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ESSAYS & BELLES-LETTRES

Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide,
In thy most need to go by thy side

INTRODUCTION

IN 1737 Samuel Johnson and David Garrick rode together on horseback to London. 'In his visionary project of an academy,' writes Arthur Murphy, 'Johnson had probably wasted his wife's substance; and Garrick's father had little more than his half-pay. . . . In three or four years afterwards Garrick came forth with talents that astonished the publick . . . Johnson was left to toil in the humble walks of literature.'

The *Rambler* is one of the many products of this period of toil. It is true that by 1750 Johnson had established himself as a writer of competence and of some distinction. In addition to much hack-work for the *Gentleman's Magazine* (including his experience as a parliamentary reporter) he had published his *Life of Savage*; he had gained a *succès d'estime* by his poems *London* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes*; he had seen his play *Irene* produced by Garrick; and, above all, he had been selected by a large group of booksellers as the man to compile a *Dictionary of the English Language*.

But neither the approbation of his poetry nor the prospective fruits of lexicography would keep the wolf from the door, and Johnson who, in Hawkins's words, 'had entertained a resolution to become an author by profession' had to seek other modes of 'writing for bread.'

Nearly forty years before, the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* had come to an end and for Addison's prose Johnson had a deep admiration. 'Whoever,' he said, 'wishes to attain an English style . . . must give his days and nights to the volumes of Addison.' But for Johnson the *Rambler* was something more than a remunerative exercise in prose composition. He embarked upon the work with a prayer: 'Grant, I beseech Thee, that in this undertaking thy Holy Spirit may not be withheld from me, but that I may promote thy glory and the salvation of myself and others.' Such was the deeply sincere petition of Johnson the Moralist, and it is to be remembered that it was as a moralist that he primarily impressed his readers, and among them James Boswell.

About a month after their first encounter in Tom Davies's shop

Boswell was much gratified at supping with Johnson at the Mitre tavern. He preserved a full record of their conversation and at the end of it reflected: 'Had I but thought some years that I should pass an evening with the author of the *Rambler*!' Long before this meeting he had been a reader of Johnson's works and nowhere had he found more 'bark and steel for the mind' than in the *Rambler*, a copy of which he took with him on his continental tour. After commenting on Johnson's amazing universality of genius as a writer, he continues: 'His conversation, too, is as great as his writing.'

Later generations of readers have approached Johnson's writings very differently. Turning to them after the fascination of Boswell's brilliant reporting of Johnson in the tavern chair, they are moved to remark: 'His writing, alas, is not so good as his conversation.'

Thus, Macaulay: 'His books are written in a learned language . . . when he wrote for publication, he did his sentences out of English into Johnsonese'; or Taine: 'His truths are too true; we already know his precepts by heart. We learn from him that life is short and that we ought to improve the few moments accorded to us. . . . We remember that sermons are liked in England and that these essays are sermons.' Leslie Stephen, who had himself been a clergyman, puts it more gently: 'It is hardly desirable,' he writes, 'for a moralist to aim at originality in his precepts,' and although he deems the moralizing to be the best part of the *Rambler* he puts Johnson the writer far below Johnson the talker.

Macaulay's influence upon the literary taste of the nineteenth century was so profound that his dictum about 'Johnsonese' has been widely and uncritically accepted. But is 'Johnsonese' unbearable? Is it, in fact, wholly unpopular? The truth is that the reader loves his Johnsonese provided that it is served to him in small doses and served by James Boswell. If a phrase such as 'I can scarce check my risibility' had been part of a recorded conversation of Johnson it would have been frequently and pleasantly quoted; but since it occurs in a *Rambler* paper it is dubbed 'Johnsonese' and dismissed. Of course it must be admitted that Johnson's prose writing lacks the sharp vigour of his conversation. There is an element of thunder in both: from the printed pages comes the deep rumble, from the talk comes the flash and the explosion. Johnson was fully conscious of the distinction, which was, indeed, deliberate:

'The graces of writing and conversation are of different kinds; and though he who excels in one might have been, with opportunity and application, equally successful in the other, yet as many please by extemporary talk, though utterly unacquainted with the more accurate method and more laboured beauties which composition requires; so it is very possible that men wholly accustomed to works of study may be without that readiness of conception and affluence of language always necessary to colloquial entertainment.'

