

Josip Torbarina

### The Meeting of Bošković with Dr. Johnson

It is notorious that not all readers of James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* remember that, in his famous biography of Dr. Johnson, Boswell has recorded, in two separate entries, three meetings between Roger Joseph Bošković and the great lexicographer. The meetings took place at the houses of Mrs. Cholmondeley, of Sir Joshua Reynolds and of Dr. Douglas, later bishop of Salisbury. Boswell himself could not have told of these meetings at first hand because he met Dr. Johnson for the first time on May 16th, 1763, i.e. almost exactly three years after Bošković's arrival in London. It is true that in 1760 he paid a prolonged visit to the British capital, travelling from his native Scotland to London as an obscure young man of twenty, but it is not at all likely that he then, or at any other time, made the acquaintance of Bošković himself. Boswell arrived in London early in March and he must have left it before Bošković's visit to the South of England (May 24th to December 20th, 1760) began.

In the section of his *Life of Samuel Johnson*, where he speaks of Johnson at the age of 61 (A. D. 1770, Aetat. 61), Boswell says:

During this year there was a total cessation of all correspondence between Dr. Johnson and me, without any coldness on either side, but merely from procrastination, continued from day to day; and as I was not in London, I had no opportunity of enjoying his company and recording his conversation. To supply this blank, I shall present my readers with some *Collectanea*, obligingly furnished to me by the Rev. Dr. Maxwell, of Falkland, in Ireland, some time assistant preacher at the Temple, and for many years the social friend of Johnson, who spoke of him with a very kind regard.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Oxford Standard Authors edition of *Boswell's Life of Johnson*. London, 1904. New edition, reset, in 1952. Quoted from edition reprinted in 1957, p. 434.

It is among these notes of Dr. W. Maxwell (1732—1818) in Boswell's *Life* that the first of the two entries concerning Bošković occurs. It runs as follows:

In a Latin conversation with the Père Boscovitch, at the house of Mrs. Cholmondeley, I heard him (i.e. Johnson) maintain the superiority of Sir Isaac Newton over all foreign philosophers, with a dignity and eloquence that surprized that learned foreigner. It being observed to him, that a rage for every thing English prevailed much in France after Lord Chatham's glorious war, he said, he did not wonder at it, for that we had drubbed those fellows into a proper reverence for us, and that their national petulance required periodical chastisement.<sup>2</sup>

The second reference to Bošković in the *Life* is made by Boswell himself, in the first person and in connexion with his eulogy of Johnson's »spoken Latin«. Writing of events which took place in the year 1775, when Johnson was 66, Boswell says:

He (i.e. Johnson) spoke Latin with wonderful fluency and elegance. When Père Boscovich was in England, Johnson dined in company with him at Sir Joshua Reynolds's, and at Dr. Douglas's, now Bishop of Salisbury. Upon both occasions that celebrated foreigner expressed his astonishment at Johnson's Latin conversation.<sup>3</sup>

It is significant that fifteen years after Bošković's visit to England his memory was still fresh among his English friends. Dr. Maxwell and Boswell call him »that learned foreigner« and »that celebrated foreigner« respectively. Bošković's meeting with Dr. Johnson had become a legend; there must have been much talk about it in Dr. Johnson's circle, for Boswell speaks about it from hearsay, not having been present at the meeting. We notice also that Boswell, when speaking in his own person, uses the Italian spelling of Bošković's surname which, by that time, had become current in England. On the other hand, when quoting Dr. Maxwell, he employs a final »tch« to represent the Serbo-Croat »ć«.

It is now interesting to see how Bošković himself reacted to these meetings with Dr. Johnson. From his unpublished correspondence it appears that his relations with Dr. Johnson were closer than we gather from Boswell's account. Writing on July 6th, 1760, from Oxford to his brother Baro (Bartholomew) in Rome Bošković says that he had been taken to see Sir

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<sup>2</sup> O. c. p. 442.

<sup>3</sup> O. c. p. 661.

