

VIEWS & REVIEWS

What Dr Johnson advised
Boswell to read to divert
distressing thoughts, p 351



Life under liberty

PERSONAL VIEW **Robbie Foy**

A week after moving into our sunny, seaside, and safe apartment in west Los Angeles, we were stirred at midnight by shouts outside and then three sharp cracks. Sirens and helicopter searchlights followed. After a restless night, I got up early to check for any internet accounts of what might have happened. I wondered how to put a positive spin to my partner about the first story I'd found: "It was just a drive-by shooting; no one will specifically be after us . . . yet." Fortunately, it turned out that Santa Monica's finest had shot dead an armed man fleeing past the front of our apartment.

It is in no small way thanks to the rhetoric of individual freedom that there were 16 907 firearm related suicides and 11 920 firearm related homicides in the United States in 2003

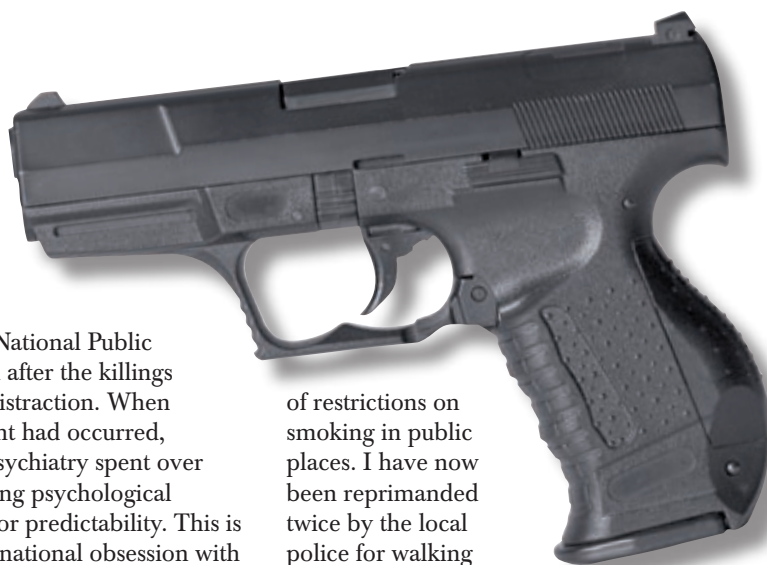
The dust eventually settled around this event, just as it seems to have mostly settled around another event last April. I was listening to the car radio when news broke that 32 people had been gunned down at Virginia Tech University shortly before their assailant turned the weapon on himself. News commentaries emerging over the day suggested the revitalisation of a vigorous debate on gun control. Yet within days, three further features of the story had distracted most of the media and politicians from such a debate. Firstly, the 23 year old killer was South Korean and, as if by magic, an unseen hand subtly shifted attention on to the reaction of the Korean community. Secondly, he had a record of mental illness, further differentiating him from the majority. Thirdly, slack enforcement of regulations had allowed Cho Seung-hui to purchase his gun while falsely declaring that he had no record of being treated for mental illness. The ensuing "how could this happen?"

deliberations also focused more on security protocols within the college campus than on why firearms are so widely accessible.

A discussion on National Public Radio the weekend after the killings typified this mass distraction. When asked why this event had occurred, two professors of psychiatry spent over 10 minutes discussing psychological profiling and its poor predictability. This is consistent with the national obsession with medical and technical solutions for social problems. Eventually, one of the eminent men almost apologetically mentioned gun control, allowing the other to declare that he still believed in the "right to bear arms."

Another reaction reminded me of a comedian I'd once seen at the Edinburgh Fringe. Craig Ferguson (aka Bing Hitler) had suggested that guns should be freely available on all passenger plane flights. Then if a hijacker tried to divert the plane to Tripoli, all of the passengers could pull out their guns and declare: "No way—we're going to Torremolinos!" Discussions I heard on a right wing talk station, promulgated elsewhere, were disdainful of "ridiculous" bans on taking guns into public buildings. A mother of someone who had committed a previous massacre had suggested that Virginia Tech could have been avoided if it were easier for everyone to carry guns.

