The Little Spark and the General Blaze:

Speech, Narrative and Fact in James Boswell’s Life of Johnson

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This thesis is the original work of the author
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Abstract

The thesis performs an explorative reading of James Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) in order to interrogate assumptions about the function, use and epistemological limits of direct speech in Boswell’s work, and the Eighteenth Century more generally. Rather than ignoring the problems posed by the competing and contradictory epistemological and ontological claims of the presentation of speech in text, the thesis reads Boswell as engaging with these problems at different scales. Each narrative scale carries with it different assumptions about facts and events, and different conventions with which to represent speech as a combination of both. The thesis aligns the problems of narration at different scales with different forms of narrative intervention and manipulation of the putatively raw materials of Johnson’s speech and their transition into the text published in the *Life*. It does this by drawing on archival research investigating the many states of Johnson’s speech in Boswell’s records, drafts and the final version of the *Life*. Chapter One investigates Boswell’s attitude to the project as a whole, seeing in his ideal of journal-keeping and personal affinity a vision of biography that draws on the non-narrative conventions of different genres. Chapter Two traces Boswell’s engagements with connected events and sustained scenes before investigating his own role as a nodal point constructing extended analogue conversations between Johnson and other figures over many years. In these chapters the print technologies of quotation marks and dashes are read as the mechanism that allows narrative connections at these different scales. Chapter Three investigates the workings of dialogue through Boswell’s use of parenthetical stage directions, reading them as a method of massaging his journals into narratives. Chapter Four turns to Boswell’s writerly interventions on the surface of words, seeing in italicisation a blunt tool for marking conceptual and textual as well as aural differences in speech, and considers the stress this places on interpretation. Chapter Five considers Boswell’s interpretive interventions within the orthography of words themselves, investigating his attention to the potential of type to convey aberrant or historically particular sounds through the representation of laughter, accents and onomatopoeia. Each level of analysis reveals both the contingency of the whole enterprise and the inescapably preemptive interpretive choices made by Boswell in the course of his composition. Boswell emerges as a writer engaging constantly with the demands and contradictions of what remains an under-theorised yet crucial aspect of non-fiction narrative in a context of changing ideas about truth and narrative.
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**Note on References**

In the interest of providing what Boswell himself liked to consider “ocular demonstration” of his techniques of textualising speech, I use a large number of screen shots of the First Edition of the *Life*, as well as archival photographs of his Journal and the Manuscript of the *Life*. Screen shots from the 1791 First Edition are all taken from the copy made available by the Google Books project, and all references to the *Life* are to this edition, marked by volume and page, except where otherwise noted. The occasional images I provide from other Eighteenth-Century works are also taken from files available on Google Books.

In making reference to Boswell’s private papers, I keep up the pretence that his Journal is a single and continuous unified entity rather than the confusing mass of scattered papers and notebooks taken up intermittently that has come down to scholars. Where I refer to the Journal, I give three points of information: the date of the entry, the volume and page number of the trade edition of Boswell’s Private Papers, and the Box, Folder and Page number of the original in the Beinecke collection in New Haven. At times, when more than one series of pages is stored in a single folder, I add the classification and number assigned to those pages by the older catalogue. Where I quote the Journal, I occasionally depart from the readings of the editors of the Trade Edition, especially with reference to punctuation around speech, which those editions regularise.

Most of the Beinecke Manuscripts are available for viewing online through the Beinecke Digital Library at [http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/](http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/). The Boswell collection is Gen MSS 89.

The Manuscript of the *Life* is principally located in the Beinecke collection Boxes 52-56/ Folders 1095-1191. I make reference to the uninterrupted series of pages by writing “MS” followed by the number. A large number of pages are collected under Boswell’s heading “Papers Apart” in the later folders. These I give more detailed notes. After noting the manuscript page, I give the location of the text in the three available volumes of the Research Edition of the manuscript under the names of each of the editors. The sequence of the first three volumes takes us as far as MS 800. MS pages beyond that point are left unadorned.

Finally, I make reference to two items in the Hyde Collection housed at Havard University’s Houghton Library: the second set of Page Proofs of the *Life* and Hester Lynch (Thrale) Piozzi’s annotated copy of the Fifth Edition. Both of these items are available digitally through the library’s Oasis service. In the body of the text I use the term “Revises” to refer specifically to the first of these items.
Cue Titles

In addition to the first edition of the *Life*, I make frequent reference to the following works by way of the abbreviations in the left column.

**Life** Second Edition


**Tour**


**Dictionary**

Johnson, Samuel, *A Dictionary of the English Language in which the Words are Deduced from their Originals, and Illustrated in their Different Significations by Examples from the Best Writers, to which are Prefixed, A History of the Language, and An English Grammar*. Two Volumes, 1755-6.

**Johnson, Lives**


**Hawkins**


**Thrale Anecdotes**

Piozzi, Hester Lynch, *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson LL.D. During the Last Twenty Years of His Life*, 1786.

**Thrale Letters**

Piozzi, Hester Lynch, *Letters to and from the Late Samuel Johnson, LL. D. to which are Added Some Poems Never Before Printed*. Two Volumes, 1788.

**Corr**


**Boswelliana**


**Waingrow**


**Redford**

Bonnell


LJ


Holland


GTGS


GTIF


Wife


Defence


OY


Extremes


Laird


AJ


Experiment


GB


BC

I cannot allow any fragment whatever that floats in my memory concerning
the great subject of this work to be lost. Though a small particular may
appear trifling to some, it will be relished by others; while every little spark
adds something to the general blaze: and to please the true, candid, warm
admirers of Johnson, and in any degree increase the splendour of his reputa-
tion, I bid defiance to the shafts of ridicule, or even of malignity. Showers of
them have been discharged at my "Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides;" yet
it still fails unhurt along the stream of time, and, as an attendant upon Johnson,

"Pursues the triumph, and partakes the gale."

(2/167)
Introduction

Compared with James Boswell’s monumental *Life of Johnson*, Sir John Hawkins’s version of Johnson’s life, the first full-length treatment of its subject, contains relatively little direct speech, even if it includes more talk than most other biographies of the period. Amongst the statements Hawkins attributes to Johnson, we can find this straightforward but overdetermined response to a simple question:

\[
\text{To a lady, who signified a great desire to increase her acquaintance with authors, conceiving that more might be learned from their conversation and manner of living, than from their works—‘Madam,’ said he, ‘the best part of an author will always be found in his writings.’—} \tag{Hawkins 410}^1
\]

The transmutation of this spoken statement about writing into text is perplexing to the point of paradox. Johnson’s proposition that the company and conversation of a writer such as himself is of less instructive value than the writer’s works starts off as a spoken utterance, and is implicitly less valuable than something he might have written. Nevertheless, by preserving the statement in text, Hawkins asserts a kind of use-value in the statement. Preservation of this curious definitive statement cuts two ways. If biography can be a way of getting to know, and knowing about, a person through a consideration of, among other things, his or her speech, the statement doubles back on itself and creates an ambiguous zone between the published works of a writer such as Johnson—who claims that his best part is to be found in his works—and this work that has been published about him by his close associate Hawkins. In this way Hawkins’s anecdote about Johnson denying value to spoken statements may very well be his best part. The story of the relationship between this statement and its

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^1 Hawkins, a magistrate and sometime member of the Literary Club, was the first to publish what might be considered a full-length biography of Johnson, a full four years before Boswell’s. Hawkins died within two years of publishing the book, so did not live to see his rival’s publication. Nevertheless, his text exists in an antagonistic relationship with Boswell’s, which took much longer to produce, and was the fruit of a shorter and less consistent association with Johnson, despite containing much more material. Brack and Kelly provide a thorough survey of treatments of Johnson as a biographical subject before Hawkins in their collection *Early Biographies of Samuel Johnson* (1974). The shorter, essayistic accounts of Johnson’s life, published mainly in magazines enact some of the difficulties I sketch in this introduction, but to a much smaller extent. Direct speech, usually apophthegmatic, can often be found as an end in itself, and somewhat participating in the paradox presented in Hawkins’s citation of Johnson—a removal from the literary interest in Johnson as an author that simultaneously betrays a demand for more of the products of his mind. Predictably, the direct speech collected in these early accounts is collected serendipitously and is haphazard and unreliable.
paradoxical, self-undercutting presence in print is even more vexed. This decontextualised anecdote, featuring an unnamed lady and occurring at an unremembered date, shows Johnson reiterating one of the principles that he had in fact put down in his works. The sentiment that an author’s conversation can be much less impressive or instructive than his life was the entire subject of *Rambler* 14. In that essay, Johnson expounds on the differences of expectation between the studious and the witty, seeing a virtue of aspiration in writing, and absolving what he calls the “stunning contrariety between the life of an author and his writings”. The anecdote in Hawkins’s telling is an attested view that Johnson really held, and in it he more pithily conveys the burden of that essay: do not go looking in the company of authors for what is more permanently recorded in their works. The interstice between the work and conversation that Hawkins establishes here is, of course, much more thoroughly surveyed by James Boswell, who, despite and indeed paradoxically because of his close attachment to the *Rambler*, sought out the author contrary to this advice. Boswell took from his conversation, his talks and his habits not only instruction, but also eventually the materials with which he would construct his enormous and intimate *Life of Johnson*. Finally published in 1791, the book identifies itself with the tenor of another of Johnson’s arguments, this time from *Rambler* 60: that biographies should be written by people close to their subject, and intimate with the small and trivial matters of their daily moral lives rather than their great accomplishments.

Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* marks an extraordinary moment in the history of this attitude to biography. Boswell instantiates Johnson’s ideal of the genre reporting on the intimate particulars of the subject’s life, conversation and manners and by so doing produces what amounts to a novel variety of biography in a style whose goals, if not its precepts, were taken as the model for subsequent generations of biographers. Much of the discord and controversy concerning the book has stemmed from disagreements about the views of Boswell’s Romantic successors towards it. Detractors have

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2 Johnson, *Rambler* No. 14 (5 May 1750).
3 Johnson, *Rambler* No. 60 (13 October 1750). John J. Burke weighs Johnson’s early biographical practice helpfully against the ideas he expounds in *Rambler* 60. Burke notes that the requirement for living closely with a biographical subject serves as a licence for brevity in the biographical form during Johnson’s apprenticeship in the genre in his essay “Excellence in Biography: Rambler No. 60 and Johnson's Early Biographies”. Burke also notes in his essay on the idea of “Boswell’s Johnson” that Boswell’s advantage over his rivals is not simply in access to “volatile” and “evanescent” details, but that he was also able to quiz Johnson and dispute the veracity of some stories, “But Boswell’s Johnson is not Boswell’s Johnson”, 174. The importance to Boswell of Johnson’s endorsement of lively and intimate detail is a key feature of Boswell scholarship. Boswell’s own approach to the ideas in *Rambler* 60, continues to produce various perspectives on the workings of the *Life*. Isobel Grundy, for instance, engages Johnson’s notion that there are domestic privacies beyond the particular to explain Boswell’s perspective of Johnson’s life in the times when he was not present, and his management of his last meetings with Johnson and the death scene, “Uncertainty in the *Life of Johnson*”, 198. John Vance argues that as the originator of this perspective of biography, Johnson exercised an unprecedented form of control over what small details would be available to his biographers, and that in the process he becomes spectral, “The Laughing Johnson”, 221-2. In his article “Truth and Artifice in Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*”, Greg Clingham treats Boswell’s practice as a turning away from “the idea of the dialectical interdependence of biographical artifice and truth”, 211. Clingham argues that Boswell’s subsequent efforts to achieve authenticity come at the expense of biographical truth.
come from a post-Romantic viewpoint in which scepticism about Boswell’s presentation of dubious factual materials has been pitted against an aesthetic appreciation of what Boswell himself calls the vivacity of his work.⁴ These two terms—fact and vivacity—might seem to be in stark opposition, however in this thesis I argue that detailed focus on Boswell’s mechanics of direct speech can allow a better contextualisation of the historical and intellectual currents running through Boswell’s work, and thereby lead to an understanding of the book where the problems of factual information and vivacious narration are seen as complementary parts of Boswell’s project. Direct speech, as in the enigmatic and forbidding statement Hawkins recorded in his own *Life of Johnson*, offers an opportunity to understand biography simultaneously within the history of genres and the history of knowledge. This is a product of the overdetermined and interstitial nature of quotation. Simply put, quotation of speech purports to do two contradictory things at once: to make a claim about something that happened in the world, and to present the thing that happened itself in text at the same time. Quotation is thus a troubled conglomerate of narrative and ontological concerns. Any interrogation of how a work of biography, and especially a work of biography like Boswell’s, which is constructed of diffuse parts including a preponderance of direct speech, artfully arranged from years of journal entries made during his intermittent visits and travels with Johnson, needs to begin by understanding the coincidence and overlapping of narrative and ontological concerns before it can proceed to the epistemological questions of what we can know about people, and how we can know it. This thesis, therefore investigates Boswell’s use of direct speech not in order to adjudicate his naiveté or mendacity in particular moments of narration, but to understand how he adjusts to the competing concerns of making claims about Johnson in narrative, and presenting his actual speech. It focuses on his management of the troubling and unsettled foundation of quotation: presenting speech in text requires a leap of faith. The rift between the two methods of communication requires the reporter to

⁴ The debate is most starkly illustrated in the emblematic dispute between the Johnsonian Donald Greene and the great Cham of Boswell studies, Frederick Pottle over a series of articles, some of them collected in series in the collection *New Questions, New Answers*. Greene’s general position is that any notion of Boswell as an artist is irrelevant to a modern Johnsonian seeking to approach the book as usable biography, particularly because of its inclusion of distorting (often second-hand) sayings that can be proven to be unoriginal, and certain errors deriving both from Boswell’s ignorance and his long absences from Johnson’s orbit (See Greene, “‘Tis a Pretty Book, Mr. Boswell, But—”; “Boswell’s *Life* as ‘Literary Biography’”; “Beyond Probability: A Boswellian Act of Faith”; “The World’s Worst Biography”). This view is opposed by Pottle’s insistence that Boswell’s attempts at assiduity and conscientiousness in minute matters, whatever their failings, are complemented by his success as a literary artist (“Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*: Art and Authenticity”; “The Adequacy as Biography of Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*”). This debate, expanded by other scholars, served as the locus for a larger discussion about the relationship between formalist and often aesthetic appreciation of non-fiction narrative in general and questions of historical truth. William C. Dowling, in his study *The Boswellian Hero*, argues for the ability to treat works such as Boswell’s as autonomous works of art in which internal consistency renders the consideration of external truth claims ultimately irrelevant. This position follows on from the inaugurating example of Ralph W. Rader’s essay “Literary Form and Factual Narrative: the Example of Boswell’s *Johnson*”, which argues that Boswell’s artistry universalises the particularities of Johnson’s life and thereby removes itself from connection to the external world, making Johnson’s character, rather the circumstances of his life, the central imaginative burden of the book.
surmount what is in fact an insurmountable and incommensurable gap between two different orders of reality, one fluid and the other static in the same dynamic Jacques Derrida identifies as the anguish of human responsibility in the moment of being commanded to write down the words of God: “It is the moment at which we must decide whether we will engrave what we hear. And whether engraving preserves or betrays speech.”5 In his analogous series of moments of engraving, transcription and publication, Boswell wrestles with this anguish of preservation and betrayal. His book is persistently dealing with the difficulties of crossing between orders of language and grappling with the many ways in which textualisation, even as it serves as a method of preservation, betrays the moment of speech.

The thesis investigates the dependence of Boswell’s claims to factual and ontological accuracy in his narrative by engaging in detailed analysis of his text as it emerges, focusing all the while on the hinges on which the relationship between narration and quotation is hung, as well as the various and contingent shifts in perspective involved in the narration and even in the smallest minutiae of quotations. All these goals mean that this thesis deploys a range of assumptions and methods derived from textual history, genre history, deconstructive analysis, and intellectual history. It is only through seeing the multiple gestures of Boswell’s authorship from many perspectives that we can fully understand the multiform and subtle differences in his models of quotation, and what by extension, his idea of biography might have been based upon.

Boswell’s Idea of his Project

To adapt the unattributed saying that Walter Benjamin uses to introduce his essay on Proust, in writing the Life of Johnson, Boswell may well have invented a new genre, even if he cannot be said to have inaugurated one.6 Indeed, his project could be said to have been formed perfectly around his materials, leaving little space for it to hew to the standards of previous forms, or to imagine the establishment of a new, more complete method of biographical writing. It is not for nothing that Boswell claims in his Advertisement that he can make concurrent statements of the completeness of his picture and the inadequacy of his project:

5 Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference, 9.
6 Walter Benjamin, “The Image of Proust” in Illuminations, 201: “It has been rightly said that all great works of literature found a genre or dissolve one—that they are, in other words, special cases.”
We should take this coming together of Boswell downplaying his literary skill while applauding the result of his own labours seriously, because it can expose some of the base assumptions about his practices. Boswell is committed to reproducing documents: records of speech included, and this allows him to assert literary humility while making grand claims for the final result. His work, he implies, should not necessarily be counted as a literary labour, especially not in those parts where the preservation of speech has allowed, in Pope’s phrasing, scenes to be “lived o’er” and would, if others had followed his example, nearly have preserved the subject of the biography himself. The implication here is that the record of Johnson’s speech is a less than literary endeavour. Since the discovery of Boswell’s journals and manuscripts, scholars have had ample opportunity, and great success, in demonstrating the extent of the misapprehension about Boswell’s literary labours in Johnson’s speech. This has not been without controversy: the basis of the biographical genre in the claim to represent truth, coupled with the consistent evidence of Boswell’s transformation of his source materials into something more lively, more literary, and more skilful has led to the development of two main tendencies of thought about Boswell’s project. One says the question of fidelity to events, and the skewed picture that Boswell presents of his friend in this work he was constantly preparing for during Johnson’s lifetime simply does not matter when held up against the

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7 The rediscovery and purchase of Boswell’s papers in the early Twentieth Century is the subject of two monographs. See Frederick A. Pottle, *Pride and Negligence: the History of the Boswell Papers* and David Buchanan, *The Treasure of Auchinleck: the History of the Boswell Papers*. The papers have been published in three forms since, first in the *Private Papers* Geoffrey Scott and Frederick A. Pottle’s edition of Col. Ralph Isham’s then privately-owned collection, subsequently in the so-called trade editions, and currently in the ongoing scholarly Yale Editions of the Private Papers of James Boswell. A briefer account of this process can be found in Joseph W. Reed’s essay “Early Morning in the Boswell Vineyard”. The manuscript of the *Life* was one of the last-discovered tranches of Boswell’s papers, but has been among the first to receive detailed scholarly treatment in the three out of the four projected volumes published since Marshall Waingrow’s first section in 1993. Bruce Redford offers a full exposition of how access to the manuscripts has changed and can influence our appreciation of the final text of the *Life*, claiming that viewing what he calls the “designing” of the *Life* shows Boswell’s dedication to both “fidelity and finesse”. See Bruce Redford, *Designing the “Life of Johnson”*, 14-5.
literary achievement of the final result. The other tendency is to berate Boswell for failing at his presumptuous task, for getting key facts wrong, for allowing spurious content into his book, and for presenting an inaccurate picture of his subject.¹

Other scholars have tried to mediate between the two positions, most notably William Dowling, who, in his 1977 study *Language and Logos in Boswell’s “Life of Johnson”*, turned to deconstruction to advance an aesthetic claim in which Boswell’s failings are seen to dramatise and deconstruct the impossible methods of biography.² But without an aestheticising anchor, we might ask, is it possible to understand Boswell’s work on its own terms in the light of our subsequent knowledge of how the book transforms the world around Boswell and Johnson, and how did it come about? I advance an argument that attending to the granular stylistic choices involved in Boswell’s lengthy process of compiling and revising the *Life* out of the direct representation of Johnson’s and his own speech, we can understand the interplay between changing notions of truth and evidence in the Eighteenth Century and the different genres that purport to represent reality. This argument sees direct speech as a hinge between reality and representation—a paradoxical zone in which representation and writing are both present and absent, but which is at the same time inescapably coloured by generic conventions and the assumptions about the nature of truth that they partake in. Boswell’s representation of speech can serve as a window onto the fluid interplay of ideas about genre and truth as they developed in the Eighteenth Century. While Boswell may have thought of himself as making a series of transcripts, and the popular imagination has kept this image of him as his chief legacy, I argue that the determining principles of the composition of the *Life of Johnson* derive from the deft management of the demands of direct speech at genres representing different scales of observation.

This study benefits from the availability of Boswell’s accounts of Johnson’s behaviour and sayings at many stages of development. Though incomplete, we can see various incidents as scattered notes, and

¹ John A. Vance, introducing *New Questions, New Answers*, gives a helpful summary of this school of thought up to 1985 (10-14), citing Paul Alkon (“Boswellian Time”; “Aesthetic Distance”), David Passler (*Time, Form, and Style in Boswell’s “Life of Johnson”*), Sven Eric Molin (“Boswell’s Account of the Johnson-Wilkes Meeting”), Thomas Newman, Jo Allen Bradham, David Schwalm, and William Seibenschuh as proponents, each of these authors takes a literary technique or generic context and finds isolated examples of it within the *Life*. More recent studies have sought to balance concern with the form of Boswell’s work and the factual claims it makes by contextualising Boswell’s endeavours with either his own life and concerns, or wider intellectual concerns in the history of the Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain. My assumption in this study is that the *Life* is an artistic enterprise in a recognisable genre whose central generic feature is the dual claim of factual accuracy and authenticity, and as such its formal coherence is determined by the engagements it makes with the quandaries of presenting facts in narrative form. These quandaries are nowhere more tense and insoluble as the representation of speech.

² Dowling’s position is not simply aesthetic, but uses the perspective of Boswell dramatising the “impossibility of its undertaking” as his basis for arguing for the *Life* as the “greatest of all biographies”, “…the true subject of the *Life*, as of all biographies, is the impossibility of the biographical enterprise, not presence but the illusion of presence ultimately revealed as an illusion, the dilemma of narrative trying and failing to reach through to a world beyond itself.” William C. Dowling, *Language and Logos in Boswell’s “Life of Johnson”*, 97.
as fleshed-out Journal entries, in addition to his manuscripts, galleys and the finished book. We can readily agree with Boswell’s sentiment in his *Hypochondriack* essay “Of Authors and Revision”: “What a treasure would it be if we could have Virgil’s own copy of his works, and see the corrections which he made” (*BC*, 159) and extend the observation to include all these various stages of the text’s transformation from the near-extemporaneous record of Boswell’s life into the posthumous solidity of Johnson’s *Life*. Indeed, we can go along with Boswell’s thoughts further to question his status as an author at all:

Some men have a vacillancy of mind which makes them quite indecisive in their composition, so that they shall alter and correct as long as they can; and at last be fixed only because the types cannot be kept longer standing. When this is only as to the language it is ridiculous enough. But when their indecision respects the very substance of their work, they are surely very unfit to be authors. (*BC*, 160)

Boswell is certainly one of these men. One of the chief concerns of this thesis is the relationship between these two conceptions of writing: Boswell’s alterations of the language are not entirely distinct from his indecision about the substance of the work. Indeed, insofar as the direct speech in his *Life of Johnson* is documentary, alterations as to the language may not only be faintly ridiculous but also afford an illuminating insight into the workings of the truth-fiction divide in Eighteenth-Century genres, and into the general representational relationship between narrative and truth.

Boswell has been seen as a precursor to later ideals of the biographical mode, following the Romantic conception of the *Life* as a great work accidentally written by a “man of the meanest and feeblest intellect”.10 His intense focus on the daily and particular open up an expanse of Johnson’s personality that had been inaccessible to the readers of previous biographies, but it is perhaps better to see Boswell not as a Romantic *avant la lettre*, but as a holdover from the Baroque period. Boswell’s craze for collecting and antiquarianism stayed with him his whole life, and found its expression not only in Johnson’s speech but extended too to the speech of any notable person he came in contact with, as

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10 The proponent of this view was, of course, Thomas Babington Macaulay in his review essay of Croker’s 1831 edition of the *Life, Essays II*, 123: “Many of the greatest men that have ever lived have written biography. Boswell was one of the smallest men that ever lived and he has beaten them all.” The argument that Boswell is such a landmark in the history of English biography is pervasive, if overplayed. See, for instance, Nigel Hamilton’s *Biography: a Brief History*, 91-4 for what we might see as the commonplace view of Boswell as having achieved something new in biography because of his intimacy with Johnson and the vividness of his portrait. Mark Longaker presents a more nuanced version, offering earlier texts such as the 1781 compilation of *Biographical Anecdotes of Hogarth* as examples of attempts to use chronology in service of turning anecdotal material into biographical form, but is still very reverential toward the notion of Boswell’s massive influence, *English Biography in the Eighteenth Century*, 505. Annette Wheeler Cafarelli offers a contrary view of the influence of Boswell on Romantic conceptions of biography, saying that the *Life* influenced perceptions that authors should assume that they would be subjects of biography, but the aspect of intimacy was eschewed in favour of the Johnsonian model of circumscribed group biographies. See *Prose in the Age of Poets*, 2-4.
well as his own **bons-mots**, laboriously detailed in his *Boswelliana*, and to physical objects, including the stag’s hoof he mentions being awarded hunting with royalty at Dessau as a particular prize for the museum at Auchinleck. Boswell comes closer to being a Baroque virtuoso than a Romantic. In one *Hypochondriack* essay, he takes a typical virtuoso’s delight in copying down what constitutes a metacuriosity:

In *Leeds*, where one would not expect it, there is a very good public library, where strangers are treated with great civility, of which I for one retain a grateful sense. I there found a manuscript containing the coats of arms and descents of the families of the West Riding of Yorkshire, upon which there is this inscription which I copied as highly expressive of a true devotee to a Museum: “Every ingenious fragment is venerable to the Virtuoso, and always pleasant to a curious inquisitive mind. But, a collector should have the industry of a Hercules; and the patience of a Socrates; an eye like Argus; and a purse like Croesus.” *Hypochondriack* LII “On Past and Present.” (*BC*, 268)

It is debatable whether Boswell actually lived up to this description as his work was dilatory and dissipated: he needed constant encouragement from Edmond Malone and others to produce it; he apologises frequently for his failure to observe conversation during different periods in his life; additionally he laments his extravagant spending and poor decisions, including the move to London during the time he was writing the *Life*. Notwithstanding all this, his glee for collecting even such a description marks him as a curiosity in himself. When this glee was extended out into his collecting his own conversations with Johnson, it resulted in the vast archive of minute particulars from which the *Life* is constructed.

Boswell’s characterisation as an anachronistic virtuoso is not surprising, given the general perception of cyclic time detailed by Ian Baucom in his *Spectres of the Atlantic* where, drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin and Giovanni Arrighi, he details a conception of historical periods where the functions and demands of capital work in different ways in alternating periods between modes. What is certain is that Boswell does not fit the mode of an Enlightenment intellectual: he is much less

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11 Journal, 24/9/1764. *GTGS*, 108. “Prince Diederic then presented me with the stag’s foot, saying, ‘My dear Sir, this is a mark of distinction.’ This pleased me. It shall be laid up in the museum at Auchinleck, with an inscription on a plate of gold or silver, telling that Laird James the Fourth had it in a present from a German prince with whom he had the honour of hunting, when upon his travels.”

12 Ian Baucom, *Spectres of the Atlantic*, 24-9. Annette Wheeler Cafarelli offers a complement to this view in her account of Romantic authors’ appreciation of Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets* as a model for group biographies, skipping the generation typified by the comprehensive approach used by Boswell. See *Prose in the Age of Poets*, 71-2.
interested with attaining verifiable general truths than he is with the particularity of individual statements. His collection is therefore more of a *wunderkammer* than a scientific archive. Since reason has refined the raw data of Boswell’s extensive experience with Johnson into a set of verified propositions, we should view the resulting biography less as a synthesised whole than as at best a presentation of all the available data arranged chronologically. Boswell’s principal concern is not with the general truth of propositions about Johnson’s behaviour and beliefs (though occasionally he does make such claims) but with the specific authenticity of each individual statement. This has perverse effects on how we can read the work because of Boswell’s framing of the collection as a biography: Boswell may choose himself not to see any of his discontinuous particulars as metonymic details about Johnson’s character, but their presence together in an extensive and ostensibly narrative work such as the *Life* means the possibility that a reader would be able to read details metonymically is never absent. This is an ineradicable tension, and one which Boswell at several points guards against by marking the non-particularity of a particular statement or action of Johnson’s, forbidding, in effect, extrapolation from particular point, and never endorsing extrapolation from others.

Such prohibitions only fuel the overriding tensions of interpretation in the work. Readers are in effect given a very peculiar window through which to look at Johnson’s life, and forced to speculate about the nature of the interpretations that can be made from what can be seen inside, knowing little about what is obscured. This frustration of the overall interpretive drive of biography occurs at all scales of action, whether understanding the nature and typicality of a single perplexing action—Johnson clearing a blockage in a waterfall that contains the corpse of a dead cat, for instance (2/167-8)—or speculating about changes in Johnson’s personality, circumstances and outlook as he grows older. The effect is that Boswell’s practice of maximal inclusion places his discontinuous curiosities on a blank and static background, and asks his readers to make their own inferences about the background. Much of the rancour in the critical reception of the *Life* can be seen as the result of the temptation to treat those inferences as a settled and authoritative picture. The abundance of trivial data certainly encourages readers to come to the conclusion that the picture presented is complete. It is true that many people are satisfied with it and do not seek out other information about Johnson, meaning that the book’s peculiarities have an insidious effect on the general reputation of the book’s subject. These frustrations stem, however, from a misprision of Boswell’s project. Even after the publication of the second edition they grew with the inclusion of much more material from what Boswell deemed to be

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13 This is the path taken by John B. Radner in his inductive charting of the course of subtle changes in their “evolving, multifaceted collaboration” of a friendship. *Johnson and Boswell: A Biography of Friendship*, 4. Radner seeks illuminating contexts for minor moments in the *Life* and through these allows a deeper perception of Johnson’s fluctuations in behaviour Boswell must have found perplexing or hurtful but does not explain.
reliable sources. The principles of the work establish a pattern where the raw facticity of individual moments is foregrounded over the general application of those particularities and the representation of speech is the most important and vexing locus of information about Johnson precisely because it is at once documentary and narrative. In purporting to represent something that is part of the real world but essentially unverifiable, Boswell presents a form of curiosity that tends closer to the monstrous end of the spectrum that Barbara Benedict describes between monstrous curiosities and scientific data laid out and arranged in comprehensible and systematic collections.14

It is perhaps only following in the wake of the conceptual art movement and the recent development of conceptual and concrete poetry, that we have reached a point where a full appreciation of the dynamics of quotation can be understood. By seeing quoted speech as a found object, ready to be appropriated but still resistant to total interpretation in its thing-ness, we may be able to approach Boswell’s book in a way that is actually germane to the principles of its construction. In such a reading, Johnson’s sayings, and the daily ordinariness and effectively accidental transcription of this statement in preference for other lost statements would serve as revenant markers of the strangeness in the mundane. It would also bring readers closer to the particular lived reality of the world that Johnson and Boswell shared than even a considered analytical summary of that reality could be. Indeed, this is the recommendation that Kenneth Goldsmith places upon the book in his manifesto *Uncreative Writing*: for Goldsmith, Boswell’s work serves as a print precursor to the type of non-directional reading that characterises reading on the internet. To flip through and browse, to “dip in and out” of Boswell’s *Life* (particularly in heavily annotated editions) allows a reader to engage with the fleeting and the fortuitous, without having to worry about the necessary relationships of dependence between narrative elements that we might find in other biographies.15 This is an enlightening reading of the effects of Boswell’s work, but it is a moot point as to whether Boswell would recognise his own book in it, or be pleased with the characterisation. Boswell’s goal was not a total abandonment of the chronology and internal logic of a narrative; rather, he was trying to marry the directionless a-linear nature of the collection of a person’s sayings, called in the period, and in the

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14 Indeed, Boswell’s text exhibits the very feature of Benedict’s characterisation of the monstrous—an “interfusing of art and nature”, Barbara Benedict, *Curiosity*, 72. Benedict describes the response of writers to the monstrous and the improbable as a hedging between the two poles of the spectrum: “Elite sentimental writers instead internalized both empiricism and second sight. Their new systematic scheme for enlightenment was the acquisition of moral expertise through the individual collection of experience: a curious quest that openly scoffed established truths”, 161.

15 Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*, 190. The status and description of direct speech in poetry has been a principal concern of critics of Conceptual poetry. Marjorie Perloff summarises the effect of the selection and appropriation of real-world speech into the poetic: “The ‘real’ speech of the protagonists—so bland, so repetitive, fragmented, unimaginative—doesn’t summarize or draw moral lessons. It simply is […]”, “Representing Speech in Conceptual Poetry”, 17. A similar effect can be adduced for the minor, transactional and procedural elements of the speech represented in the *Life*, leaving aside, of course, those of Johnson’s speeches from which Boswell adduces evidence of Johnson acting as a moral exemplar or Imlac.
book itself, the ana, with the more narrative leanings of traditional biography. So it is perhaps wrong to see Boswell as fully committed to the creation of an internet text before its time. The chief difficulty in such an assessment of the book is that it elides the central problematic of Boswell’s quotation. In the concrete version of Boswell, the quotations are found things that offer a serendipitous glimpse of the quotidian, but for Boswell they are equally narrative elements in their own right. It is only in the paradoxical conjunction of these two ends: the ontic stasis of the quotation and the fluid narratological impulse of the component that we can see the whole picture of Boswell’s text. The quotations are interesting because they are neither entirely static nor entirely fluid. As in life, speech for Boswell is self-extensive at the same time as pointing to something larger. But to determine the particular mix of these imperatives, we need to understand not only Boswell’s goals, but his processes of transcription and recording, as well as the specific attitudes to the ontic status of the things he is setting down. As we will see, the myriad twists and contortions of Boswell’s process in transforming his interactions with Johnson into printed text betray the conjunction of myriad possibilities and imperatives. It is only through attending to the specific dispositions of minute moments that we can appreciate how this book can come to present an image of the everyday even when it is claiming to write about an exceptional figure. That is, it is not enough, pace Goldsmith, to engage with the clean final version of what looks like a transcript: we need to investigate the messy process by which Boswell first constructs a textual version of Johnson’s speech, and then shapes it into something which he thinks will resemble an account of his life.

The Life of Johnson as Biography

Biography is constructed not so much out of an overriding interest in its subject, but by the problem of sources and materials: perhaps no other biographical subject before Boswell wrote had left adequate information for the kind of biography that Johnson lauded and Boswell envisaged. Johnson himself destroyed much of his personal archive rather than leave it to any of his friends, and Boswell’s account of Johnson’s early years, obtained from the mouth of the subject himself, is not

16 In accounting for the Life’s stylistic variety, Carey McIntosh follows a similar line of argument that explains variety as the function of what he calls “the gravitational pull of genres other than biography” setting off an alternation between high and low style. The crux of McIntosh’s analysis is the ana, a recognised genre in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries that presented the familiar and anecdotal talk of distinguished and celebrated figures. While the ana is a component genre of the Life, McIntosh argues that it is also the most similar to it in that “though bookish in character, [it] is not above ribald humour”, “Rhetoric and Runts: Boswell’s Artistry”, 146-8. The ana is not only a distinctive mixture of modes and content: the genre is also marked by an interest in the formal mixture of elements and juxtapositions of characters and situations in which Boswell remained very interested throughout his life. I provide a fuller description of the formal features of the genre below.
significantly less scattered and partial than those of his rivals, nor is it atypical of the genre in this period. But even the account of the later years, where Boswell gives the impression of deep and regular contact between the two, strict analysis reveals the dissolution of the relationship between the individual moments represented and the flow of time in calendrical years. Boswell’s work is disparate and frangible precisely where it is seemingly most complete. The most detailed and lengthy accounts of individual days do not come near the amount of content that could be generated by the transcription of speech in a whole day, and for most of Boswell’s encounters there is barely three minutes of recorded speech. These are problems of transcription and memory, but also problems of focus. In the conversation for 30 April 1773, for instance, Boswell reports on his own truncation of the lived experience of socialising with Johnson:

Much pleasant conversation passed, which Johnson relished with great good humour. But his conversation alone, or what led to it, or was interwoven with it, is the business of this work.

(1/409)

Boswell’s stream of exceptions allowing for the inclusion of more material as contexts for speech, shows us that here the idea of writing about someone’s life on the same narrative time scale as it is experienced requires a scheme of exclusion, even if it is the exclusion only of things that would ultimately prove inconsequential. Indeed, it is the very idea of the limits of inconsequence that provide the basis for the problems of non-fiction narration in the kind of scenes that Boswell makes the life out of. Within the scene, and in the life as lived by the subject, there are inconsequential periods punctuated by moments of importance, but negotiating the boundaries and horizons of consequence is fraught with difficulty. The same consideration applies on the larger scale of the life considered as a whole: condensation is an inescapable imperative, both because of the adventitious limits of sources, and because of the limits of space and the reader’s attention, but every manoeuvre with reference to the specific content that is included in the book affects the interpretation of the whole. Having and not having information, including and excluding contexts, presents a ceaseless challenge for both writers and readers of biographies. These problems go back to the very foundations of hermeneutics as an academic pursuit. Freidrich Schleiermacher, who wrote the subject’s foundational work while also translating Plato’s disparate records of Socrates’s life and working as a

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17 For assessments of Boswell’s claim of assiduity, see Adam Sisman, *Boswell’s Presumptuous Task*, which claims that Boswell is more committed to verifying facts rather than relying on previous authorities, 231. Donald Greene, “‘Tis a Pretty Book, Mr. Boswell, But—”, 115-6 gives a less favourable version of Boswell’s assessment of the evidence that he managed to gather.
new-testament scholar, saw these problems as central to his new pursuit. Biography, in the heightened importance it is given if the subject of the work is actually divine, faces many difficulties.\(^\text{18}\)

It is not possible to represent a \textit{continuity} of fulfilments of time. If it were possible it could only happen in the form of a \textit{strict chronicle}, for there time divides itself in consecutive sections. If one abstracts from this and posits in the biographical content a difference between what deserves to be communicated precisely and what does not, then gaps will emerge. Such a product would then have to be regarded as an aggregate of particulars. Continuity is the basis of the description of a life because life is One. Although continuity cannot be immediately represented, and can only be presented in the form of the particular that separates itself off, the relation of the particular to the continuity must yet be present. This relationship does not lie in the identity of the subject, but rather in the course of time. The particulars must be arranged in terms of time so that the reader can recognise the continuity. Mere collations of particulars without that continuity are just materials, elements for a biography. One cannot make a biography out of them; it remains, even if one arranges the particular in temporal sequence and provides it with linking phrases, just an aggregate which lacked internal connection in the course of time.\(^\text{19}\)

First, there is the problem of sources and a general lack of information, but more importantly the way in which the disparate pieces of information are made to relate to each other is immensely important for the beginnings of any interpretation of a biographical text. For Schleiermacher, this is a result of the difficulties inherent in making scanty parts relate to a divine whole. Knowing that a small incident can have more meaning in isolation from the vast amount of unrecorded information forces readers into a position where they have to decide whether such a possible interpretation is valid or intentional in terms of the entirety of a life, leading to a position where interpretive oscillation between the divine whole and the illuminating part can begin. For readers and writers of secular biography, these problems are perhaps less consequential, but they are more persistent. Without the possible guarantee of a divine ordering, biography is built up out of scraps that are more likely to have no inherent or

\(^{18}\) Boswell’s attitude to these newer conceptions of knowledge through positivistic investigation was obviously more complex than I am painting here in relation to the birth of hermeneutics. This is particularly the case in relation to his stated models for biography through anecdote. See Robert DeMaria, “Plutarch, Johnson, and Boswell: The Classical Tradition of Biography at the End of the Eighteenth Century” for an alternate view which reads Boswell’s invocation of Plutarch as a model was decidedly more approbatory than Johnson’s more reasonable scepticism of “artistic” and anecdotal narrative writing. To DeMaria, Boswell is much more comfortable with the imposing narrative implications on the fragmentary nature of biographical evidence.

\(^{19}\) Schleiermacher, \textit{Hermeneutics and Criticism}, 118.
emblematic meaning, which must be imposed by the biographer. Indeed, Boswell himself expresses a similar view in *Hypochondriack* XLV, “On Time”, where he contemplates what a complete accounting of the activities of a life might look like:

> To apply chronology to the lives of individuals, would be an entertaining, but I believe, in by far the greatest number of instances, a very humiliating experiment. Were an accurate table to be made out with various columns, in which upon a fair computation the portions of Time appropriated to eating, drinking, sleeping, conversation, study, business, amusements, in short, all the several modes of existence were to be marked, we should be surprised to see the short duration, the small quantity of any thing which has either our love or our approbation. It would be found that some of the most distinguished speakers in Parliament have not spoken two months; that some of the most brilliant, fine ladies of the court, have not been admired above a quarter of a year; nay, that some of the oldest and most intimate friends have not seen one another for a twelve-month in the whole. (*BC*, 328)

Boswell’s detractors have been assiduous in performing these very calculations for the chronology of Johnson’s life as represented by Boswell.20 The figures tend to agree with this statement that the many notable moments of the *Life* pale in comparison to the amount of time Boswell does not remark upon. The friendship between the two men also comes up for scrutiny, as Boswell imagines: a twelve-month in the whole is indeed more than the counts of all the days Boswell and Johnson are recorded to have spent any time together, and this includes all the potential subdivisions including when they slept and where they did not interact. If, for Schleiermacher, the problems of biography expose the need for rigorous theological hermeneutics, the gaps exposed by a rigorous accounting in Boswell’s book pose similar questions of his approach to writing a biography. The problem is not that there is too little intimate detail in this massive work, nor is it that there is too little consequential information: what we need to consider in any reading of the *Life* is the nature of the interrelation between its various parts. Taking on board Dowling’s appreciation of the book as intractably fragmentary, a “centreless structure, a system of purely antithetical relations in which every world is defined as a world by every other”, we need to understand the ways in which the fragments and the documents are made to corporately constitute a *Life* for Boswell, and for anyone who reads the book.21 If the complaint from the critics who turn to chronology to expose Boswell’s inadequacy is

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20 Greene “‘Tis a Pretty Book, Mr. Boswell, But—” (135-43) and Hitoshi Suwabe, “Boswell’s Meetings with Johnson, A New Count” both provide charts and statistics to convince readers of the paucity of Boswell’s personal interactions with Johnson.

that Boswell’s fragments overwhelm the abstracted rhythms of Johnson’s life, we need to understand this overpowering as a result of the narrative structures of the work itself, not simply as a failure of Boswell’s industry or intelligence. In both of these considerations, it is the vast amount of direct speech that makes up the problem and should be the central focus of any reading that will understand how biography works as a genre for Boswell.

The direct speech in the *Life* is not only a diversion for readers who expect a narrative of Johnson’s life, it is also a component of that narrative itself. That is, Johnson’s speech is both an attraction and part of the mechanical structure of the work. Because of this, it is not enough to rely on a simple hermeneutic circle oscillating between the part and the whole to understand how the text works: each statement of Johnson’s is in effect a whole in itself, out of which larger wholes can be extrapolated by being put in conjunction with other components of equal provenance. In the place of such an oscillation, we need to engage with the sinuous movements of an oscillation on sliding scales. This requires an understanding of the generic expectations of biography. We at least need to understand Boswell’s version of biography as he modelled it on William Mason’s fragmentary approach to his life of Thomas Gray, which he based on the principle of the publication of primary documents interleaved with explanatory narration, and simultaneously written in scenes.

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22 Boswell genuinely admired Mason’s *Life of Gray*, which innovatively presented Gray’s life through letters, only interfering to provide contextual commentary by way of joining paragraphs. Boswell does record that Johnson “depreciated the book, I thought, very unfairly” in the *Life* at 2/59. By contrast, Boswell distances his method from Mason’s later biographical work, partly as the result of a quarrel between Johnson and Mason that was aroused by Mason’s reaction to Johnson’s treatment of elements of his work with anecdotal material Mason had excluded from his own *Life of Gray*. In his *Memoirs of William Whitehead* (1788), a former poet-laureate and his and Gray’s friend, Mason worked directly against *Rambler* 60’s principle of biographical intimacy by barely including personal detail at all, and pointedly defending himself against the demands of a Johnsonian school in his conclusion: “I have interspersed so many of my own impartial sentiments concerning him, both as a man and a poet, through the preceding pages, and have adduced so many passages from his hitherto unpublished poems, to justify those sentiments, that to add more would here be totally unnecessary. Conscious, notwithstanding, that to avoid writing what is unnecessary is, in these days, no just plea for silence in a biographer, I have some apology to make for having strewed these pages so thinly with the tittle-tattle of anecdote. I am, however, too proud to make this apology to any person but my bookseller, who will be the only real loser by the defect. Those readers, who believe that I do not write immediately under his pay, and who may have gathered, from what they have already read, that I am not so passionately enamoured of Dr. Johnson’s biographical manner, as to take that for my model, have only to throw these pages aside, and wait till they are new-written by some one of his numerous disciples, who may follow his master’s example; and should more anecdote than I furnish be wanting, (as was the Doctor’s case in his life of Mr. Gray) may make amends for it by those acid eruptions of vituperative criticism, which are generated by uncocted taste and intellectual indigestion.” (128-9) It is this defiance that caused Boswell to disparage that work as “containing literally no *Life* but only a mere dry narrative of facts” in introducing the *Life* (1/5). Boswell recorded the difference in his opinions of the two works in a letter to Temple on 24-5 February 1788: “Mason’s *Life of Gray* is excellent, because it is interspersed with Letters which shew us the Man. His *Life of Whitehead* is not a *Life* at all; for there is neither a letter nor a saying from first to last. I am absolutely certain that my mode of Biography which gives not only a *History* of Johnson’s visible progress through the World, and of his Publications, but a View of his mind, in his Letters, and Conversations is the most perfect that can be achieved, and will be more of a *Life* than any Work that has ever yet appeared.” *Corr*, 208.
Any understanding of this approach will need to appreciate the accommodation of speech into the biography as the text’s foundational gesture, and the hinge on which Boswell’s approach to the wider questions of genre and truth hangs. We need to interrogate the relationship between the specific moments represented in direct quotation and the generalised claims that Boswell makes about Johnson’s character and the course of his life, as this is crucial to locating the truth-claims in the book and understanding what the text itself thinks about factual information. We need to know, for instance, what sort of truth Boswell is conveying, and whether he expects his work to be understood as one unitary truth claim, a series of loosely related factual points, or a complex interrelating system of different types of truth claims. If we can understand that, we will have a chance at situating the whole genre in which he is participating. To reiterate, Boswell’s *Life* presents us with two problematic stratifications of the question of fact and fiction: one where narrative methods between factual and fictional genres meet, and another where an extra level of scrutiny is made necessary for the interpretation of narrative texts that claim to be factual while necessarily not relating all possible details. Direct speech can serve as an investigative fulcrum here, because it is not only shared by both the suspect genre categories of fact and fiction, but also is an extreme or limit case of the heightened scrutiny of discontinuous factual narrative.

The presentation of direct oral discourse in a written text establishes an additional layer for interpretation because it purports to be one degree closer to the real than the narrative that surrounds it, while at the same time adding and sharpening disjunctures in the narrative by requiring space and difference in the narrative voice. Direct speech is thus a very useful concept for hermeneutic study, and hermeneutics is a useful way of establishing the status and potentials of direct speech. Hans-Georg Gadamer, writing more than a century after Schleiermacher, points the way in establishing what asking these sorts of questions might mean when he discusses the relationship between orality and textuality in the hermeneutic enterprise. Gadamer breaks with Schleiermacher in asserting the total dominance of the text over the oral utterance as the object of hermeneutic study. While speech is always primary to writing, for Gadamer, it is only where text fixes language that it can truly allow the kind of interrogation that can lead to hermeneutic interpretation. Ambiguity in speech is not persistent enough to have a life of its own which readers can go to work on. For Gadamer writing is “a kind of alienated speech” and “everything that is written is, in fact, in a special way the object of hermeneutics”.23 Each of these observations leads to a special scrutiny being necessary for the reading of a text that purports to contain actual historical speech. While the problems of understanding in

conversation are never not there (say, for Boswell conferring with Johnson at the Mitre tavern), they are surely heightened when Boswell comes to record and disseminate them in text. Similarly the hermeneutic problematics of text (that is, the give and take between the production of the text and its reception) cannot fully accommodate content that comes from outside the process of composition.

The difficulty is that Johnson’s speech both belongs to Boswell’s text and exists outside it, resisting the very accommodation of its representation. It is both a material for Boswell’s text and Boswell’s text itself. As such it must be subject to a double hermeneutic, which is to say a hermeneutic that seeks to understand Johnson himself and the text in which it is embedded. This hermeneutic will necessarily be concentrated on the transitions and overlaps between the two levels of discourse, though it must never ignore the intersection of materials, composition and technology in constructing a reading of the principles of this hybrid text.

The extent of the epistemological difficulties in Boswell’s work can only be fully grasped with reference to the conjunction of the static, ontic qualities of the quotation and the narratological purpose to which Boswell concurrently puts quoted statements. In a deep sense, this is a parallel dynamic to those that can be found in genre studies, where it is almost proverbial that there are two ways of understanding genre that are at once in contest and complementary.24 Genres are either transcendent forms with internally consistent qualities or they are dynamically determined historical

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24 For example, Michael McKeon makes a distinction between “archetypal” and “institutional” accounts of genres as a way of putting forward his case for a dialectical study of genres: “genres fill a need for which no other adequate method exists. And when they change, it is as part of a change both in the need they exist to fill and in the means that exist for their fulfilment.” The Origins of the English Novel, 20. McKeon’s study covers the same period as the Life’s “view of literature and literary men in Great-Britain, for nearly half a century”, though its view of biography is more archetypal than dialectical. J. Paul Hunter argues more sensitively that over the Eighteenth Century, biography developed not simply as a source or context for the novel but in response to it as well, “running interference” into private spaces that the novel would take advantage of to greater effect, Before Novels, 350-1. Hunter claims that the appearance of the novel placed “pressures on autobiography” and cites Boswell’s work alongside Rousseau’s, arguing their “consciousness of literary possibility leads to formal features that have more to do with rhetoric than revelation”, 327-8. This observation should certainly be true as it relates to the consideration of speech in the Life: its potential to reveal facts about Johnson is at least always in competition to the rhetorical potentials and generic contexts of each particular statement. In his influential essay “The Law of Genre”, Derrida puts forward a view that genre is constituted by a principle of contamination (59), and it is precisely the problem of citation that engenders the proliferation and degeneration of a genre. This is a problem that has fueled much narratological debate about the possibility of forming a grammatical distinction between fiction and non-fiction, with particular reference to biography. Gerard Genette, for instance, sees the distinction between fiction and non-fiction resting only in the narratological concept of the difference between author, narrator and character rather than in any identifiable feature of style within a work. By Genette’s scheme, Boswell’s book would be a rough combination of autobiography, where these three figures are identifiable as the same, and biography where there character is different from the narrator and author, “Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative”, 766-70. The moments of disjuncture between these two modes would provide us with what Dorrit Cohn calls presents as the “highly heterogeneous textual surface”—the result of a biographer not wanting to stay for too long within the formal conventions of certainty afforded by free indirect style, “Fictional Versus Historical Lives: Borderlines and Border Cases”, 10. Cohn characterises this difference as an additional “testimonial stratum” necessary for verification in non-fiction works, “Signposts of Fictionality”, 782. The Life might be a perfect example of a heterogenous surface, and it is precisely the similarity between thinking of Johnson himself as an archetypal textual mode and an institution in progress that forces Boswell into this series of disjunctures.
processes that reflect historical changes in society. Since neither of these positions can fully account for both the existence of styles of writing and their historical inflections and transformations, they must be understood contrapuntally. In *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin posits this as a contrast between intentional, concrete, particular concepts and unintentional, unreachable ideas. The latter are comprehensible only through the inductive methods of the natural and historical sciences for Benjamin, while the former are continually partaking in intention and reference. A middle term between the two, fittingly, is speech. Speech in text is simultaneously aesthetic (each utterance has its own internal properties) and conceptual (it refers to other utterances in the world and is transformed by them). To write the *Life of Johnson* through a series of scenes, then, is much the same as writing a history of a genre: Boswell presents Johnson’s speech as simultaneously being an array of discontinuous contextless forms and as a continuous stream of evidence for the portrayal of Johnson’s character and the narrative of his life. If Johnson’s speech is then a genre (or a series of genres), then biography is a particularly vexed use to which it can be put. The same problems that Benjamin finds for the trauerspiel and other critics find for Eighteenth-Century novels are magnified in the consideration of biography as a form. Biography has formal and stylistic features that clearly mark its eternal character, while also demonstrably changing over time, but added to this is the ever-present constraint of the representation of reality. Being tied to facts and the portrayal of events that actually happened presents a series of limits to biography that are not present in purely literary or imaginative genres. Biography can never be pure form not only because it is tethered to the idea of real events, but because its aesthetic properties are positively constituted by the claim that the things contained within any example of the form are literally true. Thus a history of biography has to contend with this third consideration, which, it will be observed, is also prey to the dialectic between stasis and historical development because the idea of truth is at once the immovable bedrock of the non-fictional and demonstrably an historical construct that has taken many different forms during the time that people have been writing about each other’s lives.

**Truth-telling and Style**

If, to understand biography, we need to understand these two competing and complementary dynamics, we must never lose sight of the fact that a subsequent constraint on the form and possible aesthetic effects of the genre is the availability of sources, no matter what model of truth is being...
relied upon for the aesthetic impact of the real. This is also a recursive dynamic, because changes in form produce the demand for certain types of records. From these considerations, Boswell will emerge as the result of a series of historical transformations: firstly, there is a formal, aesthetic consideration in which he thinks that Johnson’s literary life would make a good subject for a biography with the specific models of Johnson’s own lives—literary, but short—and Mason’s *Life of Gray*, composed on the basis of alternations between primary sources and narrative commentary, with the additional conception of scenes. The book is indeed remarkably open and self-reflexive about this point, including several exchanges about the nature and merits of the genre and its exponents.  

Secondly we will need to see Boswell’s adoption from other genres of different stylistic techniques in order to refer to, evoke and dispute with Johnson, as part of an historical process of interrelations between forms of writing and forms of knowledge. In this second consideration, we must appreciate the multifarious nature of non-fiction forms, as well as the intense pressure placed upon the capacity of these forms to make transparent reference to the real in the general historical context of the development of realist modes of representation in fiction. The concurrence of different media across the fiction/non-fiction divide must not be seen as a simple progress towards the development of free indirect style in fiction after the polyphonic co-option of precursory non-fiction forms. Rather, we need to view the history of these genres as a relation of persistent antagonism and one-upmanship in which non-fiction genres are not simply assimilated into the realm of fiction along with their techniques, but rather persist in reaction to the reality-evoking effects of fiction. As a result, non-fiction genres have increasingly to find a way to represent more convincingly a world which, owing to the constraints of truth-production, has become ever more alienated from the lived experience of life. It is only in this dynamic context that we can begin to appreciate the specific determinations of direct speech in Boswell’s work.

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26 See, for instance, Johnson commending Bayle’s *Biographical Dictionary* “for those who love the biographical part of literature, which is what I love most”(1/231); his argument that biography is “rarely well executed” because of to the unlikeliness that people who have enough intimacy with a subject to write such a work will know what to say (2/26); Johnson describing his own difficulties in “obtaining authentick information” for the *Life of Dryden* (2/85); and his speech on the difference between a biography marking the peculiarities of a subject’s character and a panegyric: “if a man is to write *A Panegyrick*, he may keep vices out of sight; but if he is to write *A Life*, he must represent it as it really was” (2/144). Boswell also notes conversations in which specific works of biography are critiqued: Goldsmith’s *Life of Parnell* (which suffered from a lack of materials) and Ruffhead’s *Life of Pope* (knowledgeable neither of Pope nor poetry) (1/365); Burnet’s *Life of Rochester* (“We have a good death; there is not much *Life*”) (2/189); Mallet’s *Life of Bacon* (Johnson says this was “acute and elegant” but, citing Warburton says Mallet forgets Bacon was a philosopher), (2/168-70); Boswell’s projected publication of the autobiography of Sir Robert Sibbald (Mrs. Thrale thinks it would expose the subject, Johnson thinks the story of his conversion would give an honest picture of life), (2/189); and Johnson’s own abortive attempt to write a *Life of Cromwell* (while a fascinating story, there are no unpublished sources from which to derive new material), (2/463). The common theme of these discussions is that Biography needs not only the intimacy described in *Rambler* 60 to aid in entertainment, but also an additional weight of authentic materials in order for the work to be instructive. Boswell’s decision to write the *Life* in scenes is marked as early as 1780 in an intralinear note in the Journal: “I told Erskine I was to write Dr. Johnson’s life in scenes. He approved.” Journal, 12/10/1780. *Defence*, 260; Beinecke 44/1005, 66.
Speech in biography emerges as a problem of documentation, of observation, of narrative perspective, and ultimately of verification in the face of the falsity and profusion of direct speech in fiction. Boswell’s deployment of the techniques of multiple genres of non-fictional direct speech therefore show his work as a snapshot in the dynamic relationship between media: he is using multiple forms with multiple standards of authenticity in order to simultaneously present pieces of reliable, verifiable information and also to provide a heightened sense of the reality of certain moments in the shadow of the reality effect of realist fiction. That this concern was never far from Bowell’s mind can be seen in the conversations themselves. Boswell is to be found repeatedly quizzing Johnson on the merits of different approaches to historical writing, and often circles around the merits of introducing false details, approximations and conjectures into otherwise factual narratives. The results of these conversations vary depending on Johnson’s moods, but the advice reliably tends to the view that while augmentation of the record might often be seen as necessary because of the contingent way in which information about the past is preserved, fiction is a dangerous trap to be avoided. I argue throughout that this consideration applies at every scale of interpretation, and exposes Boswell’s multiple and contingent priorities. What counts as an insidious tendency towards fiction changes depending on the local effects and demands of the gaps in the record. Moreover, Boswell’s frequent return to this topic in his conversations with Johnson show him engaging with what was a live and central debate for historians during his life-time.

According to historiographers of this period, the Eighteenth Century was a diversely creative period in which many experiments in many directions were made, and many different approaches to the problem of the concurrence of narrative history and fiction were attempted. From conceptual and

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27 For instance, see Johnson’s praise of Lord Hailes’s *Annals of Scotland* for not having “that painted form which is the taste of this age” (2/74) or his use of the same image to endorse Goldsmith’s approach to history over Robertson’s, which he casts as romance, because “he paints, he adds, he imagines” (1/406-7). Johnson can also be found arguing that it is possible to translate history (as opposed to poetry) only “insofar as it is not embellished with oratory, which is poetical” (2/62), arguing that unless historical evidence of characters comes from intimate and reliable sources, “motives are unknown” and should not be speculated upon (1/314); and saying that the history of Ancient Britain, which could be presented in only a few pages is padded out with embellishment, calling the results a “dream” (2/253). Johnson is careful enough not to reduce history to simple chronology, though, as he assents to Boswell’s argument that Tacitus’s histories are more notes for history than history itself (1/379).

28 See, for example, Leopold Damrosch’s reading of both Hume and Johnson as seeing non-fictional works through their use of fictional techniques as well as his reading of Gilbert White’s *Natural History of Selbourne* in terms of its interrogation of narrative and categories of fact on scales and through forms of observation very different from political or ecclesiastical history. Damrosch situates Boswell’s idea of history within this context, arguing that Boswell employs a distinction between a “real fact” and a “real fact as written”, something he notes Johnson would be less amenable towards, *Fictions of Reality in the Age of Hume and Johnson*, 94. Robert Mayer, in his *History and the Early English Novel* extends the perspective of innovative Eighteenth-Century approaches to history to include debates from the less binary Seventeenth Century. Mayer demonstrates the waning of notions such as the Brutish history, and shows that this process took longer than a simple debunking might be expected to take (49). For Mayer, the categories of fact and fiction were much more compatible in the period leading to the rise of the novel than had previously been argued. He reads, for instance, the *History of Myddle* as a text in which the social, collaborative process of arriving at local historical information through memory means that more
social histories, to purely documentary summaries of ancient sources, to imaginative syntheses, historians in this period were all trying to find ways to join facts with narrative. Johnson’s perspective is that only authentic evidence ought to be used rather than embellishments, as when he laments the amount of “real” history available in the present:

*The common remark as to the utility of reading history being made:—Johnson. “We must consider how very little history there is; I mean real authentick history. That certain Kings reigned, and certain battles were fought, we can depend upon as true; but all the colouring, all the philosophy, of history is conjecture.” Boswell. “Then, Sir, you would reduce all history to no better than an almanack, a mere chronological series of remarkable events.”* (1/487-8)

This was not a standard approach to the problem. Lord Bolingbroke, in his *Letters on the Study and Use of History* advocates a more moderate position of accepting some the partiality, fictiveness and inherent falsehood of narration as a given, and reading with a more critical eye in order to establish truth without falling into a total nihilistic, or as he says Pyrrhonist, view about the possibility of truthful narration.29

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29 Lord Bolingbroke, *Letters on the Study and Uses of History*, 1/337. One additional point of interest in Bolingbroke’s argument here is that after dismissing the easy refutability of especially biased religious history and easily falsified reports for which there are conflicting sources, he turns to private histories and argues that accidental falsehood can easily come about through the emotion of being close to an event. In doing so, Bolingbroke cites a line from Virgil used twice in the *Life* to describe Boswell’s participation in events: “et quorum pars magna fui” (*Aeneid* II, 6 “of which I played a great part”). Boswell’s citation of this moment applies first to the lawyer Chambers, to whom he gives the citation as an elevating sentiment in objection to the storm of laughter occasioned by the story of Langton’s will, which he had drawn up, at 1/423. The second instance refers to himself in his introduction to the negotiations leading to the first conversation with Wilkes (2/80). This second citation, form Bolingbroke’s perspective, might encourage more sceptical readings of such set-pieces even in a writer of Boswell’s commitment to authenticity.
Importantly, while this debate also included references to the inclusion of implausible but uncontroverted stories such as the Brutish and Arthurian legends in British history, the crux comes with the representation of speech. It was commonly acknowledged that not only was speech generally unattested in many original accounts, but that where it is present, as for instance Pericles’s funeral oration in Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War*, accounts presenting actual quotations in ancients works were often demonstrably spurious. This conflict between embellishment and sticking to the sources was therefore a conflict between renaissance and enlightenment conceptions of humanistic truth: the trust in ancient models for both their content and the reliability of their forms breaks down when it comes under the scrutiny of new positivistic forms of knowledge. While for historians relying on distant sources this problem presented an impasse, for Boswell’s project there was more hope. Namely, Boswell was in a position to be presenting the kind of first-hand account Thucydides himself had written, but with closer access to his one subject, and a better idea of his goals with reference to the preservation and representation of his speech. Following on from eyewitness and secret histories of the Civil Wars and the Restoration, Boswell both perceived speech and events around him as being fodder for an ongoing account of Johnson’s life, and dedicated

30 See Robert Mayer, *History and the Early English Novel*, 35 ff, and Joseph M. Levine, *The Battle of the Books*, 271-8. An interesting demonstration of this principle is given by Kate O’Brien in her study *Narratives of Enlightenment*, in which she notes a shift in the treatment, in various histories of Scotland in some dubious words attributed to Mary Queen of Scots on the moment of leaving France which had been taken from a French romance, while historians earlier in the century had incorporated the words into their history, O’Brien notes that Hume provides some cover by adding “it is said” as a qualifier, 117.
himself to putting down Johnson’s sayings as not just as curiosities but also components in narratives. The *Life* can thus be read as an exercise in the kind of close attention in intimacy that Johnson recommends for such situations in *Rambler* 60, and in the *Life* itself. Attending to the problems of genre categories, then, presents us with the opportunity of seeing Boswell’s goals clearly. Applying our understanding of these goals allows a more considered reading of the purpose and constitution of specific moments of speech in the *Life* that would otherwise be obscured in the general project of Boswell’s “Flemish Portrait” of Johnson, but it is only by adding the consideration of genre to the understanding of literary composition and the changing nature of factual statements over the period in which Boswell was preparing the work.

All this tends to the interpretation that the speech Boswell put down in his journals constitutes something akin to what Susan Stewart calls a distressed genre:31 the transition first into text and then into print has the effect of pulling apart the generic conventions perceptible to participants in the conversation. Boswell must find analogues in their simulated textual representation to signify not the boundaries of different types of speech—jokes, *sententiae*, long stories, disputes—but the sense of the spoken itself. This is something peculiar to a text as it is obviously unnecessary within speech. Boswell’s direct speech has to employ purely textual means of indicating its own authenticity, with the consequence being that these generic markers transform the raw verbal content of the speech into a uniquely textual hybrid. This process also has the effect of flattening the speech into a single genre of writing: the speech-like. Verisimilar speech in text must then be read with attention and caution, because the textual elements that are used to signify the life-like elements of speech obscure the generic markers used by speakers themselves to demonstrate their own transitions between different styles of speech. Added to this mutual obfuscation is the complication that textual practices themselves are not uniform. Boswell’s hybrid approach to biography reaches its zenith when it comes to the representation of speech.

31 Stewart outlines the idea of the distressed genre (in her essay identified as epic, fable, proverb, fairy tale, ballad and parody) as a way of describing the continued production of spurious versions of these genres through the Eighteenth Century in gestures of nostalgia for collective authorship from a heroic past. Boswell’s portrayal of Johnson’s speech exhibits the same sort of distress, but as nostalgia for the heroism absent within his own life. It is the very act of taking down sayings as a guarantee against Johnson’s projected absences (first when Boswell is separated from him by distance, later by death) that distresses the truth-content of the sayings themselves. Stewart’s discussion of nostalgia is especially germane to Boswell: “the nostalgia of the distressed genre is not nostalgia for artifacts for their own sake; rather, it is a nostalgia for the heroic past, for moral order, for childhood experiences of preindustrial life. Thus we can understand why it makes little difference whether or not the article itself is real or a forgery: distressed genres are characterised by a counterfeit materiality and an authentic nostalgia. In fact, such genres point to the immateriality of all nostalgic objects. These artifacts of memory, these mnemonics, are artifacts of appearance, both partial and allusive.” *Crimes of Writing*, 91. We can see in Boswell’s quest for authenticity in his records of Johnson’s speech a decades-long engagement with the reality that his textual presentation of Johnson through his speech will be reduced to just this sphere of the partial and allusive.
Boswell draws on the precedents and conventions of many pre-existing non-fiction genres for which the factual claims of quotation serve different ends, but are consistently important to the each genre’s constitution. He was a sporadic participant in some of these genres—legal journalism, for instance—in addition to being a life-long journal keeper. These considerations complicate our understanding of Boswell’s stylistic practices in the *Life*. We need to attend not only to his agendas as a biographer, or to the aesthetic qualities of the writing, but to the individual parameters of understanding how the different components of the narrative are made up of the markers of many different non-fiction genres. This requires a fixation on what would seem to be relatively insignificant stylistic changes made between the different versions of Boswell’s accounts as well as the brute impact of the final text in all its disintegrating porousness. I therefore focus on moments of the interstitial and the points of transition, where Boswell manages the switching between his own voice and the voices of his subjects. These are points that are easy to ignore in analysis of text which is designed to obscure the narrative level of discourse highlight the vibrancy and naturalness of its direct, real-seeming approach.

A further implication is that this sort of attention to the stylistic construction of micro-genres out of absent distressed originals is that some of the stories told to account for the “rise of the novel,” particularly in the generation of critics that came after Ian Watt, need to be reconsidered in light of the persistence and mutability of non-fiction genres. Critics such as Lennard Davis and J. Paul Hunter derive an image of the establishment of the novel out of the space created by innovations in existing non-fiction formats. We have two options in taking these analyses on board in our reading of Boswell’s work and biography more widely as both a literary and historical enterprise. We can appreciate how biography may be on a parallel track to the novel, adopting techniques and appropriating spaces made available by the advance of other non-fiction genres, but while this approach is helpful and descriptive it does not allow for the continuing development of all these tracks, often in reaction to each other. This is an especially important consideration in reading the *Life*

32 Such an effort will go beyond the efforts of Davis, Hunter, McKeon, and completely detach from the centrality of the novel as a telos for Eighteenth-Century writing without giving up on the interpenetration of genres. I draw inspiration from the generically stable work of Margaret Spufford, whose study *Small Books and Pleasant Histories* offers a literary and economic account of the jest-book over a period concluding in the Seventeenth Century. Spufford investigates the properties and the markets for ephemeral jokes distributed by hand-selling throughout Britain. These books can be considered a cousin of the table talk from a slightly less factual branch of the family tree and often depend for material on the representation of memorable jests, or the imagination of humorous dialogues, such as the example she provides between a couple arguing about whether to have prenuptial sex, 167. In the case of philosophical dialogue, the imagination of speech is much less tied to the truth, though the history of the genre abounds with the insistence of writers on the addition of detail that apes verifiability: Richard Prince, for instance, in his study *Philosophical Dialogue in the British Enlightenment*, argues that the key dispute in the use of dialogue as a philosophical mode consists in the relation between the form and the conception of the proper unit of philosophical thought—between abstractable facts and the process of an argument (96). Kevin Cope, introducing his collection *Compendious Conversations* affirms a “placeness” of the form in the Eighteenth Century (xiii), an aspect that relies on physical particularities in addition to the seeming abstraction of the matter in any specific dialogue.
of Johnson because the date of its publication (if not the dates of the initial spoken events from 1763 onwards) comes well enough after the mid-century flourishing of the novel that the genre is formal characteristics are uncontroversial and its extreme taken as a given element in the landscape of writing. Indeed, as I have noted, in scattered places throughout the Life we can find references to the need for factual writers to guard against fiction in their work. This is the inverse of the track described by critics who treat the development of the novel as the key event in Eighteenth Century letters. While Davis, at least, credits “analytical” biography with being a parallel achievement of the period, it is in the event-driven non-analytic moments of Boswell’s Life that we can find the best evidence of how he thought this non-fictional genre could function in the wake of and in contradistinction to the new discourse of fiction which was dependent on the representation of plausible sounding speech for its reality-effects.33 The questions we need to ask of Boswell therefore include ones of persistence; how he makes his speech seem realer than the simulacra to be found in novels. This is no easy question to answer.

Speech and Knowledge

What is important in answering it is the well-documented shift in the Eighteenth Century in the standard for what constitutes knowledge. As previous commentators have noted, the empiricist revolution that occurred in England in the wake of the Restoration was slow to reach its full application in humanistic pursuits, thus asking What is a fact? and What are the standards for history? is a vexed problem for students of fact-based genres such as biography in this period. To pay attention to the development of positivism, we must appreciate a kind of humanistic lag where the benefits of finding new methods of observation, as occasionally applied by Boswell in finding out information from Johnson, are counterbalanced by classical models and problems such as the resistance of speech and narrative forms of information to the totalising view of positivism. Falsity has come to be seen as both deliberate and as a result of the technologies of textual transmission. In her study of the emergence of positivism, Mary Poovey describes the rise of the fact as coming from the necessities of nascent capitalism: land surveying and double-entry book-keeping divide up

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33 Lennard Davis, for instance, notes that in Sixteenth-Century biographies the problem of recording, printing and publishing life as speech seems particularly urgent: “It is as if only by recording the details of life through transcription that one can grasp the evanescent slipperiness of experience.” Factual Fictions, 143-4.
experience into the discrete and the enumerable. Boswell’s initial records follow some of these dynamics but with the object not of material or financial increase but the establishment of a base of cultural capital. Boswell makes the same sort of breaks in experience in order to view parts of a conversation as abstractable and accumulable. Thus for Boswell facticity resides first in the simple assertion someone said this thing. Gradually this evolves into larger, more developed, series of relationships between such basic claims, amounting to a series of narratives in which many claims can be made based on the inference of links, causal, psychological, mechanical and otherwise between the smallest components. Here we encounter another difficulty, because narratives of this sort simultaneously require constituent facts, and combine to make larger, more fluid truth claims. These larger claims can come in many forms, and it is only through appreciating generic models of different narrative relationships that we can truly appreciate precisely the factual impact of specific narratives.

Boswell joins the dispute about the relationship of the presentation of facts in history and sources in his Hypochondriack essay “On Quotations”, saying that for factual forms of writing quotation “becomes evidence”: 

[A]s all facts of ancient date must be ascertained by the evidence of men who lived at the time, it is a very material defect in our modern historians, especially the French, that they do not give us their authorities, that is to say, references to the authors from whom the several facts, of which their narrative is composed, are taken, but run smoothly on, page after page, as if they had been eye-witnesses of all that they are telling. (BC, 125)

Boswell goes on to praise Dalrymple’s Annals of Scotland, the work that he reports Johnson revising on 2 April 1775, for its scrupulous attention to detail in matters of referencing. His attitude, then, is that history should be composed of adducible facts to eyewitnesses, and that quotation (of texts) is the best way to proceed with factual narrative. But this does not indicate his attitude to performing the role of the eyewitness himself. His book is primarily documentary in nature, aiming to preserve as many curiosities about Johnson as possible, from the diplomas for his honorary degrees to his correspondence—both back and forth—with a range of his acquaintances. It is in this context that we

34 Mary Poovey, A History of the Modern Fact. Poovey devotes a section of a chapter to arguing that Johnson’s Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland represents a shift away from conjectural history into the world of verifiable, abstractable facts, and that implicitly, Boswell’s decision to publish his own version stems from a disappointment that Johnson refuses to detail his conversation in his account. This comes as a disjuncture between Johnson’s lifelong project of producing general knowledge and Boswell’s interest in particularities, which comes as an anachronism in what Poovey sees as the new world of the modern fact, 249-63.
need to view the conversation in the *Life*: its first purpose is as a document that can present his collection with the authority of the eyewitness and transmit it into text. The aim of instruction is achieved by the simple transmission of these sayings as documents of the same provenance as the written documents presented by the book. Such documents inform, but they do not necessarily serve as evidence for anything other than themselves. The aim of entertainment and delight is a secondary concern: delight, indeed resides within the documents as they are presented, rather than being the first impulse of their reproduction.

These problems of accommodating particular documents and statements with general trends in an actual person’s life turn the straightforward and chronologising “mere dry narrative of facts” into something that is gloriously more complicated. Boswell, indeed, uses multiple images of wild and complex systems in order to deal with the disparate nature of his sources and the uncontrolled actions of his enterprise. Chief amongst these is a dual metaphor that comes in one self-justifying apology Boswell gives when, in the narrative of the tour to Ashbourne in 1777, he contemplates Johnson’s skill at discussing the most trivial of topics, in this case the correct shape of a bulldog. Boswell’s defence of including this conversation is that he is unable to lose any single fragment of memory of Johnson, arguing that all the smallest details will find favour with “the true, candid, warm, admirers of Johnson” (2/167). The imputation is that in preserving any detail, something of value is kept for the adulation of posterity, but instead of lighting on a metaphor of monumental solidity as he does elsewhere, at this point Boswell compares the two extremes of the scale of information about Johnson. The opposition is not cast between atoms and St Paul’s cathedral, as might be appropriate, but to something much less solid and permanent. He says “every little spark adds something to the general blaze”. The image is especially apt for his project as it makes a claim for neither the value of the wider design nor its constituent parts. The “general blaze” is uncontained and uncontrollable, unable to be traced in its flows and its intensities, except as the sort of overwhelming and all-consuming process of a life. Similarly, by figuring his trivial facts as sparks, Boswell acknowledges their impermanence and their doubtful relation to any of the specific elements or general tendencies of the blaze. The two only share the element of fire, and while there is an undeniable possibility of causality between the spark and the blaze, there is never any way of directly attributing a relationship either way, only of asserting a deep-seated relationship. The troubling complexity of this image can perhaps be honoured through treating Boswell’s text as a blaze-like complex and self-consistent system.35 Thereby we can integrate the singularities of any particular spark in the text without

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35 The inspiration for this argument comes from the engagement of certain literary critics with the principles of Chaos Theory. For a narrative introduction to the field, see James Gleick, *Chaos*. There are two specific zones of Chaos theory that
forgetting the different horizons of interpretation that are taken up in the notion of the blaze as general, unpredictable but certainly identifiable as itself. Rather than requiring the hermeneutic oscillation between the part and the whole, I devote much of this study to the appreciation of the simultaneous interaction of multiple scales of information and observation. Reading the Life of Johnson as a complex system governed by self-similarity regardless of scale allows us to accommodate the random effects of transitions between scales, and the impact of abrupt shifts of focus. This is an especially helpful way of considering the literary analysis of non-fiction writing such as Boswell’s because it presents us with a gesture of reading the interplay of factual claims and visible inaccuracies with a non-condemnatory eye.

Since facts have different varieties of reference and extension, they also have different generic modes appropriate to their narration, and these different modes carry with them their own blind spots, areas outside of their focus which become from a positivist point of view the site in which error arises. From a perspective of narrative complexity, we can see the imperatives of different scales requiring these slips and inconsistencies as part of the generic functions of narration on different scales. I therefore attempt to read the backstory of Boswell’s practices of quotation not as a series of departures from or cynical-aesthetic manipulation of the true speech-events he is presenting but as a negotiation of the demands of different scales of authenticity within those events. Even though quotation marks may imply a heightened level of authority for the adoption of a real-world voice, Boswell is continually made to decide what scale of focus is important in his narration. If, for instance, he is narrating a joke, he has the choice of concentrating primarily on the content (that is the whole of the unitary utterance), or on the delivery, which consists of multiple components on a scale smaller than the words themselves, and simultaneously the larger narrative impacts for Johnson’s auditors and for himself too. Within speech, the interaction of different scales of information (sounds, tones, words, sentences, contexts, exchanges) presents a similar range of necessary decisions that emerge from the problems of narration where speech is only a component of the events being

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Chaotic scientists expect on a fundamental level an amount of turbulence and unpredictability in the transmission of data that does not change dependent on scale. In a project like Boswell’s, this would imply that the dangers of trying to reproduce data about both Johnson’s conversation and his life is ever-present and impacting potential readings equally at the smallest scale, as I discuss below, of the spelling of particular words, all the way up to the largest interpretations Boswell places on Johnson’s life. Secondly, the notion of scale as it interacts with the intricacy of narration can allow us to see Boswell’s narrative possibilities, even in his factual form as something like a fractal—that is, a series of self-repeating patterns that allow a sense of Johnson’s self-identity within the work while never not being the product of a series of artistic choices. Of those literary scholars who have tried to adapt Chaos concepts into literary studies one of the most successful has been N. Katherine Hayles, in her study Chaos Bound, especially 179-96, where she assimilates Derrida’s notion of trace and iteration into chaos terminology, as well as seeing in Barthes’s notion of narrative economy a version of self-replicating system. See also Harriet Hawkins’s Strange Attractors for an account of how adapting the concepts of noise and information and self-similarity regardless of scale can produce productive literary readings of texts, especially the discussion of what she calls “comparative complexities”, 55-7.
described. But the wider problem is that if Boswell’s quotations are at the same time accurate records of what was said and components in wider schemes of narration, the double duty performed by the words themselves will sometimes have unintended effects, or simply break down in its ability to narrate. Once the words are put down on the page they constitute an order of their own in which the narrative interventions of the author only have as much influence on the capacity of the letters to signify historical information as the purely generic elements that accompany them. Reading the *Life*, we are asked to accept not only the general factual nature of the portrait but also the specific accuracy of every detail in it, and on every scale. Boswell’s presentation of speech can only be read with simultaneous credulity and scepticism: it is a constant performance of confidence in the face of radical doubt that contends with the difficulties of embedding information within information. The consideration of these difficulties leads us back to fundamental questions about the nature of quotations.

**Quotation and the Idea of Accuracy**

Boswell’s inaccuracies and approximations in matters of small detail in his practice of quotation are many and it cannot be denied that he was at least nominally concerned about them. But at the same time, he is very free in his deviations from his original records in myriad small matters, often imposing a unifying sense of his subject on a scene, or condensing time periods to make it appear that individual moments come in contact with and affect each other. In response to this simultaneous drive for authenticity and heavy-handedness in revision, critics have either accused Boswell of incompetence or dishonesty or praised his narrative artistry, but the consideration of scale allows perhaps a more nuanced approach to the difficulties attendant on Boswell’s shifting idea of truth and accuracy in quotation. If it is allowed that Boswell’s interest falls on different scales at different times, we can see the intervention of the tropes of the various genres of direct speech in the narration to ensure that this scaled information is conveyed. The result is that Boswell is engaged in several different standards of authenticity at the same time, depending on the most useful generic conventions for the scale of speech that he wants to highlight. Boswell is not, then, simply a skilful narrative artist who is less concerned with truth than form, nor a narrow-minded but nevertheless unsuccessful fact-finder whose incompetence distorts and maligns the reputation of his subject, but a conscientious

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collector of materials whose methods of combination in narrative lead him into a juggling act between different genres in which his unwavering commitment to accuracy shifts between scales. This juggling act exposes the assumptions that underlie each different genre’s attitude to accuracy, and the terms on which it can be claimed.

Accuracy emerges as a contextual result of generic concerns with details on particular scales, rather than a transcendent standard to which Boswell can be held. This leaves us to ask whether the relationship between the idea of accurate quotation and narrative means that Boswell’s factual claims at these different scales influence the way we can appreciate his book as a biography, rather than as a species of fine writing or a series of documents. Is there, for instance, a meta-generic, heteroglossic scale in which Boswell’s “Flemish portrait” can be seen as an adequate response to the factual and evaluative questions that can be asked about Johnson’s life? Does Boswell’s dual approach of presenting quotations as a means of constructing narrative constitute a watershed in the writing of biography, or an aberrant curiosity of curiosities?

Following the assumptions that direct speech constitutes a hinge between two otherwise incommensurable orders of language and that within Boswell’s dependence on that hinge, it is the interstitial and transitional spaces that provide the best opportunities to understand the nature of that hinge. We need to pursue a line of questioning into the troubled and potentially insoluble relationship between the ideas of Boswell as a writer of the work and as a compiler of other people’s words. At the heart of this difficulty is a problem to do with the conjunction of Boswell’s polyphonic, heteroglossic text and the central claim of biography: that it represents facts in the real world. For Bakhtin, the development of these concepts came squarely from the requirements of finding a way to talk about the novel in general and concerns peculiar to Dostoevsky more specifically. The presence

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37 We will leave aside, for the moment the doubling effect of Boswell representing his own speech throughout the book.
38 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 199. The influence of the full range of Bakhtin’s ideas about the interaction between speech and literature on the way in which Boswell’s work can be read is obviously far wider than there is scope for in this thesis. One particularly germane consideration can be found in the essay “The Discourse of the Novel” where Bakhtin makes an argument relevant both to Boswell’s practice and the most productive methods of reading the *Life*: “Discourse lives, as it were, beyond itself, in a living impulse towards the object; if we detach ourselves completely from this impulse, all we have left is the naked corpse of the word, from which we can learn nothing at all about the social situation or the fate of a given word in life”, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 292. If it is to have any biographical relevance, from this perspective, the speech in Boswell’s book has to find a way of recording not just the naked word, but also the set of social and organic relations in which it is bound. Citing a nearby passage, Anthony W. Lee sees in Boswell’s attempt at finding artistic independence through imitation a prime example of heteroglossia exhibiting “a will to power over Johnson’s lingering textual and psychic presence”, “Mentoring and Mimicry in Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*”, 75. Lee thereby finds something specific to the psychic relationship of the factual world in a concept devoted to the fictional presentation of the real world. Bakhtin’s description of heteroglossia as the “word of another” can be found in *The Dialogic Imagination*, 292-3. Philip E. Baruth adapts the idea of heteroglossic logic to account for Boswell’s “ideological consciousness” in his journals, which Baruth argues shows Boswell trying on a series of differently voiced personas, “Mushroom Votes and ‘Staged Subjects’: Linking Boswell’s Simulations of Consciousness to the Novel and Eighteenth-Century Voting Practices”, 88. Carey McIntosh adapts Bakhtin’s schema of styles and tropes to establish a rhetoric of high and low rhetoric in the *Life’s*
of other-speech, and other modes of speech within a biography presents us with some basic problems about how to discuss and interpret the word by word construction of non-fiction narratives. Bakhtin provides a typology of double-voiced discourse, which offers a set of parameters for what we can understand Boswell to be doing. The typology sets out three levels of representation: the first, unmediated speech from the speaker’s authority is what Boswell would have readers believe is the authentic nature of his records, but the situation is more complex. In the second level of Bakhtin’s typology, we find what he calls “objectified discourse”, where two forms of transformation of abstract or grammatical speech are made to signify things other than the unmediated message of the speaker. These include transformations to mark varieties of language that serve as social markers as well as more individual peculiarities. Boswell engages to varying degrees in both these practices of objectification, as I discuss in the final chapter. The most complex level of discourse for Bakhtin is double-voiced discourse, which itself has three subdivisions: unidirectional, varidiirectional and active. These three subdivisions partake, respectively, of co-opted stylisation, parody, and the reflected discourse of the other. While the latter two of these subdivisions are almost purely in the realm of fictional and literary works, Boswell’s presentation of Johnson’s words could easily be categorised as unidirectional double-voiced discourse, where Johnson’s words are stylised enough, and presented sufficiently as his own narration for extended utterances that the representation is not a simple objectification through different kinds of transformation. Boswell is trying to achieve a fusion of the two voices where he can assume the authority of Johnson’s written style as a way of undergirding the authenticity of his approximation of Johnson’s style of speech. This discourse, then, might be said to attempt to live an authentic life as Bakhtin would require of it, and therefore be what Bakhtin calls a double-voiced discourse, that is, “discourse with an orientation towards someone else’s discourse”.

