

The Writing of David Hume's *My Own Life*: The Persona of the Philosopher and the Philosopher Manqué

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The question of what the appropriate genre terms are in which to consider the philosopher David Hume's (1711–76) *My own Life* (with a published version appearing in 1777 as *The Life of David Hume, Esq. Written by himself*) is examined through the detailed discussion of 10 significant amendments, excisions and insertions that Hume made to the original manuscript. Ideas about self-biography, autobiography, philosophical autobiography, persona of the philosopher and philosopher manqué are discussed in relation to Hume's writing of the manuscript as indicated by these amendments; and the epigraphic nature of *My own Life* is considered in relation to Hume's work as a whole.

...another man may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continued which he calls *himself*; though I am certain there is no such principle in me.

(David Hume *The Philosophical Works, Volume I*, 1825: 321)

INTRODUCTION: 'LACKING THE USUAL ATTRACTIONS OF THE GENRE'

Debates about 'writing lives' are by no means new, occurring across the long eighteenth century (1670 to 1830) and in part fuelled by philosophical discussions questioning the nature of identity and perceptions, particularly by Locke and Hume (Aaron, 1978; Browning, 1980; Longaker, 1971; Nussbaum, 1989; Spacks, 2003; Treadwell, 2005). In Britain, biography was well established though itself 'under development' from the start of the period. Autobiographical writings were produced in a variety of

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interconnected forms, including testimony, legal deposition and religious apologia, with an exponential growth in 'self-biography' or autobiography from approximately the 1780s on, published because of readers' curiosity rather than moral edification, and with publishers' desire for volume sales giving rise to 'collected' as well as individual lives.

These developments are a backcloth to the consideration here of what the appropriate genre terms might be within which to situate the philosopher David Hume's¹ – Hume's what? The key question is what to call it and so I will for now defer attributing a genre to the short text written by Hume on 18 April 1776 and known either as the manuscript *My own Life* or as the book *The Life of David Hume, Esq. Written by himself*, the first edition of which was published in March 1777, preceded by a brief untitled preface by Hume's publisher William Strahan and followed by a lengthy letter to Strahan by Hume's friend Adam Smith. An interesting light is thrown on what a written 'life' might consist of through examining the process of writing that Hume engaged in, the ways in which authorial purposes as well as the actual practices of writing can be traced out around the manuscript of *My own Life*, and contemporary reactions to the publication of *The Life of David Hume*. These matters are explored here through a detailed examination of Hume's original manuscript and its relationship to the posthumously published *The Life of David Hume*.²

As Hume was one of the central figures in Enlightenment philosophy, his writings, including those concerned with selves and identity, continue to receive enormous scholarly attention (see for example the contributions on 'Personal Identity' in Tweyman, 1995, Volume III: 627–745). By contrast, the few present-day discussions of *My own Life* treat this particular text as a puzzlingly slight work, given Hume's intellectual stature and the sophistication of his other work (although its 1777 publication actually occasioned contemporary controversy, as had various of Hume's earlier publications).³ Even recent theorists of eighteenth-century biography have largely ignored *My own Life*, while according importance and influence to Hume's ideas about selves elsewhere in his writings (Nussbaum, 1989; Spacks, 2003; Treadwell, 2005). *My own Life* has not fared much better in readings from philosophers either. For instance, A. J. Ayer's discussion of Hume's overall thinking includes just one comment on it:

David Hume, to my mind the greatest of all British philosophers, was born at Edinburgh on what, in the old calendar, was 26 April 1711. In his valedictory *My Own Life*, an autobiography running to only five pages, which Hume composed in April 1776, four months before his death, he showed pride in coming of good family, on both sides. His father, Joseph Home . . . his mother, Katherine . . .

(Ayer, 1980: 1)

For Ayer, then, *My own Life* is a valediction, a short autobiography, and a source of some facts about Hume's family pride.

In general, commentators are somewhat confounded by *My own Life*. Fourteen pages from Donald Siebert (1995), an eighteenth-century literature specialist, provide the sole discussion of this text in a mammoth six-volume re-assessment of Hume's work, with Siebert commenting that:

David Hume's is a remarkable autobiography, even though it may lack the usual attractions of that genre . . . in spite of Hume's failure to admit mistakes and the pervasive self-assurance, *My own Life* is not an insufferably vain work . . . *My own Life* is unquestionably a short history, shorter indeed than most of Hume's admirers and even his enemies might wish for . . . a man's works and his works are inextricably connected . . . here we have Hume putting the finishing touches on his own life's work. What kind of man was he? Though Hume's *Life* is brief, let no one doubt that Hume has taken pains to indicate precisely how that question ought to be answered. The impression must be as favourable as possible.

