his future grandsons. His resentment, bitterness, and disappointment soured the already tense relations between them. Boswell spent long periods between July and November refusing to speak to his father. The prospect preyed upon his mind:

> SUNDAY 16 JULY. After a wretched, feverish night I awaked in a dreadful state. I have no doubt that evil spirits, enemies to mankind, are permitted to tempt and torment them. "Damn him. Curse him," sounded somehow involuntarily in my ears perpetually. I was absolutely mad. I sent for worthy Grange, and was so furious and black-minded and uttered such horrid ideas that he could not help shedding tears, and even went so far as to say that if I talked so he would never see me again. I looked on my father's marrying again as the most ungrateful return to me for having submitted so much to please him. I thought it an insult on the memory of my valuable mother. I thought it would totally estrange him from his children by her. In short, my wild imagination made it appear as terrible as can be conceived.[20]

After the event, he took Peggy to stay, in his father's absence, at Auchlinleck where, as recollected in his journal some four years later, he knelt in the ruins of the Old Castle, took a fragment of its stone in his hand, and swore "that if any man had the estate in exclusion of the rightful heir, this stone should swim in his heart's blood (I keep the stone)."[21]

If many of the obsessions in Boswell's temperament, and in his political outlook, come together in his relations with his father, so do many of the contradictions and inconsistencies. He is devoted to loyalties, hierarchies, stabilities based on the ownership of land, and enhances that devotion with indulgence in images of romantic Scottish feudalism, yet sold his birthright and spent years worrying that he might not get it back. He proclaims an

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[18] Frank Brady, *James Boswell: The Earlier Years, 1740-1769*, London: William Heinemann, 1966, p. 80. Referred to from now on as *Earlier Years*.

[19] Frank Brady and F. A. Pottle (eds), *Boswell In Search Of A Wife, 1766-1769*, London: Heinemann, 1957, p. 369. Referred to from now on as *Wife*.

[20] *Wife*, p. 245.

[21] *Earlier Years*, p. 441.

unshakeable adherence to rights of male succession, weaving it into his attitude towards monarchy and Jacobitism, and publicly tracing his ancestry back to "Thomas Boswell, who was highly favoured by his sovereign, James IV of Scotland, and fell with him at the battle of Flodden Field,"[22] yet lived for twenty years in the knowledge that his own father considered him an unworthy successor. Boswell proclaimed himself in print as a Tory, associated with Tories, cultivated Tory attitudes, yet his father was a Whig: "a complete Whig and a convinced, though not demonstrative, Presbyterian" — as Richard B. Sher points out, he was a ruling elder in the annual general assembly every year from 1755 to 1762[23] — "scorned modern literature, spoke broad Scots from the bench, and even in writing took no pains to avoid the Scotticisms which most of his colleagues were coming to regard as vulgar."[24] Boswell, meanwhile, deplored the narrow Calvinism of his upbringing, and tended, even as a young man, towards the high Anglican, even towards Roman Catholicism, in religion, and certainly towards "the most brilliant and showy method of public worship."[25] He relished writing, theatre, publication. He relished, too, the lines his friend John Courtenay wrote about him: "Amid these names can BOSWELL be forgot, Scarce by North Britons now esteem'd a Scot?" and quoted them in the *Life of Johnson*.[26] His father was diametrically opposed to him in virtually every respect, stood for all he considered most repressive, narrow-minded, provincial, prejudiced, most worthy to be put behind him, and yet was the man who had held him in a state of dependence for so much of his life.

As late as June 1781, and still a year before Lord Auchinleck's death, Boswell published as part of his *Hypochondriack* series an essay "On Parents and Children," which included a long, heartfelt section on sons kept in subjection to their fathers.

> For, if young men be accustomed to the most abject dependence on unlimited authority in an individual, it would seem their spirits must be broke, so as that they never can attain to that manly resolution without which we never enjoy liberty. In our own country we see fathers who very injudiciously, and in my opinion very unjustly, attempt to keep their sons even when well advanced in life, in such a state of subjection as must either reduce them to unfeeling stupidity, or keep them in perpetual uneasiness and vexation.

