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THE RELIGION OF DOCTOR JOHNSON

I

“ Doctor Johnson, the most abnormally English Creature God ever made.”¹

SUCH is the pronouncement of the present Master of Trinity, Dr. George Macaulay Trevelyan—himself in the front rank of modern historians, surpassed only by kinsmen even more illustrious: his father Sir George Otto Trevelyan, and his great-uncle Lord Macaulay. Magisterial and unqualified as the verdict is, is it justified? As Boswell saw him and described him for all time, Johnson seems at first little more than a bundle of contradictions: formidable, irascible, almost incredibly and unendurably rude at times, prejudiced to the last degree, yet possessing a wonderful insight into the heart of men and things, and a power almost as wonderful of describing what he saw, and, with it all, a tender and unwearied charity to all weak and broken creatures. “ He is now become miserable,” said Goldsmith of a man who bore a very bad character, “ and that insures the protection of Johnson.” The Johnson of Mrs. Thrale, of Fanny Burney, of Hannah More, of Sir John Hawkins—“ Sir John, Sir, is a very *unclubable* man ”—of Sir Joshua Reynolds, of William Cowper: how different each portrait is from all the others! Yet in each and all of them there is something extraordinarily real, no mere Brocken Spectre looming up through mountain mists menacing and gigantic, but a man fundamentally simple, lovable, sincere. Underlying all surface contradictions was a religion which he was never ashamed to profess, unifying all the diverse elements of his character, straightening what he himself would have called its *anfractuosities*, overcoming disabilities under which almost every other man would have sunk—partial blindness, overpowering melancholy, almost constant pain—and giving peace at the last.

The contrasts and contradictions are on the surface, and are very much what one sees in the age in which he lived. Johnson was pre-eminently a child of the eighteenth century,

¹ “ The Age of Johnson ” in A. S. Turberville's *Johnson's England*, Vol. I, p. 6.

and one can no more imagine him away from the England of that epoch with all its glories and with all its limitations than one can think of Luther away from the Germany of the first half of the sixteenth. The eighteenth century has been called "The Age of Enlightenment", and deserves the proud title. But darkness fought hard, and wherever one went, life was full of the most glaring contrasts. The finest manner, and the rudest and coarsest manners, were to be seen in one person. Luxury and squalor jostled each other in the same room. One remembers Sans Souci, the palace of Frederick the Great: the lofty and beautifully-proportioned bedrooms all gilded wherever gold leaf could be stuck on wall and ceiling, chairs and tables and couches unmatched for elegance of design and artistic craftsmanship, and—the most meagre provision for washing in the tiniest of basins and ewers.

Conditions were little—if at all—better in England. A wave of prosperity was sweeping all over the country. With Clive in India and Wolfe at Quebec and Hawke at Quiberon Bay,

To add something new to this wonderful year

(1759), when, as Macaulay says, "every month had its illuminations and bonfires and every wind brought some messenger charged with joyful tidings and hostile standards", England was experiencing the thrill and exhilaration of the spacious days of Queen Elizabeth.¹ But, among gentle and simple alike, there was a strange torpor of the higher faculties, and the general ignorance of, and indifference to, spiritual considerations almost pass belief. Bishop Butler's sombre verdict a quarter of a century before was still very largely justified:

"It is come, I know not how, to be taken for granted, by many persons, that Christianity is not so much as a subject of inquiry; but that it is, now at length, discovered to be fictitious. And accordingly they treat it, as if, in the present age, this were an agreed point among all people of discernment; and nothing remained, but to set it up as a principal subject of mirth and ridicule, as it were by way of reprisals, for its having so long interrupted the pleasures of the world" (Advertisement to 1st Edition of *The Analogy of Religion*).

¹ Reference may be permitted to a still more widely-known event, 25th January, 1759, obscure and unheralded at the time, when in an "auld clay biggin'" at Alloway near Ayr,

"Our monarch's hindmost year but ane
Was five and twenty days begun,
'Twas then a blast o' Janwar win'
Blew hansel in on Robin".

But the tide was beginning to turn. The Spirit of God was moving on the face of the waters. John Wesley in his apostolic journeys from the Isles of Scilly to Inverness, Charles Wesley pouring out hymns by the thousand, Whitefield in the crowded Moorfields Tabernacle, and, hardly less potent, Johnson in The Club and through his writings, were each and all setting men's thoughts astir, and preparing the way for a revolution as far-reaching as, and infinitely more beneficent than, that in France before the century ended. Barrier after barrier long supposed insurmountable fell, the last and stiffest of all being that which was within, deeply entrenched—the strange, typically eighteenth century dislike and dread of "Enthusiasm". One recalls Hume, flinging to the winds all native inhibitions of speech, as he declaims against "the frantic madman delivering himself over, blindly and without reserve, to the supposed illapses of the Spirit, and to inspiration from above", and Johnson himself in his definition of enthusiasm in the *Dictionary*, "A vain confidence of divine favour or communication".