An important further consideration is that Boswell is not simply representing the speech of identified individuals including himself, he is also imitating and subtly following Johnson’s styles of writing and speech in a form of discipleship that has been well demonstrated by many critics. Boswell’s conversations, “Rhetoric and Runts: Boswell’s Artistry”, 139. All these Bakhtinian considerations align Boswell’s text as a key example of what Bakhtin’s follower Garret Stewart terms a “phonotext”; that is, a text that depends for its effect on the way in which the words it is made out of are transmitted to the inner ear in the act of reading. Boswell’s purported preservation of Johnson’s speech becomes a key text of Stewart’s final vision: “rather than the act of, reading voices”: if Boswell has succeeded in incorporating (or in Lee’s version appropriating) Johnson’s voice, the act of reading will potentially be the locus of the revivification, Reading Voices, 292.

39 See, for instance, Anthony W. Lee, “Mentoring and Mimicry in Boswell’s Life of Johnson” for a considered opinion on Boswell’s co-option and mastery over his representation of Johnson’s voice; Carey Mcintosh, “Rhetoric and Runts: Boswell’s Artistry” for the perspective that Boswell makes careful use of a surprisingly low style in Johnson’s speech in counterpoint to an elevated pseudo-Johnsonian style in the rest of the book; Nathaniel Norman, “Organic Tensions: Putting the Tracings Back on the Map in Boswell’s Life of Samuel Johnson” for the perspective that Boswell’s methods create a
writing as well as his own speech within it, therefore, has already been Johnsonised before it is written. The presence of other speech within the work—whether it is the imprint of Boswellian inflections in the speech attributed to Johnson, or the Johnsonian influence on Boswell’s expression—is not a question of simple influence or contamination but a deep inextricable imbrication that tends both ways. It therefore makes sense in light of this mutual influence in advance of the text to consider how Johnson’s speech can be other-speech within the text. This is a more difficult problem than may at first appear, partly owing to the simple reality that so much of the text is given to Johnson’s speech, and so much additional interpretive weight is given to the speech itself than if it had been cast into a genre other than biography.

We have seen how Boswell actively Johnsonises his and Johnson’s own speech, as well as the background narration, but there is more to be understood about the nature of Boswell’s double-voiced narrative. The Life is only partly polyvocal, in that the outward form of much of the speech takes the recognisable but nevertheless strange form of speech-headed dialogue, running on continuous lines. Where Boswell is presenting speech in this manner, the aim is always an effacement of his own writing in the accommodation of the speech which is separated and made important in a way that increases the sense of its naturalness. The simple textual analysis of the history of individual moments quickly establishes that these dialogues are anything but clean transcripts of continuous discussions. Rather, the final dialogues are often discontinuous; they hide omissions and embellishments, and use vocabulary not to be found in Boswell’s earliest accounts. The problem is not deceit or dishonesty on Boswell’s part, but a serious engagement with the issues of representing reality through speech in text, which requires a transgression of the rift between the real and the representation that requires the preservation of a simulation of the real events.40 The resultant problem takes the form of a set of series of surplus resistances from Johnson as the source of speech beyond his control; finally John J. Burke, in “Talk, Dialogue, Conversation, and Other Kinds of Speech Acts in Boswell’s Life of Johnson” argues that rather than seeing Boswell’s conversations as simple mechanical representations we should acknowledge the multiple sorts of art that has been put into them, but still acknowledge the assent and approval that was initially given them by many of their participants, including Johnson, a situation that makes those records performative presentations of what those speakers accepted about themselves.

40 There is a wider intellectual context for dealing with the real-ness of written speech here that has a particular influence on the readings we can make of Boswell’s claim to reproduce even a small part of the historical speech of Johnson. The conjunction of the quotation with its function in narrative coincides with similar problems in thinking about textuality. Boswell’s text both functions as a witness or a record of speech and claims to be co-extensive with it. It thus takes place within the long history of the overlap between oral and written discourse tracked by Eric A. Havelock in his Preface to Plato and taken up by Walter Ong in his studies beginning with Orality and Literacy. Both Ong and Havelock see the historical transitions between oral and literate societies as inflecting the way in which knowledge can be produced and consumed, and also identify ways in which elements of the oral world persist in literate societies. Havelock, for instance, sees quotation within oral genres as necessitating the understanding that even in Homeric verse, the exact words of the catalogue of the ships are the same as what the poet is asking us to think was said, owing to the coextensivity of mnemonic devices that make both the catalogue and the poem possible. Havelock gives a description of this process that may well summarise the process by which the Life was produced: “what is preserved is a simplified portrait of what goes on. The record is a synthesis of
questions about Boswell’s position as the author of the *Life*. I therefore try to find throughout the thesis the features of the text that make it writing, rather than transcription, and ask if, indeed, at microscopic scales of transcription, such a distinction can even be made. For Boswell, the ideal in writing these dialogues is a variety of self-effacement where the events are made to represent themselves and the writing dissolves into occasional judicious interventions. In the leagues of Boswell’s admirers, we can find the argument that Boswell’s skill as a writer lies in making these scenes lively and convincing enough to go along with the pretense that what it presented is near enough to a transcript, while detractors of the work say that the energy of the writing detracts from its potential to signify facts, and that the distortions Boswell makes mean that the work ends up valueless. For Boswell himself, the question of composition was already vexed, but not along these lines. A useful intervention in this question of whether Boswell can be said to be writing when he is presenting a self-writing text (and consequently whether this matters for the situation of the text

experience, not an analysis” (82). Boswell undoubtedly encounters similar overlaps that have to do with the sheer orality of his social world even before he reaches the first stage of writing in his memoranda and journals. Jon Mee describes the mid-century proliferation of Clubs (especially Johnson’s) in which the creation of a semi-public world of talk is the primary goal of masculine sociability, *Conversable Worlds*, 81–100. Such oral environments pre-empt the reproduction of talk in text, and thereby effect a mediation of talk by talk itself that we can only assume to have both effected and affected some of Boswell’s authentic recordings of Johnson’s speech. This is a topic also presented by Nicholas Hudson, who tracks the place of orality in mid-Eighteenth Century England through controversies about textual reproductions, including Ossian, “Constructing Oral Tradition: the Origins of the Concept in English Enlightenment Culture” and Diane Dugaw, who turns to Boswell’s Journal to find a “panorama of oral contexts” that pre-empt the biography—anecdotes, songs and orations all influencing both perception and the form of his records, “Theorizing Orality and Performance in Literary Anecdote and History; Boswell’s Diaries”. Patricia Spacks uses this idea of Boswell’s semi-public story-telling as a way of understanding the gendered dynamics of sharing information about others that impacts on how biography can be read as a source of authority in contradistinction to the lying inherent in a novel, *Gossip*, 155–7. Notwithstanding the mediation of the social, the idea that text can accurately represent elements of actual speech has recently become productive in the field of historical pragmatics, see for instance Daniel E. Collins’s study *Reanimated Voices* which finds even in indirect discourse in Medieval Russian court records enough linguistic variation from written norms to attempt a historical reconstruction of social speech patterns, and Barbara Kryk-Kastovsky, “Historical Courtroom Discourse: an Introduction” which claims that pragmatic features can offer “a fairly adequate approximation” of historical speech (168) and details many attempts to do so from the records of English courtrooms. Eamon Duffy uses the same assumption—that records contain at least some aspects of the voice even if not verbatim transcripts, in his microhistory of the English Reformation, *The Voices of Morebath*, which studies the records of a single parish and finds in it a perplexing relationship between the notion of a record of speech and notes for performance in public (23), which at any rate allows some impact of the sensation of actual speech to take a place in the representation of the past. Such historical and pragmatic studies might encounter difficulties dealing with the example of Boswell: as we have seen, the more material there is with Boswell, the less direct information about specific moments. Theorizing Orality and Performance in Literary Anecdote and History; Boswell’s Diaries”. Patricia Spacks uses this idea of Boswell’s semi-public story-telling as a way of understanding the gendered dynamics of sharing information about others that impacts on how biography can be read as a source of authority in contradistinction to the lying inherent in a novel, *Gossip*, 155–7. Notwithstanding the mediation of the social, the idea that text can accurately represent elements of actual speech has recently become productive in the field of historical pragmatics, see for instance Daniel E. Collins’s study *Reanimated Voices* which finds even in indirect discourse in Medieval Russian court records enough linguistic variation from written norms to attempt a historical reconstruction of social speech patterns, and Barbara Kryk-Kastovsky, “Historical Courtroom Discourse: an Introduction” which claims that pragmatic features can offer “a fairly adequate approximation” of historical speech (168) and details many attempts to do so from the records of English courtrooms. Eamon Duffy uses the same assumption—that records contain at least some aspects of the voice even if not verbatim transcripts, in his microhistory of the English Reformation, *The Voices of Morebath*, which studies the records of a single parish and finds in it a perplexing relationship between the notion of a record of speech and notes for performance in public (23), which at any rate allows some impact of the sensation of actual speech to take a place in the representation of the past. Such historical and pragmatic studies might encounter difficulties dealing with the example of Boswell: as we have seen, the more material there is with Boswell, the less direct information about specific moments of historical speech is secure: the living voice of Johnson may have to remain elusive.

41 Donald Greene gives the most succinct version of the first school in critiquing what he calls “the myth of Boswell’s obstinate veracity”, “The World’s Worst Biography”, 371. Leopold Damrosch’s “The Life of Johnson: an Anti-Theory” puts forth the view that to take either extreme is wrong-headed, and that any real appreciation of Boswell’s success should be taken with its defects as “an almost inevitable adjunct”, 471. That is, there is a formalistic merit to seeing achievements of style as necessarily part of the same process that produces errors and ugliness. Further to this point, see Paul Korshin’s claim in his essay “Johnson’s Conversation” that “there can be no question that Boswell’s imaginative reconstructions, his partial inventions of the conversation of the most famous man of letters of his period are without parallel”, (191). Korshin’s point is that in making the *Life* Boswell performs a reconstruction of the whole field of Johnson’s talk as something separate from his writing, and this generic transformation, regardless of its veracity at specific moments, makes for a suitably Johnsonian product. William C. Dowling argues in *The Boswellian Hero*, that this specific genre of conversation demonstrates not valuelessness either as factuality or as literature, but an incommensurability in ways of viewing texts between reading practices devoted to what he distinguishes as the imitative and imaginative modes of literature.
within the double history of biography as a genre and a field of inquiry) can be found in the work of Maurice Blanchot, who devoted much space to the relationship between writing and conversation in his work The Infinite Conversation. Blanchot puts forward a picture of conversation as a joint authoring with no final determination: two authors facing in the same direction and speaking endlessly into a void. This would correspond to the naive first level in Bakhtin’s typology. As we have seen, Boswell is doing more than this with Johnson. Even in the actual historical discussions with Johnson he was often thinking in terms of the biography he would later write, and if not this, he was also looking for good copy for his Journal and other talk about the town. The Life is perhaps then a form of betrayal of Blanchot’s image of joint-authorship, because in seeking to represent conversation, Boswell necessarily reduces it into a finite set of exchanges in which he squarely faces Johnson in order to better understand what is being said. The exchanges therefore become in Blanchot’s terms something other than writing, and Boswell’s representation of finitude becomes a form of slavish devotion to something that does not exist. Blanchot writes of the function of writing being to enact a violence upon the language of the world, the language of speech:

Invisibly, writing is called upon to undo the discourse in which, however unhappy we believe ourselves to be, we who have it at our disposal remain comfortably installed.

From this point of view writing is the greatest violence, for it transgresses the law, every law, and also its own.42

In order to appreciate Boswell’s multiple transgressions in doing and undoing Johnson’s discourse, I view the operation of stylistic elements across scale to ask how speech and genre interrelate with changing conceptions of truth and accuracy. David Passler’s study Time Form and Style in Boswell’s “Life of Johnson” is perhaps the one work which approaches these problems through the primary lens of Boswell’s style. Passler sees in Boswell’s stylistic accommodations of direct speech—the lead-ins to quotations, and Boswell’s frequent animadversions after presenting Johnson’s speeches—a direct consideration of the juggling of different timeframes between speech as an event to be narrated, and the wider concerns of what biography can achieve as a genre. In Boswell’s sentences, Passler finds not only echoes of Johnson, but also a writer aiming to achieve a rhetorical style that both sets and matches the treasures that have already been stored away in his journals. Passler sees in Boswell’s narration a style not dissimilar to the principles of Shandyism, where his opportunistic narrative

42 Maurice Blanchot, The Infinite Conversation, xii. Lars Iyer explains Blanchot’s idea of this phenomenon as “The writing of speech, the speech of writing” where the narrative voice constitutes “saying” and speech is an instance of otherness. For Blanchot, writing speech can “interrupt the continuity of discourse” and thus instantiate the “malaise of language” creating the very space of literature”, “There is Language” 93-4. Boswell, from this perspective, exists within this space as narrator and as part of the other that is speaking.
methods, which proceed topically rather than schematically and partake in a serendipity of observation and expansion rather than any totalising scheme a sort of sinuosity. If, for Passler, there are no arcs in Boswell’s narrative, but rather a series of sinuous curves, spreading out from one another, we might well see this insight as a result of the interaction of scales of narrative information. Passler attributes the sinuosity of Boswell’s style to changes in narrative pace, meaning that the amount of time required of the reader to attend to any one moment changes depending on the focus given to it. However, where Passler’s stylistic object is in the delineation of Boswell’s sentences and the plotting out of events, he pays relatively little attention to the actual direct speech in the work. The availability of Boswell’s manuscripts allows us to delve further into the workings of those sections that claim not to be written, but to transparently represent speech as it occurred in the real world, in a test of Jerome McGann’s assertion that we should view texts as “channels for transmitting information rather than autopoeitic mechanisms”. Boswell’s text is inescapably both; what McGann calls the “unhappiness of information transmitters with a medium not ideally suited to their specialised purposes” is exacerbated by the fact that while the manuscripts show that Boswell’s text is indeed “full of noise”, it is neither entirely devoted towards the naked presentation of information, nor to the noisy texturing of autopoeisis. In these moments of effacement, it is not the sinuous style of the sentences that demands our attention, but the interstitial accretions and adjustments where the two orders of speech meet. Boswell’s punctuation—the decision to use quotation marks, dialogue headers, dashes, parentheses, italics and exclamation marks—emerges as the site of a series of heavily freighted decisions, each of which demonstrates Boswell as a writer effacing his own writing through interpretive interventions.

Outline of the Thesis

The thesis therefore aims to achieve two ends: first, to understand Boswell’s practices of quotation in light of their narrative and generic contexts by way of the technological interventions necessary to accommodate the heightened level of discourse in text, and secondly through this understanding to arrive at a conception of the relationship between style and genre that could allow us to see writerly responses to changing ideas of truth in the Eighteenth Century taking place across genres and in relation to each other. To achieve these ends, the thesis is divided into two parts. The first section,
comprising two chapters, focuses on the narrative relationships between different moments of speech in the *Life of Johnson*. Chapter One interrogates Boswell’s stated positions about the truth-status of his own quotations before using a nuanced view of quotation as having different parameters depending on the scale of observation to read Boswell’s practices as adopting multiple genre forms on different scales with the same technology. In classifying Boswell’s narrative modes as belonging to different scales (apophthegm, dialogic scene, historical scene), I hope to establish an understanding of Boswell’s hybrid text as operating discontinuously in different modes. Chapter Two widens the focus to show Boswell dealing with and at times establishing continuities between his discrete moments, and sees these shifts, repetitions and assertions of relationships as key to the composition of the work as a whole, while also engendering its own stylistic modifications at particular points. I take the use of dashes in direct speech as a special case. The second section investigates Boswell’s writerly interventions in his quotation driven narrative on ever decreasing scales. Chapter Three reads Boswell’s frequent use of parenthetical stage directions as a form of control over potential interpretations of the parts of the text that do not wholly belong to Boswell, and finds in their textual history signs of Boswell’s modifications and reorderings of his materials from his Journal into more cohesive, more easily interpreted moments of narrative. Chapter Four focuses more tightly on Boswell’s representation of speech itself, seeing in the blunt technological transformation of italic script a particular motive on Boswell’s part to affect the sense of specific utterances, and at times the tone. This chapter also explores the limits of such modifications, where the binary switch of italic and roman characters is not variable enough to indicate all the possible variations from the ground of authorial discourse required of it. I read this as a particular result of the pressures placed on writing by Boswell’s extensive use of quotation from speech. Finally, Chapter Five sets its attention tightly on the transformation Boswell makes within individual words through nonstandard orthography in order to represent the sounds of different accents, onomatopoeia and the utterances and mutterings that exist on the boundaries of speech. The question that emerges in this final chapter is whether Boswell’s dream of a transparent transcript is possible, and what the answers to this question might mean for thinking about changes in genre and biography in particular in light of the development of new ways to be true in the enlightenment. Throughout the thesis, I ask how speech is made to signify, what it can signify and in what contexts such signification occurs. The consequence of these questions is that Boswell’s multifarious, hybrid style of presenting his adventitious information exposes the innumerable and inescapable pitfalls of making claims to the marriage of accuracy in representation of facts and narrative. Where Boswell makes these attempts, it will be seen that he is never without generic precedents from the long history of non-fiction writing, but that in the new context of heightened scrutiny for certain types of factual claims, these generic contexts never offer a complete
accommodation for his needs. What remains for Boswell, and for a reader of his work is an indeterminate series of shifts of focus, always simultaneously establishing and relying on a claim that these things that appear in text actually happened, and that (mostly) Boswell was witness to them. It is the nature of such an eyewitness account, and how it can relate to other works, that is the ultimate destination of this work.
Chapter One: Quotation and Narrative

The story of how Boswell came to write the life of Samuel Johnson is well rehearsed; the dynamics of the relationship between the two men will undoubtedly never cease to be a source of psychological speculation and literary analysis.\(^{45}\) The specific elements of how Boswell’s processes of information-gathering, both in Johnson’s lifetime and during the period where he was composing the Life, interconnect with his ideas of how speech can both be accurately represented in text, and accurately represent its speaker within a biographical setting, though, are less well explored. Thomas Kinsella argues that in revising his raw materials, Boswell’s goal is for an “authoritative” text, rather than something that should be seen as predominantly fictive, even if the format is the same:

Boswell was striving to recreate conversation that allowed readers to picture Johnson, “to see him live”, but out of necessity he followed conventions of written dialogue. Boswell created dialogue that moves beyond or, more strictly, reaches back to something more suggestive than exact reporting. The models that he took for his dialogue—dramatic dialogue and the dialogue of novels—produced inherently fictional conversation. Boswell’s willingness to recast and revise dialogue shows that he understood this.\(^{46}\)

As I have argued above, Boswell’s dialogue needs to be seen in wider generic contexts that include always-already fictive genres of factual writing in the Eighteenth Century in order to understand the nature of what Kinsella identifies as the goal of authoritative and authentic dialogue. Boswell’s project exists on a boundary between spontaneous and performed speech, and his final text mirrors this boundary by adding a layer of composition and revision onto his initial records. These multiple layers combine to produce a text in which facts serve shifting roles. I hope here to sketch the relationship between the notion of authenticity and Boswell’s practices. I consider quotation marks as a historically inflected technology, before widening focus to take into account scales of narrative and

\(^{45}\) The most recent narrative exposition of Boswell’s struggles in writing the Life is Adam Sisman, *Boswell’s Presumptuous Task*. Bruce Redford, in *Designing the “Life of Johnson”*, gives a more technically oriented appreciation of the difficulties of putting together such an extensive and idiosyncratic work. Redford rightly emphasizes the collaborative nature of Boswell’s project, shared as it was with his many sources, Edmond Malone and the compositors and other worker’s in Henry Baldwin’s print-shop. Boswell’s own records of this period are also worth investigating in their own right, see *Corr* for the records of his widely collaborative enterprise, and *Experiment* and *GB* for the emotional struggle of the process, even after the date of publication. While my emphasis throughout is on Boswell’s efforts as an author figure, my assumption is that these collaborative efforts are subsumed into the writerly enterprise itself.

how they impact Boswell’s considerations of authenticity in using speech as his method of presenting Johnson’s life in scenes. This chapter therefore asks how quotation marks, as the chief technology of these manoeuvres, interact with different genres of the representation of speech. It interrogates Boswell’s idea of what is signified by these marks in different contexts. Arguing that Boswell’s adoption of different generic methods is a response to the challenges of scale presented by his sources (that is, his memories encapsulated in his journals), it considers three broad scales on which speech and narration are intertwined: the apophthegmatic, the anecdotal-dialogic and the historical. Each of these generic scales has within it different modes of attention and signification, each of which transforms the dynamics of narration and the nuances of quotation. It follows that Boswell’s practices of authenticity are more fluid than a simple reading of his intention of writing Johnson’s life in scenes would indicate. The chapter therefore argues that Boswell’s engagement with different modes is less the deliberate manipulation of materials than a contingent response to his sources, and is caught between dual imperatives in which he seeks to provide particular moments both as illustrations of Johnson’s personality and habits, and as singular objects of curiosity and delight.

“As We Talk Together”: Authenticity and the “Proper Place” of Speech

The claim of quotation to represent historically factual moments abuts the assumption that the speech so represented can itself refer to other events. This creates a situation in which Boswell’s text points in many directions and to different scales of meaning. The text even dramatises much of its own construction. When Boswell finally broaches the subject of writing a biography of his friend, he reports the conversation in which they negotiate how Boswell could obtain factual information:

I said, that if it was not troublesome and presuming too much, I would request him to tell me all the little circumstances of his life; what schools he attended, when he came to Oxford, when he came to London, &c. &c. He did not disapprove of my curiosity as to these particulars; but said, “They’ll come out by degrees as we talk together.”

(1/365)

Johnson conveniently provides the information in the manner in which Boswell has already decided it should be presented. In wanting to know particulars, Boswell displays his general biographical outlook, which focuses on the small and inconsequential. Gathering these facts together was indeed less important to Boswell than finding minute particulars in real-life observation, so it is fitting that
Johnson himself proposes to embed the details of his life “by degrees” in their general conversation. Even if this constitutes a simple resistance to being subjected to an interview, Johnson is so well attuned to Boswell’s sensibilities that his acquiescence to the general project is cemented. He offers Boswell a licence to ask questions and find out particular information, so long as it is lodged in the parallel order of particular information created by conversations “as we talk together”— a phrase Boswell added to the account in the stage between the his Journal and the manuscript. Boswell is here asserting his role as biographer by showing his licence to obtain abstracted factual information in spite of his chief interest in his Life being in the recording of lively particulars obtained from living in close social intercourse with the subject. The conjunction of these two different orders of particularity presents him with a minor problem for his project. Direct speech is obviously preferable to the simple factual content provided by questions and answers, but Boswell is presented with a narrative problem of deciding where information belongs in his deliberately chronological scheme. When at the end of his time with Johnson in 1777, rather than presenting an interview during which he obtained many facts, Boswell simply makes a note of the fact that he and Johnson had discussed the past:

On Tuesday, September 23, Johnson was remarkably cordial to me. It being necessary for me to return to Scotland soon, I had fixed on the next day for my setting out, and I felt a tender concern at the thought of parting with him. He had, at this time, frankly communicated to me many particulars, which are inserted in this work in their proper places; and once, when I happened to mention that the expense of my jaunt would come to much more than I had computed, he said, “Why, Sir, if the expense were to be an inconvenience, you would have reason to regret it: but, if you have had the money to spend, I know not that you could have purchased as much pleasure with it in any other way.”

The notion that particulars could have a proper place, and that this was not necessarily embedded within direct speech attached to the day on which they are spoken, marks Boswell’s project out as belonging properly to the genre of biography. Boswell is arranging his facts and is not a simple documentarian of his own life or the way it intertwined with Johnson’s. This restoration of facts to their point of reference is only partial however, because it applies only to information about the time before Boswell and Johnson met, and even then, when the information is restored to its proper place,

47 See John B. Radner, Johnson and Boswell: a Biography of Friendship, 93-8, for the shifts in the balance of control between Boswell and Johnson after Boswell revealed his intentions to his biographical subject.
it is often given as direct quotation of speech. Boswell uses the same phrase to treat the process of gathering old information from Johnson’s associates. Visiting Oxford for the first time, Boswell describes his encounter with an important source of information:

“We then went to Pembroke College, and waited on his old friend Dr. Adams, the master of it, whom I found to be a most polite, pleasing, communicative man. Before his advancement to the headship of his College, I had intended to go and visit him at Shrewsbury, where he was rector of St. Chad’s, in order to get from him what particulars he could recollect of Johnson’s academical life. He now obligingly gave me part of that authenticick information, which, with what I afterwards owed to his kindness, will be found incorporated in its proper place in this work.”

(2/23-4)

Dr. Adams, too, provides information that is conveyed through direct speech, but in those proper places, this is given sometimes on same order of representation as Boswell’s general narration and as embedded stories of memory as when he relates interactions with Johnson at Pembroke (1/24-5, 32). Propriety of place is an assertion of the importance of reference over iteration, but this does not last long in Boswell’s work. The Life is littered with other earlier information included, as Johnson promises, by degrees as they talk together, and which does not get reassigned to its proper place. That Dr. Adams’s information can be authentic is a second chief point: Boswell means that it comes from a reliable source as much as he means that the information itself is factually correct. But his idea of authenticity as guaranteed by reliable sources is less certain when he applies it to himself. Knowing his own processes, and his own capacities of memory, Boswell is acutely aware that authenticity is a chief concern of his work, and that this can only be guaranteed by his own good efforts and commitment to truth. This is particularly true in the main attraction to the book: Johnson’s lively conversation. If Boswell’s book is to be characterised by authenticity, it is the authenticity of quotations derived from close habitual contact and precise notation that make up the book’s chief claim to truth. Boswellian authenticity exists on a separate plane for the kind of authenticity that is asserted in the first-person facts presented in their proper-places in the sections of the book dealing with Johnson’s life to the age of 54. Authenticity of quotation is less verifiable, and prone to the myriad difficulties of memory and transcription. Boswell’s negotiation of these difficulties constitutes

49 See, for example, the discussion of Johnson’s reputation as a schoolboy at 1/15, which comes from the Journal entry for 17/4/1778. Extremes, 294; Beinecke 44/1000, 104.

50 As when Boswell gives a dialogue between Adams and Johnson when Johnson is at work on his Dictionary, 1/101.
a series of generic and technological manoeuvres in which he attempts to find a method of presenting Johnson’s Life in scenes through the idea of his speech being representable.\textsuperscript{51}

A reading of Boswell’s metatexual references in the Life quickly reveals that not only is he exercised by the idea of authenticity in an abstract way, but that he also has a reasonably detailed model of how it can be assured. This comes in three steps: first comes recollection, which ideally happens close to the event, because it is corruptible, and weakens over time. Next is the crucial step of recording. For Boswell, recording the things he recollected of conversations was itself an involved procedure, with slightly different processes at different times, but it usually involved some sort of cribbed reminder in his daily memoranda, and then an expansion into a fuller version in his Journal. His aim was usually to make a full account from his memoranda within a couple of days, but during pressured times, and hampered occasionally by his tendency to drunkenness, this gap could also stretch out to a period of months.\textsuperscript{52} Boswell’s attitude to his record was complex, too. The dual process of memoranda and expansion meant that jogging his memory would involve additions and expansions, and that these could be either generically derived or, because of the persistence of recollection, inspired from the same or parallel impulses to the first note-taking.\textsuperscript{53} This meant that Boswell’s sense of his record was that it was always frangible and subject to his own corrections and improvements, which is important when it came to the process of turning it into an account of Johnson’s life. But when it came to competing accounts, Boswell’s idea of his record grew more authoritative. Compared to other people’s recollections, a record served as a source of more readily believable evidence. And Boswell did think about this in specifically legalistic terms. He can be found saying in a footnote added to subsequent editions, that in the conversation from 1769, Dr Douglas, Bishop of Salisbury later disputed the words Boswell had attributed to him:\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{51} Bruce Redford, \textit{Designing the “Life of Johnson”}, 84, places appropriate interpretive emphasis on the image of “scenes” in contrast and counterpoint to the other metaphor of the “Flemish portrait”. Missing from Redford’s account, though, is the necessity of speech in these scenes, or rather their dependence on quotation. All the other, more mundane aspects of Johnson’s life outside of Boswell’s earshot could perhaps more easily be rendered into scenic observation without the restrictions of authenticity that apply to speech.

\textsuperscript{52} Susan Manning argues that Boswell’s alternation between drunkenness and dissipation on the one hand and his striving for self-improvement provides the chief pleasure of reading his Journal, as it is the prime motivator of and principle obstacle to his writing by providing a sense of the momentary, “Boswell’s Pleasures, the Pleasures of Boswell”. See also Thomas B, Gilmore, “Boswell’s Drinking”, for an account of Boswell’s feeling of the temptation to dissipation and ruin and its influence on his writings.

\textsuperscript{53} Additionally, William R. Seibenschuh argues that Boswell’s process of composition naturally triggered vivid and, in Seibenschuh’s view, mainly reliable memories of previously unrecorded moments in a “second crop”, adding a further layer to the processes of recording, recalling and preservation. See “Boswell’s Second Crop of Memory”.

\textsuperscript{54} Life Second Edition, 1/573 n3.
Boswell’s standard for authenticity of his record was double: he could challenge it, but he saw it as more reliably authentic than the mere memory of others by the fact of its very existence, even in situations where Boswell may concede to doubt, or to extenuating circumstances such as noise and distractions, his record remains paramount.55 This brings us to the third stage of Boswell’s model of authenticity: preservation.

Boswell talks about preservation of Johnson’s conversation often, most frequently where he is making his excuses for not having preserved enough of Johnson’s talk. He often uses related metaphors, related to pickling and botanical specimens (“the Johnsonian garden” furnishing examples, or seeing conversation as “fit for bottling”) in order to refer to his practices regarding Johnson’s speech.56 In one evening,

I found, from experience, that to collect my friend’s conversation so as to exhibit it with any degree of its original flavour, it was necessary to write it down without delay. To record his sayings, after some distance of time, was like preserving or pickling long-kept and faded fruits or other vegetables, which, when in that state, have little or nothing of their taste when fresh.

(2/162)

55 J. T. Scanlan reads this addition as demonstrating a principle “central” to the Life of Johnson of treating conversation like the sort of legal documents that need a special pleading if they are to be contradicted or even interpreted against the tendency of the court, “The Example of Edmond Malone”, 130-1.
56 Boswell invokes the Johnsonian garden to introduce miscellaneous statements from the Ashbourne tour of 1777 at 2/162. For the lament that there is no conversation fit for bottling, see Journal, 30/3/1775. Of; 108; Beinecke 42/988, 90.
This vision of preservation as the necessary and timely transformation of a substance in order to retain its essential and characteristic elements is certainly a powerful analogy for Boswell’s practices. Transformation of a physical object is in line with the principles of preserving laid out by Mrs. Glasse, the fictive author listed by Johnson as the competitor to his imagined cookbook (2/224), who, without providing a general definition of the term, gives a great many recipes for preservation. The book gives instructions for preserving a range of fruits (with sugar and sometimes in a jelly), for tripe specifically to be sent to India (with vinegar and the help of a cooper), and for the preservation of hair, instructions that promise to “make it grow thick” (white wine, rosemary flowers, honey and the oil of sweet almonds). It would be simple to agree with Boswell that a complete description of his process can be found in this one word were it not for the fact that these physical meanings of preservation constitute only a minority of the usage of the word in Boswell’s own book. Throughout, the word “preserve” refers to a process acted upon physical objects and substances: most often the word is used for abstract concepts under threat; when it is used in a physical sense, it is often for works of art. It is important to note, then, that in Boswell’s invocations of his process both as self-praise or as apology, preservation occurs most frequently as a way of talking not about speech itself, but about the document in which it is recorded. That Boswell’s idea of preservation is documentary rather than referring to speech itself is crucial because it serves as a caution not to take too seriously his claims to transparent transcription. Indeed, the Life includes multiple exchanges in which practices of short-hand, including Boswell’s own vaunted idiosyncratic method of only including the

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57 The Art of Cookery, Made Plain and Easy, see 349 and 361 for different methods of preserving pippins, 305-6 for gooseberries, barberries, 355. The instructions for India tripe are at 379 and the recipe for hair treatment “practised by Mrs. Dukely, the Queen’s tyre-woman” is on 382-3.

58 William H. Epstein takes Boswell’s focus on preservation to be one of four stages through which he enables the genre of biography to be recognised as the result of his biographical labours: establishing credit, paying attention, preservation, and correction. For Epstein, preservation applies to Johnson himself as the biographical subject. Boswell’s usage of the word, while still engaging in the process outlined by Epstein and indeed by Johnson in Rambler 60, is also more nuanced and bears contemplation with reference to the problem of direct speech, Recognizing Biography, 120-5. Things that are said to be preserved, or ought to be preserved, in the Life vary from the highly abstract to the doggedly physical: Rigid honesty (1/33), his wife’s wedding ring (1/128), veneration and attachment (1/133), an equality (1/325), a balance against the Crown (1/367), the art of making candles (1/378), quiet (1/410), public peace and order (1/415), virtue (1/473), a long poem, and poetry in general (1/477), piety (1/494), “serieses of men” as leaders (2/16), a boy (from death) (2/39), something positive (2/49), the chastity of our wives and daughters (2/52), a dignity in a dissipated schoolfellow’s deportment (2/58), life (2/61), the beauties of poetry (2/62), books (2/62), us (from vice) (2/156), the mind (from wearying and growing fretful) (2/161), intimacy (2/161), the same views of any one thing (2/169), men and angels (in a state of rectitude) (2/174), well-made marble boars (2/191), tranquillity (2/197), that which is got by books and thinking (2/200), the fruit of his mind (2/208), character (2/259), character (2/263), mankind (2/291), peace (2/318), the lives of prisoners (2/320), a written family history (Second Edition 1/xxii), an early essay by David Mallet (2/453), a letter as a memorial of Johnson’s regard for Mr. Davies (2/460), mutual faith (2/507), secrets (2/508), the comedy of the Rehearsal (from putrefaction) (2/517), and a notebook (2/575n3). Taken together, these objects of presentation can suggest that Johnson’s sayings could be both exemplary physical works of art that are contained in documents, and transcendent intellectual concepts at the same time.
beginnings of certain words, are proven to be inadequate even to the task of taking down slow dictation.\textsuperscript{59}

Boswell is conscious of the possibility that his goals might not be achievable by his methods. This leads him to think differently about what practices might guarantee authenticity, given the restrictions of memory and transcription. Mrs. Thrale’s reassurance, when Boswell appeals for a way of recording Johnson’s speech, that he will remember, is smaller comfort than could be hoped for in Boswell’s eventual project of presenting Johnson’s life in scenes:

\textit{While he went on talking triumphantly, I was fixed in admiration, and said to Mrs. Thrale, “O, for short-hand to take this down.”—“You’ll carry it all in your head, (said she;) a long head is as good as short-hand.”}

(2/433)

Perplexingly, between his Journal and the manuscript, Boswell has omitted an enigmatic remark: “I have the substance, but the felicity of the expression, the flavour is not instantly preserved unless taken instantly”\textsuperscript{60}—a remark in which Boswell either makes a subsequent triumph over Mrs. Thrale’s winning quip by creating an instance of his memory failing, or where he simply adumbrates his own statement having preserved a good quip. Whatever the ultimate determination of this recursive and omitted remark, Boswell maintains an overdetermined attitude to authenticity in his records. This is a result of the coincidence of different generic modes dependent on scale that employ different models of authenticity. The model of authenticity based on the three steps I have outlined here works best on a small scale, (that is, for the integrity of individual apothegmatic utterances of the sort that end up in anas) but is less amenable to the sort of extended conversation that might constitute a scene. An apothegm or other gnomic utterance has a kind of unity that is dependent neither on observation nor interpretation. It is self-contained, easily related and transferrable. Being unified and direct, it partakes in some of the characteristics of a material object, and thus has a sort of identity to which Boswell can appeal when disputing the authenticity of individual statements and ripostes, especially

\textsuperscript{59} Moments where the notion of transcription through shorthand is discussed also reveal some of Boswell’s attitude to the exactness of his version of the things Johnson says. The most pertinent such moment occurs on 10/4/1778, where, after vaunting his own peculiar method of truncation and abridgment, Johnson tests Boswell, who concludes he cannot take down Robertson’s writing because it is finely worked and cannot be abridged without an essential injury (2/214). Earlier, on 15/4/1773, Johnson dismisses taking down Parliamentary speeches in shorthand in no uncertain terms: “Sir, it is impossible” giving the example of a man called Angel to whom he tried to dictate a preface or a dedication before being begged to desist. A telling instance of the difficulty here and Boswell’s resultant attitude to exactness is that in the manuscript Boswell first tries the phrase “quick as the living voice” for what in the final version appears as “as fast as a man could speak” (1/309). MS 382, Redford, 93.

\textsuperscript{60} Journal, 21/3/1783. \textit{Applause}, 75; Beinecke 45/1017, 1.
in a social climate that valued such utterances and circulated them widely and with varying degrees of
accuracy. Boswell confronts this problem with some of his most celebrated material, and it can be
seen to have vexed him greatly. In 1775, twelve years after his first encounter with Johnson, Boswell
took to task his friend the author Arthur Murphy, for getting the story wrong twice:

Mr. Murphy told in my presence how he was at Tom Davies’s when a Scotch
gentleman was introduced to Mr. Johnson; and having said, “I come from Scotland,
Sir, but I can’t help it,” Mr. Johnson answered, “That, Sir, is what a great many of
your countrymen can’t help.” Now it was to me that this was said, and Mr. Murphy
was not present. He went on and said that the same gentlemen then got the answer of
the noble wild prospects. Whereas that was said to Ogilvie, the poet. I could not
contradict Murphy after he had said he was present, without being rather too hard
upon him. So he passed.

Two days later, Murphy is not so lucky:

Murphy again told his story of a Scotsman’s introduction to Johnson, “come from
Scotland” etc., as if he had been present. “Why,” said Baretti, “it was Mr. Boswell.”
Murphy tried to escape by saying that I was not then of such consequence as to make
him remember that I was the person. I could not resist any longer correcting his
inaccuracy, and told him he was not present. “You are confounding what you have
heard with what you have seen,” said I.

While Boswell is right to be insistent here in his valuing eyewitness accounts over hearsay, his
concern about greater inaccuracy about the misattribution of the conversation is just as important,
because it shows his belief in an essential unity of the expressions in their original context. The two
events happened only three weeks apart, so their conflation even in an eyewitness might be excusable,
but the centrality of minute accuracy to Boswell’s project is revealed by his overdetermined concern
at Murphy’s getting his story broadly right, but without enough detail to remember the speakers.
Boswell was concerned enough to take the story of inaccuracy to Johnson:

[...] I told him how Murphy had narrated the story at Donaldson’s. Sir, you never
again can ^quite^ believe Murphy, even when he tells a thing of some consequence. I

61 Ogilvie in turn disputed Boswell’s account of the witticism in a letter to The English Review. Boswell sought out Andrew
Erskine to corroborate the account from a letter Boswell sent to him on 6 March 1793 in order to respond in the Second
62 Journal, 30/3/1775. OF, 108; Beinecke 42/988, 90.
said it was hard to get at authenticity. He said Langton meant to be authentick as much as Beauclerk; but he did not know so well when he was telling truth. To Beauclerk he allowed full credit. Said I there are few from whom I can put down in writing, your sayings. \textit{Johns}. Why should you put down my sayings? \textit{Bos}. When they are good. \textit{Johns}. Nay you may as well put down the sayings of any one else that are good.\textsuperscript{64}

This exchange makes its way into the \textit{Life}, but with the personal references excised, and a later reflection added:

\begin{center}
\begin{quote}
I told him there were very few of his friends so accurate as that I could venture to put down in writing what they told me as his sayings. \textit{Johnson}. “Why should you write down my sayings?” \textit{Boswell}. “I write them when they are good.” \textit{Johnson}. “Nay, you may as well write down the sayings of any one else that are good.” But \textit{where}, I might with great propriety have added, can I find such?
\end{quote}
\end{center}

These transformations allow us to see Boswell’s understanding of authenticity and accuracy at work: even when he is assailing the lack of accuracy in his friends at retailing sayings from the same source as he himself puts down, he feels free to modify several words, add stress and his own subsequent rejoinder as well as taking away the context that brings about Johnson’s authoritative, though dubiously memorable statement. At the heart of these difficulties is a tension between genres. Murphy gives two apophthegms, but encounters a problem when he tells them to hearers for whom they form an historical scene. Boswell’s first meeting with Johnson, and the epochal put-down with which their friendship was inaugurated was a central event in Boswell’s life, and would become a prominent set-piece in the book he wrote about Johnson.

The difficulties of this problem of multiple versions and dubious witnessing did not go away after the confrontation, however. Boswell adds a footnote in the second edition of the \textit{Life} in 1793 to note that Murphy persisted after the \textit{Life}’s initial publication in his own version of the story, and instruct his readers to disregard Murphy’s \textit{Essay on the Life and Genius of Samuel Johnson LLD} (1792) in which Murphy had asserted his presence at the scene. Murphy’s counter-version includes the anticipation of Boswell’s seeking out Johnson as a spectacle that might be rebuffed by Johnson’s anti-Scottish

\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Journal}, 1/4/1775. \textit{OF}, 113; Beinecke 42/998, 109-10.
sentiments, and rather disrupts the economy of Boswell’s version of himself as being foiled in his attempt to forestall such an attack.65

Upon another occasion, this writer went with him into the shop of Davies, the bookseller, in Russell-street, Covent-garden. Davies came running to him almost out of breath with joy: “The Scots gentleman is come, “Sir; his principal wish is to see you; he is “now in the back-parlour.” “Well, well, “I’ll see the gentleman,” said Johnson. He walked towards the room. Mr. Boswell was the person. This writer followed with no small curiosity. “I find,” said Mr. Boswell, “that I am come to London at a bad time, “when great popular prejudice has gone forth “against us North Britons; but, when I am “talking to you, I am talking to a large and “liberal mind, and you know that I cannot “help coming from Scotland.” “Sir,” said Johnson, “no more can the rest of your coun- “trymen.”

Boswell’s defence of his own account is much more conciliatory than his Journal, and fails to remark on the confrontation:

Mr. Murphy, in his “Essay on the Life and Genius of Dr. Johnson,” has given an account of this meeting considerably different from mine, I am persuaded without any consciousness of error. His memory, at the end of near thirty years, has undoubtedly deceived him, and he supposes himself to have been present at a scene, which he has probably heard inaccurately described by others. In my note taken on the very day, in which I am confident I marked every thing material that passed, no mention is made of this gentleman; and I am sure, that I should not have omitted one so well known in the literary world. It may easily be imagined that this my first

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65 Arthur Murphy, Essay on the Life and Genius of Samuel Johnson, LLD., 106.
interview with Dr. Johnson, with all its circumstances, made a strong impression on
my mind, and would be registered with peculiar attention.66

The fact that Boswell chooses not to mention his forceful disabusing of Murphy in 1775 is itself instructive on the point of Boswell’s commitment to authenticity. He is concerned much more with the integrity of particular statements than he is with the continuity of events. It is only in situations such as Murphy’s erroneous alternate version of the interview, which persists against Boswell’s preserved version, that “all its circumstances” become important to him. Boswell’s commitment to the circumstances is less total than it would need to be for his to make the imputation in this footnote that Murphy was wilfully persisting in his error. Such a statement falls into the world of unrelated or unrelatable details too extraneous even for this master of digression. What is important for Boswell is the integrity and verifiability of the *bon-mot* as he has preserved it in the story. The contrast between the statement, which is more like an object, and the event, which is part of a scene, explains both Boswell’s anger, and the driving force of his project, which I argue is the result of the conjunction of different generic modes of representing speech, based on different scales of observation. The story turns up mangled again only nine pages later, when Mrs. Thrale notes that she has heard it mistold:

Mrs. Thrale told us, that Tom Davies repeated, in a very bald manner, the story of Dr. Johnson’s first repartee to me, which I have related exactly. He made me say, “I was born in Scotland,” instead of “I come from Scotland;” so that Johnson’s saying, “That, Sir, is what a great many of your countrymen cannot help,” had no point, or even meaning: and that upon this being mentioned to Mr. Fitzherbert, he observed, “It is not every man that can carry a bon mot.”

(1/479)

Where Boswell employs an anecdotal method, he is concerned with the kind of authenticity where a *bon mot* can be carried or not, and he is remarkably successful. Critics have found only one other joke that has been entirely mangled in its reconstruction—the quip made by the architect Gwynne about the relocation of a church in order to build a bridge.67 All the rest of the witty sallies have discernible points, and are recognisably complete. A problem arises, though, where the scale of observation is greater, and the guarantee of authenticity that comes with the reassurance that if in doubt you can check to see if the joke functions properly or not, is not available for less pointed and particular


comments. Conversation and scenes contain more than pithy remarks, but Boswell’s technologies of representation are the same at each scale where the guarantees of direct speech are concerned.

**Quotation Marks as a Technology of Accuracy and Authenticity**

A solution to these problems of accuracy should then come from a consideration of the most important typographical element of Boswell’s project: the speech mark, which in its modern form gives a sort of guarantee as to the accuracy and authenticity of the works contained within it. Its presence in a page invariably serves as an indicator of a higher or more stringent order of expression and therefore usually implies an idea of truth to the thing represented within it that is not expected of the mass of text from which it differentiates a statement. Boswell’s work emerged at a watershed moment in the development of the speech mark, which is an arbitrary and historical signifier of many different things to different users at different times, and was a relatively recent innovation for the representation of direct speech at the time Boswell learned to write.

Malcolm Parkes, along with other historians of western punctuation, traces a curious history for the incorporation of marks indicating adventitious sources in text, stretching back into the cultures of manuscript transmission of the first millennium of the Common Era. initially, monks transcribing scriptural commentaries would score the margin next to lines that contained scriptural content, but would not indicate which specific words came from holy writ. With the introduction of print, these lines were transformed into marginal inverted commas, again designed to alert the reader to the presence and location of a quotation on the page, but making no distinction between the quoted text and the rest of the text within the line. As these quotations came to extend over many lines, and their utility was observed for non-ecclesiastical texts, the practice of quotation grew with them, marking each line of a larger passage. Although it was becoming less and less frequent, this form of quotation can be found in texts as late as Hawkins’s Life of Johnson, where it is used to indicate memorabilia, such as in his account of Johnson’s taking a scissor to his leg own leg to alleviate his dropsy:

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68 See M. B. Parkes, Pause and Effect, 57-61, for the story transformation of the diple into inverted commas, and Kevin Houston, Shady Characters, 200-205, for the codification of inverted commas in primarily fictional texts over the Eighteenth Century.
That this act was not done to hasten his end, but to discharge the water that he conceived to be in him, I have not the least doubt. A dropsy was his disease; he looked upon himself as a bloated carcase; and, to attain the power of easy respiration, would have undergone any degree of temporary pain. He dreaded neither punctures nor incisions, and, indeed, defied the trochar and the lancet: he had often reproached his physicians and surgeon with cowardice; and, when Mr. Cruikfank scarified his leg, he cried out—‘Deeper, deeper;—I will abide the consequence: you are afraid of your reputation, but that is no thing to me.’—To those about him, he said,—‘You all pretend to love me, but you do not love me so well as I myself do.’

(Hawkins, 589)

Boswell’s book does not engage in this form of quotation at all. It was eventually supplanted by the method of the resumption of a quotation at the beginning of each new paragraph, which is still common practice. For Hawkins, line by line marginal quotations were a method of indicating both direct speech and the kind of textual citation that had for centuries been engaged in. Boswell’s *Life* enjoys an unproblematic ease of placing speech within wrap-around marks as well as for documents and passages from other works. We still have very little way of understanding how it came to be that this technology that was designed for text-to-text extraction and interpolation came to be not only the main medium of indicating a claim that the text represented within these marks is supposed to be spoken rather than written, but also that it represents and also constitutes a real event in the real world.

None of the *Treatise of Stops* (1680), the *Printer’s Grammar* (1750) and Joseph Robertson’s *Essay on Punctuation* (1775) mentions speech in its description of the uses of inverted commas. This is in

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69 Christopher D. Johnson gives an illuminating account of the amount of care Hawkins went to in this passage to balance the competing objectives of redeeming Johnson’s memory and maintaining his commitment to the truth. Hawkins, he argues, permits a gap of deniability that allows readers to imagine more time passing between the self-mutilation and Johnson’s death in order to give more dignity to Johnson in his last moments. See “A Rhetoric of Truth and Instruction”, 62-3.

70 See Kevin Houston, *Shady Characters*, 197-199, for an account of the fortunes of the running quotation mark.

71 The *Treatise on Stops* states that a “Note of Citation” is always to be found in the margin, and gives the following helpful couplet excluding speech, except perhaps in the rare case of Boswell’s book: “This note is made, when Authors quoted are, / And doth shew forth, what they to us declare” (18). John Smith’s *Printer’s Grammar* notes that there are differing uses of inverted commas, and tries to institute a rule that double commas be used for “verbal quotations” and singles set aside for
spite of the practice extending to their use for both real and imagined direct speech well before this period. Early novels, for instance, separate some but not all speech into direct discourse and mark it out with the same characters as were used for quotations from texts, but both guidebooks for the printing trade are silent about this key development in the history of their trade. There is thus no clear guidance as to the best practice of using quotation marks as de facto speech marks, nor of the particular implications of these marks with reference to whatever claim of real-world accuracy they may have, nor of the specificity of their content. This silence shows that writers in the decades leading up to Boswell’s extended engagement with Johnson’s extended speech were constantly reinventing and renegotiating different uses for the technology. They were also consistently coming up with idiosyncratic standards for the contents of the speech they presented within these markings. Boswell himself was no different. His manuscripts show flexibility and innovation throughout. Even as he aimed to perfect the authenticity of his quotations, Boswell kept changing his mind about the particular apparatus he would use to present them.

Boswell uses three distinct forms of quotation mark in manuscript: large inverted commas, sometimes functioning as guillemets to show quotation for a whole conversation with dashes within them, sometimes not; smaller single quotes that appear to have been subsequently added; as well as an idiosyncratic form, where two commas arranged vertically in the form of a colon are used to introduce speech and sometimes, but not always, are left unfinished.

Perhaps the most commonly encountered marks for speech in Boswell’s handwritten records are indication of two inverted commas that never reach a full separation from the page and thus form a dainty squiggle in the middle of the line.

“matter which is only an extract, or the substance of a passage” (95-6). Sadly “verbal quotations” here is more likely to mean verbatim or exact transcripts than any indication for speech. Joseph Robertson’s *Essay on Punctuation* gives even less assistance, providing only the advice that commas can introduce short quotations (60), and colons for larger ones (88), so long as the first letter is capitalised. This is in spite of a consistent use of inverted commas throughout.

Even for fiction, the history of how dialogue is presented typographically has yet to be written. Joe Bray usefully aligns modes of citation in early novels that do not necessarily require the use of quotation marks with the practices of the journalistic press in his article “Embedded Quotations in Eighteenth Century Fiction: Journalism and the Early Novel”. Nicholas Brownlee has laid groundwork for such projects by considering the type and impact of speech in early newspapers in his article “Spoken Discourse in Early Modern Newspapers”. Janine Barchas stresses the importance of accidents in what she calls Graphic Design, particularly in her analysis of the change in presentation of Sarah Fielding’s dashes in *David Simple* after the intervention of her brother Henry in the second edition. Although this analysis demonstrates the specific influence that the Fieldings’ different punctuational preferences have in allowing a novel to “convey the conversational and emotional nuances that underlie printed speech”, Barchas never directly addresses the challenges of the representation of speech in fiction. See *Graphic Design, Print Culture and the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, 154-162.

73 *Journal*, 9/1/1782. *Laird*, 419; Beinecke 45/1009, 78.
More rarely, and often with an aura of revision about them, we can find more vertical and more elevated demarcations of the boundaries of speech in Boswell’s texts.\textsuperscript{74}

More peculiarly, Boswell’s manuscripts often rely on a form of punctuation that has no real analogue in the conventions of print—a pair of commas arranged vertically in the form of a colon, and suggesting some of the prosodic weight of that mark.\textsuperscript{75}


\textsuperscript{75} Journal, 24/12/1793. \textit{GB}, 276; Beinecke 47/1029, 81.
Some of Boswell’s purpose in using these colon-like quotes can perhaps be seen in the many instances where Boswell begins a quotation with a speech tag and these marks, but does not terminate the quotation. It may be that here, the point of the punctuation is to mark the cadence of the sentence that includes both the tag and the quotation, rather than providing a guarantee of the truth-status of the words it introduces:76

At the most complex level, Boswell casts a whole conversation “catechising” his son Alexander on family history within two outer marks (initially a colon quote and terminally a more conventional squiggle):77

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76 Journal, 12/6/1786. *Experiment*, 70; Beinecke 46/1019, 15.
Each of these technologies of penmanship carries with it different implications for the seriousness of the claim that what is contained in the marks replicates words that have been said in the real world. They also have implications for how we understand the narrative itself. In particular the quotation marks in Boswell’s manuscripts are often ambiguous as to how they delimit the zone of speech in the passages of writing he creates. This is the result of the over-determination of the tools: inverted commas mark both the transition between the space of the author and imported matter as well as the transitions between different speakers. Boswell’s text overlaps in these concerns, but it is important to consider the peculiar tendencies of these different kinds of transitions. It leads us to worthwhile considerations that will allow us to understand the basic principles of Boswell’s project. The first
consideration is to understand if it matters who is speaking. Certainly, it is important to Boswell that the speech represented is Johnson’s, and authentically his. But is the speech of his interlocutors as important? We can see from Boswell’s willingness to anonymise the sensitive names of people yet living when the *Life* was published that in his representations of many interactions he did not think that the identities of the interlocutors was as important as the content of what Johnson says to them. This is also true of absent people mentioned. But this has narrative implications for the interconnections between statements. For instance, when Bennett Langton is anonymised from two consecutive paragraphs, first with a dash, then with the phrase “one of our friends” the narrative connection that Langton is not in danger of a bad marriage needing a divorce, but is the person who is “ruining himself without pleasure” is lost (2/262-3). To Boswell, the individual isolated statements are important by themselves because Johnson said them, as opposed to the full context of the conversations. But to be fair to Boswell, the extent of the anonymity he grants these people is not great. The gaps left for the names correspond to the number of letters in the names and it was possible even before the rediscovery of the manuscripts to discover the names so suppressed. This was less the case, though, when Boswell sought to suppress his own presence in much of the incidents within the book.

Consider, for instance, the effect of this suppression in terms of the authenticity of observation and witnessing as opposed to participation in the dynamics of conversation and the interview:

\[\text{He sometimes could not bear being teased with questions. I was once present when a gentleman asked so many, as, “What did you do, Sir? “What did you say, Sir?” that he at last grew enraged, and said, “I will not be put to the question. Don’t you consider, Sir, that these are not the manners of a gentleman? I will not be baited with what, and why; what is this? what is that? why is a cow’s tail long? why is a fox’s tail bushy?” The gentleman, who was a good deal out of countenance, said, “Why, Sir, you are so good, that I venture to trouble you.” Johnson. “Sir, my being so good is no reason why you should be so ill.”}\]

(2/213)

Boswell saying that he was once present, rather than saying that he was the target of Johnson’s objection to being pestered with questions triangulates the scene. Boswell as a spectator can only sympathise with the gentleman’s being out of countenance rather than expressing his own feelings. Boswell’s surprising reticence here about the dynamics of the book’s composition means that we have to remember throughout that Boswell’s claim of authenticity refers almost exclusively to the
statements attributed to Johnson. The contexts, even as here the immediate provocations of very
direct responses to what is being asked of him, are subject to different exigencies in which the
establishment of narrative ground for the authentic statements of Johnson are more important than the
presentation of the event in itself. This is despite the fact that the same technology of quotation is
being used for both Johnson’s authenticated speech and the more malleable statements that surround
it.

Boswell refers to himself as an anonymous gentleman as much as he introduces subjects with
variations on the formula “being mentioned” or “talking of” and in both cases the effect is to present
Johnson in isolation, reacting to a subject plucked from the aether. The other consideration is not
anonymous people speaking but groups of people: despite a great number of informal group settings,
there is seldom hubbub, or choric speaking, except in very rare circumstances, distanced from
Boswell’s observation, such as at his account of the performance of Johnson’s tragedy Irene where a
crowd speaks within the narration of a witness:

Dr. Adams was present the first night of the representation of Irene, and gave me the following account: “Before the curtain drew up, there were
catcalls whistling, which alarmed Johnson’s friends. The Prologue, which was
written by himself in a manly strain, soothed the audience; and the play went
off tolerably till it came to the conclusion, when Mrs. Pritchard, the heroine of
the piece, was to be strangled upon the stage, and was to speak two lines with
the bow-string round her neck. The audience cried out “Murder, murder.” She
several times attempted to speak; but in vain. At last she was obliged to
go off the stage alive.” This passage was afterwards struck out, and she was
carried off to be put to death behind the scenes, as the play now has it. The
Epilogue was written by Sir William Young. I know not how Johnson’s
play came to be thus graced by the pen of a person then so eminent in the
political world.

(1/106)

Speech in the Life is thus speech of identified, verifiable individuals whose utterances are isolated and
understood as abstractable from the general flow of talk in the world. Speech, even if anonymous, is
something that can be checked or verified. Boswell displays Johnson’s own concern with validation
and authenticity on 15 April 1778, after having been on his journey with the Thrales to France, during
which trip he enjoyed the hospitality of Benedictine monks, Johnson takes the opportunity of
mentioning to his publisher Dilly that there he undertook to act as an agent for the publication of one

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of those monks’ translations of the Duke of Berwick’s Memoirs. Johnson mentions that he has asked the translator about the authenticity of the memoirs, adding parenthetically “for if they are not authentic they are nothing.—” (2/224). Thus for Johnson, the value of memoir is authenticity, that is, the fact that it comes from the purported source, rather than its being verifiable as to any particular. Then Dr. Mayo expands the trope of authenticity. Authenticity is an ever-present literary question. Whether it is celebrated cases, such as Chatterton-Rowley and Ossian-MacPherson, the potential for missing links in the chains of textual transmission to admit errors and forgeries was a major concern for people of letters in this era. Boswell’s frequent guarantees of authenticity for his own materials betray his anxiety about the potential reception of his book, so much of which is made up out of testimony that is simply uncorroborated. His strategy extends to the inclusion of moments like this, where he presents the discussion of authenticity to bring about discussion of his (and Johnson’s) ideas on the matter, as well as the casting of doubt and aspersions on writers of the same genre and same biographical subject. In addition to the section devoted to “animadversions” on Mrs. Thrale’s errors, where he spends eleven pages quoting and commenting on passages in the book he finds problematic or untruthful, Boswell also takes the time to recall the most minor of accuracies.

It is necessary here to remember that direct and indirect speech are ever-present alternatives to each other. Understanding Boswell’s modes in this regard will help us understand what he thinks the value of presenting the words themselves is, and why he thinks presenting text that purports to be the actual speech of Johnson and his contemporaries even in otherwise decontextualised settings is more appropriate to the form of biography than extended sections of reported speech. Since both of these modes are to be found throughout the book we need to consider the relative value placed on each. Boswell commonly introduces sections with the first statement of an exchange with the formulas discussed above, whether it is from Johnson or more likely Boswell himself in indirect speech as a lead in to the more vivid and memorable statements that are in his journals. Part of the reason for this is economy, partly it allows him to fudge the context and edit out extraneous matter in preceding statements. In all of these contexts, though, the benefit of abstracting a statement is that it allows a direct quotation enough context to shine. Boswell is less likely to provide extended passages in

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78 Susan Stewart describes this as part of an historical phenomenon she calls the birth of authenticity. Impostures, for Stewart, belie the confidence in accepting falsehoods evident in the rise of the novel and instead expose the fragility of the margin between the authoritative and the fake, what she calls “a margin difficult to maintain in persons and documents”, *Crimes of Writing*, 145.

79 See Irma Lustig, “Boswell at Work” for a thorough account of the many phases Boswell went through in noting and revising these animadversions, first seeking revenge on his rival, then tempering some of his more violent and hurtful claims in the interests of his picture of Johnson. Mary Hyde, in her treatment of the relationship between Boswell and Hester Thrale, also narrates the process by which Boswell’s objections came about and were revised, *The Impossible Friendship*, 154-161.
indirect discourse, and when he does so this is often accompanied with an apology for the inadequacy of his records. Such apologies can be found at different scales, from the account of the momentary blaze of eloquence that dims Boswell’s recollection of the advice Johnson gave him at Harwich in 1763, through to excuses about his inadequate record of specific meetings all the way to general laments about his practices for whole periods of time when he was not keeping a regular diary, or he was unable to see Johnson. These apologies present the same level of importance regardless of scale. One conversation is presented despite being “by no means as perfect as I could wish” (2/89); Boswell apologises for not having caught all of a series of characteristic portraits spoken by Johnson: “I regret that any of them escaped my retention and diligence” (2/162); He gives a theory about his desire to apologise, knowing what he has lost, “I regret very feelingly every instance of my remissness in recording his memorabilia; I am afraid it is the condition of humanity that we are more uneasy from thinking of our wants,[...] than happy in thinking of our acquisitions.” (2/266-7). Only on rare occasions does he find a justifiable reason not to have recorded on a small scale: one meeting happens on “a most agreeable day, of which I regret that every circumstance is not preserved; but it is unreasonable to require such a multiplication of felicity” (2/376). On a larger scale, Boswell’s apologies maintain the serious note of regret, but cover over the specific reasons for the supposed lack in his material (strained relations with Johnson, dissipation and drunkenness): “during the remaining part of my stay in London, I kept very imperfect notes for his conversation, which had I according to my usual custom written out at large soon after the time, much might have been preserved, which is now irretrievably lost. I can now only record some particular scenes, and a few fragments of his memorabilia.” (1/491) Boswell offers up law papers dictated by Johnson to supply the lack, but this is not always possible: “During my stay in London this spring, I find I was unaccountable negligent in preserving Johnson’s sayings, more so than at any time when I was happy enough to have an opportunity of hearing his wisdom and wit. There is no help for it now. I must content myself with presenting such scraps as I have. But I am nevertheless ashamed and vexed to think how much has been lost. It is not that there was a bad crop this year; but that I was not sufficiently careful in gathering it in. I, therefore, in some instances, can only exhibit at few detached fragments.”(2/283) No matter what the loss, Boswell is determined in presenting it as a source of regret.

A more direct scale of apology can be found in Boswell’s method of fudging the boundaries between direct and indirect speech as a way of presenting potentially contestable materials while maintaining a claim to authenticity. This is the lawyer’s cliché: “or some such words” or “phrase” or “expression”. A consideration of the use of these phrases in the journals relative to the Life is instructive: Boswell, despite his usual confidence in his ability to preserve speech, is quite willing to admit where he is most uncertain about particular phrasing. There are at least thirty such moments, eight of which occur in conversations transmitted in the Life. A common theme among these moments is that Boswell is either emotionally heightened and wants to be sure to remember doubt as to his memory of the

80 These apologies present the same level of importance regardless of scale. One conversation is presented despite being “by no means as perfect as I could wish” (2/89); Boswell apologises for not having caught all of a series of characteristic portraits spoken by Johnson: “I regret that any of them escaped my retention and diligence” (2/162); He gives a theory about his desire to apologise, knowing what he has lost, “I regret very feelingly every instance of my remissness in recording his memorabilia; I am afraid it is the condition of humanity that we are more uneasy from thinking of our wants,[...] than happy in thinking of our acquisitions.” (2/266-7). Only on rare occasions does he find a justifiable reason not to have recorded on a small scale: one meeting happens on “a most agreeable day, of which I regret that every circumstance is not preserved; but it is unreasonable to require such a multiplication of felicity” (2/376). On a larger scale, Boswell’s apologies maintain the serious note of regret, but cover over the specific reasons for the supposed lack in his material (strained relations with Johnson, dissipation and drunkenness): “during the remaining part of my stay in London, I kept very imperfect notes for his conversation, which had I according to my usual custom written out at large soon after the time, much might have been preserved, which is now irretrievably lost. I can now only record some particular scenes, and a few fragments of his memorabilia.” (1/491) Boswell offers up law papers dictated by Johnson to supply the lack, but this is not always possible: “During my stay in London this spring, I find I was unaccountable negligent in preserving Johnson’s sayings, more so than at any time when I was happy enough to have an opportunity of hearing his wisdom and wit. There is no help for it now. I must content myself with presenting such scraps as I have. But I am nevertheless ashamed and vexed to think how much has been lost. It is not that there was a bad crop this year; but that I was not sufficiently careful in gathering it in. I, therefore, in some instances, can only exhibit at few detached fragments.”(2/283) No matter what the loss, Boswell is determined in presenting it as a source of regret.

81 Life Page Proofs, Houghton MS Hyde 51 Case 9 (24) 1/228.

82 This is again a central complaint of Greene, who sees Boswell’s commitment to chronology in the absence of any details as absurd, and the lengths Boswell goes to in order to plug up gaps as indicative of his bad faith as a biographer, “’Tis a Pretty Book, Mr. Boswell But—”, 121.
specific elements of a particular statement. Many of the moments concern conversations with very celebrated figures, and Boswell includes the doubt to preserve different possibilities of future interpretation. One conversation with the King, on 30 May 1781, for instance, contains as many as three of these phrases swearing off any claims of complete accuracy.83

Of the moments that concern Johnson, none is especially important in terms of the possible meanings that the different options convey. Of the eight occurrences of these phrases, one is in a sentence entirely removed from the passage (Johnson claiming that Boswell’s “old spirit (or some such word) is reviving” after talking to Captain Cook on 17 April 1776, where Boswell’s opinions are attributed to an anonymous gentleman)84 while for another five, Boswell ignores his doubts and stays with his initial recollection. So when on 13 April 1778 Johnson says “nothing but pretty baby to a child” before dinner,85 and on the twenty-fifth of the same month he advocates giving good things “hearty praise”,86 or on 12 May 1778, when Johnson says he knows of “nothing more offensive than repeating what one knows to be foolish things, by way of continuing a dispute to see what a man may answer—to make him your butt!”,87 or when on 15 April 1781 Johnson objects to the women of his household speaking over each other as “intolerable”,88 Boswell consistently makes his account more certain in the transition from the Journal to the Life. It is curious, though, that Boswell is even this conservative with these materials. Given the extent of changes of diction in the movement between journals and the final version, the fact that he maintains all these word choices even though he explicitly signals in his initial account that they may be inaccurate merits explanation. Only once, in conversation on 31 March 1776, does Boswell retain a sense of the indeterminacy of his records, changing “He said ‘take no notice of it,’ or ‘Don’t talk about it’ or used some such expression” to omit the general doubt as to the phrasing, but leaves both options open.89 Moreover, Boswell only once makes good on the possibility that he lays out for himself by changing a word he doubts in the journals. On 2 June 1781, the day of the excursion to the poet Young’s house, Johnson is given as later observing that “it is not becoming in a man to have so little acquiescence in the ways of Providence, as to be gloomy because

83 Journal, 30/5/1781. Laird, 365; Beinecke 45/1008, 177-80. These hedges and dodges should give us pause when considering Boswell’s attitude to authenticity, as it forms part of what is obviously a deliberate strategy working in the context of what Marjorie Garber describes in her study Quotation Marks as an etiolation of authority rather than a guarantee of trustworthiness: “When ‘he said—she said’ becomes ‘he said something like this’ and ‘she said something like that’ the effect of authenticity and evidence produced by direct quotation becomes blurred and etiolated”, 12. Boswell’s efforts to offer evidence of his failures of memory serve as a guarantee to the often massively edited but confidently presented quotations at other points of the book.
86 Journal, 25/4/1778. Extremes, 313; Beinecke 44/1000, 133. Life, 2/244.
87 Journal, 12/5/1778. Extremes, 343; Beinecke 44/1000, 176. Life, 2/264
he has not obtained as much preferment as he expected; nor to be gloomy for the loss of his wife": the phrase “not becoming” is a revision for “no credit (or some such word)” in an otherwise heavily modified passage.90 Similarly, Boswell ignores his own disavowal of his record in an anecdote on 11 April 1776, which in the final version reads “Of a nobleman raised at a very early period to high office, he said, “His parts, Sir, are pretty well for a Lord, but would not be distinguished in a man who had nothing else but his parts.” (2/61) This not only anonymises the Lord, (Lord Shelburne) but also works up an indirect statement into direct speech, all the while ignoring the subsequent statement “This is the meaning, but it was much more politely expressed.”91 Here we have three concurrent modifications of the closeness of quotation that work in different directions: the change from indirect to direct speech mirrors the change from noting Boswell’s approximation of the more polite words to claiming that the final version represents Johnson’s actual statement, while the move to anonymise Lord Shelburne works against the intensifying intimacy of these. By this token Boswell succeeds at forging an illusion of proximity to the event out of different standards of accuracy in his transmission, and the conjunction of ginned up direct speech with added anonymity renders the politeness lost from the original practically irrelevant.

Boswell profits neither from the licence these moments in his journals give him to silently revise or improve his accounts, nor from the sense of added authenticity that can be garnered from being honest about small doubts. We should therefore ask what benefits the quiet reassurance Boswell affords himself in these moments gives the text. Obviously there is the benefit of having the text flow more smoothly, and some of these moments come at strained times in conversations, where the drama of certainty wins out over the accuracy of the author admitting his doubts in delicate situations. We may come close to an understanding of just why Boswell is willing to give himself options he does not use by considering the converse of some such word. In conversation on 10 April 1778, Boswell removes two opposing moments of certainty and doubt during Johnson’s extended speech arguing that the rise of money had caused a decline in subordination. During the course of his argument, Johnson notes that he has already made this point with reference to the decline of feudalism in Scotland in his book about his travels there, and in the Journal, Boswell notes that he says “in my ‘Voyage (I am sure of that word) to the Hebrides.’”92

But in order to simplify the moment, Boswell abandons this certainty, and has Johnson give the correct name of his *Journey*. At the same time, at the end of the final line of the speech—“My hope is, that as anarchy produces tyranny, this extreme relaxation will produce *freni strictio*.”—Boswell has removed a parenthesis “(‘twas to that effect)”.\(^93\) This movement, removing both certainty and its opposite, establishes Boswell as a confident conveyer of Johnson’s text, but it also introduces us to the possibility of his having more than general confidence about particular words. That is, there are moments when he is in absolutely no doubt about what Johnson said. One of these moments makes it into the *Life*. In a passage where Boswell defends one of Johnson’s words against the doubts of his readers:

> He said of one of our friends, “He is ruining himself without pleasure. A man who loses at play, or who runs out his fortune at court, makes his estate less, in hopes of making it bigger: (I am sure of this word, which was often used by him:) but it is a sad thing to pass through the quagmire of parsimony, to the gulf of ruin. To pass over the flowery path of extravagance is very well.”

(2/263)

Regardless of the perplexing motivation for Boswell’s defensiveness here,\(^94\) the fact of its appearance in the final version, where it replaces a similarly positioned but differently inflected parenthesis “(Quite peculiar Johnsonian style. Excellent)” displays Boswell’s occasional confidence in the total accuracy of his records.\(^95\)

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\(^94\) Powell and other editors claim it relates to an idea of ‘big’ being a Scotticism—the catalogue of Scotticisms collected by David Hume lists *big coat*, for instance, instead of *great coat*, *Extremes*, 341, n7.

\(^95\) Journal, 12/5/1778. *Extremes*, 341; Beinecke, 44/1000, 175.
Eschewing doubt over a word that others might question, and even revelling in its peculiarity as he does here, shows Boswell negotiating the two poles of authenticity in his project. In the many doubtful words in the Journal, Boswell displays his initial concern for total accuracy of diction in important situations with important people. Accuracy at the scale of the word however, is something that may be less necessary in less heightened situations, and his comfort in the vast majority of his recorded statements shows this. But in the heightened situations where Boswell is not sure of the word said and hides behind the possibility that he may be wrong, he is focusing on the truth of the event. In this scale of narration the specific words are important because they combine to form singular utterances and misrepresentation of them could have dangerous consequences if these people agree.

There are, however, other scales at which the same utterances can be considered. From the perspective of the whole Life, in which static conceptions of Johnson’s habits and manners are more important to the idea of the rounded portrait than any one curious anecdote can be, the idea of the representation of speech shifts from precision in giving every word as an historical fact to ensuring accuracy with regard to the general habits of Johnson’s speech. This is an especially important for Boswell’s project since his book is ostensibly made up out of Johnson’s real speech and made to represent its fullness and variety. Hitting on a curious usage like “bigger” presents Boswell with an opportunity for celebration precisely because it forms an unexpected illustration of the Johnsonian style that might otherwise have been hard to capture.

We need to understand the specific horizons of direct speech and its representation in text in order to get away from the simple critical dichotomy between Boswell being a great artist whose departures from fidelity to the event are excusable because of the extent of his aesthetic achievement, and as a charlatan who poisons the possibility of writing accurately about Johnson because of the impact of his lazy and self-aggrandising inaccuracies. The difficulty lies in the acknowledgment that Boswell was trying both to be a successful artist and be bound by the ideal of fidelity to the event. His failures and inaccuracies are his own, but they are also inflected by his goals and technological limitations. We
need to read the *Life* as the result of a series of engagements with different forms of narrative involving speech, since before we can come to a position on whether it matters if the content is inaccurate or misleading and whether as a result of this, it discounts the book as a literary endeavour.

**Authenticity and Individual Peculiarity**

Johnson’s habitual peculiarities of speech become a site of difficulty for the book: they must be representative, but because of the nature of Boswell’s source material, have been put down by him at the time. This is true for aberrant uses of specific words such as “bigger” (if indeed it is aberrant), but it is of less concern to Boswell that his journals contain an accurate sense of the sounds and modes of Johnsonian speech because these are open to the process of editing and revision. This is not to say that Boswell does not try in the journals to render Johnson accurately, rather the added opportunity of revision allows him to augment his record in order to make it more Johnsonian. Indeed, one of the most famous claims Boswell made about his own processes details this exact point. In an apology for the sketchy nature of some of his earlier encounters with Johnson, Boswell asserts that he improved with time:

> Let me here apologize for the imperfect manner in which I am obliged to exhibit Johnson’s conversation at this period. In the early part of my acquaintance with him, I was so wrapt in admiration of his extraordinary colloquial talents, and so little accustomed to his peculiar mode of expression, that I found it extremely difficult to recollect and record his conversation with its genuine vigour and vivacity. In process of time, when my mind was, at it were, strongly impregnated with the Johnsonian aether, I could, with much more facility and exactness, carry in my memory and commit to paper the exuberant variety of his wisdom and wit.

(1/228)

The idea of impregnation with the Johnsonian aether is one that has perplexed many commentators, but its gist is clear: that Boswell eventually became so familiar with Johnson’s style that he was able to reproduce it accurately, rather than sit stunned with it.96 Indeed, Boswell himself prided himself on

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96 For a detailed account of the dynamic encapsulated in this image of Boswell’s, see Greg Clingham, “Double Writing: the Erotics of Narrative in Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*” which draws out the displaced eroticism of the idea of impregnation to argue that Boswell’s staging of himself in the “reproduction” of Johnson “—in gesture, body, rhetoric, idiom, ideas—is the central event of the *Life*” (196) and that the doublings and repetitions this involves necessarily engage the reader in a set of
his talents as a mimic, and it must have been a relief to him when he finally considered himself capable of reproducing Johnson’s speech both in embodied impersonation and in text. Mimics are a frequent topic of conversation in the book itself, and both Boswell himself and Garrick (repeatedly) are made to imitate Johnson’s style and manner in the course of the narrative, while Johnson himself dismisses the claims of other pretenders to be able to take him off well, leading to the fearsome anecdote of Samuel Foote receiving threats of physical violence from Johnson himself to stop him from representing his caricature on the stage (1/450). Outside the confines of the Life, Boswell can be found imitating Johnson to augment his own speech, as he does to win a bout of raillery with the Lord Kellie in Edinburgh on 9 August 1769:

When he was in great triumph, I said, “My Lord, I can say nothing to you myself, but I’ll tell you what Dictionary Johnson would say: ‘Why, Sir, Kellie is a turf that burns for other people while he consumes himself.’” The whole company roared, and my Lord was foundered for some time.

What is at stake in all these contested textual and bodily appropriations of Johnson’s manner is the foundation of the general ground of Boswell’s extended portrait of Johnson. By establishing his credentials as the only accurate imitator of Johnson other than Garrick, the most celebrated actor of the era, Boswell lays forth his claim for the accuracy of his representation of Johnson’s everyday speech. The picture is, of course, complicated by the different elements of speech itself: content and delivery. Where Johnson’s speech is elevated and like his writings—ornate in syntax, at times blunt, forceful and vivacious, these are all considerations of the abstractable content of the speech. The thing that can be represented as quotation is the words supposed to have been said by Johnson in the order that he is supposed to have said them. Beyond this consideration lies the more physical attributes of intonation, volume, bodily disposition—all things that are tantalising surpluses to the content of the deep-seated sexual displacements and transformations on Boswell’s part. Thomas A. King, in his essay “How (Not) to Queer Boswell”, warns, though, against facile queering of Boswell because of the connection the idea has with the penetrability of the male body. The idea of impregnation is for King stranger than a simple question of displaced desire and brings up questions regarding the impetus for inscription and reproduction inherent in quotation that should extend to a wider estrangement of modern readers from Boswell’s modes of interaction with his male associates that cannot be too directly mapped on to notions of homosociality and homoeroticism (146).

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speech, and involve many narrative choices at different scales, and form the basis of the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

Boswell is aware enough of these dynamics to include as a footnote a very direct claim from Lord Pembroke that Johnson’s manner made his speech more striking and admired than it otherwise would have been:

* My noble friend Lord Pembroke said once to me at Wilton, with a happy pleasantry and some truth, that “Dr. Johnson’s sayings would not appear so extraordinary, were it not for his bow-wow way.” The sayings themselves are generally of sterling merit; but, doubtless, his manner was an addition to their effect, and therefore should be attended to as much as may be. It is necessary, however, to guard those who were not acquainted with him, against overcharged imitations or caricatures of his manner, which are frequently attempted, and many of which are second-hand copies from the late Mr. Henderson the actor, who, though a good mimic of some persons, did not represent Johnson correctly.

(1/465 n4)

If it is the bow-wow way that is responsible for these already sterling sayings being memorable, what task is Boswell actually setting himself in saying that it should be attended to as much as may be? In practical terms, Boswell responds to his own challenge of capturing the surplus elements of Johnson’s speech with two different approaches, appropriate to different scales. Within the representation of speech he intervenes to both transform the appearance of the text and signify various sonic elements. He also gives occasional general descriptions of his loud clear utterance and other notable elements of his general manner that can be read as much as giving information about his characteristics as they can as minute particulars about specific conversations. But even without going into the surplus, more easily caricatured elements of Johnson’s delivery, Boswell proves himself a shrewd imitator of his style. There exists a gap between the conception of the quotation as the thing itself and a representative sample where a generic sense of Johnson’s habitual syntax and diction is beneficial to Boswell’s portrayal at any one moment. Indeed, the book’s account of Johnson’s speech does not consist only of Boswell’s mimicking Johnson’s style in writing, to others and to the man himself. Johnson can be found himself acceding to the demands of his own discourse as a genre of speech. For instance on 12 April 1776, we can find Johnson editing his statement against the transports of alcohol as he speaks it:
This momentary dynamic is rendered more fully in the collection of miscellaneous memoranda between 19 and 27 June 1784:

He seemed to take a pleasure in speaking in his own style; for when he had carelessly missed it, he would repeat the thought translated into it. Talking of the Comedy of “The Rehearsal,” he said, “It has not wit enough to keep it sweet.” This was easy;—he therefore caught himself, and pronounced a more rounded sentence, “It has not vitality enough to preserve it from putrefaction.”

Whether stopping midway through to correct a word, or redoubling over his sentence in order to replace the whole thing, Johnson is always collaborating with Boswell in the process of crystallising his speech so as to be elaborated from a set of recognisable principles of which elevation of diction is only one example. We can see the granting here of a sort of license for Boswell to tinker with Johnson’s diction as he takes it down and later refines it. And Boswell is committed to making of his records a series of scenes in Johnson’s own style. Not only are the words consistently revised to be worthier of “Dictionary Johnson”, but Boswell also makes sure that Johnson’s syntax is reproduced in a plausible way. At one point in the proof stage, one of the readers (most likely Malone) questions the repetition of the word *children* in the sentence “We may be excused for not caring much about other people’s children, for there are many who do not care about their own children.” (2/58-9) Boswell rejects this particular opportunity to revise and leaves a marginal note arguing that the value of the statement lies not in the felicity of its expression but in how typical it is of its speaker: “the repetition is the Johnsonian mode.”

Boswell also makes a general reflection about Johnson’s strange habits of using negation as affirmation as a reflection upon one of the scattered memoranda in 1784:

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100 *Life Page Proofs*, Houghton MS Hyde 51 Case 9 (24) 2/59.
Boswell effectively commits himself here to a representation of Johnson’s odd usage as the same type of character differentiation that might be seen in a play, pushing further into the habit to reveal his thoughts about Johnson’s psychological positioning when in conversation. This is the benefit of using a general platform to discuss something as common and habitual as speech, but it is equally important that Boswell does not introduce this information as part of a broader system of description of the relationship between Johnson’s habits of speech and his character. It is only because he notices the atypical usage in his representative sample—that is, in a particular, that he is occasioned to make a general comment that can extend to the picture he presents in, and makes up out of the general tendencies of, his extensive collection of such particulars.

Boswell does not stop, though, at maintaining and describing the features of high Johnsonian speech within the scale of narrative at which such speech is recognisable as belonging to a particular person. At the smaller narrative scale of representing speech in starker isolation, Boswell is committed to an order of representation in which he augments his record to draw attention to the directness of his discourse, and the naturalistic nature of the speech he is representing. It is quite a different consideration from the mentioning of Johnson’s use of “No, Sir”, as an habitual rhetorical defiance against all comers, when we note that the Life is full of people calling each other “Sir”, a phenomenon Donald Greene describes as “a liberal sprinkling of superfluous ‘Sirs’”, and what Bakhtin would view as a key indicator of addressivity: “a quality of turning to someone”, which, he says, is a constitutive element of speech genres.101 There are more than two thousand instances of the word in the book, many of them, predictably coming to form a recognisably Johnsonian element of address. In contrast to Greene, we can appreciate the impetus for the inclusion of this “sprinkling” by considering the minute demands of the genre. Nothing like this profusion of politeness is necessary in the collection of sayings, because that genre does not rely on the assumption that specific speakers require specific forms of respect and consideration. By having the people in his book constantly hail each other, Boswell makes them enter into the drama of a sense of narrative reality, regardless of the historical

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accuracy of each specific instance of politeness. The “Sir”-s become a way of patterning speech to
give the frisson of the presence of other people in the room, and they do this to such an extent that
they exist as a marker of the genre Boswell constructs for himself as much as they do as a record of
any historical instances of the word. I say this advisedly, because close comparison of Boswell’s book
with his source materials (incomplete as the comparison is because of the many gaps in the
overlapping sources) reveals 434 documentable instances of the word in the final book where it is not
recorded in Boswell’s earliest existing account of the corresponding exchange. This figure can seem
either large (there is one additional “Sir” for every third page in the book) or small (eighteen for every
year that Boswell and Johnson knew each other) or in-between (more than one for every individual
day on which Boswell and Johnson are said to have met in the book) depending on perspective.
Additional “Sir”-s cannot be ignored as a generic feature of the writing of Boswell’s dialogue-driven
scenes, particularly if we are interested in the relationship between genre and ideas of factuality and
truth. Of the 434 added “Sir”-s, 76 are added where Boswell makes a significant amendment or
addition to his scanty version in the Journal, either to fill up a gap, or to gloss over an excision. These
additional “Sir”-s come from Boswell’s impregnation with the Johnsonian aether: he is approximating
speech and making sure to include “Sir” as one of its principal characteristics. Another 68 additional
“Sir”-s result from Boswell shifting the mode of representation of speech. If, for instance, he has a
sentence in indirect discourse that he makes into direct speech to fit in the dialogue format, it often
includes a new “Sir” as a sort of guarantee of the directness of the restored speech. A further 74
additional “Sir”-s can be found when Boswell shifts a “said he” or an “I said” into a speech heading.
These additional “Sir”-s are obviously less probable from an historical standpoint as they serve to
baldly substitute the metrical loss to the sentences of the removed words, filling out a pause where the
narrative voice had been.

