Fictional Guidenotes

to Sir John Soane’s Museum, Lincoln’s Inn Fields

by Bernard Cohen, writer-in-residence **No. 5 of 6, November 2002**

Correspondence between a father and his son

The year is 1806. Somewhere on the European continent, a prisoner by the name of Pelisson keeps company with only a set of bagpipes and a spider of middling size. He is teaching the spider to expect a morsel when it hears a certain tune: ‘After several months exercise, he succeeded in training the spider so well, that she would start at the first signal, to seize a fly at the farthest end of the room, and even on the knees of the prisoner… We learn from it that the spider, though among the most quarrelsome of insects, yet is capable of being rendered familiar by the reason and perseverance of man.’

John Soane purchases the literary journal containing the above anecdote. In London, the architect is also learning a lesson. Soane’s conclusion, though as yet still in process, is increasingly that the young man, his son, George, displays neither reason nor perseverance. Instead, a charitable observer might intercede, the young man is composed of wit and obstinacy. Both of these he practises in a manner inimical to his father’s vision of the future.

[Believers in doctrines of first causes: attribute these events to a drunken wet-nurse’s refusal to relinquish a boy to his mother. Another law, that of England, persuaded her. Young George Soane returns to his family. Sixteen years pass. More years pass. The wet-nurse disappears from the narrative, only for the father to place her at the beginning of his telling.]

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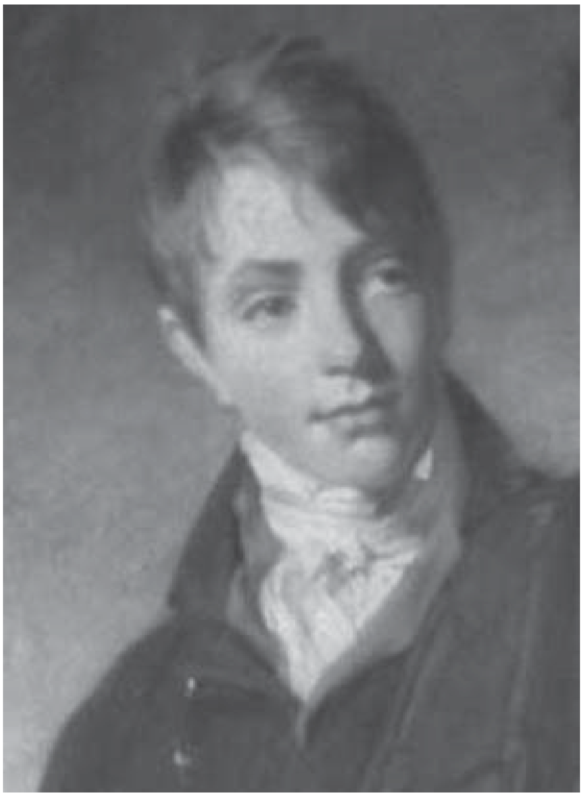
Museum visitors and friends are invited to contribute their own writing about objects, spaces and ideas from Sir John Soane’s Museum. To contribute, or to read others’ contributions, please visit the museum website at http://www.soane.org/fictional. You may also email your contribution to bernard.cohen@kcl.ac.uk. Finally, you may post your contribution on disk to Bernard Cohen, writer-in-residence, Sir John Soane’s Museum, Lincoln’s Inn Fields, London WC2A 3BP, United Kingdom. Please send email or post contributions in text-only or rich text format.

The older man practises reason and perseverance towards his son. He also, rarely of course, exhibits room-filling impatience and icy rage. At times the father regards his son and the situation of their relationship with analytical dispassion, observes the patterns of their manner to each other, finds some small correctibility in a phrase or tone he, the father, has unthinkingly spoken or used. At such moments, the older man might admit to himself that his son is not without ambitions, that the literary life is something to which he too may have aspired had his life not taken the fortuitous turns towards its current course (and had he not taken the necessary actions to maintain those fortunes), and that his own education in the end occurred largely outside of school.



