

“A HOGSHEAD OF SENSE” ?

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"A HOGSHEAD OF SENSE"?

Dr. Alexander Maclean, an admiring physician on the island of Mull, so described Samuel Johnson at sixty-three, touring the Hebrides with his faithful sycophant James Boswell. Maclean had just met Johnson. Boswell, and now Professor Walter Jackson Bate of Harvard, have amplified and qualified the characterization, but the metaphor remains a pithy summary of the man. The question mark is mine.

"Club - an assembly of good fellows, meeting under certain circumstances."

"Essay - a loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition."

These are quotations from Johnson's famous dictionary, which show his humor and encourage us to approve the first definition while attempting to disprove the second.

Samuel Johnson was born in 1709, a century after Shakespeare's prime, and died in 1784, too old to appreciate what was happening in America and before the French Revolution. The picture of him left by Boswell, who met him at age fifty-four, is of the Clubman, "talking for victory," the forceful master of epigram, asserting: "No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money," "Life is a progress from want to want, not from enjoyment to enjoyment," and "He who is growing great and happy by electrifying a bottle, wonders how the world can be engaged by trifling prattle about war and peace." Professor Bate gives Boswell his due as the most tenacious biographer with the most extensive opportunity to record the discourse of the greatest man of his time, three superlatives which have never since coincided, but Bate provides a better rounded psychological portrait.

Johnson was a man crippled by childhood disease, raised in near poverty, denied a university education beyond one tantalizing year, and subject to prolonged depression? He was self taught in classics such that his second language was not French but fluent Latin, learned also in chemistry and physics, and condemned for twenty years to Grub Street and hack work for magazines which so ashamed him that he did not sign his name, with the result that his imagined reports of Parliamta

debates were accepted until our time as the actual words of the great statesmen (who took no pains to deny their authorship, so eloquent the speeches and so fairminded). Johnson was finally raised to fame by compiling singlehanded in nine years a dictionary equal to those of the Italian and French learned societies, whose scores of members had toiled for decades. At the start of the dictionary Lord Chesterfield had expressed some interest in sponsoring the project, but Lord Chesterfield was a busy politician and forgot Johnson as the toilsome years went by. Shortly before publication, Lord Chesterfield was reminded by the publisher of his earlier commitment and wrote to the press publicizing the dictionary's appearance. Johnson's angry letter to this neglectful patron is famous: "Is not a patron, my lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and when he has reached ground encumbers him with help? The notice which you have been pleased to take of my labors, had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent, and cannot enjoy it; till I am solitary, and cannot impart it; till I am known, and do not want it." To Chesterfield's credit, he was delighted by the letter and kept it on his drawingroom table for all to read, exclaiming over its forceful expression.

What kind of man could write in this fashion, so much more revealing of the author than of the lord? It is not the dictionary which answers this question, but Johnson's moral writings (which include almost everything else he wrote), or rather the fascinating contrast between his firm, moral rationalism in speech and in print and the lifelong disorder of impulses which he struggled to contain. Professor Bate's biography of Johnson convincingly argues the necessity of joining in one volume an author's life and a critical account of his work, and the folly of presenting one without the other, but his argument scarcely prepares us for his achievement, which is to exploit the disparities between the life and the work, illuminating both. This brief account cannot convey the richness of a six hundred page masterpiece, but it can summarize the findings. The method will be anecdotal, looking at revealing episodes in Johnson's life and relating them to

the whole man and his words.

The childhood disease which left Johnson almost blind, and deaf in one ear, was tuberculosis, caught from the milk of a wet nurse. Surgery to eradicate the disease from lymph glands scarred his face and neck. Johnson's aunt, viewing him in infancy, commented that "she would not have picked such a poor creature up in the street," and we would expect this early infection to have left psychological scars as well. At the age of three or four Johnson attended a nursery school from which he was led home each afternoon because his parents were afraid that he could not see well enough to find his own way. One day when his escort did not arrive in time, Johnson set out for home alone and, encountering a gutter that crossed the street, got down on all fours, crawling and peering as he prepared to make his way over it. His teacher, who had followed him, fearing that he would come to harm, overtook him and tried to guide him. Furious, he struck out at her and refused aid. Admirable independence for a handicapped child? Yes, but Johnson's violent assertion of responsibility for himself at this tender age predicted his most striking quality as a man, a powerful self-demand which seldom allowed him to seek help from others and which tortured him when his performance fell short of his own expectations. Johnson's lifelong view of physical illness was only one manifestation of this quality. When he had a stroke toward the end of his life, he could still maintain to Mrs. Thrale that "Disease produces much selfishness. It is so very difficult for a sick man not to be a scoundrel."