Of the remaining additional “Sir”-s, 108 appear for the first time in the manuscript of the *Life* as a
part of the process of writing up and expansion, being restored, as we might think, to the record as a
natural matter of course during Boswell’s extended period of consideration of how to transfer his
Journal materials into scenes. The last 107, however, come later, and are written on the Manuscript as
insertions above the line, the result of revision and redrafting of the already inflated number of direct
addresses in the text. The minute attention that Boswell gives to the impact of direct address in this
manner can be seen in the manuscript for the scene in 1778 where Boswell and Johnson reconcile
after Johnson’s unaccountable rudeness recorded by Boswell at 2/255-6. In the scene Boswell tries
diplomatically to put his case that Johnson should not toss him in company, Boswell, even in the
process of revising the manuscript, proves his delicacy, trying two positions for his added “Sir”, which eventually results in the addition of a speech heading in place of the tag “I said”.102

The same applies to Boswell’s treatment of the word in Johnson’s speech. Take, for instance the delicate conversation in the same year about the morality of the upper class. In one paragraph in the final book, we find the word used five times:

As he was a zealous friend of subordination, he was at all times watchful to reprove the vulgar cant against the manners of the great; “High people, Sir, (said he,) are the best; take a hundred ladies of quality, you’ll find them better wives, better mothers, more willing to sacrifice their own pleasure to their children, than a hundred other women. Tradeswomen (I mean the wives of tradesmen) in the city, who are worth from ten to fifteen thousand pounds, are the worst creatures upon the earth, grossly ignorant, and thinking viciousness fashionable. Farmers, I think, are often worthless fellows. Few lords will cheat; and, if they do, they’ll be ashamed of it: farmers cheat and are not ashamed of it: they have all the sensual vices too of the nobility, with cheating into the bargain. There is as much fornication and adultery amongst farmers as amongst noblemen.” Boswell. “The notion of the world, Sir, however is, that the morals of women of quality are worse than those in lower stations.” Johnson. “Yes, Sir, the licentiousness of one woman of quality makes more noise than that of a number of women in lower stations; then, Sir, you are to consider the malignity of women in the city against women of quality, which will make them believe any thing of them, such as that they call their coachmen to bed. No, Sir, so far as I have observed, the higher in rank, the richer ladies are, they are the better instructed and the more virtuous.”

(2/266)

In the Journal version of the scene, we can find the “No, Sir” in Johnson’s final speech, but none of the others. The “Yes, Sir” replaces a speech tag, “Yes said he”, that is turned into the speech heading.

102 MS 741, Bonnell, 247.
The “Sir” given to Johnson at the beginning of the speech is added as a matter of course in the transcription and working up into the MS, while the “Sir” in between the “Yes, Sir” and the “No, Sir” after the mention of women of lower rank in Johnson’s final speech is added above the line. Boswell’s own “Sir” is the object of hesititation, as he gives himself the option of “But, Sir” at the beginning of his speech or in its final position, both above the line:103

The group added above the lines of the manuscript, mixed as it is here with older additions, is perhaps the most remarkable, because it is so large for a series of afterthoughts about the nature of the historical dialogue the book represents, and in particular the specific characteristics of Johnson’s own speech, a perspective that is even more pronounced for the eight times “Sir” is added above the line in the final Revises. A disproportionate number of the “Sir”-s are added in conjunction with other words, making characteristically vivacious phrases, “Why Sir”, “Nay Sir”, “You Know Sir” and so on. Some of the earlier additions are part of such phrases, with “Why” being the most common (23 instances before the manuscript, 6 above the line), but the finished nature of these phrases in the supralinear additions should give us pause. Certainly the vibrancy that these phrases lend the speeches to which they are attached is a boon for the book, but given Boswell’s concerns about accuracy, it is

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103 Journal, 12/5/1778. Extremes, 342; Beinecke, 44/1000, 177-8. MS 760-1, Bonnell, 260.
strange to think that he would genuinely believe that so close to publication, and, conversely, so far from the events represented, he could have arrived at a more authentic version of such particularity, and so frequently. Either he remembers better under pressure, or his standards of authenticity have shifted with time.

The addition of so many instances of the word is not simply, as Greene calls it “a sprinkling”, then, nor is it entirely limited to the function of “Johnsonising” the speech Boswell put down in his records. Not only is the vast majority of the use of the word extant in Boswell’s earliest records, and not only do the additions find their way into conversations and even speeches that already contain the word, but changes to it are performed on the speeches of 25 of the people in the book. Nor is it simply a matter of Boswell adding the word to Johnson’s speeches to make him more like the recognisable caricature of imitation. While the great number of changes (343) are made to Johnson’s speech, Boswell adds or removes the word in his own statements 103 times, and the 23 other speakers who are subject to such revisions generally are only emended once, but Mrs. Thrale is made more decorous five times, and Beauclerk three.\textsuperscript{104}

Much of this seeming contradiction or abandonment of principles can be explained via Boswell’s own metaphor for his process: in his \textit{Hypochondriack} essay “On Diaries”, adding to the metaphor of preservation, Boswell compares his Journal to ship’s soup:

\[\ldots\text{it is a work of very great labour and difficulty to keep a journal of life, occupied in various pursuits, mingled with concomitant speculations and reflections, in so much, that I do not think it possible to do it unless one has a peculiar talent for abridging. I have tried it in that way, when it has been my good fortune to live in a multiplicity of instructive and entertaining scenes, and I have thought my notes like portable soup, of which a little bit by being dissolved in water will make a good large dish; for their substance by being expanded in words would fill a volume.}\textsuperscript{105}

Portable soup is food that has been condensed to its base constituent elements, but which can be revivified with new water and some fresh herbs, and made as good as before, even if it is not the same thing entirely. Boswell went so far as to use the image as the principal conceit of an advertisement for the \textit{Life} in the \textit{Public Advertiser} of 21 May 1791:

PORTABLE SOUP

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{104} See appendix for a full accounting of Boswell’s changes with “Sir” in the different stages of composition. \hfill \textsuperscript{105} Hypochondriack LXVI, “On Diaries” (March 1783). \textit{BC}, 332.}
There are many competitors for this valuable article. ARCHIBALD DUKE OF ARGYLL, a wise and sagacious Statesman, who governed SCOTLAND, all his life, never travelled without it; for, upon coming into the worst inn upon earth, if there were but fire and water he had immediately a good and comfortable dish. Doctors differ which sort is best; whether of beef, mutton, veal, or chicken. But what shall we say to Portable Soup of the LION?

The Poet farcically says of Achilles going to war,

“He din’d on Lion’s marrow spread
On toasts of ammunition bread.”

How must the BRITISH NATION now be invigorated, when BOSWELL feeds them with the portable soup?—The LION’s marrow of a JOHNSON!106

Not only can Boswell reconstitute the conversation of Johnson, the conceit goes, but the conversation will invigorate the nation because of the source of the stock. Some of the invigoration must doubtless be a product of Johnson’s constant civility in forms of address. Additional “Sir”-s can therefore be seen in this light as a part of the process of reconstitution, adding predictable and generic elements in order that the preserved record can more closely resemble the thing it is purporting to be.107 But this is not enough of an explanation, because there is certainly no uniformity in how this condensation and reconstitution has been carried out. Not only are the additional “Sir”-s no more than a quarter of the total amount of “Sir”-s in the book, but the additional instances occur, as we have seen, in the very same passages as the majority of uses of this word that Boswell saw fit to include in even his scratchiest of accounts.

We are left with a conundrum: we have to decide if Boswell’s attention to particular “Sir”-s in his journals means that they have a specific historical significance over and above the approximations of the additional “Sir”-s. Moreover, we have to decide if this means that a reading of the truth-status of the quotations should have different standards based on whether or not individual instances traverse the record or not, or if Boswell’s final version should be trusted in every degree. In answering these questions, the notion of scale proves its usefulness. It could be that Boswell’s claims about authenticity and accuracy do not apply beyond the level of the general gist of the sentence and any

106 This advertisement is printed in Tankard, Facts and Inventions, 267-8.
107 In her study of Boswell’s management of the picture of Johnson through his use of footnotes, Donna Heiland argues that “Boswell encourages the fragmentation of the Life at the same time as making “sure that this text, and its subject, will always be reconstituted by the reader as well”, meaning that the text evades the closure of Johnson’s death. This is a powerful argument and occurs in addition to the primary reconstitution outlined here. See “Remembering the Hero”, 202.
additional context he may have to give it. But then this would mean that his assiduity in recording particular instances of the word “Sir” is not especially helpful. There are clearly moments when he is adamant that Johnson’s particular mode of politeness is important to the specific historical circumstances of a conversation, and to lose these moments in the general argument that the small scale is only ever approximate would be to do the book a disservice. Furthermore, there are other moments where Boswell has a clear objective in adding “Sir” repeatedly to heated and violent exchanges in order to render the whole more civil. Balancing the two needs requires us to picture Boswell as a chronicler with shifting standards based on the nature of his materials. Each line is subject to different contingencies: some generic, some based on faulty manuscripts, some based on difficulties of publication and politeness. Looking at them all together (that is, as a narrative whole) is less appropriate to the specific nature of the text than looking at individual moments (that is, as an apophthegmatic list). The difficulty is insoluble, and derives from the competing objectives of Boswell’s texts, which themselves are dependent on the different scales of information narrative text can convey.

Other late additions that make the speech more conversational can be found throughout the book, too. In particular, Boswell is fond of adding local repetitions to mimic the cadences of speech, and not just Johnson’s. For instance, when he is teasing out Johnson’s attitude to the moral considerations of dealing with highwaymen in the dark on 4 April 1778 (Johnson thinks it better to shoot an assailant and be sure he got the right man than swear against him in court being unsure it is the same person), Boswell adds reduplication to his own concession:

**Boswell.** “Very well, very well.—There is no catching him.”

(2/196)

The extra “very well” exists only in relation to the dulling potential of text. Boswell amplifies his spirited concession in much the same way that he often has speakers reduplicate the word “no”.108

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108 The use of “No, no” demonstrates Boswell’s commitment to representing speech with this added indication of its spokenness throughout the book and through all the stages of composition and revision. Johnson is represented saying “No, no” at 1/248: rejecting the solicitations of a sex worker “No, no my girl (said Johnson) it won’t do”; at 1/314, “No, no, let me smile with the wise”; and at 2/501 asserting an audacious claim about the morals of women: “No, no, a lady will take Jonathan Wild as readily as St. Austin, if he has threepence more, and what is worse, her parents will give her to him”. This last example is modified over the line in the MS to add the second “no” (MS 946), while the Journal account of the first initially placed the speech tags between the two repeated words (Journal, 28/7/1763. LJ, 294; Beinecke 37/931, 720). Johnson, representing someone else’s speech, is also shown quoting Dr. Dodd as having used the formulation in prison at 2/152, where the second is added above the line in the Journal, which was used as copy for the *Life*, (Journal, 19/9/1777. *Extremes*, 164; Beinecke 43/997, 68, Bonnell, 110). Additionally, quotations of Johnson from secondary sources have him using the formulation at 1/207: “No, no! I am against the dockers” (via Sir Joshua Reynolds), and the historian William Robertson quoting Johnson shortly before he re-enters the room at 2/252. Boswell attributes a further three to his own speech at 1/486, 2/163, and 2/251, each time introducing a grand declaration, and once more representing his father’s lack of
these are additions and characteristics of language that can only originate in speech, and therefore, like the abundance of direct reference to speakers that are in the room but not present in the room where the book is being read, signify the act of speaking more than they necessarily constitute the actual spoken words of an historical moment.

A less easily explained dynamic occurs with the simulation of mildly colloquial English on a smaller scale. Moments where Johnson says “‘em” for “them” are both added and removed from their appearances in the Journal. On 15 May 1784, for instance, Johnson tells his company that he had dined with three illustrious female writers, Elizabeth Carter, Hannah More and Fanny Burney, Boswell exults:

\[
\text{Boswell. “What! had you them all to yourself, Sir?” Johnson. “I had them all as much as they were had; but it might have been better had there been more company there.”}
\]

(2/491)

Johnson’s “them” here, but not Boswell’s is changed from an “‘em”. Similarly, when on 21 March 1775, Johnson is made to temper his generalisation about Scottish people being uncommitted to truth from saying “All of them” to “Droves of them,” the second them is changed from an “‘em”. The same thing happens six years later, on 1 April 1781 in a discussion that turns the question of accuracy where Boswell confronts a gentleman who said, after Boswell comments in a parenthesis that does not make it into the Life “(I imagine with some intentional petulance),”

interest in seeing his expatriate younger son David at 2/162. Baretti and Gibbon are shown using it once each at 1/307 and 2/195 respectively. Finally, the most celebrated version of this formulation is Johnson’s in his additional and haunting statements about Hodge the cat, “But Hodge shan’t be shot: no, no, Hodge shall not be shot”—a statement that was taken up by Vladimir Nabokov as the epigraph for his novel Pale Fire. See Sean R. Silver, “Pale Fire and Johnson’s Cat”, Lisa Berglund “Oysters for Hodge” and Helen Deutsch, Loving Dr Johnson, 216-219, for considerations of the expansive resonances and appropriations of this enigmatic passage. As late as the proofs, Boswell revised one “No-no” spoken by Burke to “O, no”. See Life Page Proofs, Houghton MS Hyde 51 Case 9 (24) 2/343.

109 This change elides what Felicity Nussbaum sees as a key point in the contest between Johnson and the Blue-stockings that has to do with the difference between what Lady Mary Wortley Montagu called his “finical” style in writing and his overly blunt and masculine form of address in conversation. Precisely the sort of roughness indicated by Johnson talking of these refined women as “‘em” drove what Nussbaum describes as the conflict between these modes of conversability. See The Limits of the Human, 73-9.

110 Journal, 21/3/1775. OY, 87; Beinecke 42/988, 29.
In this instance at least, Boswell’s exactness in authenticity comes up against the two available realms of representation, eschewing the more colloquial form of Johnson’s “If he had seen ’em” which he would later record in his quarto and octavo volumes in favour of the standard representation of the Life. Boswell goes on in a reflection removed in the transition from Journal to Life:

The Doctor did not make sufficient allowance for inaccuracy of memory. But, no doubt, carelessness as to the exactness of circumstances is very dangerous, for one may gradually recede from fact till all is fiction.\[111\]

Even in a passage like this where Boswell has Johnson join in a discussion about the necessity of accuracy in minor details as a bulwark against the slow assault of fictionality, he still allows room for himself to make such minor shifts between words as spoken and words in their standard, abstract format. As a result, we need to understand Boswell’s conception of the exactness of circumstances as not necessarily involving anything to do with such a transition. Moreover, the existence of different possibilities for rendering the same word should give us pause to more thoroughly consider Boswell’s representation of speech as a form of transparent transcript, rather than the result of a series of choices between alternative styles of representation, none of which has a full right to claim total accuracy or fidelity to events.

The conclusion that can be drawn from these considerations is that at whatever scale, Boswell’s project is devoted to an abstract version of Johnson’s speech that is less concerned with the real passage of time and the context of real occurrences than his statements would have readers believe. Whatever mode of narrative he is engaged in, Boswell adopts an attitude to his speech which assumes its importance is greater than what goes on around it, except when there is some captivating reason borne of curiosity that allows the expansion of narrative into what is effectively a list of clippings. We must then investigate the variety of Boswell’s modes of narrative. The modes take place on different

\[111\] Journal, 1/4/1781. Laird, 307; Beinecke 44/1006, 55-6.
scales. I have already hinted that the more detailed descriptions of Johnsonian style occur in episodes narrated at a larger scale of reference than the peppering of the word “Sir” over the conversations.

**Narrative Scales and Modes of Quotation**

In the remainder of this chapter I investigate three primary scales of narration on which Boswell’s narrative scenes are founded: the small-scale of limited exchange, a medium scale of inconsequential occurrences, and the event-driven larger scale of interconnected happenings. Each of these scales, even when they can be seen to overlap within a passage of Boswell’s book, is associated with a different genre of speech-representation to which it is most amenable. On the small scale, the apophthegmatic genre of the ana collects decontextualised sayings and pulls them together only by the assertion of the identity of the speaker. At the medium scale, we can find the kind of scenic narrative that Boswell imagines when he says that the *Life* will be presented in scenes, but what this means in practice draws less from the theatre or the vignette than from modes of speech representation in the form of the dialogue, where the particularities of speech are imagined to add specificity to the flows of abstract thought, and from the journalistic reporting of specific, easily managed occasions such as speeches, debates and court trials. At this scale, utterances relate to each other, but in smaller self-contained units than on the largest scale of continuous narrative. Fully realised historical narrative based on the forms of chronicle history and heroic biography show the interrelation and consequentality of speech, which is often imagined as having heightened and sovereign effects, coming as it most regularly does from the mouths of kings. Quotation has a specific role depending on the scale of narrative that Boswell engages in. Different scales have different techniques appropriate to them, each engaging in different requirements for authenticity. The notion of authenticity is one of the most important for Boswell’s perception of his project, and requires close scrutiny.

**Apophthegm and the Ana**

The key opposition of genres is between Boswell’s ideal of the scene, which as we see in the exactly related narrative of the first meeting, is based on the presence of identifiable people in addition to Johnson, and other contexts such as time and place and the specificity of the words’ relation to each other, as well as the possibility of exchange and surprises. In such scenes the gnomic utterance, which
exists alone in isolation, forms agglomerated lists, rather than connected narratives. The *Life* is a book that aims at the sort of narrative that requires context and can give multiple layers of information, but is simultaneously beholden to the apophthegmatic nature of much of its source material. In addition to not being able to put down much of what he hears of Johnson’s sayings from his friends, much of what Boswell stored in his Journal could only be presented in the format of the ana.

Boswell’s interest in the ana is well-documented, and can perhaps be seen as the cornerstone in his view of himself as a man in society, linking the small scale of social interaction with his wider-scale interest in biography as evidenced in his Journal and his project with Johnson. Boswell’s acquaintance with the genre occurred early. In the Harvest Journal of 1762, long before he met Johnson and put down his mentor’s instructions to keep a diary with satisfaction in the Journal he was already keeping, Boswell records encountering a copy of the French classic of the genre, the *Menagiana*, a compilation of sayings and anecdotes of Gilles Ménage, a seventeenth-century scholar:

> I brought with me from Lord Kenmore’s *Menagina* so named from Monsieur Ménage. This is a miscellaneous Collection of good Stories & *Bons Mots*. In imitation of it I began this day a Work of the same kind under the title of *Boswelliana* in which I intend from time to time to treasure up Wit & humour.

Boswell kept up this collection in parallel to his Journal for the rest of his life, and it was printed in 1874. The treasure of wit and humour that it contains is mainly his own jests and raillery, but it also stores many common jests and anecdotes which Boswell found engaging. The advantage of the ana-form as a miscellaneous collection is that it unites two interests that are otherwise hard to reconcile: the particular or curious moments of jest and wisdom that take part in any person’s life and the biographical interest of the curious anecdote about a great person. Formally this is achieved by the fragmentary and miscellaneous nature of the collection, where an implicit claim of relevance abuts the genuine interest of the particular, without the intervening narrative demands of contextualisation. This is a biographical as well as a sociable advantage that leads in the mind of Boswell and other compilers of the ana for the mutual magnification of the small moments of the life of a celebrated figure and the work that such a figure has produced. In the introduction to the *Menagiana*, a long pedigree for the practice is given, tracing connections with the anecdotal compendia of Aulus Gellius, the more biographically-focused work of Xenophon, and, importantly the scriptures of Christianity and the *Hadith* in Islam, where the incidental sayings of foundational figures continue to have immense theological weight. Boswell shared with the *Menagiana* his perspective that notable sayings

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and conversation were both a worthy and a curious thing to preserve. In his very defensive conclusion to the *Tour*, he explicitly invokes the *Ana* and its attendant interest and delight as the model to which he has aspired:

>Tour, 434

Boswell’s continual pose of lamenting his and his contemporaries’ laxity in the unappointed task of taking down Johnson’s conversation can also be found in the *Menagiana*’s introduction:

Nous aurions une infinité de belles choses dont nous sommes privés si l’on avait eu le même soin auprès des Savans & des Illustres dans les belles lettres & dans les sciences qui ont paru depuis deux cens ans: parce que quoique nous ayons leurs ouvrages; néanmoins il est certain que l’imagination & la mémoire excitées par la chaleur de l’entretien fournissent bien des choses qu’elles ne fournissent pas dans le cabinet la plume à la main. Il me semble qu’on en peut également attribuer la faute aux savans & à ceux qui devaient receuillir: aux Savans parce qu’ils n’ont pas été
assez communicatifs; à ceux qui devoient receuillir, parce qu’ils n’on pas eu assez de
zele ny de passion pour le faire.113

In the *Life*, indeed, Boswell includes a defence (by the author Bayle) of the *Menagiana* along very similar lines as a footnote in his summative character of Johnson at 2/587. Boswell’s interest there is in defending the curiosities he has preserved, but his benefit is also in the mediation provided by the form of the genre. The *ana* is frequently discussed in the book itself. Boswell quizzes Johnson about the peculiar pleasures of this genre on more than on occasion, and they talk about different examples.114 The two agree that taking down the inconsequential thoughts and statements of remarkable people is in general an admirable goal, because it keeps alive the legacy of thoughts that may not have been important enough to write down, but yet can give to a reader valuable instruction about small matters of conduct, and occasional delight about good expression and witticisms: the chief goals of the Eighteenth-Century literary establishment. Johnson knew that Boswell was an assiduous keeper of his conversation, and near the end of his life we can find Boswell quizzing Johnson as to why he was not more active in recollecting and preserving his own spoken comments (as Boswell did in his volumes of *Boswelliana*) for his own amusement:

> After repeating to him some of his pointed lively sayings, I said, “It is a pity, Sir, you don’t always remember your own good things, that you may have a laugh when you will.” **JOHNSON.** “Nay, Sir, it is better that I forget them, that I may be reminded of them and have a laugh brought to my recollection.”

(2/441)

This idea of personal recollection being better when coming from the outside allows the pleasure to lie in the relationship between the people who remember good sayings together, rather than the

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113 *Menagiana*, “Avertissement”, n.p. My translation is as follows: “We might have had an infinity of wonderful things of which we have been deprived if people had exercised the same care around the Learned and the Illustrious of belles lettres and science that they did two hundred years ago: because while we have their works it is nevertheless certain that the imagination and the memory excited by the warmth of conversation produce a bounty that is not produced at the desk, pen in hand. It seems to me that one might equally blame the Learned and those whose task it was to collect sayings; the learned, because they have not been communicative enough, and those whose task it was to collect sayings, because they have been neither passionate nor zealous enough to do it.”

114 Aside from presenting Johnson’s sayings as Johnsoniana, Boswell invokes the term to refer to the collections of his sources, Maxwell, Langton etc. On 25 April 1778, Boswell mentions Johnson quoting a joke about a French chambermaid trying to please her royal mistress “from one of the *Ana*” without attribution. The Journal version specifically describes the source as French, while the MS (722-3, Bonnell 234) includes a cancelled passage in which Johnson assents to a vaguely remembered pun “as I recollect on the word corps” from the *Menagiana* (a statement that had already been included at 1/409). This is inserted before Johnson goes on to assent to Burke’s classical pun. In addition to the *Menagiana*, Boswell and Johnson were both familiar with English examples of the genre, such as the Jurist John Selden’s Table Talk, as well as continental models, such as *Martin Luther’s Table Talk*, the *Scaligeriana* and so on. The genre was substantial enough throughout the century for John Cooke to release a compendium, *Selections from the French Anas* in 1797, followed by Richard Phillips’s further three-volume version in 1805.
abstract ideals of the expression themselves. Johnson was indeed committed to Boswell’s practices for a more personal reason: he was willing to see the things he said as the product of effort, and as parallel to his writings, and was pleased to find that not only were they preserved, but that they stood up to his sense of them at the time. On 10 April 1778, Boswell notes that Johnson reminded him of the previous night’s discussion, allowing a more complete record, which leads to a general reflection about the value of the speech in Boswell’s journals:

> He was much pleased with my paying so great attention to his recommendation in 1763, the beginning of our acquaintance, to keep a journal; and I could perceive he was secretly pleased to find so much of the fruit of his mind preserved; and as he had been used to imagine and say that he always laboured when he said a good thing—it delighted him, on a review, to find that his conversation teemed with point and imagery.

(2/208-9)

Boswell and Johnson vigorously engaged in a similar kind of shared reverie for the past, usually undergirded or affected by the knowledge that Boswell was preserving his records. In 1777, three years after their time together in Scotland, we find Boswell describing Johnson’s pleasure in this kind of shared recitation of memories:

> During this interview at Ashbourne, Johnson and I frequently talked with wonderful pleasure of mere trifles which had occurred in our tour to the Hebrides; for it had left a most agreeable and lasting impression upon his mind.

(2/171)

In his Journal, Boswell expands this comment: “So that the most minute circumstances of it please. I am pleased too in the same way, but not in so high a degree as he is.”115 A reason for the different levels of pleasure in recollection could be that Boswell had already experienced much of the joy Johnson felt in writing down and revising his Journal of the Tour, which stayed in his mind until its eventual publication in 1785. The dynamic is one where Johnson trusts his statements to be inconsequential and is delighted to find out that they are not, and Boswell believes them to be worthwhile, but his familiarity leads to less surprise. In this, we can see the general dynamic of forgetting and recovery upon which the ana genre depends for its aesthetic impact, and we can see

that Boswell is ever preparing for such a book, because of his determined collection of Johnsoniana. Boswell was never the only player in the genre. Even while Johnson was still alive, his sayings were published in this fashion, and Boswell, perhaps out of fear of competition, or genuine loyalty to his friend, brought it up to him and included their discussion of it in his book:

We got into a boat to cross over to Black-friars; and as we moved along the Thames, I talked to him of a little volume, which, altogether unknown to him, was advertised to be published in a few days, under the title of “Johnsonian, or Bon Mots of Dr. Johnson.” Johnson. “Sir, it is a mighty impudent thing.” Boswell. “Pray, Sir, could you have no redress if you were to prosecute a publisher for bringing out, under your name, what you never said, and ascribing to you dull stupid nonsense, or making you swear profanely, as many ignorant relatrs of your bon mots do?” Johnson. “No; Sir; there will always be some truth mixed with the falsehood, and how can it be ascertained how much is true and how much is false? Besides, Sir, what damages would a jury give me for having been represented as swearing?” Boswell. “I think, Sir, you should at least disavow such a publication, because the world and posterity might with much plausible foundation say, ‘Here is a volume which was publickly advertised and came out in Dr. Johnson’s own time, and, by his silence, was admitted by him to be genuine.” Johnson. “I shall give myself no trouble about the matter.”

(2/18-19)

The little volume, Boswell’s copy of which is in the Beinecke collection, is bound in with another collection of apophthegms from Publius Syrius, and includes the sayings of other celebrated contemporary figures.\textsuperscript{116} We can see in this the generic context of Boswell’s practices at this point of his friendship with Johnson—collecting bons-mots coming into contact with its classical precedents and topoi, but also into conflict with the wider more narrative project towards which Boswell is heading. The dispute between Boswell and Johnson animates a key element of Boswell’s conception of authenticity. Johnson is comfortable with inaccuracy as a necessary component of writing, but Boswell thinks that some of the false statements will have a bad tendency and malign his character if he is seen to tacitly endorse it. But each of the men has a different conception of what scale would be the important consideration in whether such a false book would be harmful. Johnson sees error as subsidiary to the wider project first of the book and then of each anecdote, while Boswell is most concerned by the interpolation of inaccuracies of Johnson’s manner of speaking. In not wanting

\textsuperscript{116} Beinecke 62/1304.
Johnson to go down into posterity swearing, Boswell displays his conviction that accuracy can abide in even these small details, rather than in the general tenor and reference of the anecdotes. The conflict went unresolved in the moment, and Boswell reserved for himself a final word, staking out his claim for accuracy in the smallest of details in defiance of Johnson’s lack of concern for his own reputation.

He was, perhaps, above suffering from such spurious publications; but I could not help thinking, that many men would be much injured in their reputation, by having absurd and vicious sayings imputed to them; and that redress ought in such cases to be given.

(2/19)

This particular conversation was not over, however, until Johnson was made to admit that on a wider scale, different considerations about the importance of truth-telling in narrative become necessary:

He said, “The value of every story depends on its being true. A story is a picture either of an individual or of human nature in general: if it be false, it is a picture of nothing. For instance: suppose a man should tell that Johnson, before setting out for Italy, as he had to cross the Alps, sat down to make himself wings. This many people would believe; but it would be a picture of nothing. * * * * * * (naming a worthy friend of ours,) used to think a story, a story, till I shewed him that truth was essential to it.”

(2/19)

In thus displaying that the factual accuracy of details is more important when they are connected to the elements of larger narratives, Johnson is making an argument about relevance and consequence that skirts around the central issues of Boswell’s project. The difficulty for Boswell is that errors and inaccuracies, not to mention falsehoods can make their way into a narrative on any number of scales, and the narrative must adopt different modes depending both on the nature of the material at hand, which may require additional information, perhaps spurious, and the scale of observation in the sources.

Context, Dialogue and Narration in Scenes

The problem of narrative modes is more complex than a simple opposition, but it is a useful starting point in considering the initial difficulties that Boswell encountered in writing the Life according to
his conception of composing it out of scenes. The idea of the scene was at first a neat solution to the problem of sources, because it allowed Boswell to predict that much of his material recorded in journals and personal commonplace books in the mode of the ana could make a fuller “Flemish” portrait of his friend than other sources would be able to provide, but a further complication arose in that the material preserved in his journals was often not the sort of material that contains narrative interest. This is why so much of the narrative sections of the Life are in fact disparate. Boswell presents Johnson’s gnomic utterances as if their context can provide clues for their inspiration, but this information is decidedly uninformative, often limited to the date, the location and the company. Close scrutiny of many of the days described in Boswell’s book reveals their scanty nature. What looks substantial at first glance dissolves into three unconnected statements, sometimes with a lead-in comment, and a subsequent reflection by the author,117 but often only the barest of introductions is given, noting the subject. Boswell has formulas at hand to aid in this sort of exposition: X being mentioned; Someone observed that X; The common observation that X being made; The conversation turned to ghosts. The deployment of these techniques is essentially the adoption of the apophthegmatic mode within the apparatus of the scene. But it is not all like this. There is enough conversation tracking back and forth between speakers for any book, despite the fact that the text is not uniform in this respect. Boswell, is, indeed able to paint his picture of Johnson in scenes where he spars memorably and often surprisingly with a large range of interesting people in such a way that many of his personal characteristics that would otherwise remain obscure are revealed. It is only because of narrative detail that this is possible. The central shift from the apophthegmatic to the scenic narrative mode involves making sure that Johnson’s interlocutors are important enough to justify their presence in the exchanges. Boswell’s most important consideration here is ensuring that the speech is not only something that resembles what might have been said, but that it also contains elements that can only have been said. That is, in order to make narrative scenes out of his experiences, Boswell has to include elements of language that are peculiar to speech between specific people, rather than the ultra-decontextualised speech that characterises the collection of sayings. The problem becomes one of signifying speech itself, as opposed to its abstract contents, which is what the process of Boswell’s journal-keeping lent itself to most readily. Centrally, Boswell aims to characterise Johnson and his speakers through their styles of speech, and the way in which they address each other within the codes of the politeness of urbane speech.

117 For an account of the nature of Boswell’s digressions in his own voice, see Marlies K. Danziger’s essay “Self-Restraint and Self-Display in the Authorial Comments in the Life of Johnson”. Danziger argues that while Malone saw such passages as “excrescences” that ought to be excised, they allow the book a “double focus” that provides much of its interest for later generations of readers.
Eighteenth-Century Memorabilia books and anas do not usually use speech marks. This stylistic convention bled into Boswell’s book in the several sections where he incorporates the collections of other Johnson-admirers into the text. The manuscripts he received from Joseph Warton and Bishop Percy, for instance, list sayings without speech marks, except when they are part of longer anecdotes. These addenda, incorporated into the text of the Life during specific gaps in Boswell’s chronological records, take the form of long lists, which Boswell took in with very little adaptation and can still be viewed in the Beinecke archives under Boswell’s name for such materials: “papers apart”. The final text incorporates the overlapping standards from these different textual sources awkwardly. Boswell uses quotation marks for each paragraph he incorporates, thus indicating textual quotations, but he encounters the problem that some of the sections are the unadorned words of Johnson while some incorporate narrative elements. The non-solution to this problem is to treat the embedded quotations in the anecdotes in the same manner as the quotations of speech within speech, so that throughout these sections there is no one standard for the same level of Johnson’s discourse. The approach causes considerable difficulties for the compositors, who were often unable to follow the different layers of quotation that Boswell was building, and one or two of these errors slipped in to the first edition, even though others had been weeded out. Similarly, we can find the trace of Boswell and his collaborators dealing with the difficulty of finding a method of representing conversations in the proofs for the famous first meeting. There, at what is a remarkably late stage for such an important aspect of this work, the conversations are all corrected from being presented in the running marginal style of quotation that would have them be recognised as an extended quotation of a text. The fact is that these quotations are indeed quotations of text: it is, however, intrinsically

118 Maxwell’s section (1/336-345), is entirely in narrative anecdotal format, giving consistent introductions to each statement, whereas Langton’s section (2/329-344) mixes the styles, giving thirteen of 66 anecdotes as Johnson’s direct speech. One anecdote, the second on 2/335, begins as direct speech from Johnson, but drifts off into extraneous reflection without terminating, and then provides a further embedded direct quotation from Johnson.

119 One unsuccessful fixing of problems with embedding happens at 2/202, where Johnson corrects a quip of Boswell’s about Tom Davies. Where the MS has no indication for inverted commas at all (MS 651, cf. Bonnell 177-178, where quotation marks are given) except for the capitalisation of the first word of the quoted line, the Revises give double inverted commas for both the beginning of Johnson’s speech and the line of verse, which is also indented. As is the convention for embedded quotations of this sort, the speech is closed out by a single pair of inverted commas. Boswell’s revision catches the double inverted comma on the line of verse and leaves off the termination. Perplexingly, in the second edition, the double inverted comma for the line of verse is reinstated (Life Second Edition, 3/30). Other difficulties and close escapes with embedded quotations in the Revises can be found at 2/70 (Boswell works up a dialogue out of an additional anecdote of his own where the speakers had only been separated by dashes), 2/246 (where the termination of a verse quotation with a double inverted comma is corrected to single in recognition that Johnson’s speech continues and had been unterminated), 2/243 (where Boswell adds an embedding single inverted comma to his story of how the celebrated orator Demosthenes Taylor had said only the word “Richard” one evening), 2/209 (where giving single inverted commas for someone’s supposed thoughts in a section of narrative indirect summary had led the compositor to miss where the indirect came in), and 1/472 (where a double inverted comma is erroneously added to an embedded quotation of a line of verse).
important to Boswell’s project that their textual nature, while never being denied, is always
subordinated to the claim that the text is making a quotation of the speech itself.\textsuperscript{120}

In each of these examples, Johnson is abstracted by the spotlight that Boswell places on him at the
centre of a decontextualised stage. In this, one of the inflections of Boswell’s metaphor of
preservation is made manifest. As in the botanical and anatomical sense of the word, preservation
makes the speaking Johnson visible, as in a jar of aspic, but the narrative-biological content of other
organs and fluids has been cleared away in order to better understand the specimen. What this does is
privilege moments of Johnson’s deliberate utterance over his habitual ways of being in company.
Those episodes where for instance in the depths of his depression, Johnson is mostly silent, are only
extreme and remarkable moments in which it is possible to view him not trying to be heard.\textsuperscript{121} These
are only ever accidental inclusions made as excuses for the absence of other more interesting content.
What is missing is the intermediate moments of experience where, for instance, Johnson has nothing
to say about a topic or is content to listen to others throughout. This is a privileging of specific
moments over the great insignificant mass of Johnson’s observable experience, even as Boswell is
presenting Johnson’s speech in endless oscillation between the everyday and the exceptional. That is,
Boswell often makes the claim that the insignificance or triviality of a lot of what he decides to
include is justified by the fact that it could serve to offer a complete picture of Johnson’s conversation
(if not his life), but this claim is always already forestalled by the fact that this massive exclusion of
conversation in which Johnson is present but not contributing has preceded any of Boswell’s acts of
preservation. Boswell is already making a distinction between moments that are too ordinary for the
book and ones that are potentially significant in their ordinariness. The result is that the book is
littered with moments that are paradoxically narrative enough to demonstrate the non-narratability of
Johnson’s habitude. These moments, though, only come about through Boswell’s feeling of
inadequacy about his success in particular periods of his project. The progress of his desire to collect
as much Johnsoniana as he can leads him to apologise consistently that his records are scanty and to

\textsuperscript{120} Life Page Proofs, Houghton MS Hyde 51 Case 9 (24), 1/212-213. The additional quotation marks close the paragraphs
ending “mankind” and “feeling” on 212, and add an opening for the second paragraph on 213, beginning “Derrick”, which
serves as a continuation of Johnson’s previous statement about Sheridan’s prospects in Bath, where Derrick is presiding.
\textsuperscript{121} Johnson’s silence, though a relative rarity in the text, is occasionally allowed to be present. Consider the narrative weight
of the following episodes, many of which occur on Easter Day: In Warton’s recollections, for instance, “Once, in our way
home, we viewed the ruins of the abbeys of Oseney and Rewley, near Oxford. After at least half an hour’s silence, Johnson
said, ‘I view them with indignation!’” (1/148); “we sat a long while together in a serene undisturbed frame of mind,
sometimes in silence, sometimes conversing, as we felt inclined, or more properly speaking, as he was inclined” (1/483);
“He was very silent this evening; and read in a great variety of books; suddenly throwing down one, and taking up another.”
(2/196); “He was at first in a very silent mood. Before dinner he said nothing but ‘Pretty baby,’ to one of the children.”
(2/220); “He was uncommonly silent; and I have not written down any thing, except a single curious fact, which, having the
sanction of his inflexible veracity, may be received as a striking instance of human insensibility and inconsideration. As he
was passing by a fishmonger who was skinning an eel alive, he heard him ‘curse it, because it would not lye still.’” (2/285).
lament what might have been. We can see here a tension between the view of recording as an action in the past that has resulted in something that can be consulted, and an action he is performing in the present time of the narration, where he is managing the expectations of the reader, or wanting to make a particular public statement, usually about some other person who was involved. Each of these has a sense of the register, but one is Boswell’s private world and the other is the public work he has set about creating.

Presentation as dialogue allows for more rounded scenes, a sense of movement and connection between statements, and allows for the economical narration of otherwise dull transactions. The implication is greater than the reality, though, as many of the condensed paragraphs in which multiple people are made to speak are no more cohesive than the disparate lists of apophthegms to which Boswell has recourse when he has less narrative detail to represent. Dialogue has a very separate history from the ana, and is less concerned with the transmission of actual facts than it is with the establishment of the illusion of reality during the presentation of abstract arguments. It is obvious that the form of the dialogue suits Boswell’s purposes in setting down Johnson’s at times extensive arguments and occasionally extended debates with specific individuals and groups, but it is less necessary for the dissemination of the particular biographical facts than would appear from the graphical importance it is accorded. The specific typographical decisions that result in the book presenting large swathes of the text with the capitalised names of the speakers followed by double quotation marks, rather than maintaining a consistent narrative voice, allow Boswell to absent himself as narrator from the scene, even though he is both a participant and the principal observer. By adopting the form of dialogue as a way of not narrating, Boswell follows a pattern he established very early in his career as a diarist. As early as the time he spent in London in 1763, Boswell made separate records of abstracted conversations he had in coffee-houses and similar locations, self-consciously describing them with titles such as the recurrent “Dialogue at Child’s”. This practice carried over into his records of Johnson’s conversation, in particular after he had, as he says, become impregnated with the Johnsonian aether.122

122 Even so, Boswell’s dialogues fall into subtly different forms. The early dialogues, especially the “Dialogue at Child’s” take new lines for speeches, for instance, while as late as 1786 in the Tour, Boswell has not settled on his final version of speech headings in small caps, and instead puts speech headings in italics. Erik Bond argues that Boswell’s practice in his Journal is deeply connected to a style of humorous dialogue associated with Steele and Addison, citing the Spectator as his conscious model in the Dialogues and Scenes at Child’s, and Addison’s travel writings as constantly in mind over the course of his Tour. See “Bringing Up Boswell: Drama, Criticism and the Journals”, 159-61. Joan H. Pittock makes a similar argument about the development of Boswell’s critical faculties through the adoption of a dialogic mode as in his texts from Child’s. See “Boswell as Critic”, 81-2.
Once an adept at putting down Johnson’s peculiar speech, Boswell was most comfortable in setting it down in extended passages as truncated dialogue, rather than fully realised narrative, except for moments when he wished to specifically describe an action, or animadvert about a particular topic. Many of these animadversions make it into the final version of the *Life*, and invite further miscellaneous reflections that were written at the time of the composition of the manuscript. Dialogue is, then, a middle ground in terms of scale between fully realised and narrated scenes and the bare content of the ana. As a middle-ground, it is necessarily hybrid and partakes of both the object and the event model of speech. As I describe in the chapter on parenthesis below, Boswell’s narrative interventions on this scale, in which he is never quite content to let the supposed transcript not take the form of a narrative, constitute an innovative and surprisingly heavy-handed form of narrative.

**Extended Scenes**

Fully realised scenes, that is, mini-narratives with their own internal logic of cause and effect, and failing that, event and repercussion, are actually relatively rare in the *Life*. My analysis suggests that when such scenes do appear, they partake in the mode of historical writing, specifically that of chronicle history, in which speech and its authenticity is different again in its conventions. Speech in chronicle history is sparser than in dialogue, but its effects are much greater. The principle for direct speech in historical narrative is that it is consequential: either through deriving narrative and worldly effects from its being the instrument of divine and sovereign power, or through partaking in ambiguities in which the words themselves matter as a part of the interpretation of singularities. It is therefore unsurprising that this mode, which is what Boswell aspires to, is actually little practised in his book. Fully-fledged consequential scenes are rare in the *Life* because of the nature of Boswell’s methods. Since the aesthetic and indeed biographical value of his book is primarily derived from its large sections where it takes the from of an eye-witness memoir, however cleverly disguised it may be, Boswell would have had to have been present at momentous events in Johnson’s life in order to

123 Howard D. Weinbrot argues that the encounter of a writer with a king is its own distinct genre, through which Johnson’s capability in conversation shines in contrast from the pack “in which other men and women of letters find themselves incapable of honest discourse or proper emotional response during a royal visit.” “Meeting the Monarch: Johnson, Boswell and the Anatomy of a Genre”, 144-5. In considering sovereign speech more widely, it may be possible to find a more textual and less personal context for Boswell’s idea of how speech should be constituted in this episode. For some of the generic features of chronicle history, see Hayden White, *Metahistory*, 6-7. On the other end of the spectrum of textual seriousness, Margaret Spufford notes that the speech of kings such as Henry VIII and Henry II itself formed a distinct category of jest-book where the king is “an unpredictable, jolly monarch, given to wandering in disguise”. This is a genre where sovereign speech is marked out not for its real effects but rather its potential power when it has suffered the ironic transformation into low life. Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories*, 222-3.
represent them with the fullness of detail that historical writing of this sort requires. The alternative is the reconstruction of scenes from multiple sources, but the vast majority of events in Johnson’s life are either not presented in their minute particulars, or sourced from conversation with Johnson himself, where they are not extensively drawn. There are two major exceptions to this generalisation. Boswell worked hard to get as much information as he could about Johnson’s death, which despite his declaration that he would not go into much detail about it, brings together several reputable sources, including his brother David, who acts as a proxy, to advance the progress of Johnson’s final days. The other is Johnson’s celebrated encounter with George III.

Johnson’s Conversation with the King is thus a practically unique episode in which Boswell presents an extended (six-page) narration of specific events centred on a conversation where he was not present and participating. The conversation occurred on an undisclosed date in 1767, and takes up the majority of the space given to that year, which was the year after Boswell had returned to Britain after his time on the continent, and was concentrating on the establishment of his legal career in Edinburgh. Since it comes in this gap, it is an event of which Boswell was aware at the time and we can assume that he felt the sort of regret at not being a part of the commotion over the meeting that he would later feel at his absence from London during the period of his friend’s death, as opposed to the kind of jolly interest he took in events from Johnson’s life before the two had met. This is an important point because it impacts upon the kind of narration that Boswell is able to give. It is instructive to contrast this approach to research and narration here with that undertaken for earlier incidents, in particular the other “gem”: the Chesterfield letter. Boswell’s efforts in securing a copy of the letter in which Johnson’s frustration with Lord Chesterfield’s less than active support of the Dictionary becomes a clarion call against patronage in general extended over decades. Boswell first records discussing the letter and the events surrounding it in 1773, and during the biographical discussions in Ashbourne in 1777 repeatedly asked for, and was promised an authentic text from Johnson, though this was deferred until Boswell took it as dictation in 1781.124 The conversation with the King, though, existed within the social world that Boswell had begun to construct for himself in 1763, and his approach to gathering information about the exchange was much less reliant on rumour.

124 The first discussion was on 2/4/1773, Defence, 176. Boswell’s notes treat it as an important reminder that public beliefs can easily become misguided about celebrated events. The Ashbourne discussion was on 23/9/1777: “He would not do it tonight, nor would he when asked either once or twice by me during this interview; but he gave me hopes that he would send me it.” Extremes, 183. It was not until 25/5/1781 that he received another promise: “HE. ‘You shall have it. You shall make one copy for self, one for me.” Laird, 362. The actual date of the dictation is unrecorded. Boswell eventually received a more authentic earlier transcription taken down by Baretti on 12/7/1785, AJ, 322.
and begging than the Chesterfield letter. Boswell managed to find five separate sources for his account, which he relates in an extended footnote on 1/292. The circumstances of these sources are discussed thoroughly in an article by F. P. Taylor, the main point of which is that Boswell’s principal debt is to the so-called Caldwell minute of the conversation, an account copied from a nearly contemporaneous record made by Johnson himself, and subsequently endorsed by the other participant in the conversation, the King himself. Both these markers of authenticity—the assent of the King and the actual authorship of Johnson himself should be enough to convince Boswell of the documentary value of the minute itself—but through his other research he had additional information that did not allow him to simply reproduce the minute in the manner of the many documents included in the text. Boswell instead incorporates information from Langton, the librarian Barnard, the printer Strahan, and Johnson himself into his own narrative of these events, and in doing so makes one of the Life’s only attempts at extended historical narration of a conversation in the form of a scene.

Taylor compares Boswell’s final text with the text of the minute and notes that Boswell’s alterations are very small, but that he does remove a small section after the arrival of the King in the library where the King turns to Johnson only after “having talked for some time to other persons in the Library”. This takes away extra witnesses in the form of the other library users, meaning that not only is there less possibility for more corroboration, but that the conversation in Boswell’s version of it is an exclusive and private affair. The second point is that Boswell makes sure that the machinations for the King to surprise Johnson while he is working are respectful rather than potentially contemptuous, even though Johnson is not warned that the episode is about to happen, and the King has directed Barnard to make him aware of Johnson’s presence in the Library whenever it happened next. The narration of the discussion follows the Caldwell minute’s version. It is important to pause to consider the significance of Johnson thus thinking that the dialogue was important enough to record for his own purposes despite his never succeeding at keeping a diary, and how this intersects

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125 See John J. Burke Jr., “The Originality of Boswell’s Version of Johnson’s Quarrel with Lord Chesterfield” for a considered account of how we can find Boswell’s self-vaulted assiduity in making the life by comparing his commitment to the authenticity of the text and the coherence of his narrative. Although Boswell had Johnson dictate a version of the letter in 1781, he eagerly sought out the more contemporary Baretti version when he heard of its existence. Burke notes that none of the previous versions of the quarrel seem to care about the cohesiveness and potential readings of Johnson’s motivations, whereas Boswell is very careful.

126 See F. P. Taylor, “Johnsoniana from the Bagshawe Muniments in the John Rylands Library: Sir James Caldwell, Dr Hawkesworth, Dr. Johnson, and Boswell’s use of the ‘Caldwell Minute’”. Alvin Kernan discusses the relationship between the Caldwell Minute and Boswell’s version of the conversation as highly important to the tenor of Boswell’s account of Johnson: “The changes were slight, but in the end what was according to the Minute a fairly ordinary morning in the royal household became one of the great symbolic scenes of literary history in which control of writing passed from kings to writers.” Samuel Johnson and the Impact of Print, 46.

127 F. P. Taylor, “Johnsoniana from the Bagshawe Muniments in the John Rylands Library: Sir James Caldwell, Dr Hawkesworth, Dr. Johnson, and Boswell’s use of the ‘Caldwell Minute’”, 239.
with Boswell’s own practices of record-keeping. The conversation from the Caldwell minute is already in the third person, and entirely indirect, despite two awkward transitions, where Johnson refers to Oxford as “we”: “at the same time he added that he hoped whether we had more books or not, that we should make better use of them than they did. He was then asked whether All Souls or Christ Church Library were the larger to which he replied that All Souls Library was the largest we had, except the Bodleian, Aye, said the K. that is the Publick Library.” Boswell seizes the opportunity to work up direct dialogue out of what is implied in the minute, taking the barely suppressed hints of the “we”-s and the King’s “Ay, that is…” into the zone defined by quotation marks. On one of these occasions he makes the lead-up direct, too, in order for it to cohere narratively. This is although it is not entirely necessary from the perspective of the relationship between the individual statements that they both be presented as direct speech.

Where Boswell adds information from his four other sources (actually three after he has discarded additional information he cannot confirm from Strahan’s letter in favour of the same moment as it is reported in the Caldwell minute), he includes the information in a narratively complex and interesting way, adding impetus to the scene by telescoping forward to the points when Johnson would recount the story to his friends, including Langton the witness, when they are later gathered at Sir Joshua Reynolds’s house. Both of these interventions mess with the chronological setting-out of the conversation in the Caldwell minute, but set up a series of displacements in the telling of the conversation that increase the sense of its inherent interest, since they dramatise the eagerness of Johnson’s friends to hear about the conversation. This extends even to the implication that the group gathered to hear it at Sir Joshua Reynolds’s house have had foreknowledge of the encounter, and have been waiting to see how it has gone, despite the fact that this is impossible, since Johnson himself did not know in advance that the encounter would happen. There is no conversation inaugurating the narration of the encounter with the King, no sense of Johnson’s handling of his dignity and that of the juncture of the narrative, only assembled crowds, waiting to hear. This brings into question the chronological relationship between the different sources. Did Johnson tell his friends at these various recitals close to the event, and close to each other? And at what point did he write down the conversation, before giving reflections that he chose to include in addition to his personal account of the occasion; or after having rehearsed and tried the most successful and dignified matter to be put down?

128 F. P. Taylor, “Johnsoniana from the Bagshawe Muniments in the John Rylands Library: Sir James Caldwell, Dr Hawkesworth, Dr. Johnson, and Boswell’s use of the ‘Caldwell Minute’”, 236.
The telescoping of the events of telling also greatly increases the amount of direct speech in Boswell’s account. This is because it allows Boswell, in effect, to have Johnson give two sections in his own indirect discourse, directly, and to seamlessly arrive at those parts of his material that have Johnson reflecting out loud about the experience, first to Barnard the librarian, then to his friends at the later undisclosed times. But we must consider why Boswell does not simply work the whole conversation up into direct speech as he did with the two or three lines where the Caldwell minute accidentally includes surpluses of the real. It will be observed that Boswell is exceptionally more faithful to his source material here than he is to his records in the rest of the Life. He is very free with his own journals as sources, and quick to switch between modes of speech as well as to alter word use if the conversation comes from his own records. The answer could lie in the preauthorisation of one key participant—the King, but it is more likely out of deference to Johnson’s authority in the origin story of the Caldwell minute itself. The conversation cannot be made more direct than the suggestions Boswell finds in the “Ah” and the “we” because of his desire to preserve Johnson’s text as far as possible, even though he is adding other information from other sources. But this is not to say that there is a single moment of working into direct speech that is Boswell’s sole responsibility either. The draft manuscript omits quotation marks, as is relatively common in Boswell’s manuscripts, and the typographical apparatus for direct speech is only a result of the words being set as print. All of these considerations show us a Boswell who is eager to stage-manage this isolated conversation, one he suspected would stand alone as a special attraction of his book,129 but which presented special challenges as a result of his not having been an eyewitness.

But we can trace another, psychological, history of Boswell’s attitude to the historical nature of the information in the book through the parallels between Johnson’s encounter with George III, and with Boswell’s own meetings with his Sovereign himself. Not only does Boswell set Johnson up as a rival to George, someone who is a sovereign in his own field and able to talk usefully and informatively with the King, Boswell presents a parallel between himself and the King that shows him in a very favourable light in his own interactions with Johnson. Boswell and George were born only two years apart, and so the generational interaction between Johnson and the King is roughly equivalent to the interaction between Johnson and Boswell which in the Life has only recently been inaugurated. While George does much better than Boswell in the initial meeting, avoiding direct abuse as Boswell has to suffer, the subjects he brings up are much less varied and interesting than Boswell’s own interventions in the conversation. He asks for facts and gives no opinions, while Boswell is sure

129 Boswell also had the conversation printed separately in advance of the publication of the whole work, as “A conversation between His most sacred Majesty George III. and Samuel Johnson, LL.D. Illustrated with observations, by James Boswell, Esq” (1790).
enough of himself to enter into the conversational lists with Johnson early on. This rivalry opens us up to the actual interactions between Boswell and the King, which parallel the conversation presented in the *Life*, and can show us how Boswell is here exercising a surprising level of narrative restraint. After Boswell decided to move to London and try his fortune at the London bar in 1786, he increased his attendance at the Court of St James and had numerous, though often stultifying conversations with George III, who usually remembered who he was, and enquired specifically about the progress, first of his book *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (during the publication of which Boswell made sure to get the King’s assent on the particular words he used to refer to the Pretender, the King’s response being, basically, that since the Hanovers won it did not matter) and then of the *Life* itself.130 This mirrors the interest George takes in the conversation with Johnson about possible future works, including the literary biography of the country, which as Alvin Kernan argues, marks a key point in the history of patronage in English literature, as Johnson refuses, effectively, to take up the project until it was offered him as a commission from actual paying publishers.131 George’s interest in the *Life* is a mark of distinction for Boswell, and he is restrained in not mentioning it in this section apart from in the footnote describing the sources for the account, and the provenance of the Caldwell minute. But more importantly, Boswell is restrained in not including information about his personal acquaintance with the King and his rival claim to interest in his literary works because it allows him to present the episode entirely from the perspective of his biographical subject and his immediate friends. Johnson’s encounter with the King is therefore an episode in which Boswell is taking care to imagine the specific social assumptions and milieus of his subject, whose horizons were in many ways much more limited than his own. His imagining of the particular honour done by George’s finding Johnson out is augmented by the precise attention he pays to the conversation and the privacy he lends it by excluding the other library patrons. In treating the conversation as an exclusive affair, and noting the specific elements of Johnson’s unlikeliness in front of his sovereign, Boswell brings his work into a realm of sympathy and focalisation that it scarcely otherwise inhabits. This displays a certain amount of historicising thinking about Johnson on his own terms and in his own social world

130 Boswell records his own meetings with the King at levees over a number of years: three occurred while Johnson was still alive: 15/5/1781, *Laird*, 355-6; 27/5/1781, *Laird*, 363; 30/5/1781, *Laird*, 365. After Johnson’s death there were even more, 20/5/1785, *AJ*, 293; 15/6/1785, *AJ*, 310; 24/6/1785, *AJ*, 313; 21/9/1785, *AJ*, 342; 11/5/1787, *Experiment*, 134; 18/4/1788, *Experiment*, 212; 23/4/1788, *Experiment*, 216. See Adam Sisman, *Boswell’s Presumptuous Task*, 99-102, 96, for a narrative summary of these encounters. The King was courteous enough to always remember Boswell’s name and his nationality, and sometimes engaged him on the progress of the two books about Johnson. A copy of the letter Boswell sent in order to gain the King’s assent to his working about the Pretender in the *Tour* is preserved at the Beinecke Library as L 580, 3/105. Boswell eventually heard from Bennet Langton in conversation about the last of these encounters that the King had been annoyed at the questioning about the Pretender, saying he did not care.

131 See Alvin B. Kernan, *Samuel Johnson and the Impact of Print*, 26-7, for an account of the import of this particular moment, and following for Johnson’s emblematic role in this shift in dynamics between publishers and patrons, which, Kernan argues, is the central part of Boswell’s myth of Johnson.
that is often missing when Boswell relies on his own journals for his accounts, where the overlapping of acquaintances between Boswell’s world and Johnson’s is presented as taken for granted, and Boswell’s greater social reach is downplayed because of the illustriousness of the meritocratic company.

If this separate conversation marks, as I argue, a practically unique instance of Boswell thinking historically while using direct speech in the *Life*, the idea of such a project being extended is not entirely new to him either. During his time in the Hebrides with Johnson, Boswell went out of his way to record an extended oral history of the movements of the Pretender after his defeat at the battle of Culloden. He took the story down from the lips of Flora MacDonald, and the resulting hybrid of first-hand eyewitness account and Boswell’s third person rendering of it are presented as an appendix to his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*. This is an instructive point. The account stands alone as a curious appendix because it is too large and unwieldy to fit in the structure of the book which devotes only a few pages at most to each day. Overburdening this structure with a digressive self-contained narrative about events twenty-seven years anterior to their narration would be too much of an imposition on the reader, but the tale is so germane to Boswell’s interests and curious purposes in publishing his book, that he cannot also pass up the opportunity to regale his readers with it outside the constraints of the chronological order he placed on the narration of the Journey. The simple telling of the flight of the Pretender was not, however, the full extent of this project, which was serious enough in Boswell’s mind to have made it into the *Life* in a conversation on the way to Derby on 19 September 1777:

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I observed, that we were this day to stop just where the Highland army did in 1745. Johnson. “It was a noble attempt.” Boswell. “I wish we could have an authentick history of it.” Johnson. “If you were not an idle dog you might write it, by collecting from every body what they can tell, and putting down your authorities.” Boswell. “But I could not have the advantage of it in my life-time.” Johnson. “You might have the satisfaction of its fame, by printing it in Holland; and as to profit, consider how long it was before writing came to be considered in a pecuniary view. Baretti says, he is the first man that ever received copy-money in Italy.” I said, that I would endeavour to do what Dr. Johnson suggested; and I thought that I might write so as to venture to publish my “History of the Civil War in Great-Britain in 1745 and 1746,” without being obliged to go to a foreign press?.
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Boswell’s desire for an authentic history of the uprising is taken up by Johnson as a feasible project, and he suggests what is essentially a first-generation oral history, collecting what can be told and identifying sources. As Boswell has already taken down his account from Flora MacDonald at this stage, the suggestion and Boswell’s undertaking to follow it up constitutes a reminder on both sides of the earlier-discussed project. The fact is that Boswell did not in fact ever follow through on the project, despite Johnson’s assurance (uncharacteristic as it is) that profit is not a necessary motive for a book. By the time of his death in 1795, Boswell had squandered the opportunity of meeting eyewitnesses and participants in their lifetimes. The compensation is conversations like this in the Life, where Boswell and Johnson give a sense of the real possibilities of narration within specific times and spaces. Additionally, of course, we have the sense of self-congratulatory importance that such conversations lend the Life: all the assurances that the details of the conversations were written down as soon as possible and even all the apologies and laments for conversations left unrecorded and unrecollected add up to a guarantee of the book’s worth as authentic history. That is, all these gestures point to Boswell’s claim that speech and narrative can somehow join together to create a more authentic style of biography, even in episodes such as the conversation with the King where Boswell’s absence from the scene means that the project is less likely to be successful on that level. The basis of such authenticity lies not only in the guarantee of the eyewitness, nor in the layered guarantee of the report of a conversation with the eyewitness, but on the differing demands of scales of observation. The success to be met with in the fusion of speech as a fact and speech as a record of an event lies in the different modes of narrative to which it can be assigned and that each of these has different demands of authenticity. In making speech the centrepiece of his biography, Boswell commits himself to the fusion of discrete forms of representation all made to serve the end of producing his “Flemish portrait”, an undertaking which depends on attention to multiple forms of detail as much as it does to the larger image that these details together make up.
Chapter Two: Narratives out of Quotation

Boswell’s special challenge in the biography is in ensuring that the details of the “Flemish portrait” can be significant. At its base, this is a question of scale, and is exacerbated by the lack of action that can be found in a literary life—one that readers might suspect to include much less in the way of action and narratable details than the life of a soldier or statesperson, for instance. This is a subject of discussion in the book itself, in a conversation on 20 April 1781:

In the evening we had a large company in the drawing-room, several ladies, the Bishop of Killaloe, D. Percy, Mr. Chamberlayne, of the Treasury, &c. &c. Somebody said the life of a mere literary man could not be very entertaining. Johnson. “But it certainly may. This is a remark which has been made, and repeated, without justice; why should the life of a literary man be less entertaining than the life of any other man? Are there not as interesting varieties in such a life? As a literary life it may be very entertaining.” Boswell. “But it must be better surely, when it is diversified with a little active variety—such as his having gone to Jamaica;—or—his having gone to the Hebrides.” Johnson was not displeased at this.

Leaving aside the knowing glance about the Hebrides at the end—and the fact that Boswell’s own life-course would lead him to publish his account of the Hebrides trip in a separate volume from his literary life of Johnson—Boswell’s book contains enough moments of travel and excursions and unexpected guests that Johnson can be seen doing unexpected and strange things: he is shown not just kicking large stones, but talking publicly of his finances in a stagecoach, trying to dislodge the corpse of a cat from an ornamental waterfall, buying buckles, and hurrying into rooms at great houses to look into the advertising catalogues at the back of rare books.\(^\text{132}\) Importantly a lot of this material is simply bizarre: it is more curious than material Boswell could glean from a simple focus on worthy and memorable speech. But these moments also exist at the edges of Boswell’s most important role in the process of making the book, which is as a mediator and initiator of much of what happens.

Where the previous chapter has laid out a scheme of different scales of narration based on the different imperatives that Boswell encountered in his sources, this second chapter investigates the

\(^{132}\) These incidents can be found as follows: 1/257 (the rock); 2/495-6 (the coach); 2/167 (the cat); 2/247 (the buckle); 1/487 (the books).
often accidental and contingent results of Boswell’s methods. Boswell provides continuity across the wider timescale of the book through staging scenes and natural though unintentional moments of connection through conversational analepsis. He thereby creates the kind of connections that Paul Ricouer claims as the basis of narrative: events are “grasped together” through the assertion of any sort of a relationship in a situation that is analogous to the workings of metaphor. In seeking out moments of Boswell’s deliberate manipulation of situations, as well as his construction of events, the chapter looks to explain his modes of narration when he is most visibly thinking of the episodes in his journals as scenes, and asks what specific stylistic impacts this has on his practice of direct discourse. The chapter then turns to wider continuities in the narrative of Johnson’s life—deliberate and otherwise, to ask how Johnson’s conversation is bound up in dynamics of repetition and embedded quotation, how these continuities contribute to the sense of time existing on multiple scales in the work, as well as how Boswell deals with multiple layers of quotation. These challenges allow us to construct a reading of Boswell’s idea of quotation that can serve as the basis for a more detailed investigation of his particular techniques and modalities of direct speech.

Boswell the Manipulator: Constructing Situations and Crafting Moments

Throughout his relation of his friendship with Johnson, Boswell constructs situations. Sometimes this means making narratable events through putting Johnson in a new place on a journey, or taking him to an old haunt like Oxford or Lichfield. At other times it means putting Johnson in contact with new people and seeing his reaction. This happens famously with John Wilkes, but also with Mrs. Knowles the “ingenious Quaker lady”, and with the poet Young’s son. In many of these orchestrated encounters, Boswell dwells upon the construction of the situation and his sentimental perspective of it as much as the content. This is especially the case in the initially rebuffed attempt to connect Johnson with Lord Marchmont to aid in the research for his life of Alexander Pope. But Boswell acts this way even when he cannot put Johnson in the company of a person who he thinks would make interesting copy. He asks difficult questions and says outré things, simply to provoke him. Boswell often gives his rationales for asking questions and in these we can see his aims of alternatively provoking responses and getting genuine and factual answers to his questions. He repeats himself. Boswell creates conversations that would otherwise not exist, by acting as an unsolicited messenger, that is, a nodal point in unseen networks between Johnson and others such as Voltaire and Hume with whom

133 See Paul Ricouer, Time and Narrative, 1/ix-x for the analogy.
Boswell was also acquainted. These analogue communications depend on Boswell, and crucially provoke some of the most interesting statements in the book. What is important in considering them is that they are both informational and narrative: they seek data, but they also work in dialogic fashion, where Boswell is able to construct a story about something that would not otherwise have happened.

Boswell transitions into a different mode of narration when he knows he has a specific story to tell and wants to be very careful about the way he tells it. When his material allows, he moves beyond the simple narration of Johnson’s sayings presented as things, and moves into a mode where the words are events. There are two kinds of these stories, ones where he has been present and something consequential occurs, and ones where he actively creates a situation for Johnson to react to, so he can have something interesting for his Journal and the book. Stories of the first kind are usually arguments, where Boswell wants to do justice to both sides. At times, Johnson actually has bad manners: once, for example, in a fight between Johnson and Dr Percy, which only ends because Boswell makes a plan to let it be known that Johnson has written a letter of praise about Percy. There are, too, encounters and accidental meetings in the street with figures such as Edwards, his old school friend with whom he goes on to have a long conversation, which Boswell takes care to make sympathetic and interesting, even though the series of exchanges itself is relatively awkward.

Boswell introduces the contretemps with Percy decorously, marking it out as a singular event and giving a reason for its inclusion and its necessary interpretation, giving it an introduction, much in the same way that the conversation with the King is marked out:

And here I shall record a scene of too much heat between Dr. Johnson and Dr. Percy, which I should have suppressed, were it not that it gave occasion to display the truly tender and benevolent heart of Johnson, who as soon as he found a friend was at all hurt by any thing which he had “said in his wrath,” was not only prompt and desirous to be reconciled, but exerted himself to make ample reparation.

Boswell further acts to seal off this episode as a singular event by giving the full exchange of letters by which Boswell works to restore both the friendship and Percy’s reputation as a set of connected correspondence out of the chronological order of their composition. The narrative flow of the text
resumes after the third letter at 13 April. By framing the dispute this way, as an excused “scene of too much heat” (the first draft called it an “altercation”), Boswell both manages to turn Johnson’s unreasonably bad behaviour into a point about his subsequent goodness, and to elevate the scene into a more fully realised form of writing, where actions and statements have consequences, and even after the personal reconciliation between the two men, Percy has to admit his unease at the damage to his reputation and seeks out Boswell’s assistance in restoring it.

Boswell’s approach to the encounter with Edwards, which happened only five days later, is similar, giving a self-conscious narrative introduction to the scene, and augmenting its importance:

> And now I am to give a pretty full account of one of the most curious incidents in Johnson’s life, of which he himself has made the following minute on this day: “In my return from church, I was accosted by Edwards, an old fellow-collegian, who had not seen me since 1729. He knew me, and asked if I remembered one Edwards; I did not at first recollect the name, but gradually as we walked along, recovered it, and told him a conversation that had passed at an alehouse between us. My purpose is to continue our acquaintance.”

The conversation, and the reflections it generates, framed in this manner with Johnson’s retrospective account of it presented proleptically, extends across five full pages of the first edition. Boswell is very careful in the narration of it, using the opportunity of reflection afforded by such an encounter with a long-lost acquaintance as the starting point for an extended discussion of the course of Johnson’s life, and other opportunities he might have taken up. The tone of the scene is wistful, with Boswell siding with Edwards in the view that old men should reflect on their lives, against Johnson’s resistance to think of himself as old at all. Boswell’s interest in these two adventitious events is perhaps more than they merit, but it shows his desire to engage in more fully-realised and cohesive narrative. It matters less that Johnson’s encounter with an old friend after fifty years might be the most curious experience in his life, strange though it might be, than the particular use of it that can be made by his biographer, who is present at surprisingly few such scenes where something of genuine narrative interest on this scale occurs to Johnson himself. The same consideration applies to the altercation with Percy, which as a scene with continued repercussions and linkages between moments allows Boswell to shape the

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134 The letters are as follows: Johnson to Boswell, 12/4/1778; Boswell to Johnson 23/4/1778; Boswell to Percy 25/4/1778.
135 MS 673 verso, Bonnell, 193.
atmosphere much more than the barely connected strings of exchanges that generally characterise the dialogue in the book.

The second kind of scene, where Boswell actively manipulates Johnson into a noteworthy situation as if to see what will happen, occurs only occasionally, and it is Boswell’s imagination that drives such scenes forward. They can involve Boswell putting Johnson in a strange place, one where he might look out of place, such as the temporary museum built in Vauxhall Gardens called the Pantheon in 1772 (1/366-7), or one where he might ask pertinent questions. During the trip to Lichfield, Boswell goes so far as to devote a paragraph to lamenting that Johnson has decided not to come with him to see Bolton’s ironworks: “I wish that Johnson had been with us; for it was a scene which I should have been glad to contemplate by his light. The vastness and the contrivance of some of the machinery would have ‘matched his mighty mind.’” (2/23-4) Usually, as in the case of his absence from the iron works these are driven by Boswell’s visual imagination, as he wants to get an image of Johnson doing memorable things or of Johnson in a vista in which admirable thoughts might be generated. Sometimes he is less successful at managing the situation in order to make a memorable scene. When travelling with Johnson in 1781, he devotes a whole page to how he manages to get Johnson to have a meeting with the son of Dr Young, the author of Boswell’s perennial favourite Night Thoughts, and one of the poets Johnson wrote about in his Lives of the Poets: “We stopped at Welwyn, where I wished much to see, in company with Dr. Johnson, the residence of the author of the ‘Night Thoughts’” (2/400). The episode of the visit is devoid of any real interest other than the spectacle of being in the company of Johnson (2/400-2). Johnson asks questions, and views the poet’s house but the whole episode is understandably undramatic, even though Boswell has excluded some of the drearier moments from his Journal account: “Mr. Young was bluntly silent”. It is only in Boswell’s imagination that the encounter is interesting: “‘I should have liked to have seen Dr. Johnson and your father together.’ ‘Ay!’ said Young with some appearance of emotion.” In another failure, Boswell admits to Johnson that he had wanted to see the spectacle of Johnson and the celebrated blue-stocking Mrs. Macaulay arguing, and understandably, Johnson is upset:

136 William H. Epstein discusses the scene in Recognizing Biography, noting that Boswell’s deployment of Johnson’s absence from the scene allows him to forge an equivalence between Johnson’s powers of mind and the forces of the industrial revolution that effectively turns Boswell himself into the “iron chieftain”, 91-2.
137 Allan Ingram, Boswell’s Creative Gloom, 9: “Boswell uses imagery to project himself onto the world, but he also uses it to look inwards and attempt to achieve a greater understanding of himself. Or, rather, he tries to define what he feels within by wrapping it up in a suitable image and presenting it in pictorial form”. Ingram notes that in the Tour Boswell is much more dependent on this sort of scenic imagining of Johnson in unlikely locales (160); the logic that Ingram outlines applies equally to the scenic and socially unlikely situations in which Boswell sees Johnson in the Life. See also William P. Yarrow, “‘Casts a Kind of Glory Round It’: Metaphor and the Life of Johnson”, for the view that Boswell’s commitment to visual imagery often works as a substitute for action in the conversations, leading into the establishment of a prevailing metaphor of conversation itself as life.
138 Journal, 2/6/1781. Laird 370-3; Beinecke 45/1008, 79-89.
Boswell’s cloying sophistry notwithstanding, the desire to see Johnson—triumphing or otherwise—in different contrasts to other speakers is strong. The most famous of these scenes is the meeting with John Wilkes, whom Johnson was violently against. Boswell works hard to arrange the meeting as a test of Johnson’s previous statement that he can have a good time and be polite with anyone (2/81), so he finds the most extreme test case he can. Johnson passes the test, because the two figures bond over the fun they can make of Boswell. As in those scenes in which Boswell’s moment of narrative interest comes about serendipitously, Boswell is extremely careful in his narration of specifics:

On Monday, September 22, when at breakfast, I unguardedly said to Dr. Johnson, “I wish I saw you and Mrs. Macaulay together.” He grew very angry; and, after a pause, while a cloud gathered on his brow, he burst out, “No, Sir; you would not see us quarrel, to make you sport. Don’t you know that it is very uncivil to pit two people against one another?” Then, checking himself, and wishing to be more gentle, he added, “I do not say you should be hanged or drowned for this; but it is very uncivil.” Dr. Taylor thought him in the wrong, and spoke to him privately of it; but I afterwards acknowledged to Johnson that I was to blame, for I candidly owned, that I meant to express a desire to see a contest between Mrs. Macaulay and him; but then I knew how the contest would end; so that I was to see him triumph.

Again, we have the invocation of curiosity, and the framing of the incident with an interpretation before any of the content is presented. As Boswell expands the scene, he engages in an ironic overture in which, having fixed the date of a dinner at Dilly’s without mentioning, Johnson has seemingly forgot the engagement and Boswell has to coax him into going at all, and he rather overemphasises his reminder to Johnson about his previous statement. By the time that he has all the figures together

I am now to record a very curious incident in Dr. Johnson’s Life, which fell under my own observation; of which pars magna fui, and which I am persuaded will, with the liberal-minded, be much to his credit.

(2/80)

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139 Sven Eric Molin offers a formalistic reading of the scene arguing it should be read as coherent and self-contained example of the Eighteenth-Century “High comedy of manners”, and both Boswell’s manipulation of time and events and his presentation of a very specific type of speech “coalesce into a perfect unity and perfect revelation... of Johnson’s character and of Eighteenth-Century society”, “Boswell’s Account of the Johnson-Wilkes Meeting”, 307. Molin’s analysis is useful in seeing how the change in mode changes Boswell’s imperatives in perceiving, recording and constructing certain moments of the encounter, but he does not pay any attention to the particularities of the speech.
at the dinner, he has expended three pages of text, and we are thoroughly primed for the interaction between Johnson and Wilkes at the dinner table.

Scenes such as these constitute a different genre of Boswell’s storytelling, and they allow him slightly different methods of representing speech on account of the visual impact of the juxtapositions is more important than the factual impact of the speech, which is presented more impressionistically than the other parts of the book, even though Boswell’s methods are the same as when he tries to get Johnson to answer his wide variety of questions on a smaller scale in their many meetings, it produces a different set of practices because of the different scale.

These set pieces are also the site of Boswell acting with considerably more freedom with regards to the style of his writing. Set pieces, such as the Wilkes encounter are not only stage-managed at their inception. Throughout, the writing and especially the accommodation of direct speech, is more spirited and more flexible in its use of punctuation for effects. Take, for example, the pleasure Boswell takes in narrating the moments after Johnson and Wilkes are made to sit down to dinner together:

Mr. Wilkes placed himself next to Dr. Johnson, and behaved to him with so much attention and politeness, that he gained upon him insensibly. No man eat more heartily than Johnson, or loved better what was nice and delicate. Mr. Wilkes was very assiduous in helping him to some fine veal. “Pray give me leave, Sir:—It is better here—A little of the brown—Some fat, Sir—A little of the stuffing—Some gravy—Let me have the pleasure of giving you some butter—Allow me to recommend a squeeze of this orange—or the lemon, perhaps, may have more zest.”—“Sir, Sir, I am obliged to you, Sir,” cried Johnson, bowing, and turning his head to him with a look for some time of “furry virtue,” but, in a short while, of complacency.

Much of the effect comes from the dangling em-dashes used to separate the multiple operations of Wilkes’s solicitous help to Johnson, with each accommodation providing a further goad for Boswell’s friend’s temper, provoking the exquisitely redundant “Sir, Sir, I am obliged to you, Sir” in response. The dashes allow a temporal and spatial flexibility that is not possible with the more conventional marks of punctuation. Wilkes’s attendance on Johnson is deliberately paced, but this pace is made ambiguous and notable by the use of the dashes: it could be a barrage at the beginning of the meal or
an extended and disparate set of interventions in Johnson’s meal. The dashes offer pauses of indeterminate lengths and in doing so expose Boswell’s goals in the set-piece (producing a mannered portrait of Johnson dealing with unlikely company) and more broadly in his wider project of presenting Johnson’s life in direct speech, because the use of the dash consistently indicates a transition between genres of narration. This is typically either from Boswell’s authoritative voice into direct conversation, or within speech, as in Wilkes’s attendance on Johnson, from the apothegmatic into more fully realised dramatic speech.

Dashes have many uses for Boswell: introducing quoted texts, introducing the beginning of Johnson’s statements in response to something being mentioned (that is, inaugurating direct speech); separating speeches where there is no heading for the speaker, or the speaker is presented in parenthesis within the speech so introduced; within speech—marking pauses and interruptions, and introducing quotations, as well as making lists and cascades, and marking shifts in syntax that do not necessarily indicate pauses. The dash, then, is the most capacious of all the punctuation marks. Take, for example the use of the dash in the construction of lists. At one point, Boswell shows Johnson in a rage about the American Revolution, and uses dashes to mark Johnson’s rhetorical structures. He has Johnson say:

“ I am willing to love all mankind, except an American;” and his inflammable corruption bursting into horrid fire, he “breathed out threatenings and slaughter;” calling them, “Rascals—Robbers—Pirates;” and exclaiming, he’d “burn and destroy them.” Miss Seward, looking to him with mild but steady astonishment, said, “Sir, this is an instance that we are always most violent against those whom we have injured.”—He was irritated still more by this delicate and keen reproach; and roared out another tremendous volley, which one might fancy could be heard across the Atlantick. During this tempest I sat in great uneasiness, lamenting his heat of temper; till, by degrees, I diverted his attention to other topics.

The dashes serve to mark the pauses between listed items, even in this half-way version of direct speech, where only specific phrases are placed in quotation marks. In this instance, the dashes serve as heightened pauses, not quite exclamations, but intimating something of that nature, to go with the extreme violence that Boswell is trying to convey. In the textual history of this section, we can find something illuminating about the dashes, too: Boswell initially had Johnson separating the three words with and rather than the dashes.
This modification can be seen as a heightening strategy on Boswell’s part, in which he uses the ambiguity of the pauses to indicate something out of the ordinary in the crescendo of the list, while at the same time tempering his account of “inflammable corruption” by making his partial citation of the description of Saul’s fulminations against the Apostles in Acts 9:1 a full and direct quotation. In the Manuscript of the Life, the ampersands have been removed, but the dashes have still not materialised. The addition of quotation marks, however, shifts responsibility for the arrangement of the three words onto Johnson as the speaker of them, rather than Boswell as only a partial hearer of them:

The summative effect of these changes is concentrated in the dashes. Boswell’s narrative account is intensified by attributing the result of his scattered memory presumably disparate insults in the “horrid fire” of this scene. Importantly, the dash is only a mark of observation and interpretation. It is not a feature of classical rhetoric, nor is it necessarily an adequate or an understandable stand-in for

140 Journal, 15/4/1778. Extremes, 287; Beinecke, 44/1000, 87.
141 MS 692, Bonnell, 209.
any of the many different types of pauses or connections make in the flurry of sounds that constitute real speech. As here, they carry significance, but in the freighted system of significance in Boswell’s accounts of Johnson, it is their narrative malleability that is most useful and most salient.

In Boswell’s manuscripts, the dash can also be a marker of direct speech, standing in for speech marks, as it does within some of these speeches. Most notably from this list of uses, it should be remembered that Boswell does not reserve the dash for one order of representation. He uses dashes equally as part of the apparatus of his text in introducing direct speech, and even when it is not involved, and as part of the internal apparatus of direct speech. Boswell and his speakers (in particular Johnson) both use dashes as part of the rhetorical structuration of speech, making pauses and dividing up the smallest units of a speech to aid sense and drama. Because it is the pauses and not the dashes themselves belong to the speakers, we can see Boswell’s interventions and manipulations of the pace of speech, as well as the relation of particular statements to each other, as one of his chief sites of writerly intervention in his texts. This is especially so when he is using dashes in the narration of dialogue that interrupts, overlaps or pauses. Many of these dash-driven interruptions come about through the writerly process of editing. They therefore are not be simply the necessary and transparent signs of really existing parts of the utterance produced because they are beyond the transcriptive powers of alphabetic characters. For instance, where Johnson takes up a thought of Boswell’s about whether he is amenable to looking over any manuscripts brought to him by his friends before it has been formed into a question, the dash that facilitates the transition between the two speakers shifts between the manuscript draft and the final printed version from belonging to Boswell’s speech to a shared pause. The transition thus eliminates both Boswell’s inarticulacy and any perceivable rudeness on Johnson’s part:

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Boswell. “But, Sir, if a bookseller should bring you a manuscript to look at.”—Johnson. “Why, Sir, I would desire the bookseller to take it away.”
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(1/381)

When an unattributed interruption stops Johnson from completing a thought about the general knowledge of poets, the dash that marks the interruption is incorporated into Johnson’s own speech, marking the fact that there was more to come. But in the earlier versions, the combination of embedded quotation and italicisation for Boileau’s French has confused Boswell into not providing a terminal set of quotation marks at all.
Boswell. “In that stanza of Pope’s, ‘rod of fires,’ is certainly a bad
metaphor.” Mrs. Thrale. “And ‘sins of moment’ is a faulty
expression; for its true import is momentous, which cannot be intended.” Johnson. “It
must have been written of moments.’ Of moment, is momentous; of moments,
momentary. I warrant you, however, Pope wrote this stanza, and some
friend struck it out. Boileau wrote some such thing, and Arnaud struck it
out, saying, ‘Vous gagnerez deux ou trois impies, et perdrez je ne sais combien
des bonnettes gens.’ These fellows want to say a daring thing, and don’t know
how to go about it. Mere poets know no more of fundamental principles
than—” Here he was interrupted somehow. Mrs. Thrale mentioned
Dryden. Johnson. “He puzzled himself about predetermination.—How
foolish was it in Pope to give all his friendship to Lords, who thought
they honoured him by being with him; and to choose such Lords
as Burlington, and Cobham, and Bolingbroke? Bathurst was negative, a
pleasing man; and I have heard no ill of Marchmont: and then always say-
ing, ‘I do not value you for being a Lord,’ which was a sure proof that he
did. I never say, I do not value Boswell more for being born to an estate,
because I do not care.” Boswell. “Nor for being a Scotchman?”
Johnson. “Nay, Sir, I do value you more for being a Scotchman. You
are a Scotchman without the faults of Scotchmen. You would not have
been so valuable as you are, had you not been a Scotchman.”

That the conversation is able to resume itself from the mysterious interruption shows that the deferral
might not have been as important as may have seemed, but Boswell is assiduous in marking, as he
does when Johnson makes a similar start to an unfinished and interrupted thought, a fissure in the
utterance where it is to be lamented that the thought is left incomplete.
It may well be that Boswell, expanding his memoranda into his journals finds a gap and invents an interruption, unable to remember the second part of the sentence. This then becomes the impetus for the ineffective interruption. The second dash in the passage, marking a shift in Johnson’s speech from declarative statement to rhetorical question, and is a solution for restoring to direct speech a vague and indecisive indirect statement from the Journal: “He observed of Pope how foolish it was of him to put all his friendship (or some such word) on Lords”.142 This solution clears the way for the eventual question, and regularises the format of the paragraph, but it also inserts a deliberate delay in Johnson’s speech that is wholly contingent on Boswell’s rather than Johnson’s demands in the passage. The cumulative effect of these dashes is that the interruption and pause make for a much less finished conversation than many of the other talks that Boswell reports; it is less slick, but also more lively because of it. A final consideration of interruptions effected by dashes should take in a conversation near the end of the book, where Boswell is trying to affectionately draw out Johnson on the ‘lost’ period of his life, where he was without religious faith:

142 Journal, 12/5/1778. Extremes, 340; Beinecke 44/1000, 173.
The pause is safely ensconced in Boswell’s speech marks, allowing him the reticence of suggesting more iniquities than swearing and drinking, and anticipating a quick, face-saving response from Johnson.

But in the Journal’s account, the exchange plays out quite differently. There is no hint of Boswell seeking out more information about Johnson’s old vices. The and is not to be found. Instead there is an exclamation mark after drinking, while the dash remains, but is performing the function of separating the speech from Johnson’s reaction, which initially comes with a description of Johnson’s “sort of smile”.

Boswell is here consciously thinking of the potential dramatic effects of interruptions and pregnant pauses, and inserting dashes in the hope of achieving the kind of vivacity he is aiming for. And it is only because the dash is so capacious and indeterminate that he is able to pull this sort of transformation of his material off. The erasure of the exclamation mark radically transforms the tone.
of Boswell’s inquiry, allowing and indeed assuming agency for Johnson’s concession of drinking and swearing, while adding the suggestion that Johnson is deliberately closing down the conversation about further vices. 143

Dashes help to untangle (and in this case, construct) interruptions, and it is interesting to see how Boswell manages the attribution of dashes in these instances. We have seen him adding dashes to indicate more speech to come on the end of an interrupted statement, showing that part of the impetus of a dash belongs to the speaker. Boswell also interpolates dashes marking pauses after a speaker has finished and before another resumes, as well as within a speech to mark transitions between topics. In a discussion of the relationship between Johnson’s pension and his political pamphleteering in 1772, Boswell maintains a dash to smooth the elision of a specific question and response about Lord North, who Johnson complains is against him owing to an unaccountable fancy:

Bos. But Sir don’t you think him him an able Minister? Johns. Yes indeed Sir- Well, how does Lord Ellibank? 144

The Journal for this period was used directly as printer’s copy, and retains Boswell’s elaborate cancellation of the line:

The finished conversation keeps only the dash separating the speeches, and reads much more abruptly:

143 Journal, 30/4/1783. Applause, 123; Beinecke, 45/1014, 19. MS 900. Lustig and Pottle, in their edition of the Journal version in Applause, add inverted commas for all of the speeches and note the change of tone. They perhaps overstate the impact as they remove the dash that comes after the exclamation mark altogether, presumably seeing it as exclusively a marker of change in speakers, which adds to the surprise to see it conjoined with the extra and in the Life. The possibility remains that the dash in the Journal may have inspired the shift to including it with Boswell’s quotation marks in the Life.

