

DAVID HUME: THE ART OF DYING WELL

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“The *elegant* part of mankind, who are not immersed in mere animal life, but employ themselves in the operations of the mind may be divided into the *learned* and *conversable*...”

That is how David Hume begins ‘Of Essay Writing’, in which he tries to bring together the *learned* life of the scholar- who is too often secluded from the world - and the *conversable* life of the rest of humanity who have been dumbed down by triviality and gossip. As Hume puts it:

*Stunn'd and worn out with endless chat
Of Will did this, and Nan did that*

In the eighteenth century David Hume despaired that clever people were becoming isolated in their ivory towers, working on increasingly self-indulgent claptrap, while the rump of humanity contented themselves with the cheap thrill of the easily available: frivolity, trashy entertainment, and shopping.

Does this sound at all familiar to you?

In many ways, the function of Hume’s Essays is the same as that of the Literary Festival or, more accurately, of the events staged in this Library; an attempt to bridge the gap between the world of the mind and the world of the everyday; to resuscitate intelligent debate and conversation - and to make an alliance against the enemies of reason and beauty.

I speak as a novelist. I am no scholar, coming too much from the gossipy conversable world; but as a writer, I think I do perhaps have a way of looking at Hume in a way that can put his attitude to literature, life, and death in context. I certainly understand

what it is like to slave away for years on a book and have it fall, as Hume so elegantly puts it- and he underlines it too - *dead born from the press*.

Hume's Treatise of Human Nature, as he puts it himself, "failed to excite a murmur" amongst the critics, his Natural History of Religion had an "obscure" and "indifferent" reception, and his History of England 'seemed to sink into oblivion.'

The author's life is, sometimes, a dispiriting business, and, like many contemporary writers Hume then made the fatal mistake of asking his publisher, Andrew Millar, what was going on. The publisher gave it to him with both barrels. "Mr Millar told me that in a twelvemonth he sold only forty-five copies." Publishers eh? Always so reassuring to the struggling writer.

My starting point for this lecture is a manuscript held here in The National Library of Scotland; a short handwritten autobiography, twelve and a quarter pages in length, entitled 'My Own Life.' It is dated 18th April 1776 – two months after David Hume had bought his own grave plot on Calton Hill for £4 - and four months before he died. As a result, the idea of mortality hovers over the entire manuscript. In this priceless document, that was only deposited here as recently as 1987, Hume is not only setting the record straight; he is trying to work out what his life has meant and what his posthumous reputation might be.

One of the most striking things about this piece of writing is its modesty. Hume makes it clear that not all his publications have been successful and he is particularly sensitive to any accusation of vanity. In fact the word "vanity" appears, with a Capital V, three times in the first paragraph:

*It is difficult for a man to speak long of himself without **vanity**: therefore I shall be short. It may be thought an instance of **vanity**, that I pretend at all to write my life; but this narrative will contain little more than the history of my writings, as indeed, almost all my life has been spent in literary pursuits and occupation. The first success of most of my writings was not such as to be an act of **vanity**.*

The manuscript also ends with the same apology.

*I cannot say there is no trace of **vanity** in making this funeral oration of myself, but I hope it is not a misplaced one; and this is a matter of fact which is easily cleared and ascertained.*

It might seem strange to use this word so frequently but Hume had been attacked for his pursuit of literary fame and his desire to stand out from the crowd. This is a fairly common trait amongst us writers, and, I would hope, a forgivable one; writing is always, to some extent an act of vanity; the desire to be heard and read - but something else is going on here.

There is a long tradition, particularly in painting, that associates vanity with death: seventeenth century Dutch and Flemish Still Lives, with which Hume would have been familiar, take as their subject the evanescence or emptiness of earthly possessions; these are “vanity paintings” often with a skull as a memento mori; together with an hour-glass, clock or candle to denote the passing of time. Jewels and coins stand for the possessions of the world that must be taken away; a sword or shield reminds the viewer that there can be no defence against death; while flowers, especially with drops of dew, are symbols of the shortness of human life and hence of decay.

It is a reminder of the Book of Ecclesiastes- *Vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas; Vanity of Vanity saith the Preacher. All is Vanity* – and the word occurs 86 times in the King James Bible.

This obsession with Vanity is something both literature and religion have in common.

