

Samuel Johnson: The Restless Sage

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Samuel Johnson is so voluminous, such a world in himself, that whole books have been written giving only the meanest caricature. So a single talk is bound to be a foolish enterprise. I shall have to leave out so much that is fascinating and vital and concentrate on those parts of his huge being which were his lifetime obsessions: his psychology and his religion. But I must say a few things about other parts of his life and work first.

He was born in Lichfield on 18th September 1709, the son of a bookseller, and the discomforts that were to last all his life began at once. The milk of his wet nurse turned out to be tubercular. He was blind in his left eye and badly sighted in the other one. He was deaf in his left ear and he caught smallpox. These things did not impede his literary career which began with his writing an epitaph for a duck he trod on when he was three. The wit – let's be honest and call it cheek – was there from the start: when his mother called him a puppy, he replied, "And do you know what they call a puppy's mother?" He had a large appetite and once at his aunt's he ate so much of a boiled leg of mutton that she talked about it for years. He was touched by Queen Anne. When he was in his sixties he said, "My health has been from my twentieth year such as has seldom given me a single day of ease".

Everything about him was huge and voracious. Boswell said,

"I never knew any man who relished good eating more than he did. When at table he was totally absorbed in the business of the moment. His looks seemed riveted to his plate. Nor would he say one word or pay the least attention to what was said by others till he had satisfied his appetite, which was so fierce and indulged with such intenseness that while in the act of eating the veins on his forehead swelled and generally a strong perspiration was visible. To those whose sensations were delicate, this could not be but disgusting; and it was doubtless not very suitable to the character of a philosopher".

And though he could be rigidly abstemious, he was never temperate in either eating or drinking. He could refrain but he could not use moderately. He said of himself,

"I have no objection to a man's drinking wine, if he can do it in moderation. I found myself apt to go in excess in it and therefore after having been some time without it on account of illness, I thought it better not to return to it. Every man is to judge for himself according to the effects which he experiences. One of the Fathers tells us he found fasting made him so peevish he did not practise it.

"I do not say it is wrong to produce self-complacency by drinking. I only deny that it improves the mind. When I drank wine, I scorned to drink it in company. I have drunk many a bottle by myself in the first place because I had need of it to raise my spirits; in the second place because I would have no man witness its effects upon me".

Sometime later Boswell said,

"He told me I might now have the pleasure to see him drink wine again, for he had lately returned to it. When I mentioned this to Johnson, he said, 'I drink it now sometimes but not socially'. The first evening that I was with him at the Thrales, I observed he poured a quantity of it into a large glass and swallowed it greedily.

Everything about his character and manners was forcible and violent. There was never any moderation”.

He lived for conversation and argument and said a seat in a tavern was the best place on earth. And although Boswell famously said to him after an evening’s banter, “You tossed and gored a great many, Sir” - he also said,

“That he was occasionally remarkable for violence of temper may be granted: but let us ascertain the degree and not let it be supposed that he was in a perpetual rage and never without a club in his hand to knock down everyone who approached him. On the contrary, the truth is that by much the greatest part of his time he was civil, obliging, nay polite in the true sense of the word; so much so that many gentlemen who were long acquainted with him never received or even heard a severe expression from him”.

Johnson said, “It is a man’s business to *command* his temper”. He had no taste for painting, though he and Joshua Reynolds were great friends, and Boswell says, “He was very insensible to the power of music” – a remark perhaps contradicted by Johnson himself when he confessed, “Had I learnt to fiddle, I should have done nothing else”.

Then there was the uncouthness. Boswell tells us: “Such was the heat and irritability of his blood that not only did he pare his nails to the quick, but scraped the joints of his fingers with a penknife till they were red and raw.

“His figure was large and well-formed and his countenance of the cast of an ancient statue; yet his appearance was rendered strange and somewhat uncouth by convulsive cramps, by the scars of that distemper which it was once imagined the Royal Touch could cure, and by a slovenly mode of dress. Though he had the use only of one eye, yet so much does mind govern and even supply the deficiency of organs that his visual perceptions, as far as they extended, were uncommonly quick and accurate. So morbid was his temperament that he never knew the joy of a free and vigorous use of his limbs: when he walked it was like the struggling gait of one in fetters; when he rode he had no command or direction of his horse, but was carried as if in a balloon. That with his constitution and habits of life he should have lived seventy-five years is a proof that an inherent vitality is a powerful preservative of the human frame.

“He would always be shaking his head and rolling himself about in a ridiculous manner”.

