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978-1-107-69542-9 - Johnson Agonistes and Other Essays

Bertrand H. Bronson

Excerpt

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## JOHNSON AGONISTES

Informed that Mrs Montagu, Queen of the Blues, First of Literary Women, was coming to dine at the Thrales', Dr Johnson, then approaching 70, began to seesaw with suppressed mirth. Finally he turned to his new favourite, the 26-year-old authoress of a recent best seller called *Evelina*, and burst out with animation:

'Down with her, Burney!—down with her!—spare her not!—attack her, fight her, and down with her at once! You are a rising wit, and she is at the top; and when I was beginning the world, and was nothing and nobody, the joy of my life was to fire at all the established wits. . . to vanquish the great ones was all the delight of my poor little dear soul! So at her, Burney,—at her, and down with her!' . . .

'Miss Burney,' cried Mr Thrale, 'you must get up your courage for this encounter! I think you should begin with Miss Gregory; and down with her first.' Dr Johnson: 'No, no, always fly at the eagle!'<sup>1</sup>

The playful mood should not blind us to the truth of Johnson's remark about himself. The incomparable fullness and vitality of Boswell's portrait of him for the last twenty years of his life dims in the reader's mind those earlier indications of a violent youth who had to shoulder his way to recognition. But the lines of the sketches are right, and need only to be scrutinized. We may disregard if we will the legend of the infant who beat his nurse for following him too solicitously; but there is no doubting a later anecdote. When Boswell reminded Johnson that he had had the reputation while at the University of being a frolicsome fellow, the Doctor's answer was:

Ah, Sir, I was mad and violent. It was bitterness which they mistook for frolick. I was miserably poor, and I thought to fight

<sup>1</sup> *Diary and Letters of Madame D'Arblay*, ed. Austin Dobson, 1904, I, 115, 117.

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my way by my literature and my wit; so I disregarded all power and all authority.<sup>1</sup>

Mad, violent, and bitter; miserably poor, and conscious of intellectual abilities of a high order, yet unrecognized: the mixture spells, as always, Radical, Iconoclast, Enemy of the Established Order.

But we have to add another characteristic, the presence of which makes combustion even more probable: aggressive physical courage. Johnson, we are told, used to call a man who was afraid of anything 'a scoundrel'. *Scoundrel* was a word he used with surprising readiness (anyone who went to bed before twelve o'clock was also a scoundrel); but in relation to courage he acted as if he meant it literally. Numerous and familiar are the stories of his own hardihood. While writing of the retort to Macpherson, itself an act of courage in the face of Macpherson's size and impudence ('Any violence offered me I shall do my best to repel. . . I hope I shall never be deterred from detecting what I think a cheat, by the menaces of a ruffian'), Boswell mentions several occasions on which Johnson showed not merely bravery, but even foolhardiness. Thus, when swimming with his young friend Langton at Oxford, he was warned that a certain pool in the river was especially dangerous: he swam straight into it. Told of the danger of a gun's bursting if loaded with several balls, he promptly put in half a dozen and fired it off. Attacked by a gang of four men, at night, in a London street, he 'kept them all at bay, till the watch came up'.<sup>2</sup>

This physical courage, as Boswell suggests, was entirely irrational and instinctive; and it was imperious enough to obliterate for the time his dread of death. In

<sup>1</sup> Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, 1, 73–74. The references throughout are to the Hill-Powell edition, Oxford, 1934.

<sup>2</sup> *Life*, II, 299.

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the examples cited, the chance of death is wantonly courted, not for a principle but simply for a whim. And yet the fear of death, as we all know, sat ever upon his mind.

'Mad and violent', he called himself; and Boswell is right in more departments than that of meat and drink when he declares that 'Johnson, though he could be rigidly *abstemious*, was not a *temperate* man'. Violence is often as apparent in total abstention as in headlong luxury; and the pattern of Johnson's temperament, far from being cut to fit the classical Golden Mean, tended everywhere to the volcanic. From his father, he once told Boswell, he had inherited 'a vile melancholy', which made him 'mad all his life, at least not sober'.<sup>1</sup>

Wherever it came from, it is this yeast of insobriety in him that, to an ear sensitive to overtones, makes his expression of even the merest truisms exciting. Taine, who had for the English music decidedly the dull ear of a foreigner, simply yawned: 'Whatever the work', he declared, Johnson 'always writes in the same style. . . Classical prose attains its perfection in him. . . Art cannot be more finished, or nature more forced. No one has confined ideas in more strait compartments; none has given stronger relief to dissertation and proof. . . none has more generally mutilated the flowing liberty of conversation and life by antitheses and technical words. . .'.<sup>2</sup> We may wonder at an implied definition of the classical which, instead of requiring an appropriate dress for the thought, admits the most general mutilation of the 'flowing liberty of conversation and life' to be the perfection of classical prose. But a glimmer of truth lurks in Taine's observa-

<sup>1</sup> *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, ed. R. W. Chapman, Oxford, 1930, p. 302; *Life*, I, 35.