Fortunately, the sickly child grew up to be an enormously strong hogshead of a man, able to walk the streets of London at night and emerge victorious from encounters with as many as four footpads at a time. More difficult was victory over self. At age sixty-one in a pessimistic moment Johnson could write: "Every man naturally persuades himself that he can keep his resolutions, nor is he convinced of his imbecility but by length of time and frequency of experiment." Yet Johnson continued to make resolutions and to exhort others to do the same, steadfast in his belief in human will. And when there was no friendly hand offering help to strike out against, he struck hard at himself for not responding to the

dictates of his own will. His wry comment on man's imbecility in expecting to keep his resolutions is an example of Johnson's undeceived honesty in observing what happens in the world, but he did not accept his own dictum as a guide to or an excuse for his own behaviour.

In 1728 Johnson entered Pembroke College, Oxford, sent there unexpectedly because his mother had received a small legacy, enough to pay his expenses for a year. Johnson had spent his adolescent years reading - his father was a bookseller - and his brilliance in school was recognized early. A wealthy cousin, Cornelius Ford, and an older lawyer, Gilbert Walmesley, had taken him up in his late teens and had given him a glimpse of intellectual society, a world of elegant dinners at country mansions where a capacity for serious discussion and debate earned admission for this ungainly youth. Oxford was, of course, Johnson's dream, but he entered the University knowing that only a miracle would enable him to complete the course and apprehensive that without a university degree his opportunities in life would be cruelly limited. Years later, when a friend suggested to him that his thirteen months at Oxford were happy ones, he replied: "Ah, sir, I was rude and violent. It was bitterness which they mistook for frolick. I was miserably poor, and I thought to fight my way by my literature and my wit; so I disregarded all power and all authority." He was so poor that his toe protruded from his broken shoes, yet when an anonymous friend placed a new pair of shoes at his door, he was outraged and threw them away.

The required financial miracle did not occur, and as Johnson struggled unsuccessfully to prolong his studies, he displayed psychological defenses which characterized all his later life and writing. At age twenty he wrote a poem called "The Young Author." The poem compares a young rustic, leaving home, with a young author desirous of fame. The rustic makes an ocean voyage and is sickened with fear as the tempest roars. He vows not to trust the ocean any longer. The author finds fame elusive, capricious, transient and productive of the hatred and envy of others. Johnson's litany of disappointed dreams owes much to Ecclesiastes and previews his later poem The Vanity of Human Wishes. But the interesting

question is why Johnson wrote "The Young Author" at age twenty when he was miserably facing the end of his time at Oxford? Professor Bate calls what he was doing "anticipative imagination", employed to defend himself against the bitterness of broken hope and ambition, not by blaming others but by teaching himself not to hope, not to hold unreasonable expectations of life and not to be fooled or caught unawares. His self-demand at twenty concentrated on a resolution to face with honesty and courage the facts of human existence, to manage his life without illusion and to accept the inevitable.

The trouble was that he was deeply disappointed. He really did care that poverty forced him to leave Oxford. To reason, like the fox in the fable, that the unattainable grapes are probably sour, was an incomplete defense against his true emotions. Probably even at twenty, and certainly later in life, he knew very well what he was doing. In *Rasselas*, he may have the philosopher Imlac say about the world, "Amidst wrongs and frauds, competitions and anxieties, you will . . . willingly quit hope to be free from fear." But Johnson valued hope highly, and others in his tale do not heed the philosopher. One factor in his periodic depressions could have been the tremendous inner struggles between his need to hope and his stern self-admonition that it is folly to do so.