Here is the Rambler's own warning of what we are to expect from him—not colloquial entertainment, but more accurate method and more laboured beauties. His primary purpose was instruction in the great issues of human life; he made no attempt to satisfy contemporary curiosity and when, like all regular contributors to a journal, he found it difficult to think of a subject, he never seized upon a newspaper article or upon a newly published book as a peg on which to hang a moral tale. Perhaps the *Rambler* would have retained more interest for modern readers if he had. It would have been entertaining, for instance, if Johnson had given us his first thoughts on Gray's *Elegy* or on Smart's *Ode on the Immensity of the Supreme Being*, both of which were published in 1751.

But in 1750 Johnson was still feeling his way as a writer. In his second *Rambler* he wrote: 'There is nothing more dreadful to an author than neglect,' and in the following paper he remarked, with some bitterness, of critics: 'To these men it is necessary for a new author to find some means of recommendation. . . . I have heard how some have been pacified with claret and a supper and others laid asleep with the soft notes of flattery.' As always, Johnson was conscious of the vanity of human wishes, and especially in relation to literary ambition. In No. 145 of the *Rambler* he writes:

'It has been formerly imagined that he who intends the entertainment or instruction of others, must feel in himself some peculiar impulse of genius . . . and animate his efforts with the hope of raising a monument of learning which neither time nor envy shall be able to destroy. But the authors whom I am now endeavouring to recommend have been too long hackneyed in the ways of men to indulge the chimerical ambition of immortality. They have seldom any claim to the trade of writing, but that they have tried some other without success. They perceive no particular summons to composition, except

the sound of the clock . . . and about the opinion of posterity they have little solicitude, for their productions are seldom intended to remain in the world longer than a week.'

Critics may call this 'Johnsonese' if they will, but can they point to a finer exposition of the lot of 'those who retail their labours in periodical sheets'?

Similarly, Johnson had no illusions about the accumulations of literature. In *Rambler* No. 106 he writes: 'No place affords a more striking conviction of the vanity of human hopes than a publick library, . . . of the innumerable authors whose performances are thus treasured up in magnificent obscurity, most are forgotten because they never deserved to be remembered.'

But although the struggles of the adventurer in literature (as Johnson described himself when he first came to London) are vividly portrayed in the pages of the *Rambler*, they are far from predominating the whole series of essays. Character sketches are frequent. One of them, that of Suspirius (No. 59), was the prototype of Croaker in Goldsmith's comedy *The Good-Natur'd Man* and, when the future of the play hung in the balance, it was Shuter's playing of the part of Croaker that determined its success. There are plenty of other characters, both of men and women, and the *Rambler* seems to have paid particular regard to marriageable, and married, couples. For the over-domesticated hostess he displays a keen dislike. Lady Bustle, for instance, is thus described in No. 51:

'She has no crime but luxury, nor any virtue but chastity. She has no desire to be praised but for her cookery, nor wishes any ill to the rest of mankind but that whenever they aspire to a feast their custards may be wheyish and their pie-crusts tough.'

A similar scorn is reserved for the omnivorously impartial collector (No. 82) with his lock of Cromwell's hair in a box turned from a piece of the royal oak and for the virtuoso who 'looked on all his associates as wretches of depraved taste and narrow notions.' To modern readers familiar with the lightness and whimsy of later essayists Johnson's satire may well seem to be applied with too heavy a hand. But again it must be recalled that the *Rambler* was primarily and deliberately what Boswell proclaimed him to be—'a majestic teacher of moral and religious wisdom.' Frequently he wrote of the minor foibles of humanity, but when the subject was a serious one he exemplified what he wrote in another

context: 'Nothing can be more improper than ease and laxity of expression when the importance of the subject impresses solicitude.'

There is a grim humour in many of the essays, but Johnson is most deeply moved when he turns to the tragic side of the life around him. No essay is more impressive than his unsentimental picture of the prostitute's life drawn from the prostitute's point of view (Nos. 170, 171), and his protest against the death-sentence for robbery (No. 114) is one of many examples of the high Tory being well in advance of his time in liberal thinking:

'Death is . . . of dreadful things the most dreadful. . . . This terror should therefore be reserved as the last resort of authority, as the strongest and most operative of prohibitory sanctions. . . . To equal robbery with murder is to reduce murder to robbery, to confound in common minds the gradations of iniquity and incite the commission of a greater crime to prevent the detection of a less.'