On the other hand, he never had the same opportunities as those he now affords his son: his son to whom he grants everything and who takes everything for granted. But this will in the end cease. It must cease for the sake of the younger man's character; and, if too late to save character, the father's support must slow in order to make clear his non-complicity in his son's choices. The young man shows a weakness of spirit, such a clear defect as to suggest organic causes — an imbalance, perhaps, in the seat of logical thinking.

It is not for the father to diagnose the son, but only to note symptoms. The symptoms are noted.

There are, according to Dr Crichton, three genera of mental disease, of which the third is amentia, or imbecility. Neither the father nor the son would discover this lack of mental power in the other. Each finds the other too powerful, too occupying of the space of the mind. The other genera are: 'delirium, or general derangement; hallucinatio, or partial illusion.'

For his part, the son sees in the father not exactly an absence of reason, but its faulty utilisation. The father is unreasonable but not unreasoning. George might find an ancient Greek quote about the rebelliousness of youth, and he might feel (as usual) vindicated.

He plays with language, for which he has a facility. Here too, however, the young man circumvents application. Instead, he displays a cruel wit. He fixes on grotesqueries of appearance and manner in his absent victims, and is well able to further exaggerate. He squeaks, lisps and stutters, rolls his eyes and sucks in his cheeks. He hops from foot to foot, flapping his arms, squawking and screeching. 'He is indistinguishable from the gentleman himself.'

These actions in themseleves cannot be taken to signify madness. In some circles (literary circles, perhaps), a sharp, cruel tongue signifies worthiness and good fellowship. Madness, on the other hand, unfolds over time. At any instant, any behaviour could be construed as sane. Insanity is to be diagnosed only from patterns and repetitions. Or, on the narrow definition, we are sane only when thinking of the future; all other thoughts are irretrievably distorted by personal histories.

Perhaps one should send him to a craniologist fully versed in the Drs Gall and Spurzheim's *New Anatomy and Physiology of the Brain and Nervous System*, as advertised.

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It is untrue to say that the older man has externalised his organ of reason, that the house in L. I. Fields now substitutes for his brain. Certainly there are similarities. He has collected vast amounts of knowledge and stores them in such a manner as he may gain access to them at short notice. Yes, the house (as the man) projects every sign of Enlightenment. Yes, the architect lives and works and performs numerous automatic functions therein. Yes, the house contains all the small contradictions of character which cannot be contained in mere words.

But still, it would be an inversion to suggest that the architect is some kind of homunculus in the body of the house. He is nothing short of a giant, and the house is a model which contains the history of civilisation.

It is also untrue to say that the young man is as mad as his father. Their obsessions runs different courses entirely. What of the son's inheritance? It contains neither spirit nor property. Not sanity, either. His taste? Certainly not! Taste is not something one inherits from one's father; rather it transmits like disease.

The young man is always on edge, always ready with blustering expressions of his own rights and feelings and rights to his feelings.

The *Quarterly Review* of August 1809 reports that, in defining insanity, 'the difficulty is sometimes increased by the natural propensity to eccentricity, which is observable in some persons, whom there is also reason to think predisposed to attacks of real insanity.'

John Haslam, the *Review*'s review noted, discounted an earlier hypothesis that 'the fault is in the actions of minute arteries, which are conceived to secrete some unknown nervous fluid.'

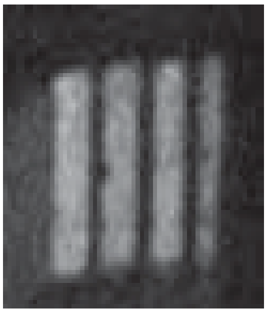
From observation, the older man's way of being is not compatible with nervous fluid secretion. Yet such a theory does fit George's behaviour, the appearance that his reason is on each occasion intruded upon and conquered, the slipping away of his propriety and and proportion and self-knowledge, and their replacement with foul words and deeds, rudeness, insubordination, disrespect and lack of fealty.

And after, the son appears to remember nothing of an episode. He thinks only on his immediate needs once more; these are multivarious.

George becomes a writer, and he does write. It is easy to read in his words rehearsals of what he might say to his father and, once published, what he has said.