And he was turned down for a teaching post because, as the headmaster said, “He has such a way of distorting his face that it might affect some of the lads”

When he did spend some time teaching, his friend the actor Garrick said, “His oddities of manner and uncouth gesticulation could not but be the source of merriment to the boys. The young rogues used to listen at the door of his bedchamber and peep through the keyhole that they might turn into ridicule his tumultuous and awkward fondness for Mrs Johnson”

Tumultuous is an apt word for his behaviour. Once in the theatre he returned to find a man had taken his seat. He picked up the seat with the man in it and threw both man and seat into the pit. He loved rolling down grassy hills. On the tour of the Hebrides he jumped from the ship into the sea and swam the last part of the way to shore. And on being warned of a particularly dangerous pool, he jumped straight into it. His clothes were so ragged and his table manners so disturbing that sometimes when he was invited to meet some prominent person, he would conduct the interview while eating behind a screen.

He went to Oxford where he was very brilliant but had to leave without his degree when his money ran out. This experience threw him into a depression for several years and he did bits and pieces jobs and nothing until setting off with Garrick for London to try to make his way as a writer. They could afford only one horse and had to take turns. When they arrived in London Johnson had tuppence-halfpenny and Garrick three-halfpence. He had married by this time – at St Werburgh’s church, Derby on 9th July 1735 - but he left his wife behind with the intention of sending for her when he had established himself.

It was a strange marriage. He was twenty-five and his wife, Elizabeth Jervis Porter, was a widow aged forty-five with three teenage children. He called her Tetty and said, “It was a love match on both sides”

Boswell says Tetty was “large, buxom and highly coloured”. But Garrick added to this portrait: “She was very fat with a bosom of more than ordinary protruberance with swelled cheeks of a florid red produced by thick painting and increased by the liberal use of cordials; flaring and fantastic in her dress and affected both in her speech and general behaviour. Johnson’s friend Hawkins said he’d married her because he couldn’t see very well. But Tetty described Johnson as “the most sensible man I ever saw”.

She would stand up to him. Once, when he started to say Grace before the meal, she chastised him, “Nay hold, Mr Johnson: do not make a farce of thanking God for a dinner which in a few minutes you will protest not eatable!”

They did live together for a while but, as Walter Bate says, “Between 1737 and 1739 something happened between him and Tetty and they began to live apart”

She began drinking heavily and turned to opium. She was hypochondriac and Johnson had to pay huge bills for treatments. She wouldn’t leave the house and rather pathetically began to use even more rouge, saying she was disturbed by the difference in their ages. Johnson spent two-thirds of his meagre and unreliable freelance writer’s income on her and, poor as they were, she always had a maid. Bate says that her various illnesses meant the end of sexual relations between them – “despite a touching persistence on Johnson’s part”. Tetty died in March 1752.

Johnson was terribly distressed and he felt guilty. He forever felt guilty, turning to God and praying, “Enable me to begin and perfect that reformation which I promised her”.

It's difficult to know what sort of marriage they had. Johnson was a man of strong desires and there were rumours about his licentious behaviour as a young man. Boswell tells how "...two young women from Staffordshire consulted him on the subject of Methodism. Johnson said to them, 'Come you pretty fools and dine with Maxwell and me at The Mitre and we will talk over the subject' – which they did. And after dinner he took one of them on his knee and fondled her for half an hour".

Boswell, himself hardly a chaste young man, said, "When Johnson was young it was well-known his amorous inclinations were uncommonly strong and impetuous. He owned to many of his friends that he used to take women of the town to taverns".

Johnson was aware of his lustfulness and ashamed of it. Refusing David Hume's invitation to sit in the green room at the theatre, he said, "I'll come no more behind your scenes, David. For the silk stockings and white bosoms of your actresses excite my amorous propensities".

He was of course extraordinarily aware and intelligent. You might say he had too much consciousness for his own good. His memory was phenomenal. Once at Oxford a friend recited to him eighteen Latin verses which he then repeated verbatim, varying only one epithet – and that was to improve the line. His attitude towards both reading and writing was ambivalent. He would work intensively for very long periods and then fall into prolonged idleness and depression saying, "I have read few books through. They are generally so repulsive I cannot". And he described scholarship, reviewing and writing generally as "the epidemical conspiracy for the destruction of paper"

Making his way in London was hard. He wrote for magazines for small amounts of money but enjoyed his first success with a long poem called *London*:

*Here the fell attorney prowls for prey;
Here falling houses thunder on your head
And here a female atheist talks you dead.*

He wrote up weekly the parliamentary debates – some half a million words altogether. The astonishing thing about this is that he very largely invented the speeches from news reports. But his version was so good that scholars and other commentators quoted from them for a century and many aspiring public speakers took them for their model.