It is **vain** to think that we can cheat death; but religion and literature both try to do so.

Religion, and particularly Christianity, offers us an escape from the limitation of our earthly existence. For the believer, we are not solely atoms, simply animals, or merely mortal human beings. We are unique; and although we will certainly die, those privileged with faith will live again.

Part of this hope emerges from the vanity that our lives must have meaning; we cannot simply cease to be; we are too special for oblivion.

Similarly, all of us writers hope that our work will outlast our death.

This is most clearly expressed in Shakespeare's fifty-fifth sonnet:

Not marble nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme

The poem is written 'gainst death and all oblivious enmity' and ends with the couplet:

So, till the judgement that yourself arise
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

Shakespeare has the benefit of arming himself against death with both faith and literature. The subject of his poem will rise again on judgement day, and until that time, when he is given immortal life, he will have an immortal reputation.

Shakespeare therefore gives his subject the best of both worlds.

This is not the case for David Hume, who you will remember, not being a believer, has to content himself with the vanity of literary reputation alone.

For him, there is no physical afterlife and certainly no judgement day.

This he makes clear in his essay 'On the Immortality of the Soul'.

For Hume, Christianity is particularly responsible, culpable even, for raising human hopes: "it is the Gospel, and the gospel alone, that has brought life and immortality to light and it requires a new species of logic to understand it"; one that has not yet been invented; for the concepts promised in the New Testament cannot be proved by reason and observation alone.

‘By what arguments or analogies can we prove any state of existence,’ Hume argues ‘which no one ever saw, and which no way resembles any that ever was seen?’

There is no empirical evidence for the afterlife. It cannot be verified. Therefore, according to Hume, it should not be believed. Furthermore, it is not even worth theological study.

In his Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding he suggested:

“If we take in our hand any volume of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance, let us ask: Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No.

Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact or existence? No. Commit it then to the flames; for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.’

For Hume, faith is a consequence of custom and sensation. There is no such thing as a rational belief but people cling on for fear of the nihilistic alternative: ‘if we believe that fire warms, or water refreshes,’ Hume argues, ‘tis only because it costs us too much pains to think otherwise’— as if to say that it is too difficult for many people to live with reason alone.

Where Hume is entirely sceptical about the after-life, he is even more fierce in his disapproval of The Last Judgement.

He argues that if all that happens is pre-ordained by the Deity then nothing can be the object of his punishment or vengeance. This is the determinist argument – if God is all knowing, then we are all pre-judged. There is nothing we can do to alter our ultimate destiny.

Of course a common Christian defence is that God’s knowledge of events does not impinge upon our actions - we have free will even if God knows what we are going to do – but then a counter to *that* is that if he knows what we are going to do then why does he not stop us from evil – or at the very least from inflicting evil on the

innocent? How can these be the actions of a loving God? And that if he does not want to, or cannot, intervene, then what is the point of prayer? Well the counter to that is that through prayer we FORCE God to act – and so it goes on. This is all, I am afraid, for another debate, because Hume does not develop the argument between determinism and free will.

Instead he makes three further complaints against an after-life preceded by divine judgement:

First of all, Hume considers it is an extremely disproportionate act to judge a person for eternity after what, in comparison to immortality, is an exceptionally short life:

“Punishment, according to our conception,” he writes “should bear some proportion to the offence. Why then eternal punishment for the temporary offences of so frail a creature as man?”

Then, Hume considers most people to be neither saintly nor evil, but somewhere between the two, making a final judgement impossible:

“Heaven and hell suppose two distinct societies of men, the good and the bad; but the greatest part of mankind float betwixt vice and virtue.

Were one to go round the world with an intention of giving a good supper to the righteous and a sound drubbing to the wicked, he would frequently be embarrassed in his choice, and would find the merits and demerits of most men and women scarcely amount to the value of either.”

Then, Hume considers it monstrous that children should be judged; and argues that the high rate of infant mortality, which in those days was exceedingly high, serves to prove the idea that ultimate and eternal judgement is surely incompatible with a loving or rational deity.

“Nature has rendered human infancy peculiarly frail and mortal, as it were on purpose to refute the notion of a probationary state; the half of mankind die before they are rational creatures...”