Boswell was in London between late March 1781 and early June, so the June essay, whether written in London or, more likely, on his return to Edinburgh, was no doubt fuelled by his sense of a period of freedom now disappointingly at an end. He continues the essay with a scarcely veiled autobiographical narrative:

> I knew a father who was a violent whig, and used to attack his son for being a tory, upbraiding him with being deficient in "noble sentiments of liberty," while at the same time he made this son live under his roof in such bondage, that he was not only afraid to stir from home without leave like a child, but durst scarcely open his mouth in his father's presence. This was sad living.

"Yet," adds Boswell, apparently aware of the contradictoriness in the position of the Tory son who writes against respect for authority, as much as in the Whig father who denies any shred of liberty to his closest family, "I would rather see such an excess of awe than a degree of familiarity between father and son by which all reverence is destroyed."[27]

Boswell never had a political career to speak of, yet spent a large amount of time, and even more imaginative energy, in trying to achieve one. Brady details his annual spring visits to London in the mid-1770s, not only seeing Johnson and the friends at "The Club," to which the

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[22] *Hebrides*, p. 373.

[23] Richard B. Sher, "Scottish Divines and Legal Lairds: Boswell's Scots Presbyterian Identity" in *New Light on Boswell: Critical and Historical Essays on the Occasion of the Bicentenary of "The Life of Johnson"*, ed. by Greg Clingham, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 31–32.

[24] *Earlier Years*, p. 11.

[25] *LJ*, p. 80.

[26] *Life*, I, p. 223.

[27] *BC*, pp. 233–234.

anxious Boswell had been elected as a member in April 1773, but also courting those personal political contacts, mainly Scottish, including Lord Mountstuart, Lord Archibald Douglas, and Charles Douglas, the 3rd Duke of Queensbury, in order to acquire appointment to a place, almost any place that would, as Brady puts it, "make him less dependent on his father while at the same time proving him worthy of parental regard."[28] His complete failure, and his failure, after his father's death gave him independence and voting influence, to gain either an office or a parliamentary seat, are reflected on in his anonymous 1791 *Memoirs of James Boswell*, but couched in substantially different terms, with Boswell cast as the uncompromising champion of independent judgement rather than the servile place-seeker:

> It was generally supposed, that Mr. Boswell would have had a seat in Parliament; and indeed his not being amongst the Representatives of the Commons is one of those strange things which occasionally happen in the complex operations of our mixed Government. That he has not been *brought into Parliament* (as the phrase is) by some of our great men, is not to be wondered at, when we peruse his public declaration in his "Letter to the People of Scotland," in 1785. "Though ambitious, I am uncorrupted."

And Boswell proceeds to quote generously from his own pamphlet:

> Lord Mountstuart flattered me once very highly without intending it. — "I would do any thing for you (said he) but bring you into Parliament; for I could not be sure but you might oppose me in something the very next day. — His Lordship judged well. Though I should consider, with much attention, the opinion of such a friend — before taking my resolution; — most certainly I should oppose him in any measure which I was satisfied ought to be opposed. I cannot exist with pleasure, if I have not an honest independence of mind and of conduct.[29]

Old Lord Auchinleck might have been proud, at last, had he not disapproved so strongly of publication. Boswell's political potential occurred far more forcefully in his own mind than it did in reality, but even that mental presence was an uneasy one, complicated in particular by the simultaneous presence of his father, not least in terms of their both being, or eventually becoming, "masters of land," indeed masters of the same land. Traumatically, Lord Auchinleck's early insistence that his son was not a worthy successor was, in spite of the dramatic Old Castle oath, a fear that Boswell shared. As Boswell, over the long years, anticipated his likely inheritance, his constant anxiety was that he could never live up to his father. Controversial, idiosyncratic, narrow-minded, over-bearing with his family, nevertheless the truth was that Lord Auchinleck was also respected, popular, courted and above all regarded as a worthy laird, everything, in fact, that would have sustained Boswell's self-image as the feudal baron. Even visiting the Highlands with Johnson, scene of his own imaginary feudal exploits, he came across examples of his father's popularity and of the regard in which he was held, noting in Aberdeen, for example, with "great satisfaction" the "regard and indeed fondness, too, which everybody here had for my father."[30] Similarly, at Fort Augustus, Boswell "had the satisfaction of another proof how much my father is regarded. The Governor expressed the highest respect for him, and bid me tell him that if he would come that way on a Circuit to Inverness, he would do him all the honours in his power."[31]

