

SESSION: Urban Elites in the 18th-Century Metropolis and Smaller Town
- Cultural Styles and Identities an a Comparative Perspective

Markku Kekäläinen

University of Helsinki

markku.kekalainen@helsinki.fi

Metropolis and periphery in James Boswell's interpretation on politeness

'We dined in a room on the third floor, commanding a view of the Green Park, St. James's Park, the Queen's House, Westminster Abbey, the Surrey hills, etc. I said I never before had dined in a room with such a prospect, and I exclaimed, "How delightful is to see the country and be sure you are not in it, Piccadilly is between us and it!'

This paper deals with James Boswell's interpretation on politeness from the viewpoint of metropolis versus periphery dichotomy. The larger project from which this paper comes from is closely linked with recent discussions on Early Modern and Georgian English culture of politeness. Lawrence E. Klein and Paul Langford have emphasized a rupture in the theories of politeness in the post 1688 years and the introduction of a new and more informal code of politeness in the turn of 18th century. On the other hand, Anna Bryson and Markku Peltonen have argued that the 'new' urban politeness has its roots in Early Modern courtly culture. The central argument of my larger project is that James Boswell integrated the formal and theatrical courtly code of politeness with a 'modern' urban sensibility. It is easy to see James Boswell as a 18th century London gentleman *par excellence*, and for that reason he has been connected with the urban code of politeness which dated back to the new interpretations of Joseph Addison and the third Earl of Shaftesbury. The new code included, besides reciprocal pleasing, the demands of honesty and sincerity in the personal intercourse as well as the modest and controlled outer appearance. I contend that there is a strong courtly and aristocratic

feature in Boswell's theory of politeness; in some crucial factors (formalism, the concealment of inner feelings, a permissive attitude towards flattery, the brilliance of the outer appearance, sexual libertinage) his interpretation on politeness approaches the theatrical tradition of courtly politeness.

Boswell wrote to Sir Alexander Dick in 1778: 'I am much entertained with your rural triumph over *us men of London*. I know not but to the pure natural mind the pleasures and beauties of the country are superior to those of a city. But I have habits far different from those of pure nature. Besides, may it not be maintained that a mind in the state that mine is, is more civilised?' In the discussions on the benefits and menaces of civilization, Boswell was in accord with Hume, Smith, and Voltaire, and against Rousseau, in defending the complex forms of culture and the value of sophisticated social life. Even in the most romantic phase of his development, Boswell wrote: 'You are tempted to join Rousseau in preferring the savage state: I am so too, at times. When jaded with business, or when tormented with the passions of civilized life, I could fly to the woods... But these are the sallies of desperation. Philosophy teacheth us to be moderate, to be patient, to expect a gradual progress of refinement and felicity...'

Boswell was consistent in his critique towards Rousseau's glorification of savagery: 'I disputed against Rousseau's notion that the savage life is the least unhappy, for the savages have none of the elegant pleasures of polished society to counterbalance their pains, and the quantity of enjoyment in an Indian tribe is hardly worthy existing for.' It is easy to recognize a certain early Romantic sensibility in Boswell, but this attitude was directed towards the infinitely fascinating metropolis, not primitive regions or the countryside. Boswell did not share the anti urban ethos of many contemporaries, nor the early Romantic admiration for wild nature. Instead he saw nature as raw material demanding cultivation; he found total unnaturalness as repellent but above all he disliked rudeness, frankness and lack of elegance. This point of view is crystallized in the diary of his youth: 'What I admire is nature improved by art, for art certainly may and does improve nature.'

Boswell's cultural identity had two local coordinates: the Scottish periphery and the metropolis of London. In his conception, these localizations exceed their particular meanings and were transformed to metaphors describing basic conditions of civilization. In Boswell's imagination, London was identified with the most sophisticated forms of human civilization: arts, pleasures and, above all, with the most developed forms of social life and politeness. This ideal crystallized in the figure of polished London gentleman, who was an ideal self in Boswell's autobiographical writing. His Scottish identity can be personified in two figures: on the one hand, a provincial and unpolished 'rattling fellow', and, on the other, a patriarchal 'old Scots baron'.