Removing his own question means that Boswell sharpens Johnson’s suspicions, and aids his thesis that Johnson’s financial position resulting from his pension was generally unaffected by his politics. But what is important here is the change in the function of the dash, which Boswell demonstrates can effect the shift necessary when in a case like this, the conversation has not reached the point where it was natural for Johnson to move on and ask after mutual friends, when in the initial account Johnson’s concession to Lord North’s ability of a minister does just this. A similar shift happens, though, when there is no motivation in the textual history, and the dash only serves as a marker of a potential factual element in Johnson’s conversation: inelegant shifts of topic, particularly where moments of politeness and nicety potentially elude Johnson:

This last usage of the dash is important because it reveals that the marker, capacious as it is, does not mark a specific unit of time, and can be used to connect unconnected statements, as well as fill gaps that are unintentional.\(^{145}\)

\(^{145}\) Journal (not extant), 8/5/1778. *Extremes*, 331 gives MS 745 in its uncorrected state, see Bonnell, 250.
This confluence of intentional and unintentional uses for the same simple line shows that Boswell’s methods of composition are primarily opportunistic. Without applying strict rules of transcription (or, in the absence of rules, applying multiple principles for the use of a single mark), Boswell improvises in making the form of the text match the speech, and it is most often with dashes, as well as combinations of dashes with other marks that he is able to do this.

As late as the second Revise, Boswell added a dash to his own speech at the beginning of the same day’s conversation. The added dash intervenes in the perceived interruption when Boswell confronts Johnson to complain about his having been rude about him in unfamiliar company. It comes just at the point where Johnson accuses him of having interrupted him on their previous meeting the week before:

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he drew his chair near to mine, and said, in a tone of conciliating
courtesy, “Well, how have you done?” Boswell. “Sir, you have made
me very uneasy by your behaviour to me when we were last at Sir Joshua
Reynolds’s. You know, my dear Sir, no man has a greater respect and
affection for you, or would sooner go to the end of the world to serve you.
Now to treat me so—.” He insisted that I had interrupted him, which I
assured him was not the case; and proceeded, “But why treat me so before
people who neither love you nor me?”
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Curiously, Boswell here constructs in effect a double interruption, where his speech in accusation of Johnson’s behaviour either peters out, or is silenced by Johnson’s insistence that Boswell has done the very thing Johnson is here doing, even at the point of reconciliation.
It is understandable in this instance that the second interruption is given in indirect speech, despite Boswell’s hesitation about the possibility of including it in Johnson’s voice. Boswell is trying to downplay Johnson’s disagreeable attitude, allowing him the moral authority to reconcile, but some part of his desire for accuracy and complete authentic information, or his personal pettiness, preserve the mild hypocrisy of Johnson’s interruptive accusation of interruption. In this, too, Boswell preserves a sense of his own plaintive tone. The pause marked by the dash in lieu of Johnson saying “Sir, I thought I was interrupted” is a signifier of a hanging and even melodramatic insistence on his being wronged, and allows him to form a more apposite construction in the form of his final question. This sense of pregnancy and melodrama in the tones being effected by dashes is certainly not unique in the *Life*. Boswell has recourse to the dash to mark dramatic pauses within speeches in order to denote exceptionally emotional delivery in some of the most heightened and sentimental moments of the text. Where Johnson reconnects with his old fellow-collegian Edwards, for instance, the dash is used to show Johnson’s melodramatic self-regard in contemplation of the course of his life and his experience of sorrow:

*Edwards. “I have been twice married; Doctor. You, I suppose, have never known what it was to have a wife.” Johnson. “Sir, I have known what it was to have a wife, and (in a solemn tender faulting tone) I have known what it was to lose a wife.—It had almost broke my heart.”*

(2/236)

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Again, this dash is an addition at a late stage of the composition of the text, and can be attributed to Boswell as much as it can to Johnson. In the Journal account of the encounter, Johnson’s balanced statements are separated by a semicolon, and the pause effected by the parenthesis is an afterthought. The gap between “lose a wife” and “It had almost broke my heart” is a simple full stop.\textsuperscript{147}

In the draft of the \textit{Life}, Boswell expands some of the statements, paying more attention to the description of the tone in the parenthesis, but there is no indication of a pause between the two sentences.

The meditation in the middle of the speech that the dash allows casts a pall over the sentence, even if the brush is perhaps overlarded, given the conjunction of the parenthesis and italics, which are the subjects of subsequent chapters of this thesis. The interposition of the dash allows Boswell to show Johnson thinking and remembering, even if the precise quality of the thoughts is mysterious, or contains too much to be articulated. In a passage leading up to Johnson’s death, Boswell also keeps a dash from his second-hand source that shows Johnson considering the emotional and dramatic effect of his own speech:

\textsuperscript{147} Journal, 17/4/1778. \textit{Extremes}, 298; Beinecke 44/1000, 106. MS 706, Bonnell, 222.
In all of these moments, Boswell is using dashes not just to manipulate the text to his own narrative ends, but as a specific trick to manage the transition of the narration between different scales. In effect during these last emotional examples, the dashes allow Boswell to achieve a smaller level of observation than direct speech would otherwise allow, by inserting gaps into the flow of the conversation. It may well be argued that the gaps constitute historical facts, or are intended to be read that way, but Boswell’s consistent use of them when he wants to make some change to the text show us that the dash is a useful technique in manipulating the scales of his narration. Dashes allow his speakers to alternately be violent and maudlin, energetic and dissipated, because of the ambiguity attendant on transitions from the smallest scale of observation into the larger scales of speech and narration. But it is not only dashes that bring about these sorts of transitions. On the much wider scale of large trends in Johnson’s life, Boswell’s reliance on his materials and his conversational gambits within them lead him to very specific methods of suturing the text and making connections between disparate parts of Johnson’s life. Where Boswell succeeds in making fully realised scenes he uses devices like the dash in conjunction with fuller narration that, as we have seen, frames the context in which the scenes can be read. The framing makes the scenes and Boswell’s idea of their curious value more vivid. They stand out from the general flow of his intermittent visits, but pulled out of the context of the ongoing friendship to stand for more than they might have meant to Johnson himself, these scenes also fall prey to being made more singular and curious than retrospect would have them to be. After Boswell’s initial trick, for instance, Johnson and Wilkes remained companionable, and there are subsequent scenes in the Life where Boswell is forced to acknowledge the developments of Johnson’s life mean that what seemed singular at the time would actually become habitual. Even when they are together again on 8 May 1781, Boswell wants to retain his previous attachment to the idea of their incongruity, fixing in his mind an image that he intends to use to stand in for the event:
The company gradually dropped away. Mr. Dilly himself was called down stairs upon business; I left the room for some time; when I returned, I was struck with observing Dr. Samuel Johnson and John Wilkes, Esq. literally tête à tête; for they were reclined upon their chairs, with their heads leaning almost close to each other, and talking earnestly, in a kind of confidential whisper, of the personal quarrel between George the Second and the King of Prussia. Such a scene of perfectly easy sociality between two such opponents in the war of political controversy, as that which I now beheld, would have been an excellent subject for a picture. It presented to my mind the happy days which are foretold in Scripture, when the lion shall ly down with the kid.1

Not only is this image a crystallisation of the whole and altogether messier series of events that he recounts for this meeting, but Boswell’s invocation of it as a “scene of perfectly easy sociality” is a deliberate intervention in the narration of this episode. Boswell added the words “scene of” above the line in his manuscript and rejects the alternative “discourse” which he abortively used to supplement the truncated form of “sociality”, before making a fair copy of this much-reworked passage on the facing page.148

Conversely, where Boswell paints a scene of reconnection with Edwards, and notes Johnson’s resolution to re-establish the friendship, he subsequently discovers that nothing has come of it in his absence, only after the scene of accidental meeting at a Good-Friday church service is repeated, also in 1781. Johnson fills Boswell in on what happened:

148 Journal, 8/5/1781; Laird, 351 (printing MS). MS 839 and verso.
On Friday, April 13, being Good-Friday, I went to St. Clement’s-church with him, as usual. There I saw again his old fellow-collegian, Edwards, to whom I said, “I think Sir, Dr. Johnson and you meet only at church.”—“Sir (said he) it is the best place we can meet in except Heaven, and I hope we shall meet there too.” Dr. Johnson told me that there was very little communication between Edwards and him, after their unexpected renewal of acquaintance. “But (said he, smiling) he met me once, and said, ‘I am told you have written a very pretty book called The Rambler.’ I was unwilling that he should leave the world in total darkness, and sent him a set.”

These undercuttings of Boswell’s claim to curiosity are artefacts of the passage of time, but also indicate something important about the relationship between Boswell’s narrative modes and the nature of his material, which derives primarily from his regular but incomplete schedule of London visits. Boswell is only sporadically present for the kinds of scene he thinks deserve a place in this “Life in scenes”, and he makes the most of his opportunities to construct a scene out of the things that he observes happening to Johnson, but in his absences, he is unable to control or record what happens. This leads him into a style of extended narration where only events that have direct relationships between each other (and occur in Boswell’s field of vision) are accessible to him and open to being put in relation to each other in the way that allows larger narrative connections to arise in the book. Boswell can only make connections of this sort if he actually encounters the same people as he has before, and the gaps in between either lead to there being no repercussions of the events he does record, or reminders allow him to be filled in on what has happened in his absence. Thus the progression of the narrative is not so much Johnson’s life, but Boswell’s knowledge of it, and he makes certain to involve himself in the narration of finding things out like the development of an acquaintance with Wilkes, or the failure of the same with Edwards, rather than putting the information as a simple fact in the chronology in which it occurred.

Making Narrative Relationships between Scenes

Where Boswell is unable to construct many of these encounters, due both to his persistent absences from Johnson’s company and the availability of new celebrated figures, he is still able to present Johnson in contact with celebrities known to both the biographer and his subject. Where he is unable to cajole Johnson into meeting new people and observing him in conjunction with unlikely figures,
Boswell’s conversational method allows him to imagine encounters that did not actually occur. In this, Boswell acts as a nodal figure, allowing encounters and reflections to come into being for his own purposes, getting beyond the simple act of reportage even in constructed situations such as the encounter with Wilkes. In addition to his conversational gambit of mentioning habitual topics, such as the existence of ghosts or the propriety of drinking, Boswell was keen to present to Johnson things that had been said about him in other company. Take, for instance, this prompt from 4 April 1778:

Thrale’s carriage not having come for him, as he expected, I accompanied him some part of the way home to his own house. I told him, that I had talked of him to Mr. Dunning a few days before, and had said, that in his company we did not so much interchange conversation, as listen to him; and that Dunning observed, upon this, “One is always willing to listen to Dr. Johnson:” to which I answered, “That is a great deal from you, Sir.”

Johnson assents to Boswell’s assessment of this as a compliment, but Boswell adds a self-serving doubt about the general propriety of telling such tales:

—“Yes, Sir, (said Johnson,) a great deal indeed. Here is a man willing to listen, to whom the world is listening all the rest of the year.” Boswell. “I think, Sir, it is right to tell one man of such a handsome thing, which has been said of him by another. It tends to increase benevolence.” Johnson. “Undoubtedly it is right, Sir.”

I call this doubt because the increase of benevolence Boswell sees in the redistribution of compliments would be massively counterbalanced by the amount of malice that Boswell records himself distributing insults and grievances to Johnson in his Journal. Much of this persists as a compositional principle of the Life. Boswell will take a comment to Johnson and record the response in place of observing an actual exchange between the two figures. But the apophthegmatic potential of this strategy in which Boswell can produce an individual and isolated retort to an insult, or indeed a compliment, as a single biographical datum to add to the pile of his records pales in comparison to the narrative strategy offered by sustained strings of such moments. Boswell carried out analogue

149 Boswell’s own index lists fourteen independent discussions of “Wine, the use of”: 1/378, 1/380, 2/20, 2/64, 2/154, 2/199, 2/202, 2/248, 2/254, 2/286, 2/290, 2/371, 2/376, 2/383.
conversations on Johnson’s behalf over the course of their friendship with a number of prominent figures with whom he otherwise had little contact. Beginning with Rousseau and Voltaire, the continental luminaries he courted on his Grand Tour, Boswell extended his orchestration of extended conversations between Johnson and absent figures to include Edinburgh-based writers and thinkers such as Adam Smith and James Burnett, Lord Monboddo. While the truncated nature of his interactions with Rousseau and Voltaire meant that those conversations only allowed for a limited range of exchanges, we can see the basis of this variety of compositional procedure in the first paragraph of conversation given for 18 July 1763, where Johnson slights Frederick the Great as writing like Voltaire’s footboy. Boswell notes that he later told this to Voltaire himself (without mentioning his failures in gaining an audience with Frederick, it must be added) and gives his response:

I repeated this to Voltaire, in order to reconcile him somewhat to Johnson, whom he, in affecting the English mode of expression, had previously characterized as “a superfluous dog,” but after hearing such a criticism on Frederick the Great, with whom he was then on bad terms, he exclaimed, “An honest fellow!”

When I was at Ferney,

The exchanges with Smith and Monboddo last longer, but are less important for Boswell because Johnson has more independent access to communicating with them.

Despite this, these extended conversations, consisting of observations retailed back and forth constitute some of the most sustained—if intermittent—narratives of the *Life*. The most important and instructive of these exchanges is the interplay of insults and observations between Johnson and the famously “infidel” historian and philosopher (and Boswell’s sometime landlord) David Hume. Boswell’s association with Hume stretched back to the time before the beginnings of his Journal, through a time where Boswell tried to leverage the fact that his friends had presented him with a forged letter complimenting Boswell into a regular correspondence with him, through to the offence he and Erskine cause Hume later the same year by publishing some of his private views in their *Letters between the Honorable Erskine and James Boswell, Esq.* At this time, Boswell was also

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150 This conversation took place on 27 December 1764. *GTGS*, 300-1; Beinecke 38/944, 1 (J 6.1). Boswell’s record of the French conversation is in English, and he has Voltaire say “He is a sensible man.”

151 See *Journal*, 16-18/2/1763. *LJ*, 142-6; Beinecke 32/927, 374-387. Robert Zaretsky notes that far more than the indiscretion and subsequent rejection, Hume’s approach to facts in his *History* was influential in Boswell’s earliest conceptions of what his Journal should be, *Boswell’s Enlightenment*, 62-63. For an account of this and other early efforts of
regularly encouraging himself to progress in his reading of Hume’s *History of England*. All this reveals a lengthy fascination with Hume as a figure, and particularly with his contentions about religion and his personal life having come to the conclusion that God does not exist. Boswell was consistently drawn to the terrifying possibility of there being no afterlife and Hume served as an emblem for this possibility. Robert Zaretsky draws an argument about Boswell’s opposition between Johnson and Hume as a figuring of different poles of religious belief and different possibilities of life and morality. The fact that up to the point of Hume’s death in 1776, Boswell was never entirely able to dispense with either extreme is for Zaretsky a sign of his typicality in an age in which Boswell was caught up in intellectual debates, trying to seek a viable middle ground in the ferment of the time: “few contemporaries straddled these two worlds [the religious and the secular] with the same degree of absorption and acuity, wonder and wit, verve and volubility.” Boswell’s dwelling in different religious and philosophical extremes was never contained in the individual conversations he had with the two of them. Over the course of thirteen years Boswell mentioned comments by each to the other, and out of this consistent process of nodal communication, or communication by proxy, Boswell strings together a one-sided conversation that shows Johnson over those thirteen years reacting to the provocations of comments from a man he regarded as a fool and an enemy. In addition to the direct representation of spoken claims, Boswell also makes frequent reference to Hume’s published arguments, particularly those about religion, in order to prod Johnson. After an initial provocation quoting Hume’s argument against miracles on 23 July 1763, Boswell directly quotes Hume to

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152 The *London Journal* refers to the book more than 30 times, mainly in his daily set of instructions styled as memoranda. These begin with the Instruction “Hume all night” on 30/12/1762 (*LJ*, 69), and continue through a range of reminders to either begin a new volume or to fall to reading the book in the mornings. Boswell persists in his plan even as he is interacting with and failing to win the favour of Hume himself in the personal dealings to do with the parodic letters, sometimes even on the same day’s plan, as on March 1, where we can see the two affairs in the memoranda separated only by a line or two of writing. The effort of reading the book is associated with Boswell’s struggle to build habits as a defence against his Hypochondriack dissipation and vice and so it is appropriate that the book looms large in Boswell’s intentions but only appears seldom in the body of the Journal proper. Entries for the beginning of May 1763 find Boswell trying to contemplate the fate of Charles I, the subject of the end of Volume five. On 3 May, after a dispiriting trip to Newgate, Boswell “felt myself dreary at night & made my Barber try to read me asleep with Hume’s History of which he made very sad work. I lay in sad concern.” (*LJ*, 211) This oppressive mood did not discourage him from viewing executions at Tyburn the next day. Boswell’s efforts run through to July 1763, where he can be found on the first of the month resolving to “finish Hume” (*LJ*, 254) but is still keeping the final volume of six, concerning the Interregnum and Restoration, in reserve on the sixth, when he instructs himself to send the work back to his friend George Dempster, from whom he has borrowed it (*LJ*, 258). This final volume had been a struggle to obtain in the first place, occasioning memoranda to get it on 23, 24 and 25 March, and finally 3 April. Boswell was still enjoining himself to begin this volume on 13 and 27 May. It seems that Boswell either succeeded in finishing the book or abandoned it unfinished before his departure for his legal studies in Holland, as the book is not mentioned afterwards.

Johnson on 3 August that year as an instance of how absurd things are ascribed to him, but turns out to have been wrong, provoking a flurry of anger:

I had the misfortune, before we parted, to irritate him unintentionally. I mentioned to him how common it was in the world to tell absurd stories of him, and to ascribe to him very strange sayings. Johnson. “What do they make me say, Sir?” Boswell. “Why, Sir, as an instance very strange indeed, (laughing heartily as I spoke,) David Hume told me, you said that you would stand before a battery of cannon, to restore the Convocation to its full powers.” I little did I apprehend that he had actually said this; but I was soon convinced of my error; for, with a determined look, he thundered out, “And would I not, Sir? Shall the Presbyterian Kirk of Scotland have its General Assembly, and the Church of England be denied its Convocation?” He was walking up and down the room while I told him the anecdote; but when he uttered this explosion of high-church zeal, he had come close to my chair, and his eyes flashed with indignation. I bowed to the storm, and diverted the force of it, by leading him to expatiate on the influence which religion derived from maintaining the church with great external respectability.

Over the course of the next few years, Boswell raises Hume, or things that he has said regularly: as evidence for the existence of a happy deist (Johnson demurs), as a collector of Scotticisms (again, Johnson is surprised), and Johnson also brings him up as an example of a derivative writer against Boswell’s assertion of progress in literature. By the time Boswell is arranging his marriage in 1769, he is ready to bring up personal comments to Johnson about the most troubling of matters and draws very strong comments about Hume himself:
This provokes such an unexpectedly violent reaction from Johnson that John Radner claims it as the turning point of the friendship. Radner argues that because Johnson is so troubled by the thought of death he asks not to see Boswell the following day and in his reading of the relationship between the two, this moment serves as a pivot for Boswell’s personal and professional understandings of Johnson, transforming him from a distant moralist into a more equally situated mortal.\textsuperscript{154} Perhaps consequentially, this outburst serves as the occasion for probably Boswell’s most celebrated reflection on Johnson’s psyche as a result of the mysterious trouble the conversation caused Johnson:

\textsuperscript{154} John B. Radner, \textit{Johnson and Boswell: A Biography of Friendship}, 73-6. Radner goes so far as to claim that the discussion “seems to have influenced Boswell’s decision to become Johnson’s biographer, and Johnson’s eventual acceptance of this project”, 76.
The technique of using others’ arguments as grist to the conversational mill thus becomes a more compellingly narrative device because it can produce narratable moments that are interesting in their own right, and offer the potential for insightful interpretation. In this case the interpretation offers the occasion for Boswell’s principal figure of Johnson’s perpetual struggle with spiritual matters. The force of both the reaction and the insights remained as a persistent feature of Boswell’s method of questioning and understanding Johnson. If Radner is correct in saying that this exchange caused the shift in the relationship that allowed Boswell to conceive of Johnson as a biographical subject in need of interpretation, this is the result of a wider narrative impulse that predated the outburst in which Boswell sought to augment his conversation by being the node in a larger exchange between major cultural figures of his acquaintance such as Johnson and Hume. Since Boswell was less assiduous in his record keeping in Edinburgh than he was in London, there is less evidence of how this networked exchange played out in his conversations with Hume. While the next reference to him in the Life is as the first in a group of historians Boswell lists to counter Johnson’s audacious claim that Goldsmith’s Roman history placed him as the best living historian, we can find Boswell in the Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides bringing up Hume for Johnson’s reactions, particularly again with references to religion. Johnson notes that as an infidel Hume is no longer acceptable company, though Johnson had been able to live well enough with him in the past. As a result Boswell failed to arrange a meeting with Hume, who Johnson saw as a bridge too far in the meetings with celebrated Scots, including Smith and Monboddo that he effected during his time in Scotland. By 1775, we can find Hume and Boswell discussing Johnson’s Journey. Hume disparages the book, but coincided with Johnson’s attitude to Ossian, which leads Boswell to retail a Johnsonism reported in Boswell’s Tour as follows:

“He would undertake, (he said) to write an epick poem on the story of Robin Hood, and half England, to whom the names and places he should mention in it are familiar, would believe and declare they had heard it from their earliest years.”

Boswell is able to draw from Hume a conciliatory response in disagreement with Johnson, allowing that the prevalence of English poetry would mean that English readers might be less credulous than Scottish advocates for Ossian. A perplexing continuation of the attitude which Boswell records in

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155 John B. Radner, Johnson and Boswell: A Biography of Friendship, 80: “The biographical project would also provide an outlet for aggression that Boswell refused to examine or even admit, authorizing him to probe Johnson’s newly discovered secret spaces. […] Instead of trying to be Johnson, Boswell would seek to understand and assess him, while still striving firmly to connect.”

156 Tour, 404-5.

the Tour occurs in the Life where a refutation of Hume’s argument against miracles provokes Boswell to ape Johnson’s earlier statement:

Dr. Adams had distinguished himself by an able answer to David Hume’s “Essay on Miracles.” He told me he had once dined in company with Hume in London; that Hume shook hands with him, and said, “You have treated me much better than I deserve;” and that they exchanged visits. I took the liberty to object to treating an infidel writer with smooth civility.

[...]

Johnson coincided with me and said, “When a man voluntarily engages in an important controversy, he is to do all he can to lessen his antagonist, because authority from personal respect has much weight with most people, and often more than reasoning. If my antagonist writes bad language, though that may not be essential to the question, I will attack him for his bad language.” Adams. “You would not jostle a chimney-sweeper.” Johnson. “Yes, Sir, if it were necessary to jostle him down.”

(2/24-5)

Whatever the propriety of keeping public company with a man as infamous as Hume, Boswell persisted in engaging in private conversations with his landlord which extended beyond the mere gathering of fodder for his London conversations. Boswell was deeply troubled by the consistency and steadfastness of Hume’s religious non-belief, and was attracted enough to it to think of Hume as a good person to sound out about his own moral doubts, and when it became clear that Hume was soon to die, Boswell made a point of undertaking a death-bed interview, partly in the hope that he would be able to report a last-minute conversion to Christian belief. While this hope was in vain, Boswell’s habitual mental opposition of the two figures was never far from the surface:

I somehow or other brought Dr. Johnson’s name into our conversation. I had often heard him speak of that great man in a very illiberal manner. He said upon this occasion, “Johnson should be pleased with my History.” Nettled by Hume’s frequent attacks upon my revered friend in former conversations, I told him now that Dr. Johnson did not allow him much credit; for he said, “Sir, the fellow is a Tory by chance.” I am sorry that I mentioned this at such a time. I was off my guard; for the
truth is that Mr. Hume’s pleasantry was such that there was no solemnity in the scene; and death for the time did not seem dismal.\textsuperscript{158}

Boswell’s encapsulation of the exchange of insults that he had managed to provoke from both sides in previous conversations is eclipsed by his regret that he loses himself in the moment in response to Hume’s pleasantry, forgetting the solemnity of the scene he has constructed for himself only to continue the habitual dynamic of carrying to each man a tale of an insult. The “Tory by chance” comment is recorded both in the \textit{Tour}, and as a miscellaneous addition included in the material that came just in time for the second edition of the \textit{Life}.\textsuperscript{159} By the time Boswell was able to retail this final conversation to Johnson, it was as an instance of horror at his non-conversion and untroubled state at the end of his unbelieving life:

\begin{quote}
I mentioned to Dr. Johnson, that David Hume’s persisting in his infidelity, when he was dying, shocked me much: Johnson. “Why should it shock you, Sir? Hume owned he had never read the New Testament with attention. Here then was a man who had been at no pains to inquire into the truth of religion, and had continually turned his mind the other way. It was not to be expected that the prospect of death would alter his way of thinking, unless God should send an angel to set him right.” I said, I had reason to believe that the thought of annihilation gave Hume no pain. Johnson. “It was not so, Sir. He had a vanity in being thought easy. It is more probable that he should assume an appearance of ease, than that so very improbable a thing should be, as a man not afraid of going (as, if I am of his delusive theory, he cannot be sure but he may go,) into an unknown state, and not being uneasy at leaving all he knew. And you are to consider, that upon his own principle of annihilation he had no motive to speak the truth.” The horror of death which I had always observed in Dr. Johnson, appeared strong-to-night.
\end{quote}

One legacy of Boswell’s efforts in preserving records is that we can see a remarkable persistence in Johnson’s attitudes here. His claim that Hume need not be taken seriously because he had never read the New Testament with attention is a claim the \textit{Life} also reports Johnson making more fully eleven

\begin{footnotes}
\item 158 Journal, 7/7/1776. \textit{Extremes}, 13. This is one of the embellishments that Boswell added to his Journal notes in making a separate record of this deathbed conversation in March 1777. See Richard B. Schwartz, “Boswell and Hume: the Deathbed Interview”, for a fuller account of the interview and how it reveals many of the limitations of Boswell’s biographical outlook.
\item 159 30/9/1773. \textit{Tour}, 278. See also \textit{Life} Second Edition 1/*ix (actually xiv).
\end{footnotes}
full years earlier. The fact of Hume’s having died persisting in ill-informed non-belief is therefore as untroubling to Johnson as his much earlier claim not to believe. But it is only through Boswell’s persistent doubt, and his inability to reconcile the two figures that we have access to this biographical information. By consistently bringing together the opposed viewpoints, asking on both sides for reasons against the other, as well as trading pettier insults, we have access to a kind of data that only a biographer operating on Boswell’s principles could give: evidence of a tendency of thinking that is remarkable for its stability and consistency. But this is not to say that Boswell’s method allows us to adduce a pattern of predictable thinking from his Johnsonian data. In the same thread of constructed interactions between Hume and Johnson we can find Johnson changing his mind. From dismissing an illustration Boswell provides of the comparative happiness of different people in February 1766 (1/276-7), Johnson shifts when confronted twelve years later with the same image, attributed to Rev. Brown of Utrecht, “After some thought, Johnson said, ‘I come over to the parson.’” (2/225-6) This technique of providing sustained analogue conversations in which Boswell is the nodal point can only, in the end, provide biographical information of the same order of truth that any of the apothegmatic information can give—that is, evidence of Johnson’s thoughts through his statements on any particular day. These threads of impossible conversations do provide, though, evidence of Boswell’s own desires and objectives in engaging in conversations that could lead to the construction of a Life. Just as his own relationship with Johnson is the unacknowledged subject of the book, Boswell’s circle of acquaintance provides him with a constant resource of augmentation for the kinds of topic he can use to provoke lively sayings and biographical information out of Johnson. The long quarrel Johnson had with Hume and his infidelity existed before Boswell’s intervention, but it was extended by him and made visible through the thirteen years in which he had reliable recourse to new sayings on either end, and he was able to use it to produce biographical information and even events that otherwise would not have happened.

Repetitions and the Patterns of Life

These conscious repetitions and connections over the course of the book allow a continuity that transcends the small time-scale in which each specific moment occurs. Boswell also serendipitously includes repetitions as an artefact of his Journal-keeping practices. Adventitious repetitions expose the difficulty of presenting a life as a narrative of mostly smaller scenes. Where Boswell is able to show continuity through his manipulations of social relationships, he is fully in control of the development of the scattered though interconnected elements. Conversely, in a work of this size, there
is a great amount of opportunity for the contrast between the presentation of facts and the narration of scenes to create redundancies. This is particularly the case in inconsequential details, the minute particulars which Boswell takes such pride in being the basis for his book. Since his narrative method lies in casting the discovery of information in direct speech, he creates opportunities for equivalent moments to contain the same basic information, yet necessitate total inclusion in the final work.

On Tuesday, 7 April 1778 we find Boswell quizzing Johnson about inconsequential past-times and the prospect of simple happiness. After Johnson observes that had he been able to play the violin, he would have done nothing else, Boswell asks as to particulars about his musical capabilities, and this leads to a surprising revelation about Johnson’s attempts to find a rewarding hobby:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Boswell.} & \quad \text{“Pray, Sir, did you ever play on any musical instrument?”} \\
\text{Johnson.} & \quad \text{“No, Sir. I once bought me a flagelet; but I never made out a tune.”} \\
\text{Boswell.} & \quad \text{“A flagelet, Sir!—so small an instrument? I should have liked to hear you play on the violincello. That should have been your instrument.”} \\
\text{Johnson.} & \quad \text{“Sir, I might as well have played on the violincello as another; but I should have done nothing else. No, Sir; a man would never undertake great things could he be amused with small. I once tried knotting, Dempster’s sister undertook to teach me; but I could not learn it.”} \\
\text{Boswell.} & \quad \text{“So, Sir, it will be related in pompous narrative, ‘Once for his amusement he tried knotting; nor did this Hercules disdain the distaff. Once for his amusement he tried knotting.’} \\
\text{Johnson.} & \quad \text{“Knitting of stockings is a good amusement. As a freeman of Aberdeen I should be a knitter of stockings.”} \\
\end{align*}\]

The importance of such minute particulars as the knowledge of a failed attempt to take up a trifling activity for a project like Boswell’s is obvious. Boswell’s knowing parody of his own seriousness in wanting to know about such things and retail them to the world after Johnson’s death is astute. In both the Journal and Manuscript versions of this passage, he includes a parenthesis to indicate the mirth of the scene: “(laughing and chuckling and Mrs. Desmoulins too)” in the Journal:

\(^{160}\) Elsewhere Boswell notes Johnson’s bad hearing or simple lack of a musical sense as a reason he is incapable of appreciating music: a discussion in 1777 where Johnson owns to Boswell “that he was very insensible to the power of musick” (2/172) while in the selection of miscellaneous sayings collected by Burney, the famed historian of music, and inserted in the narrative for 1775, Johnson is made to respond to the prospect of developing a taste for music “with candid complacency,” saying “‘Sir, I shall be glad to have a new sense given to me.’” (1/515)
This is then changed into “(He & Mrs. Desmoulins both laughing heartily)” in the Manuscript:

but Boswell discards both descriptions in favour of allowing full space for his own mock-pompomposity.\footnote{Journal, 7/4/1778. Extremes, 245; Beinecke 43/999, 20. MS, 643.} Even with the redundancy of the repeated statement, which is removed in later editions, he only goes a small step beyond his own assumptions about the importance of the knowledge he can bring to light about surprisingly unimportant matters, such as the desirable characteristics of a bulldog, for instance, or the differences between the various forms of salt.\footnote{See Life, 2/167 for bull-dogs occasioning Boswell’s wonder at the “how he entered with perspicuity and keenness upon every thing that occurred in conversation.” The lack of difference between salt-petre and sal-prunella is discussed at 2/224 (15/4/1778) and, intriguingly, causes Miss Seward, “the poetess of Lichfield” to allude to the same image of Hercules with the distaff as Boswell’s imagined narration of Johnson’s interest in knotting.} In a sense, these particulars, even in Boswell’s self-parody, mark a key dynamic of his project. But there are also limits on the narrative and informational importance of such trifles: in pointing out very specific points of information under the assumption that they will provide revealing contrasts to the public greatness of his subject, and thereby present a rounded picture, Boswell operates on a principle of narrative economy that runs against his other guiding principle of maximal inclusion. To know an ephemeral
fact such as Johnson’s one time attempt to take up knotting is a potential source of delight, but it is only really so if it is contained in itself. However, Boswell’s methods counteract the value of such tidbits, because the principle of maximal inclusion from conversation occasionally comes up against repetitions of the same material in the natural course of talk.

Different audiences, and different contexts, quite normally present a chronicler with multiple iterations of the same stories, multiple reworkings of the same witticisms, and multiple discoveries of the same personal facts. Indeed, with this particular biographical datum, Boswell is unable to contain the information within one anecdote. In 1784, the last year of Johnson’s life, Boswell tells a story about Johnson experiencing his own celebrity (and Boswell himself reveling in it), and the subject again comes up and provides Boswell with the only saying he manages to preserve from the journey:

   On Thursday, June 3, the Oxford post-coach took us up in the morning at Bolt-court. The other two passengers were Mrs. Beresford and her daughter, two very agreeable ladies from America; they were going to Worcestershire, where they then resided. Frank had been sent by his master the day before to take places for us; and I found from the way-bill, that Dr. Johnson had made our names be put down. Mrs. Beresford, who had read it, whispered me, “Is this the great Dr. Johnson?” I told her it was; so she was then prepared to listen. As she soon happened to mention in a voice so low that Johnson did not hear it, that her husband had been a member of the American Congress, I cautioned her to beware of introducing that subject, as she must know how very violent Johnson was against the people of that country. He talked a great deal, but I am sorry I have preserved little of the conversation. Miss Beresford was so much charmed, that she said to me aside, “How he does talk! Every sentence is an essay.” She amused herself in the coach with knotting; he would scarcely allow this species of employment any merit. “Next to mere idleness (said he) I think knotting is to be reckoned in the scale of insignificance; though I once attempted to learn knotting. Dempster’s sister (looking to me) endeavoured to teach me it; but I made no progress.”

This passage succinctly recapitulates things that have gone before. Like Boswell in 1763, Mrs. Beresford anticipates both meeting Johnson, and being impressed by his conversation, while Boswell makes sure that he does what Davies fails to do in the first meeting, which is letting slip personal details Johnson might find unfavourable and seize upon. Absent this entrée into Johnson’s prejudices,
there is little that is memorable or worth preserving, except the little fact which Johnson makes a point of specifically mentioning to Boswell aside, and the bald and primly offensive declaration that introduces it. In this repetition we can see either the result of careless revision on Boswell’s part, or we can find the indication of a basic dynamic in the composition of the *Life*. Boswell is evidently careful to insist that particular facts and anecdotes have their own proper locations in the book, but a fact like this, with no specific period of time attached to it, floats without a home other than the two times when Johnson introduces it as a minor biographical fact during these two different and distant conversations. Because the declaration is both times included in other interesting material, Boswell privileges the two moments of telling over the fact that is being imparted. Owing to the ephemeral nature of the material, Boswell is both times self-conscious enough to cast the incident as a reflection on the limits of his methods to give information. It is nevertheless remarkable that in the second instance, neither Boswell nor Johnson remember the first, spirited discussion, which was memorable enough for Boswell to take it down. The repetition can then be seen as both an accident and a serendipitous window on the nature of these conversations, which, taking place over such a long period of time are drawn into repetition, forgetting, and occasionally reminiscence.

That Boswell was aware of and cared about such repetitions can be seen in his management of a repeated anecdote that at different times drew different responses from Johnson and his associates. On 9 May 1773, during the contretemps between Johnson and Goldsmith over Goldsmith’s perceived impertinence, Bennett Langton contrasts Goldsmith’s conversation to a story he knows about Addison:

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Bennett Langton observes that he was not like Addison, who was content with the fame of his writings, and did not care at excelling in conversation for which he found himself so little qualified; a story he confirms of his having little in common with Addison, for that Addison in reply mentioned that Goldsmith had a thousand pounds.
In our way to the club to-night, when I regretted that Goldsmith would, upon every occasion, endeavour to shine, by which he often exposed himself, Mr. Langton observed, that he was not like Addison, who was content with the fame of his writings, and did not aim also at excellency in conversation, for which he found himself unfit; and that he said to a lady, who complained of his having talked little in company, “Madam, I have but nine-pence in ready money, but I can draw for a thousand pounds.” I observed, that Goldsmith had a great deal of gold in his cabinet, but, not content with that, was always taking out his purse. Johnson. “Yes, Sir, and that so often an empty purse!”

(1/420)

Five years later, on 8 May 1778, Boswell reports Johnson talking uncharitably about another anonymous author’s conversation, and Langton again chimes in with the same story, but Boswell takes a slightly different approach to the narration:

Mr. Langton having repeated the anecdote of Addison having distinguished between his powers in conversation and in writing, by saying “I have only nine-pence in my pocket; but I can draw for a thousand pounds;”—Johnson. “He had not that retort ready, Sir; he had prepared it before-hand.” Langton. (turning to me) “A fineurmise. Set a thief to catch a thief.”

(2/257)

This second time, in addition to the minor change of diction where “in my pocket” becomes “ready money”, Johnson is able to get his response in before Boswell. But more importantly, Boswell’s choice of words in introducing the anecdote and presenting it in indirect discourse until the narration of Addison’s statement is the result of Boswell being aware of the duplicated material. In a marginal note in the Manuscript, he instructs himself to: “See if this not in before after the violent day at Dilly’s” and then in slightly different ink, “or if it should not be amongst Langtoniana” meaning the store of anecdotes received from Langton and placed at the end of the events of 1780 in the final version of the book.163

This backward-looking awareness of the repetition occasioned the revision of the second telling of the anecdote, where originally, Langton had told the story in full, and in direct speech: “LANGTON. ‘A lady who had been a long time in Addison’s company where he sat silent said to him, ‘Now I have been sitting with Mr. Addison, what shall I say was his conversation? You know it has been nothing.’” He answered, ‘You may say if you please, Madam, that I have [...]’” before the quotation resumes. Boswell’s impulse to revise and find a specific appropriate place for Langton’s single repeated anecdote is stymied by the singular moments that each iteration of the anecdote occasions. Not wanting do away with either Johnson’s enthusiastic augmentation of Boswell’s joke about Goldsmith, or his incisive accusation about the witticism which forms the centre of the story about Addison, Boswell is forced to make a compromise, admit the repetition, and minimise the duplication of material. Similarly, in the case with the two anecdotes concerning knotting, the mere information conveyed is less important than the responses and expansions it draws.

Even when he is aware of and trying to minimise repeated material, the very nature of the conversations Boswell records dictates that some of his repetitions may be unavoidable, and indeed might be constitutive of the kind of talk whose representation he has set at his goal. A final example of this is a repeated witticism of ambiguous provenance, where Boswell is twice so caught up in the

moment of preserving a particular joke that he does not notice the repetition. The matter is quite inconsequential, but it shows Boswell’s search for biographical information colliding with his narrative’s demands for specific moments of narrated speech. On 5 April 1776, during a discussion about the projected trip Johnson was going to take with the Thrales to Italy, which was consequently abandoned after the death of their only son, Boswell warns against a rumour that their friend Baretti will be a bad guide, and favour his home district too much.

This same Mr. Jackson appears again in conversation of 15 September the next year:

On Monday, September 15, Dr. Johnson observed, that every body commended such parts of his “Journey to the Western Islands,” as were in their own way. “For instance, (said he,) Mr. Jackson (the all-knowing) told me, there was more good sense upon trade in it, than he should hear in the House of Commons in a year, except from Burke. Jones commended the part which treats of language; Burke that which describes the inhabitants of mountainous countries.”

This second attribution of the epithet comes from a section of Journal originally put down as indirect speech, and the words lie between quotation marks, and could therefore belong either to Boswell or Johnson himself. The same goes for the first instance, which is also worked up from indirect speech in the Journal, but this time the epithet is given both the parentheses and quotation marks. In both instances, the impetus for calling Mr. Jackson this very particular name could either be from the original conversation, or from Boswell’s enjoyment of such insider knowledge (witness his extended passages about Johnson’s nicknaming). In subsequent editions, Boswell adds a note to the first occasion explaining the epithet:

166 The extended discussion of Johnson’s propensity for nicknames, occasioned by Boswell noting Goldsmith’s dislike of them, is at 1/421.
A gentleman, who from his extraordinary stores of knowledge, has been stiled omniscient. Johnson, I think, very properly altered it to allknowing, as it is a verbum solemne, appropriated to the Supreme Being.167

At least retrospectively, then, the impetus for including the information, and the responsibility for both parentheses, belongs to Johnson. It is accompanied by a telling character point about Johnson’s piety. But the explanation was not immediately necessary for the first edition. This raises the possibility that the gloss is for the speech as it is presented in the book, rather than Johnson’s initial statements, which are obscured by the indirect speech. They could indicate Boswell’s recollection of the first time he heard Johnson’s pious objection. This would explain the out-of-place use of parenthesis. Whether the explanation is that Johnson twice used an epithet that Boswell would later remember had been explained to him in a conversation he had no record of, or that Boswell added identifying information to a relatively common name and later remembered that he had not included the anecdote that would explain his marker, we can see by the fact of the repetition that Boswell’s methods of conveying information again come up against the difficulties inherent in working with different scales. The huge scale of the friendship and the minute scale of individual words inescapably lead to redundancies that derive from the slight differences in narration peculiar to each particular iteration of a story.

Embedded Quotation: Competing Conceptions of Memory

If Boswell was largely successful in making sure that there was only a minimal amount of duplicate information in the *Life*, the problem was in many ways greater when he came to consider that the dynamics of conversation are themselves recursively repetitive, and that indeed, conversations between friends of long standing rely on repetitions and self-quotations in order to establish continuities and grease the wheels of friendship. Talking about oneself and one’s other conversations, as we have seen with the example of Boswell’s interactions with David Hume, was something that Boswell was both keen on and adept at. Johnson was, it would seem from the conversation recorded in the *Life*, no different. Johnson quotes himself frequently, in addition to moments where Boswell reminds him of things he has said. These moments reflect the way that memory works and their presence in the book (even if they are rare) shows that Boswell’s commitment to correct chronology

is always confronted with the dual nature of telling: that it gives information, but is also information in itself. When Johnson quotes himself in the book, the moment of telling becomes more important because it adds layers of information and melodramatic feeling to the work and Boswell cannot resist it, even though he thinks that biographical information has a correct place in the narrative separate from the moment of telling.\textsuperscript{168}

This is especially important in the consideration of memory and the event. Boswell encounters a narrative problem by his often influential presence in Johnson’s life from 1763 onwards, and it presents different manifestations looking back and looking forward. For events in Johnson’s life from before this time, Boswell is forced to become a researcher. He interviewed Johnson specifically on a few occasions with the idea of writing his biography in mind, and also tried to glean information from other people close to him, even if this work was not nearly assiduous or accurate. In interviewing Johnson, Boswell has to choose between presenting the interview in the book, and presenting the results of the interview. For the more extended interviews, he chooses the latter option, putting the tid-bits of information in as he says, “their proper place” in the chronological narrative. These tid-bits are prefaced with phrases such as “he once told me”, “he later told me” and so on, making jumps forward in time while still preserving Johnson’s talk. But there are other moments which are narratively more interesting where Johnson less formally volunteers information and stories about his past that cannot be easily excerpted from the contexts of the conversations in which Boswell heard them. When Johnson relates his memories of his own volition, it is not only the thing he remembers but the fact of his remembering that is worthy of being recorded. Added to this is the fact of repetition. There is also the consideration of the persistence of the past over the long time—almost two decades—during which Boswell pestered Johnson for such information. At some point Johnson’s information was no longer new. But Boswell’s familiarity with the information reverses the importance of its being recorded. This presents Boswell with bad options: record the repetition, abstract it into the imperfect, or ignore it. He does all these at different points and these combine to make melodramatic structures of memory.

Boswell encounters difficulties where Johnson’s prodigious memory—the book claims that “his memory was so tenacious, that he never forgot any thing that he either heard or read”\textsuperscript{169}—proves

\textsuperscript{168} Such moments of textually enacted memory open themselves into more affective possibilities both in the present and in the imagined past of the reader than simply what Lauren Berlant claims as a flattening, mimetic conception of emotional relations to the past. See her essay “Thinking About Feeling Historical” for her account of the multiple possibilities of historical-thinking, which in the case of Boswell and Johnson, I would argue, operates doubly though Johnson’s reflection and Boswell’s conception of himself as the one person able to adequately historicise such moments.

\textsuperscript{169} This claim comes in the record of his early education, 1/15.
more expansive than his own, even in the short span of time between hearing Johnson cite or quote something and putting it down in the record. This occurs both for inconsequential and consequential quotations, and it exposes a more serious question regarding the relationship between text and speech in this work. Boswell can be found fudging over lacunae in his journals. There are often intentional gaps where he wants to make sure of a line or a word. For example, the account of 17 May 1778 supplies the phrase “a French author” over a blank in the Journal where Boswell has been both unable to both remember and discover the source of Johnson’s citation “Il y a beaucoup de puerilités dans la guerre” (2/267).

This quotation remains a ghost, unattached to any author Johnson may have thought it belonged to, as it is not glossed in any edition. The closest line that I have been able to find is in a book recommended by Johnson in his list of books that would make a good school curriculum: Charles Rollin’s Histoire Romaine. In a passage describing an episode in the second Samnite war where a Roman general declared himself a Samnite, kicked his own messenger and declared it a casus belli: “Les Romaines en auroient un sujet d’autant plus légitime de faire la guerre. Quelle puérilité!” but this is a far cry from the line given by Johnson. So we are left with the possibility that either Boswell’s memory was bad enough to lose the meaning of Johnson’s original French quotation in addition to the name of the author and substituted this in its place, or that Johnson either misquoted this passage to make it a general statement or was entirely mistaken. None of these options is especially promising for the view of Boswell’s project of authenticity that can be constructed from it, but the space it opens up for considering Boswell’s strategies when dealing with doubtful information is potentially productive. Firstly, the stakes are higher where Boswell has Johnson quoting a published text, because he has to remember it well enough to reproduce it, or at least enough to find its source. Boswell creates such a situation where he has Johnson make a compact paraphrase of an argument in Sir Thomas Browne’s Pseudodoxia Epidemica: “‘Do the devils lie? No; for then Hell could not subsist.” (2/229) after ignoring a note he made in the Journal “X Vid the passage” and in the manuscript “See the passage” Boswell went to print without discovering the source.

170 Charles Rollin, Histoire Romaine, 3/205.
171 Journal, 15/4/1778. Extremes, 289; Beinecke 44/1000, 92; MS 695, Bonnell, 212.
The passage is paraphrased in similar phrasing in Johnson’s *Adventurer* Essay Number 50, “On Lying.”

> It is the peculiar condition of falsehood, to be equally detested by the good and bad:
> “The devils,” says Sir Thomas Brown, “do not tell lies to one another; for truth is necessary to all societies: nor can the society of hell subsist without it.”

The whole difficulty of this attribution shows in small Boswell’s trouble in fusing his idea of a transcendent accuracy with his sense of Johnson’s own prodigious memory. The ideal of truth to the events as Boswell notes them in his Journal have Johnson skilfully reproducing the substance of a very involved paragraph in a text following his summary of it in one of his own essays, but his instinct through stages of revision is to find the attribution and presumably to make Johnson’s more pithy summary to conform to it. During a discussion on exaggerated praise with Mrs. Thrale on 1 April 1781, Boswell omits the central section of the dispute, because he has been unable to fill gaps he has left for Johnson’s two operative quotations:

> “No, as Roger Ascham says You are neither a friend nor a ______ foe.’ Or to give Dr. Young, _______.” Come, said she, “you are not to attack my favourite poet.” Said somebody- “This is the character of my mistress.” “And of my mistress’s poet,” said the doctor. “And yet” (with a pleasing pause and leering smile), she is the first woman of the world.”

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172 *Adventurer* 50.
The line from Ascham should read “Neither fast to friend, nor fearful to foe” and is from a passage in his *Schoolmaster* which discusses the dispositions of students with quick wits. Johnson actually cites this line twice in the *Dictionary* in the definitions for both *fast* and *foe*, but not *friend*, where Boswell might have looked for it. The Young citation is, of course, lost in the mists of time, and the final version in the *Life* simply jumps over the lost citations and Mrs. Thrale’s defence of her “favourite poet” to the resumption of Johnson’s censure of Mrs. Thrale’s overly fulsome praise of her friend.

During the conversation on 16 October 1769, we can see a similar failure to follow up on the hints Boswell managed to save in his Journal. The Journal account has Boswell note that Johnson quoted Dryden and then gives the two catchwords “gentle” and “tempestuous”.

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In the manuscript of the *Life*, Boswell goes as far as adding an instruction to himself: “He repeated his lines on love (gentle, tempestuous, &c.; look for them)” and a marginal hand marks this up for further querying. 175

The final version augments *his lines* to read *some fine lines* and replaces the instruction with “(which I have now forgotten)”.

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He observed, that in Dryden’s poetry there were passages drawn from a profundity which Pope could never reach. He repeated some fine lines on love, by the former, (which I have now forgotten,) and gave great applause to the character of Zimri.

(1/317)

The hints make the citation easy enough to find: they come from a speech by the ‘great commander’ Placidus in Dryden’s *Tyrannick Love: or the Royal Martyr*:

Love various minds does variously inspire,
It stirs in gentle bosoms gentle fire,
Like that of incense on the altar laid:
But raging flames tempestuous souls invade;
A fire which every windy passion blows,
With pride it mounts, or with revenge it glows.  

But Boswell need not have looked through the entire works of Dryden to find the passage, as it is included as a description of the author’s character in Johnson’s Life of Dryden. Boswell’s failure to follow up here is accompanied by marginal questions all the way to the Revises, where the admission is added in favour of the catch-words which had already been set in type and a blank left in place of the phrase “look them up”. Notwithstanding, we can see in the operation two things: first, Boswell’s capitulation to the text is such that he feels as though he can accurately represent Johnson’s version of the quotation by relying on only three words, Love, gentle, tempestuous, out of the six full lines that Johnson recites. This is a major condensation, one we should imagine as a kind of a limit case for the general scantiness of Boswell’s notes and his ability to reconstitute speech out of them. Obviously Boswell is more confident of being able to reproduce forty-two words from three because they are already preserved in print and should be easily locatable. This does not, however, remove the possibility that the general tenor of his confidence in reproducing speech was the same and that we should therefore consider Boswell’s composition as reflecting something like this rate of preservation even in the parts of conversation that he has recorded: not only does the vast amount of conversation that does not make it into his record drop off, but also the record itself could only represent a minimal proportion of the discussion around the particular topics. Boswell, though, assures his readers that he improved, and the rate of reproduction in his later journals can be assumed to be much better.

We are, however, left with the problem presented here: when faced with two layers of quotation, mediated through his own recollection, Boswell’s preference is to trust print to contain the quoted text, rather than to trust his memory of the singular instantiations of it in Johnson’s conversation. And Boswell is not content to silently omit such citations: one of his goals is to produce curiosities, after all, and scattered verses quoted in the flesh by Johnson constitute a sub-section of his curious conversation large enough to draw a descriptive comment from Boswell himself. In the Journal entry for 10 April 1776, Boswell gives himself a hint for three lines of verse that he did manage to find. The context is a conversation about the poet Flatman, and Boswell notes in his initial account that “Johnson repeated Rochester’s verses on Flatman. I like to put down all the passages that I hear Johnson repeat: he stamps a value on them.” Boswell does not actually put down the passage itself,

176 John Dryden, Tyrannick Love: or the Royal Martyr, Act II, Scene i.
177 Johnson, Lives of the Poets, 1/255.
178 Life Page Proofs, Houghton MS Hyde 51, Case 9 (24) 1/317.
179 Journal, 10/4/1776. OF, 325; Beinecke 43/993, 42.
but he was able to locate it for the *Life*. There it is accompanied by an animadversion (“which I think, by much too severe”) to distance Boswell from Johnson’s using the verses in a general conversation about Flatman. The passage comes with an updated version of the claim about Johnson’s recitations:

I like to recollect all the passages that I heard Johnson repeat: it stamps a value on them.

The transformation of the statement shows us the overriding mode of transformation in from the Journal to the *Life*: Boswell makes the text more general, and speaks for all time. Most telling, perhaps, is the change from having Johnson stamp a value on his favourite passages to Boswell’s practice of recollection of Johnson’s recitations.

The extra step could serve as a model not simply for Johnson’s citations but also his original comments, conversation and talk. Boswell sees himself as the guarantor of the value of Johnson’s speech by way of his project of recollection and preservation in print. But, as we have seen with the examples of his troubled dealings with Johnson’s oral quotations, there is no originary moment for Boswell to appeal to: he relies on the preceding text to guarantee his representation of Johnson’s prodigious memory, but then cannot always find the texts to reproduce them and demonstrate Johnson’s feats of learning. Worse, he also reserves for himself a counterfactual space of exception with reference to Johnson’s quotations, and notes points where Johnson either could have been wrong or was indeed wrong. The possibility of Johnson, rather than Boswell the intermediary being wrong is present throughout the book. In conversation in 1776, Boswell fills in the gaps he has left for the specific classical citation Johnson’s boast about the *Rambler* being translated into Russian. Johnson compares himself to Horace’s claim that he was read as far away as the Rhone and states that the Wolga/Volga is further for Johnson than the Rhone had been for Horace. While there is no extant Journal for this conversation, Boswell left gaps in the manuscript for both rivers in order to later look up the citation, and he succeeded, first on the manuscript page in supplying the name of the river in Russia and by the proof stage he had supplied the name of the Rhone.
The gap in the text leaves open the possibility that Johnson could have either misquoted Horace or cited another of the places mentioned in the text.\textsuperscript{180}

In his Journal account of a conversation about Thomas Gray on 27 March 1775, Boswell leaves another such gap to find some lines quoted by Johnson in support of his claim that Gray was “dull in a new way.” Boswell leaves a gap at the top of the new page. He is confident at this point about the recovery of the lines enough to incorporate the lost text into the syntax of the sentence.\textsuperscript{181}

\textsuperscript{180} AJ, 213 (giving MS instead of lost original); MS 829. The reference is to the conclusion of Horace’s second book of odes, (2.20 17-20) where Horace lists the inhabitants of the Rhone among many distant peoples who have access to his work.

\textsuperscript{181} Journal, 27/3/1775. OY, 105; Beinecke 42/988, 80-1.
But, unable to find the lines, Boswell substitutes the words “repeated some ludicrous lines, which have escaped my memory” for his account in the Life:

Johnson. “Sir, he was dull in company, dull in his closet, dull everywhere. He was dull in a new way, and that made many people think him great. He was a mechanical poet.” He then repeated some ludicrous lines, which have escaped my memory, and said, “Is not that great, like his Odes?” Mrs. Thrale maintained that his Odes were melodious; upon which he exclaimed,

“Weave the warp, and weave the woof.”

(1/466)

This is a useful admission, because what he has preserved, rather than any hints about the line, is Johnson’s challenge “Is not that GREAT, like his Odes?”, which initiates a collaborative discussion of the value of particular lines of Gray’s verse between Boswell, Johnson, and Mrs. Thrale, who is Gray’s principal defender in the conversation. Curiously, after noting Mrs. Thrale’s position in the Journal, Boswell adds indeterminacy in the introduction of the next line discussed: “He repeated, or she did”, which in the Life, becomes “upon which he exclaimed”, making the line—“Weave the warp and weave the woof” (the first line of Gray’s “The Curse upon Edward”—evidence on Johnson’s part of Gray’s badness rather than retaining the possibility that Mrs. Thrale saw in the same line a potential defence of the poet. After Boswell extracts an admission that the next line—“The winding-sheet of Edward’s race”—is good, Johnson extends the quotation one more line in order to denounce it with contempt: “Give ample verge and room enough”. In his Life of Gray Johnson singles out these two lines for particular censure, doubting the mechanics of weaving are presented accurately, and saying “He has, however no other line as bad” about the sequel. In the Journal, Boswell only notes down the first two words of the line, certainly a fair indication of where to go in order to find them, but does include he “owned it was not good” an admission that is not retained for the Life. So far, this discussion has run the gamut of Boswell’s treatments of Johnson’s quotations: full records, admissions of forgetfulness and cribbed reminders, but nowhere is Johnson stamping a value on the verse. Indeed he is vigorously denouncing its quality. Then Johnson makes a final concession to Gay’s talents:

182 Johnson, Lives of the Poets, 2/391.
A value-stamping exercise such as this is worth noting for two reasons. The first is that Boswell is familiar enough with the line to know where Johnson has erred, but also that in the Journal version, which is substantially the same, he uses the note of the one errant word as a way to not have to put down the whole passage, and that Boswell maintains this approach even though he gives many other extended passages in the hope that they will be associated with Johnson’s approbation of them. Secondly, Johnson’s admission of forgetting the other stanza he approves of not only further undercuts Boswell’s general claim about his inerrant memory, but also leaves hanging the possibility of one stanza in the Elegy that stands out in Johnson’s estimation, deserving, but not attaining the accolade. Johnson concludes his *Life of Gray* by praising the Elegy, in particular claiming that there is a group of four stanzas that seem wholly original to him yet true to life. The stanza he cites here is the second of these, meaning that if his opinions remained substantially the same, as they did with his displeasure about “The Curse upon Edward” he was probably thinking of some lines near the ones he hit at.

**Conversational Recursion: Johnson Quoting Johnson**

The admission of forgetting is also an instance of Boswell showing momentary glimpses of life in its fullness. Boswell’s account of the conversation encounters an abrupt shift into a new topic after the admission. Boswell gives no account of how the conversation moved from the fizzing of Johnson singling out something only to forget it to the convoluted topic of a socially mis-matched marriage. In the Journal, this topic is introduced as having been discussed at tea, but this detail is omitted in the *Life*. That is to say, the edges of a quotation may be well-defined, even when they trail off into an admission of forgetting, but they always relate to the narrative progression of the rest of the scenes in which they are placed. If Boswell presents Johnson’s citations primarily as curiosities, even when he is being forgetful, they are not set off from the flow of the conversation in the same manner as his documentary curiosities. The result is that the practice of quotation in conversation is blended in to
the text, and adds a layer of complexity to the textual strategies of representation. Similarly, Boswell is left with vexing problems when the quotations in the text are not from text, but of the same order of memory as his account is. Quotation of speech in speech, is, of course a reliably common and even necessary feature of speech and it requires strict representation in print. But as we have seen with regard to Boswell’s stimulating conversation and continuity by invoking his famous friends, the dynamics of quoting speech in text can be troublesome. Johnson and his companions can be found continually quoting themselves and others through the Life, and this adds an extra layer of complexity to the assumptions about what quotation of speech in text can be made to do. In the habitual mode of raconteurs, and the provocative discursive mode of debate, the sayings of other people are a form of currency where both the gossipy retelling of a juicy statement (such as the hints Boswell collects and disperses about Johnson’s possible Jacobitism, (1/10, 1/233-4, 1/343, 1/396, 1/474, 2/145, 2/149, 2/432, 2/450) and the story about his green-room behaviour that Boswell heard from David Hume at 1/108) and the jocular and impressed retelling of certain triumphs, second-hand speech circulates freely around the world of Boswell’s Journal. It is no surprise, then, that we find evidence of the difficulties involved for Boswell and his collaborators in representing layered citations of speech. Embedded citations in anecdotes become, in their transferral to text, a source of great frustration for the typesetters. Embedded citations require an adaptation of the technology of quotation to display the complexities involved in the representation of representation itself. The most common convention followed in Boswell’s text is the alternation between his standard double quotation mark, and single marks. When some of these anecdotes are supplied by the trusted sources Boswell uses to augment his lighter years, the narrative accommodations of the speech differ from Boswell’s representations, and problems arise. What is more, when Boswell demonstrates that he is quoting texts from these sources, he uses a double quotation mark, meaning that speech introduced from within these letters from Maxwell, for instance, or Beauclerk, it alternates into single quotes, and any embedded quotation within those speeches is made to revert to double quotations. Two examples from the Langtoniana can demonstrate this. First, a self-sufficient statement is presented on its own:

“*There is nothing more likely to betray a man into absurdity than condescension; when he seems to suppose his understanding too powerful for his company.*”

(2/330)

The very next saying is displaced into the narrative:
“Having asked Mr. Langton if his father and mother had fate for their pictures, which he thought it right for each generation of a family to do, and being told they had opposed it, he said, ‘Sir, among the infractionosties of the human mind, I know not if it may not be one, that there is a superstitious reluctance to fit for a picture.’”

As we can see in this example, where the end of an embedded quotation coincides with the end of a speech, there is often confusion in the manuscripts about what layer of quotation is ending, and this creates many difficulties for compositors, some of which remain unresolved in the final version of the first edition of the book. The problem resides in the conjunction of the simplicity of the technology (the alternation between two forms of the same mark) and the endlessly complex potential of citational speech. Quotation marks cannot be simultaneously the solution for layered speech and a consistent benchmark of understanding throughout the work. This means that whenever someone is telling a story about what someone else said, or challenging someone with what he said earlier on the same topic, there is always the potential for confusion, and the exposure of the instability of quotation itself.

If Boswell’s efforts in rendering layered citations come up against the limits of the technology he is using, there are other considerations when the generic nature of the materials is taken into account. Where speakers are being anecdotal and layering citations in stories, the technique for embedded quotation is relatively uncontroversial, so long as the authority of the speaker to relate the scene either from eyewitnesses or reliable second-hand versions is absolute. We have seen how in conversation Boswell smarted when the story of his first encounter with Johnson was mangled and misrepresented. This only came about because of the contest of authenticity between the speakers: Murphy as storyteller and Boswell as participant-witness. The two different roles contain within them different standards of authenticity, and different possible significations for their stories. In the frame of biographical narrative in which Boswell sets his anecdotes about Johnson, the question of authority falls into a similar conundrum. Johnson often quotes himself. His verbatim accounts of things he said in the past are of a simultaneously more authentic and less reliable order of accuracy than Boswell’s record and the scattered memories of other associates. As we have seen with the meeting with George the Third, some of these memories are enmeshed with each other and the standards of quotations within these social groups are not necessarily the same. Boswell’s response is trust. But we can see

183 In the manuscript version, the first example is in Langton’s hand, and the second is in Boswell’s. As an indication of how challenging this copy must have been to work with, neither of the anecdotes uses any quotation marks whatever. See MS Papers Apart; Beinecke (M 145) 56/1187, 662-3.
that Boswell’s memory itself is also less capable than he wishes it to be from the illustrations of Johnson’s prodigious talent at quoting verse. In his journals Boswell leaves gaps, assuming the quotations are correct and he can fill them in later. A couple of times this does not work and he cannot find the passage, and in rare cases, he finds Johnson to be wrong in even the parts that Boswell himself was able to note down, and he is forced to point this out to his readers as a rare slip as in the conversation about the merits of Gray’s verse. But all this points to a fundamental problem in Boswell’s project: the melodramatic structures of memory require transformation into acceptable narrative even before the book is begun. Life itself is made up of repetitive events, and more importantly for Boswell’s book, which depends upon the scale of quotidian discussion, repeated speech about repeated events. Boswell therefore has to elide much of the actual content of conversations. People remember the same things repeatedly; they change their minds and change them back again; they sometimes quote themselves accurately but more often misremember; their memories often do not accord with those of other participants in conversations. All of these difficulties mean that Boswell’s dream of a transparent relationship between his records and a biographical truth derived from the precepts set out in Johnson’s consideration of biography in the *Rambler* remains elusive and cannot be turned into a coherent practice of biographical narrative writing. He is left with a set of anecdotes that he must anyway shape into something else.

As with telling stories about other people, in the normal course of conversation it is unremarkable for people to quote themselves with varying degrees of accuracy. The compact with the listener is that the quotation can either be the point of the anecdote, or that it must propel narrative. Additionally, there is an assurance of authenticity that comes from the fact that the words quoted come from the same mouth that said them. Even so, just as Boswell complains that text is insufficient to preserve tone, self-quotation in oral narrative cannot guarantee the replication of the particular sounds of speech. When Boswell quotes Johnson telling a story that centres on what he said, not only is he prefiguring Boswell’s practices of encapsulating complex events in simplified memorable near-caricature, he is also occluding Boswell’s access to the original event, presenting his biographer instead with a meta-narrative. The two alternate courses which Boswell adopts with relation to the information he receives from Johnson’s stories about himself can help us to understand what Boswell thinks facts are for and what they can do, as well as his scale of attention to the particular qualities and rhythms of Johnson’s speech. Where Johnson quotes himself, we can see (Boswell’s version of) him considering how he appears to other people, and falling into the mode of his own caricature.

For example, when Johnson tells his story of rhetorical triumph over the Blue-stocking Mrs. Macaulay on 22 July 1763 he makes sure to have two *Madams* in close succession:
He again insisted on the duty of maintaining subordination of rank. “Sir, I would no more deprive a nobleman of his respect, than of his money. I consider myself as acting a part in the great system of society, and I do to others as I would have them to do to me. I would behave to a nobleman as I should expect he would behave to me, were I a nobleman and he Sam. Johnson. Sir, there is one Mrs. Macaulay in this town, a great republican. One day when I was at her house, I put on a very grave countenance, and said to her, ‘Madam, I am now become a convert to your way of thinking. I am convinced that all mankind are upon an equal footing; and to give you an unquestionable proof, Madam, that I am in earnest, here is a very sensible, civil, well-behaved fellow-citizen, your footman; I desire that he may be allowed to sit down and dine with us.’ I thus, Sir, shewed her the absurdity of the levelling doctrine. She has never liked me since. Sir, your levellers wish to level down as far as themselves; but they cannot bear levelling up to themselves. They would all have some people under them; why not then have some people above them?”

(1/243)

Here Johnson is aping the rhetorical forms that Boswell associates with him throughout the book. Boswell’s Journal, though, is missing both of the madam-s, and the whole section of the anecdote beginning One day, is given in indirect discourse. The recursive relationship between Johnson’s representation of himself, and Boswell’s rendering of it is based on the troubled foundations of an initial account that was stripped of the vivacity of direct speech, if this information can even be said to have been delivered at that point at all. This is a relatively different sort of modification of Johnson’s self-quotation than can be found where he is thinking biographically about himself at Boswell’s request:

184 Journal, 22/7/1763. LJ, 288; Beinecke, 37/931, 706-7.
Johnson told me, “Sir, the way in which the Plan of my Dictionary came to be inscribed to Lord Chesterfield, was this: I had neglected to write it by the time appointed. Dodside suggested a desire to have it addressed to Lord Chesterfield. I laid hold of this as a pretext for delay, that it might be better done, and let Dodside have his desire. I said to my friend Dr. Bathurst, ‘Now if any good comes of my addressing to Lord Chesterfield, it will be ascribed to deep policy, when, in fact, it was only a casual excuse for laziness.’”

Johnson’s embedded speech is the explanatory end of longer anecdote, augmenting what has already been established in a later conversation about the events. It is part of the information obtained by semiformal interview (Boswell gives a footnote of the time and place: “September 22, 1777, going from Ashbourne in Derbyshire, to see Islam”) which he has subsequently restored to its “rightful place”.

Thus when Johnson is aware that an autobiographical reflection can, in conversation with Boswell, become biographical material, the version of his past self he presents to Boswell can be seen as a kind of preparatory collaboration with the principles of Boswell’s text. But because the quotations occur only within texts made by Boswell, it is unlikely that we can get an independent sense of exactly how Johnson wanted Boswell to think he sounded when he spoke. Similarly, Boswell is forced to elevate these occasions of embedded self-quotation to a more rigid set of truth-criteria, because they are first-hand accounts. Similarly, the information obtained from Dr. Adams at Oxford about Johnson’s early years is treated as totally unassailable information, even though it is taken from the distant reflections of an old man. Boswell’s conception of sayings being only capable of preservation if they are preserved while fresh applies principally to himself. One of the complaints about Boswell’s inaccuracies when dealing with materials he obtained from Johnson in the interviews he conducted in the 1770s is that he takes the factual detail too seriously, leading him into errors he should have been able to avoid (such as the implausible details about the young Johnson wanting to hear Jacobite sermons to give one example); in parallel, Boswell is committed to seeing Johnson’s authority in quoting himself as unassailable, making Johnson doubly the author and reviser of those historically distanced portions of the text that are only derived from Boswell’s accounts in their outermost layers of narration. What we can see when Johnson is made to quote himself, then, is a sort of biographical reflection that is quite different from the sort of quotation that comes about purely through Boswell’s usual practices of writing things down. We are pressed into a separate zone of biographical
awareness, where the facts, coming as they do as narrative and from the initiative of the biographical subject himself are given an ambiguity where they are both closer to the truth, because more authentic, and further from it, because not naively given. The reason for this is that the scale of reflection is different for both. Boswell’s conception of events and their significance, and his conception of speech as a significant component of events is in his journals bounded by a horizon of only a few days: first order speech is relatively inconsequential, except when it can be made to reveal minute particulars of character. Second order speech, though, is embedded in the speech of distant reflection, and affords a different perspective and a different scale: Johnson quoting himself is reflective, and orders his events not according to the immediately memorable, but the enduring. These different scales derive from technical considerations of both the writing of speech, and the narration of memories, but their effects are far from constrained to style: they mark generic shifts that affect the modes of signification in the book, and allow for different forms of consideration, from the goals of education and delight found in Boswell’s native narration, to the wistful, occasionally maudlin and sentimental reflections of the older man contemplating his life. All of these considerations combine in the *Life* to make it a hybrid work where, even in the act of trying to prove definitive, Boswell invites the conjunction of disparate modes and standards of authenticity on different scales. Whether it is through accidental repetitions, deliberate constructions of scenes or the play of continuities that derive from long acquaintance, Boswell’s methods of quotation are intimately linked not only with the forms and structures of his work, but with the content itself. His stylistic and narrative choices are the result of the restrictions of his methods, but also the inevitable conjunction of different scales of observation involved in perceiving and discussing life.
Chapter Three: Parenthetical Intervention in Dialogue

One of the most striking discoveries that resulted from the recovery of Boswell’s private papers came in the form of a document that Boswell himself considered important and, in a typical move, made a great deal of fuss and enjoyment about suppressing. The document, set apart and labelled “Extraordinary Johnsoniana—Tacenda”\(^ {185} \) contains a finely worked account of a conversation that took place on 20 April 1783. Boswell, joined by the painter Mauritius Lowe, was deliberately trying to find information from Mrs. Desmoulins about Johnson’s sexual proclivities. He takes great care in the meticulous doling out of revelation in the form of a dialogue in which the questioners are enthralled, just daring to ask more, and eagerly anticipating each response. The chief achievement of the secret document is the management of the fevered tone in which the questioning is conducted. The most salient contributor to this management of the tone is the augmentation of the dialogue form with frequent parenthetical phrases, reaching beyond the intentionally titillating slow release of the revelations to add tonal, gestural and reactive information that the bare frame of the dialogue could not impart on its own. Lowe introduces the subject of Johnson’s chastity, trying to bait Mrs. Desmoulins into disclosure saying “I believe he was chaste even with his wife, and that it was quite a Platonic connection (grinning a smile with his one eye to me)”.

Mrs. Desmoulins takes the bait and submits to the interrogation, gossiping first about Johnson’s married life, including an imitation of Garrick’s mimicking Johnson, accompanied by the unmarked parenthesis “blowing in his manner” to explain the exclamations “ph ph”.

\(^{185} \) Journal 20/4/1783. \textit{AJ}, 110-3; Beinecke 45/1014, 6 c-j.
The conversation then moves further into the scandalous by way of discussing Johnson’s sleeping arrangements, to which Lowe replies “(waggishly)” and then asks about Johnson’s occasional interactions with Mrs. Desmoulins herself.

When Mrs. Desmoulins obliges the text includes “(Lowe and I closing in upon her to listen)”, indicating economically the intense interest of the listeners and indicating the importance of what is about to come for the readers privileged to be brought into Boswell’s secret account.

When Boswell comes to ask directly whether Johnson ever fondled or kissed her, the question is interrupted by yet another parenthesis “(Lowe like to jump out of his skin)”:
This leads into the climax of the account of questioning and revelation, a significant action that exceeds the capacities of language and requires the intervention of Boswell as a writer to include the information conveyed by it:

Bos And was it something different than a Father’s kiss? Mrs D Yes indeed. Lowe (approaching his hand to her bosom.) But would he?- eh? Mrs D Sir he never did any thing that was beyond the limits of decency. Lowe And could you say Madam upon your oath that you were certain he was capable—Mrs D Y-yes Sir. 186

The conversation continues through to the point where Boswell in his narrative voice can pronounce the whole conversation “Strange”, but the storm of parentheses ends with Mrs. Desmoulines limiting the possible range of Lowe’s gestures with her invocation of decency. All this nicely demonstrates the potential of gesture to embody things that cannot be verbalised in conversation. This chapter analyses Boswell’s deployment of parentheses as method of embodying the similar contradictory restraint

186 Beinecke 45/1014, 6 j. The text given in AJ is worked up into the style of the dialogue in the Life, regularising Boswell’s rougher and more excited jotting-down.

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placed on him by his choice of presenting much of his account of Johnson’s life in scenes composed of dialogue. As I have discussed in previous chapters, dialogue presented Boswell with various advantages and generic contexts that made sense for the kind of book he wanted to write, but came with the disadvantage that dialogue entails the explicit absence of an authorial presence directing the release and presentation of information in the narrative.

**Actions and Tones: Observation and Interpretation**

The parenthesis, used throughout the *Life of Johnson* in the familiar style of the stage direction, allows Boswell to smuggle contextual information, always partly interpretive, back into the text of the dialogue. As in the various examples in the tacenda, he uses the technique wherever he uses dialogue, often to clarify meanings or specific interlocutors, to indicate props, or delineate gestures, and more interestingly to supplement dialogue with additional information about tone, and his own speculations about the internal psychological experiences of his characters, the most important and therefore most consistently modified of whom is obviously Johnson. The simplest and most repeated of these parentheses convey the bare indication that the speaker, most often Johnson, is “(smiling)” or “(laughing)”, but the technique is also available for extended rumination about Johnson’s emotions and multiple details of his movements, both voluntary and involuntary.

The technique is not exclusive to the *Life*, not something that Boswell hit upon to independently solve the specific problems of writing biography. In fact, Boswell uses parenthetical stage directions throughout the span of his records in the Journal, even in spaces where he is not expecting readers—that is, he uses them in sections where, at least in the pretence of marking the “Extraordinary Johnsoniana” as “tacenda”, he is not imagining an audience for his records. They are an important part of his practice, and he uses them for varied purposes. Sometimes the parenthesis is used to modify or qualify a statement, either by describing the tone, or clarifying the meaning. Boswell uses parenthesis also to supplement the content of a statement by describing a gesture that is used by the speakers themselves to augment what they are saying or to make direct reference to their surroundings.

Boswell retains the spirit of the augmentation offered by gesture by also using parentheses to make exegetic commentary on certain statements. He provides information based on situated visual observation of the speaker, but he only does this from within the instant of writing. At times this occurs from the much more distant retrospective position of remembering his own reactions.
Additionally, he uses parentheses in the Journal to abstract the content of a particular statement as a way of condensation, reticence or preservation in the face of memory loss, and to make metatextual notes about the relative accuracy of what he has remembered. Examples of each of these different types of parentheses abound in journal sections that have nothing to do with Johnson. Actions include “(striking him gently on the shoulder)”, “(with a low bow)”, “(seizing a hair on my head)”, “(stretching himself in his chair)”, “(acting it admirably all the time)”, “(with a smile & countenance perfectly expressive of confidence and contempt)”, “(pointing to the captain)”, “(taking my father by the hand)”, “(striking his comick bosom)”, “with eyes sparkling”, “(taking his hand)”, “(as he looked at his watch)”, “—Making a sign that she wd. wait till the King went away—”, “(dashing high flavoured claret into his glass)”, “(drawing the money to him)”, “(stretching out his arm some distance from his body)”, “(smiling)”, “looking to me”. All these actions serve to augment the bare content of the transcript by including slippery signifiers of non-linguistic events. Often, as in many of these examples and the overflow of content that Boswell describes in the “Tacenda”, these actions are voluntary significant actions on the part of the speaker, who uses the body to extend past the meaning-potential of language. Complementing this and moving beyond it, Boswell notes gestures and actions that are significant but involuntary, and thus moves into the troubled terrain of on-the-spot interpretation. In order to present the meaning-potential and context of his material, Boswell finds himself needing to add contextual information about the movements and actions of the participants in the conversation. Sometimes in the Journal these events are straightforward in how they are to be interpreted: “(laughing)”, “(roaring boisterously)”, “(laughing pretty heartily)”, “(laughing)”, “(laughing—rather—roughly)”, “(laughingly)”, but the inclusion of information that a speaker is laughing tends to be at once a fact and an interpretation. Far from being a simple fact, laughter in parentheses presents us with an occasion for meditation on the continual assessment and characterisation of tone and intention that is necessary in various aspects of conversation, whether taking part in one, watching it, or, in Boswell’s extreme, presenting it in text in a moment by moment, blow by blow development.


Cues such as laughter are necessary, and cannot be entirely contained in the full flow of dialogic presentation. They are equally subject to the contingency of characterisation, which is Boswell’s principal use for the parenthetical stage direction: he seeks to characterise and therefore control the tone of a statement. The starting point to analyse the purpose of this is the fact that in the examples quoted above, even laughter is subject to Boswell’s interpretation: it can be done pretty heartily, roughly, or, on revision, rather roughly. In opening a zone of articulation within laughter for the characterisation of tone, Boswell opens up an endless series of possible characterisation: a dialectic of additional information and interpretation of this context that could extend infinitely, interstitially slowing the temporal flow that I have already argued that is the chief advantage of presenting these conversations as dialogue.

Boswell was slow to move to this style of tonal description within parentheses: the first clear examples of them come from 1774, that is, a full ten years into his journal-keeping habits. They add information on a split level: the level first of factual qualification, where for instance the tone was angry and therefore the speaker was angry, but also the interpretive level, offering data about Boswell’s subjective position within the conversation, and additionally his impression upon reflection when writing up the events in his Journal. This here is the slippery moment because the trace of these feelings and explanatory interpretations of speakers’ motives leaves little trace of the aetiology of Boswell’s suspicions about speakers’ intentions. The key point is that Boswell’s impulse is to qualify statements made by other people with evidence of his interpretations at the time, which are themselves unevidenced: there is no evidence for tone, this is lost, and Boswell must himself adopt the position of a witness. It is only his testimony that will assure that his interpretations, or suggested readings based on tone, leave no evidentiary trace except for his subsequent reflection.

I take the phrase “parenthetical stage directions” from the work of Ralph Rader, who notes that while the vividness of these interventions has often been a source of praise for Boswell’s skill, this does not uniformly lead to incisive analysis of precisely how Boswell is operating in his more developed scenes. Part of the trouble, perhaps, is treating the pointing of action by parenthesis as a given or a kind of uncomplicated substitute to the dialogue in the way that a play-text instructs an actor on the important gestures. I do not wish to limit the potential of parenthesis to resonate with writing in genres other than play-texts. In fact, the argument that I develop below depends on an image of transcription that is less like a play-text, in which the stage directions are explicit instructions for

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189 Ralph W. Rader, “Literary Form in Factual Narrative”, 39. Colby Kullman notes that Boswell’s careful arrangement of the visual concentrates most frequently on his “most significant dramatic scenes” and derives more from his sense of the pacing and situation of conversation as an art form than from any appreciation of the individual actions. See “Boswell and the Art of Conversation”, 85-9.
performers to convey the correct meaning before the fact, than they are to other contemporary factual genres of reporting, particularly the double reporting, official and journalistic, that occurred in this period in the law courts, and in which Boswell was an occasional practitioner. Parentheses in transcripts and reports are closer to the type described here because they occur as a method to supplement what is supposed to be the barest form of verbal information there is: direct, sworn testimony. The fact that a witness on the stand is simultaneously a stream of evidentiary speech and the source of contextual cues and tones that allow their own speech to be doubted, making all tone potentially subject to the scrutiny of the courts and the public, means that the transcript record of a trial is never sufficient, and must be always amenable to the modification and qualification of gesture and tone. Just as Boswell makes interpretive interventions throughout the Life, a report of evidence in a courtroom must intervene to identify intentional gestures, but also allows the possibility of the imposed interpretations of an observer. Parenthesis in this context is thus a double zone, in which subjective impressions are folded into an ostensibly objective account of proceedings that are deliberately arranged for the maximisation of accuracy. Boswell’s version of this technique of adding information to his bare transcripts is not only, therefore, the result of a life of journal-keeping, but his

190 See Tankard, Facts and Inventions for Boswell’s sporadic engagement in reporting for various journals with which he was associated, such as the Public Advertiser, The St James Chronicle and the Evening Chronicle. Boswell was never a neutral reporter in these pieces. He was often engaged in the matter at hand (as with the Douglas Case and the Hackman case) or using the occasion as a vehicle for publicity for himself. Johnson and Boswell were involved with other modes of writing relevant to these considerations, for instance Johnson’s decidedly constructed Parliamentary Debates, and both men’s efforts in writing in the genre of last words, or dying thoughts, Johnson for Dr. Dodd the divine and convicted forger, and Boswell for his client the doomed sheep-stealer John Reid. Each of these genres involves the author is presenting purported speech alongside contemplative action in a heightened setting. For Johnson’s parliamentary reports, see Nikki Hessell, Literary Authors, Parliamentary Reporters, and for issues surrounding the difficulties and niceties of language in Parliamentary debates more generally, see Dror Warhman, “Virtual Representation: Parliamentary Reporting and Languages of Class in the 1790s”. For Boswell’s efforts on behalf of Reid, see Gordon Turnbull, “Boswell and Sympathy: the Trial and Execution of John Reid”, and Shirley Tung’s “Dead Man Talking: James Boswell, Ghostwriting, and the Dying Speech of John Reid”.

191 There is, of course a large difference between an official transcript and one produced for public information. As Alexander Welsh describes in his study Strong Representations, English courtrooms changed a great deal over the Eighteenth Century in how they viewed different types of evidence, particularly circumstantial evidence, which gained greatly in prestige as independent and seemingly neutral pieces of information could not be partial or corrupt like a single witness. Additionally, the practice of keeping a trial transcript was initially something done for the public, as opposed to an official, precedent-setting record. This suggests that the dramatic conventions appeal to public desires to judge character over and above the evidentiary content of a witness’s remarks (24-32). It was, according to Welsh, only in the 1760s that cross-examination by defence counsel began (15). See also J.M. Beattie, “Scales of Justice” 232-5, for the rise of defence counsel. Boswell’s legal experience in Scotland was different, as cases were argued through written briefs and sworn statements rather than potentially dramatic witness testimony. J. T. Scanlan argues that even outside the dramatic conventions of court reporting, Boswell’s work as a lawyer in both jurisdictions has a decided impact on Boswell’s style that was “virtually automatic”, “The Example of Edmond Malone”, 127. Even in English courts, verbal testimony was seen as the least prestigious type of evidence until right at the end of the century. The question of the exactness of words was given over to the power of the oath rather than doubting memory. Hearsay was only objected to on the basis that the evidence of someone being represented by a witness was not itself sworn, rather than any doubts about the quality of the reproduction being worn down. J.M. Beattie, “Scales of Justice” (234-5); see also John H. Langbein, “Historical Foundations of the Law of Evidence”, 1174. This means that for courtroom accounts of the proceedings of trials, the exactitude of statements made, and the emotional and gestural particularities of the performance of witnesses was only beginning to be seen as important. See James Oldham, “Truth Telling in the Eighteenth-Century English Courtroom”, 96.
life time of practice in the law, and his knowledge of the small adjustments to meaning that tone can make.

By the time Boswell came to assemble his materials into the Life, he was not only already adept in the use of parenthetical stage directions for a number of purposes, but he had a ready-made stock of them waiting in his Journal, forming an important contributory counterpoint to the information contained in the bare report of those sections where he had already been recording his interactions with Johnson in the dialogue form. In other sections of the Journal, where, as we have seen, he would work up native narration into dialogue, he was presented with a significant amount of extraneous information, much of which he would transform into new parenthetical stage directions. The parenthetical stage directions that ended up in the Life of Johnson dramatise the encounter between the putatively omniscient (or omni-aware) narrative voice and the contingent and failing awareness of the participants. The events are dependent on noise in the data. The written text thus relies upon partial failures of communication and attempts to avoid or overcome their own failings. The narrative is at once subject to these difficulties because it is dependent on observation that originates and is situated in the world it describes. It is tasked with overcoming the failures, that is, with knowing more than the participants, removing itself from them in the same movement as it claims to know the participants more intimately than they know themselves. The parenthesis is always paradoxical, and because of this, always opportunistic in its interventions into the flow of the dialogue. Boswell’s interventions in the pure evidentiary claim of the transcript form inevitably take place in a dual context. First, these interventions partake in the acknowledgement of the insufficiency of the transcript to transmit the simple meaning of the words conveyed at the specific moments where such interventions are necessary. At the same time, they engage in the forbidden or hidden acknowledgement that such intervention is always possible, that the addition of information to the bare content of the transcript contains within it an endless chain of possible additions, circumscribed only by the admission of the limited, fallible, subjective impressions of the observer. Since it is in a sense prohibited to acknowledge the hidden possibility of endless subjective narrative commentary—the hidden necessity of a point of view within the putative facticity of events and tones—Boswell finds himself licensed to manipulate the content and disposition of the transcripts in his Journal.