(Siebert, 1995: 388, 389, 390)

Siebert's account sees *My own Life* as a flawed but revealing autobiography, concluding that 'It is surely the man, as much as we would say those other famous memoirs [by Rousseau, Franklin, Gibbon] embody their subjects' (Siebert, 1995: 400). And Shlomit Schuster, in overviewing autobiographies by philosophers and theorizing a specifically 'philosophical autobiography' sub-genre, struggles to fit *My own Life* within her definition of what philosophical autobiography is:

'*My Own Life*' provides a precise account of how *A Treatise of Human Nature* came about . . . He appears here regretful and apologetic for its too early publication. This is not the only apology made in '*My Own Life*': Hume's final paragraph is an apology for autobiography . . . He . . . concludes the last page 'historically' . . . portrays himself as self-controlled and of a mild disposition . . . However, Hume remains uneasy about the moral excellence he ascribes to himself. The last paragraph of '*My Own Life*' is as apologetic as the first.

(Schuster, 2003, ebook: 34–35)

Schuster accomplishes this fit by interpreting *My own Life* as 'a precise account of how *A Treatise of Human Nature* came about, why a recast was needed, and in which books its mature content can be found' (Schuster, 2003, ebook: 34). Indeed, she sees this as the reason it was written, with the apology she perceives in its final paragraph being matched by another apology about 'vanity' at its start.

However, *My own Life* is not valedictory in the sense of being just 'a leave taking'; as the later discussion of Hume's writing process here

will indicate, it is far more artful and purposeful than this. Nor is it an autobiography in the now usual sense of the term, providing neither an account of the interiority of the writer nor of the social networks of the writer's life. To treat a few lines mentioning the social position of Hume's family as a rationale for reading the whole text as concerning family pride is to take the word 'vanity' both too literally and also ahistorically. That is, this removes 'vanity' from its eighteenth-century meaning of 'that which has no value' and considers it only in the personal sense of being vain, as an attribute of self and identity, both concepts which Hume interrogated and drew some distance from. Also, to see it as a 'philosophical autobiography', in the form of an extended apology, involves largely ignoring what happens between its first and last paragraphs. And while it bears some resemblance to ideas about 'self-biography' current at mid-century, it has a considerably closer relationship with Hume's (1740; 1748) earlier thinking about identity matters. However, ideas about 'the persona of the philosopher',⁴ which explore a person's philosophical *oeuvre* through their cultivation of a particular kind of self and way of life, are much more helpful in thinking about *My own Life* and will be returned to later (see Gaukroger, 2004; Green and Broad, 2004; Haakonssen, 2004; Hunter, 2004; see also Mullan, 1988; Secomb, 1999; Siebert, 1990; Spencer, 2000).

HUME WRITING ABOUT *MY OWN LIFE*

Is any light thrown on such interpretational differences by examining what Hume himself wrote about *My own Life*, as well as by what he wrote in it? There are two relevant sources regarding what Hume wrote about it: Hume's will and the codicils he made to it mentioning *My own Life* and his other then-unpublished writings; and Hume's letters in which *My own Life* is discussed or mentioned.

Hume's extant will was made on 4 January 1776 (Mossner, 1980: 591–93). In a 15 April 1776 codicil, Hume's brother – and after his brother's death, Hume's nephew David – was named as his heir and executor.⁵ Following this, in a 3 May 1776 codicil, Hume's friend Adam Smith was given full discretionary power over Hume's manuscripts. Then in a letter to his publisher William Strahan in London of 12 June 1776, Hume stated he had made a codicil making Strahan 'entirely Master' of his manuscripts. Then on 7 August 1776, a final codicil was made, that *My own Life* and Hume's two *Dialogues concerning natural religion*⁶ were to be revoke to Hume's nephew David if not published by Smith, acting with Strahan, within three years.

From Hume's letters,⁷ it appears that, from trusting Adam Smith to see his remaining manuscripts – and specifically the *Dialogues* – into publication,

Hume became aware that Smith's worries about a negative public response damaging Hume's reputation might lead to them being in effect suppressed, albeit for what Smith deemed good reason. Thus on 3 May 1776 Hume wrote to Smith from London, commenting that 'I send you enclosed an ostensible Letter, conformably to your Desire' (Greig, 1932, Vol. II: 316–17), with Smith's desire here being that publication should be left entirely to his discretion. Hume wrote in this 'ostensible letter' that 'You will find among my Papers a very inoffensive Piece, called *My own Life*, which I composed a few days before I left Edinburgh, when I thought, as did all my friends, that my Life was despaired of. There can be no Objection, that this small piece should be sent to Messrs Strahan and Cadell and the Proprietors of my other Works to be prefixed to any future Edition of them' (Greig, 1932, Vol. II: 317–18).