II

Samuel Johnson was born at Lichfield on the 18th of September, 1709, in a house at the corner of Market Street almost under the shadow of the Cathedral with its lovely three spires—the "Ladies of the Vale". He was handicapped from birth, scrofula and St. Vitus' Dance and partial blindness leaving him all the seventy-five years of his life scarcely a day without pain. Over and above the physical disability, he inherited from his father a deep-rooted and inveterate melancholy, the black days of which made life a burden, taking away all power of work, and haunting him practically to the end with the dread of madness. When one remembers this, one ceases to wonder at, or to be repelled by, the morbidness which is the constant background of the *Prayers and Meditations*, or the sombre outlook on life in so many of the essays in *The Rambler*. The marvel is that Johnson was able to accomplish so much, and that by far the greater part of his work was, alike in thought and expression, of so noble a quality.

Like so many other English children, then and since, he was taught the Collects by heart, a single reading being enough for him, his vice-like memory retaining the great simple cadences all the rest of his life. He never wished to get away from the

Collect form. "I know of no good prayers but those in the Book of Common Prayer," he once said to his old college friend Dr. Adams. "I will not compose prayers for you, Sir, because you can do it for yourself." "Sunday was a heavy day with me when I was a boy. My mother confined me on that day, and made me read *The Whole Duty of Man*, from a great part of which I could derive no instruction."

A lonely, unhappy boyhood, shut off as he was by his physical ailments from association with all but a very few of the Lichfield boys of his own age, was followed by residence in Oxford, where he read extensively through the greater part of Classical Literature, and was "depressed by poverty and irritated by disease".¹ It was then that he chanced to fall in with William Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, that famous little book which has so strongly influenced readers of the most diverse types. "I expected to find it a dull book (as such books generally are), and perhaps to laugh at it. But I found Law quite an overmatch for me; and this was the first occasion of my thinking in earnest of religion after I became capable of rational inquiry." Whether Law was the best kind of spiritual physician for a man like Johnson may well be doubted. The two men were very different, united only in their keen interest in human nature, and perhaps even more in their common love of argument. When the heat of battle was on him, Johnson would "talk for victory", quite regardless of any other consideration. But there was nothing in him of the self-conscious, self-admiring cleverness—"cleverality" to borrow a word of Charlotte Brontë's—which mars even the best of Law's work. "Johnson," says Canon Overton, "in spite of his ruggedness, was full of *bonhomie*: he took a broader view of life than Law did; he thought the world was to be leavened, not renounced, by the Christian; and thus he was able to extend his influence over a far wider area during his life-time, and to leave works behind him which would be read by a far wider class of readers after his death than Law did" (*Life and Opinions of William Law*, p. 60).

¹ In an interesting article in *The London Quarterly and Holborn Review* for July 1943 on "The Influence of John Wesley on Johnson's Religion", Mr. Harry Belshaw proves that Johnson was in residence at Pembroke when Wesley returned to Oxford and resumed his duties as fellow and tutor of Lincoln. But that the two men met at that time, and began the friendship which later was to ripen into something very warm and appreciative, though always with a strong critical element, remains unproved, and I think, despite Mr. Belshaw's ingenious arguments, not very probable.

We have no detailed consecutive narrative in which it is possible to trace the rise and progress of religion in his soul. It was no part of his manly objective nature to feel very much interested in his own mental states and feelings, still less to cherish a thought of self-pity, and, least of all, to lay bare "the pageant of his bleeding heart" before the curious gaze of others. Johnson was no day-to-day journal-keeper, like Macaulay or Sir Walter Scott, still less like Pepys. "Most men," he once said to that inveterate diarist Mrs. Thrale, "have their bright and their cloudy days; at least, they have days when they put their powers into act, and days when they suffer them to repose." In place of any such *Journal Intime*, we have the *Prayers and Meditations*, entries made from time to time between his twenty-ninth birthday, the 18th of September, 1738, and his seventy-fifth, 1784. When first written they were never intended for any purpose but his own private use, and many of his friends after his death were greatly shocked by the indiscreet publicity given to them by the Editor, Dr. Strahan, Vicar of Islington, to whom he had handed the manuscript. There is very little in them of the so-called *Johnsonese*: the Latinised forms and balanced antitheses so characteristic of the *Rambler* or *Idler* Essays, or *Rasselas*. There is nothing at all of the self-conscious "fine writing", which too often intrudes itself into many modern carefully composed prayers. Rather, as Augustine Birrell finely says: "In these *Prayers and Meditations* the reader is admitted—let him not abuse the occasion—into the innermost sanctuary of a soul. It is a welcome retreat . . . Doctor Johnson's trembling piety and utter sincerity is a true haven of refuge."

Certain days he was accustomed to keep with fixed religious observances: Good Friday, Easter, his birthday, September 18th, and the day on which his wife died, March 28th. The prayers in connection with this last anniversary are almost too poignant for quotation, but the sorrow is always that of a strong man without a trace of exhibitionism. There is one very characteristic touch under the entry, Good Friday, 28th March, 1777—twenty-five years after the blow fell that "had almost broke my heart". "I remembered that it was my wife's dying day, and begged pardon for all our sins, and commended her: but resolved to mix little of my own sorrows or cares with the great solemnity" (p. 151).