That his "satisfaction" is as ambiguous as all of his reactions to his father becomes more explicit when Boswell, late in the tour, at Erray on the Isle of Mull, relates in his journal (the passage does not appear in the published version) of having been "gloomy" from dreaming that he had "lost him." He continues (and his sentiments predate by over seven years the *Hypochondriack* paper for June 1781, quoted above):

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[28] *PC*, p. 82 and generally pp. 81–96.
[29] *LC*, pp. xlii–xliii.
[30] *Hebrides*, p. 65.
[31] *Hebrides*, p. 102.

> It gives me pain to consider that there is much doubt if he has now that warm affection for me which he once had, and which I really have for him. I have now made up to him for all the uneasiness which my follies gave him. The satisfaction which I feel on his living till that was the case, is very great. I shall do my part now as well as I can; and shall never check my sincere affection for him (an affection which has much of the tenderness of a child) though he should appear cold.[32]

Boswell's "satisfaction" has perpetually to be set in his own mind against his awareness of his father's dissatisfaction, indeed of the apparent impossibility of his ever being satisfied. The man who has, as Boswell refers to it at the end of the *Hebrides* journal, both the private and the published versions, "the dignified courtesy of an old baron,"[33] remains unassailably the real "baron," secure in his birthright, his maleness, his land and his title, occupying all the space, political, legal, domestic, imaginary and emotional to which Boswell might lay claim, and irrespective of Boswell's own efforts to become worthy of a share for himself.

"Worth" is a key term in the journals, both in its presence and its absence, and the focus for Boswell's frequent returns to the topic is, inevitably, the Auchinleck inheritance, where worth pertains, always, to his father and lack of worth to Boswell. A typical observation is from October 1776. Alone at Auchinleck for only a brief period, he worries: "I felt a kind of weakness in the short space today while I was the highest person in the House of Auchinleck; and I looked forward with a real concern to the time when my worthy father would be removed, and I at the head of the Family."[34] This is followed, two months later, by a more fully developed statement: "I was a little melancholy this day on finding him failed when I sat awhile with him. It distressed me to apprehend that if he were gone, the dignity of the Family of Auchinleck would not be properly maintained." On this occasion, Boswell actually makes plans to attempt to cope with his own anticipated unworthiness as laird:

> I had strange romantic projects of keeping myself in the most retired state, that my weakness might not appear. But then I considered that my vivacity and love of immediate personal distinction would hurry me at times into all kinds of social meetings, and make me exhibit all my powers of jocularity, so that there would be an absurd inconsistency of conduct.[35]

Inevitably, as Lord Auchinleck declines, Boswell's fears intensify. So, in October 1781, just under a year before the event, he observes:

> Had talked to Mr. Stobie of several things about the estate of Auchinleck. Had been somewhat gloomy since I last came home, contemplating my father's death and my insufficiency for representing our ancient family. I however hoped to do well, and thought that probably hypochondria made me think the duty more difficult, and myself more unfit, than was really just.[36]

The dramatic culmination, of course, is the death itself, which is marked in the journal by what is for Boswell a virtually unique time slip. The date is Wednesday 28 August 1782, though Boswell is writing much later, on 13 September.

> On Wednesday I drank so much at dinner as to be warmed or indeed heated, and somewhat intoxicated; and at supper I drank more and increased the heat and intoxication, and talked a great deal in an idle, jocular, impolite strain. Little did I apprehend that my honoured father was then lying on his death-bed![37]

Even at the point of death, Lord Auchinleck is contrived, stylistically and psychologically, as lying in judgement on whatever his son is engaged in, with the implicit assumption of unworthiness to succeed, no matter what the activity.

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[32] *Hebrides*, pp. 303–304.
[33] *Hebrides*, p. 377.
[34] Charles Mc Weis and F. A. Pottle (eds), *Boswell in Extremes, 1776-1778*, London: Heinemann, 1971, p. 46. Referred to from now on as *Extremes*.
[35] *Extremes*, p. 67.
[36] Joseph W. Reed and F. A. Pottle (eds), *Boswell, Laird of Auchinleck, 1778-1782*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1977, p. 402. Referred to from now on as *Laird*.
[37] *Laird*, p. 476.

