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# James Boswell's Revisions of Death as 'The Hypochondriack' and in the London Journals

#### **Abstract**

By comparing James Boswell's accounts of the execution of Mr Gibson, a scene he describes in three different texts written fifteen years apart, readers see the author challenging contemporary religious and philosophical views of death as the destruction of memory and even testing assumptions that writing and print are static memories in physical form. Through the revision process, he insists that memory after death, like the revision of narrative long after the original event took place, is a dynamic process of continuous, immaterial change. Advocating interpretive remembering as a means of coping with death and strengthening his faith in an afterlife, he critiques the role of memorization in law and the religious upbringing of his childhood as well as expresses his frustration with the treatment of memory by John Locke and David Hume, whose theories of the mind leave little room for the kind of intellectual immortality Boswell hopes will continue after death.

### Keywords

James Boswell, death, John Locke, David Hume, mortality, revision, journals, Hypochondriack

# James Boswell's Revisions of Death as "The Hypochondriack" and in His London Journals

### Katherine Ellison

JAMES BOSWELL learns of the deaths of his son, his mother, and his mentor Samuel Johnson by post. Perhaps it is fitting that a writer who so painstakingly records the significant moments of his life in writing reads about, rather than witnesses, the deaths of those closest to him. Boswell records in detail in his journals his experiences with the passing of his dearest family and friends, as well as with the executions of Paul Lewis, Mr Gibson, and John Reid. Boswell uses the revision process, as demonstrated most clearly in his rewritings of execution scenes, as a means of coping with death and of countering his admitted religious inconstancy. Always conscious of his inability to behave or think consistently, Boswell notes on 25 February 1763 that "I should deservedly be considered as a man of no stability but inconstant and wavering with every breath." Through revision, he strengthens his wavering belief that the transition from life to death is a change of state from the solid to the miasmic, that the mind is preserved in death through a transformation into a spatially independent existence. Through reading and writing about death, Boswell challenges his own religious instability, revising to convince himself that there is an afterlife and that

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> James Boswell, *London Journal*, 1762–1763, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw, 1950), 202. References are to this edition, cited as *LJ*, 1762–63.

memory survives in as dynamic a state as it was during life. Writing, as a mode of "Memoria technica," or "artificial Memory," serves as his model for the spiritual change of death and allows him to believe that memories are spatially and semantically transformed rather than merely stored or erased, a subtle distinction that he feels captures writing's imaginative qualities and provides evidence for the eternal existence of the human soul after death.2 In this way, Boswell presents challenges to later assumptions made by theorists such as Walter Ong, who claims that "print encouraged human beings to think of their own interior conscious and unconscious resources as more and more thing-like, impersonal and religiously neutral."3 Boswell, for whom writing is spiritually enlightening, consciously negotiates between the idea of writing and print as memorized things and as processes of change. When David Hume claims that, logically, immortality is impossible because the universe is not large enough to house every individual for eternity, Boswell quickly replies: "Mr. Hume, you know spirit does not take up space."4 In Boswell's view, the afterlife is not a physical, unchanging place where souls are eternally stored, crammed together like old books on a shelf.

William Matthews and Ralph W. Rader find that early autobiographies of the seventeenth century are exercises in religious faith and personal reflection, central characteristics in Boswell's autobiographical writings a century later.<sup>5</sup> Particularly in his journals and the essays that appear in the *London Magazine* between 1777 and 1783, published under the pseudonym "The Hypochondriack," readers see Boswell struggling to reconcile

- Boswell, "On Memory," in *The Hypochondriack, Being the Seventy Essays by the Celebrated Biographer, James Boswell, Appearing in the London Magazine, from November, 1777, to August, 1783*, ed. Margery Bailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1928), 272. References to "The Hypochondriack" essays in the *London Magazine* are to this edition, cited by essay title, followed by *H.*
- <sup>3</sup> Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982), 132.
- <sup>4</sup> Boswell, *Boswell in Extremes*, 1776–1778, ed. Charles and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw, 1970), 12. References are to this edition, cited as *Ex*, 1776–78. Boswell's discussion with Hume, who was on his deathbed, is the most extended of his contemplations of an afterlife.
- William Matthews and Ralph W. Rader, Autobiography, Biography, and the Novel (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1973), 4.

his belief that the dead remember and forget like the living with what he describes, in his reminiscences of his boyhood, as the dependence of religious teachings upon memorization and routine, a system that he believes conflicts with true faith. In his youth, before he is genuinely interested in practicing law, Boswell critiques the legal system on the same grounds that it requires memorization but cannot allow for the complexities of memory. In his depictions of both writing and death as transformative processes and not instruments of annihilation, he argues against contemporary tendencies, which he sees exemplified in John Locke's and Hume's philosophies, that materialize memory and overlook the religious implications of imagining the mind as a storage facility.6 Unhappy with the pedagogies of death and memory he sees in religion, law, and philosophy, Boswell turns to his writings to counter his often despairing theological uncertainties. By comparing different versions of the same execution scenes, which he records throughout his years as advocate, readers see that for Boswell preserving memory does not mean copying reality identically with each new draft; rather, remembering is re-visioning, the addition and subtraction of details to make a scene more memorable. One question often asked about Boswell's revisions, and of journal and biographical writing in general, is whether they are truthful representations of reality or merely more convincing fictions.7 His revised descriptions of executions may well fictionalize the original experience by some readers' standards, but his revisions are attempts to cope with death; his omissions and embellishments help him to understand better whether those about to die believe in the afterlife and to retain more effectively his memories of the dead until-and, he hopes, beyond-his own passing, of which he is always mindful.

That Boswell trusts the authenticity of what he writes in his journals and considers his work neither fiction nor memorized report is evidenced by his fear that, if made public, his journals

<sup>6</sup> John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. Roger Woolhouse (1689; New York: Penguin, 1997). References are to this edition.