The to-ing and fro-ing of letters between Hume and Smith eventuated in Hume adding the final 7 August 1776 codicil to his will already mentioned, that the manuscripts of the *Dialogues* and *My own Life* would revoke to his nephew if not published within three years. Then in response to a letter from Smith dated 22 August 1776, Hume wrote to Smith on 23 August 1776 that 'There is no Man in whom I have a greater Confidence than Mr Strahan, yet have I left the property of that Manuscript [the *Dialogues*] to my Nephew David in case by any accident it should not be published within three years of my decease', adding also that 'You are too good in thinking any trifles that concern me are so much worth your attention, but I give you entire liberty to make what Additions you please to the account of my Life' (Greig, 1932, Vol. II: 335–36). This statement from Hume came in direct response to a suggestion in Smith's 22 August 1776 letter, in which Smith had written 'If you will give me leave I will add a few lines to your account of your own life, giving some account, in my own name, of your behaviour in this last illness' (see Greig, 1932, Vol. II: 336). The particular examples of Hume's stoicism in the face of terminal illness provided in this letter make it abundantly clear that Smith's well-known letter of 9 November 1776 to William Strahan, published at the end of *The Life of David Hume*, is in fact itself an ostensible letter, one written for a specific public purpose, publication, with its contents almost exactly the same as this August letter to Hume.

William Strahan was Hume's main publisher in London. Concerning Strahan's role in relation to *My own Life*, on 8 June 1776 Hume had written to him from Bath concerning his own further decline in health. Hume made detailed comments in this letter's second paragraph about the proposed new edition of his collected works then being prepared by Strahan, in its third paragraph about who to send copies of this to, in its fourth paragraph about *My own Life*, and in its fifth paragraph about his other work and especially the *Dialogues*, attempting to persuade Strahan that he

should publish these forthwith. The fourth paragraph concerning *My own Life* states that:

If this Event [his death] shall happen, as is Probable, before the Publication of this Edition, there is one Request I have to make to you: before I left Edinburgh, I wrote a small piece (you may believe it would be but a small one) which I call the History of my own Life: I desire it may be prefixed to this Edition: It will be thought curious and entertaining. My brother or Dr Adam Smith will send it to you, and I shall give them Directions to that Purpose.

(8 June 1776, David Hume to William Strahan;
Greig, 1932, Vol. II: 322–24)

The codicils to Hume's will show that publication of *My own Life* as well as the *Dialogues* was important enough for him to ensure that it would see the light of published day, by his nephew or through him by an eventual posterity, if not by Smith and Strahan. Hume's comments about *My own Life* across his letters to Smith and Strahan add emphasis to this in a number of respects. His 8 June 1776 letter to Strahan states that *My own Life* could only be a 'small piece', with it remaining ambiguous whether this was because of his health, or because of factors connected with his purposes in writing it, something returned to later. This letter also refers to it very precisely as 'the History of my own Life', not as a self-biography, the term then used, nor even as 'a life written by himself', which is how Smith and Strahan represented it in March 1777 on the title page of the book they published.⁸ Hume also proposed in his letter of 3 May 1776 to Smith that neither Smith himself nor Strahan could object to anything in *My own Life*, that it was 'inoffensive', and so should be published without delay. This is *contra* it being seen as 'objectionable' in the way the *Dialogues* might be, though Hume does his best to persuade Smith and Strahan in his letters to them that the *Dialogues* would not occasion any great negative reactions (and in the event, Hume was correct).

The purpose Hume envisaged for *My own Life* was to act as the prefix – a precise word, as preface was in use at this time as well, with prefix indicating adding to the meaning of a text which follows – to the new edition of Hume's collected works then in progress, and concerning which he was sending corrections and amendments to Strahan even a few short weeks before his death. There was no suggestion from Hume that it should be published separately, that it might stand alone and separate from his collected works. In this context, Hume had agreed that Smith could make some additions to it, and in Hume's understanding this meant Smith would make additions to *My own Life* as a prefix to the new edition of his collected works. Also Hume had commented that, when published in this way, it would be thought 'curious and entertaining'. Again, these are precise words. 'Curious' here bears a number of meanings, in particular as

in bestowing care or being studious, the sense used by Johnson among others in the 1780s; and also in the sense of being particular about details, as in use in the 1750s and 60s. And the word ‘entertaining’ was used most likely because, as John Sturrock (1993) has commented and later discussion here will confirm, there are various passages in *My own Life* that are obliquely directed to an in-group of readers, familiars to Hume.

Some crucial points here to be returned to are that *My own Life* was written as a prefix to Hume’s collected works as a whole; it is the history of some of his writings rather than a self-biography; it is a studied, particular and careful piece of writing, the fate of which Hume took some trouble over; and Hume thought some readers, probably his close friends, would find it entertaining. What now follows traces out those aspects of Hume’s writing process that are marked on the manuscript of *My own Life*, before returning to a consideration of the wider issues arising.

