

HE FEARS MADNESS SAMUEL JOHNSON (1709-1784)



Unlike the letters of Lord Chesterfield to his son, the letters of Dr. Johnson do not, by themselves constitute a work of literature. They contain no gallery of characters, no full conspectus of an adult life, no nearly complete self-portrait. In 1965, Professor David Littlejohn published *Dr. Johnson: His Life in Letters*, a useful compilation, but one that lacks too much of the life for the title to be justified.

Among the aspects of Johnson absent from the letters are the aggressive, bullying conversationalist; the believer struggling against his own doubts; the conservative, Anglican anti-egalitarian who holds slavery to be an abomination and is indignant at the Protestant suppression of the Catholic majority in Ireland; the lexicographer who detects minute semantic distinctions; the poet of "London" and "The Vanity of Human Wishes"; and the critical genius who is able to advance Shakespearean scholarship and trace the course of English poetry from Donne to Gray.

In spite of these limitations, however, the letters of Johnson have much to offer the reader who has succumbed to the fascination of Boswell's *Life*, a book that takes one into the very presence of this mountain of a man, this huge personality who can untie Shakespeare's tangled syntax as readily as he can expose our comforting self-deceptions. While many of the letters deal with such matters as his debts, the mortgage of his mother's house, and the publication of his writings, others yield much more than dry facts.

As a correspondent, Johnson is an inveterate dispenser of advice. He counsels Boswell, whose law practice is in Edinburgh, to accede to his wife's pleading that he forgo one of his annual visits to London, to realise that he need not be in the English capital to be happy, and to try to please the father he does not much like so as to "add no pain to his last years." He guides many in their course of study; urges Francis Barber, his young black servant, to cultivate a love of reading; discourages his stepdaughter, Lucy

Porter, from pouring out money on building; tells his close friend Mrs. Thrale that her husband should buy land and recommends her daughter to advance far in arithmetic. Above all, drawing on his own experience, he has wise words for anyone labouring under a burden of melancholy.

At the end of 1729, twenty-year-old Johnson is compelled by poverty to leave Oxford without a degree. Writing after his subject's death, Boswell tells us in a frequently quoted passage that from this time,

he felt himself overwhelmed with an horrible hypochondria, with perpetual irritation, fretfulness, and impatience; and with a dejection, gloom, and despair, which made existence misery. From this dismal malady he never afterwards was perfectly relieved.

When his friends complain of a comparable affliction, or suffer a devastating bereavement, he presses them to shun solitude and take up some activity to occupy their minds. Such is his repeated advice to Boswell and to the clergyman and farmer John Taylor, and he suggests that Mrs. Thrale, soon after her husband's death, resort to some "lawful business" as this will leave her mind "little room for useless regret."

Boswell's account of Johnson's first descent into melancholia is matched by a letter in which Johnson himself recalls his desolate state when he becomes a widower. In 1745, two and a half years after his bereavement, he tells his scholar friend Thomas Warton:

You know poor Mr. Dodsley has lost his wife.... I hope he will not suffer so much as I yet suffer for the loss of mine.... I have ever since seemed to myself broken off from mankind; a kind of solitary wanderer in the wild of life, without any direction, or fixed point of view: a gloomy gazer on a world to which I have little relation.

Letters Johnson writes after the death of his mother allow us to compare the impact of this later bereavement. While research has revealed that Boswell exaggerates the happiness of his friend's marriage, the friction that disturbs it pales before the stresses in his tormented relationship with his mother. The love that he thinks he bears her is, as George Irwin demonstrates, a protective mask for an unconscious hatred for this parent who does not know how to show affection to her elder boy. (Johnson has a younger brother, Nathanael, with whom he is on uneasy terms). Irwin points out that in the nineteen years before his mother's death in January 1759, he does not once visit his native city of Lichfield, where she lives, but in his remaining twenty-five years he visits it twelve times. In 1755,

a telltale turn of phrase appears in his letter of 6 May to his friend Bennet Langton: "When the duty that calls me to Lichfield is discharged, my inclination will carry me to Langton." Much of his grief at his mother's death must be the product of guilt, and to Lucy Porter, who is his confidante as he mourns, he writes, "If she were to live again, surely I should behave better to her."

His curious marriage to a woman twenty years older than himself brings Johnson a stepdaughter who is his junior by only nine years. Lucy Porter is one of a number of women who rank among Johnson's dearest friends. Probably most revered is the devout and learned Hill Boothby, with whom he is clearly in love. He addresses her as "my Dearest" and "My sweet Angel" and declares there is "none but you on whom my heart reposes." But the lady to whom he writes most copiously is Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale.