Furthermore, Hume cannot accept the idea of the physical resurrection of the body; not only on the grounds of logic but also on the grounds of space. To put it bluntly, there are simply too many of us.

“**How** to dispose of the infinite number of posthumous existences,” Hume writes, “ought to **embarrass** the religious theory. Every planet in every solar system, we are at liberty to imagine, peopled with intelligent mortal beings - at least we can fix on no other supposition. For these then a new universe must every generation be created beyond the bounds of the present universe, or one must have been created at first so prodigiously wide as to admit of this continual influx of beings. Ought such bold suppositions to be received by any philosophy - and that merely on the pretext of a bare possibility”

I am reminded of an old Oxfordshire man who once told my clergyman father that he wouldn't be able to find all his friends in heaven because there would be too many Chinese in the way. I also remember being told by a Jehovah's Witness that of course the elect would all be able to fit into Heaven and that it would be like going on holiday to The Isle of Wight- I did not find this a comforting thought.

The standard Christian defence is that the soul takes up no space; but this is slightly at odds with the teaching of St.Paul who makes the physical resurrection of the body the cornerstone of faith. Granted it is a spiritual body rather than a natural body, and Paul is vague on the details of what our incorruptible state might look like, but he is quite clear in his first letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 15, that “ if there be no resurrection of the body, then is Christ not risen; And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain.’

But according to Hume this is precisely what it is - vain.

“Nothing in this world is perpetual; every thing, however seemingly firm, is in continual flux and change. The world itself gives symptoms of frailty and dissolution. How contrary to analogy, therefore, to imagine that one single form, seeming the frailest of any, and subject to the greatest disorders, is immortal and indissoluble. How lightly, not to say how rashly, entertained!”

It is vanity to think that human beings are marked out for special treatment in the universe. According to Hume, “the life of a man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster.”

Without revelation, there is a want of argument for the immortality of the Soul.

There is nothing special or significant about us- we merely think or believe or hope that there is.

Here Hume is at odds with that other great 18th century figure, Dr Samuel Johnson who argued that although a human being may only be one atom in the mass of humanity - there **is** evidence for mankind’s significance - and that there has *precisely* been revelation– and that this revelation has come in the form of Jesus Christ.

Listen to what Dr.Johnson writes in his essay ‘Consolation in the Face of Death: “Reason deserts us at the brink of the grave, and can give no further intelligence.”

At first he seems to be agreeing with Hume. There is no empirical evidence for anything after death. But Dr.Johnson has read his New Testament. He goes on:

‘Revelation is not wholly silent. There is joy in the Angels of Heaven over one sinner that repenteth; and surely this joy is not incommunicable to souls disentangled from the body, and made like Angels.’

Dr.Johnson was convinced that a close reading of the Gospels contained sufficient evidence for an afterlife and towards the end of his essay there is a marvellous passage which I often think should be read at funerals:

“Let Hope therefore dictate, what Revelation does not confute, that **the union of souls** may still remain; and that we who are **struggling** with sin, sorrow, and infirmities, may have our part in the **attention and kindness** of those who have finished their course and are now receiving their reward.”

For Dr. Johnson, the Gospels do indeed bring Life and Immortality to light and he complained that Hume “had never read the New Testament with attention. Here then was a man, who has been at no pains to inquire into the truth of religion, and had continually turned his mind the other way. “

You can imagine, perhaps, David Hume taking issue with the word “truth”; but for Dr Johnson, who once confessed that he “had never had a moment in which death was not terrible to him”, Divine Revelation has already occurred.

Philosophy, Johnson argues, is not enough:

‘The Precepts of Epicurus, who teaches us to endure what the Laws of the universe make necessary, may silence **but not content us**. The dictates of Zeno, who commands us to look with indifference on eternal things, may dispose us to conceal our sorrow, **but cannot assuage it.**’

For Dr. Johnson real alleviation from the pain of death can only come from the promises of Christ. “Philosophy may infuse stubbornness,” he concludes, “but only Religion can give patience.”

This is all very well; but what if a man can live and die without the consolation of a religion in which he cannot believe; what if a man can face death *with* equanimity and *without* the promises of Christ?

Can a person who is without faith still be patient in the face of death?

This was what Dr. Johnson’s biographer James Boswell came to discover on his famously insensitive visit to the dying David Hume.