<sup>2</sup> Taine, *Histoire de la littérature anglaise*, Bk. III, chap. 6 (trans. H. van Laun; New York, 1925, III, 322-323).

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tions: Johnson does almost always forcibly impose his pressure on what he says or writes. The swing of his phrases, even in trivialities, starts from the hips. His mere impatience is another man's passion. Who else would express a momentary irritation at a bashful beauty's silence with a force like this?—

She says nothing, Sir; a talking blackamoor were better than a white creature who adds nothing to life, and by sitting down before one thus desperately silent, takes away the confidence one should have in the company of her chair if she were once out of it.<sup>1</sup>

That is, precisely, to break a butterfly upon a wheel; but an engine with this power does not easily limit itself to flapping bugs. In other words, it is not that the little fishes out of some absurd pomposity talk like whales, but rather that whales cannot simply be whittled down to little fishes. It is all a matter of the amount of energy demanding release.

'Every thing about his character and manners', Boswell has written, 'was forcible and violent.'<sup>2</sup> When, at twenty-six, Johnson married a widow of forty-six, he did so not in the passive desire of being mothered and dominated—though psychologists will shake their heads and ponder. He went to church in that resolute frame of mind of which he was to make such unforgettable report:

Sir, she had read the old romances, and had got into her head the fantastical notion that a woman of spirit should use her lover like a dog. So, Sir, at first she told me that I rode too fast, and she could not keep up with me [—they were both on horseback—]; and, when I rode a little slower, she passed me, and complained that I lagged behind. I was not to be made the slave of caprice; and I resolved to begin as I meant to end. I therefore pushed on briskly, till I was fairly out of her sight. The road lay between two hedges, so I was sure she could not miss it; and I contrived that she should

<sup>1</sup> *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. Hill, 1, 289 (Mrs Thrale's *Anecdotes*).

<sup>2</sup> *Life*, IV, 72.

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soon come up with me. When she did, I observed her to be in tears.<sup>1</sup>

If Mrs Johnson had read romances, Johnson knew Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*.

Shakespeare, in fact, he did not merely *know*: he *lived* the scenes, tragic as well as comic. No critic has made stronger confession of the impact of the dramatist upon his imagination. 'He that peruses Shakespeare,' he writes of the murder scene in *Macbeth*, 'looks round alarmed, and starts to find himself alone.' 'I was many years ago so shocked by *Cordelia's* death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor.'<sup>2</sup> And has any other editor been driven to an outburst like the following, which concerns Desdemona's murder?—'I am glad that I have ended my revisal of this dreadful scene. It is not to be endured.' Of the strength of Johnson's imagination, and of the significance of his lifelong effort to hold it in check, a brilliant study has recently been published.<sup>3</sup> All that need be said at present is that it was no faculty of a 'harmless drudge', but the boiling, turbulent imagination of a poet capable of fine frenzy. All Johnson's most characteristic utterances, oral or written, display this fundamentally imaginative quality, this need for *poiesis*, seeking always the vivid metaphor or simile, the telling word. His very habit of writing, the impatient discharge of a task, galvanized by a single explosive impulse, reveals the same truth. But his emotions had staying power as well:

Once, indeed, (said he,) I was disobedient; I refused to attend my father to Uttoxeter-market. Pride was the source of that refusal,

<sup>1</sup> *Life*, 1, 96.

<sup>2</sup> *Works*, Oxford, 1825, vi, 71 and 175. All references to Johnson's works, unless otherwise noted, are to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> W. B. C. Watkins, *Perilous Balance*, Princeton, 1939.

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and the remembrance of it was painful. A few years ago, I desired to atone for this fault; I went to Uttoxeter in very bad weather, and stood for a considerable time bareheaded in the rain, on the spot where my father's stall used to stand. In contrition I stood, and I hope the penance was expiatory.<sup>1</sup>

If, indeed, Johnson ever, as his enemies supposed, set up for Sir Oracle, it was not by composing his demeanour into a wilful stillness. What drew him, in part, to Boswell was the latter's avid curiosity and zest for fresh experience. And when occasion offered, though at the age of sixty-four, he set out with him on an arduous junket through the wilderness.

Why should a man, whose blood is warm within,  
Sit like his grandsire cut in alabaster?