Johnson was a moralist. He wrote *The Vanity of Human Wishes* when he was thirty-nine and the fantastic novel *Rasselas* – to defray the expenses of his mother's funeral nine years later. His edition of Shakespeare's works is vast and penetrating. He was not an academic but a seer, a sage and an imaginative genius who saw through to the heart of things; who, as it were, saw things from the inside. Wonderful remark on Shakespeare: "He who would illustrate Shakespeare by a quotation is like a man who trying to sell his house used to take round a brick from it in his pocket".

The King asked him to write the biography of English literature and he produced the magnificent *Lives of the Poets*. But it is for the *Dictionary* that he is popularly regarded. He had assistants on this great work and typically paid them over the odds

out of his kindness. And did it all in a tenth of the time it took the whole French Academy of forty scholars to produce theirs. Voltaire urged the French to follow Johnson's method. He was paid £1575 in instalments.

He described himself as temperamentally unsuited to dictionary-writing: full of rebellious indolence and the desire to get any piece of work over quickly. In the *Dictionary* he defined "lexicographer" as "a harmless drudge". Once he was asked by two ladies why he came to define "pastern" as "the knee of a horse". And he replied, "Ignorance, ladies. Pure ignorance". Another lady asked him why he had left out rude and obscene words and he said, "I see you have been looking for them, Madam!"

When the *Dictionary* was published the Earl of Chesterfield, under the description of "Patron" was brought in to write a commendation. This prompted one of the most brilliant short letters in English. Johnson wrote to Chesterfield:

"Is not a Patron, My Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for his 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 labours, had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed until I am indifferent and cannot enjoy it; till I am solitary and cannot impart it; till I am known and do not want it. I hope it is no very cynical asperity not to confess obligations where no benefit has been received, or to be unwilling that the public should consider me as owing that to a Patron that which Providence has enabled me to do for myself".

Johnson is renowned as a sort of archetypal Tory – and he was. He was not, that is, a free market Liberal. Those were the Whigs whom Johnson described as "vile" and he said the first Whig was the devil. The Whigs were the party of great landowners and wealthy merchants. Tories were small landowners and country clergy. Johnson believed in small government. He saw all forms of government as a necessary evil, constructed and managed as it was bound to be by fallible, sinful men. He was against slavery and Boswell tells us that when he was "...in company with some very grave men in Oxford university, his toast was, 'Here's to the next insurrection of the Negroes in the West Indies'."

He was a profound monarchist and he was once given an audience with the King. When Boswell asked him what they had talked about, Johnson replied, "It is not for me to bandy civilities with my Sovereign". As to the famous definition of "patriotism" as "the last refuge of a scoundrel", Boswell says, "He did not mean a real and generous love of our country. He meant that pretended patriotism which so many have made a cloke for self-interest".

He hated republicanism and once when Dr Price defended this system in Oxford, Johnson noisily left the room. He despised the romantic politics of Rousseau and said, "Rousseau knows he is talking nonsense and laughs at the world for staring at him".

One day Sir Adam Ferguson said to him, "Sir it is surely a good thing to keep up a spirit in the people as a balance against the Crown"

Johnson put him down: "Sir, I perceive you are a vile Whig. Why all this childish jealousy of the Crown? The Crown has not power enough"

“Whiggism,” he said is “...a laughable scheme of political improvement – no better than the politics of stock-jobbers and the religion of infidels”

On Milton he said he had “...a just abhorrence of Milton who had written in justification of the murder of his Sovereign...a man who never spared any asperity of reproach or brutality or insolence...an acrimonious and surly republican who in his domestic relations was so severe and arbitrary and whose head was filled with the hardest and most dismal texts of Calvinism”.

All his life, Johnson was melancholic and often on the edge of despair. Sometimes he himself admits he was insane. This is because he was overstocked with consciousness, self-consciousness and God-consciousness. He would have made a good companion for Wittgenstein who used to go to the cinema and sit in the front row watching old black and white cowboy films to take his mind of philosophy. On one occasion Johnson was rescued by Mr and Mrs Thrale who came in to find him on his knees pathetically raving about madness and sin in front of a priest.

He spoke of “vile melancholy which has made me mad all my life”. And Boswell said the only book that would get him out of bed before noon was Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*. When he was in Lichfield he would frequently walk to Birmingham and back to escape himself. This was what he called “the great business of life” – to escape from himself. He said, “I have frequented the theatre more than in former seasons. But I have gone thither only to escape myself.” He said, “I would have a limb amputated to recover my spirits”. And Angus Calder wrote that “His profound affinity with Boswell derived from the fact that both men were guilt-ridden depressives”.