The complete failure of Johnson's anticipative imagination to defend him from dismay marks the five years from twenty to twenty-five. Throughout this period he was pathologically depressed. Intense anxiety alternated with utter hopelessness and inability to act. He feared for his sanity and thought of suicide. His capacity for self-reliance, and his insistence upon managing his own life, made him all the more susceptible to morbid guilt when he so conspicuously failed to manage anything. With our more sophisticated understanding of personality structure, ego defenses and the problems of hypertrophied superegos, we can understand depression as hostility turned inward. This describes Johnson in his early twenties. What he did to stay alive during this period is of little interest. Needless to say, he wrote nothing which has lasted as literature. He did compose a terrifying account, in Latin so that it might be more objective, of his own

condition for his godfather, who was a physician. This effort, well ahead of its times in probing into the unconscious, overwhelmed the good doctor who could think of nothing better to reply than that he agreed that Johnson might become insane. The irony of this chapter in Johnson's life is that his later reputation seemed to confirm him as the oracle of common sense, unmatched in his realistic pronouncements on the world and how man must manage it. What wisdom he developed, he earned through suffering, and it may be that his unceasing interest in man's moral stance in life owed much to his hope that it is indeed possible for man to learn principles by which he may live without depression.

This depression of his twenties was not an isolated episode. Johnson endured lesser setbacks often as the years passed and had chronic symptoms, including insomnia, uncontrolled grimacing and gesturing, and the compulsion to touch fence posts in passing and to go back if he missed one, which reflected his inner turmoil. Moreover, at age fifty-six, he again entered a disabling depression and again feared that he would lose his mind. It was when Henry and Hester Thrale found the great man on his knees before an undistinguished clergyman "beseeching God to continue to him the use of his understanding" that they took him to live in their home. Johnson told Sir Joshua Reynolds that "the great business of his life was to escape from himself; this disposition he considered as the disease of his mind." It is clear that the part of himself from which Johnson needed to escape was his constant self-criticism and all the unconscious ruses of insistent self-punishment. Professor Bate eloquently documents Johnson's capacity for self-flagellation and makes a major theme of "the burden of being a divided soul, in which one portion of him punished another with such astounding success that it needed no cooperating flagellation from others."

At age twenty-five Johnson married Elizabeth Porter, the forty-six year old widow of a friend. When his wife died seventeen years later, alcoholic and addicted to laudanum, he was almost inconsolable in his mourning. During the marriage, he spent her patrimony in an unsuccessful attempt to start a school, forcing them to live in want in cheap lodgings in London. She died before he completed

the dictionary. His friends marveled at the respect and affection with which he spoke of her, for in their opinion she was a pathetic creature through most of her later years. But the truth was that she rescued him from his paralyzing depression by her confidence in his abilities and her total willingness to give up her home, social position and even her family (her son never spoke to her again) for him. She afforded him the uncritical companionship which brought him out of himself, while at the same time turning his capacity for guilt about squandering her inheritance into the productive channel of writing furiously to support her and to make up to her for his failings. She was said to have been sexually attractive, which must have meant much to a man as ugly as Johnson and as inexperienced with women. Her sense of humor appears in two episodes. When Johnson proposed marriage, he apologized for his mean extraction, lack of money and for the fact that an uncle of his had been hanged. She replied that she judged no man by his ancestry, was scarcely richer than he was and well knew that she had fifty relatives who deserved hanging. Later, in London, when Johnson was earning too little to afford decent food, he nevertheless reserved the right to criticize his wife's meals. One evening as he was about to say grace she interrupted him to remark that it was hypocritical of him to thank the Lord for food which he would then pronounce unfit for human consumption.

Elizabeth ("Tetty") tapped in her husband his most endearing quality, gratitude a quality also displayed in his relationships with some of his fellow men. He was intensely loyal to his close friends, offering the name of Sir John Hawkins for membership in his famous discussion club when he knew that the man was "unclubable" and gathering into the household of his later years half a dozen persons wholly unlike himself because they were poor and gave him emotional support and needed him to work for them. One of these persons, Robert Levet, a poorly trained but doggedly faithful physician to London's poor, breakfasted with Johnson daily for ³⁰ years, with neither saying a word. When Levet died, Johnson's ^u elegy described him as "obscurely wise, and coarsely kind" and admired his steady, focussed life:

"His virtues walk'd their narrow round/ Nor made a pause, nor left a void/
And sure th' Eternal Master found/ The single talent well employ'd." Johnson
acknowledged Levett's greater self-control.