There are long gaps in the series—the longest being six years. Then, when he hears of the death of some old friend, or starts on a journey, or is bidding farewell to Streatham Park which had been more than a home to him for so many years, the entries become frequent. As one reads them, one begins to understand what it was in Johnson that won him the reverence—and, if you like, the forbearance—of the brilliant coterie of which he was the acknowledged centre: masters in their own professions like Burke and Reynolds, Goldsmith and Garrick; disciples like Mrs. Thrale, and Hannah More, and Fanny Burney: rakes and scoffers like Beauclerk and Wilkes—not to speak of Boswell, who, in a manner all his own, exemplified the characteristics of all three classes.

Johnson of The Club one may come to know very intimately. Johnson the Grub Street bookseller's hack, heart-sick with hope deferred, lonely, poverty-stricken and often dinnerless, tramping London Streets all night with wastrels like Richard Savage because neither could muster the coppers to pay for a lodging, we find it hard to visualise. Here is one of the prayers dating from that dim period:

“January 1st, 1744. Almighty and Everlasting God, in whose hands are Life and Death, by whose Will all things were created, and by whose Providence they are sustained, I return Thee thanks that Thou hast given me Life, and that Thou hast continued it to this time; that Thou hast hitherto forbore to snatch me away in the midst of Sin and Folly, and hast permitted me still to enjoy the means of Grace, and vouchsafed to call me yet again to Repentance. Grant, O merciful Lord, that Thy Call may not be in vain: that my Life may not be continued to increase my Guilt, and that Thy gracious Forbearance may not harden my heart in wickedness. Let me remember, O my God, that as Days and Years pass over me, I approach nearer to the grave where there is no repentance; and grant, that by the assistance of Thy Holy Spirit, I may so pass through this Life, that I may obtain Life everlasting, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen” (p. 4).

Again, we have the prayer on the day of his mother's funeral, January 23rd, 1759, when he was in London unable to travel to Lichfield. A few days previously he had written her a very beautiful and touching letter. “You have been the best mother and I believe the best woman in the world. I thank you for your indulgence to me, and beg forgiveness of all that I have done ill and all that I have omitted to do well.”

“Almighty God, merciful Father, in whose hands are life and death, sanctify unto me the sorrow which I now feel. Forgive me whatever I have done unkindly to my mother, and whatever I have omitted to do kindly. Make

me to remember her good precepts and good example, and to reform my life according to Thy holy word, that I may lose no more opportunities of good. I am sorrowful, O Lord; let not my sorrow be without fruit. Let it be followed by holy resolutions, and lasting amendment, that, when I shall die like my mother, I may be received to everlasting life.

“I commend, O Lord, so far as it may be lawful, into Thy hands, the soul of my departed mother, beseeching Thee to grant her whatever is most beneficial to her in her present state. . . . And, O Lord, grant unto me that am now about to return to the common comforts and business of the world, such moderation in all enjoyments, such diligence in honest labour, and such purity of mind, that, amid all the changes, miseries, or pleasures of life, I may keep my mind fixed upon Thee, and improve every day in grace, till I shall be received into Thy Kingdom of Eternal happiness” (p. 36).

There may be something old-fashioned, and even remote, in the feeling and the expression so firmly controlled, but how sincere it all is, how manly, how tender!

Another extract from the *Prayers and Meditations* is well-known, and it shows, as perhaps we see nowhere else, the very heart of the thunderous autocrat.

“Sunday, Oct. 18, 1767. Yesterday, Oct. 17, at about ten in the morning, I took my leave for ever of my dear old friend, Catherine Chambers, who came to live with my mother about 1724 and has been but little parted from us since. She buried my father, my brother, and my mother. She is now fifty-eight years old.

“I desired all to withdraw, then told her that we were to part for ever; that as Christians, we should part with prayer; and that I would, if she was willing, say a short prayer beside her. She expressed great desire to hear me; and held up her poor hands, as she lay in bed, with great fervour, while I prayed kneeling by her, nearly in the following words: Almighty and most merciful Father, whose loving-kindness is over all Thy works, behold, visit, and relieve this Thy servant, who is grieved with sickness. Grant that the sense of her weakness may add strength to her faith, and seriousness to her repentance. And grant that by the help of Thy Holy Spirit, after the pains and labours of this short life, we may all obtain everlasting happiness, through Jesus Christ our Lord: for whose sake hear our prayers. Amen. Our Father . . .

“I then kissed her. She told me that to part was the greatest pain that she had ever felt, and that she hoped we should meet again in a better place. I expressed, with swelled eyes, and great emotion of tenderness, the same hopes. We kissed, and parted, I humbly hope to meet again, and to part no more” (pp. 76f.).