'I have found,' he writes in 1815, embittered by the difficulty of literary life as much as by his father's supposed indifference to his needs, 'that no tie of relationship is sacred – I have found that a son or brother may rot in a jail, and solicit aid in a state of anguish that borders upon madness, and yet may coldly be repulsed.'

He stands at the frontier of delirium, but he does not cross.



Perhaps dissection would demonstrate the organic causes of his decay, 'marks of the disease… in the brain or in the neighbouring parts', 'morbid distension of the blood vessels of the head' which would explain his burningly roseolar appearance during even the most mild disagreements.

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So the years pass, and the older man's disappointment in the son transforms to disgust; the younger man is ever more resentful of his father. The father remains an architect, one of the brilliant men of his age. The son tries to write, but produces endless accounts of the failures of patriarchy.

No one says, 'Like father, like son.' At least, they don't say it either to the father or to the son.

The father and the son are each the other's prisoner. They cannot help but act with reference to the actions of the other. The father is incarcerated by the gossip surrounding his son; the son is enslaved to his father's wealth and standing.

The architect is a mightyman perched on the masonry of every building-in-progress in England. He works and dreams simultaneously, and only eats for fear that starvation would prevent him from working. His friends must of necessity decide on indulgence. Thus, those who cannot indulge cannot sustain friendship. The architect fails to hide his moods. He is tall and thin and as transparent as if the dome of his head were glazed with skylights.

At twenty-one, already publishing, the son chooses Dryden's translation of Horace for an epigraph:

'Fortune…
Promotes, degrades, delights in strife,
And makes a lottery of life.'

He is a writer, though as yet modest in scope and ambition.

He pens accusations and recantations. He cannot but write about his father.

He proves the law of diminishing returns, all the more because he knows not himself. He is ever more desperate and the more desperate he becomes, the more his father turns from him.

He dedicates his work to his father, begging forgiveness in the words of Xenophon:

'I plainly perceive, O Cyrus, that I have two souls; for if there were only one, it would not at the same time be bad and good; it would not at the same time love honorable and dishonorable actions; it would not at the same time wish and not wish to do the same thing. But it is manifest, that there are two souls; and when the good soul commands, good things are done; when the evil predominates, evil things are done. Now that I have you for a companion, the good commands and is infinitely superior.'

But he has not his father for company. The architect binds this humble work together with an earlier, insult-poisoned opus of his son's. The one nullifies the effect of the other.

And so, the son sees further fault in the father.

And so on.

Author's Note

Quotations in the above piece where indicated are *as* indicated. Pelisson's experiment is reported in *Literary Panorama*, November 1806. Crichton's genera are reported in the same article as the other theories of insanity. Sir John Soane wrote an account of his long series of disagreements and dissatisfaction with his son's actions. Quoted works of George Soane's are *The Knight*, *The Daemon and the Robber Chief* (1811); *The Peasant of Luzern* (1815); and *The Hebrew* (1820). All publications alluded to in the piece belonged to Sir John Soane and are still held in the museum.

There are contemporary accounts of Sir John's temperament. George Wightwick, seeking work, approached Soane only as a last resort: 'his reported eccentricity of mind and irritability of temper occasioned me to reserve *him* as the desperate ultimatum of forlorn hope.' (This, written decades later, may have been somewhat hyperbolic.) George Soane claimed that his father must have been delusional not to bequeath him his house. Sir John, on the other hand, thought George was bad rather than mad.

Although (to his mother's huge displeasure) George Soane is reported to have taken the stage, I have seen no evidence one way or the other regarding his talents as a mimic.

Bernard Cohen

About Fictional Guidenotes

Fictional Guidenotes are written by Bernard Cohen, writer-in-residence at Sir John Soane's Museum. They will appear monthly from July to December 2002 and are also available via the museum website at http://www.soane.org/fictional. Also on that website are other fictional and less fictional writings related to the Museum, including contributions from members of the public. Your contribution is welcome. See the front of this publication for details. For more information about Bernard, please see his website at http://www.hermes.net.au/bernard.

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