But at the same time he knew that melancholy was useless and pointless: *which of you by taking thought can add one cubit to his stature*. Worse he strongly believed that melancholy was sinful and he compounded his guilty feelings by feeling guilty about not feeling guilty enough. He fell into obsessive-compulsive actions, touching lampposts and counting his steps. He knew all this was wrong and a waste of life. He said so nearly every day and, being Samuel Johnson, he said it in vivid and powerful ways:

He said to Boswell, “I love every part of you except your affectation of distress” .
And again:

“You are always complaining of melancholy and I conclude from those complaints that you are fond of it. No man talks of that which he is desirous to conceal and every man desires to conceal that of which he is ashamed. Make it an invariable and obligatory law never to mention your own mental diseases. If you are never to speak of them, you will think of them but little. And if you think little of them, they will molest you rarely. When you talk of them, it is plain that you want either praise or pity. For praise there is no room and pity will do you no good. Therefore, from this hour think no more about them. Sir, you have but two topics, yourself and me; and I am sick of both”.

He said, “it is wise to be serious, but it is useless and foolish – and perhaps sinful – to be gloomy”.

Physician, heal thyself.

He said, “Labouring men who work hard and live sparingly are seldom troubled with low spirits. If thou be solitary, be not idle. If thou be idle, be not solitary. Take a course of chemistry or rope-dancing: anything that will get the mind off itself. A man is happy never except when he is drunk.

“I believe”, he said “it is best to throw life into a method, that every hour may bring its employment and every employment have its hour”.

And, “How much misery is escaped by frequent and violent agitation of the body!” It was from Johnson that Churchill got the phrase “the black dog”.

Though he would have despised the psychoanalytic preoccupation with introspection and navel-gazing, he had great insight into his own psychology. He knew the disease and he knew the cure:

“Do not hope wholly to reason away your troubles; do not feed them with attention and they will die imperceptibly away. Fix your thoughts upon your business, fill your intervals with company, and sunshine will again break in on your mind”.

And he believed that we are not finally the victims of our emotions but that will and act can alter our feelings and moods. This he got from St Augustine who urged hypocrisy as a practical virtue: pretend to something desirable until you make it real. Johnson likewise spoke of “...the insidious power of habits, pictured as pigmies, that smooth one’s path up the mountain of existence”. And our inner, mental state is not something airy and indefinable – something merely *spiritual*. As he said, “Intentions must be gathered from acts”.

Bate refers to “...the severe rein he kept on any temptation to project outward and to blame external conditions”. Johnson would have hated our victim culture. He denied that we are victims of ourselves and said, “A man’s being in good or bad humour depends on his will”. God knows what epithet he would have coined for our psychologists and courts who describe murderers as “suffering from narcissistic personality disorder”.

At the centre of his politics was the monarch. At the centre of his whole psychological makeup and personality was God and the constant sense of God’s presence like a haunting. Boswell said of him, “He was a sincere and zealous Christian of High Church of England and monarchical principles which he would not tamely suffer to be questioned”.

All his life he ghosted sermons for parsons. But Boswell says, “He did not accept a Living because he was persuaded that his temper and habits rendered him unfit for that assiduous and familiar instruction of the vulgar and innocent which he held to be the duty of a clergyman”.

He generally thought the clergy were a poor lot: "This merriment of parsons is mightily offensive," he said. And of the theological fads of the time, "Ancient ruffles and modern principles do not agree".

But he was not prissy and puritanical. In short, he was not Milton. Of a clergyman turned down for a benefice because five years earlier he had been found guilty of fornication, he said: "Why Sir, he has repented. If a man is good enough to go to heaven, he is good enough to be a beneficed clergyman".

He was regular at church but he said,

"I am convinced that 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. I am apt to whisper to myself on such occasions, How can this illiterate fellow dream of fixing attention after we have been listening to the sublimest truths conveyed in the most chaste and exalted language?"

Johnson believed the Christian Creed fully and explicitly. He said, "The mind can only repose itself on the stability of truth". He did not share the fashionable 18th century sophistication and the tendency to regard religious doctrines as if they were metaphors. He was once in a discussion and he turned morose. A lady asked him what was the matter and he said, "I think I may be damned"

She said, "What do you mean, Sir, to be damned?"

"Sent to hell and punished everlastingly"

"You seem Sir to forget the merits of our Redeemer"

"I do not forget the merits of our Redeemer. But our Redeemer has said that he will set some at his right hand and some at his left".