For an analysis of how Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791) influenced later biographers, who also blurred the line between history and literary creation, see Vanessa L. Ryan, "The Unreliable Editor: Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* and the Art of Biography," *The Review of English Studies* 54.215 (2003): 287–307.

would damage the reputations of himself and those he writes about. As Boswell nears the end of his own life and wonders what will become of his private writings, he considers the contradictory nature of the journals that have helped him strengthen his faith in the afterlife: although his journals will preserve his memory, they are, after all, physical objects. He will take his memories with him to the afterlife, he hopes, but the pages on which those memories are written will remain on earth. He recognizes the dilemma of textual immortality, fearing that if the journals he keeps private while he is alive become public after he dies, which they do, readers may forever hold a static image of Boswell in their minds, seeing in him a flat character and a writer who was merely "repeating what people said," to use Erskine's words to him in 1762, and not a dynamic personality struggling through self-doubt (LJ, 72). Though readers of the journals that Boswell did not intend to be published have certainly recognized and been fascinated by the writer's inconsistencies and his detailed depiction of how he changed over the course of his life, the ways in which his private and his purposely published writings, such as his London Magazine Hypochondriack essays, serve the rhetorical purpose of spiritual self-persuasion has been underestimated. "From the tape recorder to artist manqué," William C. Dowling summarizes with obvious exclusion of Boswell's religious identity, "this is the approach that has dominated Boswell criticism in recent years."8 Others, such as Richard B. Schwartz, conclude he is neither machine nor failed artist but still does not grant the author any significant spiritual presence. Schwartz ends his essay on Boswell by commenting that he "moved among the principals [of the Scottish Enlightenment] but he is neither the reliable recorder nor the trenchant interpreter of what transpired there."9

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> William C. Dowling, *The Boswellian Hero* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979), xiii.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Richard B. Schwartz, "Boswell and Hume: The Deathbed Interview," in New Light on Boswell: Critical and Historical Essays on the Occasion of the Bicentenary of "The Life of Johnson," ed. Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 124. Joan H. Pittock counters Schwartz's comments, finding that Boswell may have been more influential among the "great legal and philosophical minds of his time" than has been acknowledged previously,

As a boy, Boswell struggled with religion as a system of discipline and routine and, in his journal descriptions of his childhood, characterizes his religious upbringing as excruciatingly repetitive. 10 He was "made to say my catechism and to repeat psalms" and to be "obliged by my religion 'not to do my own work, speak my own words, nor think my own thoughts" (EY, 1740-69, 3). His second governor teaches memorization, requiring that the young Boswell merely "perform a task" but not expecting him to think creatively or independently about his lessons (EY, 1740-69, 3). The result, Boswell concludes as an adult, is that he "got the habit of reading without any profit" (EY, 1740–69, 4). He also comments that the rituals of Calvinism were so repetitive that "I should not have wished to go to heaven if there had been any other way of not going to hell" (EY, 1740-69, 2). What bothers Boswell most about his early lessons on death is that he is never allowed to reflect upon them or encouraged to consider how the catechism or the psalms he repeats address his own life. Remembering and understanding what happens to the soul when it dies is much different, he realizes early in his life, than merely being able to recite what happens.

Though his passionate defence of clients such as John Reid proves that Boswell cared deeply about the law and his responsibilities as advocate, he describes his contemporary justice system in the same terms as his religious upbringing. As he grapples with the decision to try "the law scheme," as he calls it on 25 February 1763, he notes to himself that the legal profession demands he "sit for hours hearing a heavy agent explain a heavy cause, and then be obliged to remember and repeat distinctly the dull story, probably of some very trivial affair" (*LJ*, 201–2). Like passages about his boyhood experiences with religion, this journal description—in which he demonstrates "my reasonings upon both sides of this question"—shows Boswell distinguishing between merely repetitive memories and interpretive, changing memories (*LJ*, 202). While both law and journal writing require sharp memory, accurate and exhaustive recording of everyday

noting Boswell's conversations with Adam Smith. Pittock, "Boswell as Critic," in New Light on Boswell, 81.

Boswell, James Boswell: The Earlier Years, 1740–1769, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw, 1966), 4. References are to this edition, cited as EY, 1740–69.

conversations, and clear narrative recall, he believes, at least in his youth before he gains experience as an advocate, that law demands much less intellectual engagement and liberty with its subject matter than his personal writings. As he notes in that same entry, "I had laboured hard, but it had been in writing my journal, letters and essays, which were all chiefly works of the imagination" (LJ, 202). Certainly, later in his career, Boswell labours to defend clients like Reid. Gordon Turnbull notes that Boswell was so sympathetic to his clients and so conscious of the inabilities of the Edinburgh judicial system to save the innocent that his legal career suffered.11 Turnbull notes, and I agree, that Reid's execution confirms Boswell's earlier fear that the language of law "had the capacity to incarcerate and destroy" and that his journals provide the counter purpose of "sustaining human significance by conferring a textual immortality."12 While Turnbull looks to the journals and the London Magazine essays as Boswell's attempts to "recuperate character in discourse," specifically the characters of the people he defends, I am interested in how Boswell's recoveries are self-experiments in memory and spiritual faith.

The lessons of philosophy provide little help for Boswell as he attempts to reconcile his personal belief in the importance of change and self-reflection with religious and legal emphasis on what he describes as static memorization. In his analysis of Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) in the Hypochondriack essay "On Memory" (*London Magazine*, April 1783), Boswell finds once more that human memory is described as mechanical or, as Ong summarizes as the result of the rise of print, "some sort of inert mental space." Boswell questions Locke's assumption that human memory is best represented as a physical facility where memories are recorded and stored for future access. Locke claims that memory is, in

Gordon Turnbull, "Boswell and Sympathy: The Trial and Execution of John Reid," in New Light on Boswell, 104.