As a periodical essayist Johnson recognized that he was not, in the first instance, a favourite with the public. Less than five hundred copies of each *Rambler* were sold as separate essays, but when they were collected in book form they had a much wider sale and reached their twelfth edition in the year of Johnson's death. Like all collections of periodical essays, they are uneven, and Johnson himself would be the last man to expect that any one, in his own day or in ours, should read the *Rambler* continuously and in its entirety ('Sir, do you read books *through*?').

But those who profess and call themselves Johnsonians must not rest upon Boswell alone, and that man is little to be envied whose knowledge of Johnson will not be enriched and his affection deepened by a reading of a selection of essays from the *Rambler*.

S. C. R.

EDITOR'S NOTE

THIS selection of the *Rambler* essays is designed to show Dr Johnson as both moralist and critic: as moralist in the philosophical and religious spheres, as critic of literature and manners. His moods range from the contemplation of eternal truth to the grim humour of his contemporary scene.

The text used is that of the tenth edition, 6 vols. (1784). Spelling and punctuation have been modernized. No titles were prefixed to the original essays: those given here are based upon the list supplied by the edition of 1793 in Parsons's *Select British Classics*.

J. WARRINGTON.

1953.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

[For a full bibliography see W. P. Courtney and D. Nichol Smith, *A Bibliography of Samuel Johnson* (1915; enlarged edition, 1925).]

The following is a list of Johnson's principal works:

A Voyage to Abyssinia, by Father Jerome Lobo (translated from the French), 1735; *London: A Poem*, 1738; *Marmor Norfolciense: or an Essay on an Ancient Prophetic Inscription*, 1739; *A Complete Vindication of the Licensers of the Stage*, 1739; *The Life of Admiral Blake*, 1740; *The Life of Mr. Richard Savage*, 1744; *The Life of J. P. Barretier*, 1744; *Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth*, 1745; *The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language*, 1747; *Prologue and Epilogue at the opening of Drury Lane*, 1747; *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, 1749; *Irene: A Tragedy*, 1749; *The Rambler*, 1750-2; *A New Prologue spoken by Mr. Garrick*, 1750; *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755; *The Prince of Abyssinia (Rasselas)*, 1759; *The Idler*, 1761; *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, 1765; *The False Alarm*, 1770; *Thoughts on the Late Transactions respecting Falkland's Islands*, 1771; *The Patriot*, 1774; *Taxation no Tyranny*, 1775; *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, 1775; *Prefaces to the Works of the English Poets*, 1779-81 (published separately as *Lives of the Poets*, 1781).

In addition Johnson wrote many prefaces to the works of others and a very large number of essays, poems, and reviews for the *Gentleman's Magazine*, the *Literary Magazine*, the *London Chronicle*, and other journals.

Of his posthumous works the most important are his Letters, now collected and edited by R. W. Chapman (1952); his Prayers and Meditations, first published in 1785 and frequently re-edited (e.g. by H. E. Savage, 1927); his Debates in Parliament (1787); an Account of his life to his eleventh year (1805); his Diary of a Journey into North Wales (ed. R. Duppa, 1816); his French Journal (ed. Tyson and Guppy, 1932); and the Sermons attributed to him and left for publication by John Taylor (1789).

There are several collected editions of Johnson's works, including that of Sir John Hawkins (1787); of Arthur Murphy (1792); of R. Lynam (1825); and the Oxford Edition (1825).

The standard edition of his collected Poems is that of Nichol Smith and McAdam (1941).

In addition to Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1785) and *Life of Johnson* (1791), there are other contemporary authorities, including Sir John Hawkins's *Life* (1787), Mrs. Piozzi's *Anecdotes* (1786), Fanny Burney's *Diary* (1842-6), as well as other anecdotes, many of them assembled in Birkbeck Hill's *Johnsonian Miscellanies* (1897). Of the many modern works on Johnson, the following may be noted: T. B. Macaulay: *Essay on Boswell's Life* (1831) and article in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1856; T. Carlyle: *Essay on Boswell's Life*, 1832; L. Stephen: *Samuel Johnson*, 1878; F. Grant:

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THE FIRST ADDRESS (I)

Tuesday, 20th March 1750

Cur tamen hoc libeat potius decurrere campo,
Per quem magnus equos auruncae flexit alumnus,
Si vacat, et placidi rationem admittitis, edam.