Joshua Reynolds who in turn had asked him to come again to his house the following day in order to meet Dr. Johnson. From the letter we gather that the first meeting between the two great men had taken place on June 29th, 1760. Here is the relevant passage in the original Italian:

Indi fui con Stuart a far conoscenza con M. Reinold, pittore assai celebre, massime per li ritratti, giovane ben pulito e che è stato vari anni in Italia, onde parla bene l'italiano. Mi disse Stuart che guadagna molto più di mille ghinee all'anno. Tornai da lui il giorno [dopo] per trovarvi il Sig. Johnson che è uno de' primi letterati d'Inghilterra, autore di un loro celebre dizionario, e il quale mi aveva favorito di una lettera per qui pel Sig. Chambers, giovane di parti impagabili, di una indole così dolce, così modesto insieme, e svegliato, e grazioso, che incanta, e il quale mi ha fatta, e mi fa qui una continua assistenza.<sup>4</sup>

From this we learn that Johnson had given Bošković a letter of introduction which contributed much to his being received with great cordiality at Oxford. We also learn that a day earlier he had met for the first time Sir Joshua Reynolds with whom he was to remain on friendly terms for the duration of his stay in England. It is interesting to note here that both Reynolds and Bošković were elected fellows of the Royal Society on the same day, January 15th, 1761, less than a month after Bošković's departure from England.

Next to the planning of a journey to Constantinople in order to observe the transit of Venus over the sun (June 6th, 1761) and to the printing of his Latin poem *De Solis ac Lunae Defectibus*, the problem of his election to the fellowship of the Royal Society was in the centre of Bošković's interest during his stay in England. It may therefore be convenient to interpolate here a few details about this subject that have so far not been registered.

The problem had occupied Bošković's mind even before his arrival in England. On the eve of his departure from Paris he obtained from his intimate friend Alexis-Claude Clairaut (1713—1765), the famous mathematician, astronomer and member of the French Academy, a letter of introduction for the President of the Royal Society, George Parker, the second earl of Macclesfield, who was also a member of the French Academy. When he reached London, Bošković lost no time in calling on Lord Macclesfield. In his first letter from London

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<sup>4</sup> An edition of Bošković's letters from England is in course of preparation for the Yugoslav Academy of Zagreb. As editor of this correspondence I am able to quote from the unpublished manuscripts. More excerpts from this correspondence are contained in Josip Torbarina, *Bošković in England*, »Actes du Symposium International R. J. Bošković, 1961.« Beograd, Zagreb, Ljubljana, 1962. Pp. 254—261.

(May 29th, 1760), written the day after he arrived there, he wrote to his brother:

Questa mattina ho presentata la lettera di Clairaut a Milord Macclesfield, Presidente della Società, che mi ha ricevuto con finezza; andava appunto in campagna ma tornerà per la prima assemblea, di oggi a otto, e per essa mi ha detto che egli con molti Accademici pranza per tempo ad un albergo; mi ha invitato a pranzar con essi ed andar dopo all'assemblea.

And a little further in the same letter he says:

Ora che sono libero da' supplementi e da altri impicci, farò qualche Memoria per presentare alla Società; potrebbe essere che mi aggregassero, ma io non chiederò, secondo il mio costume, aggregazione alcuna in alcun luogo, se non sono richiesto.

Despite this declaration of proud indifference, when we realize that from this early date there is hardly a letter from England in which Bošković does not harp on the same subject, it becomes clear how deeply interested in it he was.

A more objective view of the whole story we get from the archives of the Royal Society in London. In the minutes of a meeting of the Society, held around the middle of June, 1760, i.e. a few weeks after Bošković's arrival in England, we read:

A Certificate recommending Robert (*sic!*) Boscowich, S.J.S. and professor of astronomy in the Roman College, to be Elected a Fellow of this Society, dated London 12th June 1760, and signed Macclesfield, James Bradley, James Stuart, Peter Davall, Charles Morton and Thomas Birch, was read, and ordered to be put up in the publick meeting Room.<sup>5</sup>

Among the *Certificates* for the year 1751—1766 we find the certificate itself. It runs as follows:

Roger Boscowich, S. J. S.