In one level, the metropolis-periphery-dichotomy can be formulated as a bipolarity between the developed sense of form and formlessness. This tension had a religious basis. Boswell's relation to the Presbyterian tradition was a highly ambiguous one; an indication of that was his short visit to the lap of the Church of Rome. After this episode, Boswell visited Rome in his grand tour: 'Then St. Peter's in grand frame. Prayed fervent to the unchangeable Father of all to drive away melancholy and keep clouds of Presbyterian Sundays from rendering mind gloomy.' Without going into the theological and personal psychological aspects, it seems to be clear that, in Boswell's eyes, the two religious traditions represented totally different interpretation of the human civilization: the one was connected with the developed sense of form, aesthetical magnificence and ceremony; the other with informality, frankness and the lack of sense of beauty: 'This being Good Friday, I endeavoured to excite in my mind a devout and solemn frame. In my opinion the annual return of such holy seasons is of great use. Men are thus kept in mind of religion, and their affections are improved. The Churches of Rome and England in this particular have a great advantage over the Presbyterians. Regularity and ceremony are of much advantage.' An impression of a Presbyterian service crystallizes the essential: 'I thought this would have done me good. But I found the reverse. Blair's New Kirk delivery and the Dissenters roaring out the Psalms sitting on their backsides, together with the extempore prayers, and in short the vulgar idea of the Presbyterian worship, made me very gloomy. I therefore hastened from this place to St. Paul's, where I heard the conclusion of service, and had my mind

set right again.’ In an essay, Boswell wrote on the ‘religious taste’, which referred to the sophistication and complexity of the outer forms of religious life.

After moving to London, Boswell tried to perform a kind of metamorphosis. He developed a detailed programme of self-fashioning whose aim was to polish off the provincial rudeness and to produce a perfect London man of fashion. Boswell’s *Journal* can be seen both as a record of the project of self-fashioning and as its medium. The final aim was to produce a cool, distant, opaque but easily behaving metropolitan figure. The provincial point of departure was characterized naturalistically by Boswell: ‘...I threw myself loose as a heedless, dissipated, rattling fellow who might say or do every ridiculous thing. ...I found myself a very inferior being.’ The next comical sketches illustrate the process of metamorphosis in its initial phase. The visit of Scottish fellow countrymen was wrongly timed: ‘To tell the plain truth, I was vexed at their coming. For to see just the plain *hamely* Fife family hurt my grand ideas of London. Besides, I was now upon a plan of studying polite reserved behaviour, which is the only way keep up dignity of character.’ The provincial visitors were incompetent to understand the nature of the project: ‘Had they not come for a twelvemonth, I should have been somewhat established in my address, but as I had been but a fortnight from them, I could not without the appearance of strong affectation appear much different from what they had seen me. I accordingly was very free, but rather more silent, which they imputed to my dullness, and roasted me about London’s not being agreeable to me.’ The uncultivated newcomer had to be transformed to the metropolitan gentleman whose appearance included the hiding of inner feelings, a polished and easy conduct, a brilliant public show.

‘I am an ancient baron, and I would by no means estrange myself from Auchinleck the romantick seat of my Ancestors...’ Boswell wrote to a friend in 1783. A ‘rattling fellow’ was raw material which had to be polished to a new form. But what about Boswell’s second Scottish self, the ‘old Scots baron’? How does this kind of identification go with a sophisticated metropolitan gentleman? There is little doubt that it was partly a romantic object of identification generated by a restless imagination. On the other hand, the figure can be seen as part of Boswell’s interpretation on civilization