<sup>12</sup> Turnbull, 104.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Ong, 132.

For insight into Johnson's views of memory, which differ from Boswell's primarily in how they describe the effects of print and writing on remembering, see Paul Tankard, "Samuel Johnson's *History of Memory*," *Studies in Philology* 102, no. 1 (2005): 110–42.

Boswell's words, "as it were the storehouse of our ideas" where one can "lay up" ideas to be "revived" later ("On Memory," H, 267). Boswell claims, however, that "when we talk of a storehouse of our ideas, we are only forming an imagination of something similar to an enclosed portion of space in which material objects are reposited" ("On Memory," H, 267). He then asks "Who ever actually saw this storehouse, or can have any clear perception of it when he endeavours by thinking closely to get a distinct view of it?" ("On Memory," H, 269). Similarly, Boswell questions Locke's metaphor of the tomb, which he quotes in full: "Thus the ideas, as well as children, of our youth, often die before us: and our minds represent to us those tombs, to which we are approaching; where though the brass and marble remain, yet the inscriptions are effaced by time, and the imagery moulders away" ("On Memory," H, 270; Locke, 149). 15 Boswell finds Locke's passage admittedly poetic but problematic because belief in memory or the mind as either a storehouse or a tomb is spiritually at odds with a belief in the change of state that occurs after death. Boswell then reads Locke's metaphor of the tomb more closely to conclude that Locke disproves himself by the end of the passage, noting that Locke's "penetration could not but see that all this [memory as storehouse] is absolutely incompatible with a spiritual substance which mind is" and that "immediately without any interruption or preparation whatever, [Locke] proceeds very quietly, though most effectually, to contradict what he has been assuming, and to annihilate this supposed storehouse and repository" ("On Memory," H, 270). Boswell believes that Locke argues himself into a logical deadend: the mind is a storehouse in which memories are saved for later but, at the same time, the mind is a tomb in which memories die or are lost. Though Locke's treatment of memory is admittedly

William R. Siebenschuh overlooks Boswell's sophisticated analysis of Locke. Though recognizing Boswell's contribution to studies of human memory, Siebenschuh's division of memory into the categories of perception, short-term memory, and long-term memory, along with his belief that memory is a storehouse of retrievable past and present information, presents an oversimplified picture of the role of memory in Boswell's writings. Siebenschuh, "Boswell's Second Crop of Memory: A New Look at the Role of Memory in the Making of the Life," in Boswell's Life of Johnson: New Questions, New Answers, ed. John A Vance (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 94–109.

more complex than Boswell here admits, he nonetheless uses the shortcomings of the philosopher's physical metaphors as evidence that the mind, and the memories it holds, cannot be bound by materiality.

In Boswell's reading of the Essay, Locke's metaphors of the storehouse and tomb imply that memory is essentially a bodily activity, an assumption that suggests there will be no remembering after death when the body ceases to function. Locke describes forgetting in material terms as a "constant decay of all our ideas" and as "print" that "wears out" (149). Boswell does not believe that memories are completely lost when forgetting occurs but that forgetfulness happens because "the perceptive faculty of the soul is turned to other objects, while these still remain ready to be perceived whenever the 'mind's eye,' glances upon them" ("On Memory," H, 273). He distinguishes between forgetting as the total disappearance of a memory and as the simultaneous presence of more than one memory, where one comes to take visual precedence over another.<sup>16</sup> Writing becomes a form of evidence to support Boswell's belief that forgotten memories have not been annihilated but are simply covered up by others. In this way, his journals are navigational: they direct his "mind's eye" towards moments he wants to remember ("On Memory," H, 273). Memory is neither an organism nor a physical place because if it is, one must enter the afterlife without it.

From his critique of Locke's use of the storehouse to represent memory, Boswell moves on to consider writing as a type of "artificial Memory," struggling against the notion that his memories, once written down, become immobile, inanimate, and dead ("On Memory," H, 272). Journal writing represents for Boswell not simply a static record of verbal utterance but a dynamic coping mechanism for death. In "On Diaries" (March 1783), he explains that "memory is so frail and variable, and so apt to be disturbed and confused by the perpetual succession of external objects and mental operations, that if our situation be not limited indeed, it is very necessary to have our thoughts and actions preserved in a mode not subject to change" (H, 257). Writing, especially diary and journal writing, allows him to

Writing approximately a century before Freud, Boswell's simultaneity and substitution of memory operates much like repression does.

condense daily experience and package it in such a way that he minimizes the "perpetual succession" that overcomes him. Later, in his essay "On Diaries," Boswell provides what he believes to be a fitting analogy: "I have thought my notes like portable soup, of which a little bit by being dissolved in water will make a good large dish" (H, 259).17 Admittedly, his metaphor is problematic. While soup expands, it also dilutes. A more appropriate metaphor for his idea of memory appears twenty years earlier in his 26 February 1763 journal entry, written just a day after he accuses the law of being mere memorization. In that entry, he describes a conversation with Dempster when the two men "considered the mind of man like a room" in which portraits or other curiosities indicate the person's mood and personality (LJ, 203). Yet this "gallery" is not like Locke's storehouse; the place and its contents change, or, as Boswell writes, it "is often furnished different ways" (LJ, 204). Memories in the gallery are never lost or destroyed but merely substituted or rearranged. And perhaps most importantly for Boswell's belief in the afterlife, "External circumstances are nothing to the purpose" (LJ, 203).