It is in no small way thanks to the rhetoric of individual freedom, along with continual prodding from the likes of the National Rifle Association, that there were 16 907 firearm related suicides and 11 920 firearm related homicides in the United States in 2003 (www.cdc.gov/ncipc/osp/charts.htm). Yet this country is packed with paradoxes. For example, the state of California was in the vanguard



of restrictions on smoking in public places. I have now been reprimanded twice by the local police for walking across empty roads on a red light.

Such contradictions will not be new to seasoned US observers abroad. Less reported are the knock-on effects of the national obsession with gun liberty. We have had a certain amount of fun instructing our two kids on dealing with dangers less commonly encountered in the UK, like the contrasting procedures to follow if confronted by a rattlesnake, mountain lion, or bear. Recently, they experienced the novelty of a "lock down" drill at their elementary school. They practised taking cover under their desks. Both kids know this is the right thing to do for earthquakes. They were less aware that this might, in theory, increase their odds of surviving an attack with an automatic rifle.

Given that public opinion on gun control has shifted little since Virginia Tech, it is not surprising that few, if any, of the candidates lining up for presidential nominations will feel able to take an assertive stance on gun control. How many more Virginia Techs will it take?

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The author is a returning Harkness fellow in healthcare policy funded by the Commonwealth Fund and Health Foundation. The views expressed here are his own.

NICHOLAS HORNIRICH/FOTOLIA

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Trouble down under

OUT OF THE BOX
Trisha Greenhalgh



Greetings from Australia's Northern Territory, where I have been learning the meaning of the word "remote." Yesterday we drove for three hours before meeting another vehicle. Every 200 km or so we encountered a road sign or a shrivelled lake with a solitary pelican. Otherwise there is just bush—and the red, red earth.

The trip began with a lecture tour. At an interdisciplinary meeting on management of chronic disease in rural and remote communities, one questioner had his hand in the air before I had finished speaking. What, he asked, was my view on the problem of child abuse among the Aborigines?

Apparently a number of incidents have persuaded the authorities that child sexual abuse is "widespread" in some remote Aboriginal communities. The current prime minister, said to be the most right wing premier in living memory, recently decreed that all Aboriginal children below the age of 15 in these areas should be medically examined for the telltale signs of abuse. The issue has also, apparently, been used to justify increased police presence and, in some cases, withdrawal of land rights for the Aborigines.

Depending on whom you ask, all this is either a swift and decisive move to save a generation of innocents

from unthinkable trauma or, in a community where teenage marriage has been the norm for centuries, Australia's worst ever example of culturally incompetent health policy, setting back relations with the indigenous community by 20 years.

In Australia's coastal cities, where 85% of the white population live, it is not hard to spot Aborigines who are drunk, destitute, and sometimes psychotic. When they get under your feet it's easy to imagine them behaving shamefully towards their children—and hard to remember that they represent a tiny fraction of the indigenous population. With an election looming much political mileage is to be gained from policies that can demonstrate "containment" of such problems.

I guess it would be too much to invite a serving prime minister to take a briefing on the limited predictive value of so called telltale signs of sexual abuse. But is it unreasonable to ask him to divert from his usual campaign trail and visit the communities that he has accused of moral disintegration? They just might have a story of their own to tell.

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Skippy's last show

THE BEST
MEDICINE
Liam Farrell



I am laid back about emergencies; the little boy has cried "WOLF!" once too often for me. Fax a photo of the wolf chewing on his scrotum, I say, and I might think about it. But the chains of our solemn office bind tightly; when we are called, we gotta go, no matter how bizarre the circumstances.

One day a little kangaroo hopped into the surgery, making urgent chattering noises. I love wild creatures, so I reached for my gun; stuffed and mounted, I thought, it would make a nice trophy for the waiting room, maybe scare the kids a bit, keep them out in the fresh air and away from the health centre and all those superbugs.

"Wait, doc!" my patient shouted, just before I squeezed the trigger, "He's trying to tell us something . . . something about a little girl, bottom of a cliff, broken leg, may need a splint, analgesia, and a drip."