III

One part of the book which, on its publication after Johnson's death, raised a considerable amount of feeling and even scandal, was that revealing the morbid scrutiny to which he subjected himself, more especially in his preparation for Easter Communion. There are whole pages of lamentations, of whose sincerity there can be no doubt, over his own slackness in church

attendance, Bible reading, study of the Christian religion, sluggishness in getting out of bed in the morning. This last was an almost life-long trial to him, and again and again we have resolves noted: "To rise at eight, or as soon as I can," mingled with acknowledgments that "When I was up, I have indeed done but little: yet it is no slight advancement to obtain for so many hours more the consciousness of being". More often we have only very humble and repeated confessions of complete failure, either in this respect, or in weightier matters, or again in what his scrupulosity considered the sin of breaking some Church fast by eating hot-cross buns or drinking coffee with Mr. Thrale. No doubt all this has its ludicrous side, and it certainly gave occasion for creatures like John Courtenay in his *Poetical Review of the Literary and Moral Character of Dr. Samuel Johnson* to write:

On Tetty's¹ state his frighted fancy runs,
And Heaven's appeas'd by Cross unbutter'd buns:
He sleeps and fasts, pens on himself a libel,
And still believes, but never reads the Bible.

One who might have known better, and ought to have had more sympathy with souls in distress, William Cowper, allowed himself to write to John Newton (August 17th, 1785):

"His prayers for the dead and his minute account of the rigour with which he observed Church fasts, whether he drank tea or coffee, whether with sugar or without, and whether one or two dishes of either, are the most important items to be found in this childish register of the great Johnson, supreme dictator in the chair of literature, and almost a driveller in his closet; a melancholy witness to testify how much of the wisdom of this world may consist with almost infantine ignorance of the affairs of a better."

Or again, a few days later, to William Unwin (August 27th, 1785):

"Had he studied his Bible more, to which by his own confession he was in great part a stranger, he had known better what use to make of his retired hours, and had trifled less. His lucubrations of this sort have rather the appearance of religious dotage, than of any vigorous exertions towards God. It will be well if the publication prove not hurtful in its effects by exposing the best cause, already too much despised, to ridicule still more profane."

Here again we see that curious callousness of the eighteenth century which one catches even, at times, in Cowper, who had a certain feline streak in him, and which was to be seen side by side with excessive rancid sentimentality as in page after page of

¹ His dead wife.

the odious Laurence Sterne. The present-day reader, at any rate, has nothing but profound respect for Johnson looking over old papers with their long past resolutions.

“ I think I was ashamed or grieved to find how long and how often I had resolved what yet, except for about one half year, I have never done. My nights are now such as give me no quiet rest; whether I have not lived resolving till the possibility of performance is past, I know not. God help me, I will yet try.”
(*Prayers and Meditations*, p. 129).

It must again be emphasised that these memoranda were intended in the first instance for the writer's eyes alone. Like Carlyle, a century later, he was willing to give to would-be biographers such information as they needed, but he probably never dreamed of the often broken sentences being literally transcribed. Few can have guessed at the existence of such a record, and fewer still can have seen it during the author's lifetime. In any case, there is very little in its point of view and trend of thought different from the massive and sombre philosophy of life sketched in *The Rambler*, *The Idler*, and *Rasselas*, or in such a poem, “grave, masculine and strong”—to quote Cowper's tribute—as *The Vanity of Human Wishes*.

Where then shall Hope and Fear their objects find?
Must dull Suspence corrupt the stagnant mind?
Must helpless man in ignorance sedate,
Roll darkling down the torrent of his fate?
Must no dislike alarm, no wishes rise,
No cries attempt the mercies of the skies?
Inquirer, 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. . . .
Pour forth thy fervours for a healthful mind,
Obedient passions, and a will resign'd;
For love, which scarce Collective Man can fill;
For patience, sov'reign o'er transmuted ill;
For faith, that, panting for a happier seat,
Counts death kind Nature's signal of retreat;
These goods for man, the laws of Heav'n ordain,
These goods He grants, who grants the pow'r to gain;
With these Celestial Wisdom calms the mind,
And makes the happiness she does not find.

One famous passage in *The*—strangely mis-named—*Idler* (No. 41), written immediately after the death of his mother, gives Johnson's mature and considered conclusions. He has been speaking—not unworthily—of death, and the effect which it has on the survivors.

"These are the great occasions which force the mind to take refuge in Religion; when we have no help in ourselves, what can remain but that we look up to a higher and a greater Power? and to what hope may we not raise our eyes and hearts, when we consider that the greatest power is the best? . . .

"The precepts of *Epicurus*, who teaches us to endure what the Laws of the Universe make necessary, may silence, but not content us. The dictates of *Zeno*, who commands us to look with indifference on external things, may dispose us to conceal our sorrow, but cannot assuage it. Real alleviation of the loss of friends, and rational tranquillity in the prospect of our own dissolution, can be received only from the promises of Him in whose hands are life and death, and from the assurance of another and better state, in which all tears will be wiped from the eyes, and the whole soul shall be filled with joy. Philosophy may infuse stubbornness, but Religion only can give Patience."