The freedom to manipulate allows Boswell to exert control over the potential signification of his text at multiple scales, with each movement causing cascading changes to the signification of the same matter in different scales. The parenthetical stage directions in the Life are used to perform multiple functions at the local level, modifying the interpretation of specific words and the intentions that can be inferred behind them, and at the same time modifying the pace and direction of exchanges and
conversations by implying and sometimes directly claiming causality. In turn this affects how whole episodes can be read, and how the characteristics of the participants, especially Johnson, can be assessed. This is all done in and facilitated by the formal absence of the controlling, explicitly interpretive voice of a discursive narrative. The parenthetical stage directions allow a seemingly objective counterpoint to the conversations, all the while masking their use as strategic pivot points in the mechanics of the narrative in specific episodes and the underlying construction of these episodes. In what follows, I detail the back-stories of many of the parenthetical stage directions that Boswell uses in the final text of the *Life*. These back-stories demonstrate the multiple and contingent possibilities that Boswell sees in the parenthesis where it serves as a method of controlling the ragged edges of both his content and its sources.

**Adding Parentheses: Filling Gaps, Changing the Course of Conversations**

To begin with the most concrete form of the parenthetical stage direction, we can see Boswell using the necessary intervention in the narrative to explain Johnson referring to an object in the room. Analysis shows, however, that the motivation for the parenthesis is more complex than this simple necessity. This is in the discussion on 7 May 1773, in which Johnson uses a slice of bread as a prop to end the debate on what Johnson, ever Boswell’s antagonist on this frequent topic, calls “the advantages of civilised life”. The final version is neatly balanced: Boswell brings up the subject via an assertion about Tahitians laughing at the difficulty with which bread is produced in contrast with the ready availability of breadfruit. Johnson dismisses Boswell’s implication that the astonishment implies that simplicity is better by using an analogy of the difference in house building which he supposes would produce a similar dismissal from the Tahitians. Johnson then emphatically ends his point by returning to the matter of the breadfruit:

> follow that men are better without houses. No, Sir, (holding up a slice of a good loaf,) this is better than the bread-tree."

This is a typically Johnsonian strategy of using analogy for the purposes of ridicule and emphasis, but the Journal record suggests that the events ran less smoothly, and much less emphatically.
Boswell has removed a mirrored analogy “Or people who go without cloathes”, and the direct address and emphasis of the ending are missing. Instead, Boswell preserves a note about the action—“when he took bread This better than bread-tree”—that, because of the distancing when and the scattered subject matter in Boswell’s notes about the long conversation, more likely indicates that at some later point, Johnson, confronted with a slice of bread, has remembered the earlier topic and referred back to the superiority of English bread. Boswell takes the note as a hint to dramatise Johnson’s speech, turning what was likely a reprise into a coda. The method most useful for incorporating and condensing this moment is the parenthetical stage direction, the advantage of which is that its rupture into the flow of the speech allows disparate elements to be stitched together without further elaboration of narrative. The implication of the parenthesis is that no time has passed. Boswell exploits the contingency involved in the indication of the presence or absence of the prop. That is, since he has recourse to the parenthesis, the physical world becomes an addendum that is always on hand. If Johnson needs bread to make a point, it is available to him with no need for explanation or scene setting in what becomes the minimum of narrative economy. In the transition Boswell allows “bread” to become the “slice of good loaf” but the detail of the gesture gives him some difficulty. He tries “lifting” before settling upon “holding up”, which is an undoubted improvement that makes Johnson a debater rather than a priest.

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192 Journal, 7/5/1773. Not included in Defence; Beinecke 40/961, 15 (J29).
193 MS 403-4, Redford, 107.
The difference between the two actions is however less important to our understanding of the parenthetical stage direction than the fact of the action’s emergence. The “this” in the Journal entry is Boswell’s licence for a gesture that could just as easily be a point of the finger or a nod to a plate, and as such it affords opportunity for drama in a conversation that is made up of abrupt and unmotivated shifts that are the result of the incompleteness of the record.

One of the most descriptive of Boswell’s parenthetical stage directions from this period is both adventitiously supplied and altered in a minor fashion.

**Boswell.** “Pray, Mr. Dilly, how does Dr. Leland’s *History of Ireland* fell?” **Johnson.** (Bursting forth with a generous indignation,) “The Irish are in a most unnatural state; for we see there the minority prevailing over the majority. There is no instance, even in the ten persecutions, of such severity as that which the Protestants of Ireland have exercised against the Catholics. Did we tell them we have conquered them, it would be above board: to punish them by confiscation and other penalties, as rebels, was monstrous injustice. King William was not their lawful sovereign: he had not been acknowledged by the parliament of Ireland, when they appeared in arms against him.”

(1/419)

In the final version Boswell asks Dilly about the sales of Leland’s *History of Ireland*, but, after a passage of time that is only represented by two intervening paragraphs away from the contretemps with Goldsmith, Johnson will not allow Dilly a chance to respond, sidesteps the question of the book’s popularity and launches on a diatribe about the state of Ireland.
Boswell introduces the speech with “(Bursting forth with a generous indignation)”. In the manuscript, “forth” was originally “out”, a minor emendation compared to the major slant that is evident in the very fact of the insertion of this parenthesis in the manuscript.

In the Journal entry, Boswell only notes that “Johns observed” as introduction to the clipped, truncated account of the speech. The moment comes near the end of a very long entry, and Boswell’s memory is waning, drifting into disjointed notes, and occasionally leaving gaps, the longest of which takes up the space of about three lines near the top of this page of the Journal. This is therefore a very clear instance of Boswell using the parenthetical stage direction to make a narrative assertion, imposing an interpretation onto a situation where his own record does not warrant it. Further evidence of this is the advance and retreat Boswell makes with his introductory question to Dilly; first he changed it to the bare indirect reportage of the book “being mentioned” but revised back, allowing a direct, seemingly causal relationship between Boswell’s question and the reaction, and making Boswell’s interpretive link the ostensible reason for the preservation of the speech—a character point made to fill in a lacuna.

Boswell can also be found working up a parenthetical stage direction out of native narration in order to suit the dialogue format in a passage from 1783 whose dash we have already considered. In the conversation with Seward that takes place on 30 April, where Johnson responds to Seward’s prompt about the unlikelihood of people being unreligious with a confession of his neglectful youth, Boswell tries to tempt Johnson into giving specific examples of his transgressions:

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194 MS 413, Redford, 111.
195 Journal, 7/5/1773. Not included in Defence; Beinecke 40/961, 20 (J29).
196 Labelled 29 in the Life.
The formulation for the smile with which Johnson succinctly rejects Boswell’s invitation is relatively rare—there are examples in 1768 (1/307), 8 April 1775 (Second Edition 2/222), 7 April 1779 (2/286), and in 1781 (2/362), there is a similar phrase “(speaking with a smile)”\(^{197}\). More commonly, Boswell uses a similar construction when the smile is to be modified in some way: smiles are significant (2/136) incredulous (2/231), arch (2/287), leering (2/378), and pleasant (2/442).\(^{198}\) The back-story of this particular parenthesis with Johnson’s smile interrupting Boswell’s flight into his old vices shows the use of the construction as the vestige of Boswell’s original record. Initially in the Journal, Boswell notes without recourse to parentheses that Johnson spoke “with a sort of smile.”\(^{199}\) For the manuscript draft, the observation is condensed into the parenthetical stage direction and Boswell hesitates over his vague qualification.

\(^{197}\) Additionally, there are eight occurrences of the phrase without it being marked up into a parenthesis at 1/13, 1/33, 1/232, 1/233n, 1/265, 1/278, 2/88, and 2/467. The difference with each of these examples is that the phrase either takes place in a general reflection or in an isolated statement that has been introduced with a narrative clause. The example in 1779 presents an interesting case, too, as the whole phrase is added over the line in the first draft. MS 776, Bonnell, 281:

\(^{198}\) As evidence of how free Boswell felt in using parenthetical stage directions to colour a scene, we need consider only these examples, all of which have circuitous histories. The “significant smile” is changed from “(laughing)” in the Journal, through an intermediate stage “(with a significant emphasis)”; Journal, 15/9/1777. Extremes, 251; Beinecke 43/997, 26. See Bonnell, 92, for more on the deletion and reinsertion of the sentence. The incredulous smile is also a revision for “laughing”, Journal, 15/4/1778. Extremes, 287; Beinecke 44/1000, 85; MS 697, Bonnell, 215. The arch smile is entirely new in the MS, winning out over alternative versions “with a sly smile” and “slyly smiling”. See Journal, 8/4/1779. Laird, 70; Beinecke 44/1003, 15. MS 778, Bonnell, 282. The “leering smile” is in the Journal, but the Life omits an accompanying “pleasing pause”. Journal, 1/4/1781. Laird, 306; Beinecke 44/1006, 50, MS 814. The “pleasant smile” is from an anachronistic anecdote inserted into a passage for which there is no Journal extant. See MS Papers Apart; Beinecke (M 145) 837: the phrase is presented there without brackets.

\(^{199}\) Journal, 30/4/1783. Applause, 123; Beinecke, 45/1014, 19.
A word, now illegible, most likely “serious”, is substituted for the “sort of” in the Journal version. “Sort of” is a vague phrasing Boswell only uses fifteen times in the final Life, and only once, on 31 March 1776, in conjunction with a “smile”:

“For your style, Sir, is much improved since you translated this.” He answered with a sort of triumphant smile, “Sir, I hope it is.”

Evidently this approach is unsatisfactory for Johnson’s perhaps-serious smile, because it is cancelled in heavy ink, leaving the relatively rare phrase. As I have discussed above, Boswell’s use of the dash here has a large local impact on the interpretation of the word “sure”. This works with the editorial parenthesis to massage the meaning of both the statement and the smile. The passage is edited to emphasise the interruption Johnson makes Boswell’s list of thinks he must have done—the “and” is added to an ambiguous dash before Johnson’s smiling statement. Removing both these ambiguities again allows Boswell to feign objectivity while inserting questionable subjective interpretations of events for dramatic coherence.

As an extension of this method of using parentheses to add an aura of objectivity to his observations, Boswell also uses parenthetical stage directions to abstract content from the conversations recorded in the Journal. The purpose is usually to be reticent about his own life and opinions, or to censor direct references to the sensitive situations in the lives of people who were still alive at the time of the book’s publication. An example of this can be found in his original notes and memoranda in 1769, where Boswell writes “Talked of Counsel how of bad utterance—you [Boswell] said loss not Sherid’s orator—nay said Jons & he had been taught by Sher he would have cleared the room”:

200 Journal, 16/10/1769. Wife, 340 (giving MS); Beinecke 53/1114, 29 (J 20).
This is worked up in the manuscript to “Talking of a Barrister who had a bad utterance—somebody wickedly said that it was a loss to him that he had not been taught oratory by Sheridan.” Boswell then modifies the introductory description. Having already elided the fact that it is Boswell himself being wicked, he adds a parenthesis above the line in the manuscript in order to impute the motive—rousing Johnson—to the wickedness of the reported statement from “that it was a loss to him” to “that he was unfortunate,” moving the text away from the possible trace contained in the memorandum’s use of *loss*.

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201 MS 339, Redford, 45. I use underscores in the transcription here to indicate the low level of Boswell’s dashes.
The changes here are encapsulated in the use of the stage direction to provide access to the psychology of a determinedly anonymous and therefore unknowable questioner. They have the effect of generalising Boswell’s peculiar behaviour around Johnson by entertaining the possibility that anyone in Johnson’s presence, albeit wickedly, might seek to push the boundaries of the conversational norms and seek to rouse Johnson into bombast or a *bon mot* at Sheridan’s expense. The truth is that it is only Boswell as a participant in the conversation who would do this, while the text encourages a step away from the scene, paradoxically presenting the speaker’s motivations.

Using the parenthetical stage direction as a method of abstracting difficult content also means that Boswell can exercise control over the flow of time in his accounts and thus weed out tedious or extraneous matter while still giving the impression that Johnson is participating in an actual conversation. The inverse of this movement is where Boswell uses parentheses to slow down the flow of time in explaining the abrupt cutting-off of interruption. Sometimes this is done because the situation is genuinely ambiguous, but there are others where Boswell’s intervention is a direct and deliberate slowing of the proceedings to clarify and ultimately change the causative process of the exchange. In one instance, Boswell adds a parenthetical stage direction with the clear intention of clarifying the situation to demonstrate Johnson’s characteristic brusqueness. At the end of a lengthy disquisition about the moral obligation to evangelise Christianity (Johnson is against such an obligation if there is no specific vocation from God), Goldsmith objects, citing the lack of objective knowledge in this situation:

![Goldsmith quotation](image)

In the Journal this comes after a false start in Boswell’s recollection—he replaces “for calling cross mere wood” with “not believing bread and wine Christ”). But Johnson has a very ready retort—he takes up the terms of Goldsmith’s objection, and clears away that consideration, actually obfuscating

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the matter. In the manuscript of the Life, Boswell adds “(interrupting him)”\(^{203}\) above the line to make clear that Johnson is cutting in.

This is after Boswell has silently omitted the verbal trace that suggests Goldsmith was ready to go on—“for instance”—so what is happening here is that Boswell is hedging: he is using the parenthesis to acknowledge Johnson’s hurry to make his point, thus riding roughshod over Goldsmith’s coming speech, while already having softened the implication of it being plainly obvious in the text that Goldsmith was planning to go on. The brackets are an essential element in making the interruption one for the narrator, not the reader.

In another set piece on the same day, Boswell describes an instance of Goldsmith’s “wish to get in, and shine,” which results in Johnson telling Goldsmith that he is being impertinent. In the Journal entry this is narrated briefly in a mixture of direct and indirect speech, using underlined speech headings, even when the speaker is being abstracted:

\begin{quote}
Goldie had sat in great agitation wanting to shine. [...] He seised the moment when Johnson appeared to interrupt Toplady & said Sir He has heard you for an hour pray allow him to speak. Johns Sir I was not interrupting the Gent I was only giving him a signal of my attention. Sir you’re very impert— to me.\(^{204}\)
\end{quote}

\(^{203}\) MS 407, Redford, 108. Extra crotchet sic.

\(^{204}\) Journal, 7/5/1773. Defence, 194-5 (Giving MS); Beinecke, 40/961, 19 (J29). MS 411, Redford, 110.
Boswell leaves a gap at the end of Johnson’s speech, perhaps hoping to recall more, perhaps dithering about whether to include something more inflammatory. The chief narrative concern of this passage is to set up the reconciliation that is described two pages later, and is also the instance Boswell uses for his longest discussion about Goldsmith’s peculiar anxieties in conversation, which he wrote separately and inserted later. Because of the destination of the incident, Boswell has a delicate balance to strike in dealing with Johnson’s conduct. As we have seen already in this day’s conversation, Goldsmith has been interrupted by Johnson. In the extended narrative introduction that this exchange receives in the final version, Johnson obviously overpowers something Goldsmith tries to say, establishing an immediate cause for Goldsmith’s impertinence, so there is enough evidence for Johnson being irritating, careless and even rude here. Boswell needs to manage the telling of the dressing-down, lest it put Goldsmith more firmly in the right, and make his apology a grovelling supplication to an overpowering bully. Boswell uses this favoured technique for managing tone outside the speech and adds “(angrily)” as a parenthesis before Johnson’s explanation that he was only back-channelling Toplady, and the accusation of impertinence.
On revision, it is softened to “(sternly)” and Boswell hesitates about including the “very” and “to me”:

> he seized this opportunity of venting his own envy and spleen, under the pretext of supporting another person: “Sir, (said he to Johnson,) the gentleman has heard you patiently for an hour; pray allow us now to hear him.” **Johnson. (sternly,)** “Sir, I was not interrupting the gentleman. I was only giving him a signal of my attention. Sir, you are impertinent.” Goldsmith made no reply, but continued in the company for some time.

(2/418)

These two modifications, one making Johnson’s complaint a question of Goldsmith’s character rather than a personal grievance, the other making his tone that of a moral arbiter of manners rather than an aggrieved interlocutor, work in tandem to allow Boswell’s interpretation of the reconciliation. But it remains to be asked why Boswell thinks it necessary to give any sort of help to the reader regarding Johnson’s tone at all. The possibilities are that his tone really was moved in some way, and Boswell remembered the intensity of the speech when he came to incorporate it in the *Life*, or that he is trying to smooth out the narrative and the relative importance of *sternly* over *angrily* is a consideration of the narrative—that is, exterior and interpretive—decorum rather than the preservation of pre-existing facts.
Revising for Local Effects: Tone and Explanation

Such moments in which Boswell intervenes in the very articulation of an interruption to make sure of the maintentance of his preferred reading of the exchange and its potential consequences are indicative of a wider tendency in his application of the parenthesis as a tool in controlling the interpretation of not just a speaker’s intentions in speaking but also the smallest qualities of tone that would lead to the possibility of an interpretation. As in this example where “sternly” is preferred over “angrily”, Boswell consistently demonstrates his concern for the very local influences of small tonal changes, not only at the moment of recollection in which he commits them to the pages of the Journal, but also in the delicate revisions he makes on the way to the final version of the *Life*. These revisions accord with a general tendency to soften Johnson’s brutality while still maintaining traces of his original impressions and their effects. The extent of this desire to exercise minute control over the tone (and by extension meaning) of Johnson’s outbursts can be seen in a parenthetical stage direction that shows Johnson “(laughing sarcastically)” on 10 April 1778. The occasion of the laughter is Johnson’s own jibe in response to Boswell’s asking for a reason for the breakdown of subordination, which he has just lamented: “the coming in of the Scotch,” so it is instructive to see Boswell adjusting his description in the successive stages of this text.205 His initial record has “(laughing roughly)”, modified about the line to “(laughing /rather/ roughly)” —at once an intensification and a distancing of the tone in its context as an interaction between the subject and the author. The added “rather” allows Boswell not to have to show himself as feeling the roughness of the joke, but it is maintained in the revision he makes in the manuscript of the *Life* from “rather roughly” to “rather surlily”.206

The intensity and attempted objectivity is maintained even when the interpretation of the tone changes, but not when he hits on the more diplomatic final rendering—“sarcastically”—which allows intention and irony into Johnson’s joke, bringing Boswell into the fold of the humour, rather than

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206 MS 665, Bonnell, 187.
being its object, allowing his own response and deflecting the joke in order to press the question in better humour.

The laughter is always necessary here, no matter the tonal interpretation that Boswell puts on it, also necessary is the fact that, as always, the laughter is restricted to Johnson, and not the whole company.

More changes can be found in another cluster of modified parenthetical stage directions in a discussion—begun by Boswell on one of his favourite topics—whether or not to drink wine. The exchange involves a dispute with Sir Joshua Reynolds about the problem of being a civil guest or host, when you have personal convictions against a social lubricant such as alcohol. Johnson refuses the topic as unoriginal, and dismisses Reynolds as drunk and therefore unable to engage in the conversation. They turn to the idea of a new thought versus a new articulation of, or a new attitude towards it, upon which Johnson makes a witticism and Reynolds drops out of the evening’s conversation. In its final version Boswell intervenes in markedly extended parentheses:
I was at this time myself a water-drinker upon trial by Johnson’s recommendation. Johnson. “Boswell is a bolder combatant than Sir Joshua: he argues for wine without the help of wine; but Sir Joshua with it.” Sir Joshua Reynolds. “But to please one’s company is a strong motive.” Johnson. (who, from drinking only water, supposed every body who drank wine to be elevated,) “I won’t argue any more with you, Sir. You are too far gone.” Sir Joshua. “I should have thought so indeed, Sir, had I made such a speech as you have now done.” Johnson. (drawing himself in, and, I really thought, blushing,) “Nay, don’t be angry. I did not mean to offend you.” Sir Joshua. “At first the taste of wine was disagreeable to me; but I brought myself to drink it, that I might be like other people. The pleasure of drinking wine is so connected with pleasing your company, that altogether there is something of social goodness in it.” Johnson. “Sir, this is only paying the same thing over again.” Sir Joshua. “No, this is new.” Johnson. “You put it in new words, but it is an old thought. This is one of the disadvantages of wine. It makes a man mistake words for thoughts.” Boswell. “I think it is a new thought; at least, it is in a new attitude.” Johnson. “Nay, Sir, it is only in a new coat; or an old coat with a new facing. (Then laughing heartily) It is the old dog in a new doublet.—An extraordinary instance however may occur where a man’s patron will do nothing for him, unless he will drink: there may be a good reason for drinking.”

(2/250)

Throughout the paragraph, Boswell is eager both to explain the thoughts of Johnson and control his tone. Initially, in explanatory mode, Boswell pre-empts the possibility that Johnson’s “You are too far gone”, might be genuinely rude, by introducing it as an habitual prejudice of Johnson’s: “(who, from drinking only water, supposed every body who drank wine to be elevated)”. This general comment defuses the justifiability of Reynolds’s anger, while not making any decisive comment about Reynolds himself. In the Journal, Boswell is blunter and less forgiving, making only a limited claim about Johnson at the time “(insinuating that he had drunk to much)”, followed by a claim that Reynolds “very properly took fire a little”, an observation that is later removed.207

207 Journal, 28/4/1778. Extremes, 322; Beinecke 44/1000, 149. MS 729, Bonnell, 239.
The shift from a specific remark about insinuation that stylistically obstructs the narrative to the general claim that absolves Sir Joshua both of his supposed drunkenness and his justification in his anger serves to allow the subsequent discussion. Also missing between the draft and the final version is a parenthesis indicating that Sir Joshua is speaking “(with a spirited keenness)”. The question of offence becomes enough of a non-issue on both sides to be glossed over after Johnson’s next statement, “Nay, don’t be angry, I did not mean to offend you.” This is introduced by the parenthesis “(drawing himself in, and, I really thought, blushing)”. There is no cue for this action in the Journal. That is, it is entirely an insertion at the time of writing, whether from Boswell’s memory or his sense of propriety, perhaps demonstrating the progressive revelation of Boswell’s perception.

Johnson’s reaction is doled out through commas, each step of qualification a drawing in of its own into the momentary intimacy of sharing the fleeting success, laced with equivocation—“I really thought”—that Johnson, uncontrollably, is blushing. There is no other instance of blushing in the Life, so the effort at generating surprise is perhaps justified, but the intimate immediacy is disrupted by the fact that the “thought” was not one that Boswell considered necessary to note down at the time. In the knowledge of this, we are left to assess why he thinks this thought, which relates his personal perceptions, is necessary for the passage, particularly since it is operating in stark contrast to his usual practice of using parenthesis to generalise his personal observations into objectivity. Without the action, Johnson is really a boor. The change in which Johnson moves from excusing himself for joking at Reynolds’s expense to admonishing him not to be angry serves a bullish running down and
trampling over the justification in his feelings which Boswell has already suppressed. Johnson’s subsequent good humour is marked by another modified parenthesis in which “(laughing)” becomes “(Then laughing heartily)”⁸⁸. By showing that he is sure he can see some sign of surprise in Johnson’s behaviour rather than the insouciant brutality of a victor, Boswell’s breathless doubt in the matter reveals (or, as is likely, constructs) a distance between then authority of fact given in the other parenthetical stage directions “supposing every one” to be one way or another. This is a stark contrast to the personal effusion of “and, I really thought”. Boswell is surprised, and Johnson is most likely unaware of the significance in his cheeks, his mortification a private suspicion between the writer and reader that presents itself as the same sort of curiosity as his using an uncharacteristic word.

Boswell’s practice of using the parenthetical stage direction is a conjunction of his natural ease with the technique and his desire to stage-manage potentially confusing or troubling passages without having to limit them entirely. A striking example resulting from the confluence of these two streams happens in the events described in 1778, where Boswell adapts a string of parentheses he has applied to an outburst from Johnson into a more manageable, tamer, but still narratively coherent string of modifications. The topic is another one of Boswell’s stock subjects of conversation—this time whether vice affects a man’s public character. Johnson will have no bar of Boswell’s agreement with the proposition, citing the case of an anonymised friend (Beauchler) before eventually cracking in the face of Boswell’s relentless questioning about the suicide of a nobleman, who has again been anonymised. This time the anonymisation obscures Lord Clive:

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²⁰⁸ MS 730, Bonnell, 240.
In the Journal, Boswell modifies four of Johnson’s statements thus: “(keenly)”, “(angrily)”, “(quite violent)”, “(horribly angry)”. Keeping the position of each of these modifications, and for the main part retaining the content of the speeches, Boswell modifies three of the parentheses, making the sequence in the final version: “(warmly)”, “(angrily)”, “(very angry)”, “(angrier still)".

Boswell. “What, Sir, if he debauched the ladies of gentlemen in the county, will not there be a general resentment against him?” Johnson. “No, Sir. He will lose those particular gentlemen; but the rest will not trouble their heads about it.” (warmly.) Boswell. “Well, Sir, I cannot think so.” Johnson. “Nay, Sir, there is no talking with a man who will dispute what every body knows. (angrily.) Don’t you know this?” Boswell. “No, Sir; and I wish to think better of your country than you represent it. I knew in Scotland a gentleman obliged to leave it for debauching a lady; and in one of our counties an Earl’s brother lost his election, because he had debauched the lady of another Earl in that county, and broken the peace of a noble family.”

Still he would not yield. He proceeded: “Will you not allow, Sir, that vice does not hurt a man’s character so as to obstruct his prosperity in life, when you know that —— ——— was loaded with wealth and honours; a man who had acquired his fortune by such crimes, that his conscience of them impelled him to cut his own throat.” Boswell. “You will recollect, Sir, that Dr. Robertson said, he cut his throat—because he was weary of still life; little things not being sufficient to move his great mind.” Johnson. (very angry) “Nay, Sir, what stuff is this? You had no more this opinion after Robertson said it, than before. I know nothing more offensive than repeating what one knows to be foolish things, by way of continuing a dispute, to see what a man will answer, to make him your butt!” (angrier still.) Boswell. “My dear Sir, I had no such intention as you seem to suspect; I had not indeed. Might not this nobleman have felt every thing ‘weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable,’ as Hamlet says?” Johnson. “Nay, if you are to bring in gabble, I’ll talk no more. I will not, upon my honour.” My readers will decide upon this dispute.

In the Journal, Boswell modifies four of Johnson’s statements thus: “(keenly)”, “(angrily)”, “(quite violent)”, “(horribly angry)”. Keeping the position of each of these modifications, and for the main part retaining the content of the speeches, Boswell modifies three of the parentheses, making the sequence in the final version: “(warmly)”, “(angrily)”, “(very angry)”, “(angrier still)”. 

Journal, 12/5/1778. Extremes, 353; Beinecke 44/1000, 176-80.
Grouping the different tones into one crescendo of anger obviously has the advantage of concentrating the development of the outburst around the single fury. However, it also moves away from the specificity of Boswell’s impressions “quite violent” and “horribly angry”, both of which display Boswell’s concern at Johnson’s anger. Boswell displays contrary impulses for modification here: he wants to temper the violence with a qualifier such as quite, and to note the horror of Johnson’s anger as a contrast to his erstwhile amiability. So the same impulse, acted upon during these two successive instances of writing, serves to erase itself, thus offering less information about Johnson’s habitual demeanour and this exception to it in the process. The final form of the passage presents Johnson blowing up in steady progression, but without reaching a climax in the heights of the “horribly angry”. The passage is also modified in that Boswell has removed another two parentheses. The first is one of the type I have already discussed with reference to Boswell’s models of authenticity—“(or some such word)” in which Boswell in high legal form animadverts about the accuracy of the wording of a particular attribution.

The word removed from the shadow of this doubt is “offensive”. Earlier in the passage and more importantly for the understanding of the impact and tendency of what I have described, Boswell has
removed the note “(he silent)” after the initial “(keenly)” / “(warmly)” statement. This had served as an explanation of Boswell’s pressing forward in summative disagreement “Well, Sir, I cannot think so.”

This abandoned silence is mimics the switch to focusing on levels of anger because it removes some of the erratic contingency from the development of Johnson’s outburst. Boswell’s provocation in the original version is a goad applied to a sleeping giant, while in the finished work it is simply the next step in a disagreement where Johnson is inevitably building to an exaggerated but understandable endpoint. In the Journal version there is also a narrative sentence at the midpoint of the escalation: “He was very hot, though much in the wrong.” At every point Boswell is smoothing the edges of the incident, while hoping to keep some of the initial emotional thrust of the dispute. He adds in the place of Johnson’s being “much in the wrong” the final caveat “My readers will decide upon this dispute”. But of course it is not the content of the arguments that provides useful biographical data here, despite the consistency of Johnson’s positions between the versions. Rather, it is the statement by statement accumulation of Johnson’s anger, and the seemingly unwarranted force of it, that even in Boswell’s milder final version seems to give a picture of a man irrationally prone to overreacting when provoked. The parentheses abstract the potential factual content of the narrative in their attempt to control the minute implications of each step of the fearsome and tempestuous tirade.

Also notable in this section is the anomalous use of the full stops within the parentheses. This suggests a change of pointer or compositor for this section, as well as the variable position of the parentheses in the passage relative to the statements whose tone they qualify; the stops move from a position after the statement, to mid-way through, to the beginning, before finally reverting to postmodification for the final burst in “(angrier still)”. These all follow the position in Boswell’s involved and dismayed Journal account, and are testament to the variability of his narrative control. The movement is towards more preparation on the part of the reader until the final parenthesis, denuded of the full force of Boswell’s initial shock, is given as an afterthought to the statement.
Boswell can be frequently found constructing this sort of framework that distinguishes between principal and side narration, always, however, on unsettled ground that demands parenthesis. The back-story of one moment from Good Friday 1781 is can demonstrate this. The passage involves Johnson telling a story in which he quotes Edwards, his long-estranged schoolfellow, to Boswell. In the writing of the incident, which only takes up a few lines, Boswell gets confused by the differing levels of nested dialogue he has constructed, possibly because he is working from memory to supplement the most truncated of notes in the extant Journal “Silent w. J + his old friend Edw meet only at Church—Best place except heaven—greet there too—”

Johnson’s story comes after, and has Johnson quoting Edwards saying he’d heard about *The Rambler*, obviously without having read it. Boswell wants to record both this story, which is probably temporally distinct and thus miscellaneous, so stiches it to the initial exchange, giving it the immediacy of an aside, and adds to the intimate immediacy by marking the tone “(smiling)” (2/382). However, in the manuscript draft he neglects to use quotation marks until the embedded sentence of Edwards’s, which leaves him making an odd comment in what is in effect indirect speech.

The error is corrected by the time the final version is printed, but Boswell does not pick up on the mistake himself in the draft. This is possibly because the boundaries of the parenthesis, particularly when confounded with the nested quotations, are particularly fungible. It would be interesting if Johnson himself were to note Edwards smiling, and to see how this would be represented graphically:

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that is, describing an imitated smile, rather than a spoken mention of one. Boswell would have even more trouble with second order imitative action.

Boswell minutely manages the tone of a conversation in April 1781 where Johnson and Boswell visit David Garrick’s widow by modifying a parenthetical stage direction with a similar intention. At one point the writer Elizabeth Carter doubts that someone, unmentioned, is an atheist and Johnson makes a quip that, given time, this person might have become one, first saying “he might have had time to ripen” then augmenting the observation with the speculation “he might have exuberated into an Atheist”:

Mrs. Carter having said of a certain person, “I doubt he was an Atheist.” Johnson. “I don’t know that. He might perhaps have become one, if he had had time to ripen, (smiling). He might have exuberated into an Atheist.”

(2/387)

In his Journal report of this exchange, Boswell uses only unpunctuated speech, and adds that Johnson was smiling at or before his first pause: “I don’t know that said the Dr smiling. He might perhaps [...]”.

In the manuscript form, the smile is enclosed in a parenthesis, as Boswell’s usual form demands, and moved. First Boswell places it before the beginning of Johnson’s speech, but this is cancelled and the parenthesis is inserted above the line in its first position, before the full stop at the end of the second to last sentence.

212 MS 830.
The different positions present minutely different readings. The specific location and coverage of the smile are important enough to Boswell that he is willing to try three possibilities out within the potential orbit of the second sentence, in order to stop it straying too far into the punchline. Boswell is thus alive to the possibilities of signification that his tonal and gestural modifications provide. More important are the specific ramifications of each of these possible choices, stemming from the fact that the very technique Boswell is using here exposes its duality of impact. That is, “(smiling)” is ambiguous in its intended direction. Boswell is forever appropriating the limit between events and interpretive significance in his composition of the Life. Wherever Boswell includes the smile, he is forced to accept the contingency of his choices each time he feels the need to augment the verbal content of any particular exchange he presents.

Accepting these contingencies is for Boswell an ever-present concern, because the fine points of detail that he uses in parentheses to control the interpretation of a statement’s delivery and reception constitute the most important location of his agency as a writer within the dialogue, even where it interract with extended passages of his own narration. Boswell changes his initial impulse in marking the atmosphere of a conversation in the passage in which he notes a company, himself included, being dared to laugh by Johnson.

Talking of a very respectable author, he told us a curious circumstance in his life, which was, that he had married a printer’s devil. Reynolds, “A printer’s devil, Sir! Why, I thought a printer’s devil was a creature with a black face and in rags.” Johnson, “Yes, Sir. But I suppose, he had her face washed, and put clean clothes on her. (Then looking very
serious, and very earnest) And she did not disgrace him—the woman had a bottom of good sense.” The word bottom thus introduced, was so ludicrous, when contrasted with his gravity, that most of us could not forbear tittering and laughing, though I recollect that the Bishop of Killaloe kept his countenance with perfect steadiness, while Miss Hannah More slyly hid her face behind a lady’s back who sat on the same fetter with her. His pride could not bear that any expression of his should excite ridicule, when he did not intend it; he therefore resolved to assume a solemn, despotic air, glanced sternly around, and called out in a strong tone, “Where’s the Merriment?” Then collecting himself, and looking awful, to make us feel how he could impose restraint, and as it were searching his mind for a still more ludicrous word, he slowly pronounced, “I say the woman was fundamentally sensible;” as if he had said, hear this now, and laugh if you dare. We all sat composed as at a funeral.

After Johnson unintentionally hits on the double entendre, he notes the reaction it produces then extends the image, saying first that the woman he is talking about “had a bottom of good sense”. His final extension the description to the point that it says “the woman was fundamentally sensible” is presented as a deliberate attempt to test the seriousness of the assembled group. Boswell’s initial record uses a parenthesis to note that “(we tittered and laughed)” at the initial statement.

In the final version, which is subject to numerous other revisions, this note is removed and in its place is instead put a remark about Johnson himself: “(Then being very serious, and very earnest)”. This switch is typical of Boswell’s general practice in utilising the parenthesis as a space for additional information or interpretation about speech in which his instinct is to record the reaction of the room as he and his companions experienced and performed it. This involves two shifts: the first is a move away from actual subjectively experienced and enacted experience, recorded close enough to the even

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to be accurate no matter what it signifies, while the second is the dislodgement of focus from what at this point is the majority of the participants in the conversation onto Johnson. The dynamic of interest and observation is thus shifted from Johnson’s milieu and his effect upon it to his intentions and strategies in doing it. This shift to the direction of Johnson’s participation in the scene at the expense of the scene itself actually serves to advance Boswell’s ends in that it makes the reader part of the audience. The possibility of tittering and laughter is left open. The reader can join in with Johnson’s original hearers as the factual content of the response that Boswell initially recorded in his Journal is replaced by a more distant objectivised description of Johnson. The reader is thus invited to share in the scene on the same level as the participants, who now observe more than interact with and access him. After this narrative shift, the episode serves the purpose of showing Johnson managing the expectation of his interlocutors after a mistake, exploiting his public image by playing on the bathos of the double entendre he has unintentionally hit upon. But it is not a quick recovery in the way that the Journal reports it, because there is no sound in the reaction, no slow realisation on Johnson’s part that he has missed his mark and that the response is getting away from him. This reflects the dynamic Boswell is enacting throughout the Life: the imperative he places on himself to focus with more seeming objectivity on Johnson by qualifying his tone and clarifying his intentions at the expense of the dramatic content and even-handedness that his Journal often displays, places Johnson into a spotlight, or onto a platform, at the focal point of a meeting, someone to be watched and noted, but with a structured power to control conversation and direct the tone of the whole room. Whether or not this tendency derives from his actual impression of Johnson and the relationship between the two men in social situations like this, the effect is that Johnson is placed into a familiar generic context where he is either a king holding court, a speechmaker holding forth, or a witness in the stand; he is set apart for observation, and the effect of his tone and his actions as presented and minutely manipulated in Boswell’s numerous parentheses is that he is removed from his social context even as Boswell is trying to directly represent it.214

The technique of the addition of interpretive information years after the fact spirals out of Boswell’s control: every departure from his initial record becomes only an invitation to add even more specific detail into a sequence. This can be seen in a conversation in 1783 where Johnson makes a

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214 The net effect of this sort of abstraction of Johnson from his surroundings in his focusing on only Johnson’s actions offers a conception of these conversations as a modified version of what James Chandler’s characterisation of “literary spectatorship” in sentimental fiction presents as an internalisation of modes of theatrical watching. Boswell’s version is more concentrated and embodies a concomitantly different ethical and sentimental relationship to his subject, which rather than being the object of sympathy for the most part of the book is an objectified, separated and heroic figure, even in these intimate settings. See Chandler, An Archaeology of Sympathy, 167-175.
conspiratorial remark to Boswell claiming that the Hanover family is “isolée” in England, using it as evidence that opposition to Government was a result of the revolution.

He talked with regret and indignation of the factious opposition to Government at this time, and imputed it, in a great measure, to the Revolution. “Sir, (said he, in a low voice, having come nearer to me, while his old prejudices seemed to be fermenting in his mind,) this Hanoverian family is isolée here. They have no friends. Now the Stuarts had friends who stuck by them so late as 1745. When the right of the King is not reverenced, there will not be reverence for those appointed by the King.”

(2/432)

The statement, which is thematically isolated, and followed by a whole paragraph where Boswell reflects on the observation and quietly imposes upon it his flattery towards the monarchy, is introduced by the abnormally long parenthetical stage direction: “(said he, in a low voice, having come nearer to me, while his old prejudices seemed to be fermenting in his mind)”. All this is an addition to the bare record of the Journal. Each of the three actions steps back to an anterior datum: the low voice is preceded by the closing in, which follows on from the inward appearance of inner percolation.215

This backwards-looking development mirrors the process of Boswell’s composition: his first thought is to comment on the tone, and then, without punctuating, add the antecedent movement. This lends conspiratorial intention to the tone. This is in spite of the fact that the conversation lacks both other people and anything to give much more situational detail in the scene than the facts of its location (it is taking place in Johnson’s rooms), Johnson’s physical state (he is sick, and has had trouble breathing), and his effort to overcome this (Boswell says that Johnson “soon assumed his usual strong animated style of conversation”).216

\[\text{215 Journal, } 21/3/1783. \text{ AJ, 74; Beinecke 45/1012, 10.} \]
\[\text{216 MS 863.}\]
On revision, Boswell has seen the need to augment the parenthesis further, adding the initial cause for the movement and the tone of the statement over the line and, when space runs out, in the margin. It is no longer a question of detail or accuracy in factual matters that governs Boswell here: he is now given over to the form he has created, in which all statements can be made to reveal antecedent contextual explanations. At points such as this in the text, his retreat into the format of dialogue—where he is no longer a narrator—presents him with opportunities to give extra information like this on multiple levels. This comes at the cost of his mixing of generic modes attendant on the different styles of observation that each new piece of narrative information entails.

A curious example of the overlapping of conventions that results from this occurs in the events described on 29 May 1783. In the conversation (which is considerably shortened from what is described in a stand-alone section of journal that Boswell preserved in a special wrapper marked “Johnson & Burke”), Boswell and Johnson discuss the nonconformist preacher Richard Baxter’s attitude to the post-mortem prospects of the souls of suicides. Boswell objects by bringing in an oblique quote from scripture—“As the tree falls so must it lye”—to argue against the position, and Johnson qualifies this by saying the metaphor refers to the tendency of a life, rather than the final action. Boswell is keen to note Johnson’s apparent apprehension in making the qualification marking a pause.

Boswell. “But does not the text say, ‘As the tree falls, so it must lye?’” Johnson. “Yes, Sir; as the tree falls. But—(after a little pause)—that is meant as to the general state of the tree, not what is the effect of a sudden blast.”

217 Beinecke 45/1014 wrapper (J 89).
The way he marks the pause is notable, as it takes the form of a parenthetical stage direction “(after a little pause)” wedged between two em-dashes indicating the pause itself in the competing conventions of transcription, which here can be seen colliding on the page. This collision demonstrates the necessity of additive techniques of description to accommodate the larger demands of the ideals of both transcription and narration. Whether such additions come through punctuation or narrative they show in their conjunction the contingent superfluity of each approach. Boswell recorded the exchange twice in the journals, once late in the entry, then in the margins following on from the relevant beginning section about Baxter. In the initial, main text version, the dashes are present (as is the deleted word “it” following after), but in the marginal version they are absent.

In both versions, Boswell uses the word “embarrassment”, a much stronger interpretation than “pause”. In the draft of the Life as well, “pause” is preferred after an attempt at using “start” in its place.218

This change may explain the awkward conjunction of the two modes of representing the pause. The embarrassment is different enough from the pause to have necessitated both the temporal and interpretive regimes of representation. But the movement of the dashes to envelope the parenthesis in the middle of the pause has the unintended effect of making an interruption longer than what is signified. Boswell thus maintains the weight of the interpretation that he is trying to suppress in revising the embarrassment to the pause. On the face of it, this neutralises the doubt and concern with which the Journal presents Johnson’s attitude: the pause, little, but longer than an ellipsis would

otherwise produce, now hovers above the possibility of Johnson worrying about being incorrect in biblical interpretation, rather than presenting it directly, but it does not eliminate it. This is undoubtedly the result of the accidental process through which the text was composed and revised: it is this process of accumulation, attrition and unintended consequences that most vividly displays the contradictions of factual writing.

The conjunction of different regimes of interpretation at the same moment in the text dramatises the fractured and contingent perspective through which the world is experienced and observed, and through which it is remembered and subsequently reconstructed. That is, the pause as a unit of sonic description can be made to represent itself in the text, as well as imply the interpretation that the thought is disturbing Johnson’s speech. Boswell’s on-the-spot interpretation is a parallel event in the narrative that can be made to do the same narrative work, but with more control. This adds a further level of possible signification. The point is that the conventions of writing are simultaneously the only way to intervene in the endless process of possible signification in the representation of language and the inevitable source of more potential layers of signification: it is a devil’s bind between adding clarity, by moving away from the belief that quotations can signify themselves, or maintaining obscurity by ignoring extratextual details. Neither of these approaches is adequate, but each betrays the principles of transcription. All that is left to Boswell is the contingent juggling between systems of presentation, and, as in this example, the risk of exposure when these systems are aligned in clumsy juxtaposition.

In another incident from 1773, this time on 29 April, Boswell modifies a parenthetical stage direction by adding information in the form of an adverb. In the Journal entry for this day, Boswell has Johnson saying “He thinks I’ll cut him down. But I’ll let him hang.”

This statement transitions with no pause except the resumption of the conversation on a new page presenting Sir Joshua Reynolds’s final words for the same day making fun of the self-interested logic of Boswell’s argument. By the time he came to write the draft of the *Life*, Boswell thought it necessary to add that Johnson was laughing after the conclusion of what is now more obviously a jocular statement than one made out of callous indifference.

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In extensively revising this section, Boswell used darker ink, and the emendation is made below the line with an extension of the tail of the opening bracket so that it obviously contains the new word. The emendation is revealing; Boswell carefully calibrates the joke made at his expense, indicating first that Johnson is kidding, which maintains the image of the pair’s intimacy, then enlarges it, allowing Johnson to momentarily overstep the bounds of the relationship, so as to be not only joking but also amused at his own joke.

The dynamic of Boswell’s after-the-fact clarifying interpretation is thus a continuation of Boswell’s attempts to mediate the relationship even after Johnson’s death.

Further to the minute control of tone that Boswell effects through the modification of his initial impressions as reported in the parenthetical stage directions in his journals, Boswell also exercises delicate control in massaging small details of the content of previously existing parentheses. In one instance from the pair’s first meeting in 1776, Boswell’s approach in using a parenthetical stage direction as a way of censoring a name while preserving the content of a speech belies his approach to

220 MS 393, Redford, 100.
veracity in narrative, and importantly to the relationship between narrative and evidential speech within it.

He said, “The value of every story depends on its being true. A story is a picture either of an individual or of human nature in general: if it be false, it is a picture of nothing. For instance: suppose a man should tell that Johnson, before setting out for Italy, as he had to cross the Alps, sat down to make himself wings. This many people would believe; but it would be a picture of nothing. ******* (naming a worthy friend of ours,) used to think a story, a story, till I shewed him that truth was essential to it.”

In the speech, Johnson expounds on the statement “the value of every story depends on its being true.” This statement, as we have seen, can be taken more or less as a motto for Boswell’s project in writing the Life. Johnson concludes by making an assertion that an anonymous person “‘used to think a story, a story, till I shewed him that truth was essential to it.’” Boswell’s move to suppress it only came in the writing of the manuscript. At that point he attempted a solution to the problem of censoring while remaining true to the spirit and rhythm of the conversation by massaging the word “Langton” into “a worthy friend of ours” followed by “(naming him)”.

Boswell seems to have been chided by the subject matter into changing to the less elegant string of asterisks followed by “(naming a worthy friend of ours)”, removing responsibility for the interpretation of the obscured friendship onto Boswell as an intervener rather than Johnson as speaker. At the same time, this move engages in a reduction of the distortion of the factual content of the statement. Boswell, then, shows himself as willing to intervene for the sake of decorum, while still retaining an approximate relation to the event.

221 Journal, 16/3/1776. OY, 259-60; Beinecke, 42/992, 60. MS 504, Redford, 189.
If, as in this example, Boswell’s reliance on the parenthetical stage direction is a mode of pre-empting the interpretation of tense situations either within the scenes being described or in the social world into which the book was to be released, it is never more apparent than in the heated exchange with Dr. Percy in which Percy and Johnson become personal in their dispute about the travel writer Pennant’s accuracy in his account of Northumberland, in particular Percy’s ancestral home. Eventually, mutual apologies ensue. In the space of half a page, the device is used six times in two clusters of near consecutive statements, separated by a sentence of indirect description abstracting the reconciliation. The first cluster adds a descriptive psychological counterpoint to the statements: Johnson’s comment made “(pointedly)” is received by Percy “(feeling the stroke)”, which causes Johnson’s crescendo to be interrupted by him “(puffing hard with passion struggling for a vent)”:

222 For an account of this scene and how it demonstrates Boswell’s failure in his efforts to show honour on both sides through showing the letters Johnson wrote for Percy’s reputation at Boswell’s instigation, resulting in the cessation of Boswell’s relationship with Percy soon after the publication of the Life, see C. N. Fifer, “Boswell and the Decorous Bishop.”
These interrelated parentheses run the gamut of Boswell’s parenthetical content from interpretive characterisation of the tone, through to unspecified internal psychological explanation, finally to the express treatment of Johnson’s physical action to allow Boswell’s inference about his mental state. The passage uses them in concert in order to direct the intensification of feeling as Johnson’s combined rudeness and offence crescendo. In Boswell’s original rendering of the exchange in the Journal, much of the matter is dealt with indirectly—Johnson’s initial statement is “said tartly,” while
Percy, “hurt,” answered him, with only the climax given in parenthesis, and even when it is this is much less explicit: “(blowing hard)”.223

To make the exchange much more direct and to conform to the main part of his practice in the *Life*, Boswell marks it up into direct speech with the headers and adds the stage directions taking care in the addition of detail to ensure the right tone is building.

“Tartly” is changed to “contemptuously” before Boswell settles on “pointedly”—a convenient middle point. The information that Percy is “hurt” is changed to him first “(feeling the blow)” before it is refined to “stroke”—a meditation that estimates the presentation of extremes in feeling for both Percy and Johnson, replacing that intentional (and unexpected) hurt from Johnson’s blow with the more

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tempered sense of a defeat in a regulated sporting arena such as fencing. Percy is beaten in this
to manage the tone at this microlevel do not extend into the connected part of the narrative. While
employing the same approach, the second cluster in the paragraph is less unified in its effect with
regards to what I have just outlined. Each of the three—“(resuming the former subject)”, “(humouring
the joke)” and “(smiling at his own violent expressions, merely for political difference of opinion)”
are new in the manuscript draft, and all are worked up from simple articulatory verbs to give very
specific psychological motivations for each of the three statements they introduce, each delving into
the mind of a different speaker.224

The intricate self-awareness in the irony of Johnson’s smile is entirely absent from the original
record. Each of these interventions betrays Boswell’s delicate task in trying to represent the squabble
in a manner that assigns no blame, not to Johnson who probably deserves it here. The goal is to
forestall the potential for misunderstanding inherent not in the words, as the crux of the passage is
that its impetus comes from the question of tone. Johnson had thought he was not being rude, but
Percy did not share that understanding. Boswell’s attitude, as well as his veracity as an observer is
firstly manifested in his shifting attempts at describing the tones, which tend towards minimisation
and resolution. But the very existence of the different options Boswell explored shows that the

224 MS 676 and verso, Redford, 195.
resolution was not a thing that was mutually arrived at that night and put to bed; it was not the resolution of a misunderstanding but the diplomatic acceptance of the fiction of a misunderstanding. Boswell’s impulse is to moderate the tone in the middle parenthesis, which is tonally contiguous with the speech, and thus shares some of the authority of the transcript, rather than the more subjective terrain of the narrative. It is worth noting, too, that the narrative intervention that treats of the moment of reconciliation—instantly taking place when Johnson and Percy hold hands—itself elides one of only two parenthetical stage directions in the original passage. The elision is interesting because it removes another person, Nichols, supplying the material for what in the Life is Johnson’s own pun (“I am willing you shall hang Pennant”), which is, in Nichols’s rendering “A Pennant is made to hang. There’s a pun for you.” In a further parenthesis, this is said “(quietly, not to hazard)”.

In the final version, this is presented as being said so quietly that the pun and the motivation for release it affords disappear. The movement at this point in the conversation into shared conciliatory mirth is now exclusively the product of Johnson’s initiative and big-heartedness. Boswell here finds the minute set of motivations important only in his principal subjects. While not strictly inappropriate in light of the other speakers’ jovial reconciliation, Nichols’s set of puns is surplus to the story Boswell is telling. Boswell’s minutely managed intervention expertly mixes aural information about volume with an interior motivation for it in and expert modulation of the tone of the scene, despite this is not being strictly required.

Boswell was not shy, though, at using these interventions in order to present the interior motivations of statements in moments that he did deem necessary for the narrative. During his final reported

conversation with Johnson, where Boswell announces to Johnson the financial arrangements he has managed to set up that will enable him to travel to Italy in the hopes that such a trip will alleviate his soon-to-be fatal illness, Boswell uses a parenthetical stage direction to describe the emotional content of his own statement:

—He listened with much attention; then warmly said, “This is taking prodigious pains about a man.”—“O! Sir, (said I, with most sincere affection,) your friends would do everything for you.” He paused—grew more and more agitated—till tears started into his eyes, and he exclaimed with fervent emotion, “God bless you all.” I was so affected that I also shed tears.—After a short silence, he renewed and extended his grateful benediction, “God bless you all, for Jesus Christ’s sake.”

This passage, one of the last of the many conversations that form the centrepiece of the book as well as Boswell’s friendship with Johnson, and the climax it builds to, where Johnson is brought to tears in contemplation of his friends’ kindness, is reworked minutely in several particulars not least of which is the redaction of telling Johnson about the arrangements, dragging out a promise from him not to be angry. The exchange is replaced with narration “I gave him a particular account of what had been done, and read to him the Lord Chancellor’s letter.—He listened with much attention; then warmly said, ‘This is taking prodigious pains about a man’”. This reaction of warmth (which is, as we have just seen in Boswell’s writing, one step on the way to anger) provokes Boswell’s display of sincere affection. In this context, it is important to note that the parenthesis is introduced some time between the revisions of the draft and the final Revises, that is, the placement of Boswell’s sincerity in the privileged background of the parentheses is yet another afterthought. Furthermore, during the composition of the draft, Boswell wrote the word “affection” directly over the word “emotion”—the change appropriately closing down the potential dynamics of the conversation in the same manner as the elision of the no-anger promise.226

226 MS 977.
The change of sincere emotion to affection is typical of Boswell’s attention to the possibilities that these minor interventions can offer his text. Since he is talking about his own sincere feelings, he has more authority, perhaps, than in the many parenthesis where he presents his impressions and observations, but the change is revealing. “Affection” is non-committal in its judgment of Johnson’s behaviour in his reaction to the offer while remaining positive towards Johnson himself. The original reading potentially has more behind it than affection. It is an uncontrolled response, which, whatever level of sincerity it comes with, could include frustration or anger at Johnson’s stubborn refusal to seek or accept help in the desperate state his health has reduced him to. The effect is to simultaneously neutralise Boswell’s reaction and to contain Johnson’s response into the space of Boswell’s affection rather than his more intimate and more culpable potential frustration.

The level of control that Boswell displays in this final personal parenthesis is actually quite typical of his practice in massaging the minute implications of the text of the Life. On 12 June 1784, one of the last conversations with Johnson reported in the book, a discussion takes place at Pembroke College in which the divine Dr. Adams and Johnson disagree about the prospect of punishment in the afterlife, with Adams asserting that God’s infinite goodness means that there would be no punishment only exclusion from heaven, but Johnson disagrees strongly.

Dr. Adams suggested that God was infinitely good. Johnson. “That he is infinitely good, as far as the perfection of his nature will allow, I certainly believe; but it is necessary for good upon the whole, that individuals should be punished. As to an individual therefore, he is not infinitely good; and as I cannot be sure that I have fulfilled the conditions on which salvation is granted, I am afraid I may be one of those who shall be damned.” (looking dismally). Dr. Adams. “What do you mean by damned?” Johnson. (passionately and loudly) “Sent to Hell, Sir, and punished everlastingly.” Dr. Adams. “I don’t believe that doctrine.”

Boswell presents Johnson taking the prospect of his own death and its consequences very seriously, given his sickness and advanced age. The statement of his fear of his own damnation is followed by the action-based parenthetical stage direction “(looking dismally)”. In the only other extant version of this scene, Boswell initially included more and more sensible information, trying “(looking down dismally)”, rejecting it for “(looking dismally down)” moving the line. He finally abandoned the
impulse to complete the action with a direction, leaving only the adverb and changing looking from an active aversion to Johnson’s part to a generalised category of appearance.227

The result is akin to Boswell’s often preferred formulation “seeming”, in which the interpretation is made the chief point of focus, but without entirely eliminating the active sense of the verb. Johnson could still be looking around with a dismal look in his eyes, a more haunting intimation of his horror than the more factual inclusion of the “down” would allow. Johnson’s next statement, the psychological compliment is to his dismay qualified in advance “(passionately and loudly)”. His response to Adams’s question as to his understanding of damnation “sent to Hell, Sir, and punished everlastingly” is a contrasting roar. Boswell modified this parenthesis mildly in the revision of the manuscript by adding –ly to both words each above the line, thereby attaching the description to the action of the speaking rather than to Johnson himself. This amounts to a direct reversal of the previous movement. Throughout the passage, Boswell demonstrates that his sense of the drama of the moment needs to find an appropriate object in order to convey Johnson’s terror. The two revisions, taking a description of Johnson’s action and applying it to his whole person, then reducing ambiguity by transferring an observation that could apply to Johnson himself into a description of his manner both serve to heighten the focus on the mystery behind his overreaction to the discussion of a basic proposition of Christianity by opening up a gap between the discussion and Johnson’s mediated and personal ruminations upon it.

**Interpretation and the Risk of Added Ambiguity**

While the impulse I have so far been delineating is to use parentheses to control through clarification of the meaning, there are times when the modifications actually add ambiguity to what could be

227 MS 955. Journal, 13/6/1784. *AJ*, 238 (giving MS); Beinecke, 45/1015, 13 (J 92) has a very truncated note of the conversation.
seemingly straightforward, if less interesting utterances. The very first parenthetical stage direction in the *Life* shows Boswell augmenting a habitual anecdote of Johnson’s with his personal observation of a specific, unspecified instance of it:

I have heard him more than once talk of this frugal friend, whom he recollected with esteem and kindness, and did not like to have any one smile at the recital. “This man (said he, gravely,) was a very sensible man, who perfectly understood common affairs: a man of a great deal of knowledge of the world, fresh from life, not strained through books. He borrowed a horse and ten pounds at Birmingham. Finding himself master of so much money, he set off for Welf Chester, in order to get to Ireland. He returned the horse, and probably the ten pounds too, after he got home.”

Johnson’s tone is absolutely necessary to the success of this anecdote of a man of his early acquaintance. Seeking to reproduce the control Johnson would exercise over the interpretation of the scant facts about this frugal man, Boswell intervenes in the revision of his manuscript.²²⁸

He adds the modifier “gravely” above the line, along with an introductory comma and the closing bracket as well as the opening bracket fully enclosing the $S$ of “said”. The modified “said” is actually an incongruously testamentary construction, which breaks from the sentence that has set it up. By acknowledging the multiplicity of times Johnson talked fondly of the Irish painter, Boswell inserts a confusing arbitrariness into the specific moment of quotation here, which the use of “gravely” as a modifier exacerbates, rather than pins down. In effect, Boswell’s move to clarify Johnson’s meaning through his tone frustrates the movement most in need of clarification through modification, which is

²²⁸ MS 62, Waingrow, 71.
the situation of Johnson’s statement in a specific moment of time. The result is a second level clarification without a foundation: essentially it is the unravelling of the technique.

In the first frank discussion Boswell reports having with Johnson about his pension, a conversation that is given a place in the miscellaneous section of gleanings from the 1763 Journal, Boswell follows a strategy of late modification in order to control the tone:

To such a degree of unrestrained frankness had he now accustomed me, that in the course of this evening I talked of the numerous reflections which had been thrown out against him on account of his having accepted a pension from his present Majesty. "Why, Sir, (said he, with a hearty laugh,) it is a mighty foolish noise that they make*. I have accepted of a pension as a reward which has been thought due to my literary merit; and now that I have this pension, I am the same man in every respect that I have ever been; I retain the same principles. It is true, that I cannot now curse (smiling) the house of Hanover; nor would it be decent for me to drink King James’s health in the wine that King George gives me money to pay for. But, Sir, I think that the pleasure of cursing the house of Hanover, and drinking King James’s health, are amply overbalanced by three hundred pounds a year."

(1/233)

In the manuscript, Boswell’s first instinct was to follow his frequent method of introducing the quotation with colon quotes and no transition from the “Why Sir” into an extraneous “with a hearty smile”.*

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* The whole story is absent from the Journal account, although Boswell marks in a margin where it should go “Here his defence of his pension”, Journal, 14/7/1763. Lf, 271; Beinecke 37/931, 667, MS 245, Waingrow, 299.
Later, though, the “hearty smile” is changed to a laugh in a correction above the line, but the notion of
the smile persists in a change made some time after the first proof, where it is moved sixty words
down the page where it becomes the parenthesis “(smiling)” that shows Johnson’s ironic attitude in
acknowledging the limitations placed on him by the pension. This alteration and transposition might
be able to instruct us about Boswell’s attitude to the facticity of his observations. The possibilities are
multiple, but condense to two avenues: Boswell, concerned about accuracy, corrects his first
impression of a hearty smile to the more plausible laugh, or, Boswell, concerned about the formal and
aesthetic qualities of his writing, decides, with no reference to the event, to dramatise through the
modification of his initial impressions, or initial memory as the case may be.

That both these examples come from the very early stages of the book, and in the early stages of
Boswell’s project of keeping a journal of his life and conversation is not surprising. With time, he
became so skilled at the technique that he was able to use it to hinge, pivot or otherwise stitch
together scenes in which he has purposefully omitted dialogue from the Journal. Here he has
recombined disparate but notionally connected matter that was disjointed in his recollection, and he
has a deliberate agenda in changing the focus or tendency of a conversation to bolster his
interpretation of Johnson’s personality or a local objective in moving the discussion to a new topic.

One such is the parenthetical stage direction “(laughing all the time)” in the section where, to
illustrate Johnson’s capacity to be “exceedingly diverted at what seemed to others a very small sport”,
he has Johnson mocking an anonymous friend’s pride at having made out his will.

I have known him at times exceedingly diverted at what seemed to others
a very small sport. He now laughed immoderately, without any reason that
we could perceive, at our friend’s making his will; called him the testator, and
added, “I dare say, he thinks he has done a mighty thing. He won’t stay till he
gets home to his seat in the country, to produce this wonderful deed: he’ll call
up the landlord of the first inn on the road; and, after a suitable preface upon
mortality and the uncertainty of life, will tell him that he should not delay
making his will; and here, Sir, will he say, is my will, which I have just made,
with the assistance of one of the ablest lawyers in the kingdom; and he will
read it to him (laughing all the time). He believes he has made this will; but he did not make it: you, Chambers, made it for him. I trust you have
had more conscience than to make him say, ‘being of sound understanding;’
ha, ha, ha! I hope he has left me a legacy. I’d have his will turned into
verse, like a ballad.”

(1/423)
The Journal and final forms of this episode are very different because in anonymising the “testator”, Boswell has had to remove references to Bennett Langton, including a laboured pun on his nickname, Longshanks. To balance the excision, the measured speech about Langton reading out the will in the Inn is an extrapolation from one laconic note “Hell read his will to ye Landlord of the first Inn on the road.”

Boswell’s decision in placing the note of the sustained laughter at the hinge of the extrapolation of this and the following sentence, shifts the attention to Chambers, Langton’s lawyer, and shows Boswell diligently at work in his composition. He can be found using this technique to manage tone even when he has relatively extreme latitude to transform his account of this episode, which is based on a very scanty initial record. Curiously, in the manuscript, while adding the direction “(to Chambers)” in a heavier ink, Boswell decides to underline the phrase “Laughing all the time” to indicate italics, but changes his mind, cancelling the underlining with sixteen small dashes.

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230 Journal 10/5/1773. Defence, 197 (giving final text of MS); Beinecke 40/961, 23 (J 29).
231 MS 418, Redford, 115.
Most likely having noticed the mistake this would make, but potentially also indicating his anxiety that the passage reflects the merriment it is used to indicate, a subject to which I will return in discussing onomatopoeia in the final chapter.

In a conversation with Goldsmith in 1773, of which there is no previous extant record, Boswell adds a parenthetical stage direction “(laughing)” to clarify Johnson’s tone and intention in noting Goldsmith’s lament that even if the King would come to see his new play, it would not do him any good. Johnson’s riposte is the hope that the good would be done to the King.

We talked of the King’s coming to see Goldsmith’s new play.—“I wish he would,” said Goldsmith; adding, however, with an affected indifference, “Not that it would do me the least good.” Johnson. “Well then, Sir, let us say it would do him good, (laughing.) No, Sir, this affectation will not pass;—it is mighty idle. In such a state as ours, who would not wish to please the chief magistrate?”

(1/398)

The parenthetical laughter is important because it allows us first the jest and then a transition from the jest into solemnity—advising Goldsmith that the desire for the approval of this high-ranked and illustrious figure is normal and justified. Without the laughter, Johnson’s speech accepts Goldsmith’s high opinion of himself. It is important that Boswell revises the text to indicate the consistency of Johnson’s opinion of Goldsmith—talented, vain, competitive, and often foolish. The revision, which is made above the line in the manuscript, also offers a neat minute of Johnson through the narrative picture of his thoughts that is afforded by the shift in his strategic response to Goldsmith.²³²

²³² MS 382, Redford, 92. There is no full extant account in the Journal for this period, given as 15/4/1773 in the Life. Beinecke 40/961, 21 (J 29) includes an instruction “Vid paper a part”. See Samuel H. Woods’s essay “Boswell’s Portrayal of Goldsmith: a Reconsideration” for an extensive account of the specific efforts to which Boswell went in representing Goldsmith.
Boswell’s revision first provides some ironical levity which is then followed by solemn reassurance that allows Goldsmith to move on and redirect the conversation towards the subject of Dryden. The parenthesis affords Boswell the opportunity to move on because the necessary shift in focus from the content of the speech to the extraneous consideration of the laughter smooths out the gap in subject matter.

**Stitching Together Dialogue**

This capacity of the parenthesis to smooth out gaps was also useful to Boswell in bridging much larger gaps than small tonal shifts such as this: Boswell also used the arbitrary authority gained by ordaining similar shifts in focus to bring together disparate elements in a conversation. In a moment that Ryksamp and Pottle, the editors of the Journal for the years 1774-6 note as “a rare—perhaps a unique—instance of a failure by Boswell to ‘carry a bon-mot’” in both the Journal and in its recovery in the *Life*, Boswell adds and augments a parenthetical stage direction to provide testamentary support to Johnson’s stated response. The situation is at Oxford with Gwyn, the architect, whose modifications of the layout to a London church allow the pun that Boswell simply cannot explain (the jest receives a marginal note “Qn” in the manuscript, which is cancelled without receiving additions).²³⁴

²³³ *OY*, 280 n4. Ryksamp and Pottle note that the mystery might perhaps have been resolved by L.F. Powell in his augmentation of Hill’s edition in the 1930s. ²³⁴ *Journal* 20/3/1776. *OY*, 280; Beinecke 42/992, 108. MS 509, Redford, 192.
In the Journal, the pun is introduced with speed, and Johnson’s reaction is given before the matter it refers to: “There was not much conversation. Gwyn would needs enter the lists with Dr. Johnson, and he blundered out an answer which the Dr. allowed to be a good one, in so much that he could rest his colloquial fame upon it & cried ~Speak no more~”
In the *Life* Boswell reverses (and thus restores) the order of this, noting the pun (poorly) and giving
Johnson’s reaction as entirely direct speech:

Gwyn at last was lucky enough to make one reply to Dr. Johnson, which he allowed to be excellent. Johnson censured him for taking down a church which might have stood many years, and building a new one at a different place, for no other reason but that there might be a direct road to a new bridge; and his expression was, “You are taking a church out of the way, that the people may go in a straight line to the bridge.”—“No, Sir (said Gwyn) I am putting the church in the way, that the people may not go out of the way.” Johnson. (with a hearty loud laugh of approbation,) “Speak no more. Rest your colloquial fame upon this.”

The parenthesis, again, allows Boswell to stitch together items that are preserved disparately in the Journal, using the step away that the irruption of the interpretive declaration allows as a transition to the reaction that may well have been distinct. The laugh serves as stitching and as support for Johnson’s belief in the excellence of the remark, which is convenient because in itself the remark is baffling, and it is telling in the context of the absence of understanding that Boswell further adds the “hearty” and “loud” to bolster the close though spurious description.

Boswell makes a double addition of the direction “(turning to Goldsmith,)” above the line in the manuscript to a passage from 1766 in which Boswell deliberately positions the conversation as a “specimen of the easy and playful conversation of the great Dr. Samuel Johnson”:

He talked of making verses, and observed, “The great difficulty is to know when you have made good ones. When composing, I have generally had them in my mind, perhaps fifty at a time, walking up and down in my room; and then I have wrote them down, and often, from lazinesfs, have written only half lines. I have written a hundred lines in a day. I remember I wrote a hundred lines of ‘The Vanity of human Wishes’ in a day. Doctor, (turning to Goldsmith,) I am not quite idle; I made one line t’other day; but I made no more.” Goldsmith. “Let us hear it; we’ll put a bad one to it.” Johnson. “No, Sir; I have forgot it.”

The addition has a direct impact on the integration of the exchange as a conversation. Since Boswell has an agenda in presenting the exchange as evidence of Johnson’s capacity for playfulness, which in
turn is a microcosm of Johnson’s wider mental dexterity when applied to weightier topics and considerations, it is worthwhile to note the aggressive proactivity with which Boswell inserts the phrase “I am not quite idle,” and the parenthetical stage direction which has it refer back to his earlier exchange with Goldsmith.235

This is not quite so in the original note Boswell made of the conversation in 1766. Johnson addresses Goldsmith directly, calling him “Doctor”.236

The addition softens the tone while strengthening the sense of Johnson’s playful tenacity. The double movement of concentrating the address and softening the tone by referring back to the preceding paragraph do indeed result in a text that affirms Johnson’s playfulness. But the fact of the additions must surely reduce the evidentiary value of the passage. The reference back also serves to stitch together disjunctive paragraphs that follow Boswell’s usual technique for introducing new topics, separated by time—“he talked of”—into coherency.

In a passage that is itself an insertion into the discussion marked 12 September 1777 (actually September 21), Boswell demonstrates his care in locating the parenthetical stage directions.

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235 MS 317, Redford, 10.
236 Journal, 23/2/1766. GTGS, 313; Beinecke 39/950, 69.
Adding the parenthetical stage direction to a passage that takes place under the heading “I shall present my readers with the series of what I gathered this evening from the Johnsonian garden,” Boswell here shows through his attention to detail that the parentheses are intended to have local effects in the dialogue, rather than marking a more general impact through shading the dialogue. The specific instance is worth looking at. Boswell wrote an extended introduction to be added before a long conversation he had already written about Johnson’s low opinion of actors, which initially in the manuscript is an unmotivated diatribe because it has been detached from its original context in the Journal of following on from Johnson giving a character of Samuel Richardson. The switch to Cibber is motivated by the general category of Johnson’s opinions and memories of celebrated authors, but the version in the Life requires its own motivation. The addition allows the topic to emerge out of Johnson quoting an instance of his own disdain for actors. This leads in to Boswell’s general question about Johnson’s stance, and the stitch as we should now see is typical in the composition of this book, takes the form of the parenthetical stage direction: “(smiling disdainfully)”. Boswell’s first impulse is to have the smile cast a pall over the emphatic line that leads into the past already written— “Now Sir to talk of respect of a player”—but before concluding the sentence he decided against the placement, allowing the action as a form of response or affirmation of his own indignant sarcasm while Boswell refines the conversation.238

238 MS Papers Apart; Beinecke (M 145) 56/1182, 578, Bonnell, 129.
This is a moment where Boswell’s instinct for his preferred rhythm is minutely exposed. This further demonstrates his care in using parenthetical stage directions to manage the tone, even in so small a scope as the small number of words by which he adjusts the location of this disdainful smile.

In yet another of Boswell’s extended set-pieces, the conversation with the Quaker Mrs. Knowles in which Boswell notes Johnson being uniquely bested in repartee, the parenthetical stage direction is used to varying ends. The conversation extends over ten pages in the final version, during which there are ten stage directions, many of them with intricate histories. Most notable is Boswell’s description his impression of Knowles’s behaviour. He stands in for any observer, which dually stitches together two parts of the original beat separated by an omission and allows the sense conveyed by Boswell’s interpretation to move along the spectrum into a more objective zone.

The direction “(seeming to enjoy a pleasing serenity in the persuasion of benignant divine light)” is an addition worked up from the phrase “seemed to enjoy a pleasing serenity in the persuasion of divine light to the soul”, which is presented in the full flow of the Journal’s narrative voice after some
reflections on the topic of Boswell’s own fears about Johnson’s mortality as well as a statement by Dr. Mayo. “There was a danger of presumption in assurance.”

After this, Mrs. Knowles quotes St. Paul. In the final version, Mrs. Knowles’s basking in the light is prospective rather than reflective, propelling or inspiring her into the felicitous quotation of scripture, rather than simply showing her calm assurance in response to Johnson’s blustering. Typically, the parenthesis is added as a second thought in the manuscript, above the line.

The change, with the elision of Mayo’s intervention about assurance makes an exchange out of a dilatory conversation, intensifying the dispute and turning Boswell’s personal observation about his own religious fears into an objective and causative event in the flow of the conversation. They then move into a discussion of ghosts, which is itself peppered with parenthetical stage directions of mixed provenance. Chief amongst these is the management of Johnson’s tone as he moves to shut down the levity of the discussion he himself has introduced as an anecdote about John Wesley. In the final

239 Journal, 15/4/1778. Extremes, 285-6; Beinecke 44/1000, 82.
240 MS 696, Bonnell, 213-4.
version the progression is as follows: Boswell prompts Johnson to weigh his comment about Wesley’s eloquence against the story about a ghost, Johnson obliges, noting only that Wesley did not consider the evidence clearly enough. The observation leads him to make a joke “(laughing)” about lawyers. He recovers from the laughter to note that Wesley’s brother Charles did not agree and to repeat this lament that Wesley did not put more effort into investigating the story. Mrs. Knowles is thus suppressed, and she asks “(with an incredulous smile)”, “What sir! About a ghost?” She does not feel, one must assume Boswell thinks, that this is a worthy topic for Johnson to think that Wesley should devote his energy to. Johnson snaps into the gravity of the question. Boswell marks this by describing it as being delivered “(with solemn vehemence)”: 

Of John Wesley he said, “He can talk well on any subject.” Boswell. “Pray, Sir, what has he made of his story of a ghost?” Johnson. “Why, Sir, he believes it; but not on sufficient authority. He did not take time enough to examine the girl. It was at Newcastle, where the ghost was said to have appeared to a young woman several times, mentioning something about the right side of an old house, advising application to be made to an attorney, which was done; and, at the same time, saying the attorney would do nothing, which proved to be the fact. ‘This (says John) is a proof that a ghost knows our thoughts.’ Now (laughing) it is not necessary to know our thoughts to tell that an attorney will sometimes do nothing. Charles Wesley, who is a more stationary man, does not believe the story. I am sorry that John did not take more pains to inquire into the evidence for it.” Miss Seward. (with an incredulous smile) “What, Sir! about a ghost?” Johnson. (with solemn vehemence) “Yes, Madam: this is a question which, after five thousand years, is yet undecided; a question, whether in theology or philosophy, one of the most important that can come before the human understanding.”

This exchange, in which three consecutive statements from two different speakers are characteristically and parenthetically modified—laughter met with a smile which is in turn met with a tonal about-face—is yet another instance of Boswell minutely focusing the possible understandings he allows to the rougher edges of Johnson’s expressions. Boswell is at pains to impart the seriousness of his final disquisition on the importance of the possibility of ghosts—not only is the tone “vehement”, but it is also “solemn”. This is a modification that survived all the way from Boswell’s initial Journal entry in 1778 to the publication of the work in 1791 with the only alteration being the
addition of the crotchets. The tonal mark of Anna Seward’s scepticism, by contrast, is modified from “(laughing)” into the “incredulous smile”.

This elides an intervening passage in the Journal where Boswell remembers an exchange from earlier in the evening, also about ghosts, where Johnson’s statement—“It was but a sorry ghost, I think, for he owned he was damned”—is delivered with a smile. Johnson’s statement prompts a quizzical wondering aside shared between Boswell and Mrs. Knowles. The wondering was presumably eliminated from the final version because it came out of chronological order. Perhaps, too, the intimacy the passage displays between Boswell and Mrs. Knowles renders it irrelevant. Nevertheless, eliminated, it seeps back into Boswell’s revision of Mrs. Knowles’s laughter despite being irrelevant to the account of Johnson. The shared moment, however, allows both the avoidance of the repetition, and a stronger motivation for Johnson’s vehemence. The elision and sublimation of its content affords greater coherence in the marked up final product. This comes, however, at the hidden cost of moving away from the initial, more factual-seeming, more transcript-like version in which it is permissible for a fact such as someone’s having been “(laughing)” to be used twice in quick succession without concern for the narrative cadence.

Other parenthetical stage directions in this conversation show similar refinement in cadence and content as Boswell works towards a final version. Praising Mrs. Knowles’s learned riposte to his

242 Journal, 15/4/1778. Extremes, 287; Beinecke, 44/1000, 86.
claim that friendship is not a Christian virtue, Johnson speaks “with eyes sparkling” without the aid of punctuation in the Journal, but Boswell deems it necessary to clarify that it’s happening benignantly, rather than with the solemn vehemence above.243

The change underscores the perception Boswell has of Johnson as an arbiter of worthiness in conversation. This is also a rare instance of Johnson acknowledging defeat in such a situation. Johnson’s statement “Very well, indeed, Madam, You have said very well” cannot be mistaken in the way that “sparkling”, unadorned, might be. We can see that the addition of an extralinguistic observation is not automatically a help in clarifying what is going on in the conversation. Rather, as textual items these parentheses add their own spheres of contestable interpretability, malleability and error to the text. Further, the adverb “benignantly” projects itself into the extended parenthesis describing Mrs. Knowles’s statement of faith that comes five pages later, hinting that the source of her complacency is at least partly the scene of exchange with Johnson himself. The same happens in

the parenthetical stage direction added at the manuscript stage explaining the reason “(not hearing distinctly)” that Mrs. Knowles thinks Johnson called Mason a Prig:

Johnson signified his displeasure at Mr. Mason’s conduct very strongly; but added, by way of shewing that he was not surprized at it, “Mason’s a Whig.”

Mrs. Knowles. (not hearing distinctly) “What! a Prig, Sir?” Johnson, “Worse, Madam; a Whig! But he is both.”

(2/229 [orig. 289])

This excludes the possibility that Mrs. Knowles has thought of the witticism herself, allowing Johnson’s triumphant “Worse Madam…” as a punchline. In the draft, Boswell discards “accurately” as an alternative for “distinctly”, but the extent of his honing the material extends to more than simple question of general diction.

Boswell removes this section where he extemporises a Johnsonian couplet based on the misprision of the rhyme—“I in the Dr’s stile said”—, to allow the punchline to pass to Johnson. In the manuscript, Boswell also added but discarded the statement “I immediately rhymed in Johnson’s own style.” More strikingly, Mrs. Knowles is given the question and the hardness of hearing it implies. Without explanation, the Journal attributes it only to “one of the ladies”.

The instance, already based on the contingency of setting up the bon-mot, brings about a necessity for a speaker, and that speaker having more personal characteristics such as hardness of hearing. This consideration is made leaving aside at this point the fact that this evening Johnson’s speaking style is marked by violence and shortness of breath which could easily make him difficult to understand.

244 Journal, 15/4/1778. Extremes, 290; Beinecke, 44/1000, 95. MS 694 verso, Bonnell, 212-3.
Boswell’s instinct is to make sure that the parenthesis is attached to a named someone for precisely this reason, and he chooses Mrs. Knowles as the natural focus of the conversation. Whether or not she was in fact the hinge at this point, this makes for a more unified episode in the *Life*.

Two lines later in a new paragraph introduced by the succinct statement “I expressed a horror at the thought of death”, Boswell includes an atypically baroque parenthetical stage direction:

> I expressed a horror at the thought of death. Mrs. Knowles. “Nay, thou should’t not have a horror for what is the gate of life.” Johnson: (standing upon the hearth, rolling about, with a serious, solemn, and somewhat gloomy air) “No rational man can die without uneasy apprehension.”

(2/229 [orig. 289])

This parenthesis comes about as the whole statement is worked up from an indirect telling of it where a parenthesis is used to indicate a shift in time within the context of the day’s conversation: “Dr. Johnson (between dinner and coffee and tea) standing rolling with his face to the chimney & a serious, solemn & somewhat gloomy air, said that no rational man could die without apprehension.”245

In making the statement direct, and adding the adjective “uneasy” along the way, Boswell faces the choice of finding either a declarative sentence with which to narrate Johnson’s moody hearth-rolling, or to lessen the narrative centrality of such action. This is what he does by consigning them to the set of brackets that previously had included the temporal context, and removing the gloomiest element: the fact that his face is towards the chimney, that is, directed away from the conversation that he is

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dominating and perhaps bathed in the flicker of hellish flames. This allows a balance between Johnson’s aberrant behaviour and the consolation later offered by Mrs. Knowles, leading into the subsequent extended discussion of the topic, part of which I have already described.

The effect of this transformation is that the significance of the rolling about on the hearth is left at once constrained and hovering over the conversation. It is constrained because it is not necessary for Boswell to state over the conversation’s remaining page whether the rolling stops, as it is foreseeably confined to the statement at the beginning, but hovering because without termination or narration to say otherwise, the description could possibly extend to the whole conversation. Absent another narration, or record, or memory of what actually happened, Boswell takes the handy option of the parenthesis, which allows him to have it both ways, adding the interesting and colourful detail without having it dwarf the content and expression of the ensuing conversation.246 But what can be

246 Of course, other parts of this conversation do have potentially corroborating alternate accounts, namely dialogues written by participants Anna Seward and Mrs. Knowles. Boswell solicited additional memories from both, but eventually ignored the accounts provided him, dismissing Mrs. Knowles’s additions as improbable and tendentious in a footnote in the second edition. This account had been published in the Gentleman’s Magazine after being rejected by Boswell. James D. Woolley reproduced Seward’s version in an article in 1972. Both versions add specific information about the particular nature of Johnson’s outburst against Miss Jenny Harry, the convert to the Society of Friends who he argues is not informed enough about religion to reasonably convert. While Boswell suppresses and limits Johnson’s abuse of the young woman to having him call her “wench” Seward provided him with many more epithets (she is variously a “chit”, and a “young”, “raw” and “odious wench”), while Knowles has him describe her as a “little slut”. Johnson defines “slut” as either “a dirty woman” or “a word of slight contempt to a woman”; “wench” is given as “a young woman”, “a young woman in contempt; a strumpet” and “a strumpet”, while the relevant sense of “chit” is given as “a child, a baby; generally used of young persons in contempt.” (Dictionary, “WENCH,” “CHIT,” “SLUT,” s.v.) The accuracy and the reliability of both these accounts, maligned and rejected by Boswell with reference to “the internal evidence” are the subject of a dispute encouraged by Boswell himself: “any one who may have the curiosity to peruse it, will judge whether it was wrong in me to reject it, however willing to gratify Mrs. Knowles.”(Life Second Edition, 3/84n9.) Knowles’s version is instructive in reference to the subject at hand. Throughout her self-serving account of Johnson being shown short in his preemptive dismissal of the Quakers as “upstart Sectaries, perhaps the best subdued by a silent contempt”, Knowles adopts the use of parenthetical stage directions, but they have none of the intimate specificity of Boswell’s interest in sparkling eyes. Indeed, Knowles uses the parentheses as a heavy-handed means of narration in addition to giving the same kind of information about moods, tones and laughter at which Boswell was an adept. As well as a familiar colouring such as “(much disturbed at this unexpected challenge)”, Knowles uses her own narrative voice within the parentheses: “(When the laugh occasioned by this personification was subsided, the Doctor very angrily replied,); “(Here the Doctor grew very angry, still more so at the space of time the Gentleman insisted on allowing his antagonist wherein to make her defence, and his impatience excited one of the company, in a whisper, to say, “I never saw this mighty lion so chased before!”).” Finally, Knowles even ends her account of the conversation with an instance of the technique: “(This sarcastic turn of wit was so pleasantly received, that the Doctor, joined in the laugh; his spleen was dissipated; he took his coffee, and became, for the remainder of the
made of the fact of the existence of this dialectic? Boswell opens the text to include narrative detail in the thicket of talk, but the interpretive and logistical impact of such detail only complicates the bare transcript, potentially bringing new questions and possibilities that Boswell does not have the resources to accommodate.

In the passage leading up to the censorship of his own rhyme, Boswell also deletes a parenthetical phrase that could easily have been worked up into an explanatory censoring parenthetical stage direction. Disapproving of the bookseller Murray’s prosecution by Mason, Johnson is recorded as saying “It was a mighty _____ thing (using a word to denote that he thought it mean & illnatured.”

In the final version, Boswell abandons the project of trying to remember Johnson’s synonym for mean and ill-natured. Instead, he says,

Johnson signified his displeasure at Mr. Mason’s conduct very strongly; but added, by way of showing that he was not surprized at it “Mason’s a Whig.”

The reasons for the change could be as simple as Boswell being aware that his page is already peppered with parentheses, and so he feels that it is the best course to eliminate the confusion, or it could be that he does not want to expose the lacuna. The gap in the Journal is an obvious missing word, possibly left open in the hope that he will be able to fill it in from the prompt. But the fact that Boswell passes up the opportunity to exploit the phrasing, which is near identical to the way he would otherwise censor the uncouth or inappropriate word of Johnson’s, as an intervention in direct speech as opposed to the ambiguity of the indirect representations here, shows the malleability of his approach to narrative and the tools he employs to construct it. Boswell is not committed exclusively to the parenthesis as a guarantor of the preservation of meaning through minor details. He uses it evening very cheerful and entertaining.) The economy of Boswell’s interventions in this conversation, as retrospective as it is, can be seen by contrast. For Boswell’s attempts to get information from Seward, see Corr 47-8, and Woolley, “Johnson as Despot” (1972). Knowles’s account is in the Gentleman’s Magazine of June 1791. Vol. LXI No. 6. Part I. 500-2.

247 Journal, 15/4/1778. Extremes, 290; Beinecke, 44/1000, 95.
more as one possibility amongst many in the apparatus available to him. The goal of assuring Johnson’s punchline is more important to his narrative than the exposure of the precise nature of his structures and stamps of authenticity. The limit of speech to represent itself is tested most intensely when the point of the representation or at least a feature of it is the reproduction of spoken peculiarities in the imitation of one person by another. When writing is used to represent one person trying to mimic another person’s characteristic speech patterns, then writing is tasked with a double duty. It must represent not only the transcript, but convey some aspect too of the surplus of performance, some marker of the ironic distance between the speaker and the mode of speaking which is either the target of the satire or the object of admiration. When Boswell, an enthusiastic and talented mimic, moves to mark down a moment when he assumes what he thinks are Johnson’s characteristic vocal and rhetorical attributes, he is presented with a challenge. The writing itself will require special attention in order not to show the ease of conformity Boswell’s written versions of Johnson’s speech share with any vocal performances of his own speech he wants to similarly record. In the second instance he needs to simultaneously present the similarity and difference of his spoken imitation of Johnson: the presentation cannot be identical with either the imitation as he spoke it, nor with his habitual representation of Johnson’s actual speech. In 1778 he decides to imitate Johnson’s manner of closing down discussion of a topic to get across to Johnson the strength of his feelings that Johnson should have published an account of his trip to France—“You should have given us your Travels in France. I am sure I am right—and there’s an end on’t.”248 Here Boswell needs to use a parenthetical stage direction to mark this difference by adding gestural exaggerative detail, the like of which the main flow of Johnson’s speech has not given, no matter how typical or omnipresent such gestures are.

