

# On the evening of October 10, I presented Dr. Johnson

to General Paoli. I had greatly wished that two men, for whom I had the highest esteem, should meet. They met with a manly ease, mutually conscious of their own abilities, and of the abilities of each other. The General spoke Italian, and Dr. Johnson English, and understood one another very well, with a little aid of interpretation from me, in which I compared myself to an isthmus which joins two great continents. Upon Johnson's approach the General said, 'From what I have read of your works, Sir, and from what Mr. Boswell has told me of you, I have long held you in great veneration.' The General talked of languages being formed on the particular notions and manners of a people, without knowing which, we cannot know the language. We may know the direct signification of single words; but by these no beauty of expression, no sally of genius, no wit is conveyed to the mind. All this must be by allusion to other ideas. 'Sir, (said Johnson,) you talk of language, as if you had never done anything else but study it, instead of governing a nation.' The General said, '*Questo e un troppo gran complimento*;' this is too great a compliment. Johnson answered, 'I should have thought so, Sir, if I had not heard you talk.' The General asked him, what he thought of the spirit of infidelity which was so prevalent. Johnson. 'Sir, this gloom of infidelity, I hope, is only a transient cloud passing through the hemisphere, which will soon be dissipated, and the sun break forth with his usual splendour.' 'You think then, (said the General,) that they will change their principles like their clothes.' Johnson. 'Why, Sir, if they bestow no more thought on principles than on dress, it must be so.' The General said, that 'a great part of the fashionable

infidelity was owing to a desire of shewing courage. Men who have no opportunities of shewing it as to things in this life, take death and futurity as objects on which to display it.' Johnson. 'That is mighty foolish affectation. Fear is one of the passions of human nature, of which of which it is impossible to divest it. You remember that the Emperor Charles V, when he read upon the tomb-stone of a Spanish nobleman "Here lies one who never knew fear," wittily said, "Then he never snuffed a candle with his fingers."' "

He talked a few words of French to the General; but finding he did not do it with facility, he asked for pen, ink, and paper, and wrote the following note:

*'J'ai lu dans la géographie de Lucas de Linda un Paternoster écrit dans une langue tout-à-fait différente de l'italienne, et de toutes autres lesquelles se dérivent du latin. L'auteur l'appelle linguam Corsicae rusticam; elle a peut-être passé, peu à peu; mais elle a certainement prévalu autrefois dans les montagnes et dans la campagne. Le même auteur dit la même chose en parlant de la Sardaigne; qu'il y a deux langues dans l'Isle, une des villes, l'autre de la campagne.'*

The General immediately informed him that the *lingua rustica* was only in Sardinia.

Dr. Johnson went home with me, and drank tea till late in the night. He said, 'General Paoli had the loftiest port of any man I had ever seen.' He denied that military men were always the best bred men. 'Perfect good breeding,' he observed, 'consists in having no particular mark of any profession, but a general elegance of manners; whereas, in a military man, you can commonly distinguish the *brand* of a soldier, *l'homme d'épée*.'

Dr. Johnson shunned tonight any discussion of the perplexed question of fate and free will, which I attempted to agitate. 'Sir, (said he,) we *know* our will is free, and *there's* an end on't.'

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JAMES BOSWELL is best known for his extraordinary biography of Samuel Johnson, from which this extract was taken: *Life of Johnson*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). He wrote about Paoli during the period of the Corsican Revolution (1755-1769): *The Journal Of a Tour to Corsica*.