Marriage, escaping from his preoccupation with himself, gratitude for emotional support - it is interesting that following his second severe depression at age fifty-six Johnson was again restored to mental health by family life when Henry and Hester Thrale installed him as a member of their household. Then, the disparity of ages was the other way around. Hester Thrale was twenty-five and having a child a year. But for perhaps the first time since his marriage, Johnson allowed himself to gratify dependency needs as he became in part another child of this exceptional young mother.

Before the appearance of the dictionary Johnson wrote whatever he thought would pay: an abortive drama "Irene", poems, articles on all conceivable subjects from agriculture to medicine to Chinese architecture, imaginary Parliamentary debates based on the sketchiest outlines of the topics and of the Whig and Tory positions, translations, essays on foreign policy, and biographies. To none of this ephemera did he sign his name until the appearance of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* in 1748 when he was thirty-nine years old. Professor Bate considers that his greatest contribution, second only to his great moral writings, was in literary biography. Even his early biographies of writers, condensed hack work that they often were, tried to do what Bate himself has done, to show how the life and the work are inseparable and must be analyzed together. Johnson, with his wide reading, keenly analytical mind and rich experience both in the crowded world of 18th century London and within his own suffering soul, was an expert literary critic and an ideal literary biographer. His edition of Shakespeare, with its powerful preface, is still a cornerstone of Shakespearian scholarship. His last great work, *The Lives of the Poets*, examined the lives and works of fifty-two English poets, whose important poems he mostly knew by heart. His insights have stood up, except in his biased *Life of Swift* with whom he associated anger, satiric bitterness and a sense of the emptiness of life. Dreading these qualities in himself, he condemned

them in Swift and found no good in the man.

As interesting as his subject matter were Johnson's methods of composition. His memory was prodigious and he could draw upon it for facts and quotations years after reading original texts. His research problems were thus much simplified. Moreover, he liked to compose in his head, particularly when he wrote poetry. After working out fifty lines or so, he would hurriedly write them down. When writing prose, his powers of organization were instant, and he could pour out thousands of words in a few hours, or begin and complete a number for The Idler while the printer's boy was waiting at the door to carry it away. His imagination for relevant argument, no matter what he was discussing, was incredibly resourceful and thorough. He usually refused to reread and edit his writing. A friend complimented his speech in words which could also apply to his writing, stating that his speech was "as correct as a second edition." He would have been an outstanding lawyer, and was only prevented from trying his hand at this by his lack of a university degree. In fact, he ghost-wrote law lectures for Robert Chambers, who was terrified almost to muteness when he was appointed Blackstone's successor as Vinerian Professor of Law at Oxford.

At the same time Johnson was one of History's great procrastinators. He was capable of planning a literary project, such as his edition of Shakespeare, publishing a prospectus asking for subscribers to support the project, collecting the money, losing the names of the subscribers, and then doing nothing for years. Especially when he had no wife to labor for, he found within himself fierce rebellion against carrying out self-imposed tasks. A blank page, waiting to be filled, aroused in him a complex mixture of desire, hope, fear, anger and guilt. His hack work in Grub Street probably came easier than the later pieces to which he signed his name. Easiest of all were prefaces, essays, sermons, poems and other writings which he did gratis for his friends, often for publication under their names. The volume of these contributions is very large and the quality very high. His standards for himself were higher, so high that he was often unable or unwilling to write. Writing for a friend probably allowed him to relax his

BLANDIUS, to become more productive and to enjoy himself. Flagellation from others to work faster was naturally not well received. When working on a catalogue for the library of Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, Johnson was upbraided for delay by Thomas Osborne, the ignorant bookseller who was to publish the catalogue. Johnson felled Osborne with a huge sixteenth century Greek Bible and kept him prostrate with his foot on Osborne's neck.