The gallery of the mind that he discusses with Dempster, though it is a physical metaphor, is attractive to Boswell because he can vividly imagine it as a psychologically complex space, whereas Locke's storehouse is blank, boring, and too difficult to visualize. His first question about Locke's storehouse, after all, is "Who ever actually saw this storehouse or can have any clear perception of it when he endeavours by thinking closely to get a distinct view of it?" ("On Memory," *H*, 269). While he questions Locke's storehouse because he cannot imagine it and because it implies that memory is merely a bodily experience, Boswell remains fascinated by the philosopher's idea of "secondary perception," which is a spontaneous and largely

The metaphor of the soup describes Boswell's afterlife as well; while Hume's souls overcrowd eternity, Boswell's are efficiently soluble. The memories he preserves, in turn, will serve him in the afterlife: "I shall lay up a store of entertainment for my after life" (*LJ*, 40). Though he often uses terms like "store," the preservationist capability of writing appeals to him more than the storage capability, because preservation more strongly denotes security from annihilation: "I shall preserve many things that would otherwise be lost in oblivion," he writes in November 1762 (40). Preservation is a protective measure, securing for posterity the things and ideas he wants to remember after death.

uncontrolled remembering in which memories are triggered by a "turbulent and tempestuous passion" (Locke, 150). Locke finds that memories of secondary perception "almost constantly affect our bodies, as heat and cold" and that experiences emphasizing touch or motion are more likely to be "roused and tumbled out of their dark cells, into open daylight" than those that do not (150). Boswell certainly emphasizes bodily associations, such as heat and cold, in the memories he records in his journal. He picks up on Locke's language, translating "the eye of the soul" (Locke, 150) into the "perceptive eye" and repeating the imagery of darkness and daylight ("On Memory," H, 273).

Boswell confidently critiques the metaphorical flaws of Locke's theory of memory, but he is less successful arguing against the philosopher whose views of death most challenge his religious faith—Hume. During the famous deathbed scene that he "partly recorded in my Journal, partly enlarged from my memory, 2 March 1777," Boswell cannot resist asking Hume, out of a "strong curiosity," if he still denies the possibility of an afterlife (Ex, 1776-78, 11). Hume insists that death is the final annihilation of both body and mind and that it would be "unreasonable" to believe otherwise (Ex, 1776-78, 11). Unable to persuade Hume, Boswell leaves the conversation as a believer but visibly rattled, remarking that "I was like a man in sudden danger eagerly seeking his defensive arms; and I could not be assailed by momentary doubts while I had actually before me a man of such strong abilities and extensive enquiry dying in the persuasion of being annihilated" (Ex, 1776-78, 12-13). At this moment in his journal, it seems as though Boswell must write about this deathbed meeting in order to convince himself that he still believes in the afterlife. The emphatic "But I maintained my faith" reads like a self-command, a rule to be followed rather than a sentiment he feels in a moment of doubt (Ex, 1776–78, 13).

Perhaps what is most memorable to Boswell after his meeting with the dying Hume is not the philosopher's refusal to

Also important in Locke's theory of secondary perception is repetition, which gives permanence to memories both temporally and physically. Boswell does not remark upon this part of Locke's theory, which would seem to parallel the memorization that Boswell has problems with in his religious upbringing and in the law.

believe in an afterlife but the self-control and calm with which he faces death. Though Hume believes that death is a complete annihilation of the body and mind, he is not afraid: "I asked him if the thought of annihilation never gave him any uneasiness. He said not the least; no more than the thought that he had not been, as Lucretius observes" (Ex, 1776-78, 12). Similarly, Boswell admires Henry Thrale, who "bore the loss of his son with so manly a composure that it was not painful to be with him"19 and, of course, Johnson, whom Boswell remarks was "well prepared for the great change."20 Boswell is clearly frustrated by his inability to react like Hume, Thrale, or Johnson; death has an uncontrollable effect on him emotionally and physically even though, unlike Hume, he believes the soul moves onto a better existence. Repeatedly in his journals, he laments that he is unable to control his mind and his body when he loses someone dear to him. On 9 April 1764, immediately after he reads the letter notifying him that his son Charles has died, Boswell notes that he is "seized with a severe cold" and fears that "every post might bring me accounts of the departure of those whom I most regarded."21 He imagines his circulation has slowed and his "blood [has] thickened," and then again in a letter written just eight days later on 17 April he exclaims that his "blood is bounding through his veins" (BH, 211, 224). Afraid to receive the post, he is overcome by the possibility that death is in each letter he opens. After hearing of Johnson's death from the physician on Friday, 17 December 1784, he is "stunned, and in a kind of amaze," but knows that "I should afterwards have sorer sensations" (AI, 1782-85, 271). His senses are numb, and he dreads the return of feeling. He seems no better the next day, when he is "conscious of a deadness of spiritual feeling, and indeed a cold indifference as to the awful subject of religion" (AJ, 1782–85, 271).

<sup>19</sup> Boswell, Boswell: The Ominous Years, 1774–1776, ed. Charles Ryskamp and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw, 1963), 317. References are to this edition, cited as OY, 1774–76.

<sup>20</sup> Boswell, Boswell: The Applause of the Jury, 1782–1785, ed. Irma S. Lustig and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw, 1981), 271. References are to this edition, cited as AJ, 1782–85.

<sup>21</sup> Boswell, Boswell In Holland, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw), 211. References are to this edition, cited as BH.

Though recent scholars and medical writers interested in Boswell's condition correct his terminology, Boswell calls his sensitivity to death "hypochondria."<sup>22</sup> With this condition, "an extreme degree of irritability makes him liable to be hurt by every thing that approaches him in any respect" ("On Hypochondria," H, 42). "There is a darkness in [the hypochondriac's] mind," he writes, and "his ideas hide them selves like birds in gloomy weather; but in warm sunshine they spring forth gay and airy" ("On Memory," H, 273). In his London Magazine essays "On Hypochondria" (February 1778 and March 1778), Boswell concludes that the hypochondriac experiences a "habitual current of feelings" (41). In Boswell's view, hypochondria is the continued state of Locke's "turbulent and tempestuous passion" and thus is a condition uniquely subject to secondary perception (Locke, 150).