He disgusted himself. One Good Friday confession was simply: "I have made no reformation. I have lived totally useless, more sensual in thought, more addicted to wine and meat".

He did not have the easy-going attitude of his great friend Edmund Burke who said, "While I am honoured to be the Member of Parliament for Bristol, I should not like to live there. I would always have to on my best behaviour!"

Johnson had a lifelong abhorrence of lying, even about the smallest matters. And of lying to save someone's feelings he said,

"I deny the lawfulness of telling a lie to a sick man for fear of alarming him. You have no business with consequences: you are to tell the truth. Besides you are not sure what effect your telling him that he is in danger may have. It may bring his distemper to a crisis and that may cure him. Of all lying, I have the greatest abhorrence on this because I believe it has frequently been practised on me".

And he was uncompromising about this stability of truth business that would rule him out today as hopelessly politically-incorrect. As Boswell says,

“He defended the Inquisition and maintained that false doctrine should be checked on its first appearance and that the civil power should unite with the church in punishing those who dared attack established religion”.

When his aged mother consulted him with anxiety on the perplexing difficulties of the times, he advised her to keep to the old religion.

Johnson told Boswell, “Let the blindness of the Mahometans confirm you in Christianity”. There would be a fatwa issued these days

I often think that the great many people who have a sentimental regard for Samuel Johnson as a composite of table-wit and Father Christmas would hate him if they knew more about him.

He said, “I know of no good prayers except those in *The Book of Common Prayer*”. But he wrote hundreds of wonderfully heartfelt and tender prayers himself. For example:

“Give me grace to withdraw my mind from unprofitable and dangerous enquiries, from difficulties vainly curious and doubts impossible to be solved. Let me rejoice in the light which thou hast imparted. Let me serve thee with active zeal and humble confidence”.

And he did serve. His Christianity was practical. Boswell says,

“He for years nursed whole nests of people in his house where the lame, the blind, the sick and the sorrowful found a sure retreat from all the evils whence his little income could secure them”.

And Mrs Thrale said of him, “His soul was not different from that of another person. It was simply greater”.

Again Boswell says,

“He frequently gave all the silver in his pocket to the poor. Coming home one night he found a poor woman lying in the street, so much exhausted that she could not walk. He took her on his back and carried her to his house where he discovered that she was one of those wretched females who had fallen into the lowest state of vice, poverty and disease. Instead of harshly upbraiding her, he had her taken care of with all tenderness for a long time, at considerable expense, till she was restored to health; and endeavoured to put her into a virtuous way of living”.

He lacerated any escape into the sentimental – especially in himself – with self-deprecating humour and wit. Johnson complained to Boswell about someone who had criticised him:

“He said that I sometimes contradicted people in conversation. Now what harm does it do to any man to be contradicted?”

“I suppose he meant the manner of it – doing it roughly and harshly”

“And who is the worse for that?”

“It hurts people of weak nerves”

“I know no such weak-nerved people”

Boswell said, “I related this conversation to Burke who said, ‘It is well with a man who when he comes to die has nothing more on his conscience than having been a little rough in conversation’.”

He was seventy-five when he died. As he approached the end he declared.

“I will be conquered. I will not capitulate. But I will take no more physic, not even my opiates. For I have prayed that I may render up my soul to God unclouded”.

This was the man who had said to Boswell years before that, “The fear of death is so much natural to a man that the whole of life is but a keeping away of the thoughts of it”.

And Boswell said, “I shall never forget the tremulous earnestness with which he pronounced the awful petition in The Litany, ‘In the hour of our death and at the Day of judgement, Good Lord, deliver us’.”

A few days before he died, Johnson received the Blessed Sacrament for the last time and composed this prayer:

“Almighty and most merciful Father, I am now as to human eyes it seems, about to commemorate for the last time the death of thy Son Jesus Christ our Saviour and Redeemer. Grant O Lord that my whole hope and confidence may be in his merits, and thy mercy enforce and accept my imperfect repentance. Make this commemoration available to the confirmation of my faith, the establishment of my hope and the enlargement of my charity. And make the death of thy Son Jesus Christ effectual to my redemption. Have mercy upon me and pardon the multitude of my offences. Bless my friends. Have mercy upon all men. Support me by thy Holy Spirit in the days of weakness and at the hour of death. And receive me at my death to everlasting happiness, for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen”

This was the man who wrote: “Life is very short and uncertain. Let us spend it as well as we can”. And “The principal use of prayer is to preserve in the mind a constant dependence on God”.

Edmund Burke carried his coffin.