In a telling comment, made in the *Hebrides* journal, Boswell, in a characterisation of his father just prior to the much heralded visit with Johnson to Auchinleck and the meeting between arch Whig and arch Tory, mentions that Lord Auchinleck "assured me he never had felt one moment of what is called low spirits, or uneasiness without a real cause."[38] If this represents yet another difference between father and son, between the solidity of the one and the weakness of the other, it also seriously understates the basis and the extent of Boswell's hypochondria. Certainly, "uneasiness without a real cause" is a feature of the state of mind that he finds himself so often obliged to record in his journal, but we should be in no doubt, either, of the reality of all those unreal causes that contributed to, and indeed constituted, his depression. Fearfulness, anxiety, guilt for past actions, or for past inactions, inertia generally, religious doubts, self-recrimination for all these things, and for feeling the need to recriminate, and, overall, a crippling sense of the futility of human existence, are the hallmarks of Boswell's hypochondria. As he writes to his friend John Johnston from Holland in 1764:

> I saw all things as so precarious and vain that I had no relish of them, no views to fill my mind, no motive to incite me to action. I groaned under those dismal truths which nothing but a lucky oblivion prevents from weighing down the most vivacious souls. Black melancholy again took dominion over me. All my old dreary and fretful feelings recurred.[39]

Or, as he puts it sixteen years later in one of his *Hypochondriack* papers on hypochondria:

> his corrosive imagination destroys to his own view all that he contemplates. All that is illustrious in publick life, all that is amiable and endearing in society, all that is elegant in science and in arts, affect him just with the same indifference, and even contempt, as the pursuits of children affect rational men.[40]

The hypochondriac vision, indeed, with its relentless insistence that all activites are futile, constitutes the very converse of ambition, social, artistic, intellectual and, of course, political. If activity, be it as a lawyer, a writer, a future laird, a politician or political office-holder, or even as an imagined feudal chief, is essential to the sustaining of Boswell's self-image as a man of some worth, hypochondria for him is an assurance that all activity he has undertaken, real or imaginative, has been negative:[41] it is the denial of the energetic self, and the confirmation of the void. "Though his reason be entire enough," says Boswell in *The Hypochondriack*,

> and he knows that his mind is sick, his gloomy imagination is so powerful that he cannot disentangle himself from its influence, and he is in effect persuaded that its hideous representations of life are true. In all other distresses there is the relief of hope. But it is the peculiar woe of melancholy, that hope hides itself in the dark cloud.[42]

It is self-worth in particular that is the object of the jaundiced scrutiny of the hypochondriac perspective. As Boswell sets it out, in the inert stylistic monotony of his most hypochondriac writing:

> His opinion of himself is low and desponding. His temporary dejection makes his faculties seem quite feeble. He imagines that every body thinks meanly of him. His fancy roves over the variety of characters whom he knows in the world, and except some very bad ones indeed, they seem all better than his own. He envies the condition of numbers, whom, when in a sound state of mind, he sees to be far inferior to him. He regrets his having ever attempted distinction and excellence in

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[38] *Hebrides*, p. 369.
[39] F. A. Pottle (ed.), *Boswell in Holland, 1763-1764*, London: Heinemann, 1952, p. 206.
[40] *BC*, p. 209.
[41] For the relation between the real and the imaginative in Boswell's hypochondria, see Allan Ingram, *Boswell's Creative Gloom: A Study of Imagery and Melancholy in the Writings of James Boswell*, London: Macmillan, 1982, especially chapters 2 and 3.
[42] *BC*, p. 209.

> any way, because the effect of his former exertions now serves only to make his insignificance more vexing to him.[43]

Self-contempt and the real or imagined contempt of others constitute the inner and outer audiences for the hypochondriac's assessment of himself, audiences which can only confirm the inability even to begin a political career and the "personal incompetence" of an inheriting son and heir. For Lord Auchinleck never to have "felt one moment of what is called low spirits, or uneasiness without a real cause" was the crowning triumph in a relationship that threw "worth" into the sharpest of reliefs, and threw Boswell himself into a situation where proving himself through achieving political office was the life-line that he could not afford to have fail.