Neither the rigorous self-discipline of his early religious education nor the philosophical theories of death that he learns from Locke and Hume help Boswell cope with the loss of his loved ones, so he invents his own exercise in self-control: watching executions. Through close examination and recording of the behaviours of condemned criminals about to face their executions, Boswell hopes to learn how to accept death without fear or doubt. Like Thrale and Johnson, Mr Gibson, an attorney executed for forgery, represents the paragon of confidence and resolve before death: "I never saw a man hanged but I thought I could behave better than he did, except Mr. Gibson, who, I

22 In his collection of Boswell's London journals, John Wain remarks that Boswell suffered from depression rather than hypochondria, as does retired doctor Theodore Dalrymple, who notes that in twenty-first-century practice Boswell would be prescribed anti-depressant medication. Boswell, The Journals of James Boswell, 1762–1795, ed. John Wain (New Haven: Yale University Press), 249. References are to this edition, cited as J, 1762-95. Dalrymple, "Help for Hypochondriacks," British Medical Journal 334.7596 (April 2007): 751. Brian Evenson believes that Boswell's self-portrayal in his journals is schizophrenic, that his intense self-examination "instigate[s] a disruption." Evenson, "Boswell's Grand Tour of Selves," James Boswell: Psychological Interpretations, ed. Donald J. Newman (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 72. Although I agree that Boswell multiplies his identity, I question whether he exhibits schizophrenic symptoms, and instead I read his diverse self-presentation as part of his belief in changes of state. At once a tireless lover and an intellectual conversationalist, a lawyer and a literary biographer, he very consciously, not unconsciously, moves across identities.

confess, exceeded all that I could ever hope to show of easy and steady resolution."23 Executions provide Boswell with a visually and aurally moving experience with which to test his faith in the afterlife, his writing and narrative skills, and his memory when he returns to the scenes later during revision. Further, executions, which are intensely emotional and physical, are like spontaneous memories in Boswell's journals. His records of them, though admittedly disturbing for reasons that Elaine Perez Zickler notes in her study of Boswell's masochistic tendencies, are among the most memorable and richly descriptive in his writings, because the "interesting scene of a man with death before his eyes cannot but move us greatly" (SW, 1766-69, 140).24 After the execution of Paul Lewis on 4 May 1763, Boswell is so affected that he has "gloomy terrors" throughout the night and cannot sleep (LJ, 1762-63, 253). An entry for the next day is missing, but on Friday morning he suffers one of his more severe periods of melancholy. Though he fashions himself the detached philosopher in these scenes, the brevity and tone of the journal entries that follow the executions betray the intensity of his psychological reactions.

The most interesting execution for Boswell involves the attorney Gibson, who was hung on Wednesday, 23 March 1768. He describes Gibson's execution in his journal and in his Hypochondriack essay "On Executions" written in 1783, in which he includes a letter that he originally wrote in April 1768. In these three writings, he is most concerned with how Gibson behaves before death. When Gibson submits to his hanging with "a manly and decent resolution," Boswell admires his "calm and easy" look and thinks he "seemed truely devout" ("On Executions," *H*, 282). He learns most from those who face their deaths calmly and quietly, imagining they are confident because of their faith in an afterlife.<sup>25</sup> Though he is

<sup>23</sup> Boswell, Boswell in Search of a Wife, 1766–1769, ed. Frank Brady and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw, 1956), 141. References are to this edition, cited as SW, 1766–69.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Elaine Perez Zickler, "Boswell's *London Journal*: Binding a Life," in *James Boswell: Psychological Interpretations*, 33–50.

<sup>25</sup> Boswell's views on capital punishment fall outside the scope of this study, but his firm stance in favour of it is surprising, considering the compassion he feels for most of the people he sees executed. In his essay "On Executions,"

unable to emotionally or physically control himself when he experiences executions, he is comforted when the prisoners are not overcome with feeling before their deaths.

A comparison of Boswell's two descriptions of Gibson's execution, the first in his journal and the second in the letter embedded in his Hypochondriack essay, reveals that he continued to revise his descriptions of these experiences long after they happened. The three documents—the journal entry, the letter, and the essay—act as three separate levels of witnessing, serving as chronological and narrative markers of Boswell's revision process. As with the Life of Johnson (1791), his journals provide the foundation from which the other versions are built. In his descriptions of Gibson's hanging, he appeals to sight, sound, touch, and even taste to help himself remember the experiences.<sup>26</sup> In both his journal entry for 23 March and the letter printed in the Publick Advertiser on 26 April, Boswell points out that Gibson ate a "sweet orange" even as the rope was dropped around his neck (SW, 1766-69, 141). The letter is obviously modelled after the journal entry, yet in the revision readers can see Boswell filling in gaps in sentences, providing additional visual information,

he asks for more brutal demonstrations, even going so far as to wonder if extreme methods of public torture would not deter would-be criminals more effectively. Backing away from torture as a deterrent because of the pain experienced by the victim, he concludes that the best solution would be a Roman method of execution he has read about, in which the condemned is knocked unconscious, sliced across the neck, and then dismembered (284). The benefits of such a method, he believes, are that the victim would suffer little but the crowd would experience the death more memorably. This discussion provides further evidence for Zickler's argument that he has masochistic tendencies. Boswell looks to executions for two purposes: personally, he uses them to test his own religious faith in an afterlife, but publicly he understands them as deterrents to crime.