In passages like these one can see how closely the writer keeps to the subject of his discourse, patiently and persistently hammering out the expression of his thought till at last he makes it say exactly what he wishes to say, no more but no less. It is this moral weight which gives momentum to all of Johnson's judgments, arbitrary and prejudiced as they often are. If he was impatient to the verge of rudeness—and beyond it—with what he called "cant" in other people, it was because he was persistently laying violent hands on the hateful thing in his own mind, which must be cleared from it at all costs.

"To Johnson [says Carlyle] as compared with Hume, Life was as a Prison, to be endured with heroic faith: to Hume it was little more than a foolish Bartholomew-Fair Show-booth, with the foolish crowdings and elbowings of which it was not worth while to quarrel; the whole would break up, and be at liberty, so *soon*. Both realized the highest Task of Manhood, that of living like men; each died not unfitly, in his way: Hume as one, with factitious, half-false gayety, taking leave of what was itself wholly but a lie: Johnson as one, with awe-struck, yet resolute and piously expectant heart, taking leave of a Reality, to enter a Reality still higher" (*Essay on Johnson*).

"I told him [said Boswell once] that David Hume said to me he was no more uneasy to think he should *not be* after his life, than that he *had not been* before he began to exist. Johnson: 'Sir, if he really thinks so, his perceptions are disturbed; he is mad; if he does not think so, he lies. He may tell you he holds his finger in the flame of a candle without feeling pain: would you believe him? When he dies, he at least gives up all he has' . . . To my question whether we might not fortify our mind for the approach of death, he answered in a passion, 'No, Sir, let it alone. It matters not how a man dies, but how he lives. The act of dying is not of importance, it lasts so short a time. . . . A man knows it must be, and submits. It will do him no good to whine'."

IV

There was a very practical side to Johnson's religion. The eighteenth century had a passion for sermons. Johnson himself not only wrote a large number for clerical friends—like Dr.

Taylor, the bucolic and Simonaical rector of Market Bosworth, but had ideas far before his age about ministerial life and work generally. Witness the *Letter to a Young Clergyman in the Country*¹—Rev. Charles Laurence, son of Dr. Laurence, Johnson's physician and friend, and a direct descendant of Milton's "Lawrence of virtuous father, virtuous son"—full of mellow wisdom and the soundest and kindest of common sense. It is curiously little known, and I have never seen any reference to it in any book on Homiletics or Practical Training.

Even better than Johnson's precept in religious matters was his example. Never a wealthy man, though the pension of £300 a year which, much to his credit, Lord Bute secured for him from the Royal Bounty—despite his Anti-Hanoverian sympathies and the famous definition of *Pension* in the *Dictionary*, "An allowance made to any one without an equivalent. In England it is generally understood to mean pay given to a state hireling for treason to his country"—made him financially independent for the rest of his life, Johnson was little short of reckless in secret charities to those who could not possibly repay him, and were, more often than not, unworthy and ungrateful. His friends' remonstrances could not shake him. "Johnson had a natural imbecility about him," said the *unclubable* Hawkins, "arising from humanity and pity to the sufferings of his fellow-creatures, that was prejudicial to his interests"; and Mrs. Thrale, with one of those genuine flashes of insight which redeem so much of her flightiness and intellectual snobbery, adds her testimony, "Concerning the poor, he really loved them as nobody else does—with a desire they should be happy".

Her long and close friendship with Johnson completely destroyed any illusions she may have had about him in the early prime of her lion-hunting days. Some of her passing remarks bring him very near to us. "The coldest and most languid hearers of the Word must have felt themselves animated by his manner of reading the Holy Scriptures, and to pray by his sick-bed required strength of body as well of mind, so vehement were his manners, and his tones of voice so pathetic." Again: "In answer to the arguments used by Puritans, Quakers, etc., against showy decorations of the human figure, I once heard him exclaim, 'O let us not be found when our Master

¹ Given in full in Boswell's *Life*, 30th August, 1780.

calls us, ripping the lace off our waistcoats, but the spirit of contention from our souls and tongues! Let us all conform in outward customs, which are of no consequence, to the manners of those whom we live among, and despise such paltry distinctions. Alas (continued he) a man who cannot get to heaven in a green coat, will not find his way thither the sooner in a grey one'."

If we wish to know what Streatham Park meant to Johnson, it is not so much to Mrs. Thrale's *Diaries*, still less to the Autolycus-like "snappers up of unconsidered trifles" in our own days, that we must turn, but rather to Johnson's altogether charming letters to "Queenie" Thrale, and that most touching farewell to what had been a home to him for more than sixteen years.

"October 6th, 1782. Almighty God, Father of all mercy, help me, by Thy grace, that I may with humble and sincere thankfulness remember the comforts and conveniences which I have enjoyed at this place, and that I may resign them with holy submission, equally trusting in Thy protection, when Thou givest, and when Thou takest away. Have mercy upon me, O Lord, have mercy upon me. To thy fatherly protection, O Lord, I commend this family. Bless, guide, and defend them, that they may so pass through this world as finally to enjoy in Thy presence everlasting happiness, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen . . . October 7. I was called early. I packed up my bundles, and used the foregoing Prayer with my morning devotions, somewhat I think, enlarged. Being earlier than the family, I read St. Paul's farewell in the Acts, and then fortuitously in the Gospels, which was my parting use of the library" (*Prayers and Meditations*, p. 211).