JUVENAL.

Why to expatiate in this beaten field;
Why arms oft us'd in vain, I mean to wield;
If time permit, and candour will attend,
Some satisfaction this essay may lend.

ELPHINSTON.

THE difficulty of the first address on any new occasion is felt by every man in his transactions with the world, and confessed by the settled and regular forms of salutation which necessity has introduced into all languages. Judgment was wearied with the perplexity of being forced upon choice where there was no motive to preference; and it was found convenient that some easy method of introduction should be established, which, if it warranted the allurements of novelty, might enjoy the security of prescription.

Perhaps few authors have presented themselves before the public without wishing that such ceremonial modes of entrance had been anciently established as might have freed them from those dangers which the desire of pleasing is certain to produce, and precluded the vain expedients of softening censure by apologies or rousing attention by abruptness.

The epic writers have found the proemial part of the poem such an addition to their undertaking, that they have almost unanimously adopted the first lines of Homer; and the reader needs only to be informed of the subject to know in what manner the poem will begin.

But this solemn repetition is hitherto the peculiar distinction of heroic poetry; it has never been legally extended to the lower orders of literature, but seems to be considered as an hereditary privilege to be enjoyed only by those who claim it from their alliance to the genius of Homer.

The rules which the injudicious use of this prerogative suggested

to Horace may indeed be applied to the direction of candidates for inferior fame. It may be proper for all to remember, that they ought not to raise expectation which it is not in their power to satisfy, and that it is more pleasing to see smoke brightening into flame than flame sinking into smoke.

This precept has been long received, both from regard to the authority of Horace and its conformity to the general opinion of the world; yet there have been always some that thought it no deviation from modesty to recommend their own labours, and imagined themselves entitled by indisputable merit to an exemption from general restraints, and to elevations not allowed in common life. They perhaps believed that when, like Thucydides, they bequeathed to mankind 'κτῆμα ἐς αἰεί—an estate for ever,' it was an additional favour to inform them of its value.

It may, indeed, be no less dangerous to claim, on certain occasions, too little than too much. There is something captivating in spirit and intrepidity, to which we often yield as to a resistless power; nor can he reasonably expect the confidence of others who too apparently distrusts himself.

Plutarch, in his enumeration of the various occasions on which a man may without just offence proclaim his own excellencies, has omitted the case of an author entering the world; unless it may be comprehended under his general position—that a man may lawfully praise himself for those qualities which cannot be known but from his own mouth, as when he is among strangers, and can have no opportunity of an actual exertion of his powers. That the case of an author is parallel will scarcely be granted, because he necessarily discovers the degree of his merit to his judges when he appears at his trial. But it should be remembered, that unless his judges are inclined to favour him they will hardly be persuaded to hear the cause.

In love, the state which fills the heart with a degree of solicitude next that of an author, it has been held a maxim that success is most easily obtained by indirect and unperceived approaches. He who too soon professes himself a lover raises obstacles to his own wishes; and those whom disappointments have taught experience endeavour to conceal their passion till they believe their mistress wishes for the discovery. The same method, if it were practicable to writers, would save many complaints of the severity of the age and the caprices of criticism. If a man could glide imperceptibly into the favour of the public, and only proclaim his pretensions to literary honours when he is sure of not being rejected, he might

commence author with better hopes, as his failings might escape contempt though he shall never attain much regard.

But since the world supposes every man that writes ambitious of applause, as some ladies have taught themselves to believe that every man intends love who expresses civility, the miscarriage of any endeavour in learning raises an unbounded contempt, indulged by most minds without scruple as an honest triumph over unjust claims and exorbitant expectations. The artifices of those who put themselves in this hazardous state have therefore been multiplied in proportion to their fear as well as their ambition, and are to be looked upon with more indulgence as they are incited at once by the two great movers of the human mind, the desire of good and the fear of evil. For who can wonder that, allured on one side and frightened on the other, some should endeavour to gain favour by bribing the judge with an appearance of respect which they do not feel, to excite compassion by confessing weakness of which they are not convinced, and others to attract regard by a show of openness and magnanimity, by a daring profession of their own deserts, and a public challenge of honours and rewards.

The ostentatious and haughty display of themselves has been the usual refuge of diurnal writers; in vindication of whose practice it may be said that what it wants in prudence is supplied by sincerity; and who at least may plead that if their boasts deceive any into the perusal of their performances, they defraud them of but little time.