HUME WRITING *MY OWN LIFE*

What is under scrutiny here is Hume’s original manuscript. The focus is not on the text of the 1777 first edition of *The Life of David Hume*, nor on Mossner’s (1980: 611–15) transcription of the manuscript, the version that perhaps most present-day readers come across. It is instead on my own detailed transcription of the original manuscript, which includes all of Hume’s excisions, insertions and other amendments, so as to produce a much busier and more active text than most readers of Hume’s work are accustomed to. In the discussion of this which follows, the emphasis is not the content of *My own Life*, but specifically the traces left of Hume’s actual writing of it, the amendments that mark the progress of his pen on that day in April 1776 when the manuscript was written.

There are some 17 significant marks of this kind, as well as less significant changes to correct simple mistakes. For word-count reasons, 10 of the more significant changes will be discussed, selected because they provide interesting insight into Hume’s writing process. Following this, what these marks of writing *My own Life* add up to, together with what they suggest about the ‘persona of the philosopher’, will be discussed in the conclusion.

From where and to whom

18 of April 1776

My own Life

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 shall contain little more than the History of my Writings ; as indeed, almost all my Life has been spent in literary Pursuits and Occupations. The first Success of most of ^{^my^} writings was not such as to be an Object of Vanity.

The first example does not in fact concern any *change* made by Hume, but rather how he marked the opening page of the manuscript to 'this Narrative' that will be the 'History of my Writings'. No addressee is named, although Hume commences *My own Life* in a textual sense by speaking ('It is difficult for a man to speak long of himself'), then writing ('that I pretend at all to write my Life'), so there is the strong sense of an implicit addressee who is being spoken and written to. That is, this is a kind of letter, or perhaps an epistle, addressed to an unknown audience, perhaps a particular person or perhaps the general one of 'the future' when the letter might finally 'arrive', in the sense of a more positive audience for Hume's writings as an *oeuvre* having been gained.

The layout of the opening of *My own Life* is exactly that of many of Hume's letters, which by the 1770s start with a date and an address as well as an addressee (in earlier letters, the date was often at the end). Consequently its epistolary flavour is even more pronounced when considering its layout, which is reproduced in the extract above.⁹ Its 'date and address' form is a feature that has, however, vanished from the printed first edition, because the date has been moved from the start to the end of the manuscript, with 'My own Life' centred as though a title, rather than as Hume positions it, which is as a kind of place that he was writing the manuscript from. Also interesting here is that the manuscript text appears *under* a date, '18 of April 1776', and not *above* it as in the first edition, so there is actually no guarantee in the manuscript that it was in fact necessarily all written on the same day, as many commentators have taken for granted.¹⁰

From 'it' to 'them'

Never literary Attempt was more ~~unsuccessful~~ ^{^unfortunate^} than my Treatise of human Nature. It fell *dead-born from the Press* ; without reaching ~~that~~ ^{^such^} distinction as even to excite a Murmur among the Zealots. But being naturally of a cheerful and sanguine Temper, I very soon recovered ~~that~~ ^{^the^} Blow, and prosecuted with great Ardour my Studies in the Country. In 1742, I ~~gave~~ printed at Edinburgh the first part of my Essays : The work was favourably received, and soon made me entirely forget my former Disappointment.

On my return ~~to London~~, ^{^from Italy^} I had the Mortification to find all England in a Ferment on account

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of Dr. Middleton's Free Enquiry ; while my Performance was entirely overlooked and neglected. A new Edition, which had been published at London of my Essays, moral and political, ~~was not much more successful.~~ ^met not with a much better reception^.

In these extracts from paragraphs 6 and 8 of Hume's manuscript, words are excised from both which might imply that Hume's writings were in themselves unsuccessful. The changes made place the emphasis instead, through Hume's excisions and insertions, onto the *reception* of the *Treatise* and his *Essays*, rather than their ideas, arguments or conceptual structure. In the first extract from paragraph 6, 'unfortunate' replaces 'unsuccessful', while the longer excision and insertion at the end of the extract from paragraph 8 emphasizes that Hume's concern was to put across that it was the public response to, rather than the intrinsic qualities of, his *Treatise* and *Essays* that was at issue.

The paragraph 8 extract concerns Middleton having raised questions about the facticity of some biblical miracles, while Hume had rejected their occurrence altogether; there had been considerable excitement and debate around Middleton's book, but with the neglect of Hume's more challenging work. This provides an ironic comment on the unpredictable oddities of circumstance, something that Hume's philosophical ideas about identities and circumstances insist upon.

Answering to versus replying to

... my former Publications (all but the unfortunate Treatise) were beginning to be the Subject of Conversation, that the Sale of them was gradually encreasing, and that new Editions were demanded. Answers, by Reverends and Right Reverends, came out two or three in a Year : And I found by Dr Warburton's Railing that the Books were beginning to be esteemed in good Company. However, I had fixed a Resolution, which I inflexibly maintained, never to ~~answer~~ ^reply to^ any body ; and not being very irascible in my Temper, I have easily kept myself ^?well^ clear of all literary Squabbles.