It took place on 7th July 1776 and, not to put too fine a point on it, Boswell came to find out if Hume was scared. It was quite a ghoulish thing to do, treating the great thinker as if he were a specimen in a zoo. He wanted to see if Hume's experience of impending death might change his philosophy and if there might even be a death bed recantation; a return to the faith in which he had been baptised.

Was it really possible, in 1776, to accept the idea of death without the possibility of an afterlife? That this life is all that there is: nasty, brutish and short?

Could Hume, whom Boswell referred to as "the great infidel" practice what he preached?

The patient was extraordinarily unwell, having just returned from London and from Bath- where the waters had, all too predictably, done him no good at all.

'I found him alone,' Boswell records, "in a reclining posture in his drawing room. He was lean, ghastly, and quite of an earthy appearance. He was dressed in a suit of grey cloth with white metal buttons, and a kind of scratch wig. He was quite different from the plump figure which he used to represent. He had before him Dr Campbell's Philosophy of Rhetoric. He seemed to be placid and even cheerful. He said he was just approaching his end. I think those were his words...'

He was just approaching his end...

The meeting starts calmly and pleasantly, and Hume is an exceptionally kind host to a guest who clearly outstays his welcome. 'Mr Lauder the surgeon came in for a little, and Mr. Mure, the Baron's son...' but NO, Boswell keeps pressing on, asking Hume whether he was religious as a child and what devotional works he has read.

For a brief moment Hume's calmness of mind cracks- but not in a way that Boswell had been expecting:

"He then said flatly that the morality of every religion was bad.'

Boswell in a moment of self-examination then admits “ I really thought he was not jocular, when he said that when he heard a man was religious, he concluded he was a rascal...”

You would think Boswell might have got the message by now; but no, he goes on...

‘I had a strong curiosity to be satisfied if he persisted in disbelieving a future state even when he had death before his eyes...I asked him if it were not possible that there might be a future state. He answered that it was possible that a piece of coal put upon the fire would not burn; and he added that it was a most unreasonable fancy that we should exist forever. That immortality, if it were to exist at all, must be general, that a great proportion of the human race has hardly any intellectual qualities; that a great proportion of the human race dies in infancy before being possessed of reason; yet all these must be immortal; that a porter who gets drunk by ten o’clock with gin must be immortal; that the trash of every age must be preserved, and that new universes must be created to contain such infinite numbers. This appeared to be an unphilosophical objection, and I said ‘Mr Hume,’ you know spirit does not take up space.’ I asked him if the thought of annihilation never gave him any uneasiness. He said not the least; no more than the thought that he had not been.’

Here Hume is directly quoting from the *De Rerum Natura*, the great godless work of Lucretius in which we are all a mere part of nature, atoms in the universe - we return to the oblivion that existed before we were born: pre-birth and after death are one and the same.

This view of human existence is still resonant today – you can find it, for example, in Samuel Becket’s *Waiting for Godot*:

‘They give birth astride of a grave- the light gleams an instant- and then it’s night once more.’

For both Lucretius and Hume it is as useless to worry about life after death as it is to worry about death before life. As we have no memory of anything before we are born so we will have no sensation after we die.

Nil igitur mors est – therefore death is nothing at all – in Lucretius’s famous sentence.

This might seem nihilistic but there can be some consolation in this idea. You can find it frequently addressed in contemporary writing. Here is Richard Dawkins in his book “Unweaving the Rainbow”:

We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place but who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the sand grains of the Sahara. Certainly those unborn ghosts include greater poets than Keats, scientists greater than Newton. We know this because the set of possible people allowed by our DNA so massively outnumbers the set of actual people. In the teeth of these stupefying odds it is you and I, in our ordinariness, that are here.

Here is another respect in which we are lucky. The universe is older than 100 million centuries. Within a comparable time the sun will swell to a red giant and engulf the earth. Every century of hundreds of millions has been in its time, or will be when its time comes, 'the present century.' The present moves from the past to the future, like a tiny spotlight, inching its way along a gigantic ruler of time. Everything behind the spotlight is in darkness, the darkness of the dead past. Everything ahead of the spotlight is in the darkness of the unknown future. The odds of **your** century being the one in the spotlight are the same as the odds that a penny, tossed down at random, will land on a particular ant crawling somewhere along the road from New York to San Francisco. You are lucky to be alive and so am I.