Johnson's letters to Mrs. Thrale, her husband, and her daughters constitute the centrepiece of his correspondence: the most vivid chronicle the greatest adventure of his life; the remainder disclose the complexity of his relationship with the Thrale family.

In the summer of 1773, thirty-two-year old James Boswell at last induces his sixty-three-year-old friend Samuel Johnson to accompany him on a daring journey into the Scottish Highlands and the Hebrides. Week by week, his letters to Mrs. Thrale record discoveries that enthral Johnson and portray the characters he meets. These range from a blind poet who is read to in Greek, Latin, and French to Flora Macdonald, who managed the escape of Bonnie Prince Charlie, the Young Pretender, in 1746 after the defeat of his army. As Johnson advances from the Scottish cities, with their cathedrals and universities, into remote regions, he encounters an archaic, pre-capitalist society where tenants live in feudal dependence on their lairds and chiefs. From the Isle of Skie, he writes:

The Laird of Raarsa has sometimes disputed the chieftaincy of the clan with Macleod of Skie, but being much inferior in extent of possessions, has, I suppose, been forced to desist. Raarsa and its provinces have descended to its present possessor through a succession of four hundred years, without any increase or diminution.

Although the landscape and society are to him new and strange, Johnson encounters there learned men, educated women, books, and imported foods—patches of the familiar such as can add an extra charm to the experience of an exotic society.

Several weeks of hard travelling on foot and horseback bring observations on rock formations, watercourses and mountainsides. Johnson notices the presence and absence of trees on the earth and of shoes on the people, along with the kinds and quantities of crops and garden produce. Castles, houses, and cottages figure in the letters to Mrs. Thrale, along with the structure of sod huts. The discomfort of clambering over rocks, rough riding, and dirty accommodation in some places is balanced by the pleasures of sublime scenery and liberal hospitality in others:

On the 13th [of September], travelling partly on horseback where we could not row, and partly on foot where we could not ride, we came to Dunvegan.... Here, though poor Macleod had been left by his grandfather overwhelmed with debts, we had another exhibition of feudal hospitality. There were two stags in the house, and venison came to the table every day in its various forms.

A romantic vein in Johnson is touched by the spectacle of Macbeth's heath, while his piety is stirred by the sight of the spot where St. Columba built his church and monastery on Iona. Seeing the barrenness of great areas, he comments on the supposed blissfulness of pastoral and primitive life praised by some poets and philosophers: "The use of travelling is to regulate imagination by reality." His endurance is equal to being imprisoned on islands by dangerous winds, and near the end of his adventure he writes to Henry Thrale:

About ten miles of this day's journey were uncommonly amusing. We travelled with very little light, in a storm of wind and rain; we passed about fifty-five streams that crossed our way, and fell into a river that, for a very great part of our road, foamed and roared beside us; all the rougher powers of nature, except thunder, were in motion, but there was no danger. I should have been sorry to have missed any of the inconveniencies, to have had more light or less rain, for their co-operation crowded the scene and filled the mind.

How much Johnson's expedition meant to him can be gauged by his anxiety, visible in his letters, that his *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* should be well received. In this fine volume, the descriptions and reflections in the letters to the Thrales are greatly expanded at the cost of some of their lively immediacy.

On his return to London in 1773, Johnson continues to take frequent refuge at the house of Henry and Hester Thrale, whom he calls his Master

and Mistress. "I love the Thrales and the Thralites," he writes to Hester; childless himself, he delights in their children, especially the eldest, Hester Maria, known as "Queeney," to whom he teaches Latin. Mrs. Thrale is an intellectual and fashionable lady who keeps a salon in the family house at Streatham, where she sets aside a room for Johnson. As early as 1767, he writes to her of "that place which your kindness and Mr. Thrale's allows me to call my *home*." It allows this famous Londoner to make frequent escapes from his own house at Bolt Court, where he charitably accommodates some unfortunate persons who are all too ready to quarrel with each other.

In his letters to Mrs. Thrale, Johnson can be playful, but is more often full of grave advice. At one point she is his Mistress who can "lie abed hatching suspicions," and information about the tempting invitations she receives brings the charge, "You will become such a gadder, that you will not care a penny for me." However, when she finds her uncle has unexpectedly left his estate to someone else, Johnson reminds her, "The event is irrevocable, it remains only to bear it," and he counsels, "Remit yourself solemnly into the hands of God, and then turn your mind upon the business and amusements which lie before you." In another mood, he rebukes her for her "despicable dread" of living in the unfashionable Borough of Southwark, where her husband's brewery is situated, and he can admonish her, "do not think to be young beyond the time." Other advice helps the Thrales to overcome a financial crisis that threatens their brewery: this scholar and man of letters recognizes that Henry Thrale is too apt to delegate important work.