The one success in Boswell's political career — and it was a success as ambiguous as everything else that had to do with his politics — came late, in January 1788, when he was elected to the office of the Recordership of Carlisle. It was not an insignificant post and Boswell, still aged only forty-seven, might well have expected a parliamentary seat to follow. His achievement, however, satisfying though he found it, had strings attached, and they were strings that, even before taking office, he foresaw might have threatening implications. In July 1786 Boswell had suddenly been invited to dine with Sir James Lowther, Earl of Lonsdale, and one of the most powerful men behind British politics.[44] Boswell's immediate reaction had been: "Things at last come forward unexpectedly. The great LOWTHER himself has now taken me up. I may be raised to eminence in the state."[45] He was indeed "taken up," and Boswell's eventual reward for joining the Lonsdale camp was the Recordership. But he counted the cost. Lonsdale was tyrannical, brutish, moody, and impatient with independent thinking, even from feudal barons. He expected political obedience, if not servility, and Boswell, proud of the office, was humiliated by attendance on the "great LOWTHER" and by his political dependency. Eventually, after eighteen months of obedience, he was summoned by Lonsdale to Carlisle for the parliamentary election in June 1790. He went, fell out with Lonsdale, grudgingly performed his duties, and then resigned. His words in the "Memoirs" of 1791, "I cannot exist with pleasure, if I have not an honest independence of mind and of conduct," if they begin to have a hollow ring, had also been put to a recent test.

Boswell seems to have extracted himself from the humiliating Londsdale episode with as much credit as the situation allowed, given that he had been desperate enough to get into it in the first place. Just over a year later, however, he was singing "The Grocer of London" six times, without fear of humiliation, in front of the even more powerful William Pitt, still looking for patronage, still hopeful of a political offer, still placing being "first minister of state in London" above the mastership of land. Pitt, ironically, had himself been brought into parliament in 1781 for Appleby by the then Sir James Lowther, and not for singing songs. Lowther had been created 1st Earl of Lonsdale for his continuing support while Pitt was first in office.

The death of Lord Auchinleck solved nothing for Boswell. It could not possibly have done so. He continued to hanker for a political career, more so now that he could no longer prove himself through it to his sceptical father. But death itself was also a crucial factor for the hypochondriac. No man, says Boswell in *The Hypochondriack* for November 1778, "whose mind is not naturally dull, or grown callous by age, [can] be without uneasiness when he looks forward to the act of dissolution itself." A hypochondriac in particular

> 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

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[43] *BC*, p. 208.

[44] The narrative of Boswell's relationship with Lonsdale is given in Brady, *PC*, chapter 5. The journal for the period is *Boswell: The English Experiment, 1785–1789*, ed. by Irma S. Lustig and F. A. Pottle, London: Heinemann, 1986, p. 86 onwards. Referred to from now on as *Experiment*.

[45] *Experiment*, p. 86.

> frequently terrified, and dismally afflicted in this way; nor can I yet secure my mind against it at gloomy seasons of dejection.[46]

By April 1782, again in *The Hypochondriack*, four months before the death of his father, he is expressing it if anything more painfully, and more personally: "The dread of that aweful event is so habitual to me," he acknowledges, "that I can conceive nothing so desireable as relief from its gloom."[47] Boswell was in Edinburgh while writing this paper, number fifty-five in the series, with little to do but drink and visit his father. His journal for the period is a dull register of idleness and dejection.

> SUNDAY 7 APRIL. New Church all day. Father's between sermons. [...] TUESDAY 9 APRIL. Still idle. Dined father's. Drank too much. Was heated. [...] SUNDAY 14 APRIL. [...] Was in miserable hypochondria. Saw my ambitious views in London all madness. Vexed at being neglected by Burke. Thought I'd indulge a proud distance and just be an old Scottish baron and Tory. A slumber in the afternoon produced shocking melancholy. Up to tea. A *little* better. Thought myself unworthy of valuable spouse. Was quite sunk. To bed without supper. Divine lessons.
>
> MONDAY 15 APRIL. Still uneasy. Wrote *Hypochondriack* No. 55 agreeably. Grange dined with us. Was at my father's at night during supper, but took nothing. TUESDAY 16 APRIL. Still uneasy.[48]

The prospect of death, for Johnson a matter of terror at the prospect of being "Sent to Hell, Sir, and punished everlastingly,"[49] was dreadful, too, for Boswell, not only from his "habitual" hypochondriac perspective but also because the particular death of Lord Auchinleck would make for a culmination of all his anxieties.