Harold Nicolson claims that Boswell "invented actuality" by using a formula for creating "a series of photographs," or disconnected images representing separate memories, presented in such quick succession that readers perceive a whole. Nicolson, "The Boswell Formula, 1791," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Boswell's Life of Johnson, ed. James L. Clifford (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 74. Comparing Boswell to a "cinematograph" is in line with other scholarly analogies that make the author a machine of sorts, yet Nicolson's choice emphasizes sight and underestimates the author's masterful depiction of the other senses (74). Nicolson's use of the term "formula" for Boswell's art, though implying more consistency than the author may have been capable of, facilitates a reading of Boswell as more deliberate and intentionally experimental than others have granted.

and clarifying the sequence of events. In the journal, he records the following scene:

Mr. Gibson came in a coach with some of his friends, and I declare I cannot conceive a more perfect calmness and manly resolution than his behaviour. He was dressed in a full suit of black, wore his own hair cut round and a hat, was a man about fifty, and as he drove along it was impossible to perceive the least sign of dejection or gloom about him. He was helped up on the cart. The rope was put round his neck, and he stood with the most perfect composure, eat a sweet orange, and seemed rationally devout during prayers. (SW, 1766–69, 140–41)

The letter included in "On Executions" is obviously adapted from the journal entry, but it provides a more complete, or at least a more detailed, portrait of Gibson:

I met the mournful procession in Oxford-road; and I declare that if I had not been told it, I should not have known which was Mr. Gibson. He was drawn backwards, and looked as calm and easy as ever I saw a man in my life. He was dressed in a full suit of black, wore his own hair round and in a natural curl, and a hat. When he came to the place of execution he was allowed to remain a little in the coach. A signal was then given him that it was time to approach the fatal tree. He took leave of his friends, stepped out of the coach, and walked firmly to the cart. He was helped up upon it, as he was pinioned and had not the free use of his arms. When he was upon the cart, he gave his hat to the executioner, who immediately took off Mr. Gibson's cravat, unloosed his shirt neck, and fixed the rope. Mr. Gibson never once altered his countenance. He refreshed his mouth by sucking a sweet orange. (H, 281–82)

Boswell writes in "On Executions" that "after an interval of fifteen years, I have little to add to this occasional essay" (H, 282). The revised description, however, certainly adds much to the journal entry. Though the scenes seem very similar on first glance, they actually only use three of the same phrases: "and I declare," "full suit of black," and "wore his own hair" (H, 281–82). In the first text, his portrayal of Gibson's demeanour is abstract: he "conceive[s] a more perfect calmness" (SW, 1766–69, 140). In contrast, the second description describes Gibson's backward posture and emphasizes the slow and steady motion of the process, creating a calm feeling for the reader rather than merely stating it. He also explains why Gibson is helped onto the cart, which eliminates

the connotation of helplessness in the first description. Even the smallest gesture, such as handing the executioner his hat, helps characterize Gibson in the way Boswell needs for his essay.

The revised scene of Gibson's execution is Boswell's "portable soup" (H, 259). His journal entry is condensed, and as evidenced by what appear to be awkward syntactical moments, such as when Gibson "eat a sweet orange," Boswell writes hastily to record the scene while he can still remember it (SW, 1766-69, 141). Over a month later he expands it to make "a good large dish" (H, 259). Whether he could actually remember new details that much later is less important to Boswell than his continuing to learn from the memory and that, through rereading and revision, he could recreate the depth of feeling he experienced the first time.

By revising execution scenes, whether by temporally and spatially expanding the narrative or by clarifying important details, Boswell is able to save his subjects in a way that he cannot in real life.27 Revision and resuscitation are related projects. Not surprisingly, he is intrigued by resuscitation and notes, in many of his journal entries on the condemned John Reid, a secret plan to cut down and revive the body after the hanging. In collaboration with the surgeons Alexander Wood, John Aitken, and John Innes and his friends John Johnston, Michael Nasmith, and Charles Hay, Boswell devises a plan to seize the body, escape from the mob down an alley, and resuscitate Reid in a nearby room. Apparently having second thoughts, Aitken provides the most convincing argument against the plan, reminding Boswell that he will be attempting to revive a man who has "got over the pain of death," who "may curse you for bringing him back," and who "may tell you that you kept him from heaven."28 Aitken might have convinced Boswell had Wood not begun speaking of death as total annihilation as Hume does too, of "the soul being material" (D, 1769-74, 328). Boswell remarks that "I disliked

<sup>27</sup> Boswell recognizes that as a technology the journal, as Ong writes, "[does] not merely store what we know. [It] styles what we know in ways which [make] it quite inaccessible and indeed unthinkable in an oral culture" (155).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 1769–1774, ed. William K. Wimsatt, Jr, and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw, 1959), 327. References are to this edition, cited as *D*, 1769–74.

Wood because he revived doubts in my mind which I could not at once dispel" (D, 1769–74, 327). Nasmith tries to dissuade him, arguing on the grounds that rescuing Reid will fly in the face of the court. He also believes that resuscitation is potentially more brutal than execution, and that if successful the plan will set a precedent for those who wish to revive those rightly condemned: "If he is brought to life, they will hold it up as full evidence that they too may—and that there may be a Boswell at hand the moment they are cut down" (D, 1769-74, 328). Boswell never explains why he abandons his plan, though he notes after the execution that it would not have worked because the body was allowed to hang for forty-five minutes (D, 1769-74, 335). The only way to save Reid, then, is in his journal, where he can record his innocence for posterity and, in the process, provide one answer for the question that Reid asks in his brief autobiography: "What will you say when Gardner's conscience smites him in America and he owns that I got the sheep honestly from him, and I am gone and cannot be recalled?" (D, 1769-74, 308). The last days of his life, as well as his assertion of his innocence, are recalled in detail in Boswell's journal.