A miscellany of subjects enriches the letters to Mrs. Thrale. Johnson's awe as he crosses the Staffordshire Canal, "one of the great efforts of human labour, and human contrivance," foreshadows his powerful emotions on his Scottish expedition. There are many remarks on John Taylor's notable successes at breeding cattle. When Samuel Plumbe and his wife vigorously object to their daughter's marrying John Rice, though John's father is ready to accept a daughter-in-law without a dowry and set his son up in trade, the couple elope, and Mrs. Thrale is much surprised when Johnson, a famously rigorous moralist, argues in their defence:

Unlimited obedience is due only to the Universal Father of Heaven and Earth. My parents may be mad or foolish; may be wicked and malicious; may be erroneously religious, or absurdly scrupulous. I am not bound to compliance with mandates either positive or negative, which either religion condemns, or reason rejects.

There are concise reports of the quarrels among the unfortunates whom Johnson allows to share his home—principally the poor physician Robert Levet, the blind poet Anna Williams, and his godfather's widowed daughter, Elizabeth Desmoulins. A late addition is named Poll Carmichael. In November 1778, Mrs. Thrale learns that "We have tolerable concord at home, but no love. Williams hates every body. Levet hates Desmoulins, and does not love Williams. Desmoulins hates them both. Poll loves none of them." There are comments on people known to both writer and reader: when Lucy Porter manages to keep Johnson at Lichfield longer than he wishes, she is "a very peremptory maiden." Weightier matters, which include his ailments and prescriptions, are seasoned with a little gossip: referring to the purchase of the Drury Lane Theatre, Johnson reports, "They pay [for the theatre] neither principle nor interest; and poor Garrick's funeral expences are yet unpaid, though the undertaker is broken. Could you have a better purveyor for a little scandal?" Before concluding his letter, Johnson offers Mrs. Thrale the prospect of "more mischief."

Sadly, Johnson suffers from masochistic urges, which he does not understand: he is terrified that they portend madness. Their existence must reinforce fears stemming from his nervous breakdown when he has to leave Oxford, fears strengthened by the response of his godfather, the physician Dr. Swinfen, to his written account of his symptoms. Swinfen tells him that much care is necessary to prevent his lapsing into insanity. In an undated letter to Mrs. Thrale—written in French to protect its secrets from plebeian eyes—he begs her to keep him locked up while she makes him feel her authority and to hold him in a slavery which she knows how to make happy. She may also have shackled him since she refers in a notebook not only to the great Dr. Johnson on his knees kissing her hands and feet, but also to the fetters and padlocks which will reveal all to posterity. Johnson himself writes in his diary in Latin, "Insane thoughts of fetters and handcuffs." In what appears to be her reply to the letter just cited, Mrs. Thrale gives him advice the first part of which could well have come from his own mouth—not to brood on hateful thoughts and to rely on his best doctor, Mr. Boswell, for "Dissipation" [i.e., diversion] is to him "a glorious medicine," but she agrees to play her part in the uneasy game and to impose strict confinement on him, except when there are visitors.

Despite his failure to understand his masochistic impulses, Johnson is gifted with considerable psychological insights, usually linked to his passion for moral conduct, and these frequently appear in his letters to Mrs. Thrale. Commending her for not having failed to travel to Brighton to be with her dying infant son, he observes, "We can hardly be confident of the state of our own minds, but as it stands attested by some external action; we are seldom sure that we sincerely meant what we omitted to do." As he

affirms the rightness of her decision not to make a small boy bathe in the sea since he is terrified of the water, he warns her against entrusting children to nursemaids: "A nurse made of common mould will have a pride in overpowering a child's reluctance. There are few minds to which tyranny is not delightful." The second wife of the music historian Charles Burney (father of the novelist Frances Burney) takes great pride in the superiority of her wealthy daughter, Elizabeth Allen, to Mr. Burney's own girls, and when this daughter elopes with an adventurer, Johnson feels for her mother's pain:

Poor Mrs. [Burney]! One cannot think on her but with great compassion. But it is impossible for her husband's daughters not to triumph; and the husband will feel, as Rochefoucauld says, *something that does not displease him*. You and I, who are neutral, whom her happiness could not have depressed, may be honestly sorry.

Johnson himself suffers an agonizing blow when Henry Thrale, who has ignored medical warnings to cease gormandizing, expires on 4 April 1781. "No death since that of my wife," he writes to the widow next day, "has ever oppressed me like this." Nearly a year later, he laments to Bennet Langton:

Of my life, from the time we parted, the history is mournful. The spring of last year deprived me of Thrale, a man whose eye for fifteen years had scarcely been turned upon me but with respect or tenderness; for such another friend, the general course of human things will not suffer me to hope. I passed the summer at Streatham, but there was no Thrale.