Professor of Astronomy in the Roman College, now on his travels in London.

Being desirous of election into this Royal Society is recommended by us, on our personal knowledge as well qualified by his knowledge in astronomy and other parts of natural Philosophy to be a useful member.

London, June 12, 1760.

Then follow the signatures of Lord Macclesfield, James Bradley, James Stuart, Peter Davall, Charles Morton, Thomas Birch, Nevil Maskelyne and James Burrow. In the same document is

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<sup>5</sup> *Journal Book of the Royal Society*. Copy XXIII. 1757—1760. P. 912.

recorded that balloting had taken place in ten separate sessions of the Society between June 19th, 1760, and January 8th, 1761, and that Bošković was finally »balloted and elected« on January 15th, 1761. In the minute-book of the Society we also find a reference to this final meeting and to this election:

Father Boscovich of the Society of Jesus, and Mr. Reynolds of Leicester Square who were formerly proposed according to the Statute, were elected Fellows of the Society.<sup>6</sup>

The place where Sir Joshua Reynolds lived was better known in those days as »Leicester Fields«. It is mentioned under that name, e. g., by Dr. Johnson in a letter addressed to Boswell, where Johnson speaks of »your friends . . . in Leicester-fields«, meaning »in the home of Sir Joshua«<sup>7</sup>.

In his last two letters from England Bošković again refers to Dr. Johnson whom this time he met at the house of Dr. Douglas. In the first of these, dated 12th December from London, he says:

Oggi devo pranzare dal Sig. Duglas, che è quel Prete protestante che trovai a Tunbridge . . . Venne l'altro giorno a farmi una visita e mi invitò per dimani, assicurandomi che avrei di magro; e vi sarà *Johnson*, che è uno de' grandi letterati del paese.

As a Jesuit priest Bošković wanted to make sure that he would »eat maigre« (*di magro*), for the 12th December, 1760, as we gather from the following letter, was a Friday. In this second letter, written at Dover on December 20th, he gives an account of the dinner:

In Londra prima di partire fui poi a pranzo il venerdì da M. Duglas, Prete della Religione Inglese, che è stato Cappellano di Milord Bath; vi era a pranzo il celebre M. Johnson, che ha fatto uno dei più celebri dizionari di questa lingua . . . Mi trattò di magro a meraviglia.

So we see that in his correspondence Bošković describes two of the three meetings with Dr. Johnson recorded in Boswell's *Life*. He does not speak of the meeting »at the house of Mrs. Cholmondeley«, mentioned in the *Collectanea* of Dr. Maxwell although the Cholmondeleys were among the first of the new friends Bošković had made in England. In a letter of June 5th he says that he had been taken to their house by Edmund Burke on June 3rd, i.e. seven days after his arrival

<sup>6</sup> *Journal Book* . . . Copy XXIV. 1760—1763. P. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Oxford Standard Authors edition of Boswell's *Life*. London, 1957. P. 641.

in London. From that date we constantly come across the Cholmondeleys and the Burkes in his letters. To Edmund Burke he always refers as »my friend Mr. Burke«.<sup>8</sup>

Another member of Dr. Johnson's circle, the dramatist Arthur Murphy, was present at the house of Dr. Douglas when Bošković dined there in the company of Dr. Johnson, as recorded by both Bošković and Boswell. Fortunately Murphy gives a fuller and more detailed account of the meeting. In his *Essay on the Life and Genius of Samuel Johnson* (London, 1792, pp. 91—92) he says:

At one of the parties made at his house (i.e. of Dr. Douglas), Boscovich, the Jesuit, who had then lately introduced the Newtonian philosophy at Rome, and, after publishing an elegant Latin poem on the subject, was made fellow of The Royal Society, was one of the company invited to meet Dr. Johnson. The conversation at first was mostly in French. Johnson, though thoroughly versed in that language, and a professed admirer of Boileau and La Bruyère, did not understand its pronunciation, nor could he speak it himself with propriety. For the rest of the evening the talk was in Latin. Boscovich had a ready current flow of that flimsy phraseology with which a priest may travel through Italy, Spain, and Germany. Johnson scorned what he called colloquial barbarism. It was his pride to speak his best. He went on, after a little practice, with as much facility as if it was his native tongue. One sentence this writer well remembers. Observing that Fontenelle at first opposed the Newtonian philosophy, and embraced it afterwards, his words were: Fontinellus, ni fallor, in extrema senectute, fuit transfuga ad castra Newtoniana.