and civilized way of life. In Germany, Boswell reflected the nature of a Scottish feudal lord. For him, Germany was an ideal place to learn French and polite behaviour because here it was possible in a familiar rugged milieu; on the contrary, ‘the delicious countries of the south’ were not unproblematic: it is true that there a man can ‘enrich his mind with a variety of brilliant ideas, and to give his manners a still finer polish. But let him not stay there too long. Let him not remain in the Italian sun till his Caledonian iron is melted.’ Boswell reverted to the matter in a letter from the same period: ‘The German formality and state pleases me much, for I am the true old Scots baron.’ In the first sight it seems to be that the fragments would refer to the archaic and rural feudal reality which had nothing to do with the metropolitan lifestyle or the courtly milieu. Nevertheless I would call attention to the terms formality and state; they are very similar with the terms with which Boswell illustrates religious experiences in the sphere of the Church of Rome or the Church of England. The letter was written immediately after Boswell’s enter to the courtly circles of Berlin, so the context is *‘la cour et la ville’*, not an archaic rural milieu. It is far removed from Addison’s and Steele’s ideal of the moderate and informal urban gentleman.

Boswell made two well known voyages to the periphery regions of Europe: as a young man, he made a trip to Corsica inspired by Rousseau, and the other excursion was made with Doctor Johnson to the Highlands of Scotland. It is typical of Boswell’s accounts of these journeys that he, travelling in periphery regions, focused attention to the marks of highly developed civilization, not to the primitive or archaic traits of the local culture. In Corsica, he noticed with fascination how a certain Signor Barbacci offered a dinner of twelve courses ‘served on Dresden china, with a desert, different sorts of wine...’ Boswell was asking, with astonishment, the host of the dinners that ‘...in what country he could shew me greater luxury than I had seen in his house.’ Later in the journey, Boswell received ‘...many civilities at Corte from Signor Bocciacombe, and from Signor Massessi the Great Chancellor.’

The account of the journey to the Highlands is ever more illustrating. Here Boswell met Lord Erroll – ‘the representative of the ancient Boyds of Kilmarnock’ – in whose person the modern man of fashion appeared in the disguise of ‘old Scots baron’.

The conduct of Lord Erroll was characterized that he had ‘agreeable of manners and softness of address’. Mr. Boyd, the brother of the Lord who had spent many years in France, ‘...entertained us with great civility. He had a pompousness or formal plenitude in his conversation, which I did not dislike.’ Boswell came to conclude that he was ‘...exceedingly pleased with Lord Erroll. His dignified person and agreeable countenance, with the most unaffected affability, gave me high satisfaction. From perhaps a weakness, or, as I rather hope, more fancy and warmth of feeling than is quite reasonable, my mind is ever impressed with admiration for persons of high birth.’ The noble host was not represented as a archaic feudal lord, rounded by tenants and neighbours, devoted to the primitive pleasures, but as a cultivated man of fashion with ‘agreeable manners and softness of address’. Lord Errol’s Scottish residence is a drawing room of the London high society moved to the Highlands.

In this brief paper I have tried to show that, as reflecting his tripartite identity, Boswell formulated the general concept of the basic conditions of the civilized form of life. The distinctive feature in his viewpoint of politeness is, that at the same time as it was totally urban – according to Boswell, the sense of his project of self-fashioning was that *London* demanded a certain kind of outer appearance – it adopted, more than from Addison and Steele, from the code of aristocratic court politeness. In his concept of politeness, Boswell combined the Enlightenment idea of polishing of the human nature with a very aristocratic emphasis. A certain Mrs. Cholmondeley ‘is a pretty-looking woman, lively and entertaining, with that fine gay polish of manners which is only to be acquired in the genteel company.’ The clearest formulation was the depiction of Mr Beauclerk’s drawing room: ‘Lady Di and her two brothers, Lord Robert and Lord Charles Spencer, were there. I was pleased with seeing people of high fashion, who, though no doubt of the same clay of which we all are made, have had it refined, and are like figures on Indian earth.’ Again we meet the idea of the cultivation of natural material. It is crucial to notice how the civilized humanity was compared with the work of art. In Boswell, the fashioning of the polite self has to be seen as an aesthetical project, which, by polishing outer appearance and behaviour, aimed to create a kind of object of art – an aesthetical artefact without any references to the inner qualities.