So, according to Dawkins we should celebrate the fact that we live rather than mourn the fact that we die; a sentiment I feel Hume would have shared.

It was his continual task to question what it meant to be alive or, indeed if life had any meaning at all- and to answer the central questions of moral philosophy: How then shall we live? And how shall we prepare for death?

Hume read very few religious texts; instead he was an avid reader of classical sceptics and stoics, familiar with both Cicero and Virgil and with Shaftesbury's Characteristics – a sophisticated version of a modernised polite stoicism. And he read Lucretius who believed

Our terrors and darkneses of mind
 Must be **dispelled**, not by sunshine's rays
 Not by those shining arrows of the light
 But by insight into nature, and a scheme
 Of systematic contemplation

Systematic contemplation...

Reason, rather than faith or superstition was paramount. By the time Hume was twenty he had filled a manuscript book with his thoughts, or rather doubts, on the subject of religion. The direct apprehension of human experience was, according to Hume, 'the only solid foundation for the other sciences. Science must be laid on experience and observation.' You cannot therefore reason about entities such as God, his qualities, and his operations, of which experience gives us no firm knowledge.'

Yet despite any direct experience of God or the devil, the mind of man, according to Hume "is subject to certain unaccountable terrors and apprehensions, proceeding either from the unhappy situation of private or public affairs, from ill health, from a gloomy and melancholy disposition, or from the concurrence of all these circumstances. In such a state of mind, infinite unknown evils are dreaded from unknown agents; and where real objects of terror are wanting, the soul... finds imaginary ones, to whose power and malevolence it sets no limits. As these enemies are entirely invisible and unknown, the methods taken to appease them are equally unaccountable, and consist in ceremonies, observances, mortification, sacrifices, or in any practice, however absurd or frivolous, which either folly or knavery recommends to a blind and terrified credulity. Weakness, fear, melancholy, together with ignorance, are, therefore the true sources of Superstition."

Clearly Hume rejected this superstition and approached his own death without the weakness, fear, melancholy, and ignorance that were the enemies of reason. Joseph Black, Hume's physician was with him when he died on Sunday 25th August 1776 and he wrote to Adam Smith.

'He continued to the last perfectly sensible and free from pain or feelings of distress. He never dropped the smallest expression of impatience; but when he had occasion to speak to the people about him always did it with affection and tenderness. I thought it improper to write to bring you over, especially as I had heard that he had dictated a letter to you on Thursday or Wednesday desiring you not to come. When he became very weak it cost him an effort to speak and he died in such a happy composure of mind that nothing could have made it better....'

One can only hope that either Joseph Black or Adam Smith had a word with Boswell afterwards; although even if they did so, it cannot have had much impact because Boswell wrote to Dr. Johnson on July 9th 1777 that Hume's account of his own life was part of the "daring effrontery" of the age and an act of "vain and ostentatious infidelity." The infidelity to which Boswell refers is, of course, to religion.

For Boswell to accuse Hume of vanity is ironically rich, and after Hume's death he continued to be both unsympathetic and ungenerous. "Dr Johnson was much pleased with a remark which I told him was made to me by General Paoli: 'That it is impossible not to be afraid of death; and that those who, at the time of death are not afraid, are not thinking of death, but of applause...'

No wonder Hume felt the need to defend himself so strongly against the charge of vanity; the vanity that he could do *without* religious belief; but his composure in the face of death was considered a terrible threat to the majority of those who still professed their faith – and it is interesting, I think, to notice that at Dr. Johnson's own funeral, the preacher, Mr Agutter, of Magdalen College Oxford, made a direct comparison between the deaths of Hume and Johnson, taking as his text a particularly cheery section of The Book of Job Chapter 22 Verse 22-26:

‘One dieth in his full strength, being wholly at ease and quiet.... and another dieth in the bitterness of his soul, and never eateth with pleasure. They shall lie down alike in the dust, and the worms shall cover them.’

Of course, for followers of Hume, the Reverend Agutter will have got the comparative attitudes to death the wrong way round- it may just as well have been Johnson who lived in perpetual terror of death and who died in bitterness- while Hume who died “wholly at ease and quiet.”