Throughout his years in London, Johnson was seldom without a discussion club, formal or informal. His most famous, and last, was called simply The Club, and was founded in 1764 when Johnson was fifty-five and famous. This prototype of all dining and conversational clubs included as founding members Johnson, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Edmund Burke and Oliver Goldsmith. It enlarged steadily and became the most sought-after and prized informal society in England. Boswell has been its chronicler, and we know in detail the nature of the discussion. When Johnson was in good form, he commonly had the last word, and it is this habit of Johnson's which reveals another aspect of his character. He talked for victory. Although he could intone: "That is the happiest conversation where there is no competition, no vanity, but a calm quiet interchange of sentiments," he did not mean it. He frequently found himself unable to resist a thunderous putdown when a person with whom he was "quietly interchanging sentiments" offered him the opportunity. At dinner at General Paoli's, arguing the merits of drinking wine with Sir Joshua Reynolds, the abstemious Johnson finally shouted, "I won't argue any more with you, Sir. You are too far gone." Reynolds replied, "I should have thought so indeed, Sir, had I made such a speech as you have now done." There followed apologies, and protestations of the value of friendship, a sequence which Johnson often found necessary to employ. Johnson was an aggressive man, aware of his aggression, and anxious to control it or to undo its consequences. He felt its force because he so often turned it upon himself.

Johnson's favorite volumes, which he reread constantly, were Pilgrim's Progress, Robinson Crusoe and Don Quixote. He identified with these lonely seekers and saw himself shipwrecked, beset by physical and moral challenges and in quest

of, while at the same time debunking, meaningful crusades. We have seen the degree to which he pressed self-reliance and a stoic acceptance of life's disappointments, and the price he paid for his convictions. As a moralist, however, he was looking for more than rules of conduct, and the most fascinating theme of Professor Bate's biography is the relationship between Johnson's morality and his religion. Was he a religious man?

Johnson brought to his moral writing honesty, courage, compassion and humor, so that the remarks he made on a wide range of human behaviour were reassuring rather than condemning, explaining to us our common lot and common self-deceptions. Our century would call him a psychologist. His first concern was with the lively reach of the human imagination, always stretching for what it cannot attain, or refusing satisfaction by asking for more. The Great Pyramid, he said, "seems to have been erected only in compliance with that hunger of imagination which preys incessantly upon life. Those who have already all that they can enjoy, must enlarge their desires." He explored the "fallacies of the imagination" which deceive us into thinking that, for example, if we are married, the single state is to be preferred, or vice versa; that if we are troubled, travel will leave our problems behind; or that if we consider ourselves important, the world will notice. In Rambler number two he reminds us that we are all like Don Quixote, living in dreams and exaggerating the rewards we will gain. Yet he hastens to add that "Without hope there can be no endeavor. It is necessary to hope, though hope should always be deluded; for hope itself is happiness, and its frustrations, however frequent, are less dreadful than its extinction."

Johnson was interested in man's "stratagems of self-defence" against the frustrations which our undisciplined imaginations will bring. He understood our anxious repression of unacceptable impulses or memories and our eagerness to project our defeats onto others. Some of his liveliest essays deal with envy and our need to censure others or to force them to share our misery. Yet he knew that "We do not so often endeavor or wish to impose on others as on ourselves." He saw that "Children are always cruel. Pity is acquired and improved by the

cultivation of reason." "Abundant charity is an atonement of imaginary sins."

"There is a kind of anxious cleanliness . . . (which) is the superfluous scrupulosity of guilt, dreading discovery, and shunning suspicion." It is not surprising that psychiatrists have quoted him for years. He did not, however, condemn man to the control of unconscious forces bred into him in childhood.

"The first step in greatness is to be honest." "Truth such as is necessary to the regulation of life, is always to be found where it is honestly sought." These quotations gather force and poignancy when we recall Johnson's own inner conflicts. His moral writing was profoundly autobiographical, a dialogue between different parts of himself, a pilgrim's search for meaning.

Johnson's poem *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, after cataloging examples which illustrate the title, asks "Where then shall Hope and Fear their objects find?" "Must helpless man, in ignorance sedate,/ Roll darkling down the torrent of his fate?" His answer follows: "Enquirer, cease, petitions yet remain/ Which heav'n may hear, nor deem religion vain./ Still raise for good the supplicating voice,/ But leave to heav'n the measure and the choice./ Safe in his pow'r, whose eyes discern afar/ The secret ambush of a specious pray'r." This sounds properly submissive, but also skeptical - "petitions . . . which heav'n may hear," "the secret ambush of a specious pray'r." This work, written when Johnson was thirty-nine, was a sort of prologue to his lifelong religious struggle.