We must remember that Murphy speaks of the meeting more than thirty years after it had taken place, when both Johnson and Bošković were dead.

It is surprising to find that Dr. Charles Burney, — who belonged himself to Dr. Johnson's circle, exchanged letters with him, had his portrait painted by Reynolds, and was mentioned several times in Boswell's *Life* — in a long account of his visit to Bošković at Milan (July, 1770) never even refers to Bošković's meeting with Dr. Johnson. And yet he had a long discussion with Bošković about his stay in England and mentions by name several scientists and scholars with whom Bošković had made friends. Dr. Burney says that Bošković »complained very much of the silence of the English astronomers, who answer none of his letters. He was seven months in England, and during that time was very much with Mr. Maskelyne, Dr. Shepherd, Dr. Bevis, and Dr. Maty, with whom he hoped to keep a corres-

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<sup>8</sup> More about Bošković's ties with Burke, Dr. Charles Burney and other English men of letters see in: J. Torbarina; *Bošković u krugu engleskih književnika*, Građa za život i rad R. Boškovića, knjiga I. Yugoslav Academy, Zagreb, 1950, p. 51—90.

pondence«. <sup>9</sup> It is obvious that Bošković seems to have rated these men of science higher than a *littérateur* even of such an extraordinary calibre as was Dr. Johnson, whom he appears to have totally forgotten in the course of ten years.

The story of the meeting between Bošković and Dr. Johnson was kept alive in English letters all through the 19th century, thanks mainly to Boswell's account. We find echoes of it especially in travel-books whose authors had visited Bošković's native land and been reminded there by the inhabitants of their celebrated fellow-countryman. So, for example, the famous Egyptologist Sir John Gardner Wilkinson (1797—1875) in his book on Dalmatia and Montenegro, speaking of education and literature at Dubrovnik (which he, naturally, calls Ragusa), dedicates three full pages to Bošković, incidentally referring to his stay in England and his meeting with Dr. Johnson. His whole account, however, avowedly drawn from Appendini, is full of errors. The motives of Bošković's visit to England are fanciful, the date of his arrival in England is wrong (1759), the duration of his stay there is lengthened from seven months to three years, and even the transit of Venus over the sun is erroneously placed in 1769 instead of 1761. But Sir John's apt remark on the relationship between Bošković and Dr. Johnson deserves to be quoted. After saying that Bošković remained in England three years, he continues: »... during which time he became acquainted with Dr. Johnson; by whom his talents do not appear to have been so well understood, or appreciated, as by the Royal Society. Received by the President (Lord Macclesfield) and the Council, with the greatest distinction, he was elected a Fellow of the Society.« <sup>10</sup> It is difficult to estimate for certain what exactly Dr. Johnson thought of Bošković, but we must give Sir John the credit of having been the first author to realize that in Bošković the great lexicographer had met his superior.

Another traveller, the architect T. G. Jackson (1835—1924), in his three-volume book on Dalmatia, the Quarnero and Istria, is much more accurate. In the first chapter of Volume I, where he writes a brief sketch of the »History of Dalmatia«, he gives a prominent place to Bošković among the »Ragusan worthies«. After saying that »in the eighteenth century the achievements

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<sup>9</sup> Dr. Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music in France and Italy*: or, The Journal of a tour through those countries, undertaken to collect materials for a general history of music. London, 1771. I quote from the 2nd edition of 1773 in which Dr. Burney's visit to Bošković is described on pp. 89—93.