Certainly Hume’s friends thought this.

But how did he achieve what his Doctor called his “happy composure of mind”?

What did he read, and what did he think, that gave him the composure to combat the weakness, fear, melancholy, and ignorance of superstition that were all parts of what Hume called ‘false religion’?

This is a question we all might ask.

According to Shakespeare’s Hamlet, “the readiness is all”, and David Hume certainly spent the last year of his life preparing for his own death. He bought a grave plot - and made a will stipulating his burial in the Calton Churchyard - leaving money so that a “Monument be built over my body at an expense not exceeding a hundred pounds - with an inscription containing only my name with the year of my birth and death - leaving it to posterity to add the rest.’

Crucially, he also wrote the short autobiography “My Own Life” which he describes as a “funeral oration of myself.”

I believe that this document, with which I started this talk, is more than a secular sermon.

I think it is David Hume coming to terms with his own death .

The manuscript, later published as ‘The Life of David Hume’ was certainly dated and written on a single day and, I believe, at a single sitting. This may seem somewhat speedy; but this was an age in which Dr Johnson wrote the first seventy lines of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* in a morning, and *Rasselas* in a week in order to pay for his mother’s funeral. So for Hume, if you allow a quarter of an hour for each page, his autobiography would have taken him just over three hours; an afternoon to sum up a life.

And what a life

If you look at the manuscript you can see that it does not seem to have been planned but is written straight out. There is possibly a break after the second paragraph because the ink colour changes before the third paragraph begins; and there is clear evidence that Hume re-read it, making corrections, cuts and additions but it is a remarkably clean and fluent piece of writing; and I still find it absolutely extraordinary that any one of us can come into this library, as I did last week, and order it up. I arrived at ten to one and the lady at the desk said ‘It will be two o’clock. Is that all right?’ Of course it was all right. In just over an hour I was handed a folder. Inside it was ‘My Own Life’. David Hume was speaking directly to me, and by his own hand. What a considerable and universal privilege this is.

The simple, twelve and a quarter page document, is rather like a letter. It is not the kind of philosophical essay that re-writes the hero’s intellectual evolution so that the final outcome appears predestined.

It is modest, factual, and straightforward – a last c.v. as it were, or, if David Hume were applying for Edinburgh University now, a rather long personal statement on a University application form – a short essay written, for posterity, by one of this nation’s greatest thinkers.

At first glance it is not a particularly exciting read; a personal entry perhaps, for the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

But towards the end, something extraordinary happens; for this document contains what I believe to be the most telling grammatical change in the history of literature.

After recounting the story of his literary career, his employment in France and his return to Edinburgh, David Hume announces the onset of his final illness.

In spring 1775 I was struck with a disorder in my bowels which at first gave me no alarm, but has since, as I apprehend it, become mortal and incurable. I now reckon on a speedy dissolution.

The words are specific- mortal, incurable, a dissolution.

Dissolution: as the dictionary has it, “the reduction of a body or mass to its constituent elements; disintegration; decomposition; the extinction of a life or person, the dismissal or dispersal of an assembly, see also dissolution of the Monasteries...”

Mortal, incurable, dissolution.

This is happening to Hume as he writes. In modern creative and sports reportage he is “in the moment” or “in the zone”; and yet he is also sanguine; a lazy writer would call him “philosophical” as he takes stock of his current situation:

‘I possess the same ardour as ever in study, and the same gaiety in company. I consider besides, that **a man of sixty-five**, by dying, cuts off only a few years of infirmities; and - though I see many symptoms of my literary reputation’s breaking out at last with additional lustre (As a writer I love the dim flame of literary ambition leaping up at the last) - I know that I had but a few years to enjoy it. It is difficult to be more detached from life than I am at present.’

He has reached a state of acceptance, and is ready for death.

*It is difficult to be more detached from life than I **am** at present.*

Now comes the crucial switch. It occurs right in the middle of the sentence— *‘To conclude historically with my own character- I am, or rather was (for that is the style I must now use in speaking of myself; which enables me the more to speak my sentiments) I was, I say a man of mild dispositions, of command of temper, of an open social, and cheerful humour, capable of attachment, but little susceptible of enmity, and of great moderation in all my passions.’*

This is one of the great statements of the Enlightenment.