As Boswell demonstrates in his revisions of Gibson's execution and his documentation of Reid's innocence, journal writing is not the indiscriminate storage of daily details but the subjective piecing together of saved remnants of experience, the conscious deletion of the unwanted and the creative addition of details that fill in the gaps of memory. Hume's most convincing argument against an afterlife is his point that "immortality, if it were at all, must be general" and that all citizens, regardless of their crimes, must necessarily be immortal (Ex, 1776–78, 11). "That the trash of every age must be preserved" disturbs Boswell almost as much as the possibility that death is total annihilation (Ex, 1776–78, 12). In his journals, he seeks to weed out the "trash," preserving what he wishes to remember and leaving out what he hopes to forget (Ex, 1776-78, 12). Private writing allows perpetual revision in a way that published writing cannot. At certain points, Boswell notes when he has forgotten to include something and backtracks to include it. In his description of Reid's execution, for example, Boswell's narrative eye follows the subject down the

stairs of the prison but, as Reid is in mid-step, Boswell writes that he "forgot to mention" a detail that he then goes on to include in his revision (D, 1769-74, 332).29 Paul Alkon might describe such revised moments as a playwright tweaking his stage directions in order to create "dramatic illusion." Though I am examining Boswell's changes as a means of narratively working through his religious doubt, I acknowledge Alkon's argument that Boswell's writings are performative and cause the reader to experience "willing suspension of distinctions between past and present" and "awareness of the difference between action on-stage and action off-stage."31 Yet, my argument builds from Erik Bond's disagreement with Alkon and with Patricia Mever Spacks, Michael D. Friedman, and Donald Kay, who agree that Boswell's method is theatrical.<sup>32</sup> Bond finds that Boswell's use of "self-commands," such as instructions to himself to "Be like Sir Richard Steele," link Boswell to literary history and establish him as a "new type of critic," who "was experimenting with a new technique for policing individual imagination."33 The word "policing" may be too stern; Boswell's revisions of Gibson's execution and interjectory recall of Reid's stairway descent are critically evaluative of the narrative subject's conduct, yet they indicate that though he may try to control his imagination he is aware that his memories are in a constant state of change. I would modify Bond's conclusion to claim that Boswell experiments

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Boswell emphasizes that he gave Reid many chances to revise his plea of innocence and admit his guilt, so that he would be relieved of the burden before God: "That you are to remember as your last bell," he warns Reid as time runs out to confess (*D*, 1769–74, 305).

<sup>30</sup> The subject of Paul Alkon's essay on Boswell's narrative strategies is the Life of Johnson, but the observations are helpful for reading Boswell's journals and periodical essays. Alkon, "Boswell's Control of Aesthetic Distance," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Boswell's Life of Johnson, 53.

<sup>31</sup> Alkon, 53.

Erik Bond, "Bringing Up Boswell: Drama, Criticism, and the Journals," The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual 15 (2004): 151–76; Patricia Meyer Spacks, Imagining a Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth-Century England (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); Michael D. Friedman, "He Was Just a Macheath': Boswell and The Beggar's Opera," The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual 4 (1991): 97–114; and Donald Kay, "Boswell in the Green Room: Dramatic Method in the London Journal," Philological Quarterly 57, no. 2 (1978): 195–212.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Bond, 153.

with new techniques of narrative revision in order to creatively understand death and police his spiritual inconsistency.

The deaths of Gibson and Reid represent experiments in adding subtle details to recreate the psychological depth of the original scene, but painful experiences one might think even more important to the author, such as the death of Johnson, occupy a much less visible presence in his journals. Not simply a means to remember what he wants to recall later, journal writing provides a way to forget all that is not written down. For the obsessive recorder who trains himself to notice and write about everything, forgetting poses a particularly difficult challenge: "Shakespeare makes Macbeth solemnly but hopelessly ask for the physician if he has any remedy to wear out direful traces from the brain; and the fable of the ancients of the river Lethe, by drinking the waters of which forgetfulness was obtained" ("On Memory," H, 274). By fixing his attention on only certain conversations and events in his journal and consciously omitting others, he enables himself to erase from his mind the unwanted moments not recorded, and thus more easily forgotten. The entries that follow Johnson's death, for example, offer little or no reflections on the events or thoughts of the day, and most are written days later. On Christmas day, he remarks that he is still "cold and unhappy" (AJ, 1782-85, 273). Blank spaces in his journal in which he only comments that "I recollect nothing," the entries of the Tuesday and Wednesday following Johnson's death, record their own disappearance from his memory (AJ, 1782-85, 272). Journal writing facilitates forgetting as much as it does remembering.

Though writing protects him against forgetting moments of his life that he wants to preserve and enables him to forget those he wishes to erase, and though they allow him to dissolve his experiences and strengthen his faith in the immateriality of the afterlife, Boswell recognizes that journals are still physical objects. They can be read—or misread—by others who, judging his personality based only on the words in print, may mistake him as a mere static character rather than a dynamic mind in motion. At many points in his journals and in his essay "On Diaries," Boswell acknowledges that "a plan of this kind was dangerous, as a man might in the openness of his heart say many things and discover many facts that might do him

great harm if the journal should fall into the hands of my enemies" (*LJ*, 1762–63, 39). In "On Diaries," he relates his experience of losing one of his journals, which he requested be sent to him from Holland with a few other papers that he could not carry with him on his return to England: "I was sadly vexed," he remarks after hearing that the packages became unbound in the mail and his diary was missing, "for indeed it was a disagreeable thought, that what maybe properly enough called so much of one's mind should be in the possession of a stranger, or perhaps of an enemy" (*H*, 262). Unread, his journals serve their purpose: they allow him to manage the multiple adventures and thoughts of the day and remember them more vividly in the future. Once read by readers he does not know or who wish him ill, however, they no longer protect him.