*Quid enim? Concurritur horae.
Memento cito mors venit, aut victoria laeta.*

HORACE.

The battle join; and, in a moment's flight,
Death, or a joyful conquest, ends the fight.

FRANCIS.

The question concerning the merit of the day is soon decided; and we are not condemned to toil through half a folio to be convinced that the writer has broke his promise.

It is one among many reasons for which I purpose to endeavour the entertainment of my countrymen by a short essay on Tuesday and Saturday, that I hope not much to tire those whom I shall not happen to please; and if I am not commended for the beauty of my works, to be at least pardoned for their brevity. But whether my expectations are most fixed on pardon or praise I think it not

necessary to discover; for having accurately weighed the reasons for arrogance and submission, I find them so nearly equiponderant, that my impatience to try the event of my first performance will not suffer me to attend any longer the trepidations of the balance.

There are, indeed, many conveniences almost peculiar to this method of publication, which may naturally flatter the author, whether he be confident or timorous. The man to whom the extent of his knowledge, or the sprightliness of his imagination, has in his own opinion already secured the praises of the world, willingly takes that way of displaying his abilities which will soonest give him an opportunity of hearing the voice of fame. It heightens his alacrity to think in how many places he shall hear what he is now writing read with ecstasies to-morrow. He will often please himself with reflecting that the author of a large treatise must proceed with anxiety lest, before the completion of his work, the attention of the public may have changed its object. But that he who is confined to no single topic may follow the national taste through all its variations, and catch the *aura popularis* the gale of favour, from what point soever it shall blow.

Nor is the prospect less likely to ease the doubts of the cautious and the terrors of the fearful. For to such the shortness of every single paper is a powerful encouragement. He that questions his abilities to arrange the dissimilar parts of an extensive plan, or fears to be lost in a complicated system, may yet hope to adjust a few pages without perplexity; and if, when he turns over the repositories of his memory, he finds his collection too small for a volume, he may yet have enough to furnish out an essay. He that would fear to lay out too much time upon an experiment of which he knows not the event persuades himself that a few days will show him what he is to expect from his learning and his genius. If he thinks his own judgment not sufficiently enlightened he may, by attending the remarks which every paper will produce, rectify his opinions. If he should with too little premeditation encumber himself by an unwieldy subject he can quit it without confessing his ignorance, and pass to other topics less dangerous or more tractable. And if he finds, with all his industry and all his artifices, that he cannot deserve regard, or cannot attain it, he may let the design fall at once and, without injury to others or himself, retire to amusements of greater pleasure or to studies of better prospect.

ON LOOKING INTO FUTURITY (2)

Saturday, 24th March 1750

Stare loco nescit, pereunt vestigia mille
Ante fugam, absentemque ferit gravis ungula campum.

STATIUS.

Th' impatient courser pants in every vein,
And pawing seems to beat the distant plain;
Hills, vales, and floods appear already crost,
And, ere he starts, a thousand steps are lost.

POPE.

THAT the mind of man is never satisfied with the objects immediately before it, but is always breaking away from the present moment and losing itself in schemes of future felicity; and that we forget the proper use of the time now in our power to provide for the enjoyment of that which, perhaps, may never be granted us, has been frequently remarked. And as this practice is a commodious subject of raillery to the gay and of declamation to the serious, it has been ridiculed with all the pleasantry of wit and exaggerated with all the amplifications of rhetoric. Every instance by which its absurdity might appear most flagrant has been studiously collected; it has been marked with every epithet of contempt, and all the tropes and figures have been called forth against it.

Censure is willingly indulged, because it always implies some superiority; men please themselves with imagining that they have made a deeper search or wider survey than others, and detected faults and follies which escape vulgar observation. And the pleasure of wantoning in common topics is so tempting to a writer that he cannot easily resign it: a train of sentiments generally received enables him to shine without labour, and to conquer without a contest. It is so easy to laugh at the folly of him who lives only in idea, refuses immediate ease for distant pleasures, and instead of enjoying the blessings of life lets life glide away in preparations to enjoy them. It affords such opportunities of triumphant exultation to exemplify the uncertainty of the human state, to rouse mortals from their dream and inform them of the silent celerity of time, that we may believe authors willing rather to transmit than