There is another wry or ironic comment in this extract from paragraph 9, which concerns the unintended effects of Dr Warburton's 'railing' in giving publicity to, and gaining a greater readership for, Hume's work. More importantly, the excision of 'answer' and the insertion of 'reply to' removes the possibility that readers might suppose that Hume would 'answer' the 'Reverends and Right Reverends' in the sense of 'answering to' someone in authority or superior, with 'reply' being a more dialogical

and reciprocal term. Hume's amendment here, as with the extracts earlier from paragraphs 6 and 8, involves him emphasizing the untoward reception of his work rather than its intrinsic qualities, and also ensuring that his equality with his critics is conveyed.

The ruling passion

In the same Year was published at London my Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals, which, in my ^{own} opinion (who ought not to judge on that subject) is of all my writings, historical ~~or~~ philosophical, ~~and~~ ^{or} literary, incomparably the best : It came unnoticed and unobserved into the World.

The list of the types of Hume's writing in this extract from paragraph 10 was initially 'historical or philosophical', with Hume then starting to move on to the next part of the sentence, but stopping, excising 'and' and then inserting 'or', to enable him to finish the list with 'literary'. In the third paragraph of *My own Life*, Hume had been careful to state that he was 'seized very early with a passion for Literature, which has been the ruling Passion of my Life' and, notably, he does not present himself anywhere in *My own Life* as 'a philosopher'. However, the excision here seems to indicate that Hume was making a mindful choice to present himself in a 'literary' rather than 'philosophical' way.

Hume is consequently being very precise about representing himself as a man of letters, of writing generally. And in a narrow sense he avoids, even if he does not disavow, describing himself as a philosopher. It is certainly correct that Hume throughout distances himself from *A Treatise of Human Nature* but not his other work, and his explanation for this is that he published it before its ideas were properly worked out, thereby inadvertently occasioning the critical response it did. However, he then has the same job to perform concerning the negative reception to other books, which he ascribes to 'Zealots' as well as critics. However, he does not explain anywhere in *My own Life* the basis of such criticisms (which to a large extent came from religious bigotry against Hume as a non-believer).

From 'it was' to 'I was assailed by'

I then formed the Plan of writing the History of England ... I ~~began~~ ^{commenced} with the Accession of the House of Stuart ... as the Subject was ~~proper~~ suited to every Capacity, I expected proportional Applause : But miserable was my Disappointment : ~~It was~~ ^{I was assailed by} one Cry of Reproach, Disapprobation, and even Detestation.

The significant change in this extract from paragraph 11 is the excision of ‘it was’ and the replacement insertion of ‘I was assailed by’. This has the effect of shifting the meaning away from happenstance concerning the public reaction to his Stuart history, to there having been an assail, an attack, on ‘I’, on him as a person, and is consonant with the changes already referred to regarding paragraphs 6, 8, 9 and 10. Moreover, the litany of the ‘assails’ in this passage as involving reproach, disapprobation and ‘even Detestation’ emphasize their extraordinary nature, that they resulted from orchestration (and which had adversely affected his candidature for a number of academic positions).

Removing ‘ana’

Those who have not seen the strange Effect of Modes will never imagine the Reception I met with at Paris, from Men and Women of all Ranks and Stations. The more I recoiled from their excessive Civilities, the more I was loaded with them. ~~Dr Sterne told me, that he [?about fifteen unreadable worlds] But he added, that ?his ?Vogue ?Lasted ?Only ?One ?Winter~~ There is, however, a real Satisfaction in living at Paris from the great Number of sensible, knowing, and polite Company with which the City abounds.

The lengthy excision in this extract from paragraph 18 removes what could be read as tittle-tattle from Lawrence Sterne and also tones down the criticism Hume is making of the effects of ‘modes’ in Paris on how people behaved. But more importantly, it involves Hume removing traces of ‘ana’, that is, removing the sayings and conversation of people he knew. *My own Life* contains no signs of the interiority of Hume as an individual self; there are also few traces in it of the social groups and friendship networks he was part of either, apart from this ‘absent/present’ excision in the manuscript. Indeed, more strongly, although various of the men that Hume worked for are mentioned, together with some of the key events occurring during the time he did so, his many friends are entirely absent from the text, although the names of some critics appear.

A supplementary reading of this passage is that Hume wanted specifically to remove this sign of his acquaintance with Sterne, because he was at the time considered a lightweight, and also because retaining the reference to Sterne would have meant Johnson entering *My own Life* by the back door. That is, Johnson’s strong disapproval of the ‘ungodly’ Hume was well known in the circles both moved in, while Sterne was closely connected with Johnson, and also gossip had (erroneously) claimed that Hume and Sterne had quarrelled in Paris on the subject of religion (see Mossner, 1980: 501–503).