V

Johnson lived for two years more—years of which Carlyle wrote very beautifully:

"If Destiny had beaten hard on poor Samuel, and did never cease to visit him too roughly, yet the last section of his Life might be pronounced victorious and on the whole happy. . . . Early friends had long sunk into the grave; yet in his soul they ever lived, fresh and clear, with soft pious breathings towards them, not without a still hope of one day meeting them again in purer union. Such was Johnson's Life: the victorious Battle of a free, true Man. Finally he died the death of the free and true: a dark cloud of Death, solemn, and not untinged with haloes of immortal Hope 'took him away', and our eyes could no longer behold him; but can still behold the trace and impress of his courageous, honest spirit, deep-legible in the World's Business, wheresoever he walked and was" (*Essay on Johnson*).

This is true in the main, but somewhat idyllic in expression. The general impression one gathers from the closing pages of Boswell is rather that of an old man with a new gentleness and considerateness, very touching in one formerly so formidable,

but with health much broken, the old fear of death still haunting him many an hour by day and night.

One remembers his saying to Boswell fifteen years before (October 19th, 1769), "meditating upon the awful hour of his own dissolution, and in what manner he should conduct himself upon that occasion: 'I know not, whether I should wish to have a friend by me, or have it all between God and myself' ". Happily, he never needed to make the choice. With unselfish loyalty and devotion friends gathered round the old man's sickbed, glad to do what they could in cheering him on what they and he knew must be the last journey. His physicians were unwearied in their care, and refused to take a farthing for their services. Burke, Langton, Reynolds, Windham, Hawkins, all gave up many hours in their busy lives in order to sit by his bedside. One friend alone was absent, detained in Scotland, to his own sorrow, and to the lasting loss of every reader of his book.

What Boswell did on bringing his great task to a close, was to take the day-to-day memoranda which Hoole and Hawkins and others had already set down, to cross-question the various witnesses on certain points in detail, and to weave together all this miscellaneous material into as connected a narrative as possible. He succeeded wonderfully, but, notwithstanding all his efforts, his touch for once is curiously uncertain. There are gaps, overlappings, redundancies, and comparatively little of that vividness and intimacy which in many a page of the *Life* make us free of the finest company in the world. Once and again one is conscious of a certain *stammer*, as though the writer were uneasy and could not bring himself to say what his literary conscience would not allow him to suppress. He has told us that, amid all Johnson's sufferings in his last illness, the gentleness which had surprised many who had known him well, now became more marked than ever, and that, for several days before the end, the old spectres of fear and gloom were altogether and finally exorcised. As Macaulay puts it in his biography of Johnson, written for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*¹—"a piece

¹ This biography written for the 8th Edition of the *Encyclopaedia* appears unaltered in the 9th Edition. In the 11th and subsequent editions it appears as revised by Thomas Seccombe, who says in an explanatory note, "Macaulay's text has been retained with a few trifling modifications in which his invincible love of the picturesque has drawn him demonstrably aside from the dull line of verity". What those "trifling modifications" are, may be learned from a comparison of the two versions. With much else, the sentences quoted above have been expunged. Macaulay, it must be remembered, not only knew his Boswell and the abundant relevant literature by heart, but, as a writer in *Macmillan's Magazine*, February 1860, on "Macaulay as a Boy" says, "Through

of English Literature of the very first order" as Matthew Arnold well styles it—"His temper became unusually patient and gentle: he ceased to think with terror of death and of that which lies beyond death, and he spoke much of the mercy of God and of the propitiation of Christ. In this serene frame of mind he died".

Was there anything to account for such a noticeable change in Johnson, and also to explain that curious *stammer* in the narrative?—Boswell's anxious disclaimer of "fanaticism", one significant suppression by Dr. Strahan and the peevish surprise of Sir John Hawkins that a High Churchman like Johnson "should be driven to seek for spiritual comfort in the writings of sectaries". I think there is such evidence.

In Hannah More's *Memoirs*, Vol. I, p. 377, may be read a very interesting letter, which, according to the editor, the Rev. Mr. Roberts, was found among her papers after her death. This letter from the Rev. J. Sanger to Lady Lifford, a well-known Irish Evangelical, runs as follows:

"Dr. Johnson had expressed great dissatisfaction with himself on the approach of death . . . and was not to be comforted by the ordinary topics of consolation which were addressed to him. In consequence, he desired to see a clergyman, and particularly described the views and character of the person whom he wished to consult. After some consideration, a Mr. Winstanley was named." [This was the Rector of St. Dunstan's-in-the-East, who, some three or four years before this date, had proved himself a very good friend to George Crabbe the poet in the hour of his direst need.] "The Doctor [the narrative proceeds] requested Sir John Hawkins to write a note in his name, requesting Mr. Winstanley's attendance as a minister." [Hawkins in his *Life of Johnson* makes no mention of this.] "Mr. Winstanley, who was in a very weak state of health, was quite overpowered on receiving this note, and felt appalled by the very thought of encountering the talents and learning of Dr. Johnson. In his embarrassment he went to his friend Colonel Pownall, . . . asking him for his advice how to act. The Colonel, who was a pious man, urged him immediately to follow what appeared to be a remarkable leading of Providence, and for a time argued his friend out of his nervous apprehension. But after he had left Colonel Pownall, Mr. Winstanley's fears returned in so great a degree as to prevail upon him to abandon the thought of a personal interview with the Doctor. He determined in consequence to write him a letter.

"Sir, I beg to acknowledge the honour of your note, and am very sorry that the state of my health prevents my compliance with your request: but my nerves are so shattered that I feel as if I should be quite confounded by your presence, and, instead of promoting, should only injure, the cause in which you desire my aid. Permit me therefore to write what I would wish to say, were I present. I can easily conceive what would be the subjects of your

Hannah More as through a secondary memory, he had a more vivid tradition of the English literary society of the Eighteenth Century, and of the personal habits of Johnson and his contemporaries, than might otherwise have been possible".

One feels that a protest against such drastic and tendentious "Editorship" is necessary.

inquiry. . . . On whichever side you look, you see only positive transgressions or defective obedience; and hence, in self-despair are eagerly inquiring, "What shall I do to be saved?" I say to you in the language of the Baptist, "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world". . . . When Sir John Hawkins came to this part of Mr. Winstanley's letter, the Doctor interrupted him, anxiously asking, 'Does he say so? Read it again, Sir John'. Sir John complied: upon which the Doctor said, 'I must see that man; write again to him'. A second note was accordingly sent; but even this repeated solicitation could not prevail over Mr. Winstanley's fears. He was led, however, by it to write again to the Doctor, renewing and enlarging upon the subject of his first letter, and these communications, together with the conversation of the late Mr. Latrobe who was a particular friend of Dr. Johnson, appeared to have been blessed by God in bringing this great man to the renunciation of self, and a simple reliance on Jesus as his Saviour."

This seems to me, despite all its old-fashioned, pietistic phraseology, a very straightforward narrative, none the less credible because Mr. Winstanley plays a somewhat unheroic part in the whole business. At the same time, I think we can understand why there should have been a certain hesitation about the expediency of its publication by any one in Johnson's immediate circle. Feeling ran high in those days between Evangelical and High Church. We can gather from allusions in Wilberforce's Letters and elsewhere that there was a definite amount of floating tradition about Johnson's "conversion". John Wilson Croker—perhaps the most detested man of his time, of whom it was once said, that he "would go a hundred miles through sleet and snow, in a December night, to search a parish register, for the sake of showing that a man was illegitimate, or a woman older than she said she was"¹—made certain investigations after the publication of the narrative, attempting to shake its credibility. It may be conceded that the "Rigby" of *Coningsby*, the "Wenham" of *Pendennis*, was not the kind of person most fit to judge of the evidence in such a case.

In a notice of Hannah More's *Memoirs* in *The Quarterly Review* for November, 1834, written, if one may judge from the style, by John Gibson Lockhart, at that time editor, a flood of invective is let loose on the "indiscreetness in which authors of his class"—this refers to the editor of the *Memoirs*, Mr. Roberts—"are apt to indulge when they see or fancy the slightest opportunity of insinuating anything to the disparagement of the rational and immense majority of the religious public in this country—their faith and practice"; and then goes on:

¹ *The Maclise Portrait Gallery*, ed. Bates, p. 73.

"Mr. Croker's annihilation . . . of the romance about Mr. Latrobe is complete and perfect: and as to the story of Mr. Winstanley, it is enough to say that no such person is named, either by *Sir John Hawkins*, or in *any other* of the accounts of Johnson's life hitherto published. The whole of this circumstantial narrative is therefore a dream, a blunder, or more probably a bungling piece of quackery,—a pious fraud. In any view, this attempt to persuade us that Dr. Johnson's mind was not made up as to the great fundamental doctrine of the Christian religion until it was enforced on him *in extremis* by sectarian or Methodistical zeal, cannot redound to the credit of Mr. Roberts's understanding. . . . But enough of Dr. Johnson."

And enough of the *Quarterly Reviewer* and his pontifical assertions. At the same time, it is rather curious to read Lockhart's scornful denunciation of the very offence for which he was himself to be charged—I cannot but think on insufficient evidence—a century later, in connection with his own famous account of the last days of Sir Walter Scott.