The letters Johnson writes in his remaining years make sad and often monotonous reading. Afflicted with illnesses that leave him hardly able to walk, to sleep at night, or even to breathe easily, he fills sheets of paper with medical details for his physicians. To friends he sends apologies for not writing sooner since a solitary sick old man has nothing but complaints with which to fill his pages. The English climate aggravates his ailments, and he confesses to Charles Burney, "I am now reduced to think, and am at last content to talk of the weather. Pride must have a fall." He grieves over the death of one old friend after another, and in March 1782, he complains to Lucy Porter of his dwindling household (which still includes his black servant Francis Barber): "My dwelling is but melancholy; both Williams, and Desmoulins, and myself, are very sickly: Frank is not well; and poor Levett died in his bed the other day, by a sudden stroke." Twenty months

later, he writes to the same lady, "Last month died Mrs. Williams, who had been to me for thirty years in the place of a sister: her knowledge was great, and her conversation pleasing. I now live in cheerless solitude."

In his happier hours, Johnson can still emerge from his dwelling to enjoy company, and he is alert enough to ponder a spectacular new invention, the hot-air balloon. Its first trial, he writes to his physician, Dr. Brocklesby, "was bold and deserved applause and reward," but he decides:

In amusement, mere amusement, I am afraid it must end, for I do not find that its course can be directed so as that it should serve any purposes of communication; and it can give no new intelligence of the state of the air at different heights, till they have ascended above the height of mountains, which they seem never likely to do.

Devouring luxurious food is a pleasure he can still relish, though he admits in one of his last letters to Mrs. Thrale, "there are other things, how different! which ought to predominate in the mind of such a man as I: but in this world the body will have its part; and my hope is, that it shall have no more." Yet however great his pain and his loneliness, he never ceases to write letters soliciting funds and employment for the needy.

A final wound to Johnson's spirit comes five months before his death. A letter from Mrs. Thrale informs him that his beloved friend, to the indignation of her daughters, who have fled the house, is about to marry the Roman Catholic Italian music teacher Gabriel Piozzi. With uncontrolled fury, Johnson replies, "If you have abandoned your children and your religion, God forgive your wickedness; if you have forfeited your fame and your country, may your folly do no further mischief." It takes him nearly a week to regain his self-possession and to concede, in his last letter to the lady, "What you have done, however I may lament it, I have no pretence to resent, as it has not been injurious to me," and in a kind of repayment for "that kindness which soothed twenty years of a life radically wretched," he urges her to persuade Mr. Piozzi to settle in England, although he adds, "I am afraid however that my counsel is vain." A month later, he writes to Mrs. Thrale's daughter Queeney, "I love you, I loved your father, and I loved your Mother as long as I could." The Piozzis, after travelling on the Continent, return to live in Britain, and despite Johnson's fears, Mrs. Piozzi does not change her religion.

That Johnson speaks of his life as "radically wretched" accords with his other complaints. When he writes to Mrs. Thrale from Scotland that on his sixty-fourth birthday he "can now look back upon threescore and four years, in which little has been done, and little has been enjoyed," he reveals

the depths of his melancholy delusion. While he has suffered grievously from poverty (by this time, happily, an affliction of the past) as well as continuous ill health in body and mind, his literary achievements are extraordinary and his charitable actions exceptional. He is, however, troubled not only by the possibility of madness but also by fear of damnation. Boswell's claim, sometimes doubted, that he was at one time lured into sexual irregularities and his guilt about lapsing into periods of idleness between his bursts of productive energy help to explain his terror of posthumous judgment, several times expressed in his letters. In March 1784, nine months before his death, he rebukes Mrs. Thrale: "Write to me no more about *dying with a grace*; when you feel what I have felt in approaching eternity—in fear of soon hearing the sentence of which there is no revocation, you will know the folly." In April, he declares to the Reverend John Taylor, "O! my friend, the approach of death is very dreadful. I am afraid to think on that which I know I cannot avoid." In his last months, nevertheless, the terror falls away, and Johnson dies peacefully on 13 December 1784. Eight days earlier he has written a prayer containing the plea "forgive and accept my late conversion"; perhaps it is in the light of these words that we should read such a passage as occurs in a letter of 6 October to his merchant friend John Ryland:

My mind, however, is calmer than in the beginning of the year, and I comfort myself with hopes of every kind, neither despairing of ease in this world, nor of happiness in another.