'A life' as external events and temporal succession

In [^]the beginning of [^]1766, I left Paris, ~~and the same year,~~ [^]and next summer [^]went to Edinburgh, with [^]the [^]same View [^]as formerly [^]of burying myself in a philosophical Retreat . . . But in 1767, I received [^]from Mr Conway [^]an invitation to be Under-Secretary . . . I returned [^]to Edinburgh [^]in 1769, very opulent.

Throughout the manuscript of *My own Life*, there are many insertions and omissions which make dates, places and the succession of events considerably more precise. There are five such in even this short extract from paragraph 19, with others in various of the extracts discussed earlier, emphasizing the temporal junctures and specific locations of these events and occurrences that Hume is writing about. It is notable that the manuscript of *My own Life* is organized around temporal succession and not implied causation. That is, events simply follow earlier events, with Hume writing no 'explanation' of the how and why of these. And apart from writing about his feeling for literature and not law or commerce near the start, Hume assigns no agentic role to the various things he did, but rather by implication presents these as him responding to externalities. Also the terms he uses to describe his character as an equable and mild one are ones that present him in a non-agentic way.

I, it, his person and his spirits

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 upon a speedy Dissolution. I have suffered very little pain from ~~it~~ ; [^]my Disorder [^]and what is [^]more [^]strange, have, notwithstanding the great Decline of my Person, never suffered a Moment's Abatement of my ~~Abatement~~ Spirits : Insomuch, that were I to ~~choose~~ [^]name [^]the Period of my Life which I shoud [^]most [^]choose to pass over again I might be tempted to ~~name~~ [^]point to [^]this later Period.

In this extract from paragraph 20, the penultimate paragraph of *My own Life*, Hume's writing carefully distinguishes between 'I', the 'it' that is the 'Disorder', his 'Person' and his 'Spirits'. In making these excisions and insertions, Hume was very specific about 'it', the 'Disorder in his bowels'. The 'Decline of his Person' follows, but it is not causally linked. Then his 'Spirits' are treated as distinct from his 'Person' and its decline. Also the changes to the last sentence here, starting 'Insomuch', have the effect of emphasizing the dominance of 'Spirits', because Hume then writes that if required he would 'most choose' the period in which this has happened as the one he would like to 'pass over again'.

This directly links to Hume's ideas about identity in his earlier overtly philosophical writings in a number of ways. Not only is there no fixed principle assigned to identity, but also being separated out here into almost unrelated dimensions. Events and their succession are treated as impacting on his 'person', but not his spirits; and the decline of his bodily person is presented as occurring almost of its own accord. And although his person might be experiencing a 'speedy dissolution', his spirits the text insists are such that if he could choose a period of time to live over again, it would be this very time in which he, or rather his person, was dying.

Character and matters of fact

To conclude historically with my ^{own} Character. I am, or rather was (for that is the Style I must now use ~~with any~~ in speaking of myself ; which emboldens 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. Even my Love of literary Fame, my ruling Passion, never soured my humour, notwithstanding my frequent Disappointments. My Company was not unacceptable to the young and careless, as well as to the Studious and literary : And as I took a particular Pleasure in the Company of modest women, I had no Reason to be displeas'd with the Reception I met with from them. In a word, though most men, any wise eminent, have found reason to complain of Calumny, I never was touch'd, or even attack'd by her baleful Tooth : And though I wantonly expos'd myself to the Rage of both civil and religious Factions, they seem'd to be disarm'd in my behalf of their wonted Fury : My Friends never had occasion to vindicate any one Circumstance of my Character and Conduct: Not but that the Zealots ^{we may well suppose} wou'd have been glad to invent ^{and propagate} any Story to my Disadvantage, but they could never find

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find any which, they thought, wou'd wear the Face of Probability. I cannot say, there is no Vanity in making this funeral Oration of myself; but ^{I hope} it is not a misplac'd one ; and this is a Matter of Fact which is easily clear'd and ascertain'd.

This is the entirety of the last paragraph of *My own Life*. It starts, rather unnervingly for present-day readers, with Hume commenting that he must now 'speak' of himself in the past tense of 'I was' rather than 'I am'. He then does this throughout this paragraph without mistake – 'I was . . . a man', 'my Company was not', 'I had no Reason', 'I never was touch'd' – until the

end of its final sentence on page 13, when Hume actively 'is' again, with 'I cannot say' and 'I hope it is'.

The manuscript of *My own Life* consists of three sheets of paper, 9 inches by 14 inches, which are folded together in their middle, giving six double-sided sheets and 12 sides of paper; and there is another similar sheet, folded in the same way, and attached, but written on only the first four lines of its first side, the page numbered 13 by Hume. Hume, then, clearly set out to write something short, of around 12 of these folded pages in length. Equally clearly, the entirety of the last sentence of *My own Life* was important, important enough for Hume to take another sheet, fold it, and write only the last few lines of the sentence on its first page, page 13, leaving the rest blank. This last sentence comments that, whatever vanity is involved in writing such a thing, he hopes it is not misplaced.