"Thanks a million, Dr Doolittle," I said.

When we got there the

mandatory crowd had gathered, and there was already a festive mood; a few tinnies had been cracked open and the scent of barbecued ribs graced the air. A little blonde-haired girl, unmistakably and adorably Aryan, lay at the bottom of the traditional cliff. I noted, with a fatal satisfaction, that the cliff looked on the verge of collapse. Someone had inexplicably obtained a park ranger's uniform, and he called me over, unsuccessfully trying to conceal his enormous enjoyment.

"Her leg's real crook, doc," he said, "you better get down there."

I was in my good clothes, it was muddy; where were all those paramedics in combats when you need them, I thought.

Eventually I got down, signing a few autographs and reluctantly dismissing a groupie on my way.

"It's a sprain," I shouted up, and a ripple of fascinated horror went through the crowd; "A sprain, a sprain," they wailed, like a sweaty

and inebriated Greek chorus.

"The copter's on its way, doc," said the park ranger, "but we'll have to MacGyver a stretcher from didgeridoos and wombat hides."

"Actually, a sprain's not too bad," I said, professional integrity outweighing the need to consummate the melodrama, "Up you get, girlie." A little pinch emphasised my authority and she got to her feet reluctantly; the crowd began to drift away, giving me disapproving looks. Diverting from the original script was obviously considered bad taste.

Skippy reappeared: "Something about a cave, a landslide, two kids, a pneumothorax, a chest drain, and . . ."

A single shot echoed through the eucalyptus groves, and far away a flock of parakeets rose, their wings golden in the sunset as the credits rolled for the last time.

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Where there's a will

As everyone knows, Francis Bacon, the philosopher, was one of the founders of the empirical method in the sciences. Indeed, he was almost a martyr to it, for one day he alighted from his coach to gather snow with which to stuff a dead chicken to establish whether or not refrigeration preserved animal flesh, and in so doing caught a fatal chill.

What, I wonder, is the empirical evidence that behaving as Bacon behaved predisposes to fatal infections?

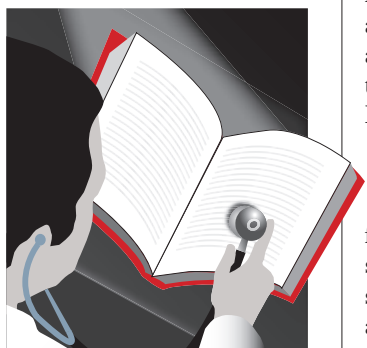
Certainly as a child I behaved like it all the time, for I obstinately refused to wear a coat in winter or take any notice of the holes in my shoes when walking in the rain. Perhaps it is a question of age.

When it comes to medical matters, Bacon left a list of prescriptions and their uses, and they are not evidence based, to say the least. He was a polypharmacist who didn't even see proof of efficacy as a problem.

Here is his method of preparing what he called "grains of youth": "Take of nitre four grains, of ambergrease three grains, of orris-powder two grains, of white poppy-seed the fourth part of a grain, of saffron half a grain, with water of orange-flowers, and a little tragacanth; make them all into small grains, four in number. To be taken at four o'clock, or going to bed.

Some of his prescriptions were rather unpleasant and messy. As a "preservative ointment" he suggests "deers suet one ounce, of myrrh six grains, of saffron five grain, of hay-salt twelve grains, of Canary wine, of two years old, a spoonful and a half." Then comes the nasty bit: "Spread it on the inside of your shirt, and let it dry, and then put it on."

BETWEEN THE LINES Theodore Dalrymple



Bacon says "that a sick man does ill for himself who makes his physician his heir"

There is also Methusalem water, "against all asperity and torrefaction of inward parts, and all adustion of the blood, and generally against the dryness of age." For what he calls "openers," presumably of the bowels, he recommends no fewer than 69 substances, among them solution of millipedes and man's urine. As for "astringents," which "by cherishing the strength of the parts, do comfort and confirm their retentive power," he suggests a "stomacher of scarlet cloth or whelps, or young healthy boys, applied to the stomach."