248 Journal, 17/4/1778. Extremes, 293; Beinecke 44/1000, 100.
The solution is that Boswell augments the Journal’s “to talk in your own style” twice in the process of writing the draft of the *Life*.249

Each of these actions is added at a different moment in the composition. If both Boswell’s imitation of Johnson in this instance and Mrs. Desmoulins’ s in the *tacenda* can only be accommodated by the supplementary inclusion of extra detail to verify and codify their adoption of the habitual tics of the subject of the biography, it is the function of the parenthetical stage direction to point to this inviolated space beyond the bare transcript. The recursion inherent in imitation means that the parentheses here are both necessary and superfluous in that they both approach the limit of one imitation (the text) sharing identity with another (the impersonation) and surpass this limit in the marking of the imitation as more than what is contained in the text itself in its other sustained representations of Johnson’s habitual patterns of speech, his tics, and most importantly his difficulties in being understood. It is this last that is most important in understanding Boswell’s motivation for the use of the parenthetical stage direction. At all the moments I have outlined above where Boswell has sought to remove even those ambiguities that are dependent on his necessarily limited position as a spectator, his role as author forces him to interpret, to intervene in the communication. He is thus able to inhabit multiple positions in reference to each exchange. He is both a participant and the near omniscient observer who can interpret Johnson and his interlocutors for posterity.

249 MS 701, Bonnell, 218.
This ideal position is inescapably one which can be seen to undermine his claims about authenticity. On varying levels and at different times, this is not so much a failing on Boswell’s part, nor a deliberate dishonesty, but rather a function of the shifting levels of data and confusion that both force and invite intervention, always at the potential cost of further confusion, inconsistency or falsification. The parenthetical stage direction should then be read as the structural hinge between levels of understanding, and as such, something that is necessary for the management of Boswell’s narrative on the level that sits between the description of speech as a component of events, such as conversations, and the more detailed level in which the components of speech are events in themselves.
Chapter Four: Italics, Emphasis and Textual Mechanics

This thesis so far has focused on Boswell’s narrative-level interventions in his representation of Johnson’s life, made, as was his own claim, through direct speech in a series of scenes. I now turn to consider Boswell’s intervention at the more involved level of the quoted words themselves. In the previous chapter, we saw Boswell’s commitment to controlling tone and pace by inserting stage directions during the progress of the speech he was representing; this chapter shows him exercising a similarly intense level of control over the potential meanings of the words themselves by graphical alternation between the Roman and Italic typefaces. While italicisation is such a pervasive feature of Roman alphabet-print culture, the technique of slightly altering the appearance of words on the page is not a necessary component of the apparatus of print. Rather it is an accidental historical consequence of the development of alphabetical printing in Europe. Over the course of the development of movable metal type, different styles of printing were designed in different locations to reproduce different schools of monastic handwriting where type founders were established. The dissemination of these different styles led to competition between three major styles—gothic/black letter from Germany, and the two Italian styles—one from Rome and its Venetian rival, which was named in England “Italic”.\footnote{See M. B. Parkes, \textit{Pause and Effect}, 51-5 for the background on the development of typefaces in English and their names.}

In the history of English print culture, black letter flourished earlier, but since it was more difficult to read, and required more ink, resulting in messier pages, had largely died out in English language printing by the end of the seventeenth century. The Roman and Italic fonts, however, were found to be compatible with each other. By the time Boswell was writing a range of conventions had arisen about their interaction within a text and what this could mean. Boswell wrote in a period where the use of italics was becoming steadily less prevalent within texts. Whereas in the Restoration the respective amounts of Roman and Italic on a page was relatively balanced, Boswell’s contemporaries were more reserved in their application of the latter. John Smith, the possibly fictitious editor of the mid-century \textit{Printer’s Grammar} is instructive in this respect. In his section detailing the history and purpose of Italic, he rails against the unnecessary usage of both Italic and Roman on the same page, claiming with specific reference to the ‘puerile’ over-use of Italic to denote common names, personal and place names, and that what he calls the interlarding of the two fonts is ugly and unnecessary. The Grammar’s attitude offers a snapshot of the purpose of Italic in the decades leading up to the publication of the \textit{Life}:
It is therefore to be wished, that the intermixing of Roman and Italic may be brought to straighter limits, and the latter be used for such purposes as it was design’d for; viz. for varying the different Parts and Fragments, abstracted from the Body of a work—for passages which differ from the language of the Text—for literal citations from Scripture—for words, terms, or expressions which some authors would have regarded as more nervous; and by which they intend to convey to the reader either instructing, satyrizing, admiring or other hints and remarks: whereas others, again, would not chuse to allow that method, fearing that their works should be thought to have been printed in a house where, for want of Roman, they had recourse to the Italic.  

So John Smith, at least, was for a rationalisation of the purposes of mixing the two fonts. We can see that Boswell’s book fails to enact the dream described here, while conforming to many of the conventions it sets out. The final set of allowances the *Printer’s Grammar* makes for interlarding make up the bulk of Boswell’s italicising, and fall under the rubric of the nervous: the story of italics in the *Life*, particularly in the sections of direct speech, is a tale of instruction, satire, hints and remarks. It is most likely that the *Printer’s Grammar* shares with Johnson his understanding of the meaning of nervous: “Well strung, strong, vigorous”; relating to the nerves”; “Having weak or diseased nerves”. The words Smith would have marked in this fashion are words that are stronger or more highly strung than the ones surrounding them. Indeed, the *OED* offers a specific definition of “nervous” prominent between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries which connotes vigour or strength in writing. This is a form of emphasis, but also an intimation of the sense that italicised words are to have an inherent, rather than a contextually derived difference from the rest of the text. The motivating reasons for these therefore become inseparable from their appearance in the text and their presentation in the different typeface. Each of these rationales is a mark of distance, and when confronted by the additional scalar difference presented by the technology of quotation, constitutes what we might, to force upon the *Printer’s Grammar*’s appeal to the nervous the then nascent but now predominant sense of the word, call a basic anxiety in Boswell’s writing. It is my hope here to show that Boswell’s level of attention to the use of Italic puts him on the side of the *Grammar*, despite the abundance of that typeface throughout the book, and that it is throughout a result of

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251 John Smith, *Printer’s Grammar*, 21. See Lisa Maruca, “Bodies of Type”, 330-335, for a discussion of the probably pseudonymous Smith’s elision of the sweaty bodily world of the workshop in favour of considering the qualities of type itself in service of paradoxically making the type functionally invisible. Maruca devotes particular attention to Smith’s description of italics, arguing that his interest in their purity and feminine attributes underlies his disgust at the corruption of their use.

252 *Dictionary*, “NERVOUS” s.v.
consideration of the anxieties at the heart of his project that allows so much italicisation, rather than simple recourse to the letters to make up the supply of Roman.

While considering this description of the uses of Italic, we should also keep in mind the fact that the *Printer’s Grammar* does not specifically endorse the use of Italic for emphasis. This may very well come under the auspices of hints and remarks, nervously applied. That is, a nudge to the reader coming in the physical form of the slanting of the letters may very well be coextensive with the type of emphasis that even the *Grammar* uses twice in the four pages it takes to outline the purposes of italics. Vocal or auditory emphasis is not a specifically independent reason for the use of italics here. The producers of books increasingly restricted themselves to using the difference in the typeface to signify shifts of various kinds: shifts of language, shifts into quotations of various texts and speeches, and, more locally, shifts of argument turning on italicised individual words. The use of italics, therefore, is an arbitrarily and historically contingent and changing practice in which Boswell makes a late entry. By Boswell’s time, the conventions had solidified enough that italics had become a natural solution for the marking of emphasis in transcribed dialogue in addition to the other shifts that it could indicate in a text. Boswell makes abundant use of these new possibilities.

This chapter pursues three principal claims. The first is that the convention of using the italic font as a method of differentiating portions of a text from each other was an arbitrary result of the development of print and textual cultures, and that this accidental outcome of different processes in turn happened to collide with normal and varied practices of tonal difference in spoken language. These were close enough for italics to serve as a ready analogue for their representation but that italicisation was too blunt an instrument to represent all the complexities of spoken differences. The second claim is that Boswell’s project occurred in a context in which multiple varieties of italicisation coexisted and overlapped, facilitating the representation of many different kinds of textual differentiation, both in first order discursive writing and in second order citational writing. Crucially, one of the ways these orders intersected was through the use of italics itself as a technology of quotation. The final claim is that since this interaction of different orders and scales of italicisation coexist, overlap and occasionally compete wherever the *Life* is representing speech, Boswell’s use of the technique presents him with a never-ending series of epistemological dilemmas whenever he seeks to represent speech. This establishes an inescapable paradox in his project of authenticity. Boswell’s attempt to enrich or to more realistically represent the sonically variable nature of speech through italics runs

253 “What Roman Letter suffers by being interlarded with Italic, is of equal prejudice to this, when it is invaded by the former…”(20) [actually deictic]; “yet it may be hoped that their parading so very promiscuously may be prevented” (21); “were we to trace the beginning of the custom which still prevail in England, to vary all proper names” (22); “But if this has given the hint to the English to vary their proper names” (22).
into its own limits because of the presence of his quotations within a wider context of his textual practices: where he is presented with a challenge of representation his methods are only sensitive enough to point to, rather than to directly enact, the kind of historical, notable, curious distinctions of vocal delivery he is trying to preserve. The result is that all Boswell’s representations of speech are clouded by the possibility of multiple interpretations. His efforts towards precision open up an abyssal logic in which more modification is always possible and, in a limited sense, always necessitated by the paradoxical nature of his project, which insists on the possibility of simultaneously preserving speech in text both as event and as content.

To develop these claims, I attempt to offer a catalogue of the different exigencies which call for italics in the *Life*, starting with the different deployments of italics within Boswell’s discursive and exegetic prose before turning to more vexed moments in which he uses italics as part of the technology of transcription. In the first section the techniques are simple to follow but nonetheless distinct. I detail how Boswell uses italics to make mechanical distinctions between types of text and orders of narration in his patchwork project, as well as how he uses italics as a method of both quotation and of reading, noting additional uses of italics in accordance with printing conventions to signify switches in language. I then consider the rhetorical uses of italics to point the key terms, developments and distinctions in Boswell’s discursive analysis of Johnson’s claims and motivations.

The distinction between the techniques sets the scene for their collision with the disjuncture between orders of verbal representation in the consideration of the quotation of speech. I investigate how Boswell presents the words of speakers who are already textual creatures, speakers of dialogue that is already moulded to the requirements of text. I focus particularly on the way in which Johnson’s longer speeches and his more artful exchanges with his interlocutors use the same rhetorical style of emphasis that Boswell uses in his authoritative discursive text. I then outline how this technique bleeds inexorably into the order of representation required by the notion of the transcript as it seeks to represent the more fluid world of speech. This world is replete with demands for emphasis of tone to denote deictic references to people and situations in addition to high and emotive anger as well as jocularity and finally to point out moments of wit, including puns. Finally, I examine more vexed instances in which larger sections of text are marked out for ambiguous emphasis. My focus is on finding moments where the logic of Boswell’s representation finds itself stalled through such collisions. We are therefore afforded an insight into the competing demands of different scales of Boswell’s narration, inflected by the impulse to modify the bare information of the transcript through the consideration of its effectiveness. What follows, then, is a consideration of moments where Boswell’s drive to precision leads him unavoidably into indeterminacy.
Italics as Textual Mechanics

At the outermost level of the text, Boswell and his publishers and their compositors use italics as the principal method of constructing a bespoke mechanical apparatus for presenting the varied aspects of the book. In both volumes, the reader is initially confronted with four full pages of the _ADVERTISEMENT_ set out in italics. (1/ix-xii, 2/ix-xii) This introductory section is thus set apart from the main text of the book, commenting on what is to come in a space that is reserved for such paratextual and dominating material.\textsuperscript{254} Thereafter, throughout the text, italics are used to mark transitions. From the notes in the margins that mark the beginning of material about a new year through to introductory headings for the incorporated texts of letters, inscriptions and poems from other sources, as well as Boswell’s own subsections when in the discussion of Johnson’s _Lives of the Poets_ he offers an extensive series of glosses, italics are the tool that makes possible a break or a step away from what precedes or surrounds the new material. This is because the obviousness of the visual difference offers an instantly recognisable cue for pausing the flow of the text. Complicating this, however, is the consideration that mechanical uses of italics come from a level of authority that is reserved and ultimately unrevealed.

One of these mechanical uses is reserved for titles. Boswell uses the option to italicise titles inconsistently. The title of _The Rambler_, for instance, is rendered variously as _The Rambler_, “The Rambler”, the Rambler, and THE RAMBLER, depending on the demands of the context and his own whims.\textsuperscript{255} This inconsistency extends to the titles of other works, with no specific distinctions between shorter and longer works, and bleeds into short versions of titles, based on the subject being treated in a work, and sometimes simply an author’s name. This is the case in the discussion on 7 April 1778 (2/201) where Boswell lists the authors of sermons and asks Johnson’s opinions of their style, each name being italicised. What is important, though, is that the distinction of titles of some works is a possibility within the scope of the technology. That is, Boswell is always able to use italics

\textsuperscript{254} Gerard Genette’s assertion that paratexts are “more or less” sanctioned by the author (Paratexts, 2) is certainly correct in relation to Boswell with the emphasis on more: in the MS there is a prominent note on the top left saying “This to be printed in Italicks in a smaller size than the Life”, MS “Advertisement”, 1, and he later instructs the inverse for quotations: “Dr Adams’s words to be in Roman”, 6. Waingrow (3, 5) does not print these notes.

\textsuperscript{255} See respectively 2/382 for italics, 1/108 and 2/423 for inverted commas, 1/109, 1/111, 1/112, 1/113, 1/116, 1/117, 1/118, 1/123, 1/138, 1/255, 2/45 for variations on the unmarked but capitalised word, and 1/110, 1/158, 1/181, 1/222 for full marking and small caps. Boswell’s usual practice, by no means uniform, is to use small caps when introducing a major work and inverted commas for a smaller one throughout the rest of the text. Italics are less common, and more frequently used for texts with non-English titles. All this is influenced by the status of the words of the title within and without the bounds of direct speech.
to distinguish the name of a work, even if he does not use it. This means that the expressive possibilities of his regime of speech representation are complicated by this preceding mechanical use for them.

These mechanical uses do not partake in irony or in tone, but must be understood as the ultimate source—the legitimising force—of the subtle and ironic other uses of italics within the text because they mark the most extreme limit in the relationship between the text and the world. The *Printer’s Grammar* claims that this marking of boundaries between different textual apparatuses, that is the distinction of the body of the text from extraneous matter, is the primary use for italics. Even so, these mechanical uses of italics are not immune from confusion in the slow bleeding between layers of meaning. This is especially the case in the ever-present use of italics to signal the recipient of a letter, sometimes with the address. In these instances it is often clear, or intended to be clear, that the address is simply being quoted, and is therefore part of the text that comes from another author. In other instances it is quite obviously supplied by Boswell to succinctly identify the letter.

Because the mechanical use of italics here overlaps with the competing convention of italics as quotation, there is always a blurred line when regarding the authorship of these sections of text. Since the letters are offered as literary curiosities, this question takes on more importance in relation to Boswell’s idea of authenticity than it would otherwise necessitate. Following the logic of Boswell’s preservation and presentation of all the materials at his disposal in the hope that even the smallest detail will illuminate some readers, it is necessary to ask whether for instance it was Johnson himself adapting his addresses to Boswell’s location when on the Grand Tour, marking letters “A Mr. Mr. Boswell” or whether Boswell is imposing this curious convention upon him. Even in the most removed structural aspects of the *Life’s* text, Boswell (and along with him his readers) is required to engage with the contradictions of constructing a text out of life, weaving it out of layers that take place at different scales. At heart this issue rests on the question of ownership of or responsibility for the use of italics. In Boswell’s book, this question is uniquely magnified because of his commitment to the incorporation of hybrid sources into the one document. Since, as I have discussed in earlier chapters, the book incorporates many voices without necessarily being truly polyvocal, and certainly not polyvocal in the strict Bakhtinian sense, the text, even when it is not purporting to quote real world speech, is caught up in shifts of focus that render a clear perception of the mechanics of transmission unclear. When this is brought over into the zone of direct speech, the problems involved in these determinations become even more vexed.

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256 See 1/258 and 1/273. Most of Johnson’s letters to Boswell preserved in the *Life* have been lost.
Italics in Boswell’s Narrative Voice: Emphasis and Quotation

In the very initial stages of Boswell easing into his narrative of the story of Johnson’s life, he intervenes in the sentence “And now Samuel Johnson returned to his native city destitute, and not knowing how he should gain even a decent livelihood” with an additional comment “(I had almost said poor)” before “Samuel Johnson”:

And now (I had almost said poor) Samuel Johnson returned to his native city, destitute, and not knowing how he should gain even a decent livelihood.

(1/35)

We can see him using italics as a method of negotiating different levels of articulation and knowledge. “Poor” in italics is at two removes from the initial use Boswell says he was to make of it, and the italics themselves serve overlapping purposes. First they serve the method of quoting his putative word. Second, they set the word apart for emphasis or consideration as an object of pity or surprise on the level of metanarration (that is, Boswell surprised at himself for considering this) and at the level of the imagined description (Boswell having the reader concentrate on the unlikeliness of this description as an object of pity for the man who would later become great). Finally at the level in which we can imagine that Boswell’s initial impulse was to italicise as well as use the word “poor".

In this last instance, the method of modification comes up against its natural limits, and comes to signify more than itself. While within the seeming simplicity and normality of the treatment of this single four-letter word there lurks this range of possibilities and different inflections, Boswell is nevertheless able to draw off their summative impact to achieve something like tone. This tone is the chief ingredient in an intimacy that would be otherwise unattainable. In attending to the peculiar impact of italics in what follows, it will serve us to remember that even at this early stage in the text, Boswell is using italics as a method of effecting highly pinpointed interventions in the text that allow the suturing of different levels of reference with little explanation.

Boswell’s practice is also to use italics as a marker for quotation itself. This takes the form of quotation of texts or other people’s speech, and in text and as well as in speech. At the simplest end of this spectrum, sometimes he will italicise larger sections of text taken from other sources. More complex versions of this use of italics encompass a transition between layers, where a speaker will quote a phrase from a text, and Boswell will use italics to represent that small citation. Often, these
citations would already be presented in italics as they are in languages other than English, usually Latin or French.

Such a structure is of most interest for my purposes, when it is used as in-speech quotation of speech, both as a form of memory or embedded narrative, and as an on-the-spot response or adaptation of what a speaker has just said. In this latter version of italics as quotation, the practice bleeds back into other strategies of the modification of text into italics. The purpose of the quotation in such other strategies can range from linking together different speakers’ statements, to taking up rhetorical structures and terms in order to engage with them, to noting what has been said as a way of engaging in or setting up wordplay. In all of these instances, the question of tone becomes vexed owing to the collision of the two imperatives of quotation and tonal representation colliding in the same portions of text. It is unclear whether Boswell follows a system in choosing between quotation and italics as a marker of quotation, or if this is simply haphazard.

Near the end of the book, Boswell includes almost six pages devoted to his “animadversions” on Mrs. Thrale’s *Anecdotes of Johnson*, some of which were supplied to him by an “eminent critic” (identified as Malone) and the rest provided by Boswell himself.257 These form an analysis of Mrs. Thrale’s shortcomings both as a transcriber of the spoken word and as an interpreter of character. Throughout, the most damning passages are excerpted in italics with glosses and counter-arguments following in Roman. But even in this strategy of distinguishing between point and counterpoint by deploying the switch between Roman and Italic, Boswell reserves an ambiguous recourse to further switches for emphasis as a strategy of reading. Switching back into Roman is of course a convention to preserve emphasis from an italicised text. However, in these pages Boswell does not distinguish between Mrs. Thrale’s emphases and his own. In two of the four instances of this, Boswell points out Mrs. Thrale’s egregiousness in her characterisation of Johnson:

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257 Neither Irma Lustig in her essay “Boswell at Work” nor Mary Hyde in her book *The Impossible Friendship* notes Boswell’s tinkering with italics in their psychologically astute accounts of Boswell’s missteps and revisions in these passages.
Her words are, "Veneration for his virtue, reverence for his talents, delight in his conversation, and habitual endurance of a yoke my husband first put upon me, and of which he consentedly bore his share for sixteen or seventeen years, made me go on so long with Mr. Johnson; but the perpetual confinement I will own to have been terrifying, in the first years of our friendship, and irksome in the last; nor could I pretend to support it without help when my coadjutor was no more." Alas! how different is this from the declarations which I have heard Mrs. Thrale make in his life-time, without a single murmur against any peculiarities, or against any one circumstance which attended their intimacy.

(2/528-9)

and

She says of him?, "He was the most charitable of mortals, without being what we call an active friend. Admirable at giving counsel; no man saw his way so clearly; but he would not stir a finger for the assistance of those to whom he was willing enough to give advice." And again on the same page, "If you wanted a slight favour, you must apply to people of other dispositions; for not a step would Johnson move to obtain a man a vote in a society, to repay a compliment which might be useful or pleasing, to write a letter of request, &c. or to obtain a hundred pounds a year more for a friend who perhaps had already two or three. No force could urge him to diligence, no importunity could conquer his resolution to stand still."

(2/531)

While in two further sections Boswell preserves the structure of emphasis that Mrs. Thrale presents in her rendering of a conversation.

"It is said, 'That natural roughness of his manner so often mentioned, would, notwithstanding the regularity of his notions burst through them all from time to time; and he once bade a very celebrated lady, who praised him with too much zeal perhaps, or perhaps too strong an emphasis, (which always offended him,) consider what her flattery was worth before she shoaked him with it.'

(2/529)

and
Boswell is amenable to finding his way through the difficulties of using italics to mark both mechanical and meaningful shifts in the text, but that the apparatus for this is unwieldy to the point of increasing the amount of ambiguity that is possible in his final text.

Italics and the Rhetoric of Quoted Speech

This is especially true for this book of Boswell’s where so much of the content is taken up in the quotation of speech where texts are the subject of discussion. Here we encounter both the utility and the troubled potential for oversignification in italics where the text represents critical reading or performing it itself. Boswell and his speakers are frequently shown quoting a text, and italics are used within the quoted sections as a form of critical reading. Similarly, the question of tone in these sections is vexed, because of the potential of any of these moments, particularly in the mouth of Johnson, are so likely to be scornful. As a result of this situation any tonal excess in these situations is effectively silenced, or made unavailable to a reader because Boswell focuses on the sense. Since it is necessary to be very clear in these instances that a speaker such as Johnson is marking a particular word for comment, none of the speakers own modifications of this content are available to be contained within the writing itself. The words in question are therefore being set apart in a zone between their source and the speaker’s own discourse. Take, for instance, this isolated anecdote from

(2/530)\textsuperscript{258} See Thrale, \textit{Anecdotes}, 293, 51, 183, 202. Boswell marks each of these passages for italics in the margins of the MS, while the phrases that are in Roman in these sections remain underlined, MS 986-996.
1763, only six weeks after the first meeting between Boswell and Johnson, and only two paragraphs after an apology for the sketchy nature of Boswell’s record:

On Tuesday the 5th of July, I again visited Johnson. He told me he had looked into the poems of a certain pretty voluminous modern writer, which had lately come out, but could find no thinking in them. Boswell. “Is there not imagination in them, Sir?” Johnson. “Why, Sir, there is in them what was imagination, but it is no more imagination in him, than found is found in the echo. And his diction too is not his own. We have long ago seen white-robed innocence, and flower-bespangled meads.”

(1/228)

Even without providing the name of the poet, or more text than the two ambiguously original phrases, Boswell is able to show Johnson both quoting and scorning these poetic clichés simply through the use of italics. Naturally the impact of the italicisation is not contained within either of the purposes for which it is used—quotation and emphasis—but in their concatenation. Here is a much more extreme version of a dynamic that is at play whenever Johnson and his associates are shown quoting texts, incorporating their own emphases into the fabric of works that already have their own stress patterns. This represents an almost endless regression of citationality where each additional layer of emphasis in a quoted statement is potentially incorporated into the previous one and its impact thus diminished.

The other chief mechanical purpose for italicisation is the accommodation of languages other than English in the text. Boswell does this as a matter of course in both the discursive and conversational sections of the text. It is important to consider the limitations on interpretation that the convention of alerting readers to the switch in languages by switching typefaces imposes, especially because of the multilingual atmosphere of the book. Not only is the Life saturated with italicised classical words, citations and extended quotations in both Latin and Greek (for which alphabet an italic version is used), but French as well as occasional Italian feature prominently on all scales in the course of the book. What this means is that the same protocols are used for accommodating a single term such as jeu d’esprit (2/92) and for the extended text of Johnson’s doctoral diploma (2/469-70). When these protocols are applied to direct speech, as they are uniformly throughout, whether it be for a Latin tag, for an extended conversation in which the language is important, as in the first meeting between

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259 The Life MS 235, shows the phrases clearly underlined for italics, while in the Journal, they are neither within quotation marks nor underlined. Journal, S7/1763. LJ, 257; Beinecke 32/930, 632. The editor of LJ notes that neither phrase can be found verbatim in Ogilvie’s poetry, though many rough equivalents are provided.
Johnson and General Paoli, conducted in halting, partly written French (1/315), their deployment as a mechanical means of differentiation on the level of the text means that they are unavailable for unambiguous deployment in instances where italics would otherwise be of use to Boswell to mark a quip or a shift in tone. When Johnson is quoted saying he is “penetré with His Majesty’s goodness” on the occasion of being granted his pension (1/206), the potential of italics for conveying tone, or indeed information about Johnson’s method of delivery in foreign languages, is subsumed into the signification of the difference of this single word from all those around it. We are left without an unambiguous signal of Boswell’s intentions in marking significant features of speech because of the coincidence of the two necessities. This precludes knowledge about the use of foreign languages in a peculiar way that is limited only because of the conventions of printing. It is an important point that I will develop further, but it bears attention at this stage in the argument: as we consider the simple discursive conventions for the use of italics, there is always a complication involved when these conventions are required in the representation of direct speech.

Apart from distancing paratextual elements and foreign languages in his discursive sections of the text, Boswell’s use of italics is mainly restricted to the marking of rhetorical structures, and when he writes dialogue, he replicates this. A principal and relatively simple version of these structures is the contrasting use of two terms to mark a subtle distinction or a wide antithesis. Boswell does this frequently, from making a nice distinction in his analysis of Johnson’s character:

通过 to cavilling about the minute implications of a particular statement of Johnson’s:

260 MS 202 verso shows the word twice, first as a reminder, then in the full text and it is clearly marked for italics both times, despite Boswell including an additional, feminising e in the reminder, Waingrow, 260.
261 MS 286 shows the neat balance provided by temperate to be a revision from a formulation that had temperance: “had not the virtue of temperance” being replaced by “was not a temperate man” above the line, Waingrow, 328.
or making a qualification about Johnson’s thinking that explicitly invokes the principle of distinction:

In each of these instances, Boswell engages italics to force the distinction in the eye of the reader, holding up the two contrasted terms to a level of scrutiny reserved for them alone. That Boswell does this is not surprising: it is the general textual convention for expository writing in the period, as evidenced by the profusion of the technique in Johnson’s writings. If anything, there is a much smaller prevalence of italics generally and specifically of contrastive italics in the *Life* than in many of the texts that provide the context for its composition. However, Boswell is still given to marking these differences of terms even when they are not strictly necessary for the sense, since often other textual markers such as punctuation are at his disposal to direct the reader through the arguments being made. They are, therefore, obviously important to him in a way that is not strictly limited to the visual structuring provided by presenting two isolated Italic words on a field of Roman text. Part of this importance can be attributed to the aural remnant of stress in the mental construction of language in text: even in writing, the mind hears the stresses and tonal adjustments of language as if it were being spoken. Marking opposed terms in text helps this interior auditory understanding so that the rhetorical structure is immediately apparent. This allows the progress of the argument to be much more readily apparent. Making this a regular part of his discursive composition, however, Boswell sets himself what should by now be a familiar challenge when he comes to represent real world speech using the same techniques. Where, in his discursive writing, Boswell’s contrastive italics helpfully approximate what the text would sound like if spoken, in the dialogue sections this additional or supplementary guide afforded by the technology of print abuts Boswell’s goal of presenting speech as the preserved remains of events. Wherever the use of this technique appears in
dialogue, its presence can only be ambiguously attributed to the speaker on the one hand, and the inherent structuring elements of the utterance on the other.

To take this line of reasoning further, Boswell’s speakers can never entirely own their own emphases, while conversely their conventional emphases are never entirely free of the hint that they could indicate more sonic difference than they otherwise would if the speakers had written their thoughts instead of speaking them. The consideration of this matter is consequential when related to contrasts, but it steadily becomes more important the higher the emotional and dramatic stakes of a given conversation are raised. The problem is that in using the same technology for representing both the tiny tonal shift that is necessary in the mind of a reader of discursive prose and a shift imagining actual speakers getting angry about a topic they are disputing, Boswell robs himself of the opportunity to mark clearly whether his modification of the text is mechanical or historically significant. The problem expands when the same technological solution is used for such varied ends as Boswell uses it in the Life.

Emphasis is a surprisingly vague concept. It can, as we have seen, refer to the style of delivery of extended passages of discussion, as well as specific stress on particular syllables. This unique example of Boswell applying the term to explain his treatment of Johnson’s delivery of a particular repeated word actually does not help deliver a determining answer as to the question of whether the italics he distinguishes for emphasis are to be read with a transformation of volume or of tone, or a combination of the two. Additionally it does not help to establish the relative levels of the figure and the background conversation, especially given that anger is given as the distinguishing feature of the whole speech, and that the accompanying frowning looks are attributed equal credit in establishing the reproof. What we can deduce about the purpose of the italics, then, is that either Boswell is overconfident about their utility in preserving and rendering specific historical observations about Johnson’s delivery, or that he is comfortable with a blunter, less agile tool that can alert his reader to an alteration, but cannot restore the specific character of the alteration. If it is more likely to be the latter, and the abundance of other overlapping uses to which Boswell puts the technique would suggest his ease with the technique being at best imprecise, then we must expand this understanding into a method of reading the italics in his direct speech as a series of ad-hoc interventions, rather than a systematic attempt to consistently render Johnson’s speech in a reliable bespoke convention. Boswell’s italics then indicate nothing more than a slight shift in whatever direction is needed, as opposed to the direct register of an event that occurs in the world. That is, they are indexical metasigns that indicate the limitations of text rather than an addition to the textual apparatus that would
allow more information to be recorded within it. Understanding italics then means dealing with both its lack of determining influence and Boswell’s apparent commitment to and interest in it.

A simple three-line instance of Johnson making a contrast both of whose terms are to be italicised by Boswell can be located in the entries for 1781:

When I observed that a housebreaker was in general very timorous. Johnson. “No wonder, Sir, he is afraid of being shot getting into a house, or hanged when he has got out of it.”

(2/405)

In her marginal notes to the 1816 edition, Mrs. Thrale makes the observation that this is “Comical Enough” and so it is. More importantly, it shows the key element of balance in this form of rhetorical contrast: both of the italicised words carry the same weight in their respective parallel clauses, and indeed they are both prepositions, making exactly matched opposites of movement to underline the “comical enough” constant state of fear of the housebreaker, and justify the inclusion of the witticism in Boswell’s collection. It is logical for the prepositions to have been matched in this way because the verbs “is getting” and “has got” shift in tense: it is only for the prepositions where the two clauses are so precisely balanced.

But it is not necessary to the sense that Johnson should be emphasising these words, even though the pointing is helpful. Moreover, the italics belong to the stage of composition for readers, rather than existing as an imprint of a real event, as they are not present in the Journal.

264 MS 852 verso.
Throughout the *Life*, Boswell’s use of italics to mark rhetorical contrast between two terms is extended, and by converse implicitly diminished, by the use of the same technique to mark a term with which the speaker is making an implied contrast. The suppression of one term serves as a rhetorical gesture in which the presumably vocal emphasis on one word is counterbalanced by the silence in which the implied term is enveloped. For this reason such italicised emphases are vocal, but never entirely and most often not even partially the bearers of emotional or interpersonal information. As is the case with explicit balanced contrast, such emphases operate at the same time as writerly transformations, clarifications and interventions in the text and as the already present already thought structures in the mind of the speaker. This is especially true in the case of Johnson and many of his interlocutors, since Boswell presents their conversation as engaged in a literary and philosophical milieu whose habitual patterns of thought and speech are always already infused with the textual conventions of contemporary rhetoric. They can easily expect their speech to be recognisable and representable in text and in addition that their interlocutors will be able to understand their tonal shifts to be coextensive with pre-existing textual conventions or rhetorical representation. Italics, then, are not only a method available to Boswell in the representation of real-world speech events and conversational exchanges, but also an operating condition of the speech he is setting about to represent and reconstruct. This brings about a dynamic in which Boswell comes to use the same technique to signify different levels of modification to the reader. Because of the potentially unending recursive cycle between the speaker’s assumptions about the rhetorical construction of meaning on the spot and the transcriber-author’s ability to transform and to clarify meaning through intervention, there is never a moment in which a reader can assume that italics point wholly to the assumption of a familiar rhetorical structure or to the marking of a rare and potentially meaningful flight of emotion.

Where single words are marked in implied contrast with an absent term, the stakes are even higher. Instances of this technique occur throughout the *Life*, essentially whenever Johnson is quoted speaking directly; however, Boswell also relies on implied contrast with an absent couple in his own voice in the narrative and interpretive sections of the book. As I have been arguing in reference to
explicit contrasts, the technique is used in parallel in different orders of discourse within the book. This means that its use is much less simple than the straightforward augmentation of the text by transforming the word’s shape in a different typeface: rather, the supplementary nature of the italics in the discursive sections of the text is amplified when it is transferred into the dialogue section. This is the result of Boswell’s role in the authorship of these sections being only a partial one. The presence of other authors and other intentions in the transcript or transcript-like text of the dialogue sections of the Life has a multiplying effect on the possibilities of signification performed by the marking of difference with such a blunt tool as the binary switching between two typefaces. The question is always whose italics?

The blurring of the distinction between Boswell as author and Boswell as transcriber making necessary interpretive interventions in the speech he is recording in order to determine both its sense and impact means that this question is never entirely answerable. The result is a continual oscillation between the different levels of interpretation that is necessitated by the gap that opens up between Boswell as transcriber and Boswell as narrator, with a never negligible impact from the phantom historical presence of the speaker as a complicating, rather than mediating factor. Since even (or especially) within spoken language, tone and volume are fluid and overlapping, speakers such as Johnson are always already mediating between the use of tonal modification as a method of rhetorical structuring and as pure prosodic emphasis to denote the force of their thoughts, feelings and emotions. The movement between these two functions can be overlapping and unintentional. This, however, does not negate the intentional use of tone as a means of signification. Even the most neutral of transcribers is presented with an inescapable struggle by the excessive or supratextual nature of tone. Once a transcriber has accepted the possibility offered by the convention for marking difference with italics in text, the introduction of a single switching shift within text to indicate tone becomes a poisoned chalice, as it is not sensitive enough to deal with all the minute shifts and overlapping purposes of tonal shifts. Since the use of italics offers to the transcriber only an either-or relative to what has preceded the speech that is to be marked (and of course taking into account pre-existing textual conventions), a transcript that tries to denote such shifts must make subjective determinations about the manner of the speech, and how it relates to the matter, without the help of the speaker. The transcriber must also make these determinations not only at the level of the individual word or phrase, but also consider how an individual use of the switch will affect the interpretation of other parts of the speech that are to come. A transcriber must trade off between competing claims to the use of the binary switch in a way that a speaker does not have to, since a speaker can modulate tone along a continuous spectrum of sounds. Naturally, this has major implications to the types of truth claim and models of factual accuracy that a transcription can claim to embody. Since the italics switch is such a
blunt instrument, it is inadequate to fully represent the minute differences of speech. A transcript is always already a move away from a catalogue of facts about events, as a natural consequence of the very nature of transcription.

**Boswell Using the Blunt Instrument**

One instance of Boswell representing Johnson’s taking issue with a previous speaker’s word is particularly striking in an entry recorded on 22 September 1777, where an anonymised “gentleman farmer”, (named Fieldhouse in the Journal) repeatedly defends Mungo Campbell’s action in the killing of Lord Eglintoune:

> The negation is a straightforward example of that variety of italics, but the concurrent use of italics for the first “damned” jars the scansion of the line. The purpose of the italicisation introduces a competing tone to the sentence too quickly after the “not”. Since these two words form a juxtaposition of the same technique being used for different effects, the transition is awkward: Boswell cannot dispense with the negation because he wants to present the strength of Johnson’s emphatic and already noted anger, but he also wants to set up a remarkable and much more nuanced trill of emphases to round out and demonstrate the point of what is in effect an isolated anecdote. The thrice repeated “damned” begins as a taking up of the term of the line that feeds into it. As we have seen, this is a familiar cause for Boswell to see the need for italics. Instead of simply taking issue with the term at hand and riffing on a distinction, Johnson is additionally taking issue with the tone. His issue is with the fact of the swearing as much as it is with the meaning encoded in it. Johnson’s problem is not with the characterisation of Eglintoune as a fool as much as it is with his interlocutor’s

265 Journal, 22/9/1777. *Extremes*, 179; Beinecke 43/997,102 (Journal was used directly as copy for the *Life*).
lack of decorum. In the stroke of conversational vivacity that Boswell is attempting to preserve here, Johnson sidesteps his usual path of interrogating the term and instead flips the offending intensifier onto Campbell and his actions.

It is easy to imagine the tonal effect of this scorn to be cumulative, though there is nothing to suggest a crescendo in the surface level of the writing. The impact of these italicised words is extended by Boswell’s discursive conclusion to the paragraph: “His emphasis on damned, accompanied with frowning looks, reproved his opponent’s want of decorum in his presence.” Here, having completed the quotation, Boswell switches the mode of use for italics. Now the “damned” is italicised in order to mark it as isolated quotation of both Johnson and Fieldhouse, and the “his” that follows soon after is the form of italics that is made necessary by the desire to inculcate the reader into Johnson’s peculiar mindset through emphasis on the peculiarity that attaches to him: the possessive takes on a double function of referring both to Johnson and the idea of his stature that has been breached by Fieldhouse. The breach of decorum is thus made a figure of fun. While the offending word “damned” is innocently unmarked in Fieldhouse’s anonymous mouth, Johnson’s objection points out its rarity and inappropriateness, then repeats it so that, including Boswell’s appropriation of the word for subsequent comment, the italicised version appears four times in three lines of text. It is unsurprising that in a passage where Boswell’s enjoyment is so exercised all the modulations of tone marked by italics in the Life go back all the way to the Journal.

Boswell is here gleefully engaging in, and augmenting, Johnson’s game with the idea of decorum, fitting in the offending article as many times as he can get away with. But it is only in the limited
extent to which Johnson is engaging in a game of his own devising, and enacting the skilful switch of focus on the pivot of the indecorous word, that Boswell is warranted in his playfulness.

Boswell’s extension and explanation of the outburst is therefore made to balance with the moment-by-moment demands of the narration in which Johnson’s emotions have an impact on what can be perceived from the written version of the exchange that is equal to the structural demands of the wordplay. In order to justify the anecdote’s existence, he must balance between the technical challenge of presenting the evidence of Johnson’s talents and quick-wittedness as well as the narrative demands of explaining the causes of the playfulness. It is to this end that he sandwiches the outburst with information about Johnson’s emotional reaction to the claims, first marking the reply as being delivered “angrily” and then noting Johnson’s “frowning looks” in the explanatory sentence at the end. Notwithstanding this emotional information, Boswell is drawn into a metanarrative level of discourse in his explanation. This is a very rare moment for the book where Boswell makes use of the word “emphasis” in the singular. He also infrequently uses “emphasis” to refer to the delivery of a single repeated word. To explain that the italics on the first three uses of “damned” represent emphasis on Johnson’s part, he is forced to use the very same technique. We should be under no apprehension that the technique is being applied consistently, or at least that Boswell’s idea of emphasis is wide enough to include these two technically disparate functions. It is important to note that in Boswell’s explanation of the outburst, emphasis is present as the agent of Johnson’s action in reproving Fieldhouse. Boswell is acknowledging, at least in this instance, that italics are being used to indicate meaning that is surplus to the expressed content of the speech. Johnson is adapting the words of the man who Boswell claims is an opponent and intensifying them through emphasis and repetition, adding meaning only through spoken means that would be unrepresentable in simple type. His additional meaning requires the use of an additive technological solution as an analogue to the modification that the words go through in Johnson’s angry delivery. However, Boswell’s double intervention of marking the words and then explaining both the change and its emotional motivation is still inadequately reticent in indicating the precise qualities of the difference he is making.

Boswell uses italics to note Johnson taking under scrutiny a term already established by the preceding conversation in an exchange late in the *Life*, a 1783 conversation where Boswell sounds out Johnson’s advice about whether to try to get into Parliament.
I have no minute of any interview with Johnson till Thursday, May 15, when I find what follows:—Boswell. "I wish much to be in Parliament, Sir." Johnson. "Why, Sir, unless you come resolved to support any administration, you would be the worse for being in Parliament, because you would be obliged to live more expensively." Boswell. "Perhaps, Sir, I should be the less happy for being in Parliament. I never would sell my vote, and I should be vexed if things went wrong." Johnson. "That's cant, Sir. It would not vex you more in the house, than in the gallery. Publick affairs vex no man." Boswell. "Have not they vexed yourself a little, Sir? Have not you been vexed by all the turbulence of this reign, and by that absurd vote of the House of Commons, 'That the influence of the Crown has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished'" Johnson. "Sir, I have never slept an hour less, nor eat an ounce less meat. I would have knocked the factious dogs on the head, to be sure; but I was not vexed." Boswell. "I declare, Sir, upon my honour, I did imagine I was vexed, and took a pride in it. But it was, perhaps, cant; for I own I neither eat less nor slept less." Johnson. "My dear friend, clear your mind of cant. You may talk as other people do. You may say to a man, 'Sir, I am your most humble servant.' You are not his most humble servant. You may say, 'These are sad times; it is a melancholy thing to be referred to such times.' You don't mind the times. You tell a man, 'I am sorry you had such bad weather the last day of your journey, and were so much wet.' You don't care sixpence whether he was wet or dry. You may talk in this manner; it is a mode of talking in Society: but don't think foolishly."

(2/454-5)

The conversation turns on whether Boswell could be content in a situation where he would most likely be too principled to engage in the actual business of Parliament by supporting an administration or as he puts it "selling his vote" as this would "vex" him if things went wrong. The idea of vexation becomes the key note of the discussion, which subsequently expands into a treatment of and exhortation against cant. Over the course of the exchange, forms of the verb "vex" are used six times in a paragraph with both speakers using the word three times each. "Cant" is introduced immediately as the brunt of Johnson’s rejection of Boswell’s projected vexation should he enter parliament, but its resumption in the conversation is delayed until the idea of vexation is played out.

What is striking in the conversation is that the multiply repeated word is unitalicised until Johnson uses it the final time in a burst of disapprobation: "Sir, I have never slept an hour less, nor eat an
ounce less meant. I would have knocked the factious dogs on the head, to be sure; but I was not vexed.” Here the italicisation serves concurrently as a punchline emphasis, and a holding up of the term for final consideration and differentiation from the rhetorically extreme conjectural actions listed by Johnson. Every use of the word leading up to this point thus becomes a stepping stone towards the release of Johnson’s scorn, which has been delayed since his initial dismissal of Boswell’s idea of his own vexation as cant. The four repetitions of vex before Johnson reaches this point do not meet any of Boswell’s usual criteria for italicisation because they keep the meaning of the term as Boswell introduces it alive, contain no wordplay, and effect no structural transformation of the logic of the propositions being discussed. It is only when Johnson’s rejection has reached its peak that a differentiation of this sort is necessary. This italicisation is not of the sort where it is specifically the term that is being played back and forth. Vexation is not an object whose qualities are under dispute, rather it is the whole question of whether both Johnson and Boswell experience it as an emotion, and because of this, there is no call for italics before the final word. But it is what happens after that is most relevant for our understanding of the relationship between Boswell’s italics and real-world emphasis.

In the rest of the exchange, which takes the space of only ten lines there are a further six italicised words. First, Boswell allows the possibility of Johnson’s refutation: “But it was perhaps, cant;” Then Johnson replies with a balanced distinction between spoken, conventional language and the actual process of thought: “My dear friend, clear your mind of cant. You may talk as other people do.” This is a less-than-successful balanced contrast because the terms represent contrasting ideas but are not grammatically equivalent: “mind” and “talk” are not distinct opposites. The call for emphasis on these words, however, is limited. They are not hugely important concepts to be discussed. They have not been set up well to oppose each other, nor are they the culmination of an earlier series of steps. Rather, they are Johnson’s conceptual intervention in the discussion about vexation and whether or not it is cant, and the intervention is not metrically measured in the standard way Boswell has transmitted other such interventions as there is not enough space for them. Johnson proceeds, imitating the usual canting pleasantry of social discourse, then promptly negating the factual reality of the claim: “You are not his most humble servant.” He follows this with two further examples of exaggerated spoken formulae, followed by succinct denials of the same structures. Neither of these negations follows the first example by italicising the negation. Johnson rounds off his point by reaching the balanced aphorism that Boswell has him struggling towards at the beginning of his speech: “You may talk in this manner; it is a mode of talking in Society: but don’t think foolishly.” The opposition of the two italicised words, matched in their part of speech, now conforms to the conventional mode of balanced opposites that characterises much of Johnson’s reasoning as it is
represented in Boswell’s rendering of his speech. Over the course of a paragraph, we can see Boswell moulding his and Johnson’s speech into the shape required by different conventions of the use of the same technique. The affirmation and the negation are different from the balanced opposition, which are in turn different from the inaugurating italicisation of “vexed”. Each italicisation hints at a marginally different sort of tonal modification, but the key here is that the precise quality of the modifications can never be determined, especially in the extent to which they relate to each other and not a simple base level of volume or neutral tone.

The textual history of these italicisations is itself troubled. The most important consideration is the question of how italics can be made to refer to actual shifts in the patterns of living speech without abandoning the joint project of intelligibility and authenticity. Of the seven words italicised in this exchange, only three are there in the account of the conversation in Boswell’s Journal: the final opposition between “talk” and “think”, and the “was” in Boswell’s concession to Johnson’s claim.

The “was”, as well, is subject to some editorial massaging in the process of transmission from the Journal to the final version of the Life. Initially, Boswell’s response is “But I see it is cant”, the affirmation underlined to indicate the shift that conventionally becomes italics in print.266

266 Journal, 15/5/1783. AJ, 143; Beinecke, 45/1014, 45-6.
The shift in tense to the final version, where the verb is also underlined only occurs in the manuscript stage of the text, where the “is”-version is inserted over the line along with the replacement of “I see” with “perhaps”, which is essayed in two locations, one of which is crossed out.

267 MS 906-7.
The significant fact here is that the emphasis is maintained even when Boswell changes the tense and adds a qualification. It is important to Boswell that the operative verb be loaded with his concessionary emphasis even when he is lessening its coverage with the “perhaps” and changing his mind about what tense he wants to use. In this sense, the retention of the emphasis is the most important aspect of this part of Boswell’s own speech and his attachment to it can tell us more about
his attitude towards the cadence of the direct speech in the rest of the book. Even if his enthusiasm for this particular emphasis is limited to the limited range of options that can be brought to bear on a conciliatory concession such as this one, Boswell is patently committed to making sure that the concession is imbued with a lilting suggestion of the change of mind that he undergoes within the passage. The tonal element in the emphasis is, therefore, as useful as a narrative tool as it is in the preservation of whatever minute shift in expression Boswell thinks he is preserving in his records, and then, notwithstanding the shift in tense and surrounding supporting words, in the Life. This narrative usefulness arises because it allows the distanced acknowledgement that Boswell is changing his tune, and that the change is the pivot point in the conversation. This shift, however, is only a local effect, and is crowded out by the other italicisations in the conversation, each, as I have outlined, having its own rationale. What is clear is that none of these words is to be understood carrying the same tonal freight. Certainly, Boswell’s “was” is nowhere near the same tone as Johnson’s “vexed”, and the other words, the balanced pairs and the single inaugurating negation in Johnson’s speech are employed differently again. What this means for our purposes is that both Boswell and his implied reader are engaged in an endless enterprise of switching between regimes of signification in which the inconsistencies of the purely textual use of the technique serve as cues to read the text as signifying something else, something peculiar, but can never be clear of this dynamic.

Demonstration and Deixis

A further and much rarer subset of single word emphases that belong to the speakers is in the use of deictic words. Johnson in particular uses demonstratives to refer to objects and actions in his general vicinity, and more abstractly for propositions as well as concepts. The most remarked instance of this form of emphasis is of course the famous refutation of Berkeley in 1763:

After we came out of the church, we stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley’s ingenious sophistry to prove the non-existence of matter, and that every thing in the universe is merely ideal. I observed, that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, “I refute it thus.”

The word is not enough on its own, for the special reason that it refers to something outside of the stream of the dialogue. In order to do this, Boswell has recourse to italics, which he uses in
conjunction with additional narrative information, a tactic which we have seen as marking the limits of the transcript in the previous chapter. To expand the analysis I developed there, the transformation of the words through narrative intervention itself is not enough to mark the tensions on the boundaries between direct speech and the world in which it takes place. The words themselves must be transformed to mark the edge between speech and world. This is also true when the words refer back to the dialogue itself. In all the book there is only a handful of instances in which the speakers refer directly to the world around them, and even in this small constellation of events, there is no consistency in Boswell’s approach to putting it down on the page. These moments of conversation that pierce the surface of the text occur first because of the inability of speech to consistently refer to the world beyond itself. This lack is redoubled when text is substituted for speech and the referential world is taken away from the statements, creating a potentially unending chain of supplementary referentiality. This can be seen wherever a speaker is forced to give up on words in pointing to objects or actions in the real world to demonstrate what they are saying, as where Johnson is quizzed by Boswell in his practices stoking a fire:

  Boswell. “Why, Sir, do people play this trick which I observe now, when I look at your grate, putting the shovel against it to make the fire burn?”  Johnson. “They play the trick, but it does not make the fire burn. There is a better (setting the poker perpendicularly up at right angles with the grate). In days of superstition they thought, as it made a cross with the bars, it would drive away the witch.”

(2/301)

Johnson warns Boswell that his real world action in kicking the stone or rearranging the grate is the next step in his argument. He is alerted to watch, but the reader is left to trust the written description as an unnecessary backwards substitution for the real thing which in the discussion was itself a substitute for words.268

The most intense of these deictic moments occurs in during the visit to Bristol on 29 April 1776, where George Catcot proposes to take Johnson and Boswell to the purported site of the discovery of the manuscripts of Thomas Chatterton’s fictitious poet Rowley:

268 While the Journal for this episode is not extant, the MS shows the marking for italics clearly. Boswell dithered about the inclusion of the anecdote, writing it in full, cancelling and reinstating it in the MS stage. MS 791, Bonnell, 294.
Catcot’s demonstration is theatrical and overdetermined. It has the obvious agenda, set out by Boswell in the introductory paragraph of the anecdote that Catcot wants to make of Johnson as zealous a believer as himself in the authenticity of the fictitious manuscripts. Boswell couches the whole incident in the terms of the “ocular demonstration”, a term which is itself italicised. Catcot’s demonstration is thus engaged in establishing a situation in which his interlocutors are to appreciate a curiosity in the physical realm, located at a point beyond the capability of both his own speech to testify, as well as the texts purportedly found in the chest he is pointing to. This requires him to enter into the double demonstrative presented in the text, which, without the very descriptive parenthetical stage direction delineating his excitement, would be a simple and redundant repetition “there… there is the very chest itself.” That this redundancy rebounds upon the physical muteness of the chest is extended by Boswell’s subsequent comment is also significant: Boswell closes the anecdote by adding “there was no more to be said”: the muteness of the chest engenders silence. Catcot’s repeated emphasis preserves an element of his vocal insistence, but this is also a rhetorical oratorical flourish, which does not have to have happened in the real world in order to be necessary for Boswell’s account of it. The possibility and the improbability of the genuine are, then, caught up in the arbitrary nature of Boswell’s recollections and modifications.

It is more common in Boswell’s practice to use italics where the speakers are making metaconversational interventions, pointing back to their own speeches themselves. The italics in these are again never entirely divorceable from the regime where italics point to emotional and tonal shifts in the historical speech they record, but the rhetorical function of these is paramount. Moments such as these abound:

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269 Boswell’s own manuscripts for this passage give a less than ocular demonstration of the progress of the italicisation. Journal, 29/4/1776 is scanty. OY, 344 gives a summary of the incident without mentioning the deixis; Beinecke, 43/994, 6-7 gives clipped notes with a mention of the chest, but only a hint of Catcot’s anxiety and elaborate presentation of the chest.
Johnson. “Countries which are the most populous have the most destructive diseases. That is the true state of the proposition.”

(2/192);270

Let us have that kind of luxury, Sir, if you will.”

(2/222);271

Boswell. “A flagelet, Sir!—so small an instrument? I should have liked to hear you play on the violincello. That should have been your instrument.”

(2/198);272

But if such a man stood in need of money, I should not like to trust him; and I should certainly not trust him with young ladies, for there is always temptation.

(1/241);273

Boswell. “Would you teach this child that I have furnished you with, any thing?” Johnson. “No, I should not be apt to teach it.” Boswell. “Would not you have a pleasure in teaching it?” Johnson. “No, Sir, I should not have a pleasure in teaching it.” Boswell. “Have you not a pleasure in teaching men?—There I have you. You have the same pleasure in teaching men, that I should have in teaching children.” Johnson. “Why, something about that.”

(1/325);274

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270 The emphasis is clear in both the MS 632, Bonnell, 165, and the Journal, 3/4/1778. Extremes, 235; Beinecke, 44/999, 7.
271 The whole sentence is an embellishment made in several stages to MS 682, Bonnell, 203 from the Journal, which omits it. 14/4/1778. Extremes, 278; Beinecke, 44/999, 67.
272 Clear in MS 643, Bonnell, 172, and Journal, 7/4/1778. Extremes, 246; Beinecke, 44/999, 20. In the Journal version, the underlinings are clear despite the line being a supralineal addition.
273 Journal, 22/7/1763. LJ, 286; Beinecke, 37/931, 700. MS 261, Waingrow, 310. The italicised “there” is an addition in the MS to the Journal’s “for there is always temptation”.
274 Journal, 26/10/1769. Wife, 349 (giving MS); MS Papers Apart; Beinecke (M145), 55/1173, 360, Redford, 52. Both indications are clear in this section of the manuscript, but the Journal is not extant.
Most significantly, this structure is necessary for the replication of one of the strange and overdetermined motifs of the relationship between Boswell and Johnson, Boswell’s citation of Johnson’s statement about free will on 10 October 1769:

**Dr. Johnson shunned to-night any discussion of the perplexed question of fate and free will, which I attempted to agitate: “Sir, (said he,) we know our will is free, and there’s an end of’t.”**

(1/316)

Through the course of Boswell’s Journal this formulation becomes something of a balm for Boswell in moments of doubt. He can be found repeating the categorical statement as a hypothetical performance of suicide on 10 October 1776: “I really have a notion that it is possible for a man to have such a hard mind as to be happy with present enjoyments, and to think, without dismal feelings, of dissolution: “And there’s an end on’t” But he cannot have delicacy and an exceeding fancy.”

275 This is from a section where Boswell’s Journal was used directly as printer’s copy, and the underlinings for italics seem to be consistent with the stage of revision, rather than the original text, though the editors of OY print the italics.

276 Journal, 6/4/1775. OY, 125; Beinecke, 42/989, 16.

276 Journal, 14/10/1776. *Extremes*, 42; Beinecke 43/995, 81.
Here he underlines as a method perhaps of augmenting the citation indicated by the quotation marks, or of emphasis. Johnson is shown using the same construction three other times. Early on in the book, he can be found using the phrase while looking back on his education:

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Johnston, upon all occasions, expressed his approbation of enforcing instruction by means of the rod. “I would rather (said he) have the rod to be the general terror to all, to make them learn, than tell a child, if you do thus, or thus, you will be more esteemed than your brothers or sisters. The rod produces an effect which terminates in itself. A child is afraid of being whipped, and gets his task, and there’s an end on’t; whereas, by exciting emulation and comparisons of superiority, you lay the foundation of lasting mischief; you make brothers and sisters hate each other.”
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(1/14)\textsuperscript{277}

Later, the phrase is used when Boswell shows Johnson damning Lady Diana Beauclerk (with whom he afterwards reconciled) in terms that obfuscate the situation as reported in the Journal:

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Seduced, perhaps, by the charms of the lady in question, I thus attempted to palliate what I was sensible could not be justified; for, when I had finished my harangue, my venerable friend gave me a proper check: “My dear Sir, never accustom your mind to mingle virtue and vice. The woman’s a whore, and there’s an end on’t.”
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(1/413)\textsuperscript{278}

Finally it is used when Johnson dismisses an argument about the dangerous fragility of blood vessels in applying emetics:

\textsuperscript{277} The anecdote is added in the margin overflowing from another addition, but the underlining for emphasis is clear. MS 10 verso.
\textsuperscript{278} Boswell constructs this categorical disparagement out of a conversation in which Johnson is riled by Boswell’s insistent and indecorous questioning on this point, leading Johnson into shouting: “Angry at me for defending Lady Di. Go to Scotl Go to Scotl I never heard talk so foolishly” as a way of ending not only the conversation but also Boswell’s tumultuous visit of 1773. Wimsatt and Pottle, editing Defence note that it is likely that Johnson did say this about Lady Diana Beauclerk, but possibly at another, unrecorded, time. Journal, 7/5/1773. Defence, 194; Beinecke 40/961, 13. MS 401, Redford, 105. The incident is one of Greene’s principal exhibits against Boswell as a reliable biographer for modern Johnsonians who had previously believed in the model of Boswell as a stenographer. See “Boswell’s Life as ‘Literary Biography’”, 166 for his indignant critique.
In none of these instances does the structure itself necessitate the kind of emphasis for stress that the momentous declaration of Johnson’s faith in his own free will, but in its final application, in a passage I analysed in the previous chapter where Boswell imitates Johnson’s habitual formulation, the emphasis is decidedly important in conveying Boswell’s impression of Johnson’s style of speech. This takes place on 17 April 1778 where Boswell is trying to encourage Johnson to publish a memoir of his trip to France:

The emphasis in this passage only reaches this form in the final version. In the Journal, none of the italicised words is marked, though subsequent reflections that were not retained in the Life are underlined. 280

In the manuscript, the “should” and “sure” are marked for emphasis, but the “right” and the characteristic phrase are not. 281

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279 Journal, 16/9/1777. *Extremes*, 154; Beinecke, 43/997, 37. The Journal here was used as printer’s copy.
281 MS 701, Bonnell, 218.
The multiplicity of iterations of this single formula suggests that the practice of italics in the *Life* is at once deliberate and shifting. Johnson’s historical variations have at least as much to do with the need for italics as the inherent structures of his pat rhetorical flourishes, and when Boswell comes to emphatically imitate Johnson’s speech he amplifies the emphasis, punctuating the two antecedent clauses with prosodic stress before italicising the whole phrase as a conclusion to surpass all others. What this means is that we need to be always assessing the italics on multiple scales if we are to gain a full appreciation of Boswell’s sense of the aural components of the conversation he is reporting. Even where the rhetorical structures lead to more likelihood that stress would be conventional, as with these demonstratives, these variations show us that more attention must be paid to the multiple possibilities of this accidental, arbitrary technique.

It is also common for italics to be necessitated by personal pronouns within the conversation. The same rationale is in operation in this, but it has more of an added sense of emphasis that derives from the parallel contingency of accommodating direct address or the speakers referring to themselves. Where a demonstrative pronoun exposes the limit of speech projecting outwardly towards the world in which it takes place, personal pronouns reinsert the speakers and their interlocutors to a position within the flow of the speech, making the words apply literally rather than abstractly. But when these interventions of extra, self-referential meaning are transferred into text, they point in invisible directions, allowing an imagined geometry of reference that is constructed only by the text in a space where none exists. This dynamic is the same as the one enacted by the italicisation of demonstrative pronouns. However, the practice is altogether more common as the speakers themselves are far more frequently the subject of discussion than physical objects in the world at hand. Johnson is fond of mentioning himself either as an exception to, or as a surprising inclusion in, a general statement about people. He is shown revelling in the demonstration of his unexpected position, and it is this contrast that requires Boswell to mark his mention of himself with difference. Boswell marks pointed instances of personal pronouns throughout the book, and ranges through all the possible delineations that the option entails. We can find Johnson emphasising the fact that he is speaking of himself, for instance, objecting to his inclusion in two discussions of general disputes:
This second distinction was added as a new underlining in the draft stage of the composition, joined by a new supralinear “Sir”.  

This suggests that Johnson’s self-emphases were less important to Boswell as an observer than to Boswell as a reteller of the conversation, making sure his audience is attuned to the particularity of the statements. Boswell was more inclined to be consistent with Johnson’s self-emphases when they became reflexive and possessive:
In each of these moments, Boswell has Johnson play a complicit role in his image-making, consciously interrogating and bringing into question the idea and the oddity of his presence in each of these discussions, and labouring the point with a special heaviness.

This sort of emphasis extends more commonly to Johnson’s treatment of people absent from the conversation in the third person. We can find Johnson repeatedly using pronouns with more force than simple presentation in Roman can convey. The impact of his statements relies upon the special distinction of the person from what could be generally expected by the plain syntax of the sentence he is saying, and Boswell accordingly undertakes its transmission through italics. So when Johnson wants to make an insult, this is what will happen:

“\textit{Yes, Sir, you have made her ridiculous.}” \textbf{Johnson. “That was already done, Sir. To endeavour to make her ridiculous, is like blanking the chimney.”}

And if Johnson wants to contrast an absent person with his interlocutor, Boswell will do the same:

\textit{\textbf{“Why no, Sir. If be has no objection, you can have none.”}}

This special form of emphasis for pronouns extends even to the absent dead:

\textbf{Boswell. “But then, Sir, their maffles for the dead?”} \textbf{Johnson. “Why, Sir, if it be once established that there are souls in purgatory, it is as proper to pray for them, as for our brethren of mankind who are yet in this life.”}

\textsuperscript{285} Journal, 1/4/1775. \textit{OY}, 113; Beinecke, 42/998, 109-10. The italicised “my” is unmarked for emphasis in the Journal, despite it being accidentally repeated in the transition between pages.

\textsuperscript{286} This is worked up from Johnson saying “To make Macaulay ridiculous, is blanking the chimney” in his initial version. Journal, 2/4/1775. \textit{OY}, 117; Beinecke, 42/998, 117. The word “her” does not quite make it onto the pages of the MS as it is revised to this final version, but an earlier “her” is underlined for emphasis there, but left unmarked in the final version. MS 456, Redford, 148.

\textsuperscript{287} Journal, 26/10/1769. \textit{Wife}, 351 (giving \textit{Life} MS as the Journal is not extant); MS Papers Apart; Beinecke (M145) 55/1173, 368, Redford, 54. The underlining in this only extant version is clear.

\textsuperscript{288} Journal, 26/10/1769. \textit{Wife}, 351 (giving \textit{Life} MS as the Journal is not extant); MS Papers Apart; Beinecke (M145) 55/1173, 373, Redford, 55. The underlining is clear in the original.
All these emphases occur in the overlapping zone between the recursive and demonstrative rhetorical uses for italicisation and the more descriptive sonic emphatic requirements. This is most apparent when the person whose pronoun is being italicised is the interlocutor. Second person address doubles as both emphatic punchline and demonstrative suturing of the real world into the sentence through the conative function of language, providing a more dramatic and intense situation altogether. Thus when Gibbon mutters his

“I should not like to trust myself with you.”

or when Johnson intends to cut down an anonymised Boswell with a riposte such as this:

A gentleman having to some of the usual arguments for drinking added this: “You know, Sir, drinking drives away care, and makes us forget whatever is disagreeable. Would not you allow a man to drink for that reason?”

Johnson. “Yes, Sir, if he eat next you.”

or when the full force of Johnson’s anger is directed most directly and effectively at Boswell:

No, Sir; you are not to talk such paradox: let me have no more of’t. It cannot entertain, far less can it instruct. Lord Monboddo, one of your Scotch Judges, talked a great deal of such nonsence. I suffered him; but I will not suffer you.”

we can see the exigencies of visual and rhetorical differentiation bleed into narratively important tonal and emotional requirements in the representation of individual words. In these cases with pronouns, the potential for ambiguity in interpretation is low, but if the same rationale we take when reading Boswell’s treatment of spoken pronouns and possessives is extended to the spatially contiguous treatments of other single words, we can see that the interaction between different exigencies can affect what kind of information it can be said that Boswell is trying to commit to the page.

289 Journal, 7/4/1775. OY, 134; Beinecke, 42/989, 37. This “you” is unmarked, but MS 462, Redford, 152, has it clear in a much reworked passage.
290 Journal, 15/4/1772. Defence, 127; Beinecke, 40/959, 221 (unmarked). MS Papers Apart; Beinecke (M 145) 55/1174, 416 (clearly marked), Redford, 76.
291 Journal, 30/9/1769. Wife, 331 (giving Life MS as even Boswell’s notes do not mention this day. MS Papers Apart; Beinecke (M 145) 55/1172, 343, Redford, 38, has underlinings for both “him” and “you” but it is emended before the page proofs.
The highpoint of Boswell’s interest in delicately managing the italicisation of pronouns and possessives is undoubtedly the flurried exchange of pronouns between Johnson and Beauclerk on 16 April 1779, when, in what Boswell describes as a “tempest”, there occurs a mutual accusation of incivility, deriving from an argument about the celebrated and controversial case of the Rev. James Hackman, who was tried for the murder of Miss Martha Ray, the long-time mistress of the Earl of Sandwich. Hackman admitted to shooting Miss Ray, but claimed that despite having two loaded pistols, he had only originally intended to kill himself. Hackman was hanged within a week, and Boswell took a special interest in the case, attending the trial and writing about it in the press. It is therefore unsurprising that Boswell saw the exchange between Beauclerk and Johnson that was initiated by the case as a situation requiring a great deal of delicacy in the telling, in addition to the fact that yet again he would be reporting on Johnson behaving badly before being reconciled with his adversary. Boswell took pains to write the argument up separately from his Journal, probably in order to pay more attention to it, and the paper apart was incorporated directly into the manuscript of the Life. Nevertheless, there are many minute changes made by Boswell between the different versions of the most direct personal statements in the dispute, which trade in personal pronouns. First, in the final version, Boswell has Johnson make an abrupt exclamation:

There was then a cessation of the dispute; and some minutes intervened, during which dinner and the glass went on cheerfully; when Johnson suddenly and abruptly exclaimed, “Mr. Beauclerk, how came you to talk so petulantly to me, as ‘This is what you don’t know, but what I know.’ One thing I know which you don’t seem to know, that you are very uncivil.”

(2/288)

The resolution of the conflict in the book mirrors the pattern, but extends it between the two speakers:

292 The affair was the subject of a book, Love and Madness, which is censured for its mixture of fact and fiction by Johnson in an addition to the miscellaneous quotations given for 23 March 1783 in the Second Edition (3/449).

293 For Boswell’s reporting of the Hackman case, see Tankard, Facts and Inventions, 92-102. Boswell published four reports between 21 and 16 April 1779. While the sections dealing with the trial do not contain direct speech, they do contain Hackman’s prepared statement in its entirety, which, it is speculated, was written by Boswell himself. In a later report, Boswell gives a conversation between himself and the attorney Frederick Booth about the virtuous nature of Hackman’s plea that he shot Miss Ray in a “momentary phrenzy” rather than by accident (100-101).
So minute is Boswell’s attention to these pronouns and possessives (the probably erroneous “to” in Johnson’s initial statement notwithstanding) that it would be impossible to predict which of them are contained in Boswell’s initial account of the scene, and which are not. In the earliest extant version, Boswell only saw the need to underline in the second section of the dispute: Johnson’s “command”, and the neatly balanced pair of Johnson’s “me” and Beauclerk’s final “you”, both of which, of course, referring to the same person.  

Only in revision do the other five italicisations emerge. Johnson’s original stresses are important for tone. They are needed to work up the beginning of the breach between the two interlocutors, and while there is a possible reason for the bizarre emphasis on the “to” in Boswell’s desire to record the highly emphatic and increasingly jarring scansion of the accusation, with the inverted stress on the “to” balancing stress that would otherwise need to fall on the repeated “knows”, the italics on the “to”
are clearly a compositing error. The phrase “seem to”, duly underlined, is a supralinear addition to Boswell’s initial text, presumably added with the intention of further exonerating Johnson.

In the page proofs, Boswell pays a lot of very direct attention to this line of text, underlining the three words “I”, “you” and “seem”, but missing the italicised “to”. He marks in both margins. The left reads “Ital stet Roman” while the right contains a bubble directing “seem roman”: the inherent confusion here would allow us to explain away the strangeness of the “to”, but equally, the amount of revision here might allow us to construct a case about Boswell’s intention to specifically retain it.

The later italicisations fall on a cross between the speakers, Beauclerk’s “I should learn of you, Sir” and Johnson’s “your company” complement each other, and so make sense to balance out the emphasis. This may in itself be necessitated not by Boswell’s drive to authenticity, but by the fact that he has also added both speakers calling each other “Sir” in order perhaps to make the exchange more civil. However, these changes could just as easily have been made in Johnson’s “Sir, You have given me”. Both arise from very clear marginal instructions in the page proofs, well after the extra “Sir”-s have appeared. The remainder of all these transformations is the intimation that Boswell is as deeply engaged in managing the use of italics for stress as he is for rhetorical structures. Naturally, this influences the way in which his final versions can be made to tell stories which he is acutely aware need careful telling. That this is a problem that does not go away can be seen in the fact that all subsequent editions starting with the second make the text conform to different conventions than the ones Boswell deploys here: the italics on the “to” are most usually removed, taking with them the possibility that a specific instance of a peculiar stress pattern from the mouth of Johnson could be preserved in the text, while Beauclerk is given an extra emphasis in his initial slight on Johnson: “Because you began by being uncivil (which you always are)” to match Johnson’s.295 These transformations demonstrate that the differences in priorities mean that this sort of interrogation of the shifts between the inherent stress seen to be proper diexsis and the historical pragmatic emphasis of the

speakers never ceases. The deictic and conative use of italics for pronouns is peculiar to the use of italics in direct speech because text is (mostly) transportable between locations of its own making, and it is only when speakers are shown to refer to the immediate world and people around them that it is necessary to mark a difference within the text that can accommodate the difference between the world of the reader and the world of the speaker. These italics are not inherently emphatic, though they might mimic certain constrained moments in speech where, as in Catcot’s demonstration and in the tempest that erupts between Beauclerk and Johnson. Emphasis is indeed a part of the historical occurrences that are being narrated. What is important is the collision of two otherwise parallel orders of rhetorical differentiation one in the realm of the pure text making reference to its own arguments and the world it can be assumed to share with the reader—this book, here, this country, and so on—and the realm of speech which refers to its own world. It is only in direct speech that these two orders are brought into collision with each other in conjunction with the entirely separate consideration of aural emphasis. Where demonstrative pronouns are ambiguous in their application, they cause a series of interpretive problems that can only be solved through an appeal to the author-transcriber’s feeling for the patterning of the utterance. The consideration of even less vexed individual italicisations in Boswell’s writing, though, can only go part of the way to an assurance of the authenticity of the historical aural imprint being indicated by the technique.

**Individuals’ Words and the Conjunction of Techniques**

On the level of the individual word, the potential for slippage between regimes of italic modification is high. The rationale for the italicisation of a single word can never be entirely inferred from the context, especially in cases where there is space for multiple reasons for Boswell to use the technique. This means that there is a sense in which the spoken word is resistant to the attempts to represent it on the page: it withholds the precise elements of its articulation even as the techniques of writing close in on the differences from the stream of speech that give it is particular character. This resistance ensures that a never-ending dynamic in which mystery is sublated by the drive to clarity becomes a chief characteristic of the text of the transcript. We can see this through the way Boswell treats Johnson’s use of two particular words in the *Life*. The first is the word “verbiage”. Johnson says the word twice in conversation, at an interval of three years. Both times the word is italicised, and both times he uses it to convey his disapproval or dismissal of a literary work. To begin, in the conversation on historians I have already discussed from 30 April 1773, Johnson provokes Boswell into surprise by naming Goldsmith as a model historian:
One element here is notable: Boswell’s parenthetical stage direction. This is a hybrid explanation and description in which antipathy both causes the content and is set up to influence the tone. The marker establishes a hint of anger, but no more. This is not an explosion, but the rising movement of the antipathy suggests that Boswell means to imply Johnson is being roused into heated expression on account of the shared nationality of the three historians Boswell has supplied him with.

Elsewhere in the book, it would be unremarkable and unsurprising to find this context necessitating the use of italics to mark Johnson’s antipathetic tone. In parallel with the tonal imperative for italics, there is also the question of the balance between the two clauses to consider. Having dismissed Hume because he has not read him, Johnson is free to dismiss the remaining two writers in a balanced pair, which he does with aplomb, re-establishing Goldsmith as the point of contrast and employing the same phrasing for both Robertson and Dalrymple. In representing the formula “The X of Y”, Boswell might in any other instance choose to italicise both characterisations, verbiage and foppery, other historians, or, much less likely but still possible, all four terms. Since none of these balances is taken into consideration, it is worthwhile to question what other considerations Boswell has taken in to account in choosing to italicise only the word “verbiage” which is done very clearly in the manuscript.296

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296 MS 394, Redford, 101. Journal, 30/4/1773 does not include this conversation, from Boswell’s first appearance at the Literary Club. Defence, 192-3 gives MS.
The italicisation could indicate Boswell’s impression of a particular unbalanced emphasis in Johnson’s delivery, a singling out of Robertson’s verbiage over Dalrymple’s foppery for more opprobrium for personal or idiosyncratic reasons. This seems unlikely, given Johnson’s predilection for balance, but it can never be entirely ruled out. More likely is the consideration that Boswell’s emphasis on verbiage here has to do with the novelty or unfamiliarity of the word, which is absent from all editions of Johnson’s own Dictionary, and treated inconsistently as a French word in English publications from its appearance in the 1730s onwards.297

Boswell’s marking of the word could more likely be to accommodate the foreign word in the way that a plethora of specific words are conventionally treated, and are accordingly presented in the Life. What we can see here, then, is a snapshot of the emergence of a word into the English lexicon, and Boswell’s attitude to the unfamiliarity of the new word proves to be more of a concern to him in this passage than the balanced disdain he has Johnson release in it. Six years later, though, the situation of verbiage becomes genuinely ambiguous:

Clearly an emphasis on the insult would not be out of place elsewhere in the book, but the etymological recency of the word. In the manuscript, the word is both underlined and (perhaps) capitalised:298

297 The OED cites Matthew Prior using the word in a manuscript from 1721, modern editions of which give no italics; Warburton’s Divine Legation of Moses (1738) prints word unitalicised at 1/69; while in the Monthly Review’s account of a political pamphlet in November 1762, the anonymous reviewer states “there is much of what the French call Verbiage in it” (384).

298 MS 659, Bonnell, 183.
In the Journal, the word is left alone. The word’s history in Johnson’s life means that in this instance, it is ultimately unclear whether Johnson intends the word to bear a tone indicating marked insult to Potter’s translation, or for that matter an accommodation of pronunciation into Johnson’s unconfident spoken French, as well as the possibility of Johnson revelling in his own novelty.

Similarly, the italicisation of a single word is not enough to mark anything more than the simple notion of difference in a conversation from 1775 on one of Boswell’s habitual topics:

“...and the common question, whether it was pernicious in its effects, having been introduced;—Johnson. “As to this matter, which has been very much contested, I myself am of opinion, that more influence has been ascribed to THE Beggars Opera, than it in reality ever had; for I do not believe that any man was ever made a rogue by being present at its representation. At the same time I do not deny that it may have some influence, by making the character of a-rogue familiar, and in some degree pleasing.” Then collecting himself, as it were, to give a heavy stroke: “There is in it such a labefaction of all principles, as may be injurious to morality.”

While he pronounced this response, we sat in a comical sort of restraint, smothering a laugh, which we were afraid might burst out.

Neither “labefactation” nor its simpler variant “labefaction” is a word Johnson saw fit to include in his Dictionary, though he does define “labefy”. A consideration of the rationale for Boswell’s use of italics to represent the variant form, of which the OED takes this passage as the only example, should begin with the possibility that Boswell is pointing out the variation from the standard form of the word. Boswell could be showing Johnson’s diction in a momentary lapse of accuracy. The suppressed laughter could then be in part increased beyond the spectacle of Johnson catching himself sympathising with roguery by Johnson’s overshooting the right register of pomposity in reasserting his claim to being a protector of public morality. But this need not be the case. Boswell could also be marking the word as novel or unfamiliar, a high possibility, given that he tried both the forms of it in the manuscript.

299 Journal, 10/4/1778. Extremes, 257; Beinecke, 43/999, 35.
300 Dictionary, “LABEFY” s.v.: “To weaken; to impair.”
It could be that any form of *labefy* was so unfamiliar to Boswell that he felt it needed a marker of distance, or equally that he thinks the anecdote preserves the moment of Johnson in the process of coining the word. In this last case, the motivation for the distancing via italics is part admiration, part enthusiastic aping of what he calls the heaviness of the stroke, a phrase which is deemphasised from the initial version, which called it “heavy and comprehensive”. In that instance, the italics might also have been used simply to perform of the punchline function which I have detailed above.

It is worth recognising that even with such a strong indication of the reading as the note about the preparation for the heavy stroke, Boswell still does not reach for an exclamation mark. Such a move would be a truly positive confirmation that it is Johnson placing a heavy emphasis on “*labefactation*” rather than Boswell either pointing out the strangeness of the word or applying to it a helpful convention for readers who are likely to be unfamiliar with it. We therefore have a range of possibilities tending to a fracturing of possible meanings, depending on how much Boswell felt himself to be in agreement with both the success of the statement and the appropriateness of the word. Whatever combination of these motives led Boswell to underline “*labefactation*” in his Journal and then maintain it as he revised this section for printing, the point is that the instability of the difference marked by italics is the result of the never to be discounted possibility that the underlining and its transformation into italics bears the trace of an historical and observable difference in the actual way the words were spoken. These traces are only possibilities in reading, however. Boswell’s notion of accuracy is as shifting and indistinct when it comes to the internal differentiations of the spoken word.

301 Journal, 18/4/1775. OY, 152 (giving *Life* MS); Beinecke, 42/990, 7 (J 42). MS 484, Redford, 164.
as it is with the specificity of the wording itself. Indeed, it is the interaction of different kinds of inaccuracy on these two levels of signification—the word and its delivery—that creates such an interesting dynamic where the specific intentions behind any single gesture (whether it be the italicisation of a bizarre construction like “labefactation” or the two uses of “verbiage”, a word in transition) are never open to the kind of finalising analytical determination that Boswell seeks to provide in ensuring the authenticity of his stories about Johnson. Where the ambiguity inherent in the two uses of “verbiage” stems from the collision of regimes of italicisation relating to textual convention and spoken differentiation, larger phrases might prove less ambiguous in their adherence to one or the other, since with the italicisation of longer phrases there is less room for confusion regarding language or the unfamiliarity of vocabulary, but this is not the case.

Many of these single-word emphases come in the final line of an exchange or speech, and as such can be seen as punchlines. Yet again, the question is open as to whether the punchiness of the line—the manipulation of the stresses in a sentence to achieve a hint of finality—belongs to the speaker closing off a topic in victory or stubbornness, or to Boswell moulding his material into shape in order for it to be narratable. In effect, the text in such instances is always somewhere between the two with the balance of these moments being attributed to Johnson’s speech in such a way that it becomes characteristic of his speech patterns, especially when he is triumphant or angry. In these emphases, the text is concurrently using conventions that belong to oratory and to the representation of verbal humour, and in many of the instances where this type of emphasis is employed the final word in an argument is both an angry retort and a play on words, both of which are generally times when Boswell sees fit to italicise. Either and both of these alternatives can tell us much, but their conjunction and incompatibility on specific scales of narration reveals to us speech as the central problematic of Boswell’s project. The overlapping of these two goals is additive rather than contrapuntal, and this is largely because the modification aids scansion more than it does tone.

This push of the metre towards the final operative word can be found throughout the dialogue sections of the *Life*, often with multiple examples on a single page. For instance, when in discussion with Dr. Adams at Oxford, Johnson is set up by Adams to reaffirm his extreme position about the propriety of attacking an opponent’s bad language:

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Adams. “You would not jostle a chimney-sweeper.” Johnson. “Yes, Sir, if it were necessary to jostle him down.”
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(2/24-5)
Here, Johnson closes off the conversation by making an affirmation of Adams’s extreme proposition, adding a minor distinction that will let him have the final part in the exchange, and Boswell signals this (or records this) by indicating stress on the final word.\textsuperscript{302} Within only two paragraphs, this same structure is repeated. Boswell includes a section, absent in his initial Journal account, of Johnson’s college companions, and talks about his friendship with John Fludyer, who, it is said, later became a notorious Whig:

\begin{center}
\textbf{Boswell. “Was he a scoundrel, Sir, in any other way than being a political scoundrel? Did he cheat at drafts?” Johnson. “Sir, we never played for money.”}
\end{center}

(2/25)\textsuperscript{303}

Johnson’s scorn at the premise of Boswell’s question is the necessitating cause of the italics, but the emphasis has the same effect as the instance ten lines earlier: the flow of the metre of what is being said is made to lean towards the end of the paragraph, and the subject is brought to a conclusion, not because it has been exhausted but because it has been punctuated by Johnson’s terminal emphasis.

In marking up a punchline like this, Boswell is not simply working to finesse his raw materials and so to insist on readings that make plausible sense of the data that he collected over decades. This is because the technique of italicising allows for multiple uses that do not all require or rely upon the same nuances in the textual representation of any given speech. The aural difference that is marked in the difference of delivery for an operative word on a punchline not only seeps into the difference in marking out subject matter that I have discussed above, it also bleeds into other exigencies of textual representation that take place on a slightly wider scale.

Chief among these is a structure quite common in the \textit{Life} where italics are used to demonstrate one speaker in a conversation knowingly taking up the terms of a previous statement and adapting them to their own ends. As with a punchline, this can carry a weight of superadded meaning, ironic layering, vituperation—whatever is needed for the narration, or was contained within the social setting of the real world even Boswell is representing—but often this sense of the tone being reproduced or hinted at by the use of italics is absent and unnecessary to the functioning of the text. In these instances, which I would add are far more numerous than the punchlines I have until now been treating, the adoption and adaptation of the operative term in an interlocutor’s statement is most purely a structural

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{302} Journal, 20/3/1776. \textit{OY}, 278; Beinecke, 42/992, 105. The Journal has no marking for emphasis. MS 514, Redford, 194 has it marked.
\textsuperscript{303} This section is not included in the Journal entry for 20/3/1776, but rather comes from Boswell’s notebook (Redford, 194), MS 515, Redford, 195 has the emphasis.
\end{flushright}
consideration that allows the connection and flow of the conversation to be most easily pointed. As always, these imperatives are almost never exclusive, and can be seen most directly when they are competing with each other in the same instance. For example, where Johnson rides roughshod over Gibbon, Reynolds and Langton in conversation to enlighten them as to what Pennant tells of bears, Gibbon is given a *sotto voce* punchline with an italicised finale:

Silence having ensued, he proceeded: “We are told, that the black bear is innocent; but I should not like to trust myself with him.” Mr. Gibbon muttered, in a low tone of voice, “I should not like to trust myself with you.” This piece of farcical pleasantry was a prudent resolution, if applied to a competition of abilities.

(1/478)

Ten pages later, Boswell himself adopts the structure of this punchline of Gibbon’s in order to round out an isolated exchange in dispute between Boswell and Johnson about the nature of history and historical writing where Johnson claims that so little of history is fact that most of it is philosophical conjecture. The initial record of this exchange only consists of Johnson’s bold claim and Boswell objecting that this means that history is no better than an almanac. In the finished version, however, Boswell adds the extra consideration or curiosity that Gibbon himself, then most likely engaged on the monumental work for which he is remembered, did not enter the lists in the dispute. Boswell ends the note with this jocular assumption:

Mr. Gibbon, who must at that time have been employed upon his history, of which he published the first volume in the following year, was present, but did not step forth in defence of that species of writing. He probably did not like to trust himself with Johnson.