Does Hume here intend 'vanity' as the word is generally understood now and as many of his present-day readers, including Siebert and Schuster, as noted earlier, have presupposed? Against this, the context suggests that the word means, to quote Hume's opening paragraph, 'that I pretend at all to write my Life'. This is in part because writing 'my life' flouted conventions concerning a properly civil and 'Attic' rectitude about personal matters. But it is in greater part because writing 'a life' of *any* kind attaches an emphasis to 'I' in a way that Hume was philosophically uncomfortable with and which he had attempted to reduce earlier in the manuscript by the distinctions carefully drawn between 'I', 'Person', 'Spirits' and the 'it' of disorder, dissolution and decease.

It is interesting in this regard to note the comment made in the very last sentence of the manuscript, concerning Hume's vanity or otherwise being 'a Matter of Fact'. This could be taken as meaning that it is only the externals about a person that can be 'cleared and ascertained' by others; that is, as a factual history of external events, rather than as a self-biography with interiority and the ana of social life. However, it would also be consistent with Hume's views in *A Treatise* . . . if this was being applied to externally verifiable aspects of 'character' or identity as well, because for Hume such externalities were what identity added up to.

'TO WRITE MY LIFE'

My own Life, then, inscribes the same conundrum that exercised Hume elsewhere in his writings on matters of identity, and which he famously felt unable to resolve. This is that intellectually he evacuates 'I' as having any fixed 'principle'; and yet it is 'I' that writes, does this and that, and has continuity; and the writings and the person of 'I' are assailed by others, who also ascribe continuity and fixity to this 'I'. And be the 'it' of Hume's disorder, the 'I' of his person, and the spirits of his character,

never so teased apart, all of them will cease together on the decease of the 'I' for whom writing *My own Life* was some kind of 'Funeral Oration'. I now want to consider how this plays out in relation to those traces of Hume's writing process which are marked on the manuscript of *My own Life*, to comment on what these excisions, insertions and amendments add up to, to consider why he saw *My own Life* as 'entertaining', and also to look at what light, if any, can be thrown on what kind of an 'it' in genre terms *My own Life* might be.

Hume clearly had a specific purpose in mind concerning how and where *My own Life* should appear in print: he presented it to Smith and Strahan as a prefix, a careful choice of word, to his works as a whole. And by acting as the prefix to the whole, Hume is using this text inscribing his fractured view of self as one lacking 'fixed principle' and which is composed by successive externalities in an epigraphic way – that is, as a key to or metaphor for reading and interpreting his collected works as a whole, as suggested by John Sturrock (1993). It is in this respect that I think Hume commented to Strahan that readers might find *My own Life* 'entertaining'. People familiar with Hume's work and/or familiar with Hume himself would have been aware of his views about identity and his refusal to ascribe 'simple and continued principle' to a notion of self, as in the quotation used as the epigraph to my discussion. *My own Life* both represents this view and, by writing 'I', confounds it, precisely the impasse that Hume had interrogated in *The Treatise of Human Nature* and its Appendix and which he appears to have thought unsolvable. And in this regard, it was perhaps because it was intended as an epigraph prefixing his collected works that Hume had commented in his 8 June 1776 letter to Strahan that it would need to be 'but a small one'.

There is no indication, neither in the text of *My own Life* nor in Hume's letters, that he saw himself as producing a self-biography. Its many excisions, insertions and other amendments indicate that *My own Life* was written in a precise and careful way – it is indeed a 'curious' production in this sense of the word. The opening of the manuscript very precisely presents this text as providing a history of Hume's writings, with literature being his ruling passion. However, later in it Hume presents his writings as concerned with history and philosophy, but amends this to add literature to the list, suggesting some reluctance publicly to claim the category 'philosopher' – and perhaps also implying that the insistence on literature as his ruling passion was a matter of public presentation. And signs of a concern concerning this highly sociable man have been almost entirely omitted, and when they were included in the manuscript they were then excised. Relatedly, there is no interiority given to the writing 'I' – even the final paragraph assessment of Hume's 'character' provides this in a way that turns the assessment round to matters of external verifiable fact which can be ascertained by others. Moreover, the very last point that Hume made in

My own Life, about his writing a 'Funeral Oration' and this having value, was so important to him that he prepared more paper of the appropriate size and wrote those extra few lines stating this.

So do these excisions, insertions and amendments on the manuscript of *My own Life* throw any light on matters of genre and, more importantly, on how to understand this manuscript? In my view they do, although perhaps not in an entirely straightforward way.