Sometimes even Bacon's psychology goes amiss: for example, when, in his *Essay on Death*, he suggests that "death is disagreeable to most citizens, because they commonly die intestate," not wishing to tempt fate with a will.

But Bacon sometimes speaks sense on medical matters. In his *Ornamenta Rationalia*, for example, he says "that a sick man does ill for himself who makes his physician his heir." As it happened, I was on a visit to Eastbourne when I read this, and one of the most celebrated medical men of that town was the late Dr Bodkin Adams. Among his patients were rich old widows who made wills in his favour, and tended not to live long afterwards. They died from, or at least with, large doses of opiates.

Strictly speaking, the career of Bodkin Adams was not illustrative of the truth of Bacon's dictum, because he was found not guilty, and rightly so: for it was not proved that he did more than he said, "easing the passing."

Still, it would be a pretty dogmatic empiricist who demanded proof of the wisdom of Bacon's observation.

Theodore Dalrymple is a writer and retired doctor

MEDICAL CLASSICS

The Anatomy of Melancholy

By Robert Burton First published in 1621

According to the "Advertisement" (or preface) of its 1893 reprinting, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* was at the time of its publication (1621) "of great celebrity," going through at least eight editions "by which the bookseller got an estate." It was highly recommended by Dr Samuel Johnson, who advised Boswell to divert distressing thoughts by having a "lamp constantly burning in his bed-chamber at night and if wakefully disturbed . . . compose himself to rest" by reading from this "valuable work."

Published under the pseudonym Democritus Junior by Robert Burton, an Oxford scholar and clergyman who wrote to assuage his own melancholy, it has an 165 page rambling introduction in which the author quotes innumerable authorities (in Latin), explaining that as a mere spectator of other peoples' lives (and follies) he, like Democritus, laughs at them or pities them all. He thinks that most people are mad, their brains afflicted by melancholy, especially those who pursue glory, money, and power in "the tumults and chances of this wavering world." Wisdom indeed comes too late if at all, coming to Theophrastus at the age of 107 and causing him therefore to "lament his departure." The author faintly apologises for transgressing into subjects dealing with the diseases of the body, but argues that after all physicians intrude



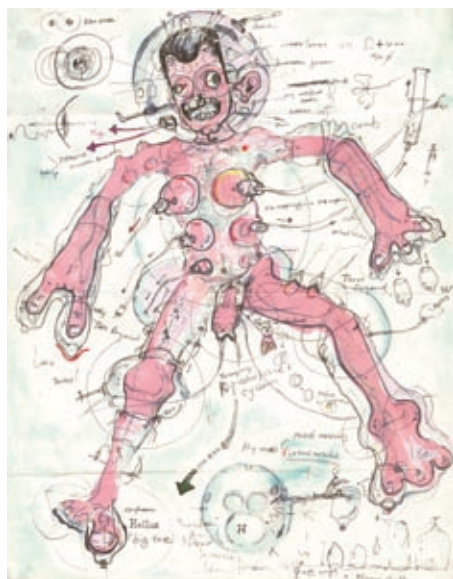
into his business of caring for the mind or soul. He advocates a simple life, indicting the rich for their natural contempt for learning and deriding them for having "as much wit in their heels as in their brains." He then presents his own version of utopia, and concludes that the excesses and foolishness of the world are symptoms of this

all pervasive madness or melancholy that afflicts not only individuals but also kingdoms—and even dogs, who die of grief for the loss of their masters.

What then is this melancholy? It is an excess of black bile, one of the humours of the body, and to understand it the reader must first be subjected to a chapter on anatomy as understood in the 17th century. Then the book covers the causes, symptoms, "prognostics," and treatment of this "disease" and its various subdivisions (including love melancholy, jealousy, religious melancholy, and despair), reflecting the 1000 year old humoral theory of disease, which already in Burton's time was beginning to be discredited. Much is tedious and absurd, but much is also amusing or instructive.