David Hume realises the enormity of what he is saying *as he is writing it down*; the fact, and the impact of his death, suddenly hits him - his pen in his hand - and he moves from the present to the past, and from life to death, in the same sentence.

Let me take you through it:

‘I am...’ he begins, and you can sense him stopping; you can almost see the pen in the air above the paper.

You can hear, in that slightest of pauses, Hume correcting himself – *“or rather - was”*

In my experience writers often do not know what they really think until they write it down. They discover their thoughts in the process of writing. It is the act of writing itself that articulates both thought and emotion.

So in reading this passage you can hear David Hume thinking aloud; and stopping.

‘I am, or rather - was...’

Now he must collect himself. He must explain. He returns the pen to the paper and picks up the pace of the prose with an explanation and a justification; *(for that is the style I must now use in speaking of myself; which enables me the more to speak my sentiments)*

He realises that this switch of tense makes him free. He does not need to worry about what people will think. When people read this he will be dead. He can say what he likes; the idea of death liberates his prose.

But after this collection of his thoughts, as in a Bach fugue, there comes a repeat:

I was, I say

He wants it to be clear. He is already dead; or rather, he is a living corpse.

What has his life meant? What really matters?

I was, I say

a man of mild dispositions

There then follows a list of his achievements. But these are not literary achievements- they are achievements of character - and they are entirely without the vice of vanity. Instead they are the classical virtues of moderation in all things. He was, he says,

'a man of mild dispositions, of command of temper, of an open social, and cheerful humour, capable of attachment, but little susceptible of enmity, and of great moderation in all my passions...'

His only vanity, paradoxically, is in his **lack of pride**- in his classical detachment; in the control of his emotions. The phrase , *capable of attachment, but little susceptible of enmity*, is added in the margin, after he has re-read what he has written. He is keen to stress that he harbours no grudges.

Even my love of literary fame, my ruling passion, never soured my humour, notwithstanding my frequent disappointments...'

Cheerfulness, warmth of character and good company are of equivalent, or of even greater benefit, to reputation than literary achievement.

This is a precise indication of how Hume saw himself. It is this equanimity and mildness of manners that not only prevented direct confrontation with others - and helped him to evade further controversy – it also made so many people miss what he was actually saying.

Hume had always been careful not to flaunt his unbelief in a way which would alienate the open-minded.

‘An orator addresses himself to a particular audience,’ he wrote (Of the Standard of Taste), ‘and must have a regard to their particular genius, interests, opinions, passions, and prejudices; otherwise he hopes in vain to govern their resolutions, and inflame their affections. Should they even have entertained some prepossessions against him, however unreasonable, he must not overlook this disadvantage; but before he enters upon the subject, must endeavour to conciliate their affection and acquire their good graces.’

In other words, however explosive your words might be, you still have to be careful. It is, interestingly, exactly the same tactful approach that Charles Darwin would use a hundred years later; a cheerful, charming, mild mannered, and loveable man, whose company his contemporaries adored but whose intelligence would undermine everything they believed in.

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In his latter years, Hume devoted less of his time to writing and more to reading. He had come to terms with the futility of worldly ambition and the vanity of human wishes even if, occasionally, it made him rather despairing.

‘My ambition was always moderate and confined entirely to letters; but it has been my misfortune to write in the language of the most stupid and factious barbarians in the world, and it is long since that I have renounced all desire of their approbation, which indeed could no longer give me either pleasure or vanity.’

Like many writers he runs out of energy, gives up, and retires from the fray. “I have now no object but to sit down and think and die in peace” he writes. At the same time, however, Hume rediscovers his taste for reading – an appropriate activity for a man who was, after all, made the Librarian of the Faculty of Advocates in 1752 – the fore-runner of this library in which we are today.

But what advantage did this rediscovery of literature and philosophy give Hume?
How could the act of reading help a dying man without faith?

Can literature allow us to die well?

There is a further document here in the National Library of Scotland which I think is of interest to us. It is “A Sketch on the Character of Mr Hume” by John Hume, deposited here in 1949, which recounts the futile journey to Bath made in 1776 - the year of Hume’s death.

The Reverend John Hume was David Hume’s cousin, and he clearly loved him. He also could not believe in David Hume’s lack of belief.