Boswell's reactions to other people's deaths display a range of lessons. He pays tribute in his November 1778 *Hypochondriack* to

> that firmness and fortitude of which some men are possessed, who while they are sensible of the aweful importance of launching from one state of being into another, support the thoughts of it with a calmness and humble hope becoming at once the dignity of human nature, and the humble confidence of piety.[50]

Thus, Boswell conducts his deathbed interview with David Hume in order to see how an infidel faces death.[51] He takes the opportunity of discussing personal dissolution with the celebrated and the wise, including Rousseau, Voltaire, Paoli and Johnson. But the death of Lord Auchinleck brought other terrors for Boswell: responsibility, authority, exposure to comparison and judgement, and, potentially fatally, it brought mastership of land to the man who had written in *The Hypochondriack* for October 1780, "On Living in the Country," that

> Even plantations, the rearing of which is by much the highest rural enjoyment, advance so imperceptibly; that a Hypochondriac proprietor is sick and sick again with *ennui*, and is tempted with wild wishes to hang himself on one of his own trees long before they are able to bear his weight.[52]

The contradictions underpinning his political outlook were never more pointedly stated.

Boswell's political conservatism, then, was a matter of temperamental complexity, drawing together as it did factors from his family and psychological inheritance, as well as views about constitutional and religious organisation. But above all his life-long hypochondria gave a characteristic cast to his political principles, influencing both what he valued and deplored, and also the language in which he articulated his conservatism. The private, hypochondriac, rhetoric of the journals, as quoted above, with Boswell, for example, "black-minded" and

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[46] *BC*, p. 87.
[47] *BC*, p. 277.
[48] *Laird*, p. 436.
[49] *Life*, II, p. 299.
[50] *BC*, p. 88.
[51] The event is recorded in *Extremes*, pp. 11–15. See also Richard B. Schwartz, "Boswell and Hume: The Deathbed Interview" in *New Light on Boswell*, ed. by Clingham, pp. 116–125.
[52] *BC*, p. 200.

"absolutely mad" at the prospect of his father's second marriage, uttering "horrid ideas" to his friend Grange, or even the anonymously public self-exposure of *The Hypochondriack*, with the Tory son who was "afraid to stir from home without leave like a child," informs and sustains the more politically conservative declarations: that innovations in laws or constitution are "ever to be dreaded"; that loss of reverence in a society is "fatal"; and that "uncertainty and fluctuation," in *The Hypochondriack* for April 1779, are to be shrunk from "with horrour":

> That government is absolutely necessary for the preservation and happiness of society, has I believe never been controverted even by the wildest and most turbulent political visionaries. To be in a constant state of uncertainty and fluctuation, as to every thing around us, is what no individuals whose understandings are sound would choose. But when such a state is considered as belonging to an aggregate of numbers, confusion and destruction of all that is valuable are proportionally augmented, and if we think justly we shrink with horrour from its contemplation.[53]

Boswell, alert to change, and deploring it, alert to the contradictions in his own nature, and bewildered by them, and alert, too, to his tendency to "absurd inconsistency of conduct," and recriminating himself for it, yearned for fixity, political, personal and psychological. "Nothing is more disagreeable," he wrote in *The Hypochondriack* for January 1783, "On Change," "than for a man to find himself unstable and changeful. An Hypochondriack is very liable to this uneasy imperfection, in so much that sometimes there remains only a mere consciousness of identity."[54] Boswell's political aspirations represented a search for stability, for order within the flux of time and temperament. Political office would have given him a point of achievement, a "consciousness of identity," a fixity on which to rest. As it was, his failed political career, and the tensions behind his whole political outlook, had their origins in, and made their contribution to, the circle of his chronic political hypochondria.

[53] *BC*, p. 111.
[54] *BC*, p. 325.