Mrs. Thrale noted Johnson's "fixed incredulity of everything he heard," and Johnson himself, hearing that a man had accurately predicted the time of his own death, said, "I am so glad to have every evidence of the spiritual world, that I am willing to believe it." His companion replied: "You have evidence enough; good evidence, which needs not such support." Johnson concluded: "I like to have more." Johnson had difficulty accepting the explanation of evil which Elihu gives Job - that the wisdom and justice of God are unsearchable to the human mind. As he entered his sixties he clutched at the idea that only an afterlife could justify the fact that "the only thinking being of this globe is doomed to think merely to be wretched, and to pass his time from youth to age in fearing

or suffering calamities." He could become terrified that he himself might not be among those saved, but his deeper concern was that an afterlife might not exist, that purpose in this universe might not be found.

Johnson went to church regularly and prayed. At the same time he confessed: "I am convinced I ought to be present at divine service more frequently than I am; but the provocations given by ignorant and affected preachers too often disturb the mental calm which otherwise would succeed to prayer." He had thought more deeply than most preachers about the subject matter of most sermons, and his character was strongly individualistic and self-reliant. This led him to question rather than to accept, and to regard religion as a subjective experience rather than a corporate exercise. Yet he distrusted "the secret ambush of a specious pray'r" and well knew how self-serving religious observance could be. He tried "to consider the act of prayer as a reposal of myself upon God, and a resignation of all into his holy hand" thus lessening the selfish wish component of prayer, and he wrote that "He that hopes to find peace by trusting God, must obey him." "This constant and devout practice is both the effect, and cause, of confidence in God." These quotations come from a sermon he wrote for a friend. It is significant that when writing in his own name he avoided religious questions because he felt himself unqualified. He was torn between his exaggerated feeling of self-responsibility, for everything including his religious experience, and his honest observation that a "solitary mortal is probably superstitious, and possibly mad." He despised the sin of pride.

Johnson's own fierce self-demand put him in danger of projecting onto God a harsh, punishing nature. He prayed to accept the fact of "God's mercy and forbearance." In *Rasselas*, written at the end of his twelve years of concentrated moral writing, he has the philosopher Imlac say: "Keep this thought always prevalent, that you are only one atom of the mass of humanity, and have neither such virtue nor vice as that you should be singled out for supernatural favors or afflictions." Johnson's struggle, between self-responsibility and submission, and between horror at the evil in the world and hope for an afterlife to give

life purpose, continued unabated until his death. He attacked these issues with a characteristic resolution "to confirm myself in the conviction of the truths of Religion." Listed below these words were other resolutions "To rise by eight, or earlier" and "To form a plan for the regulation of my daily life." We know that he almost never rose before noon and that his daily life remained unregulated.

At his death Johnson did not go gently into the dark night. He greeted a visitor to his deathbed with the Roman gladiator's cry "Iam moriturus," (I who am about to die), and he urged his physician to cut deeper into his leg to drain away the fluid of congestive heart failure, crying "I want length of life, and you are afraid of giving me pain, which I do not value." "I will be conquered, I will not capitulate."

It is possible to criticize Johnson for his belief in the power of reason and for his insistence that responsible, rational man can create a moral order which will "repose on the stability of truth." Two centuries of increasing insight into the psychodynamics of individuals and groups, and of genocide, totalitarian regimes and mass hysteria, have left us less naive about man's capacity to act rationally and self-responsibly in the sense that Johnson intended. But to offer such criticism would be to miss the point of Professor Bate's biography. In presenting to us Johnson's inner struggles, illuminated by modern psychological insights and compared to his recorded pronouncements, Professor Bate suggests that Johnson was not so much giving us his convictions as trying to persuade himself, and that his difficulty in self-persuasion arose from his honest knowledge of man's true, irrational nature. Johnson knew himself, and therefore understood others.

Johnson was a hogshead of a man. He makes sense to us because he lived the inner conflicts common to us all with a fierce intensity and a profound understanding of their consequences. The hogshead of sense did not conceal the ferment within.

Richmond Prescott

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