Home says of his cousin David “that he was the best Christian in the world without knowing it” which says something rather wonderful about his Christian optimism – like a Priest I once met who told me that he was convinced Richard Dawkins was a believer because he hated the Church so much – and then he added “rather like homophobic men who are really gay”. Well; each to his own.

There is, however, one sentence in John Home’s short “Sketch on the Character of Mr Hume” which sums up what he might have been like.

It certainly provides a sense of his final priorities:

‘Mr Hume’ John Home writes, “in the latter part of his life, retired to his native country, and devoted the evening of his days to Hospitality, Elegance, Literature and Friendship.’

These are values that I, personally, hold dear. They combine conviviality with style and scholarship with shared pleasure – they are qualities which David Hume held in abundance and with little vanity; the man of mild disposition and of an open, social and cheerful humour.

Clearly it is hard to choose between them - Hospitality, Elegance, Literature and Friendship – and an ideal life would possess all four- but, let me end, since we are in a library, by talking about literature and Hume’s devotion to a life of letters.

Hume was a prodigious reader and a classicist- his Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals is, in part, an attempt to re-write the Offices of Cicero; he studied philosophy from Plato to Locke; he quoted Lucretius’s De Rerum Natura to Boswell on his deathbed; and he clearly read Seneca, whose Essay “On the Shortness of Life” praises philosophy for its provision of a secular immortality:

According to Seneca:

“Of all men, only those who find time for philosophy are at leisure; only they are truly alive; for it is not only their own lifetime they guard well: they add every age to their own; all the years that have passed before them, they requisition for their store...’

The ones you should regard as devoting time to the true duties of life are those who wish to have as their intimate friends every day Zeno, Pythagoras, Democritus, and all the other high priests of good learning...none of these will be “too busy” to spend time with you, none will fail to send his visitor away a happier man; by night and by day all men on earth can enjoy their company.

None of these will compel you to die, yet all will teach you **how** to die; none of these will wear out your years, but rather will make you a gift of his own...’

For Seneca, the act of reading liberates us from the constrictions of our own life- we can have different families, different friends, different lives, and move across time.

We can live multiple lives.

David Hume knew this. Literature creates a virtual or parallel existence that we can shape and change at will. In his Essay “Of the Standard of Taste” Hume argues:

“A young man, whose passions are warm, will be more sensibly touched with amorous and tender images, than a man more advanced in years, who takes pleasure in wise, philosophical reflections. At twenty, OVID may be the favourite author, HORACE at forty, and perhaps TACITUS at fifty. We choose our favourite author as we do our friend, from a conformity of humour and disposition. Mirth or passion, sentiment or reflection; whichever of these most predominates in our temper, it gives us a peculiar sympathy with the writer who resembles us.’

For Seneca:

‘The noblest intellects have their households; choose the one you wish to be enrolled in; you will inherit not their name alone, but also their property, which you will not have to guard in a mean or ungenerous spirit: it will increase in size the more people you share it with. These men will set you on the road to immortality, and raise you to that place from which no one is cast down. This is the one way of prolonging mortality, or rather of turning it into immortality. Honours, monuments, all that ambition has commanded by decrees or raised in works of stone, are swift to collapse, and all things are destroyed or displaced by the long march of years - yet what philosophy has made sacred cannot suffer harm; no age will destroy those works; no age diminish them...’

Literature provides its own immortality.

Hume knew this and his work is testament to a lifetime of reading. In his essay ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ he refers to Homer, Virgil, Aristotle, Plato, Terence, Epicurus and Cicero: Ovid, Horace and Tacitus; Petrarch, Boccaccio, Ariosto, Milton, Bunyan, Addison, Descartes and Cervantes. The essay is only twenty pages long. You could say that this was showing off. You could even say that it was vanity. But I prefer to see it as a demonstration of the mind of man who took a deep delight in the pleasure of reading.

David Hume knew that the study of such works would allow him to live more than one life. For this is the enduring advantage of literature. The great writers continue in their immortality; while the reader is informed and enriched by an inexhaustible supply of character, thought, and experience; becoming wiser, wittier and more agreeable company as a result.

Consequently, I can think of no better place to celebrate David Hume's literary achievement, three hundred years after his birth, than here - in this literary festival.