My own Life is not quite a self-biography; nor is it, as it was titled by Smith and/or Strahan, 'The Life of David Hume Written by himself'. It is a history of Hume's writings with some, mainly related, externalities of his life, which would act as a suitable prefix to his collected works as a whole. In evacuating interiority to 'I', it has a clear mirror-writing relationship to the discussions of identity and self that appear elsewhere in Hume's work, perhaps particularly in the Appendix to *A Treatise of Human Nature*. It is also in a marked way a kind of letter, one written from a life on a particular date to an unnamed addressee, with its 'funeral Oration' character mentioned in the last few lines on page 13 of the manuscript implying a similar loose kind of addressee that such orations typically have. This is people in general, and the future, the future when Hume's epistle was not only written and, he hoped and planned, sent out into the world, but would eventually have 'arrived', to be read by a sympathetic audience for his collected works.

My own Life is certainly not the 'philosophical autobiography' that Schuster tries to fit it within, thereby ignoring most of its interesting features. But then, it does not inscribe 'the persona of the philosopher' either, or at least not in any very straightforward way. That is, it certainly constructs a particular kind of persona, one that attempts – necessarily contradictorily, in writing 'I' at all – to evacuate 'the principle of himself'. And this is a persona in which, among other things, the writing 'I' – in public writing at least – disowns itself as a philosopher and situates itself more broadly within the framework of literature and writing, while at the same time being intended as an interpretive epigraph condensing Hume's philosophical argument about identity to stand at the head of his collected works. And beyond this, it can also be seen as the inscription of the persona of 'le bon David' (Mossner, 1980: 4, 318, 529), who might not be a philosopher as the world saw this but nonetheless possessed philosophical tranquillity, which Hume had characterized as 'superior to pain, sorrow, anxiety, and each assault of adverse fortune... [This attitude carries] a grandeur... which seizes the spectator, and strikes him with admiration. And the nearer we can approach in practice this tranquillity and indifference... the more greatness of mind shall we discover in the world' (Hume, 1748/1975: 356).

As this discussion has indicated, *My own Life* is not a failed 'proper' autobiography, not a misconceived self-biography as understood at the time,

and not a duplicitous attempt to hide or misrepresent personal detail. Although ‘a life’, it is a written life of a kind conceived and worked out for specifically philosophical purposes. *My own Life* can best be viewed as a piece of mirror-writing, as writing which refracts the ideas about selves and identity present in Hume’s earlier and most definitely philosophical works. It can also be seen as the inscription of the persona of Hume as a writer of literature and a man of letters generally but more especially as someone who had lived ‘the good life’ in his own philosophical terms. *My own Life* in fact inscribes Hume’s persona as a ‘philosopher manqué’, not in the sense of ‘failed’, but rather of eschewing the title while claiming the practice. This persona is very much that of Hume dying as he had lived, without religious beliefs and with a tranquil dispassionate mind. Interestingly, the critical responses to and defences of *The Life of David Hume* after its 1777 publication revolved around claims about the referentiality or otherwise of Hume’s written life in relation to Hume’s actual death (see Mossner, 1980: 621–22, for an overview), lending support to this reading of *My own Life* as the inscription of ‘a persona’, one involving the life and the works of David Hume being presented as a philosopher and a philosophy manqué.

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NOTES

1 David Hume (1711–76) is generally regarded as the most significant philosopher to write in English, a key figure of Enlightenment philosophy, and at the centre of a network of giants of the Scottish Enlightenment, including Adam Ferguson, William Robertson and Adam Smith as well as Hume himself. See Morris, 2001.

2 National Library of Scotland, David Hume Manuscripts, 23159, 23.

3 Some of these responses are discussed in *My own Life*. Fuller details are provided in the relevant parts of Mossner, 1980 in relation to each of Hume’s key publications.

4 I am very grateful to Thomas Ahnert for suggesting I should explore this body of work.

5 National Library of Scotland, David Hume Manuscripts, 23159, 24.

6 Smith and Strahan were anticipating an orchestrated violent response to the *Dialogues* from certain sections of the religious community. In the event, when published in 1779 there was praise mixed with less vociferous criticism than they had feared.

7 Hume's letters are in a number of archive collections. For the published versions, see Greig, 1932; and Klibansky and Mossner, 1954.

8 It is composed by a short preface, the edited text of *My own Life*, and a long letter, an 'ostensible letter' written by Smith to Strahan on 9 November 1776, about how Hume had died, in a moral or existential sense.

9 On epistolary theorization, see Stanley, 2004.

10 Hume's handwriting on the manuscript provides few clues in this regard. Certainly the writing differs at a number of points, as his pen was re-dipped and/or sharpened; however, this would have happened if the manuscript had been written in one sitting. I tend to the view it was probably written on this day in its entirety, including its amendments, excisions and insertions, but still think it worth making the point that Hume's manuscript style in fact does not 'guarantee' this in the way the published first edition leads readers to presuppose.

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