Boswell stresses the importance of keeping his journals private during his lifetime, and he adopts a number of strategies to maintain their security after his death. All of his strategies, from writing in code to omitting subjects' names, either fail or are abandoned. In "On Diaries," he notes that "in order to guard against detection of what I wished to be corrected, I once wrote parts of it in a character of my own invention, by way of a cypher" (H, 262). The problem with writing in code, he discovers, is that "having given over the practice for several years, I forgot my alphabet, so that all that is written in it must forever remain as unintelligible to myself as to others" (H, 262). Cipher may protect his privacy, but it frustrates the purpose of his preservationist project. He occasionally tries using "borrowed names" for individuals he mentions, but the number of times he refers to his friends and acquaintances shows that he does not deploy this strategy often (LJ, 1762-63, 40).

The only certain way to keep his journals out of the wrong hands is to burn them, a suggestion Johnson offers when he compliments Boswell's diligence in keeping a journal: "He said indeed that I should keep it private, and that I might surely have a friend who would burn it in case of my death" (*LJ*, 1762–63, 305). Boswell cannot bear the thought of burning his writings, an act that would be equivalent to destroying all of his memories: "It shocks me to think of burning it," he

writes in response to Johnson's advice, and "I rather encourage the idea of having it carefully laid up among the archives of Auchinleck" (*LJ*, 1762–63, 305). Fittingly, this is what seems to have happened to his journals, letters, and other papers after his death. David Buchanan describes how a number of Boswell's archived writings were found in a storehouse:

I soon discovered that all our prewar records had been cleared out and dumped in a subterranean storage room deep below a large Edinburgh department store. Nobody had been there for years. Even the store manager seemed to have forgotten that he had a room full of our papers. With an assistant to show me the way, I descended successive flights of stairs until, far from the light of day, I came to the storeroom. It was crammed with files and loose papers in considerable confusion, all covered with a thick layer of sticky black dust.<sup>34</sup>

Embarrassed by what they read, Boswell's descendents would allow publication of his journals only if several of the entries were censored. In the early twentieth century, for example, Lord Talbot de Malahide, who married one of Boswell's greatgranddaughters, consulted with the publisher John Murray about the possibility of printing the journals. In a letter to Talbot, Murray writes that he is disappointed and almost in "dismay, at finding how badly Boswell's character shows itself throughout."35 Besides passages that involve Johnson, Murray finds little that he feels deserves "permanent record."36 Boswell predicted just such a reaction, noting that "if brought forth to the publick eye," a diary "may expose [the writer] to contempt, unless in the estimation of the few who think much and minutely, and therefore know well of what little parts the principal extent of human existence is composed" (H, 258). Despite the possibility that his journals, if published, might

<sup>34</sup> Boswell scholars owe a great debt to Buchanan, who, like Isham, took up the formidable task of collecting the scattered archives. The history of the archives is complicated but interesting. For example, several of Boswell's papers were used as sandwich wrapping, others were forgotten in a department store basement, and still others were locked in the famous ebony cabinet passed down through the family. David Buchanan, The Treasure of Auchinleck: The Story of the Boswell Papers (New York: McGraw, 1974), xiv.

<sup>35</sup> Buchanan, 43.

<sup>36</sup> Buchanan, 44.

never reach those who would appreciate his attention to the small as well as the grand moments that comprise a life, he still insists on their preservation after his death. That a diary may fall into unknown or enemy hands is frightening to Boswell, but that a piece of writing he intentionally discloses to the public in print should go unnoticed is even more agonizing. He fears being forgotten after his death.

Early in his career, he learns that the attention to detail that characterizes his journal writing may not be as well received in print. Though frequently given advice against "repeating what people said," Boswell admits that he has "unlucky custom of doing so," and in February 1763 he received a letter from Hume admonishing him for publishing a private dialogue between the two men: "I repeat it, how the devil came it into your noddles to publish in a book to all the world what you pretend I told you in private conversation? I say pretend I told you; for as I have utterly forgot the whole matter, I am resolved utterly to deny it" (LJ, 1762-63, 72, 206). Boswell's ability to record conversation is a useful talent in his private writing, but in public media it can be overly effective, revealing the true nature of personalities who wish to have more control over their own public images than Boswell's narrative style allows. The one print genre in which recording does prove effective, and to which Boswell is naturally drawn, is biographical writing. Just one month before the publication of his Life of Johnson, Boswell writes to William Johnson Temple that "I have every fear concerning [the Life] that I may get no profit, nay, may lose—that the public may be disappointed and think that I have done it poorly—that I may make many enemies and even have quarrels."37 The Life of Johnson, of course, was a publishing success.

Twentieth-century debates over whether Boswell's memories, represented with such physical and psychological presence on the pages of his writings, should be destroyed make possible an ironic continuation of Boswell's conversations about memory in the afterlife. Readers' memories of him depend upon what has been accessible, what has been shared or censored. His character is still being modified and influenced by the ideologies of contemporary print cultures just as he continuously modified

<sup>37</sup> Boswell, *The Great Biographer, 1789–1795*, ed. Marlies K. Danziger and Frank Brady (New York: McGraw, 1989), 138.

how he chose to remember life and the people he had lost. Although writing and print, because they capture memories at a moment in time, may seem at odds with religious faith in an afterlife in which memory can change, Boswell's journals and his Hypochondriack essays in the London Magazine resist being static repositories like Locke's storehouse, and they are instead media of revision and preservation. Recalled scenes change as Boswell revises them in writing and as they are edited by new hands in updated versions. In his critique of Locke's theories of memory and in his portrayals of executions, as well as in the ongoing transformation of his identity in the minds of present and future audiences, readers can better understand how he reconciles his era's religious and philosophical affairs with memorization and materiality with his personal belief in memory as dynamic, mutable, and everlasting. This reconciliation, in turn, allows him to keep his faith in the transmutation of the soul after death.

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