Few modern readers will want to read the *Anatomy* from beginning to end. But tasting a few pages should prove pleasurable and instructive. Those in the thrall of love melancholy are advised as a last resort to see their beloved naked and observe certain defects of her body, notice her bad breath, remember that "beauty fades as a tree in the winter," and look at her aged parents and presume that she too will "be molested in like manner." But this is only for the victims of extremely refractory love melancholy. The unaffected may merely want to relax with an open mind, enjoying the wisdom and excusing the errors of the many who went before us.

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Top: Drawing (2003); middle: *Altering Facial Features with H-WR* (2007); above: *A Device (Gauntlet 1) That Makes My Hand Bigger* (1999)

REVIEW OF THE WEEK

Cosmetic artistry

Colin Martin is fascinated by an exhibition of pseudomedical devices designed to help an artist overcome what he sees as “undersized Asian male complex”

The Homo Species

An exhibition by Hyungkoo Lee, Korean pavilion, 52nd international art exhibition, Venice Biennale, until 21 November

www.labiennale.org/en/art/exhibition/en/76530.html

Rating: ★★★★★

Many people feel that their self image and other people's perception of them might be transformed if they could enhance their appearance. Their attempted metamorphosis could be as simple as wearing different clothes or as drastic as having cosmetic surgery. Korean artist Hyungkoo Lee (b 1969) tackles the subject in a series of works entitled *The Objectuals*, which forms part of his solo show in the Korean pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

The series explores the additional dimensions of physical differences between races and feelings of cultural inferiority. Lee created them after he experienced “undersized Asian male complex” while studying at Yale University, where he encountered “bigger and stronger” white men. The works were not the result of any locker room comparisons. “One day, Lee was standing in a subway train next to a white man of roughly similar physique,” says Soyeon Ahn, the Korean pavilion commissioner. “He realised that his hand, holding on to the handle, was significantly smaller than the Westerner's next to his.” Back in the studio, his artistic response was to develop a series of pseudomedical devices to enlarge or alter parts of his body visually, via a sort of perceptual cosmetic surgery, which made him feel better about his body image.

Lee's untitled 2003 ink drawing of a nude man, which echoes Leonardo da Vinci's often reproduced drawing of an ideal Italian Renaissance man with his outstretched limbs bounded by geometry, summarises his own points of perceptual intervention. The first work in the series, *A Device (Gauntlet 1) That Makes My Hand Bigger* (1999), was constructed using a water filled polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottle of the type manufactured for laboratory use, some shot glasses, and steel wire.

HK LAB-CPR (2001-2007), a large installation with mixed media from the series,

creates a tableau reminiscent of both Dr Frankenstein's laboratory and an operating theatre. Tubing suspended from the ceiling feeds into the base of an operating table; and glass shelves on the surrounding walls are stacked with assorted laboratory vessels, surgical instruments, limbs, and heads. “By turning his inferiority complex to humour and making the postures of medical science a laughing stock, Lee questions widespread Western values,” asserts Mr Ahn.

Lee's inherent interest in human physiology stimulated his development of a series of helmets that use simple enlarging and reducing lenses to distort the facial features of the people wearing them. Rather than satisfying what Mr Ahn describes as Asian “longing for the large eyes of Westerners” by merely imitating them, Lee's optical helmets exaggerate and caricature the desired features. Although some of the helmets transform their wearers into visions of doe eyed

cuddliness, *Altering Facial Features with H-WR* (2007) presents a more disturbing metamorphosis. The helmet distorts its wearer's smile into a grimace which, along with his enlarged metal-capped

teeth, produces a sinister, voracious effect.

Helmut WR (2007), a five minute high definition video playing within the pavilion, follows the helmet wearing artist around Venice as he walks alone around the city at night or sits among tourists at an outdoor restaurant, drinking coffee in the sunshine. The soundtrack includes rasping breaths, similar to those made by artificial ventilators; however, neither these sounds nor the prosthetic devices worn by Lee seem to elicit much attention from surrounding people. At the Venetian winter carnival, locals and visitors are used to seeing people wearing more elaborate and eye catching disguises.

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