(1/488)

The first italicisation of the word trust in what is now in its third iteration since Johnson’s introduction of it in his discourse about bears occurs as the final point in a cascading series of displacements, variations on a theme introduced by Johnson. First is Johnson’s “but I should not like to trust myself with him” presented neutrally, with no transformation of the words in Roman, nor any additional punctuation. This is followed in the same paragraph by Gibbon’s aside, introduced with the information that it was said “in a low tone of voice”: “I should not like to trust myself with you.” The adaptation of the structure is marked at the most operative change in a word the “I” and the “myself” for whatever reason seeming less important to Boswell—or indeed to Gibbon—than the triumphant final word where Johnson is put in the place of the black bear in relation to Gibbon. The phrasing,
too, is important and contingent. For both the instances of “trust myself” in the initial discussion, the Journal account gives dual alternatives, with “trust myself” being offered above the line as another option for the phrase “meet (or engage with)”.

The particular phrase is apparently less important to Boswell in his continuing composition of this scene than the structural element that comes with the fact of repetition. The final iteration, where days later Boswell extends the two line exchange about the nature of historical writing by speculating about Gibbon’s motivations for silence, extends the transposition. The format now changes into the tense appropriate to Boswell’s speculation about the past, with the stress placed on the operative word, rather than the transposition of the pronouns: “He probably did not like to trust himself with Johnson.” And, in case the italicisation is not enough to jog the memory of and alert the reader that an allusion is being made to the conversation of ten pages earlier, Boswell adds a footnote with a reference back:

9 See page 478.

The joke might be seen to fall flat, since the transposition is only a transposition through time. There is no other pivot, and indeed it is a bare reproduction in indirect speech and a different tense of the elements of Gibbon’s under-the-breath riposte to Johnson in the initial conversation. The passage is a new reflection in the manuscript, and Boswell takes several approaches before settling on the joke, which was added at some invisible stage between the manuscript and the page proofs. The first version is a cancelled passage in which Boswell reflects “Perhaps he felt the same unwillingness to engage which he expressed upon an occasion I have formerly mentioned.” This is followed by attempts to settle on the contextual information about Gibbon’s participation in history-writing at the

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304 Journal, 7/4/1775. OY, 134; Beinecke, 42/989, 37.
305 MS 483, Redford, 163.
time, and it is only at a stage after these advances that Boswell has the inspiration to allude to the phrasing of the earlier incident. The fact that it is the word “trust” that is italicised here is important because it shows how malleable the technique can be. When Gibbon is speaking in a low tone of voice an emphasis is perceptible, but not necessary for preservation when the joke it repeated in Boswell’s own narrative voice where the technique is more useful for the already vacillated signalling of repeated subject matter and self-reference. Indeed, this arguable failure of Boswell to capitalise on his instinct to make the joke cascade through the days into Gibbon’s silence is noticeable enough for the second edition of the Life to intervene by adding another level to the repeated structures of the emphases. He does this by keeping trust in italics and additionally capitalising “JOHNSON” and adding an exclamation mark at the end of the paragraph, making for a second level of jocular emphasis within Boswell’s narration.

The weight of this amended version of the sentence thus falls very strongly on the final word after bouncing on the trust. Again this does not quite work, as such an emphatic structure would normally imply that both words were or at least “JOHNSON” was the effect of a witty and apropos transformation of the previous structure, when it is really a simple repetition, which means the intensification added in the second edition and kept by subsequent editors is basically unwarranted.

Whatever the mechanical difficulties Boswell and his subsequent editors have encountered with these passages, the tendency that is being expressed in their attempts to present the three stages of adaptation here is obvious and important: Boswell sees italics as a strategy to link together distant passages of text through manipulating the appearance on the page of similar words and structures. That this technique is never entirely visual is also important: he is also manipulating the implied tones with which the words should be read. This deployment works differently on the different levels of discourse and speech-representation. In direct speech, the shifts in emphasis are made to align with

306 MS 482 and 481 verso, Redford, 162.
the presentation of the speakers’ own intentions and motivations. In this example, while Boswell is making a gesture to mark the structural relationship of inversion between Gibbon’s and Johnson’s statements, it is Gibbon himself who must be imagined leaning on the emphasised “you” to himself in frustration. In the coda to the joke, where it is Boswell himself narrating and observing his speculation, this level of discourse requires a different tone, owned unsurprisingly by Boswell, where he draws the reader into a zone of intimacy generated first from knowledge of Gibbon’s aside, of which Johnson was not aware, then from the presumed familiarity with Gibbon’s thought processes that is assumed in making a speculation about why he would stay silent. The tone for the emphasised “trust” is a licence from Boswell to join in making fun of Gibbon, and, by extension, Johnson because the emphasis works by signalling the backward allusion to the heated moment of a few days earlier. It is thus that these cascading displacements of emphasis allow Boswell to present an illusion of continuity and cohesion to his isolated and fragmentary recollections. It is only through this speculation that is opportunistic even at the level of the composition of the text that Boswell produces this continuity. The discursive reflection is literally added after the fact to augment the later two-line exchange between Johnson and Boswell. It is therefore worth considering the less extreme applications of the technique he has available for his use in this endeavour.

What I have been arguing here is for the conjunction of the italic apparatus for projecting the enveloping intimacy of jocular speech, particularly wordplay, and in this last example that this structure of tonal intimacy is layered on top of a more basic structure of displacement and logical relation between the subject matters dealt with by different speakers. This more mundane foundation for the two linked Gibbon episodes is widespread throughout the *Life*. Boswell commonly uses italics to mark the mechanical transitions in extended discussions. He uses italics to mark both words that make up the subject matter of the discussions he represents. Also, when these terms are taken up by subsequent speakers, as in the Gibbon episode, speakers adapt larger rhetorical units for their own use.

Often, as with the Gibbon episode, there is an overlap between the use of italics to point to structures of logical relation visually on the page and the implied imprint of spoken tones, signifying excitement, anger and basically the full gamut of Johnson and his companions’ disputative attitudes. The coincidence of these techniques in their use of italics is important, because this allows us to interrogate the possibility of Boswell committing information from the real world on to the page within a regime of textuality that already has its own shifting conventions. At least some of the locigo-structural uses of italics neither require nor imply special tonal adjustment on the part of the speaker. This is enough to establish that two techniques are distinct if not necessarily at odds with
each other. Boswell is never able to escape the possibility that his adjustments could signify in a
direction he does not intend. We are confronted with an inescapable result of the conjunction of the
generic attributes of writing purporting to represent real-world speech and Boswell’s particular
choices in establishing his own rules for this representation in the Life. Even where this applies to
simple italic interventions to mark only the logical flow of ideas and arguments between speakers,
Boswell is having to engage with the possibility that this structure adapted from print conventions
will bleed into the methods of reading required by his notation of speech, and conversely that his
attention to real-world changes in tone could imply logical significance where it did not necessarily
have an historical basis. As in the Gibbon case, the result of this conjunction of imperatives is that no
choice of Boswell’s is ever entirely natural or entirely adequate to the situation in which he makes it.
By reading the conjunction of logical and tonal imperatives in Boswell’s italicisations, we can see
that neither the order of discursive narration nor the order of direct speech has any constituent or
transparent natural functionality; they are mutually constituting and proceed on an ad-hoc basis.

Marking Wordplay in Speech

A peculiar and exceedingly rare version of the single-word italicisation for emphasis is the pun. Puns
are infrequent in the book, as a result of what might be one of Boswell’s most direct factual claims
about the overall tenor of Johnson’s conversation: that he did not deign to make them. Naturally, in
the hermeneutic dialectic between Johnson’s habitude and curious versions of his breaking it, Boswell
is happy to include moments when Johnson is willing to countermand his injunction against puns.
Puns in this sense occupy a higher order of signification within the schema of Boswell’s rationales for
using italics, because their rarity dictates that they must be noticed and accommodated. It follows that
it is only in a limited sense that the few examples of them function in exactly the same way as the
punchlines I have been describing above. Granted, the structure can be expected to be the same, with
the natural weight of the statement tending to require emphasis on the part of it that serves to suture
together the components of the whole pleasantry, but the short circuit that is effected by a pun is more
intense because the set-up and the pay-off occur almost concurrently. Because of this, the pun must
be more carefully arranged. This occurs because of the relative isolation of the few puns Johnson
makes. They are mainly stand-alone utterances which refer to the general situation without specific
motivation. Take, for example what might be the most salient instance of the pun, 28 April 1778
where Johnson and Boswell are out and about in London and Johnson wants to buy silver buttons:
This story in which Johnson makes a pun, a story in which the pun is even so dubious that Boswell has to subsequently explain that he supposes it was meant this way, necessitates the establishment of narrative prerequisites that make the two meanings of the word coincide. Since Johnson is not quoted stating that the shop is a toy shop, Boswell has to do this in his narrative introduction, along with the added information that they are directed to the corner, and badly. All these components are fed into Johnson’s pun, where he recapitulates the information Boswell has given, that he’s following directions, that they are vague, and finally, crucially, that this constitutes “toying” with one. As is evident, the weakness of the joke is such that it needs to be carefully managed. The subsequent explanation—complete with a disclaimer of Boswell doubting the intentionality of the pun, and a further explanation of its rarity—serves to defuse the potential for misunderstanding the purpose of the inclusion of such a trivial statement in the book. The same difficulties that attend Boswell’s practice of italicisation of punchlines occur here too, magnified because of the specific claim to the curious nature of Johnson making such a quip. We are caught in a familiar interpretive trap, asking how much the italicisation can be attributed to Boswell pointing out the fact of the pun being made and how much his intervention is directed towards the specific quality of Johnson’s delivery of the pun, which would be a significant curiosity, given its rarity. This is all, of course, only applicable to our reading of the delivery of the pun if we can wholly discount the possibility that under Boswell’s conventions of transcription the pun would not invariably require this modification regardless of the peculiarity of its delivery. Boswell’s account of this strange occurrence obviously has enough outside the actual delivery of the line to show that he both cares enough about the rarity to ensure that it is showcased, and that the delivery was at best ambiguous. While the italics for the word “toying” are necessary to the delivery of the story and the presentation of the historical fact of Johnson’s exception to his own distaste for the play on words, they are unhelpful in actually transmitting information that would serve to understand Johnson’s attitude to his own statement in the moment of his making it.308

Much of the difficulty here can be perceived in the minute modifications that Boswell makes to the

308 Journal, 28/4/1778. Extremes, 319; Beinecke, 44/1000, 142. MS 725, Bonnell, 236.
emphasis in his different handwritten versions of the pun. The Journal account shows Boswell preserving the moment for himself, underlining the context-giving “toyshop”, but only the first syllable of “toying”:

By the time of the manuscript, Boswell increases the amount of emphasis. He extends the underlining in Johnson’s speech to “toying” and the repetition of the “toy” to the form of the final version. Both of these changes transform the aural impression of the story as it goes along, making Johnson’s pun ambiguous enough to need explanation, but obvious enough for the observation to make sense:

The ultimate difficulty remains in the transition between the forms. Whatever particularity Boswell perceived in the moment of Johnson’s aberrantly stooping to “such sport” runs up against the technology that allows Boswell to mark the fact of the pun itself. This difficulty could be the result of the difference in personality between Boswell and Johnson: Boswell’s eagerness to point out and record every joke available to him, to have the last word in a comical exchange, and Johnson’s indifference to the posterity of his sayings mean that it is possible that Johnson delivered the pun
drily, begrudgingly, and Boswell is at pains to point it out. Such is the difference in personalities demonstrated in a pair of puns that Boswell added for the second edition:

I have mentioned Johnson's general aversion to a pun. He once, however, endured one of mine. When we were talking of a numerous company in which he had distinguished himself highly, I said, "Sir, you were a Cod surrounded by Smelts. Is not this enough for you? at a time too when you were not fishing for a compliment?" He laughed at this with a complacent approbation. Old Mr. Sheridan observed, upon my mentioning it to him, "He liked your compliment so well, he was willing to take it with pun sauce." For my own part, I think no innocent species of wit or pleasantry should be suppressed; and that a good pun may be admitted among the smaller excellencies of lively conversation.

Boswell records Sheridan's reaction to the pun in a Journal entry for 15 April 1779, five years before the section for 1784 where Boswell would eventually insert the anecdote in a series of unrelated gleanings. This initial record of Johnson's "complacent approbation" is recorded as Boswell's continuation of a discussion with Sheridan in which a series of puns on the word "shear" are made. Boswell brings up Johnson's reaction before Sheridan offers his concluding pun. In the initial version, the cod in Boswell's compliment starts off as a turbot, but for some reason Boswell has revised or re-remembered this detail, but factual accuracy is unimportant to the story so long as the relationship between the large fish and the smelts is preserved. Boswell's eagerness to point out the pun and Johnson's acceptance of it feeds back into the initial telling with Sheridan, so that it becomes a central point in a finely managed progression of different puns leading up to the pun about the sauce.

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310 Journal, 15/4/1779. Laird, 84; Beinecke 44/1003, 40a.
But in the final version, denuded of the initiating impulse for Boswell introducing the story to Sheridan, Boswell’s ingratiating and eagerness to distinguish the pun is exaggerated. The lack of context here can allow us to see some of Boswell’s attitude to the purpose of italics in the presentation of jokes, and therefore of its purpose in his transcriptions of conversation, owing to the extreme decontextualisation to which he subjects this embedded anecdote. The information about Johnson contained in the anecdote is minimal: he laughs and thereby accedes to the use of the pun. In the Journal account of the discussion with Sheridan, Sheridan’s final contribution is introduced by “Nay”, negating Boswell’s assertion that Johnson’s laughter indicated acceptance, which makes clearer the barb against Johnson’s vanity. For Sheridan in the earlier version, the pun is irrelevant to Johnson because of the compliment. In the version in the *Life*, the initiative for supposing that Johnson approved of the pun is folded in to Sheridan’s being told of it, and his negation is merely implicit. What this means is that Sheridan’s pun is more pro-forma, and less meaningful than it might have been if it had been presented with its context. Yet Boswell is still so committed to the pun that he italicises both words, indicating that he is also committed to the practice of italicising in order to indicate the pun through difference, whatever the context. Something similar happens on 1 April 1781 where Boswell censors the name of Dudley Long, later Lord North, in a passage where Johnson riffs on his name and calls his character “*short*”, a word that is italicised, preserving the pun even in a context where the recognition of the pun depends upon the censored name:

> Mrs. Thrale gave high praise to a gentleman of our acquaintance. **Johnson.** “Nay, my dear lady, don’t talk so. Mr. ****’s character is very *short*. It is nothing. He fills a chair. He is a man of a genteel appearance, and that is all. I know nobody who blasts by praise as you do: for whenever there is exaggerated praise, every body is set against a character. They are provoked to attack it. Now there is *****: you praised that man with such disproportion, that I was incited to lessen him, perhaps more than he deserves. His blood is upon your head. By the same principle, your malice defeats itself; for your censure is too violent. And yet (looking to her with a leering smile) she is the first woman in the world could she but restrain that wicked tongue of hers—she would be the only woman could she but command that little whirligig.”

(2/378)
While it is true that it could be argued that Boswell here preserves an auditory datum about Johnson’s delivery of the line, and that he was also at pains to make obvious the identities of the majority of the censored names in the book, given that the asterisks used the corresponding number of letters, we can also see Boswell trying to preserve the original purpose of his anecdotes by keeping the written signifiers of the pun. This is borne out by the textual history of the episode. In the Journal, both words are underlined for emphasis in a balanced and punning contrast, while in the manuscript, which first uses a long underscore for Long before adding the asterisks, short is copied in with its underlining intact.311

Wherever there is space for his written record to indicate that the spoken context can contain an excess of meaning, Boswell is more than prepared to indicate it. The “pun sauce” anecdote demonstrates this amiably by connecting together both Sheridan’s and Boswell’s own pun in order to make a minor point about Johnson’s attitudes to conversation, but principally to allow space for Sheridan’s riposte.

Boswell makes singularly few italicised puns in his own narrative voice during the course of the *Life*. This happens on page five of the first volume, where he impugns Mason’s *Memoirs of Mr. William Whitehead*,

> literally no *Life,* but a mere dry narrative of facts.

Boswell’s manipulation of the conventions for marking titles here, italics and initial capitalisation for the genre and no differentiation for the name of the actual work, should alert us to the fact that there is more sense in the text than would otherwise be indicated by plain text. The conjunction of the two meanings allows Boswell a quick swipe at his generic predecessor while setting out his objectives in writing about Johnson. Curiously, however, the witticism does not belong exclusively to Boswell,

even in his own (rather, that is, Johnson’s) *Life*, because Johnson himself can be found making a more intricate version of the joke to malign Bishop Burnet’s *Some Passages in the Life and Death of John Earl of Rochester* during the trip to Ashbourne in 1777:

> I asked if Burnet had not given a good *Life* of Rochester. **Johnson. “We have a good *Death*: there is not much *Life.*”**

(2/168)³¹²

In this earlier version of the joke that Boswell appropriates but does not suppress, Johnson includes a contrasting pair, and both are italicised. We can see the same conjunction of necessities in the transcription of the pun in which it is most likely that without the need for emphasis, Boswell could be italicising these words simply because they contrast, or simply because they are generic titles and included in the unmentioned title of the work under discussion. In both versions—the original spoken witticism and the written emulation of it—we can see a certain amount of surplus or excess in the articulation of the pun itself. This excess embodies the central contradiction of the practice of italicisation. It also allows us to apprehend that its result within the regime of direct speech is that the writer is made into an arbitrary interventionist interpreter on any scale, and so becomes free to direct the attention of the reader to shifts in meaning wherever these are desired. Such seemingly arbitrary shifts can be seen at a scale smaller than single punning words during the extended meeting of the Club in which Boswell censored the names of some of the participants:

> P. “As many as are for Dr. Johnson being secretary hold up your hands.—Carried unanimously.” Boswell. “He will be our Dictator.” **Johnson. “No, the company is to dictate to me. I am only to write for wine; and I am quite disinterested, as I drink none; I shall not be suspected of having forged the application. I am no more than humble *tribe.*” E. “Then you shall prescribe,” Boswell. “Very well. The first play of words to-day.” J. “No, no; the *bulls* in Ireland.”

(2/195)

This singling-out of the different prefix in E’s speech (E is identified as Burke in Boswell’s key) shows that the location of the emphasis can, depending on the inclination of either the speaker or the transcriber, be whittled down to a unit smaller than the individual word.³¹³ The same happens in a

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³¹² Journal, 22/9/1777. *Extremes*, 180; Beinecke 43/997, 105. This page was used directly as copy for the *Life*, and the underlinings are clear.

³¹³ Journal, 3/4/1778. *Extremes*, 239; Beinecke 43/999, 10. The Journal version indicates the emphasis on the prefix only, while the italicisation in Gibbon’s riposte to Boswell’s comment traces a curious history. Initially in the Journal, Boswell’s
footnote for May 1781, where Boswell remembers a pun on the Johnson’s reputation and the name of John Shebbeare:

9 I recollect a ludicrous paragraph in the news-papers, that the King had pensioned both a He-bear and a She-bear. 

(2/397n5)314

Boswell is unable to contain his enthusiasm for the extraneous pun, but is restrained enough both to keep it to a footnote and to concentrate the italics on only the pertinent syllables joined by hyphens to the word “bear” in order to convey the pun on “Shebbeare” correctly.

In an anecdote detailing the establishment of the Literary Club, Boswell uses compounded italics to show Johnson appropriating a complete statement for ridicule. He is told of David Garrick’s reaction to being told about the proposal for the club by Sir Joshua Reynolds, which is presented thus:

In justice both to Mr. Garrick and Dr. Johnson, I think it necessary to rectify this mis-statement. The truth is, that not very long after the institution of our club, Sir Joshua Reynolds was speaking of it to Garrick. “I like it much, (said he,) I think I shall be of you.” When Sir Joshua mentioned this to Dr. Johnson, he was much displeased with the actor’s conceit. “He’ll be of us, (said Johnson,) how does he know we will permit him? The first duke in England has no right to hold such language.”

(1/262)315

That the whole of Johnson’s paraphrase is marked up in italics here is remarkable because it stretches beyond the convention in textual production where snatches of text are shown in italics by appropriating the technique into Boswell’s representation of Johnson as a speaker. Boswell is showing Johnson as an author of this statement, of which, it must be added. Boswell was not himself exclamation is that “prescribe” is the “first Pun today”. The revision to “play of words” allows the removal of a line in which Boswell quibbles with Gibbon’s counter-example, which he remarks is “only a play of words”. Gibbon’s objection itself is revised in a series of steps. Initially, he provides two counter-examples: “The boare and the Bull”, the boare being marked for the emphasis that, once it is eliminated, is given to the “bulls in Ireland” in reference to Burke’s jest on 2/191. “Boare” refers to another jest of Burke’s that did not make it into the final version, but exemplifies Boswell’s commitment to marking the stress to be placed on puns. In introducing Johnson’s comments on the marble bull at Florence, Boswell’s Journal notes the fundamentals of a joke: “Boar at Florence mentioned. B. There are many Bores.” (Extremes, 235; Beinecke 43/999, 6). The pun is included but cancelled in the manuscript, while the whole “Dictator” section is cancelled but reinstated. Gibbon’s reference to the “boar” was transferred within this paragraph and not specifically canceled after reinstatement, but it leaves the text at this point, having become an uneconomical and spectral reference to events in the conversation. See MS 638 for “Dictator” and 630 for “Bores”, Bonnell, 168.

314 Boswell includes the footnote cramped in the right margin of MS Papers Apart; Beinecke (M 145)56/1190, 801. The indications for emphasis on the individual syllables are clear, though only the second includes the hyphen.

315 MS Papers Apart; Beinecke (M145) 55/1169, 284. Boswell attributes this section of particulars of Johnson’s life in the year 1764 to Langton. The underlinings for emphasis are clear on the page and used in conjunction with clear quotation marks.
a witness as the story came from Reynolds. Johnson is accepting and paraphrasing Garrick’s statement as reported to him, repring it so he can cut it down with the secondary emphasis on the operative word in his dismissive question: “permit”. This treatment of “permit” fits within the general rubric of what I have outlined as Boswell’s approach to making sure that either Johnson’s punchlines are obvious or that his (remarkably consistent) emphases are preserved in his record. With the balancing lead-in to this emphasis, though, we approach a different order of italicisation. While it is quite possible that the anomalous aspect of this italicisation could stem simply from the anecdote being taken as a whole from a written account provided by Reynolds, Boswell is still committed to presenting Johnson speaking this way through the entire process of composition. He must have thought that it was a likely enough approximation of Johnson’s style of speech to merit inclusion in the final version of the text. That the whole of the paraphrase is italicised hints to more than the simple form of italics as quotation that I have hinted to above, however, and it is because of the conjunction of the phrase with the subsequent treatment of “permit” in the same sentence. Together, the italicised words in the riposte produce a suggestion of a tonal excess that is not otherwise marked. The absence of any such tonal marking means that the precise nature of any difference is absent from the text and, therefore, the information that it might have carried is also absent from the account. Specifically, this lack has to do with Johnson’s mood, if he is truly angry or entertaining some sort of jocular ironisation of an already ironic attitude. This becomes important to the passage in its larger context, in which Boswell is trying to engage with differing accounts of Johnson’s attitude to Garrick joining the Club, beginning with a claim from Sir John Hawkins’s Life of Johnson that Johnson objected to Garrick claiming “He will disturb us by his buffoonery” and enveloping the exculpatory anecdote by objecting to a similar story given by Mrs. Thrale where Johnson says “If Garrick does apply, I’ll black-ball him.” This quotation is a truncation of the account that is in Mrs. Thrale’s book in which Mr. Thrale intervenes to object: “Who, Sir? Mr. Garrick, your friend, your companion—black-ball him!” before she resumes on Johnson’s side of the conversation where he adapts a line from the third of Pope’s Moral Essays to the ideal situation of the Club.

It is curious that Boswell chooses to elide Thrale’s intervention, especially as it forms a nearly balanced pair of displaced emphases, first the conditional and then the particularising pronoun, shared between the two lines, especially in this context, where he is explicitly trying to disabuse his competitors of what he calls a misinterpretation. It seems that both Reynolds’s and Thrale’s...
eyewitness accounts, which take a familiar interventionist approach in italicising for emphasis, as well as Hawkins’s which does not, betray the imprint of a style of conversation that can conceivably be called Johnsonian. Thrale and Reynolds even both follow the same basic structure, where Johnson recapitulates the possibility of Garrick trying to join the Club before defiantly undermining it. Certainly, Thrale’s anecdote has Johnson do this far more bluntly, baldly stating that he will blackball Garrick, while in Reynolds’s version the triumph hangs together more by adding a further conditional and thereby gives Johnson a reasonable motivation for initially having excluded Garrick from the Club, which is the point of Boswell including the anecdote as a corrective to Hawkins’s version. Boswell’s objection to Thrale’s story is that Johnson is presented “as if he had used these contemptuous expressions” and he claims that Reynolds’s story is sufficient “to vindicate at once the heart of Johnson and the social merit of Garrick” but the juxtaposition of the three stories to this effect gives the deliberately wrong impression that these are competing accounts of the same exchange, when in fact there is nothing in any of the three stories to suggest that Johnson did not in fact have at least three discrete conversations on the same topic with as many partners. It is in this light that we can see the elision of Mrs. Thrale from his published account as a dishonest move on Boswell’s part, tending, as it does to position Reynolds’s version as an authoritative representation of a moment, rather than a parallel even from the same period observed by a different writer. The method of italicisation in both of these accounts of Johnson’s unfavourable attitude to Garrick joining the Club, no matter the conclusion that can be drawn from them as to Johnson’s motives, both arouses interest in the manner of speaking and the speakers attitude to the content while it cannot signify more than curiosity.

Extended Italicisation and the Speech of Others

The same dynamic is enacted even where Johnson’s mood is given special attention, as in the conversation with Mrs. Knowles, where Johnson gets heated, exclaiming
After this, he blows up even further into what Boswell can only call a tempest from which Johnson has to be slowly navigated onto other, safer topics. A more indicative or promising consideration is when italics are used to cover a much longer section of speech. At times there is a clear sense that the conjunction of different imperatives, such as quotation and the institution of a consideration for tone do not compete but combine to form a mysterious illumination in the transcript. So when on 21 September 1777 Boswell has Johnson mock the pretensions of actors by pretending to be one, the marriage of italics as quotation and as emphasis allow for an extended marking out of the passage from the rest of Johnson’s speech:

> “I am willing to love all mankind, except an American:” and his inflammable corruption bursting into horrid fire, he “breathed out threatenings and slaughter;” calling them, “Rascals—Robbers—Pirates;” and exclaiming, he’d “burn and destroy them.”

When we had done with criticism, we walked over to Richardson’s, the author of ‘Clarissa,’ and I wondered to find Richardson displeased that I ‘did not treat Cibber with more respect.’ Now, Sir, to talk of respect for a player!” (smiling disdainfully). Boswell. “There, Sir, you are always heretical: you never will allow merit to a player.” Johnson. “Merit, Sir! what merit? Do you respect a rope-dancer, or a ballad-singer?” Boswell. “No, Sir: but we respect a great player, as a man who can conceive lofty sentiments, and can express them gracefully.” Johnson. “What, Sir, a fellow who claps a hump on his back, and a lump on his leg, and cries, ‘I am Richard the Third?’ Nay, Sir, a ballad-singer is a higher man, for he does two things; he repeats and he sings: there is both recitation and musick in his performance: the player only recites.”

Here Boswell manages to maintain the tone of Johnson’s scorn (or the idea of the tone being different) over the utterance of five full words, much longer than the natural units of emphasis. Boswell is also able to enact Johnson taking up Boswell’s own terms delicately in order to dispute them in a very personal discussion about how to deal with depression:

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318 Journal, 15/4/1778. *Extremes*, 287; Beinecke 44/1000, 87. MS 692, 209. See above for discussion of this passage with reference to the use of dashes. The phrase is very clearly underlined in both versions.

319 Journal, 21/9/1777. *Extremes*, 175; Beinecke 43/997, 96. In the Journal version, which was used as copy for the *Life*, this line is given neither markings for italics nor embedded quotation marks.
In the transition from the Journal to the final version, Boswell ignores a gap in the Journal left for the recollection of some seemingly important advice: “Remember always,” said he, “_______”, before working up Johnson’s subsequent advice from an indirect discourse that is begun with the statement “He said I was wrong”. The final version doubles the phrase “think them down”, preserving the emphasis but transferring it from Boswell to Johnson, turning it into an ironising quotation from its initial status as either pure emphasis or the distancing necessary for the accommodation of a vulgar or unfamiliar phrase. The manuscript tries and then cancels italics for only the word “think” in Boswell’s question, further indicating his minute attention to these matters.

We must be open to the possibility that these italics indicate more than simple quotation, and retain something of the tone of Johnson’s adoption of Boswell’s phrase. But the difficulty with italics is that they reach their expressive limit very quickly. Even in these three words, Johnson’s tone, if indeed it is being marked for modification, runs towards indeterminacy. What is left is the hint of an ironic possibility. Consider too, the ending of the anecdote about Catcot demonstrating the trunks in which Chatterton’s poetry was reportedly discovered, which takes the form of an additional citation of a Highlander talking about Ossian:

He brought to my recollection a Scotch Highlander, a man of learning too, and who had seen the world, attesting, and at the same time giving his reasons for the authenticity of Fingal:—“I have heard all that poem when I was young.”—“Have you, Sir? Pray what have you heard?”—“I have heard Ossian, Osscar, and every one of them.”

(2/70)321

320 Journal, 19/3/1776. OY, 276; Beinecke 42/992, 99-100. MS S09a, Redford, 192.
321 Beinecke, 43/994, 6-7 shows that Boswell’s recollection did not progress into his Journal.
The foolishness of the statement is contained in the italics, along with a hint of tone that defies description. That Boswell is at least partially thinking of tone when marking out these phrases should be clear from a reading of a statement from 1769, where Johnson concludes a discussion of Colley Cibber with a dismissive story:

"Johnson. "Yes, it is very entertaining. But as for Cibber himself, taking from his conversation all that he ought not to have said, he was a poor creature. I remember when he brought me one of his Odes to have my opinion of it, I could not bear such nonsense, and would not let him read it to the end; so little respect had I for that great man (laughing). Yet I remember Richardson wondering that I could treat him with familiarity.""

The parenthesis supplies a ready explanation for the otherwise strange italicisation, which is particularly interesting because of the inclusion of the "that" within the phrase. This makes the italicised section longer than a scornful tone would otherwise need to be, but the phrase is not peculiar enough to be a specific citation of something else. While Boswell’s initial Journal version is no longer extant, the editors of *Boswell in Search of a Wife* add an exclamation here, even though the manuscript they are working from does not include one.322

This suggests that there is an imprint of an exclamation in the strange deployment of the italics, enough, again to give the sensation of a putative transformation, but not enough, even with the direct description of laughter, to give access to its particular qualities. The result is an unending interplay between the different possibilities for which italics are necessary.

When they extend beyond mechanical and prosodic imperatives, Boswell’s italics engage in the troubled interplay between levels of understanding at different scales precisely because they have

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multiple applications. In the conversation with Edwards, Johnson’s old school fellow, Boswell has Edwards say something that grates on Johnson:

\begin{quote}
**Edwards.** “Ah, Sir! we are old men now.”  
**Johnson.** (who never liked to think of being old) “Don’t let us discourage one another.”  
**Edwards.** “Why Doctor you look stout and hearty, I am happy to see you so; for the newspapers told us you were very ill.”  
**Johnson.** “Aye, Sir, they are always telling lies of us old fellows.”
\end{quote}

Here Boswell marks out the bit which annoys Johnson “(who never liked to think of being old)” in an act of ironic sympathy with Johnson. He calls attention to the appeal to a common situation, in order to articulate what he assumes is Johnson’s aversion to the sentiment. These italics are added in the draft stage, an artefact of Boswell revising the text and clarifying the narrative usefulness of the details in the anecdote. But the possibility that the italics signify an attempt at aural authenticity cannot be done away with. Could they not, after all, be an indication of what Boswell remembers of Edwards’s emphasis? All these considerations come together: quotation, tone, ridicule. They are indeterminate because italics operate on different scales in the same way that levels of narration do.

As a final consideration of the interaction of these different imperatives is useful to turn to an utterance of Goldsmith’s, which is given as a statement of which Johnson was most likely unaware. The statement comes from a passage whose use of parenthesis I have analysed above, but the italicisation deserves attention in its own right:

\begin{quote}
Once when he was beginning to speak, he found himself overpowered by the loud voice of Johnson, who was at the opposite end of the table, and did not perceive Goldsmith’s attempt. Thus disappointed of his wish to obtain the attention of the company, Goldsmith in a passion threw down his hat, looking angrily at Johnson, and exclaiming in a bitter tone, “Take it.”
\end{quote}

This command, said by Goldsmith to himself in resentment but directed at Johnson occurs as an afterthought addition to mark a parallel track to the main line of Johnson’s conversation, where Goldsmith has been overlooked. Goldsmith reveals his own intense feeling in the hearing of Boswell, who passes it on in his written account as an explanation for what comes later. The command, along with its curious lack of context, is key to the establishment of Boswell’s claims in his potted account.

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323 Journal, 17/4/1778. *Extremes*, 294; Beinecke 44/1000, 103. MS 703, Bonnell, 219. The same dynamic occurs with the phrase “lost a wife” which occurs only pages later, and is discussed above in my treatment of dashes.
of Goldsmith, summing up all his remarks about Goldsmith’s wish to shine, his infelicity in witty exchanges, and his sad personal resentments. The remark is combined with the actions of the throwing down of the hat and the look at Johnson, as well as the bitter tone. These, however, are all the context that the peculiar utterance is given. It is impossible to connect it to a point in the preceding narration of Johnson’s conversation. Decontextualised in this way, the command is used as a stepping stone towards narrating and explaining the dressing-down that Johnson gives Goldsmith when he finally complains. The intensification of the command through italics is required by Boswell’s goal of showing Goldsmith unguarded in frustration still resenting, still feeling strongly. We can read the italics here as belonging to the tone, as well as to Boswell’s desire to make something of the fact that they are said. Insofar as the italics given to Goldsmith are tonal, though, they have nothing to do with the volume: they only help him to seethe, not to exclaim. Again, this peculiar use of italics for a complete statement is subject to a revision before it meets its final form in the *Life*. In the Journal, Boswell gives a description: “Goldie had sat in great agitat wanting to shine. He at last took hat & sat like a man at a gaming table still going to take a throw if possible. But being checked he once threw down hat wt vengeance on floor.”

In the manuscript of the *Life* Goldsmith is given his bitter exclamation, but this time only “take” is underlined, offering a metrical emphasis on the action:

The final version in the *Life* itself extends the emphasis into the object of the command. Mysterious as it is (does he mean his hat or the opportunity to shine or the turn at the gambling table Boswell had

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324 Journal, 7/5/1773. *Defence*, 194-5 (Giving MS); Beinecke 40/961, 19. MS 411, Redford, 110. The page proofs bear no markings for this passage.
imagined him to be at?) the italicisation of both words makes Goldsmith’s statement the bearer of more than the italics can signify.

The question here is how much of a complete statement can be covered in italics for it to still be a marking of tone. Goldsmith’s entire frustrated sarcastic command is imbued with the bitterness that Boswell assigns to it. Because, despite being an aside, the command in its revised format is short and direct, it is also grammatically complete. This makes it a rarity in the category of things Boswell italicises. Larger and longer italicised statements verge towards the quotation of other people’s full clauses embedded within a much more extensive speech. The tonal shift that can be indicated by the italics generally has only a local effect, while the rhetorical and structural effects of italics can be more persistent, though not as long lasting as when the technique is used in the order of narrative and analytical discourse, where whole paragraphs are transformed. The shifts in scale between these modes mean that in itself, italicisation is subject to polysemy. Italics can signify multiple and competing instructions on how to read the text, and so are embedded within the structures of textuality and signification to which critics have been paying close and sceptical attention since the advent of poststructuralism.

Coda: Small Capitals

The same dynamic is carried out on to a smaller degree than italics when Boswell uses small capitals to distinguish words and phrases within the different textual zones of his own narration and direct speech. In his own narration, Boswell adopts print conventions of the time in order to highlight or illuminate certain words, chief amongst which are words that command reverence for their spiritual and sometimes political import. In addition to the fact that small capitals are the means by which the innumerable speech headings for the dialogue portions are achieved, throughout the book, words such as SAVIOUR (1/384) are given this treatment, as well as secular subjects who Boswell hopes to single out, such as WARREN HASTINGS (2/365). This follows his practice in his manuscripts and journals, where specific figures he wants to exhibit his reverence for are distinguished not by the double underlining that usually marks copy for small capitals, but by the actual writing out of the letters in this manner. Chief among these is the illumination given at times to DOUGLAS, in defence of whose paternity Boswell exercised his energies over a number of years. Unsurprisingly this extends into the central areas of the Life as well. Not only does Boswell add capitals for eminences for whom he wants to mark his real but conventional reverence, he also does this for the Literary Club, an institution towards which the book constructs reverence in a mixed mode of the real and the ironically overblown (2/138, 2/221, 2/379, 2/520, 2/580).
As with italics, the mark of reverence that this textual practice provides when it is used in plain narration becomes very complex when it is combined with the potential for representation of tone and emphasis inherent in direct discourse. “The CLUB”, to take the example at hand, takes on different possibilities when it is uttered in a visually different format. On 23 March 1783, Johnson can be found distinguishing the Literary Club from a putative club that an anonymised Lord might be imagined heading:

“All of this takes place in a textual context where Boswell is exercising minute control over how these words appear in the final version—at 2/223, for instance, “THE CLUB” is marked up for capitals in the final Revises, again in Johnson’s speech. The oversignification that we found with italics occurs with equally with these examples, and even more so with terms marked for small capitals in speech that are not present in Boswell’s narration for comparison. Boswell’s romantic attitudes partake in this mixing of the potentials of print where he tries to convey some of his admiration for fanciful ideas, as well, it may be, as presenting his actual shift of the moment in a discussion prompted by his having dined with Captain Cook:

I told him that while I was with the Captain, I caught the enthusiasm of curiosity and adventure, and felt a strong inclination to go with him on his next voyage. Johnson. “Why, Sir, a man does feel so, till he considers how very little he can learn from such voyages.” Boswell. “But one is carried away with the general grand and indistinct notion of A Voyage Round the World.” Johnson. “Yes, Sir, but a man is to guard himself against taking a thing in general.”

Here the transformation that is usually effected in Boswell’s plain narration more or less matches the reverential tone he can be assumed to apply to the phrase in speech, but this is not always the case. Where Goldsmith proves himself to have “more of the old prejudice in him” than Boswell had imagined in a conversation about the King coming to a performance of She Stoops to Conquer in 1773, for instance, he is provoked into high sarcasm after he claims that the relation in which the poet is the friend of the monarch ought to be inverted:
A form of modification that in plain narration is a stable tool for conveying reverence here receives the admixture of aural potential, and so becomes unstable in its precise signification. The same happens when Boswell wants to mark Johnson making a perhaps too boisterous joke at the expense of the Irish:

My much-valued friend Dr. Barnard, now Bishop of Killaloe, having once expressed to him an apprehension, that if he should visit Ireland he might treat the people of that country more unfavourably than he had done the Scotch, he answered, with strong pointed double-edged wit, “Sir, you have no reason to be afraid of me. The Irish are not in a conspiracy to cheat the world by false representations of the merits of their countrymen. No, Sir; the Irish are a fair people:—they never speak well of one another.”

In both of these examples, the phrases “FAIR PEOPLE” and “HAPPY REVOLUTION” are opened into a zone of multiple tonal interpretations even in this moment of having been marked out for their difference. The same applies for the most personal of the moments in which this textual transformation is effected. On the way to his departure for the continent in 1763, Boswell records Johnson intervening with a very direct observation about his mental state:

I teased him with fanciful apprehensions of unhappiness. A moth having fluttered round the candle, and burnt itself, he laid hold of this little incident to admonish me; saying, with a fly look, and in a solemn but quiet tone, “That creature was its own tormentor, and I believe its name was Boswell.”

The question of whether this is a textual intervention in Johnson’s imagination, or Boswell’s effort to register Johnson’s modification of tone (or both). Robert H. Bell identifies in the line as one of many
“frequent exhortations in jest and earnest”,325 it is precisely the extra and enigmatic emphasis that allows this to come into play. In using a print convention to draw attention to the word, Boswell raises possibilities that can never be confirmed except through more and more detailed commentary on the words themselves.

While this polysemy in the very application of italics and their cousin small capitals brings in another metatextual level of signification into the realm of writerly play and radical readerly doubt, such polysemy is itself more vexed than the kind of unhinged play of signifiers that usually draw the attention of postructuralist readings. This is because Boswell’s troubled use of this technique to bluntly point any of this range of possible transformations or adjustments to the bare content of his text, while in itself polysemous, is the very technique he is using to point to and in many cases to control or tamp down the free-flowing untethered polysemous potential of the words contained in his curiosities. To turn this statement around: while Boswell controls the polysemous potential of the text of the Life through recourse to the metatextual devices allowed to him by the convention of using different typefaces to motivate shifts in tone and context, the very devices he uses are caught in a similar, higher order of polysemy that only serves to trouble, rather than clarify, his efforts to reduce the floating potential for multiple readings and error in his authentic records. The problem, then, as always, is one of competing scales of interpretation and intervention. Boswell’s italics are always potentially something other than he intends. The same applies to those of Johnson’s words that are reported using them: the text is destabilised even in the very gesture of trying to secure it. This is the result not of sloppiness or agenda-pushing, but of the very conditions of writing itself: in their multiple deployments, Boswell’s italics made in the service of transcription embody both the then-contemporary and the then-nascent understandings of the word nervous, the peculiar indication given for them by the Printer’s Grammar.

Chapter Five: Accent, Laughter, Onomatopoeia

In the preceding chapter, I have outlined the difficulties presented to readers of the *Life* by Boswell’s inescapable commitment to opposed and often contradictory regimes of italicisation in the representation of speech. In that argument these contradictory regimes were typified by their attachment to the clarifying of the words presented by the ordering hand of Boswell as an author and his concurrent commitment to use italics as an aid to preserve specific historical information about factual occurrences in speech that text itself is otherwise unable to contain. The hinge there was the overlap between the mechanical and rhetorical sense of emphasis which is shared by both speech and text, and the dynamic range of excess in speech that can only be partly accommodated by text when it represents speech. The surplus of signification in speech that is necessitated by many of Boswell’s italics is born of the aural qualities of speech. The majority of the claims in the previous chapter turn on the consideration of the possibility that italics point to modifications in the bare text that should be read as indicating shifts in sounds, particularly tonal shifts and prosodic emphases. In this chapter, I turn to more explorative interventions in some of Boswell’s text that show his interest in bringing atypical historical moments that hinge on sonic and aural differences directly onto the page. Where I have shown that Boswell’s italics are at best ambiguous in their success at the competing goals of clarification and preservation, his other aural interventions, happening at a smaller scale, inhabit a more directly obvious and deliberate space in the range of his techniques in the direct quotation of speech. These techniques, however, raise significant questions about the nature of his attitude to authenticity. The scale of Boswell’s commitment to different versions of his idea of the truth of his accounts of Johnson at different periods in his life as well as how they relate to his larger narrative. This, as we will see, is as much a reproduction at a smaller scale of those problems in his project that I have already discussed as it is a difficulty specific to the representation of sound in text.

The challenge of onomatopoeia is that Boswell’s interventions in presenting them are violent assertions of interpretation over the presentation of context. These interventions are also a form of context itself. At the same time their goal is to produce transparency in the transcript at a smaller scale. They rely on the regularity of orthography while at the same time asserting a right to modify it to the demands of the particular occurrence. The oscillation is between the retention of the history of the words (Johnson’s position) and the retention of words as components of history, which is the position Boswell most frequently inhabits. Boswell’s version of this oscillation presents us with the problem of what, if anything, the aural specificity of textualised speech itself signifies. The further consideration is that such signification can take place at the different levels of utterance, word,
conversation, life-stage and personality. Boswell’s accommodations of speech’s aural specificity may not even be limited to direct speech and indeed, may even be hampered by that method of reporting about conversations. This represents the most extreme version of the spectrum of choices offered between direct and indirect, the part and the whole, the thing itself and its representation. It also calls into question the constitution of these oppositions. The question of orthography inserts the interpretive observational mind of the author into the very word itself. The limitation of inarticulate sounds into recognisable symbols (and, alternatively, silence) presents the ephemeral and infinitesimal interplay of body parts and air in articulation with the total and abstract sense of the speaker’s personality and habits. If the interposition of the author into the smallest of interstices in the representation of speech is inescapable, thinking about orthography encourages us to ask whether the notion of abstracted, general claims about an utterance, a conversation or a character, is any less of a distorting factor than the transcript of words themselves. This chapter concentrates and combines three stress points of direct speech: onomatopoeia, accent and laughter, in order to interrogate Boswell’s principles of authenticity and narration in particular relation to his attitude to the challenge of representing the consistent variations from normal vocal and textual practice in Johnson’s speech, and in the speech of minor figures in his life.

As with the series of ambiguities engendered by the necessary and limiting technology of italics being made to play off between different scales of observation, the modification of orthography to represent aberrant sounds rather than standardised words can lead to some interpretive and historical difficulties when there is so much potential difference to represent. In the *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, Boswell reports Johnson “toasting Highland beauties with great readiness”:

> His conviviality engaged them so much, that they seemed eager to shew their attention to him, and vied with each other in crying out, with a strong Celtic pronunciation, “Toctor Shonson, Toctor Shonson, your health!”

In one of the excurses on Goldsmith’s attitude to conversation in the *Life*, Boswell gives this account of another foreign accent talking about Johnson, just over four months before the incident on the Tour:

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326 Boswell, *Tour*, 267 (27/9/1773). The statement is an addition to the original MS and therefore not visible on Beinecke 41/975, 374.
This conjunction of two presumably very different accents in the same orthography presents an inescapable problem in Boswell’s methods of transcription. Modifying the spelling can work locally in contradistinction to standard presentation, but it does not guarantee transparent transmission of the sounds.

Two aspects of the coincidence of these moments in their orthography are of interest here. The first is that Boswell’s desire to represent sounds is shown to be insufficiently subtle to deal with two varieties of difference from Standard English. The second is that even if the German and the Celtic accents were the same, there would be no way of knowing whether Boswell’s choice of non-standard orthography actually represented the sounds that he heard as a different and amusing way of addressing his biographical subject. The consequence is that in light of the instability of presenting accented speech, Boswell’s project of preservation is thrown into relief. We can see in the layers of textual ambiguity with reference to specific events an array of Boswell’s attitudes to his material and what he is trying to do more generally. In investigating Boswell’s impulse to record specific aural

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327 MS Papers Apart; Beinecke (M 145) 55/1146, 443, Redford, 112.
moments as well as his efforts to do so, we can see how much importance he places on the historical sonic impact of particular sounds, and how much on the conventions of written speech that were available to him.

This chapter focuses on the use of two devices: orthography and exclamation marks, which combine in Boswell’s most direct attempt to produce speech in text as transcript. In comparison to the other techniques I have already canvassed in this thesis, orthography and exclamation marks are circumscribed in their ability to record the specific moments of Boswell’s interest because they only briefly signify within the three standardised contexts I discuss here: accents, laughter and onomatopoeia. On this smallest scale of consideration, we will see how Boswell is relatively conservative in his approach to the potential of text to represent sounds, no matter how fleetingly exercised he may have been in the representation specific historical sonic moments.

Orthography and Aberrant Sounds

Throughout his life, Boswell was interested in and amused by the sounds of speech. The linguistic variety of Eighteenth-Century Britain was a fertile source of humour and a certain amount of personal pride for Boswell, who during his youth worked hard to suppress the Scottish elements in his spoken English. In Edinburgh in 1762, he took lessons from Thomas Sheridan, the master of elocution and standardisation, in order to eliminate any burr from his speech, and in this he at least claims to have been so successful that in addition to Boswell’s generally unpatriotic preference for English company, Boswell was pleased to reproduce an instance of Johnson calling him the most “unscottified” man he knew (1/409).328 Boswell derived a certain amount of esteem from this comment, so much so that it makes its way into the Life as an illustration of Johnson’s attitude to Scottishness, and, more importantly perhaps, also as a boast about his achievement. But if Boswell was able to suppress his own deviation from Standard English, he was not able to join Sheridan in an elocutionary revolution. Thus he was led to a situation in which, whenever he wanted to represent speech in text, either in his Journal or in print, he was presented with the consideration that the varieties of speech he encountered could be either the focus of his attention or completely irrelevant to his telling. It is for this reason that we must turn to Boswell’s treatment of accent as another separate scale of analysis when reading

328 Journal, 1/5/1773. Defence, 193 (giving Life MS). MS 339-40, Redford, 45. For discussions of this compliment, see Pat Rogers, “Boswell and the Scotticism”, 66, and Marlies Danzinger, “The Authorial Comments”, 169-171, where Boswell’s increasing Anglophilia is said to have been obscured even in recording such comments.
the Life. What immediately stands out in such an analysis is that there is relatively little focus on this particular aspect of the sound of speech. While Boswell pays determined attention to tone and stress, his textual interest in accent is only ever apparent if it is relevant to the narration for its own sake, and then on a separate plane. If the central remaining question to this analysis is how Boswell conveys what Johnson (and his contemporaries) sounded like, the answer is a vexed interaction between different scales of perception in which some sounds are more important than others.

In a passage added to the discussion about accents that took place on 28 March 1772, Johnson advises not to go too far beyond Good English into High English, saying it makes “the fools who use it” “truly ridiculous” […] “A studied and factitious pronunciation which requires perpetual attention and implies perpetual constraint, is exceedingly disgusting.” (1/361) The strange choice of word here—the heightened and exaggerated notion of disgust with reference to something so inconsequential as an accent—is a direct and deliberate echo of the terms used in disapprobation of variant accents in Sheridan’s Lectures on Elocution. There, Sheridan applies “disgust” to the feeling brought on by bad delivery, be it from reading poorly or reading with a regional accent. Sheridan does not go so far as Boswell in applying the term to the effects of too much effort in correcting a regional pronunciation, which is in itself a difference between the two that is worthy of scrutiny. Boswell’s seeking a middle ground in the Good as opposed to the High shows him to be aligned more closely to Johnson’s ultimately lenient attitude to the fixing of pronunciation than to Sheridan’s hard-line meliorism.

This is demonstrated later in the same day’s conversation, where Boswell mentions Sheridan’s pronouncing dictionary and reports two separate objections of Johnson’s to that enterprise. First, Johnson notes the impracticability of a large reference text of that sort when its chief utility is intended for the correction of on-the-spot conversation rather than in the quiet removes of a study. Secondly, Johnson objects from an even more pragmatic standpoint that high English pronunciation is not in itself fixed, and that modelling a standard of pronunciation on the speech of noblemen would

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329 Thomas Sheridan, Lectures on Elocution, presents disgust as the product of the “little effect” of “monotonous speaking” (5); he also posits it as the result of the use of only two tones in reading, marking different lengths of pause (17); and of reading without room for the passions and emotions (109); of uncharismatic reading of scripture and sermons (135); of children mispronouncing words they have obviously only encountered in books (149); and finally the result of discordant emotions (182).

330 See Elizabeth Hedrick, “Fixing the Language” for an account of Johnson’s goals in fixing orthography and his ultimate retreat into etymology. Sheridan’s entitlement to fix English may have been shaky as an Irishman, but his desire was strong. In the introduction to his General Dictionary, he blames the Hanoverian succession for the displacement of English from court, and with it a dearth of concern about correct pronunciation, and adds a harsh warning: “From that time the regard formerly paid to pronunciation has been gradually declining; so that now the greatest improprieties in that point are to be found among people of fashion; many pronunciations, which thirty or forty years ago were confined to the vulgar, are gradually gaining ground; and if something be not done to stop this growing evil, and fix a general standard at present, the English is likely to become mere jargon, which every one may pronounce as he pleases.” Thomas Sheridan, General Dictionary, 3.
leave to insoluble cruxes based on the disagreements between such distinguished speakers of the language:

Sir, what entitles Sheridan to fix the pronunciation of English? He has, in the first place, the disadvantage of being an Irishman: and if he says he will fix it after the example of the best company, why they differ among themselves. I remember an instance: when I published the Plan for my Dictionary, Lord Chesterfield told me that the word great should be pronounced so as to rhyme to flat; and Sir William Young sent me word that it should be pronounced so as to rhyme to feat, and that none but an Irishman would pronounce it grait. Now here were two men of the highest rank, the one, the best speaker in the House of Lords, the other, the best speaker in the House of Commons, differing entirely.”

Here, of course, Boswell draws Johnson’s speech down into the irreducible problems of textual representation. The rhyme-words are perhaps stable enough to convey across the centuries a sense of the vowel values at use in Johnson’s original, entirely aural demonstration. Even if these sounds have changed in the intervening centuries, these two guide-words can at least give a sense of the difference between the two pronunciations offered to Johnson. The entirely phonetic representation “grait”, however, presents us with new though familiar problems for the understanding of Boswell’s objectives and operations in reining in the unruly realities of speech into text. Boswell is largely in

331 Journal, 27/3/1772. Defence, 73-4; Beinecke 40/959, 95. The Journal for this section was used directly as copy for the Life. Each of the indicative spellings Johnson gives is maintained in the italicised versions given in the Life, though “Great”, “State” and “Grait” are all given initial capitals in the Journal. Each word is underlined for italics. In his account of the same day’s conversation Boswell has removed a straightforward factual question on pronunciation: “Bos Pray Sir whether do you pronounce it Lord Coke or Lord Cooke? Johns Why Sir We pronounce it Lord Cooke.” (Beinecke 40/959, 92) Boswell uses diacritical markings to indicate the length of the vowels. Johnson’s response is presented enigmatically with the marking underneath the vowels, whereas Boswell’s are both above.

It is perhaps as a consequence of the difficulty of dealing with these modifications that this passage did not end up in the final version, though the occurrence of the passage in itself nicely details both Boswell’s interest in being correct in pronunciation and his involvement in finding alphabetical methods of transcription.
agreement with Johnson’s own version of the limits of orthography, but the desire for a transparent relationship between individual characters and the sounds they signify is frustrated by the difficulty involved in overturning the established conventions for spelling words. The a and the i he uses to demonstrate the further difference in articulation that Johnson attributes to the Irish accent are for the most part useless in conveying specific information about the nature of the sound Johnson is supposed to have used. In the absence of a specialised phonetic alphabet, Boswell is left to hope that his transcription is adequate to the task of marking specific sounds in this heightened context where the conventions of spelling have already been demonstrated to be a minefield of potential interpretations and absent authorities.

What is most important is that in this isolated instance, Boswell feels at the very least confident that the letters of the Roman alphabet can perform this function of recording specific sounds in contradistinction to their use in conventionalised spelling. We can surmise that Boswell is committed to a phonetic potential in English vowels from the fact that he limits himself to the deployment of letters alone in transmitting Johnson’s mock-Irish sound. This will become important when we consider Boswell’s wider treatment of accents, and in particular his attitude to the problem of representing Johnson’s aberrant speech in the standardised medium of text. Boswell thinks it is possible at this level to represent the pure acoustical impression of the sound of Johnson’s deliberately non-standard locution using only the malleable vowels available to him in the English version of the Roman alphabet, rather than using Johnson’s own method of getting around the problem by offering a guide word that includes the identical sound he wants to reproduce. Had Boswell indirectly indicated that Johnson rhymed great, for instance, with “bait” in order to give his reductio ad absurdum to Sheridan’s goals in making his pronouncing dictionary, the sound would have stood more of a chance of being preserved. However, such an act of preservation would have missed out on Boswell’s potentially ironising incorporation of Sheridan’s own methods of transcription to represent Johnson’s dismissal of them. Using a simple phoneticisation of Johnson’s speech allows Boswell to hedge his bets in the dispute between Sheridan and Johnson. While presenting Johnson’s derogation of the entire project of Sheridan’s life: correcting speech, reading and spelling through regularisation, Boswell himself employs some of the methods of the man who had helped him to reduce his Scottish accent in Edinburgh ten years before the conversation in question, and almost thirty before the publication of the book itself. The three decades of Boswell’s loyalties being divided between the two men was not limited to orthography, and Boswell’s attempts at effecting a reconciliation between the two after their very public dispute about the merits of their respective pensions during Johnson’s lifetime were thwarted by pride on both sides, finally fizzling when Sheridan refused to join Boswell in a room where Johnson had been placed in ambush.
It is fitting that Boswell brings about a textual reconciliation here, and the manner in which he does this should be enough to help us to understand Boswell’s attitude to the necessity and potential of phonetic representation of speech in text, and his ultimate choice to limit his use of it to very specific and isolated moments such as this one.

This was despite Eighteenth-Century attempts to fix the problem of orthography. In Sheridan’s work on elocution for instance, one can find a concerted attempt to reciprocally fix both spelling and pronunciation, rather than abandoning the Roman alphabet altogether. A more extreme version of orthographic reform aimed against the barbarity of usage and dialect can be found in the efforts of Boswell’s sometime correspondent James Elphinston, who sought to be the one to find “dhe hoal system ov real or audibel propriety in hiz language; and dhen ov repprezenting dhat propriety, by dhe moast expressive system ov literary symbols; so to picture speech, az nearly az possibel, in the exact state ov perfeccion she may hav attained”. Boswell’s interest in elocution comes from both ends: fixing his own speech, and tying down the speech of others in text. It is not coincidental that Boswell attended a lecture where Sheridan delivered his introductory Lecture on Elocution on 9 April 1781, reminiscing about his early encounter with both Sheridan and his ideas about English in the early 1760s. Within two weeks of attending the lecture, at which Sheridan apologised for the room being too big for his voice, Boswell marks three instances of Johnson’s accent, none of which make it into the Life. In two uses of the word “punch”, once referring to the drink and once to the tool, and in an elaborately vexed insistence on the particularity of Johnson’s version of “once”, even in a textual situation where Boswell admits to the fact that his memory is fading, Boswell directs his interest and pleasure to the appreciation of Johnson’s minor deviation from standard pronunciation.

Another attempt to regularise the representation of speech was Joshua Steele’s Prosodia Rationalis, which interested Boswell enough to mention its goals in the Life:

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332 Journal, 24/6/1784. AJ, 250 (giving Life MS), MS 969.  
334 Journal, 9/4/1781. Laird, 315; Beinecke, 45/1008, 115-7. Boswell went to the lecture “with Mr. Dilly and a number of his friends” and felt a sense of nostalgia mixed with some distance from his youthful fervor: “He read his lecture very well, though he complained he was ill, and the room was by much too large for his voice. I was very well pleased to have the system which I had formerly heard revived; and it was very just when moderated by an understanding on the subject less enthusiastic than Old Sheridan’s.”
I cannot too frequently request of my readers while they peruse my account of Johnson’s conversation, to endeavour to keep in mind his deliberate and strong utterance. His mode of speaking was indeed very impressive; and I wish it could be preserved as music is written, according to the very ingenious method of Mr. Steele, who has shewn how the recitation of Mr. Garrick, and other eminent speakers, might be transmitted to posterity in score.

(1/363-4)

The phrase in score is no exaggeration. Steele’s system adds marks for pitch, volume specific types of emphasis and pauses far beyond the constraints of musical notation in order to transmit both the correct way of speaking, and historically accurate accounts of particular speakers. 335 One section gives Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” first in what Steele hopes will be the standard delivery:

and then in a notation of specific deviations given by Garrick:

In the absence of a mechanical method of recording sound, Steele’s scheme is laudable if overambitious. Not even Boswell could record all the detail that Steele requires for score in the time he had available. Boswell’s more modest attempt in reproducing certain elements of the sound of Johnson’s speech is restricted to interventions to mark tones, pauses, and, as we see here, specific aberrant sounds. But even in this limited version of writing speech in sound, there are endless difficulties that derive from the arbitrary significance of the characters of the Roman alphabet when

335 Joshua Steele, Prosodia Rationalis, 40-41.
they are made first to represent standard speech, and then, in more specific moments, deviant sounds within that speech.

Both Boswell and Johnson were interested in orthography. For Johnson, the goal of fixing the language is seen as a desirable project, but over the course of designing and executing the Dictionary, he reversed his opinion in favour of convention, means that words remain as spelt, not as they sound. For Boswell, this has personal importance on two fronts. Firstly, in his Journal, he is determined in his efforts to accommodate Scots English as separate from his own discourse, while retaining it as worthy of preservation (that is, as a particular form of speech, especially his father’s). Secondly, Boswell himself engaged in an abandoned project to codify Scots speech in a Dictionary aimed at preserving it. He was thus doubly engaged in deciding on matters of orthography on a regular basis, and his decisions were occasionally unorthodox.

In the Life, Boswell’s interest in accent has two main features. Firstly, he is willing to report but not preserve the way in which his own speech was or was not scottified—he is proud of his Englishness,

336 Elizabeth Hedrick notes that the development of Johnson’s practices in the dictionary began from a high-minded zeal to fix usage and orthography, but ended in settling for the precedence of etymology: his “subsequent practice in the Dictionary reveals that his respect for etymology ultimately superseded any epistemological principles on which the method may have been based.” “Fixing the Language”, 426-427. See Jeff Strabone, “Samuel Johnson: Standardizer of English, Preserver of Gaelic” 244-248, for an account of Johnson’s initial desire to fix English ceding to his resignation towards the barbarousness of use. Adam Beach maintains that despite Johnson’s retreat from standardisation, he was certainly seen as a standard-bearer for the cause that was taken up by other figures including Sheridan, “The Creation of a Classical Language”, 124-125.

337 Some indicative examples can be found in Journal entries: In conversation with Rousseau, Boswell reflects on Rousseau’s enthusiasm for Scotland and imagines a detailed speech in Scots: “There he felt the thistle, when it was applied to himself on the tender part. It was just as if I had said “Howt Johnie Rousseau man, whatfor hae ye sae mony figmagairies? Ye’re a bony man indeed to mak siccanawark; set ye no canna ye just live like ither fowk? It was the best idea could be given in the polite French language of the rude Scots sarcastical vivacity.” Journal, 15/12/1764. GTGS, 260; Beinecke 38/943, 811-2. Meeting a countryman, “I had no pleasure in hearing him cry How’s aw, wi’ ye? Will you sit in the fire. And then he told that when the King asked the Duchess of Gordon how she liked London, she said It’s frizzle-frizzling all the morning and knock-knocking aw the neght (night).” Journal, 19/3/1772. Defence, 35; Beinecke 40/959, 16. Complaining of affectation in foreign tongues, Boswell has recourse to Scots: “he seemed to be so very a Frenchman, and that too of the priggish style, speaking French as an Englishman who what we in Scotland call knaps (speaks) English.” Journal, 10/4/1772. Defence, 107; Beinecke 40/959, 177. He adds English glosses above the line in a description of his client John Reid’s speech: “He told me he had said to Peter in this very room: ‘Peter mony “many” a lee “lie” I have telt “told” for you which I repent’; and Peter said he would help him to the utmost on this occasion; and he did not think there was much harm in it, as it was to save a man’s life; ‘though it was very wrang “wrong” to swear awa “away” a man’s life.’” Journal, 30/8/1774. Defence, 300; Beinecke 42/983, 127 Journal, 3/2/1776. Boswell clarifies marked dialect speech to display his shock at hearing a direct and colorful image: “Mr. Boswell, rather than agree to that compromise, I would put a pistol to my lug (ear)”. OY, 229; Beinecke 42/991, 164.

338 For Boswell’s attempts to create a dictionary of Scots English, see Pat Rogers, “Boswell and the Scotticism”. Rogers argues that Boswell’s “motives were probably less pure than Johnson’s antiquarian values would indicate” (62) arguing that the impetus of the effort, as with Hume’s list of Scotticisms, was to aid in the elimination of Scots expression in writing. See also Erin Rabie’s argument that Boswell’s motivation in making his Dictionary was an unconscious desire to emulate Johnson, “Identification and Identity”, 57-59. The working draft of Boswell’s dictionary was found in 2008. See James Caudle, “James Boswell (1740-1795) and his Design for a Dictionary of the Scot[t]ish Language, 1764-1825”, for a counterclaim based on the evidence of the manuscript that Boswell’s aim was to “preserve a distinctive language, which he believed to be dying or at least severely endangered and under existential threat, in order that its high and low literature could be read and enjoyed by future generations” (5). See also Susan Rennie “Boswell’s Scottish Dictionary Rediscovered” and “Boswell’s Scottish Dictionary Update” for a narrative of the rediscovery and some preliminary findings.
and so unwilling to present himself speaking Scots or Scottish inflected English, whatever an outsider’s opinion of his success at this might have been. Secondly, he is interested in some of the aural qualities of Johnson’s speech, and sometimes the speech of minor players in his stories, as we can see in the interventions when he makes a general description of how Johnson sounded. But this interest is only occasionally oriented towards the question of his accent. The regional content of Johnson’s speech would be basically absent from the *Life* were it not for a specific descriptive passage with illustrations of the particular values of some of Johnson’s vowels. This interest is strongest when visiting Lichfield with Johnson in 1777 and in London in 1781. Boswell’s presentation of Johnson’s accent relies principally on a single anecdote that Boswell inserts into his general reflection on Lichfield where Garrick imitates Johnson, which is particularly interesting because in addition to being Johnson’s birthplace, Lichfield was where Garrick had been raised.

He expatiated in praise of Lichfield and its inhabitants, who, he said, were “the most sober, decent people in England, the genteelst in proportion to their wealth, and spoke the purest English.” I doubted as to the last article of this eulogy; for they had several provincial sounds; as, *there*, pronounced like *fear*, instead of like *fair*; *once*, pronounced *wone*, instead of *wunse*, or *wunf*. Johnson himself never got entirely free of his provincial accent. Garrick sometimes used to take him off, squeezing a lemon into a punch-bowl, with uncouth gesticulations, looking round the company, and calling out, “Who’s for *poonf*?”

The narration of this information is crucial because its focus is first on Lichfield as a place, fitting in with the general account Boswell gives of the food and the society there, before he makes the small observation about Johnson in the form of a doubly negative qualification: he never entirely got rid of the town’s speech. The Garrick anecdote comes as support for this limited claim, not as a demonstration of Garrick’s own accent, which we must assume he had been more successful than Johnson in eliminating. It is important to appreciate Boswell’s ambivalence towards the description in the light of the massive book he is writing made up for the large part of Johnson’s speech. Obviously, Johnson’s accent is recognisable enough for it to be the focus of Garrick’s repeated mimicry, and to be successfully remembered when Boswell came to revise this section of his Journal for the *Life*. But he also is not interested enough in the modifications of the accent to pursue the changed representation throughout the book in order to make his account of Johnson’s speech conform to his provincial sounds.
Boswell is very keen to be in on the joke (any joke, all jokes), but in this case he is actually restrained enough to limit the comical sound of Johnson’s countrified speech to this one second hand moment. So he is being very deliberate in his management of Johnson’s accent. He wants to note the particularity without having it dominate the way the rest of the text can be read. If we were to apply the modification to the rest of the book, where the moments of Johnson’s saying “once” are unaffected by the statement from so late in the book, the tenor of many of the conversations would be quite different. For instance, consider these instances in which Johnson says once. First in Warton’s reminiscences of a visit to Oxford in 1754:

He much regretted that his first tutor was dead; for whom he seemed to retain the greatest regard. He said, “I woonse had been a whole morning sliding [skating] in Christ-Church Meadow, and missed his lecture in logick. After dinner, he sent for me to his room. I expected a sharp rebuke for my idleness, and went with a beating heart. When we were seated, he told me he had sent for me to drink a glass of wine with him, and to tell me, he was not angry with me for missing his lecture. This was, in fact, a most severe reprimand. Some more of the boys were then sent for, and we spent a very pleasant afternoon.”(1/147)

Talking of his own experiences in his limited time as a poor regional student at Oxford, Johnson would become a figure unaffected by his education, recalcitrant in accent even after the reprimand that is the point of the story. The same shift in register to regional speech would also colour his sallies in literary criticism, making him even more of a down-home fountain of common sense rather than a source of unconventionally contrarian analysis, as for instance when he dismisses Swift’s powers of invention and composition:

I wondered to hear him say of Gulliver’s Travels, ‘When woonse you have thought of big men and little men, it is very easy to do all the rest.’ (1/462)

Or when baiting Garrick about the quality of Shakespeare’s poetry:

Some one mentioned the description of Dover Cliff. JOHNSON. “No, Sir; it should be all precipice,—all vacuum. The crows impede your fall. The diminished appearance of the boats, and other circumstances, are all very good descriptions; but do not impress the mind at woonse with the horrible idea of immense height. […]” (1/317)
In a saw collected by Maxwell, what is presented as a piece of sage wisdom would be reduced to country banality:

“He said, foppery was never cured; it was the bad stamina of the mind, which, like those of the body, were never rectified: *woonse* a coxcomb, and always a coxcomb.”

(1/344)

Similarly, the effect of reproducing the accent described would make grave situations frivolous:

BOSWELL. “But suppose now, Sir, that one of your intimate friends were apprehended for an offence for which he might be hanged.” JOHNSON. “I should do what I could to bail him, and give him any other assistance; but if he were *woonse* fairly hanged, I should not suffer.” (1/321)

Restricting the regional component of Johnson’s speech, then, allows Boswell to control effects in the same way that he uses other narrative techniques to situate it in its preserved abstraction. But this is at the obvious cost of providing a moment-by-moment feeling of the manner and the sound as well as the content. We need to understand this further as a problem of the interaction of scales because, as we have seen, Boswell uses narrative techniques on different scales to provide a feeling of momentary reality and authenticity in the dialogue by variously using habitual utterances, engaging in interruptions, marking tone and emphasis. Indeed, all these techniques whose deployment I have described are the result of specific choices made by Boswell in response to parallel considerations of the authenticity of the moment and the demands of specific impressions and agendas Boswell is hoping to record and pursue. The difference with the consideration of accent is that Boswell is able to compartmentalise it as a constant characteristic element of Johnson’s speech, rather than a fleeting shift in tone, or an emphasis on a particular point. Johnson’s accent, once he has shorn it of all but the two minor regional inflections Boswell notes in the *Life*, is always with him, and thus can be safely ignored in the mass of material in the course of the book’s narration, except in those two moments when it is at the forefront of his mind: the excursion to the place Johnson learned to speak, and Boswell’s personal return to Sheridan’s ideas in 1781, where the motivation is removed, but the imprint of his impression of the accent remains.

But this is all carried out under the shadow of another problem: Boswell’s orthography is itself subject to revision. Boswell hesitated in settling the spellings of Johnson’s particular “there” and “once” and even when these are printed they are constrained in their ability to signify by the fact that Johnson’s own orthographic choices in the *Dictionary* mean that no letter in English has a transparent relationship to a sound. In the initial version, Boswell represents the sounds differently. He adds to
his transcription of “fear” for “fair” by giving “or rather fee ar”\textsuperscript{339}—a clear indication that he is hoping to provide an exact approximation of the sounds in letters, rather than with reference solely to established words, as the final version does.

“Once” is additionally subject to revision between the Journal and the Life, this time in the consonants rather than the vowel sound: Boswell gives “once pronounced woonss, instead of wunnse,” rather than the final version which hews to the standard spelling of the word, that it might be more recognisable. A further addition is the alternative pronunciation “or wonse” as a subsequent acknowledgment of the variability of acceptable Standard English.\textsuperscript{340} These revisions show that at the same time Boswell had faith in the ability of letters to bear the weight of representing nonstandard sounds, but also their instability under this pressure. The finality of print means that there is no evidence of this doubt in Boswell’s published version. Instead, there is confidence where uncertainty and improvisation were a key part of the process. The projected authority of the final version asserts a degree of certainty even when Boswell has superseded his aural impressions in the intervening eighteen years. In an additional assertion of confidence, Boswell removes a parenthetical explanation of Garrick’s imitation of Johnson “(instead of punch)”\textsuperscript{341}

\textsuperscript{339} Journal, 23/3/1776. OY, 291; Beinecke 42/992, 135-6. While the MS is not extant for this section, in the page proofs the description of the pronunciation of “there” is underlined and marked for questioning with a marginal “Qn” which is crossed out in rejection.

\textsuperscript{340} MS 534, Redford, 206, does not have the additional “or wonse”, but it is added some time before the page proofs.

\textsuperscript{341} This change is also effected before the page proofs.
Boswell’s revisions of his general characterisation of Johnson’s accent are matched with a series of three elisions of the accent’s representation in the two weeks following his attendance at Sheridan’s lecture in 1781. Two moments are removed totally in the process of the book’s composition, one for being too intimate, the other potentially too trivial even for Boswell. Firstly, we can find Boswell, drinking again, exhausting either Johnson’s wine supply or his patience:

When done, I asked Doctor if he’d give us any more wine- I have no more wine. But you may have poonch. Mrs. Desmouls made it.”342

In this Journal account, there is no special explanation of the accent, only its presence accounting for itself. The second takes place on an excursion into the street, following Johnson on an errand:

Went to an iron-monger’s near Bolt Court. Sir, will you let me have a small poonch. Saw him chuse one carefully- Then buy a hundred nails.343

To deal with these two instances of “punch” as “poonch”, we ought to see Boswell revelling in the memory of the joke that he has heard Garrick make in taking off Johnson, and which he has recorded five years earlier as having remembered when considering Johnson in his native linguistic context in Lichfield. Curiously, the orthography in the terminal consonant differs from the version he has Garrick perform in the *Life*. The fixity of transcription is always less than it appears, even when Boswell knows what he is about. The final elision of Boswell’s recording Johnson’s accent occurs in a passage describing events from 15 April 1781 that eventually end up in the *Life*, but with the accent removed:

343 Journal, 30/4/1781. Laird, 337; Beinecke 44/1007, 35.
Mrs. Hall and Mrs. Williams were both speaking at once in answer to something that he had said. He grew angry and called out, “Nay, when you both speak at woonce, it is intolerable” (or some such word).\(^{344}\)

Again, in this version of the accent, the terminal consonant is represented differently from either of Boswell’s general descriptions of the Lichfield accent. The removal of the accent shifts the focus of the anecdote, from Johnson himself being frustrated and having a peculiar method of expressing it to a wider comic scene, with which Boswell draws a ludicrous parallel to his favourite play *The Beggar’s Opera*, casting Johnson as Macheath. Removing the accent allows this focus to be unimpeded, but only at the expense of Boswell’s initial experience of the scene. The result for our understanding of Boswell’s practices is that Boswell is forced to make an either/or choice at each of the levels of focus and narration. Accent is a narrative end in and of itself, rather than a constant consideration during Boswell’s narration of other occurrences.

Contrastingly, Boswell also notes a particularity of Johnson’s speech whose origin is not regional. In the meeting at Ashbourne in 1777 after a discussion of “colloquial barbarisms” out of Johnson’s favour, Boswell uses the same technique of modified spelling to represent an aberrance that is explained by Johnson as being the result of a deliberate attempt at consistency:

> I perceived that he pronounced the word *beard*, as if spelt with a double *e*, *beard*, instead of sounding it *berd*, as is most usually done. He said, his reason was, that if it were pronounced *berd*, there would be a single exception from the English pronunciation of the syllable *ear*, and he thought it better not to have that exception.

\(^{(2/171)}\)

That the exchange here is given in indirect speech shows how difficult the transparent reproduction of such moments can be. Boswell is confident in giving a generalised and abstract version of the discussion so that its general and abstract principles are conveyed, but unlike the discussion of “great”

\(^{344}\) Journal, 30/4/1781. Laird, 326; Beinecke, 44/1007, 11.
the subject matter is perhaps too particular to Johnson for direct treatment. We are left with a conception of the book in which the authentic sounds of Johnson’s accent in conversation are removed from the record, and, because of this, the idea of the transcript is forced to remain more completely on a broader scale. Focusing on the content rather than the accent in this sense sanitisises and standardises Johnson’s speech. But the insistence on providing a clean abstract version of Johnson’s speech except when it amuses him is not a bulwark against the inclusion of smaller scales of narrative and perception in Boswell’s account. If Boswell generally eschews the transcription of accents, this is not because he is not interested in the sonic qualities of what he is taking down in his Journal and reproducing in the Life. Boswell uses the opportunities offered by the differences between the perception of these and the understanding of the content of the speech to massage the wider narratives he is constructing. Not only does he pay close attention to tone and volume, as we have seen, but he is also attentive to fugitive sounds below the level of the utterance. The care that Boswell takes with regard to exclamations and onomatopoeia goes beyond the necessary brief indication of sub-linguistic utterances and therefore shows that his practice of it is at least partly devoted to reporting an accurate version of specific sounds to which he was witness over the course of his friendship with Johnson. The rest of this chapter will be devoted to such sounds. I will focus first on Boswell’s interest in Johnson’s laughter as a representation of the thing itself and as a narrative strategy. I will then turn to other sounds, habitual utterances and onomatopoeia in order to consider the extent of Boswell’s commitment to the idea that what might be considered as inarticulate sounds can be incorporated into a text, and what impact he hopes such sounds to have on the quotations of articulate speech in which they make up a part.

Accents and the Particularity of Individual Speech

The typicality of Johnson’s speech in the Life, then, is more consistently represented in his habits of utterance than in his static variation from the norms of Standard English. Boswell’s insistence on the particularity of Johnson’s “Why, Sir”-s supersedes the particularity of his “Woonse”-s because they are more useful in narrative and rhythmic propulsion, allowing the focus to remain on the content it helps, rather than produce the materiality of Johnson’s speech as the constant focus. This is not to say that Boswell ever abandoned the possibilities of aural transcription, though. Boswell’s abiding interest in accent is a persistent feature of his writing in the Journal. Not only was he attracted to incidents where accents were prominent in the lived reality of an interaction, Boswell was also consistently engaged in the problematics of description and recording of accents. In the Journal, we
can see him across the course of his life being amused by the local and typical inflections of speech as well as feeling his way towards ways of representing the specific elements of speech that garners his attention. These constant experiments lead into the ultimate decisions he makes in the Life to represent Johnson’s speech as only occasionally coloured by his midlands accent, and only as specific interventions in the long text.

The most important presence of accent in Boswell’s life is the inescapable difference of Scots English. As we have seen, on the level at which Scots is a sufficiently different language from standard English, Boswell was enthusiastic in typifying and standardising orthography and in making sure meanings and etymologies were clear and correct. As for Scots conversation, Boswell was presented constantly with a dilemma of representation. When his friends, family and colleagues spoke in mixtures of Scots and Scots-inflected standard English, Boswell had always to choose what manner was best to represent this speech in the Journal: the choice was between the smooth and unobstructed representation of the abstract content of the statements and the material representation of the sounds in which those abstract thoughts were expressed. A further consideration for Boswell is that neither of these two approaches is sufficient in itself. While Boswell is always subject to the temptation to represent accented speech as a series of sounds that express something of more peculiar interest in their particular difference from standard speech, he is also exercised by the concern that representing the sounds will reduce the potential for preservation of the sense. This is particularly a concern in representing Scots speech, where he is already worried that whoever would read the Journal in the library at Auchinleck in future generations might not have enough knowledge of the dialect to understand even the standard form of the speech. It is to this end that he often offers a parenthetical gloss of Scots terms, such as when, complicating the matter, he glosses in French when his father claims that Boswell has “nae siller (point d’argent) except by me” in one Journal episode.345 This habit of glossing the speech to preserve the meaning as well as its physical manifestation is not restricted, though, to the gaps between the Standard English of Boswell’s Journal narration and his imagined future reader. After becoming a father, Boswell periodically made concerted efforts to record the doings and sayings of his young children as a special bounty of their inheritance. This was especially true of his efforts with Alexander, his first son, to whom he devoted a separate notebook, but his favourite child Veronica’s speech as a toddler is singled out for particular focus in the main flow of his journals:

345 Journal, 23/3/1777. Extremes, 100; Beinecke 43/996, 45.
In the afternoon I was quite charmed with Veronica. She could now sing a number of tunes: […] It was really extraordinary that a child not three years old should have such a musical memory, and she sang with a sweet voice and fine ear (if that expression be just). She could speak a great many words, but in an imperfect manner “Etti me see u picture.” Let me see your picture. She could not pronounce f. I heed. I’m feared. English I’m afraid. She rubbed my sprained ankle this afternoon with rum, with care and tenderness. With eager affection I cried GOD bless you, my dearest little creature. She answered “Od bess u, Papa.”

Of interest here is the association of music with the demands of representation of the particularities of speech. The hinge between Boswell noting Veronica’s musical talents and her imperfect manner of speaking is obviously illuminating of the association in Boswell’s mind between the aesthetic experience of sound and the goals of writing. Both Steele’s and Sheridan’s methods of representation are implicit in Boswell’s confidence that he can replicate what is interesting to him in Veronica’s interactions with her father. But the shift in modes towards Steele’s ideal of representing speech in score brings out the necessity of interpretation because the raw sound—“Etti me see u picture”—is not enough for Boswell to be confident that he is conveying the sense that he was able to arrive at as a

spectator in the moment. The result is a deliberate diachrony between two possible forms of representation, the score and the content side by side. The sublation of the dialectic between these two is reached by the addition of supplementary information. Just as in the Life Boswell provides an informative key to aid the reader in reconstructing the sound of speech, Boswell intervenes in the temporal flow of his account to provide a technical explanation of the difference between Veronica’s English and the standard version: she cannot pronounce “f.” This is an anticipation of his next moment in which Boswell is forced to offer a staged transition between Veronica’s bodily restricted aberrant speech into Scots diction and then Scots into Standard English, “heed” into “feared” into “afraid”. This intervention allows the third statement “Od bess u Papa” to be presented without explanation as a transcript of its speech. Not only is this last statement simple and recognisable through the phonetic transcription, but Boswell has prepared his readers for it by offering the preceding context that the speech will be non-standard. This is an important point. Boswell, even with the diachronic rupturing of orders of representation in which he co-opts both phonetic and interpretive techniques to convey elements of non-standard speech, still needs to provide narrative context and preparation for the eruption of phonetic representation into his text. This means that the drive to representing accent as experienced brings him away from the abstract rendering of communicative utterance and into a very specific type of spectatorship. Boswell the observer interprets, as we have seen with his narrative interventions with parentheses and italics, on the spot, but he also is aware that the representation of accented speech requires the kind of contextualisation that is necessary for the transmission of jokes. He must prime the reader to expect the aberrant. The result is that his narration of the whole incident is constructed around the dynamics of observation that allow him to know at the same time what is being said and how it is being said. In presenting accents, Boswell turns his act of telling into the narration of his noticing the accent, and it is with his intelligence as an observer of what he assumes are interesting differences in speech that the reader is made to experience the scene.

Sometimes, the impact of this mode of spectatorship of accent is married with Boswell’s emotional reaction to the speaker. In a letter to Temple included in The Applause of the Jury Boswell narrates his disgust when he arrives back in Edinburgh after what would turn out to be his last visit with Johnson, Boswell was particularly struck with his welcome from Blair:

Dr. Blair accosted me with a vile tone, “Hoo did you leave Sawmuel?” What right have I to be so nicely delicate?347

Blair’s overfamiliar and directionless insinuation rankles Boswell, and it is the accent that he uses to illustrate the “vile tone” that Boswell perceives in the question about Boswell’s dying idol, whose name is mangled in Blair’s Scots inflection. Boswell’s subsequent self-interrogation about his reaction: that he is too delicate or sensitive to this kind of slight, only demonstrates that the effect of the sound of the question in Blair’s accent has sunk deep into his experience of the conversation, and that Boswell’s horizons of representation. This happens, too, when Boswell records his father’s part-senile, part-heartless question in October 1774 soon after the death of his son: “Shocking speech from father: ‘And how ca’ they your youngest son?’” There is nothing necessary in the representation of the missed final consonant of call except for the raw emotional impact of the actual observed sound. The emotional experience of being shocked by a rude or ignorant and insensitive question from his father about a delicate topic, like Blair’s bluntness about Johnson, is part of and even the main point of recording the anecdote. Taking down the impression of the accent allows Boswell to metonymically record some of the directness of affront, in these cases, or joy and appreciation in the case of his daughter’s musicality.

The converse of this directness is when Boswell appreciates that accent and dialect do not add to the impression gained from a scene, but are still a veritable fact in and of themselves, and things that Boswell enjoys noticing. While he is on circuit during his frustrating days trying to gain patronage from James Lowther, Lord Lonsdale, describing on these travels a man who he asks for the distances to Clifton and Penrith thus:

“The good civil old man with the Coomberland dialect”

Boswell adopts the accent only for the name of the dialect, making sure to underline the variant vowels within the two words Cumberland and dialect, offering a light-hearted précis of the kinds of modification necessary to imagine Boswell’s experience of the conversation without labouring the point of the difference. This is similar again to Boswell’s attitude in treating Johnson’s accent,

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348 Journal, 25/10/1777. Extremes, 190; Beinecke 43/998, 8.
offering only a couple of key words to present the variation and allowing the mind of the reader to assimilate the necessary changes while reading through the more abstract representation of the thoughts exchanged in the conversation. If it is true that this is Boswell’s preferred mode of representing accent—that is, only when it is either important to the story for some reason of spectatorship, the point of the story itself, and not as a diachronic modifier—then this has important implications for the way in which we can read the Life’s representation of any speech. As I have argued over the course of this thesis, Boswell’s interest in preserving the authentic moments of speech is perturbed by the fact that speech is uttered and observed simultaneously on different scales. The necessary interventions to point out aspects of different scales on the part of the writer transcribing the speech mean that there can be no ultimately authoritative quotation, and that this makes more important the writer’s specific and local generic choices in the narration of the events in which speech takes place. In his journals at least, Boswell has a decided preference to present an abstracted version of speech, with relatively few exceptions where the aberrant nature of a speaker’s mode of utterance intervenes, interrupts and becomes the point of the story comes with an interpretive consequence. We should reevaluate the claim that Boswell’s shifts between scales and genres are as responsive with regard to accent as they are to emphasis and the interruption of speech through tone and actions as I have discussed in the preceding two chapters. The consideration of accent presents us with the insight that Boswell’s goal tends towards the abstract. Moreover, even when he chooses to present variation from the standard speech which he aims at (and had at one time trained with Sheridan and the actor James Love to replicate), Boswell is keen to manage the aberrant material aspect of accented speech carefully so that his record does not tend to inarticulacy. What this means is that the contrary aim, derived from Steele, of presenting speech in score is a wild and generally impractical goal. If we accept that Boswell is trying neither to present a completely aural account of the things he hears, with the exception of when he hopes to convey exceptional moments of interest and emotion, we need to focus on the always preceding interest that the oral transmission of quotations has on the transmission of speech into text.