<sup>10</sup> Sir J. Gardner Wilkinson, *Dalmatia and Montenegro: with a journey to Mostar in Herzegovina, and remarks on the Slavonic nations; the history of Dalmatia and Ragusa; the Uscocs; &c. &c.* London, 1848. Reference to Bošković in Vol. I, pp. 358—361.

of Ruggiero Giuseppe Boscovich as a mathematician and natural philosopher shed lustre on his native city« (i. e. Dubrovnik), in a footnote he almost limits himself to quoting Boswell: »Boscovich travelled to England and . . . was made a fellow of our Royal Society. Boswell mentions him more than once; he met Dr. Johnson at dinner at the houses of Sir Joshua Reynolds and Dr. Douglas, afterwards Bishop of Salisbury, where 'that celebrated foreigner expressed his astonishment at Johnson's Latin conversation'.«<sup>11</sup>

By the end of the 19th century writers who dealt with the meeting between Dr. Johnson and Bošković had started romancing and embroidering the story with exaggerations. A good example of this is provided by Abraham Rees in his *Cyclopaedia*:

The abbé Boscovich was tall in stature, of a robust constitution, with a long pale visage. His temper was open and friendly, but irritable, vehement, and impatient of contradiction. James Boswell, in his amusing *Life of Dr. Johnson*, incidentally mentions that the English moralist chancing to meet Boscovich in London, had a very keen dispute with him in Latin on some metaphysical topic. There was much heat on both sides; and the Goliath of literature treated the mathematician in his usual bearish manner.<sup>12</sup>

For the description of Bošković's physical appearance Rees obviously draws from Dr. Burney's account, who says: »He (i. e. Bošković) is a tall, strong-built man, upwards of fifty, of a very agreeable address.«<sup>13</sup>

Although in England Bošković has hitherto not been so well known as he deserves to be, it is clear that, from the time of Dr. Johnson to the present day, there have always been English scientists and scholars who realized his greatness and who knew how to appreciate his real worth. However, outside the circle of scientists it was the meeting with Dr. Johnson that helped to keep his memory alive. It is only recently that in this respect there has been a considerable improvement. After a period of eclipse, when he was not considered important enough to figure in the *Index of Boswell's Life of Samuel Johnson* (see, e. g., the Everyman edition!), he is gradually beginning to be recognized as a universal genius in his own right. So, for instance, Aldous Huxley in his *Antic Hay* mentions him side by side with some of the greatest men of all times, with Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Handel and Sir Christopher Wren. This is how Casimir Lypiatt, one of the characters in the

<sup>11</sup> T. G. Jackson: *Dalmatia, the Quarnero and Istria*, with Cettigne in Montenegro and the island of Grado. Oxford, 1887. Vol. I, pp. 179—180.

<sup>12</sup> A. Rees: *The Cyclopaedia; or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences and Literature*. London, 1899. Reference to Bošković in Vol. V.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music* etc. Loc. c.

novel, complains of the present age of »specialization« and sighs for the days when great minds distinguished themselves in various fields of arts and sciences: »You see no painter-sculptor-poets, like Michelangelo; no scientist-artists, like Leonardo; no mathematician-courtiers, like Boscovitch; no impresario-musicians, like Handel; no geniuses of all trades, like Wren.«<sup>14</sup>

But the greatest tribute to Bošković in England is a book published recently to mark the 250th anniversary of his birth.<sup>15</sup> Apart from an introductory »biographical essay« it contains essays by one Yugoslav, three American and four English scientists dealing with various aspects of Bošković's work. Sir Harold Hartley has contributed a »Foreword« of which the concluding sentence runs as follows: »All the authors of this volume of essays will have earned the gratitude of English speaking scientists by giving us for the first time this most enlightening picture of Father Boscovich which establishes his position as one of the great intellectual figures of all ages.«

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<sup>14</sup> A. Huxley, *Antic Hay*, 1923. On p. 46 in the Phoenix Library edition of 1928.

<sup>15</sup> L. L. Whyte (ed.), *Roger Joseph Boscovich, Studies of his Life and Work on the 250th Anniversary of his Birth*, London, 1961.