It is good to leave the regions of controversy, and to read the Prayer which Johnson wrote for the Communion Service held in his room, little more than a week before his death:

"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 in Thy mercy. Forgive and accept my late conversion; enforce and accept my imperfect repentance: make this communion 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 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 the grace of 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."¹

"He joined," we are told, "in every part of the service, and in this prayer, with great fervour of devotion", and thereafter, "I have taken my viaticum. I hope I shall arrive safe at the end of my journey, and be accepted at last". Next day he made his will, prefixing it, on the suggestion of Hawkins, with "such an explicit declaration of his belief as might obviate all suspicions that he was any other than a Christian". "I humbly commit to the infinite and eternal goodness of Almighty God, my soul polluted with many sins; but, as I hope, purified by repentance, and redeemed, as I trust, by the death of Jesus Christ."²

¹ The above is an exact copy of Johnson's autograph MSS., now in possession of Professor C. B. Tinker. In *Prayers and Meditations*—both the MSS. of the prayer in Dr. Strahan's (the Editor's) handwriting and the official printed copy—the clause "Forgive and accept my late conversion" is expunged. See Note in G. Birkbeck Hill's Edition of Boswell's *Life*, Revised Edition, Vol. IV, Appendix J, p. 553.

² Hawkins in *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, Vol. II, p. 125. The version in Boswell's *Life* is much shorter: "I bequeath to God, a soul polluted by many sins, but I hope purified by JESUS CHRIST".

Despite great exhaustion and severe spasms of pain, he refused to take any opiates, "for", said he, "I have prayed that I may render up my soul to God unclouded". So, about seven o'clock in the evening of Monday, 13th December, 1784, he passed

Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem.

VI

It would be hard to overestimate the influence, direct and indirect, which Johnson exercised on the whole attitude of his contemporaries towards religion. Deeply read in the older works of divinity as he was, and always setting his powerful faculties to play freely on the greatest of themes—God, the World, the Soul—Johnson was never, in the strict sense, an original thinker. He had the typical English dislike to, and distrust of, speculation *in vacuo*. All his thinking, like that of Sören Kierkegaard, was deeply tinged by the hardships, at times the horrors, of his own experience. But if we consider the influence of those beliefs

On that best portion of a good man's life,
His little, nameless, unremember'd acts
Of kindness and of love,

we find ourselves in a different world. The stricter Evangelicals of that time looked with a certain suspicion on Johnson's intimate association with men and women who were frankly worldly, many of them free-thinkers, some of them loose livers. They lamented that such brilliant powers as his, instead of concentrating on what they considered some distinctively Christian work, should expend themselves in ephemeral talk. But Carlyle has well emphasised the impressiveness of the fact that, in such an age, a man of Johnson's stature should wholeheartedly identify himself with Christian faith and Christian standards. In Mrs. Thrale's Salon, at the weekly meeting of The Club or other gathering of the "Wits", or at a dinner-party at Dilly's, he was always the central figure; and, as Sir Joshua Reynolds said, "he would never suffer the least immorality or indecency of conversation to proceed without a severe check". In the presence of such a champion of the Faith, open scoffers like Wilkes and Foote were constrained, literally, to "keep their mouths with a bridle". And all who cared might see him in his pew in the north gallery of St. Clement

Danes Church—now, alas, smashed to pieces by enemy action in the Battle of London—or humbly kneeling at the altar-rails some Easter Sunday, side by side with “a poor girl at the Sacrament in a bedgown, to whom I gave privately a crown, though I saw Hart’s *Hymns* in her hand”.

There was no figure better known in London streets from Temple Bar to the Royal Exchange: and merely to know that Johnson was there, holding his own and far more than his own against all comers, was to hundreds of plain Christian folk, something like the sight of the White Plume at the Battle of Ivry to the soldiers of Henry of Navarre.

Some also knew him in quite a different character, as a man, with all his formidableness, not at all unlike that troublesome *Mr. Fearing* in the *Pilgrim’s Progress*, who, after he had started on his journey “lay roaring at the *Slough of Dispond*, for above a month together. *He would not go back again neither*. . . . He had, I think, a *Slough of Dispond* in his Mind, a *Slough* that he carried everywhere with him. . . . When we came at the *Hill Difficulty* he made no stick at that, nor did he much fear the Lions: For you must know that his Trouble *was not about such things as those*, his Fear was about his Acceptance at last”. Like *Mr. Fearing*, too, “he always loved good talk . . . and when he was come at *Vanity Fair*, he would have fought with all the men in the Fair . . . so hot was he against their Fooleries. . . . But when he was come at the *River* where was no Bridge, there again he was in a heavy case; now, now he said he should be drowned for ever, and so never see that Face with Comfort, that he had come so many miles to behold. And here also I took notice of what was very remarkable, the Water of that River was lower at this time than ever I saw it in all my Life: so he went over at last, not much above wet-shod.”

Mrs. Thrale tells that in repeating the *Dies Irae*, Johnson never could pass one particular stanza without bursting into a flood of tears. The words of that stanza were at the very roots of his religion, and reveal the secret of his life. They are the most moving words in the whole range of the literature of devotion:

QUAERENS ME, SEDISTI LASSUS:
REDEMISTI, CRUCEM PASSUS:
TANTUS LABOR NON SIT CASSUS!

WILLIAM T. CAIRNS.

Edinburgh.