As we have seen, part of Boswell’s motivation in writing lies in the extension of his prodigious powers of mimicry. In imitating his friends and interlocutors generally, Boswell replicates mannerisms and accent while presenting content. It is unsurprising, then, that many moments of accent-description in his journals actually come as second or third hand imitations in which Boswell takes down someone else performing an anecdote. For instance in 1778, we find Lord Ossory mocking Hume’s accent:
Lord Ossory said he absolutely could not understand Hume sometimes. In France, they saw some gentlemen a-partridge shooting. David said, “They’re fooling.”

The mockery rests on the fact that Hume’s accent is purportedly so strong that it affects his sense, making an unintentional confusion between fool and fowl. Hume becomes the butt of a joke, and in replicating it in his Journal, Boswell adopts Ossory’s imitation of the accent, regardless of whether this is a true event. Importantly, as with the preceding examples, Boswell has to find a way of both representing the fact of the accent and his impression of it. He settles on noting the premise of the joke (Ossory cannot understand Hume through his accent) and adopting the same in-word underlining that he would use for an intentional pun, favouring the variant spelling and offering no explanation. This is a technique that only works locally. In other places where Boswell needs to represent a second hand accent he has recourse to different modes of representation, eschewing the underlining of a long speech in favour of the simple modification of the spelling in this report from a Captain Johnstone, a sailor returned from the East, “speaking such broken English as the Chinese do”:  

He told us a Chinaman at Canton showed him Wilkes’s head in china and said, “He knockifar your King. Your king fooly king. Do so here, cutty head. Inglis no love your king; Cots (Scots) love your king.” It is curious that people at such a distance can understand so much of the minutiae of Britain.

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351 Journal, 9/9/1769. Wife, 303; Beinecke 39/954, 63.
The potential for the modified orthography breaks down when the speech is so different from Standard English that it needs explanation, which comes in the parenthesis and is presumably provided by Boswell, but possibly by the sailor himself. The transmission of this anecdote takes multiple stages, from the sailor talking with a Chinese man, to the sailor retelling his story, to Boswell imagining how it would look in letters, along with any intermediate stages in which Boswell retailed the story to other people as we must imagine he was constantly doing with all the material that ends up in his Journal. The total effect of these stages of agglutination is that there is no overriding event to which this anecdote in its final version might be attached. Boswell’s interest in the forms of Chinese broken English becomes as much the point as the man’s insight into the affairs of the King. But there is no guarantee that this broken English in Boswell’s Journal represents anything in the world, either real broken English as was spoken in China to which Boswell has no direct access, or to the Captain’s version of it. Boswell’s putting down the imitation in score is only an approximation of an approximation, and results in the perplexing “knockifar”, which is unglossed in any of the times it has been reproduced in print.352 It is tempting to think that Boswell himself was unaware of the meaning and was carried away by the enthusiasm with which he habitually greeted the chance to reproduce stories that turn on variant forms of English.

352 Pottle gives no gloss in Wife, 303. See David Clarke, who uses the passage in discussing ceramic representations of Wilkes in his Chinese Art and its Encounter with the World 228 n. 68, where there is no help; likewise Boris Johnson, quoting the passage in his character of Wilkes himself in Johnson’s Life of London, 203, lets the word pass without assistance.
This revelling in non-native speaking varieties of accent is something that turns up in the Life, too. During his time in Europe, Boswell had ample opportunities to be entertained by anecdotes and experiences of amusing accents that were to stay with him for the rest of his life as part of his own repertoire. He finds recourse to one such story as a subsequent reflection on an assertion of Johnson’s in 1776 that vivacity of character can be acquired as a habit and is not therefore an innate personal quality. Boswell cannot resist the temptation to include as an entertaining aside a story told to him by Belle de Zuylen in 1763:

The family likeness of the Garricks was very striking; and Johnson thought that David’s vivacity was not so peculiar to himself as was supposed. “Sir, (said he,) I don’t know but if Peter had cultivated all the arts of gaiety as much as David has done, he might have been as brisk and lively. Depend upon it, Sir, vivacity is much an art, and depends greatly on habit.” I believe there is a good deal of truth in this, notwithstanding a ludicrous story told me by a lady abroad, of a heavy German baron, who had lived much with the young English at Geneva, and was ambitious to be as lively as they; with which view, he, with assiduous exertion, was jumping over the tables and chairs in his lodgings; and when the people of the house ran in and asked, with surprize, what was the matter, he answered, “Sbr apprens ‘etre fij.”

(2/34-5)

The humour lies not only in the ludicrous image of the heavy Baron jumping around in his attempt to learn liveliness, but also in his ludicrously broken French which mangles the j of “je”, hardens the d of “de” to a t, and softens the initial v of “vif”. While this is an example of Boswell’s additive compositional principles, it is equally an example of his lifelong commitment to specific humour based in episodes of mimicry. Again, the information about the accent comes at least at second hand, and Boswell is only able to be a witness to the material form of the words as they are represented by Zélide. Boswell was committed enough to the anecdote to record it separately at least twice. It can be found in the Boswelliana, where it takes a slightly different form, with more direct speech leading up to the punchline:

A dull German baron had got amongst the English at Geneva, and, being highly pleased with their spirit, wanted to imitate them. One day an Englishman came in to the baron’s room, and found him jumping with all his might upon the chairs and down again, so that he was all in a sweat. ‘Mon Dieu! Monsieur le baron,’ dit-il. ‘que faites-vous?’ (‘Good God! baron,’ said he, ‘what are you about?’) ‘Monsieur,’
replied the baron, wiping down his temples with a handkerchief, ‘j’apprens d’être vif’
(‘I am learning to be lively’).353

Remarkably, Boswell does not make any sign of a ludicrous accent in this version of the anecdote, event though it is more embellished with details and conversation. The lack of interest in the accent here, and in Boswell’s initial record of the story, a line in his memorandum for 12 December 1763: “Mark German baron learning d’etre vif”354 where he is also speaking recognisably correct French even in the three words he takes down as a reminder means that there may be something peculiar to the circumstances of the Life that encourages Boswell to transform it into Germanised French.

Certainly, in reciting the story in the intervening years, Boswell may have come to place more importance on the accent of the baron, who in many ways resembles the German I have already noted lauding “Toctor Shonson”, but it is also the case that this embellishment within an embellishment takes place within the section of the text that deals with Boswell and Johnson’s time together in Lichfield, which is, as we have seen, the principal occasion for his excursus on Johnson’s accent. It could be that the proximity of accent within Boswell’s material encourages him to add more vivacity to his favourite old story. Whatever the reason, the modification is striking because it shows Boswell thinking about accent in the Life in terms of suiting his particular genre. As an anecdotal aside, it makes sense that Boswell would want to characterise the German baron in adding the marks of a comical delivery to his French in speech. The constraints of space, and Boswell’s continually vigilant yet unsuccessful attitude to limiting extraneous matter while trying to somehow include it, mean that Boswell is encouraged to include immediately striking information, while for the subject of the monumental work, the consideration of accent, comical or otherwise, is much less imperative.

353 Boswelliana, 220.
354 Journal, 12/11/1763. Holland, 64; Beinecke 37/394, 93.
Taking Down Laughter

While these sporadic considerations of accent fall victim to Boswell’s overriding preference for standardisation, there are other levels of representation at which the specific qualities of a sound might have an impact on how Boswell chooses to write it. Laughter is one such. The representation of laughter is as vexed an issue as the representation of accent for different reasons that are appropriate to its very local scale. Laughter exists as a social and communicative fact as well as a sound in its own right. It is separate from any significance it might have, or any intention with which it might be produced. Boswell reports Johnson himself making a germane comment about its nebulousness:

A writer of deserved eminence being mentioned, Johnson said, “Why, Sir, he is a man of good parts, but being originally poor, he has got a love of mean company and low jocularity; a very bad thing, Sir. To laugh is good, as to talk is good. But you ought no more to think it enough if you laugh, than you are to think it enough if you talk. You may laugh in as many ways as you talk; and surely every way of talking that is practised cannot be esteemed.”

Even though Johnson is here talking about social and content-driven aspects of laughter, the conception of laughter as being as varied as talk should attract our attention. Far more than for the representation of accent, laughter presents a challenge to the practice and the theory of the transcript because it is more multifarious and inchoate than differently inflected speech is. This derives from the fact that laughter exists first as a sound before it is incorporated into language’s fringe, where accents are variations on codified forms of language.

Laughter does not exist entirely outside the realm of signification, however. “Ha!” is actually codified as a word in Johnson’s Dictionary, and assigned a Latin root: “An expression of wonder, surprise, sudden question, or sudden exertion” as well as “An expression of laughter.” For Johnson, it is a word in the sense that it is regular and recognisable, but it also retains a sense of being uncontrolled as a result of the dubious status of the second definition. “Laughter” itself is defined as “Convulsive merriment; an inarticulate expression of sudden merriment”, with the verb being defined as follows: “to make that noise which sudden merriment excites. In poetry, to appear gay, favourable, pleasant or fertile.”

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355 Dictionary, “HA” s.v.
356 Dictionary, “LAUGHTER” s.v.
the exclamation. This sort of exclamation can easily be brought into the realm of the text because it is discrete and signifies something other than itself. “Ha!” alone occurs only once in the book:

Notwithstanding that this “Ha” is removed from its chronological specificity in this anecdote, and that it is the final result of a series of revisions in which Boswell also attempted to represent the expression with both “Ah!” and “Aye!” in its draft stages, it is surely fits the definition as an expression of any one of wonder, surprise, or sudden question.357

But this correspondence does not work so simply for the second meaning. An expression of laughter is also the thing itself. “Ha” is coextensive with the action Johnson defines it as expressing. In this conjunction, we have the central problematic of quotation, and especially of transcription, writ large. In the same way that text represents quoted speech while remaining itself, “ha” expresses laughter while bearing the shape of the sound it represent. This presents a problem for the more attuned ear of a writer such as Boswell, who, as we have seen, is interested in intervening in text in order to represent certain sonic peculiarities, but only when they occur at propitious and significant moments. Boswell’s writerly interventions in the representation of laughter consist of his combinations of multiples of these exclamations in chains that the Dictionary does not describe but which are nevertheless conventional representations of laughter. They express laughter through representing it in rhythmic sets where direct signification becomes redundant. “Ha!” alone intervenes in a sentence to show a specific point in the delivery at which the speaker stops to express a feeling beyond words; multiple chains of “ha”-s, however, work surplus to that kind of signification.

357 MS 176, Waingrow, 226.
The central question when confronted with his representation of laughter is whether Boswell is hoping to describe specific sounds, and if so, what in particular he is hoping to achieve in terms of narrative, factual and generic considerations. That is, with each decision he makes in representing individually insignificant puffs of air, we must see Boswell aligning his text with different generic horizons. Each of these horizons entails a turn away from other possibilities. The inability of the text to simultaneously represent sound on all of the scales at which it could be significant thus enacts the necessarily limiting violence of narrative perspective. Boswell is left with a series of decisions about how to aggregate his fragmented observations rather than the impossible narration of a life. These moments of decision all present the encounter of the event with the limitless possibility of context. Each time, the event fractures on contact with the multiple dispositions of text, ending in the resistant paradox of quotation: the closer to encapsulating the event a text becomes, the further from comprehensibility it becomes. A series of sounds bound only by the antecedent experiences of the auditor-reporter (and the reader his proxy) stands far from Boswell’s stated goals of presenting Johnson’s life through preserving his delightful and instructive statements in their proper places. It is notable that Boswell does not pursue these possibilities in the manner of a Sheridan or a Steele, but remains within the codified realm of semi-signification as defined by Johnson. Part of this is because he uses the mention and description of laughter in the abstract as a narrative tool in order to manage the pace of his transcripts. It is to these interventions that I will turn first before considering the extremely rare instances in which Boswell does actually decide to directly represent laughter in his work.

A concomitant consideration is the punctuation that accompanies laughter. Johnson’s “Ha!” In response to the anecdote about Soame Jennings is a singular instance of an exclamation in a place where Boswell is also quick to ascribe “Oh!”-s, “Ah!”-s and even “Oho!”-s. Each of these is made emphatic by the exclamation mark, which is defined in the *Printer’s Grammar* as “The Sign of Admiration or Exclamation [which] explains itself by its name, and claims a place where Suprize, Astonishment, Rapture, and the like sudden emotions of the mind are expressed, whether upon lamenting, or rejoicing occasions.” This definition does not go in to the particularities of dealing with exclamations in direct speech, but the purposes it gives exist comfortably with Johnson’s first definition of “Ha”. The problem for the second definition, though, remains. The *Printer’s Grammar* gives no help in considering how to punctuate directly represented laughter when it comes in strings. Sudden emotions may be expressed by groups of “Ha”-s, as we shall see, but the specific relationships between them are left to the discretion of the writers brave enough to do it. Boswell is

left with a problem in that to represent laughter he must make very specific choices that can easily affect the tones and rhythms of laughter in ways he might not expect. It is no wonder that Boswell quotes laughter almost as infrequently as he represents Johnson’s accent. He is much more likely to include it as an event fit for narrative intervention.

Where Boswell narrates laughter rather than quoting it, he is as likely to modify the description than not. Most commonly, laughing is done “heartily” (in a total of fourteen instances out of the fifty laughs mentioned in the narration), while there are single instances each of laughing or laughs being done or being “ironically” (1/316), “vociferously” (1/406), “immoderately” (1/423), “sarcastically” (2/209), “a good deal” (2/177), “loud and long” (2/209), “all the time” (1/423), “preparatory” (1/307), “with some complacency” (1/475), “with approbation” (2/246), and in the second edition “with complacent approbation” (Life Second edition, 3/580-1). None of these descriptors is especially aural. Heartiness in laughter describes a tone. While there are descriptions of length and intensity, there is no real sense of the sonic rather than the communicative or transactional qualities of the laughter contained in descriptions such as ironically and sarcastically. The mechanics of his representation of laughter is similarly dispersed. The participle “laughing”, as we have seen in the consideration of parentheses, is most common, accounting for about half of the instances. Within these, it is most likely that Boswell is laughing in the middle of a speech (that is, laughing at his own contribution to the conversation as it develops), closely followed by reactive laughs at the beginning or near-beginning of a speech, with a much smaller likelihood that Johnson will fully endorse his own joke with a stamp of laughter at the end, something that happens a mere four times.

In Johnson’s speech, the two are virtually never combined. We almost never encounter “laughing” and runs of “ha!”-s coinciding to represent the same moment. Boswell never mentions laughter and represents it directly in the way that he can mention that Johnson has said something and then give the precise words he used for it. It is probably not a stretch say that the two modes, indirect authorial narration and the direct graphical representation of the sounds, are equivalent to each other, but not compatible. In conjunction with each other, they would be redundant, but also they would join together two orders of representation that Boswell’s principles of transcription and composition do not allow for. The direct representation of laughter can exist its abstract narrative version, but it is not entirely so similar to speech that it can be simultaneously abstracted and transcribed.

359 Words related to “laugh” can be found modified by “hearty” / “heartily” throughout the book: (1/46), (1/233), (1/246), (1/253), (1/414), (1/494), (2/22), (2/155), (2/223), (2/239), (2/250), (2/256), (2/358), and (2/406).
It is thus in laughter where we can see most distinctly the difference in modes offered by direct and indirect representation of speech. For Boswell, a mention of laughing means that he is stating a fact and bringing into the more abstract dialogue on the page a hint of what is absent from it. But the mention of laughter is hampered by the difficulty of considering its extension and duration. Laughter is a recognisable aspect of the communication of speech. In its invocation in text—and particularly in Boswell’s preferred method of presenting it in the present continuous, cloaked in parentheses—the specific aspects of laughter, take a different form from the other markers of tone which Boswell uses in parenthesis to colour the speech. The important considerations such as whether it intrudes on the speech, is interspersed with it or precedes it, as well as how long a shadow it casts on what is said, always need to be taken into account. Laughter exists at the point of connection between speech and experience since it is simultaneously very easy to abstract from speech as well as being discontinuous with the components of the utterance. The actual physical form of laughter is so similar to words that it can as easily be represented alongside them in their stream. Since the individual moments of laughter take up time, and occupy the apparatus of the speaker for that time, to mention but not include the sounds actually serves to remove information from the transcript. Information about pacing, the particular quality of sounds, the intensity of the mirth and so on are all ignored when the laughter is mentioned only in its abstract form. But the inclusion of the sounds only opens up more problems from the point of view of the transcript. Laughter may well be recognisable, but it is also on the verge of being inchoate, as Derrida has it, “the burst of laughter is the almost-nothing into which meaning sinks, absolutely”.\(^{360}\) In turning the almost-nothing of oral communication into text, the sinking of meaning is turned into a potential vehicle for meaning. Boswell is forced to make the decision between a general and potentially degrading abstract and a set of further and more minute decisions about the form of what he has witnessed. Even when Boswell is presented with recognisable texts to transmit, his ideal of transcription can come undone in the variety of challenges presented by accuracy, memory and minor errors. When the content is taken out, the challenge of both abstraction and transcription is in effect intensified, even though the potential stakes are lower. An abstraction involves the choices and hazards of intrusive cutting and colouring, while transcription involves a series of real choices about the nature of what he has heard, and what he wants his readers to imagine him hearing in which we can see clearly the dispositions of his transcriptional impulse.

\(^{360}\) Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 324.
Neither of Boswell’s biographical rivals produces anything like this in their representations of Johnson’s speech, despite including a generous amount of bons-mots and joviality. Sir John Hawkins only includes three separate incidents involving laughter, and these are all digressions in which he tells an anecdote about a minor figure in the book in the way of giving their character. One occurs in the account he gives of Goldsmith, which is much less forgiving than Boswell’s portrait, and records Goldsmith offering one of his own bon-mots without success before subsequently storming out in a huff:

At the breaking up of an evening at a tavern, he intreated the company to sit down, and told them if they would call for another bottle they should hear one of his bons mots:—they agreed, and he began thus:——‘I was once told that Sheridan the player, in order to improve himself in stage-gestures, had looking-glasses, to the number of ten, hung about his room, and that he practised before them; upon which I said, then there were ten ugly fellows together.’—The company were all silent: he asked why they did not laugh, which they not doing, he, without tasting the wine, left the room in anger.

(Hawkins, 418)

Even if in Goldsmith’s case the laughter of the group is not forthcoming, it is absent in Hawkins’s book, too. The other two anecdotes give little more than the fact of someone laughing generally at a story, and someone joining in the laugh which another story occasioned. So for Hawkins at least, laughter is something to be expected, or lamented in its absence, but not something that requires direct representation of the sort that Boswell occasionally gives it in his own version of Johnson’s life.

Mrs. Thrale’s approach comes slightly closer to Boswell’s. In her Anecdotes, Johnson himself can be found laughing, at least. She gives two past imperfect examples of things he used to laugh at, as well as six instances in which laughter constitutes an event in the story at hand. Some of these are very descriptive. We can find Johnson laughing “very heartily at the recollection of his own insolence” in

361 John A. Vance identifies Boswell’s special commitment to presenting Johnson in the act of laughing, but he does not consider the specific written forms of laughter, “The Laughing Johnson”. Nathaniel Norman has recently read Johnson’s persistent laughter as a resistance to Boswell’s biographical project, that is, something that persists beyond his efforts to control the representation. Again, Norman leaves aside the particularity of each peal of laughter, “Organic Tensions: Putting the Tracings Back on the Map in Boswell’s Life of Samuel Johnson”. 
the sliding episode at Oxford (29); “with obstreperous violence” when critiquing Swift (81); and talks about him laughing “most unmercifully” at Shenstone (264). Additionally, Thrale gives instances of laughter as a reaction to Johnson’s statements as a guarantee of the interest in the anecdote: “It was impossible not to laugh when” (239); “Mr. Johnson made us all laugh one day…” (41); and as part of the transaction of the *bon-mot* which influence Johnson to force his point: “seeing me disposed to laugh” (45); “seeing us all laugh” (210); “seeing me laugh most violently” (280). All of these mark laughter as a point in the narrative, and not necessarily an end-point. While they include occasional modifiers to convey a sense of the significance of the sound of the laughter in its social setting, there is nothing to indicate specific qualities of the sounds. Mrs. Thrale does give a general description, though, of Johnson’s laughter:

> He used to say, “that the size of a man’s understanding might always be justly measured by his mirth;” and his own was never contemptible. He would laugh at a stroke of genuine humour, or sudden fulness of odd absurdity, as heartily and freely as I ever yet saw any man; and though the jest was often such as few felt besides himself, yet his laugh was irresistible, and was observed immediately to produce that of the company, not merely from the notion that it was proper to laugh when he did, but purely out of want of power to forbear it.

(Thrale *Anecdotes*, 228-9)

But again, this is a description of conditions and social effects of Johnson’s laughter, more than it is of its particular qualities. “Heartily” and “freely” are never more intense as descriptors as the ones Thrale uses to describe particular outbursts. The focus of her generalised narration here attaches itself to proprieties and the spectacle of laughter rather than laughter’s material elements. It is not marked for its own interior properties, nor is it assumed that these could be significant.

If Hawkins and Thrale shied away or thought it unnecessary to represent the actual sounds, of laughter, Boswell’s sporadic efforts to do so should invite our attention. It is not only important in the simple fact that he includes graphical representation of such ephemeral and insignificant sounds.
Boswell also makes minute adjustments to his own transcriptions of laughter between the versions of it he puts down in his journals and the final representations in the Life. These could be significant, but they could also be mere peculiarities of the process by which the book was composed. As such, it constitutes an aporia of the kind that we encounter whenever we consider such minute changes and discrepancies in the work. We must always consider the possibility that Boswell found the change important, and that its impact is consistent with how he intended the rest of the text, even while we cannot dismiss the potential for these moments to be insignificant and accidental. We can find Johnson laughing while dismissing the achievements of Scottish learning:

> His prejudice against Scotland appeared remarkably strong at this time. When I talked of our advancement in literature, “Sir, (said he,) you have learnt a little from us, and you think yourselves very great men. Hume would never have written History, had not Voltaire written it before him. He is an echo of Voltaire.” Boswell. “But, Sir, we have Lord Kames.” Johnson. “You have Lord Kames. Keep him; ha, ha, ha! We don’t envy you him. Do you ever see Dr. Robertson?” Boswell. “Yes, Sir.”

(1/301)

The version of this in the Journal account differs slightly but intriguingly, in that in the first version Boswell wrote, each individual “ha” has its own exclamation mark.362

This minor revision makes Johnson genial rather than violent as the forcefulness of the three distinct exclamations is shaped into the thrumming triplet of the final version. This interpretation is compounded by the fact that in the manuscript version, the laughter is unpunctuated apart from a full stop. The revision to the semicolon and exclamation mark happens some time before the page proofs.

That Boswell feels the need to make this double revision shows that while his attention is focused on managing the detail of the sounds at this very minute level where the specific sounds of the two alternatives can have an impact on the more general tone of the whole anecdote, the process is haphazard and subject to the vagaries of the process or transcription and printing. The same processes of representation occur in the other moment of the book where Johnson’s laughter is directly represented, where he gets worked up in response to hearing Bennet Langton has made his will in a passage I have already analysed for the shifts in its parenthetical stage directions:

I have known him at times exceedingly diverted at what seemed to others a very small sport. He now laughed immoderately, without any reason that we could perceive, at our friend’s making his will; called him the testator, and added, “I dare say, he thinks he has done a mighty thing. He won’t stay till he gets home to his feast in the country, to produce this wonderful deed: he’ll call up the landlord of the first inn on the road; and, after a suitable preface upon mortality and the uncertainty of life, will tell him that he should not delay making his will; and here, Sir, will he say, is my will, which I have just made, with the assistance of one of the ablest lawyers in the kingdom; and he will read it to him (laughing all the time). He believes he has made this will; but he did not make it: you, Chambers, made it for him. I trust you have had more conscience than to make him say, ‘being of sound understanding,’ ha, ha, ha! I hope he has left me a legacy. I’d have his will turned into verse, like a ballad.”

(1/423)

In this example a similar process occurs, but from the other direction. The exclamation mark where it has not been put it in either his initial account or the manuscript.363

363 Journal, 10/5/1773. Defence, 197 (giving Life MS); Beineke 40/961, 23 (J 29). MS 418, Redford, 115.
This passage is much shaped, too, since Boswell removes his own reaction to Johnson’s outburst, in which he intensifies and encourages Johnson’s merriment. But the addition of the emphasis regularises the laughter, giving it the same outward form as the laughter at his own joke about Lord Kames.

Johnson, is not, though, the only person to be represented laughing in the Life. We can also find Wilkes laughing at his own joke in an isolated section in the first encounter Boswell orchestrates between him and Johnson:

> Mr. Wilkes remarked, that “among all the bold flights of Shakspeare’s imagination, the boldest was making Birnam-wood march to Dunfinane; creating a wood where there never was a shrub; a wood in Scotland! ha! ha! ha!”

(2/85)

In addition to this, Garrick finishes off the conversation of 9 April 1778 laughing at his own triumph over an aggrieved playwright he had rejected:
In both these instances, the laughter is represented with the same punctuation as can be found in the Journal version of Johnson’s laughter about Lord Kames, rather than the version Boswell settled on for the *Life*. In both, too, the effect that I adduced for the initial version remains: both Garrick and Wilkes laugh forcefully. The pressure of the exclamation marks on each syllable forces the laughter into the realm of jaunty cruelty as opposed to urbane pleasantries. Wilkes’s laughter is directed at the conjunction of Shakespeare criticism and the familiar problem that English observers, Johnson especially, have with Scotland’s vegetation. The outburst of sounds allows the scene to progress nicely to the rapprochement between Wilkes and Johnson, fittingly over the question of Boswell and his national origin. But the laughter is not as harsh as it might have been. The comment and its resulting laughter are late additions. In the Revises, Wilkes’s punchline on Scotland is followed by three exclamation marks before the laughter, and Boswell only refined the expression at the last moment, crossing out the second and third. Garrick’s laughter, on the other hand, caps off a long discussion about the interplay between interpersonal manners and individual taste and judgment, and his triumph allows him the final word in exchange in which Boswell has saved him from Johnson’s display of his own tact. The triumph is in effect double: over Hawkins the dud playwright, and Johnson, who has demonstrated himself to be the more tactful critic. Importantly, both of Johnson’s direct outbursts of laughter occur within his speeches, while Garrick’s and Wilkes’s are uncontained by the addition of more content. In this sense they are ungenerative in the way that Johnson’s genial laughter is. But the question remains as to whether the coincidence of these two representations of laughter can be significant when read in distinction to the two instances of Johnson’s more genial laughter. We are forced into a position of considering whether it is too forceful to view these only

364 Journal, 15/5/1776. *OY*, 349 (giving *Life* MS) does not include this passage; the laughter and its cause are also absent from their place in the conversation on Beinecke 43/994, 31. Bonnell describes the action of removing the exclamation marks as the derision being “slightly moderated.”
marginal differences as marking at once a textual difference in signification and a potential historical difference in the sounds and effects of laughter.

It may be helpful to seek to answer this question by considering two points where Boswell reduces the impact of the material element of laughter between his journals and the Life. Firstly, a speech too personal for inclusion in the Life shows Johnson laughing immoderately at Boswell’s expense:

JOHNSON. “You did right, Sir. To take it and burn it would have been destroying a deed. We should have you hanged, ha! ha! ha! No. You would not have been hanged, but you might have been whipped or transported, ha! ha! ha!...”\(^{365}\)

This is from a passage in which Johnson and Boswell discuss Boswell’s chieffest concern during this period: his conflict with his father about the specific form of inheritance that they would adopt in an entail on their land. The very personal conversation extends over some pages and it is unsurprising that Boswell was reticent enough to keep it out of the Life. We can only speculate as to whether he would have regularised the laughter had he put it in. But it is instructive to see that in this episode, Johnson’s laughter is given the form that it takes in the other episodes: he clearly has a preferred method of putting laughter into his journals which extends further than Johnson. It is also another instance of the direct laughter taking place within Johnson’s speech rather than as the end of the statement, which is what happens at the other point of repression:

We talked of sounds. The General said, there was no beauty in a simple sound but only in a harmonious composition of sounds. I presumed to differ from this opinion, and mentioned the soft and sweet sound of a fine woman’s voice. Johnson. “No, Sir, if a serpent or a toad uttered it, you would think it ugly.” Boswell. “So you would think, Sir, were a beautiful tune to be uttered by one of those animals.” Johnson. “No, Sir, it would be admired. We have seen fine fiddlers whom we liked as little as toads,” (laughing).

(1/379)

This parenthetical mention of laughter conceals a direct representation in the Journal:

\(^{365}\) Journal, 21/3/1772. Defence, 53; Beinecke 40/959, 54-5.
BOSWELL. “So you would think, Sir, were a fine tune to be uttered by one of those animals.” JOHNSON. “No, Sir, you’d say ‘twas well. We’ve seen fine fiddlers whom we liked ill as toads, ha! ha! ha!”366

It may well be that the anecdote simply does not have enough humour in it to warrant the direct representation of the laughter. In which case, the four instances already discussed take on a minute significance with regard to their methods of transcription. Since only these moments are presented as being worthy of the direct representation, their differences should also be significant. But then, we are left with the problem of the laughter hidden by abstraction: the question of what is repressed of the specific sound of the laughter in the dozens of moments when Boswell marks laughter rather than sounds. This specific kind of silence, a preference for narratorial rhythm over the presentation of historical sounds, is the same sort of silence that surrounds the habitually accented speech of Johnson in a work that is not averse to the representation of accents: it is a silence that takes place on the same scale of representation as the text and thus creates an ironic gap even in the smallest areas of the text. It is not just the difference between large observable events and their presentation that Boswell is forced to grapple with in making a transcription. He also has to make serial interventions whenever he thinks about semi-significant sounds such as laughter. At the other extreme of representation—the abstract description—we also have to come to terms with habitual sounds. Just as Boswell intervenes with a general description of Johnson’s accent when he is motivated by the specific demands of the text, he also gives abstracted descriptions of Johnson’s laughter that engage with the specific sonic qualities of the laughter. These are given in a way that neither his narratorial abstract interventions to mention laughter nor his specific direct representations can. When laughter becomes the central aspect of the story, its sounds bear more importance than when they are included in direct contact with significant speech:

This is expert narration that takes great interest in the materiality of the laughter and its interaction with the uncontrolled movements of Johnson’s body and the cityscape he opens out into. It is only here where the heartiness, the vociferousness and the loudness of Johnson’s laughter as it is elsewhere described, is allowed to occupy the full focus of Boswell’s representation. This is the result not only of the absence of accompanying speech, but also of the shift in scale that Boswell makes in following Johnson out into the streets, and having the sounds resound through the benighted city. But if this consideration of how Johnson laughed gains its dimensions from its particular narrative moment, Boswell is still concerned with Johnson’s laughter in its abstract dimensions.

His fullest consideration of the qualities of the laugh comes as an addendum to the lack of any remnant of conversation for 17 May 1775:

I passed many hours with him on the 17th, of which I find all my memorial is, “much laughing.” It would seem he had that day been in a humour for jocularity and merriment, and upon such occasions I never knew a man laugh more heartily. We may suppose, that the high relish of a state so different from his habitual gloom, produced more than ordinary exertions of that distinguishing faculty of man, which has puzzled philosophers so much to explain. Johnson’s laugh was as remarkable as any circumstance in his manner. It was a kind of good humoured growl. Tom Davies described it drolly enough: “He laughs like a rhinoceros.”

There are two considerations here. The first is that Boswell sees laughter as an important and remarkable part of Johnson’s demeanour because it is unexpected from the perspective of his towering moral reputation. Additionally, the general description, like the general description of accent comes only as a serendipitous result of a local effect: since Boswell has little to go on other than the note “much laughing” he is inspired to give detail at a more general level than he would have given
had there been more information to work up.367 The process of this passage’s composition was, indeed, messy. Boswell cancelled and reinstated the earliest version of the paragraph up to “so much to explain”. After reinstating this passage (but continuing the removal of a passage in which Johnson disparages David Garrick’s abilities at Latin), Boswell adds the final comments in two marginal notes, trialling “thing” for “circumstance”, adding “kind of” above the line and starting the description of Davies’s statement as “used to” before settling immediately after on “described”. The rhinoceros comment runs right to the extreme margins of the page.368 The second consideration is the bleeding of metaphor into Davies’s simile. In thinking of the laugh as a good humoured growl, Boswell is made to think of the apt image provided to him by another hand and so adds it as a culmination of his own comparison. It remains to be seen whether a rhinoceros has a good humoured growl. There is a certain possibility that Davies had heard a rhinoceros (possibly the celebrated Clara whose stay in London in ended in her death in 1758)369 or the rhinoceros mentioned as being in London in John Hill’s History of Animals, even if that author had not heard it laughing. Pennant tells of rhinoceroses that they have “no voice, only a sort of snorting, which was observed in females, anxious for their young,” while Johnson’s friend Oliver Goldsmith relates a second hand account of a captive rhinoceros from 1739: “it had a peculiar cry, somewhat a mixture between the grunting of a hog, and the bellowing of a calf.”370 Such disparate accounts of the sound only make the simile more perplexing, rather than dry, as Boswell describes Davies’s observation. The key question is why Boswell reproduces this as a general description when the comparison is so unfamiliar. It seems that both extremes of the dichotomy between direct and figurative representation, laughter eludes description.

367 This note does not survive.
368 MS 493, Redford, 169.
369 The story of Clara is told in Glynis Ridley, Clara’s Grand Tour. See 192-3 for Ridley’s confident assertion that Davies must have seen Clara shortly before her death. Johnson himself observed a rhinoceros in the menagerie at Versailles in 1775, as recorded in the travel diary Boswell reproduces. No mention is made of its sound: “Rhinoceros. The horn broken, and pared away which I suppose will grow. The basis I think four inches cross. The skin folds like loose cloth doubled, over his body, and cross his hips, a vast animal though young, as big perhaps as four Oxen.” (1/506) For a more general overview of the importance of the rhinoceros to Eighteenth-Century conceptions of knowledge caught, like Boswell, between classical models and personal experience, see Craig Hanson, “Reconsidering the Rhinoceros” especially at 561, where he notes that whatever the significance of Johnson laughing like a rhinoceros, it demonstrates a change in perception of the animal from ferocious to good-humored and gentle that has come about through experience.
Onomatopoeia, the Singular and the Personal

Even when Boswell is trying to make laughter and accent particularly representative, they are both able to resist their direct transcription. Similarly, the notation of the specificity of modes of speech is also a troubled focus for Boswell’s account. The first section of this chapter shows that the representation of accents through the transformation of orthography from the standard conventions of arbitrary historical spelling to the phonetic can be used to demonstrate particular ways in which speech can be particular to a person, even if this is only to denote the ways in which they conventionally typify a regional speech. But even within this consideration there is another layer in which people are seen to take on and eschew different styles of speech throughout their life, so the bare factual element of accents represented phonoetically always requires the deliberate curation and contextualisation of the author. As we have seen, even when this has happened there is always the conflict between two varieties of figure and ground: the usual practice of the culture versus the practice of the individual, and the usual practice of the individual versus the particular instance in quoted speech. This irreducible conjunction happens too in the representation of laughter: the presence of laughter in a statement forces upon Boswell as observer-writer a series of choices in what to represent and how, with an ever-present tension subsisting in the interplay between the preceding conventions of denoting with letters sounds that are recognisably laughter. The resultant impulse is to assert that even if the particulars of laughter are in themselves inarticulate, they can be important to the progression of a narrative or as specific biographical data.

We are left with a version of the central enigma that drives biography as a genre: what was a person like? In this case, the answer comes from the manner of their speech. The potential of being able to answer what a person spoke like is only ever partial, but it is the animating force of Boswell’s work, and the site of his most epistemologically vexed undertakings. The assumption that the habits of speech can lead to the understanding of a person, or that what is typically individual to person can be conveyed through their habitual utterances has already been canvassed in the first chapter, though in a different light. Here, I wish to follow through on the two lines of thought that I have developed with regard to accent and laughter. In light of the consideration that Boswell’s rare excurses on Johnson’s accent take the form of decisive interventions as part of explanations of the larger scale rather than representing a constant commitment to the transcription of the sounds of Johnson’s speech as he heard it, we need to account for the role of what we might call the typical aberration in Boswell’s version of speech.
We can see the typical aberration most clearly with reference to other figures in the Life. Goldsmith and Garrick are both frequently present and engaging in conversation with Johnson, and their vivacity in these conversations is the result of deliberate gestures from Boswell in representing the characteristics of their speech through aberrant exclamations. Garrick for instance, has a monopoly on “eh” in the book:\footnote{371}

Nor could he patiently endure to hear—that such respect as he thought due only to higher intellectual qualities, should be bestowed on men of slighter, though perhaps more amusing talents. I told him, that one morning, when I went to breakfast with Garrick, who was very vain of his intimacy with Lord Camden, he accosted me thus:—“Pray now, did you?—did you meet a little lawyer turning the corner, eh?”—“No, Sir (said I). Pray what do you mean by the question?”—“Why, (replied Garrick, with an affected indifference, yet as if standing on tip-toe,) Lord Camden has this moment left me. We have had a long walk together.” Johnson. “Well, Sir, Garrick talked very properly. Lord Camden was a little lawyer to be associating so familiarly with a player.”

\footnote{372}{MS Papers Apart; Beinecke (M 145) 56/1184, 622, Bonnell, 226. A second-hand version of the particularity of Garrick’s speech is given at 1/273, where Samuel Foote is described imitating Garrick’s “usual aw-aw way of speaking”.

In this passage, Boswell is quoting, and most likely mimicking, Garrick for Johnson’s benefit. The mimicry inherent in the retailing of the anecdote allows Boswell to aggregate Garrick’s habits, and add the interrogative sound to ramp up the comic effect of the celebrated actor caring about Boswell’s perception of the company he keeps. In the draft of this passage, which is itself an addition to Boswell’s record in his Journal, written as a paper apart, Boswell adds the “eh?” as an afterthought as, it might seem, an anchor or guarantee of the typicality of Garrick in this anecdote.
This performative retailing of Garrick’s expansive character can be found, too, in the passage where his laughter is represented above, in which he brings up the subject of Epigrams and is surprised by Johnson’s response:

> **Garrick.** “Of all the translations that ever were attempted, I think Elphinston’s Martial the most extraordinary. He consulted me upon it, who am a little of an epigrammatist myself you know. I told him freely, ‘You don’t seem to have that turn.’ I asked him if he was serious; and finding he was, I advised him against publishing. Why his translation is more difficult to understand than the original. I thought him a man of some talents; but he seems crazy in this.” **Johnson.** “Sir, you have done what I had not courage to do. But he did not ask my advice, and I did not force it upon him to make him angry with me.” **Garrick.** “But as a friend, Sir—” **Johnson.** “Why such a friend as I am with him—no.” **Garrick.** “But if you see a friend going to tumble over a precipice?” **Johnson.** “That is an extravagant cafe, Sir. You are sure a friend will thank you for hindering him from tumbling over a precipice: but, in the other cafe, I should hurt his vanity, and do him no good. He would not take my advice. His brother-in-law, Strahan, sent him a subscription of fifty pounds, and said he would send him fifty more, if he would not publish.” **Garrick.** “What! eh! is Strahan a good judge of an Epigram? Is not he rather an obtuse man, eh?”

(2/207-8)\(^{373}\)

Neither of these interjections is to be found in the Journal account of this scene, which is moreover more verbose. In composing the draft, Boswell transcribes the original “What is Strahan a good judge of an Epigram? I think as obtuse a man as I have seen—” with the additional sounds even before he changes the phrasing to its interrogative final version.

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\(^{373}\) *Journal, 9/4/1778. Extremes, 258; Beinecke 43/999, 36. MS 661, Bonnell, 185.*
The same strategy of reinforcing the question with the interrogative “eh” is used in combination with the exclamation to sandwich the question with surprise and indignation, making Garrick’s building discombobulation understandable:

Garrick. “Yes, I know enough of that. There was a reverend gentleman (Mr. Hawkins) who wrote a tragedy, the siege of something, which I refused.” Harris. “So the siege was raised.” Johnson. “Aye, he came to me and complained; and told me, that Garrick said his play was wrong in the concoction. Now, what is the concoction of a play?” (Here Garrick started, and twisted himself, and seemed sorely vexed; for Johnson told me he believed the story was true.) Garrick. “I—l—l—said first concoction. Johnson. (smiling) “Well, he left out first. And Rich, he said, refused him in false English: he could shew it under his hand.”

(2/208)

The stuttering here is unique in the book, and exists on the very borders of the representation of specific moments and convention. It is a ludicrously petty consideration to think whether Garrick’s stutter in the moment might empirically have been three discrete attempts at saying “I”, or whether the idea of stuttering is familiar enough that this representation can exist as a shorthand for nebulous speech in the manner that cascades of “Ha”-s might, but the dynamics of Boswell’s shifting focuses on different levels of detail in speech require us to at least consider the possibility that he intends to convey actual sounds as he heard them. This is compounded by the fact that all three aural points in this passage leading up to Garrick’s laughter are additions that happened at the manuscript stage of the book. The stuttering replaces a parenthesis in Johnson’s speech: “(Garrick plagued wt. this For twas true, & he said first concoction Johns he left out first)”.374 In the manuscript, the stutter is confidently rendered.

The whole display of his being plagued is made literal out of the parenthesis, with the added emphasis of italics. This is the same for both of the “eh”-s, which are added, and attached to the alternate version Boswell adds for the question. We are left with the difficulty of determining whether Boswell’s later memory of the vivid episode supersedes his weaker version of it from his journals, or he feels confident enough that he is impregnated with Garrick’s aether as well as he is with Johnson’s to add these characterising flourishes to the speech. A similar dynamic emerges where perhaps the most perplexing of Garrick’s “eh”-s is deployed:

Goldsmith, to divert the tedious minutes, strutted about, bragging of his drees, and I believe was seriously vain of it, for his mind was wonderfully prone to such impressions. “Come, come, (said Garrick,) talk no more of that. You are, perhaps, the worst—eh, eh!”—Goldsmith was eagerly attempting to interrupt him, when Garrick went on, laughing ironically, “Nay, you will always look like a gentleman; but I am talking of being well or ill dreed.”

(1/316)

This time the impetus for the exclamations is Garrick’s desire not to be interrupted, and the exclamation is reduplicated. The outburst has a curious textual history. In the first edition, the exclamation is given confidently as “eh, eh!”—a certain combination that encodes involuntary force, a cascade of sound objecting to Goldsmith. In the second edition, a space is added and the exclamation mark retained.375

But the version in subsequent editions makes Garrick more deliberate in his objection, intensifying the complaint about Goldsmith’s vanity. The two options of punctuation, whether or not there is a compositor’s error that went undetected through two stages of proofs give two very singular possibilities for this singular moment. The impasse cannot, be resolved by simple recourse to the original material, however, as this is different again. In the Journal, the exclamation is entirely unpunctuated, though it is certainly a part of Boswell’s account.

The shapes of the letters, too, are ambiguous. While the editors of the Journal give the manuscript version with the letters as “eh”, which makes them conform to the Life, the exclamation in the Journal could just as easily be “ah ah” or “oh oh”. This raises the possibility that Boswell made a choice in the intervening stages to regularise Garrick’s extralinguistic sounds, making them conform to each other. Whatever the situation, the episode demonstrates the fragility of the claim to authenticity when it is viewed on such a small scale and without the benefit of fixed rules for the representation of simply aberrant sounds.

Goldsmith has a singular instance of a typical aberration, which is much more regular than Garrick’s as it is actually a word defined by Johnson’s Dictionary:

> When accompanying two beautiful young ladies with their mother on a tour in France, he was seriously angry that more attention was paid to them than to him; and once at the exhibition of the Fantocini, in London, when those who sat next him observed with what dexterity a puppet was made to toss a pike, he could not bear that it should have such praise, and exclaimed with some warmth, “Pshaw! I can do it better myself.”

(1/224)

“Pshaw”, according to Johnson, is “An expression of contempt”. Since this is the only use of it in the book it is tempting to adduce a determination on Boswell’s part to reserve it for Goldsmith, who is so often showing self-interested contempt. While it is just as likely not, the word is a phantom in the process of composition. In the initial version, an addition to this large digression on Goldsmith’s character, Goldsmith’s outburst is introduced with the much more sedate and interchangeable “Why!” What is important to consider here is the interplay between the realms of semi-articulate sounds determined in advance to convey certain emotions and the more diffuse sounds such as “eh” that exist on the hinge between signification and nonsense. If at least for Garrick and not Goldsmith,

376 Dictionary, PSHAW s.v.
377 MS Papers Apart; Beinecke (M 145) 55/1167, 239, Waingrow, 286.
there is something characteristic about these liminal articulations, Johnson’s own habits of almost-
speech are much more roundly explored, and with a similar level of indeterminacy about their
mixture of intentional utterance and the bodily habits of the biographical subject. While Johnson can
be frequently exclaiming “O!” as a beginning of a vocative phrase, like other speakers, he is most
distinctive when he is dismissing a statement or a person with “Poh”, as when Johnson works himself
up into a fury when Boswell is laying the groundwork for the ambush dinner with John Wilkes:

Boswell. “I beg your pardon, Sir, for wishing
to prevent you from meeting people whom you might not like. Perhaps
he may have some of what he calls his patriotick friends with him.” Johnson.
“ Well, Sir, and what then? What care I for his patriotick friends? Poh!”
Boswell. “I should not be surprized to find Jack Wilkes there.” Johnson.
“And if Jack Wilkes should be there, what is that to me, Sir? My dear
friend, let us have no more of this. I am sorry to be angry with you; but
really it is treating me strangely to talk to me as if I could not meet any
company whatever, occasionally.”

This is a passage with no available textual history, so it serves as a good road into considering the
sonic impact of the exclamation, which takes place as a puff of air coming outward from the mouth,
the result of exercise without more to say. The consideration of breath is so important that it comes
into the descriptions too:

“I do not like to take an
emetick, (said Taylor,) for fear of breaking some small vessels.”—“Poh!
(said Johnson) if you have so many things that will break, you had better
break your neck at once, and there’s an end on’t. You will break no small
vessels.” (blowing with high derision).

There is some doubt about the history of this exclamation, as the second half of the word has fallen
off the edge of the page in the initial Journal account, which was used directly as printing copy.
The editors of the trade edition of the Journal fill out the word to make it “Pooh!” while in the scholarly edition of the Manuscript of the Life it is extrapolated to follow the final version as “Poh!”

This crux (or error on the part of one set of editors) is in itself instructive, because it shows the ease with which these sounds can be made to conform to different editorial expectations. If, with the Journal editors, we read “Pooh”, Johnson’s exclamation is a variant that is subsequently edited into the same conformity that Boswell gives it in the rest of the book. If not, Boswell is already conforming to a self-imposed convention that not even his sympathetic editors can usefully predict.

More usefully, it is worth noting the conjunction here between the initial exclamation as an inauguration for Johnson’s dismissal of Taylor’s doubts, which is then extended in the abstract form of the parenthesis, where the highly derisive blowing might just echo the extended vowel sound in the exclamation. But the nature of the transcription of these ephemeral sounds is that whatever modification and description they are given, there is not enough in the sphere of articulated differences to come to a positive determination of the sound that is being represented. In the Journal, Boswell does actually differ in his representation of “Poh” and similar sounds. See for instance this exchange too personal again for the Life:

Spoke of my drinking water. Said it was probably malignancy in those who asked me to drink wine. I said only objection was I did not know myself now I was so happy. I had not that gloom which was part of my character. JOHNSON. Po Po I won’t sit to hear such nonsense.

Omitting the final H-s of the exclamation is understandable when considering the constraints of Boswell’s journalising, which here has him squash the exclamations into the third line of a marginal addition, but the effects on the sound must be considered. Boswell could just as well be signifying a lighter more staccato sound, unburdened with the further aspiration of his preferred spelling, or he could be being lazy. The point is that the technology of alphabetic transcription does not allow him enough leeway to be entirely clear of either possibility. The determination is left to his readers. The conventional punctuation is also missing here, and has a similar effect to the omission of the H-s. This

379 Bonnell, 99, follows the first edition.
is a difference that can be found at one point in the *Life* too, at the Thrales’s in Grosvenor Square in March 1781 where the Johnsonian sound is given to his acolyte:

He also disapproved of bishops going to routs, at least of their staying at them longer than their presence commanded respect. He mentioned a particular bishop. “Poh (said Mrs. Thrale) the Bishop of ——— is never minded at a rout.” Boswell. “When a Bishop places himself in a situation where he has no distinct character, and is of no consequence, he degrades the dignity of his order.” Johnson. “Mr. Boswell, Madam, has said it as correctly as could be.”

(2/374)

In the Journal version, Mrs. Thrale’s exclamation mark is present, although it is squashed enough to resemble a colon.

It disappears in the transition to manuscript, and goes undetected in the Revises and first edition.  

Modern editions follow the Second Edition and supply the mark, but again, the fact that Boswell and his many editors can have different opinions at different times about the inclusion of an excluded mark shows that the order of representation of these extra-linguistic sounds can accommodate any number of variations from standard representations. The consequence is that the dream of perfect preservation is lost in the multiple possibilities of text pressed into the extremes of representation.

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381 Journal, 28/3/1781. Laird, 296; Beinecke 44/1006, 19. MS 808.
The reverse dynamic of additive punctuation can be found when Boswell and Johnson take the Harwich coach and encounter the other passengers:

On Friday, August 5, we set out early in the morning in the Harwich stage coach. A fat elderly gentlewoman, and a young Dutchman, seemed the most inclined among us to conversation. At the inn where we dined, the gentlewoman said that she had done her best to educate her children; and, particularly, that she had never suffered them to be a moment idle. Johnson. “If wish, Madam, you would educate me too; for I have been an idle fellow all my life.” “I am sure, Sir, (said she) you have not been idle.” Johnson: “Nay, Madam, it is very true; and that gentleman there (pointing to me,) has been idle. He was idle at Edinburgh. His father sent him to Glasgow, where he continued to be idle. He then came to London, where he has been very idle; and now he is going to Utrecht, where he will be as idle as ever.” I asked him privately how he could expose me so. Johnson. “Poh, poh! (said he) they knew nothing about you, and will think of it no more.”

(1/253-4)

Again, in this private moment, Johnson uses “Poh” to nonchalantly dismiss Boswell’s complaint. But the forcefulness of the exclamation mark is absent from the manuscript of the Life, along with the comma.383

Either at the compositing stage, or in the first Revises, the punctuation has been supplied, making Johnson more emphatic in dismissing Boswell’s concern and offence about the interaction in the coach. That Boswell recovers enough to include the joke in the book, suggests that the admonition worked, no matter how forcefully its accompanying inarticulate sounds were delivered. Yet again, though, the nature of the representation of these sounds means that the doubt that can be drawn from the discrepancies between the versions cannot lead to a final determination of the historical fact of Boswell’s impressions of what sounds Johnson was making at the time. This is compounded by the

383 Journal, 5/8/1763. LJ, 301 (giving Life MS as this section of the Journal is lost). MS 286, Waingrow, 236.
fact that in punctuation, Boswell does not settle on a final form. Where in 1763, Johnson is given a comma and an exclamation mark, on 20 April 1781, he has two exclamation marks:

Somebody mentioned Mr. Thomas Hollis, the strenuous Whig, who used to send over Europe presents of democratical books, with their boards stamped with daggers and caps of liberty. Mrs. Carter said, “He was a bad man. He used to talk uncharitably.” Johnson. “Poh! poh! Madam; who is the worse for being talked of uncharitably? Besides, he was a dull poor creature as ever lived. And I believe he would not have done harm to a man whom he knew to be of very opposite principles to his own. I remember once at the Society of Arts, when an advertisement was to be drawn up, he pointed me out as the man who could do it best. This, you will observe was kindness to me. I however flit away and escaped it.”

(2/387)

Not only is this defiance more violent than the comma-joined “poh”-s, but it comes in a passage during the proofing stages of which Boswell was concerned enough about the correct spelling of “Hollis” to write detailed instructions about where to find the name correctly published in in a pile of magazines. Such delicacy in revision is also apparent in the course of the composition. In the Journal’s cramped and messy recollections of the scene, there is no exclamation, while a single “Poh!” and the “Madam” are added during the composition of the manuscript. 384

Some time after the manuscript he adds the second “Poh!” But this is not the only “Poh” that Boswell adds to those contained in his records. At the second meeting of the pair, we find:

The exclamations here are entirely added to the sketchy version given in the London Journal, along with the phrase “never mind these things”. On the manuscript page, there are many revisions and attempts at amending the passage, including trails for two potentially characteristic turns of phrase—“Don’t think so, Sir” and “By no means Sir”—in the conclusion to Johnson’s speech. This instance of Boswell diluting his hard soup shows that the “Poh”-s (no matter the subtle specifics of their mechanical representation) are characteristic enough of Johnson’s speech in moments such as this that Boswell is confident to supply them even when he has no specific record pointing to the sound. In this sense, “poh” is as much of the apparatus of Johnsonian mimicry as the “Sir”-s and the “No-no”-s and the multiple “ends” on and of things that Boswell lights upon as the markers of the particular Johnsonian quality of his subject’s speech. As we have seen, all of these, as well as Garrick’s “eh”-s and Goldsmith’s unique “Pshaw” exist in a textual inter-zone between habitual codified and recognisable lexemes and singular moments of sonic description. It is in this inter-zone that Johnson’s words as recorded by Boswell connect with his larger image of the qualities of his speech and delivery. Johnson’s sounds, particularly where a sound such as “Poh” is concerned, tend to drift into indeterminacy when considered on the extreme scales of lifetime habits and particular observable sense details.

If “Poh”-s and “Ha”-s and “woonse”-s all exist only locally as attempts to contain particularities of Johnson’s speech, they only do so in dialectical engagement with the idea of his speech as a static body of potential utterances that can be characterised, mimicked and reproduced. At this other extreme, there runs the danger of the aether overtaking the substance of individual moments. The alternative is for the inter-zones of aural transcription to be supplemented by general description. But even in the widest of scales, Boswell’s attempts to convey what Johnson sounded like are restricted by the double constraints of print technology and the conventions of orthography. Since spelling of non-conventional sounds can only be approximate, and the conventions of letters apply alternately to familiar words as they do to the referents of the letters themselves, Boswell’s general descriptions are

385 Journal, 14/6/1763. LJ, 244; Beinecke, 37/930, 610. MS 218-9, Waingrow, 276.
also made to juggle with interpretive and descriptive considerations even when they are entirely divorced of context. In the early extended account that he gives of Johnson’s manner of conversation at the close of the year 1764, Boswell almost quotes an habitual utterance in addition to the many items of description on offer:

That the most minute singularities which belonged to him, and made very observable parts of his appearance and manner, may not be omitted, it is requisite to mention, that while talking or even musing as he sat in his chair, he commonly shook his head in a tremulous manner, moving his body backwards and forwards, and rubbing his left knee in the same direction, with the palm of his hand. In the intervals of articulating he made various sounds with his mouth, sometimes as if ruminating, or what is called chewing the cud, sometimes giving a half whistle, sometimes making his tongue play backwards from the roof of his mouth, as if clucking like a hen, and sometimes protruding it against his upper gums in front, as if pronouncing quickly under his breath, too, too, too: all this accompanied sometimes with a thoughtful look, but more frequently with a smile.

(1/265)

It is well to say he almost quotes here, because it is phrased as an as-if. The habitual utterance is mysterious, and so personal to Johnson that without asking him, it will have to be forever uncertain if he is indeed muttering to himself, and if so what the word might be and if it has significance. The passage is even enough of an afterthought for Boswell to have composed it separately and on a used envelope.386

There are other reports of Johnson uttering prayers under his breath constantly, but the “too”-s are something different. This passage, though, is not unique. A similar account is given without quotation where Boswell describes Johnson’s “humming prayer” 17 April 1772 (1/379); more directly, we can find Johnson’s enigmatic utterances coming to the fore during a direct speech conversation in the John Wilkes set piece:

386 MS Papers Apart; Beinecke (M 145) 55/1165, 289, Waingrow, 340.
When we entered Mr. Dilly’s drawing-room, he found himself in the midst of a company he did not know. I kept myself snug and silent, watching how he would conduct himself. I observed him whispering to Mr. Dilly, “Who is that gentleman, Sir?”—“Mr. Arthur Lee.”—JOHNSON. “Tut, tut, tut,” (under his breath,) which was one of his habitual mutterings. Mr. Arthur Lee could not but be very obnoxious to Johnson, for he was not only a patriot but an American. He was afterwards minifter from the United States at the court of Madrid. “And who is the gentleman in lace?”—“Mr. Wilkes, Sir.”

(2/82-3)

The whole ornate introduction of Johnson at the dinner party is an embellishment of the Journal account, as is this habitual sound. In his original notes, Boswell includes only a list of those present, without noting Johnson’s reactions as he builds up to the revelation of Wilkes. Understandably the keying of Johnson’s reactions to the presence of an American and a patriot through sonic cues is not a priority of Boswell’s notes.387 The addition of these utterances adds immeasurably to the suspense and tensions of the scene, where Boswell is building up to the revelation that Wilkes will be dining with Johnson. They give a sense of Johnson’s anxiety at Boswell’s strange behaviour and the unfamiliar and indeed antagonistic company in which he finds himself. But their inclusion also betrays Boswell’s anxiety at wanting to narrate the story adequately, since in the course of his revisions of the line, he manages to produce two equivalent parenthetical phrases “(under his breath)” which is an addition, and “(which was one of his habitual mutterings)” a phrase elevated into the full narrative discourse once the information about the volume is added.388 Managing these two layers of information—the observation of the volume and the already noted fact about Johnson’s habits, puts too much stress on the sentence. More noteworthy is the crux created by the difference in the mutterings between 1764 and 1776. Boswell’s attention to detail might suggest that “tut”-s are distinct from “too”-s, both in their different qualities and their capacities for personal meaning for Johnson. The irregularity suits the irregularity and strangeness of the utterances, which are so peculiar to Johnson that they need double accommodation in the text as singular instance and general description. If they are alternative to each other, there is sense in the phrase “one of his habitual mutterings”, but by the second edition, these “tut”-s are modified to “too”-s and thus regularised into a system of representation within Boswell’s book that can accommodate strangest and wildest gust of air, even as they stay close to Johnson, preserving their feeling of mystery and strangeness.389 This is

387 Journal, 15/5/1776. OY, 346 (giving Life MS); Beinecke 43/994, 27.
388 MS 598, Bonnell, 54, states that these are typical Boswellian alternative phrases that have both been printed and might otherwise have been chosen between, n 7.
not to say that it is impossible for Boswell to be correct about Johnson’s mutterings being either multifarious or self-consistent. Rather, this double possibility in interpretation of sounds renders manifest the dynamics that Boswell has to engage whenever he wants to incorporate specific auditory information on this scale. He can either become like Sheridan, and create a recognisable standard means of representation, or he can extend the possibilities of representation in imitation of Steele, but he must always choose.
Conclusion

Despite Boswell’s several objections to being painted as a stenographer, taking down conversation even as it was being spoken, it is easy to imagine him revelling in the possibilities offered to modern-day biographers by the development of more advanced technological apparatuses for the recording of events. While he would have been awed, overwhelmed and perhaps a bit put out at having missed the suite of technologies that have come in the two centuries since he wrote—typewriters, audio recording, video, computer-driven transcription engines—many of the considerations of memory that Boswell struggled are basically moot for someone wanting to take on a similar project. Recording a conversation has become so easy, in fact, that a skill like Boswell’s in noting, recollecting and preserving a series of spoken statements might now carry with it little in the way of cachet for a biographer. Indeed, recorded interviews are seen as such a basic part of the repertoire of biography as to be unremarkable, except when the nature of the interviews is in some way exceptional. But this is only a consideration of a small aspect of the methodological difficulties under which the Life was produced. First, while modern biography (and, for that matter, oral history) has greatly benefited from the availability of media in which to record the kind of deliberate interviews Boswell undertook with his subject as early as 1773, and with a range of Johnson’s friends in the years after Johnson’s death, most of the struggles I have documented in this thesis have to do with problems that have been translated, rather than overcome, by the development of other methods of preserving speech. The bulk of Boswell’s documentary material, his Journal, even though it was often a deliberate attempt to record biographically relevant information, was treated by Boswell as a transparent and putatively incontrovertible record of his memories rather than a series of structured and defined interviews. The nearest analogue for such materials would be records, tapes, and files of candidly or surreptitiously taken moments. Each process of capturing such material faces the same problem of interpretation for a biographer as Boswell’s Johnson materials—problems of selection, typicality and aberrance, inherent interest, propriety and intimacy. What is more, for a biographer working primarily in text, the problems of scale and observation deriving from interpretation through such sources will never cease to be exacerbated by the gap between speech in reality and its textual representation. On the level of pure information, candid or repurposed files in which speech is preserved are always as partial and selectively-focused as Boswell is in his writings. A microphone is directional and subject to multiple interferences and distortions. The most fascinating troves of surreptitiously recorded conversations in the twentieth-century, the recordings of Oval Office conversations during the Nixon presidency for instance, are as hampered by the inability to hear equally in all parts of a room and to catch multiple perspectives when many people are speaking as Boswell is. Further, although such
materials offer an ease of transcription in that they are replayable, the difficulties of textualisation on different scales of observation that I have outlined in this thesis all remain for a biographer hoping to use them. First the sheer weight of such materials can be overwhelming. Where Boswell once secretly rejoiced in his materials being limited by his ability to recall them, the work of synthesis and interpretation in a life that has been extensively recorded threatens to become impossible. Secondly, the work of interpretation must be engaged simultaneously on multiple levels, and the same problem of knowing when information about tone, emphasis, accent and aberrant speech helps or hinders a transcription remains for a biographer. Rather than eliminating the problems of capturing the intimate particularities of a biographical subject through an account of the subject’s speech, technologies of recording in many ways magnify these problems because of the volume of material available and the persistence of these materials in potential competition with the account left in the biography. Boswell’s position of self-appointed responsibility in his “presumptuous task” becomes in this sense perversely more secure with time, and his claim to have preserved more of Johnson himself than any other biographer might remain unassailed because of his lack of a technological competitor.

If in the minute particulars of the textual details in Boswell’s book we have found an intimation of how Johnson’s voice is constructed out of and preserved in type, we will have understood much about how authenticity could have, for Boswell, various destinations, rather than a single, transcendent referent. The sinuous oscillation between the various scales of observation and interpretation that work in concert effaces the strain of the writing. Boswell’s shifts of focus, even in the smallest gaps created by the demands of the double accommodation of speech into text and text into print as well as the conglomeration of discrete and multi-generic fragments into a deceptively cohesive whole, allow his text the claim of straddling the divide between these different scales of interpretation. But Johnson’s speech extended beyond the text of Boswell’s Journal, out past his Life and into the aether by which Boswell claimed it was his fate to have been impregnated. In a fitting bookend to Boswell’s first encounter with Johnson, where he anticipated his arrival with explicit reference to the appearance of the ghost in Hamlet (1/211), Boswell was haunted by his friend. Less than two months after news came to him of Johnson’s death, Boswell was dreaming of Johnson, and still writing down his sayings:

He then said in a solemn tone, “It is an aweful thing to die.” I was fully sensible that he had died some time before, yet had not the sensation of horror as if in presence of a ghost. I said to him, “There, Sir, is the difference between us. You have got that happily over.” I then felt myself tenderly affected, and tears came into my eyes, and
clasping my hands together, I addressed him earnestly. “My dear Sir! pray for me.” The dream made a deep and pleasing impression on my mind.390

By the next month, Boswell has regressed into thinking Johnson still alive:

Carlisle, in the night between the 21 and 22 March 1785, dreamt I was sitting with Dr. Johnson. Did not recollect he was dead, but thought he had been very ill, and wondered to see him looking very well. I said to him, “You are very well, Sir.” He called out in a forcible pathetic tone, “O no!” He said, “I have written the letter to Paoli which you desired.” He then expressed himself towards me in the most obliging manner, saying he would do all in his power (or words to that purpose) to show his affection and respect, and seemed to search his mind for variety of good words.391

The dreams lasted well into the period of the Life’s composition, resurfacing in 1789:

In the night between 13 and 14 August 1789 thought I was in a room into which Dr Johnson entered suddenly with a very angry look at me. I said to him, “My dear Sir, you certainly have nothing to say against me.” He answered sternly: “Have I nothing to say against you, Sir?” I awoke uneasy and thought this applicable to my connection with E.M.392

390 Journal, 6/2/1785. AJ, 276 n 6. Colby Kullman notes that Boswell “respected dreams while questioning their reality” and notes that these dreams of Johnson represent an “unconscious craving for the support of his master” in his article “James Boswell and the Interpretation of Dreams”, 228, 235. See also Allan Ingram’s article “The Vision at Slains: James Boswell’s Supernatural Encounters” for a treatment of Boswell and supernaturalism, detailing his ambiguous feelings about ghosts, second sight, calling and what Ingram calls his being predisposed to accept superstitions and the supernatural” on the tour of the Hebrides (15).

391 Journal, 22/3/1785. AJ, 284. The notes in AJ say the notebook in which this account is located is now missing.

392 Journal, 14/8/1789. GB, 9; Beinecke 49/1051 (M 78) 3.
Finally, in December of that year, Boswell records only a fragment of an extended speech:

In the night between Saturday the 20 & Sunday the 21 Decr /1789/ I dreamt that I was in company with the two Wartons and Dr Johnson. Joe complained that his xxxxxxxx talents were not effective. Tom muttered thickly something in opposition to this as Brother. What (said I) Dr Warton will you maintain that you are not a man of great {talent} eminence in the World of Letters “It does not signify talking (said he eagerly) I have scattered my writings in the world in different ways, uphill and down hill and they have not advanced me Sir said Johnson {I suppose do you} {think Chu} would /you/ rather be Churchill I suppose you think he was in Heaven—Ah Sir do not regard this World. It is well observed there are three heavens only in the other […]393

In all these dreams, the techniques of representing speech that have been the subject of the thesis make appearances: we find the typical civility of address from both men addressing each other repeatedly as “Sir”, Boswell notes in parenthesis his lawyerly doubt over his memory of a phrase, he marks for tone, he has Johnson exclaim in recognisable onomatopoeias: these conversations, though in the entirely illusory world of Boswell’s dreams after Johnson’s death are almost entirely indistinguishable from the putatively real conversations as represented in the *Life*.

393 Journal, 21/12/1789. Beinecke, 49/1051 (M 78) 1-2. I follow the transcription conventions of the scholarly editions of Boswell’s private papers, where curly brackets indicate alternatives Boswell has given himself but not chosen between.
These dreams show us that not only was the impact of the voice, echoing after Johnson’s death found the same form as the speech he had heard in vivo and constructed in his journals, and would later finalise into the form in which we encounter it in the Life, but that Boswell’s textual practice was consistent in relying on the same techniques to get around the same difficulties of representation that he encountered in real life. Johnson’s voice, even disembodied, was to be met with his usual practices. Boswell reports in his book which is more than ordinarily interested in attitudes to ghosts and the supernatural, that Johnson believed in a folk account of the supernatural power of the voice:

He mentioned a thing as not unfrequent, of which I had never heard before—being called, that is, hearing one’s name pronounced by the voice of a known person at a great distance, far beyond the possibility of being reached by any sound, uttered by human organs. “An acquaintance, on whose veracity I can depend, told me, that walking home one evening to Kilmarrock, he heard himself called from a wood, by the voice of a brother who had gone to America; and the next packet brought accounts of that brother’s death.” Macbean asserted that this inexplicable calling was a thing very well known. Dr. Johnson said, that one day at Oxford, as he was turning the key of his chamber, he heard his mother distinctly call Sam. She was then at Lichfield; but nothing ensued. This phenomenon is, I think, as wonderful as any other mysterious fact, which many people are very slow to believe, or rather, indeed, reject with an obstinate contempt.

In a real sense, the phenomenon of Boswell’s haunting biography is as mysterious, and has met in some quarters with the same sort of resistance and, in equal parts, credence from figures as eminent as Johnson. In her elegant and enlightening study of Johnson’s afterlives, Helen Deutsch traces a series of artistic and literary reactions to the two different interpretations of Johnson’s character that idolatry of Johnson allows: the troubled hypochondriac and the jocular sage. Central to Deutsch’s thesis is the argument that affection for Johnson and his archetypal Englishness hides in plain sight the darker and
more troubling sides of his personal life, presenting a sanitised picture of him even without meaning to. According to Deutsch, this process started early, with the public autopsy conducted on Johnson’s corpse. Deutsch describes a process of mystery and fetishisation though which doctors and medical historians have treated the possibility that a specimen of emphysema in a lung in London once belonged to Johnson, or if a nineteenth-century illustration might represent the real lung. Deutsch reads this medical preservation of specimens from a known and illustrious corpse as “the literal fleshly equivalent to the anecdotal preservation of the living Johnson in encapsulated fragments of time.”  

The preservation that Boswell claims as the chief merit of his work has its analogue in the material of Johnson’s body itself, but there is more. The connection of the lungs to the words and sublinguistic utterances of Johnson, his laughter and whale-like outbursts of indignation are tantalising, but in a different way from the Johnson that vaguely haunted Boswell, or could have called to him when he lay dying and Boswell was absent in Edinburgh. The material connection to the voice is there deterritorialised, and unable to voice itself. In the gap left by the silenced lung, Boswell’s text engages in its surplus of signification as a supplement to the lost voice. But in the absence of sound recording, and in the tense series of oscillations engendered by the textual processes I have explored in this thesis, there is no determinate method of reinstating Johnson’s voice, despite the abundance of verisimilar speech in the book.

One moment of textual afterlife left unanalysed by Deutsch can offer us a sense of how the reputation of Johnson is transmitted through ideas about his speech and his voice. The actor Robbie Coltrane portrayed Johnson on BBC television twice. First in a hastily conceived episode of the situation comedy Blackadder in 1988, then in a stand-alone serio-comic adaptation of Boswell’s Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides opposite John Sessions as Boswell in 1993. In both, Coltrane portrays Johnson as a high pitched, energetic and bombastic speaker of forceful sallies, rude and unconcerned about the impact of his brusqueness. It is not true to say that such a reading is not supported by some reading of Boswell’s text, despite the fact that Coltrane is reported as having walked into the Blackadder set to play a pompous version of himself. A reading of many of the episodes Boswell put down in the Life can certainly lead to such a condensation, but the portrayal misses all of the oscillations between scales, and between shades that have been my central argument about the limits Boswell’s project placed on his representation of speech. If Coltrane’s voice as Johnson can be said to be wrong, it is

394 Helen Deutsch, Loving Dr. Johnson, 29. The matter of the lung constitutes a narrative thread through which Deutsch engages in her exploration of the anecdotal as a form of criticism and way of engaging in our relationships with authors. See also 40-1 and 61-2. Images of possible representations of Johnson’s lung can be found on pages 30-1.
395 See J. F. Roberts, The True History of the Black Adder, 240-1 for an account of the tight time-frame and vacuum of historical context through which the portrayal was constructed. Needless to say, in Deutsch’s terms, Coltrane’s version of Johnson can tell us a lot about how the caricature of Boswell’s portrayal has sunk deep into the public consciousness.
only because it is not the result of a total reading of the book, despite the general endorsement within the book itself, and by the book’s admirers, of partial and non-linear readings.

Boswell was excited and exercised by minimally useful and cumbersome technologies such as shorthand and Steele’s vision of speech taken down in score. He was also enthusiastic about the prospect of reproducing written speech through performance, based on the prospects of notation. While I have noted the lack of relief that technological advances in recording and transcription have provided for an enterprise such as Boswell’s, it is probable that he would have been especially pleased, to find that in the second half of the twentieth century, several different recordings have been made of his work, putting back into the spoken voice these things he took down from Johnson. The difficulties Boswell encountered in taking down and writing up Johnson’s speech however, are perversely reproduced in the recording of audiobooks. The tenor of Johnson’s voice (to say nothing of the interpretation of Boswell’s own tone) at all the various individual points of Boswell’s book comes as the sort of choice that actors are wont to talk about making. The results have been disparate. If the many reader-recorders of Boswell’s book are forced to make the same choices that Boswell made in reverse, they are also confronted with the immense material reality of the book and its textual apparatuses. Extra choices emerge that hack away at the textual infrastructure: are footnotes to be read in the stream of narration in the narrative voice? When the dialogue sections are read out, do the speech headers count as words or do they get in the way of the flow of the reported conversation? What happens when there are more than two people in the conversation? Should the voices be differentiated from each other? It is in this last question where the true test of Boswell’s choices lies.

As I have argued over the course of the thesis, Boswell’s choice was to tend toward the abstract content of Johnson’s speech over the general sonic qualities of it, except in cases where the sounds are particularly important in Boswell’s perception of the event. But reconstituting the voice from the text presents a problem of whether to undo the violence that this bifurcation of focus has enacted upon the full lived reality of speech. This means that the producers of audiobooks must make the choice with every line of what sounds Johnsonian in Johnson’s speech. In this respect, the actors and enthusiasts must choose how much credence to pay to Boswell’s intermittent injunctions to remember Johnson’s strong forceful utterance, and the peculiarities of his speech and delivery, including accents, and his physical difficulties with communication, in reading out the words that Boswell chose to present abstractly in the text. The stagey pomposity of Coltrane’s performances as Johnson is one option, producing a brusque civility, but the true strangeness of the implications of the way Boswell describes Johnson’s speech in general terms would produce a very odd listening experience. Instead, readers opt most commonly for a middle ground between acting and reading, while others
stay firmly on the side of the neutral reading. The impact of these considerations is that when the conversations revert to speech and to the aural world, those moments when Boswell breaks form in order to represent sound retain some of their particularity, rather than being dissolved into the general tenor of the Johnsonian performance. What remains is another interstitial zone—this time, one of reading—where the problems of oscillating between speech that was strange for England in the 1770s and 1780s because it was Johnson’s, and speech that was strange even for Johnson produce a simulacrum rather than a simulation, as the simple result of the range of scales upon which Boswell’s choices can be read as significant.

We are left in a situation in which Boswell’s necessarily constant interpretive interventions cannot ever offer a final determination either about how something sounded on a local level, or how Johnson was in company or in private. What we must do instead is hazard the same risks from the other side of the text. We must keep in mind the multiple and contradictory dispositions of certain textual formations, and know that whatever reading we make is a partial reading of a particular set of evidence, rather than the totalising view of the novel. But remembering this is insufficient as we read, because the genres we recognise require of us that we fill out the detail in the assemblage of evidence that we are given and acknowledge the “Flemish portrait” that we have been offered, whether or not it is accurate in particulars and whether or not it is accurate in its general tenor. Such a reading is simultaneously ironic and earnest, and must engage with the sort of daily changes that Boswell documents in Johnson, when he has access to him. We must imagine him as a complete person, but remind ourselves of his desultory attitude to reading, and from his recommendation to read only as our inclination leads us imagine the construction of the book itself as perversely parallel: desultory in its insistence on the gathering of authentic materials even as it grows to its enormous mass. It is only through this that we will be able to reconcile the (troubled) minute particular and the (impossible) general and by induction feel the frisson of an invisible intimacy.
Appendix: Changes in the Usage of “Sir”

Of the more than 2,000 usages of the word “Sir” (and “Madam”) in the Life of Johnson a substantial, though not indiscriminate, number were added to the dialogue at a stage later than Boswell’s first record of a particular scene. Here I record the basis for the figures I give in Chapter One. Owing to the nature of Boswell’s composition and the relationships between the text and the extant manuscripts, this count cannot be comprehensive, but it is instructive to see the forms and persistence of the changes Boswell and his collaborators make with this key indicator of the presence of speech. Each section gives a different stage and type of change. Boswell freely added “Sir” in the process of reconstituting speech from his Journal as he wrote the manuscript draft of the Life. The first section gives instances and names of the speakers where a statement appears in direct discourse in both the Journal and the MS, but “Sir” appears for the first time in the MS. Where “Sir” is added as part of a wholly new phrase, the accompanying word is given in the middle column. Second, I give instances of Boswell using “Sir” to fill in a gap left by changing his presentation of direct discourse by transforming speech narrated with speech tags to speech given as dialogue with speech headings. The replaced speech tags are given in the middle column, along with accompanying words if the entire phrase is new. Third, I give moments where Boswell changes statements from indirect discourse to direct discourse and in the process adds the word “Sir”. Instances where the transition also involves the transformation of a speech tag are marked, as are the speakers and any new words accompanying “Sir”. Fourth, I give additional uses of the word “Sir” where there is a substantial change or addition in between the Journal and the MS. This is not a list of all the usages for which there is no prior extant record, only usages where a previously existing conversation has either been substantially changed or augmented with new material, and this includes a “Sir”. Many of these usages in substantially changed material also fall into the previous two categories, and these are marked in parentheses after the speaker.

In the stages of composition after the creation of a first draft based from the journals, Boswell and his collaborators exercised additional opportunities to add “Sir”, either after immediate reflection or in preparation for the press. In the fifth list, I note instances where “Sir” or a phrase that includes Sir is added either above the line of text in the MS or clearly in the margin of the MS. In some of these instances I disagree with the notation in the Research Edition of the MS. After the speaker I list the MS page on which the additional “Sir” is added. The final stage for adding “Sir” was the Revises. In the sixth list I note those pages such changes can be found. Finally I note changes in other directions:

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transpositions of the word from its location in a speech in the Journal, deletions from the version in the Journal, and second thoughts where the word is added in the MS but subsequently removed.
“Sir” in MS and Life but not in Journal:

Volume One:
- 31, line 16: Johnson
- 32, line 21: Ah Johnson
- 216, line 35: Why Johnson
- 217, line 19: Johnson Volume 2
- 217, line 22: Johnson 19, line 2 Besides Johnson replaces “And”
- 228, line 29: Why Johnson
- 230, line 23: Johnson
- 232, line 17: Johnson
- 236, line 10: Johnson 49, line 38 But Murray
- 238, line 8: Johnson 61, line 6 Boswell
- 239, line 26: Johnson 64, line 9 Johnson
- 240, line 7: Why Johnson 88, line 14 Yes Johnson
- 241, line 26: Why Johnson 89, line 24 Johnson
- 242, line 1: Johnson 145, line 19 Johnson
- 245, line 4: Ah Johnson 145, line 24 Johnson
- 248, line 34: Johnson 150, line 16 Johnson
- 252, line 7: Johnson 154, line 11 Why Johnson replaces “to be sure”
- 274, line 31: Why Johnson 161, line 29 Johnson
- 277, line 20: Why Johnson 163, line 19 Boswell
- 278, line 4: Johnson 168, line 10 Johnson
- 278, line 21: Johnson 174, line 33 Johnson
- 279, line 24: “A young gentleman” (Boswell) 197, line 1 Boswell
- 301, line 7: Boswell 197, line 13 Boswell
- 301, line 8: Boswell 198, line 5 Boswell
- 321, line 5: Boswell 198, line 13 Johnson
- 321, line 25: Boswell 201, line 7 Johnson
- 355, line 31: Johnson 201, line 28 Johnson
- 357, line 6: Boswell 202, line 17 Johnson
- 357, line 31: Boswell 205, line 3 Johnson
- 364, line 29: Johnson 207, line 38 Johnson
- 378, line 31: Johnson 209, line 30 Boswell
- 391, line 10: Boswell 210, line 25 Johnson
- 394, line 11: Boswell changes “Yes” to “But” 211, line 30 No Johnson
- 395, line 35: Goldsmith 213, line 4 Johnson mocking Boswell
- 420, line 10: Goldsmith 216, line 8 Johnson
- 467, line 32: Johnson 221, line 13 Johnson
- 467, line 32: Johnson 229, line 15 Johnson (Madam)
- 467, line 32: Johnson 246, line 6 No Johnson
- 467, line 32: Johnson 247, line 29 Johnson
Where “Sir” fills a gap left when a speech tag has been made into a speech heading:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page, Line</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Corresponding Page, Line</th>
<th>Author</th>
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<tr>
<td>Volume One</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>247, line 12</td>
<td>said J Johnson</td>
<td>160, line 10 Why</td>
<td>He said Johnson</td>
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<tr>
<td>249, line 3</td>
<td>said he Johnson</td>
<td>161, line 8 Depend upon it Dr J said</td>
<td>Johnson (indirect)</td>
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<td>said I Boswell</td>
<td>164, line 20</td>
<td>He said Johnson</td>
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<tr>
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<td>I said Boswell</td>
<td>166, line 6 Why</td>
<td>said he Johnson</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>359, line 7</td>
<td>he said Johnson</td>
<td>166, line 36 said the Dr</td>
<td>Johnson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Volume Two</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>250, line 35</td>
<td>Johnson</td>
<td>393, line 15 Mr J said</td>
<td>Johnson</td>
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<td>Boswell</td>
<td>473, line 31 Mr J said</td>
<td>Johnson</td>
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<td>What Johnson</td>
<td>474, line 8 said I</td>
<td>Boswell</td>
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<td>Mrs. Salusbury</td>
<td>475, line 26 said Mr J “Then”</td>
<td>Johnson replaces</td>
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<td>260, line 6</td>
<td>Boswell</td>
<td>476, line 29 said Mr J</td>
<td>Johnson</td>
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<td>Johnson</td>
<td>482, line 30 said I</td>
<td>Boswell</td>
<td></td>
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<td>yes Johnson</td>
<td>484, line 10 said he</td>
<td>Johnson</td>
<td></td>
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<td>268, line 1</td>
<td>Johnson</td>
<td>Volume Two</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>285, line 15</td>
<td>Johnson, replaces speech header</td>
<td>16, line 11 said I</td>
<td>Boswell</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Johnson</td>
<td>21, line 30 Said I</td>
<td>Boswell</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Johnson</td>
<td>25, line 8 Said I</td>
<td>Boswell</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Boswell</td>
<td>26, line 38 Said Dr J</td>
<td>Johnson</td>
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<td>30, line 26 said the Dr (at end)</td>
<td>Johnson</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>387, line 4</td>
<td>Poh Johnson (Madam)</td>
<td>39, line 10 Said I</td>
<td>Boswell</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Johnson (Madam)</td>
<td>42, line 2 said he</td>
<td>Johnson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>388, line 18</td>
<td>Johnson</td>
<td>43, line 5 said Dr J</td>
<td>Johnson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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481, line 5  Johnson (indirect)
482, line 20  Why then Boswell (indirect)
482, line 22  Why Johnson (indirect)
482, line 25  Johnson
485, line 6  Johnson (Said Mr. J)
486, line 4  No Johnson, changed from "You’re"
515, line 25  Why Johnson

Volume Two
17, line 2  Johnson (indirect)
23, line 3  Johnson (indirect)
30, line 19  Johnson
33, line 34  Pray Boswell
35, line 36  Surely Boswell
40, line 30  Now Johnson (indirect)
48, line 32  Boswell
54, line 18  Johnson (indirect)
58, line 38  Johnson (indirect)
143, line 24  Johnson (said he)
143, line 30  Johnson
152, line 22  Boswell
152, line 25  Depend upon it Boswell quoting Johnson
156, line 22  no Johnson (indirect)
159, line 19  Johnson
162, line 27  Johnson (Dr J well observed)
167, line 9  no Johnson
191, line 28  it is plain Johnson
197, line 14  Johnson
197, line 33  ! Boswell
199, line 23  Boswell
202, line 12  Why Johnson
205, line 30  Bishop of St. Asaph
212, line 38  Nay Boswell
213, line 18  Johnson
220, line 38  why Johnson (indirect)
221, line 10  Johnson
222, line 13  Johnson
226, line 35  Pray Boswell (indirect)
226, line 38  Johnson (indirect)
227, line 12  No Johnson
237, line 15  Why, yes Johnson (indirect)

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16, line 13  Johnson
27, line 29  Johnson
47, line 18  Boswell
164, line 29  Johnson
191, line 32  Johnson
448, line 4  Mrs. Burney MS 892
510, line 25  Miss Adams

“Sir” is in Journal but Deleted:

Volume One
249, line 7  Johnson replaced by “my lad”
280, line 13  Johnson
416, line 35  “And Sir”  Johnson almost deleted but stet
479, line 1 preferred  Johnson “My dear lady”

Volume Two
52, line 28  Boswell
164, line 6  Johnson
166, line 15 yes  Johnson (made indirect)
196, line 4 compositor’s intervention  Johnson MS 369 (as
239, line 36  Boswell
373, line 35  Johnson
401, line 9  Boswell

“Sir” First Added but then Removed in MS:

Volume One
321, line 22  Johnson MS 346

Volume 2
225, line 6  Mrs. Knowles MS 687
434, line 9  Johnson MS 867
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