In the last months of his life, hopeless of recovery from fatal sickness, 'such', says Boswell, 'was his intellectual ardour...that he said to one friend, "Sir, I look upon every day to be lost, in which I do not make a new acquaintance"; and to another, when talking of his illness, "I will be conquered; I will not capitulate".'<sup>2</sup>

Examples could be multiplied without end in illustration of the ferment and tumult of Johnson's nature. Are we, then, to conclude that habitually we think mistakenly of him? Was he really a firebrand needing only to be tossed among dry fagots to start a conflagration? The query has only to be phrased to be denied. What we have seen so far is indeed the disposition of a man who will swim instinctively against the current, whose forces are naturally called into play by opposition and difficulty. Of such temperaments revolutionaries are made: so much is clear. But when Johnson is brought to the bar on any of the fundamental issues, he ranges himself on the conservative

<sup>1</sup> *Life*, iv, 373.

<sup>2</sup> *Life*, iv, 374.

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side. Authority, and more authority, is what he wants, in Religion, in Morals, in Politics, in Literature. To labour the general truth would be more than ungrateful; it is too obvious and well known. The orthodoxy of his religious opinions is one of the most striking features of his character. In politics, it is not yet forgotten in America that he wrote *Taxation No Tyranny*. One brief paragraph in this pamphlet contains, according to Leslie Stephen, his whole political theory. The paragraph is as follows:

In sovereignty there are no gradations. There may be limited royalty, there may be limited consulship; but there can be no limited government. There must, in every society, be some power or other, from which there is no appeal, which admits no restrictions, which pervades the whole mass of the community, regulates and adjusts all subordination, enacts laws or repeals them, erects or annuls judicatures, extends or contracts privileges, exempt itself from question or control, and bounded only by physical necessity.<sup>1</sup>

This simple fundamental tenet Johnson illustrated conversationally in various sallies, and by implication or argument in his political tracts. There could hardly be a plainer declaration of belief in the authoritarian principle.

By this power, wherever it subsists [he continues], all legislation and jurisdiction is animated and maintained. From this all legal rights are emanations, which, whether equitably or not, may be legally recalled. It is not infallible, for it may do wrong; but it is irresistible, for it can be resisted only by rebellion, by an act which makes it questionable, what shall be thenceforward the supreme power.<sup>2</sup>

Hence the Whigs and 'patriots' and 'democrats' of his day get short shrift, because they in their several ways deny the supremacy of any such authority and bring chaos in their train. 'Whiggism, at the time of the Revolution,

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, vi, 234.<sup>2</sup> *Works*, vi, 234–235.

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he said, was accompanied with certain principles; but latterly, as a mere party distinction under Walpole and the Pelhams, was no better than the politicks of stock-jobbers, and the religion of infidels.<sup>1</sup> Johnson thought, as did George III himself, that the king ought to have more power rather than less, and, given ability and integrity, should be in a sense his own minister, 'the directing soul and spirit of his administration'.<sup>2</sup>

Johnson's conservatism, therefore, though not Toryism in the narrow party sense of the word, was a matter of deep-lying convictions. In morals, it drove him to ask a rule for right and wrong, 'in their abstracted and invariable state, divested of the prejudices of age and country'. In poetry, it made him 'neglect the minuter discriminations... for those characteristics which are alike obvious to vigilance and carelessness':<sup>3</sup> it made him prefer, in fiction, 'characters of nature' to 'characters of manners'.

## II

The opposition of these two forces, the conservatism of intellectual attitude and the ebullient temperament, is at the root of most of his inconsistencies, and is perpetually fascinating. It keeps him from ever being a philosopher in the strictest sense, although his powerful intellect was as firm in its grasp of a logical concatenation as it was prone to generalize. Philosophy was too narrow a room for his humanity: he could not look upon a metaphysical system, no matter how pretty the structure, as a desirable exchange for the rich irrelevancies and contradictions by which men live. Hence his notorious opinion of Berkeley and Hume. Generalization, yes; metaphysical abstraction, no. Confronted with a system, he always tries it with a

<sup>1</sup> *Life*, II, 117 (Dr Maxwell's *Collectanea*).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Rasselas*, chap. x.

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pragmatic ear; and if the vibrations set up a beat, the system is out of tune:

The bigot of philosophy... is entangled in systems by which truth and falsehood are inextricably complicated, or undertakes to talk on subjects which nature did not form him able to comprehend. The Cartesian, who denies that his horse feels the spur, or that the hare is afraid when the hounds approach her; the disciple of Malbranche, who maintains that the man was not hurt by the bullet, which, according to vulgar apprehension, swept away his legs; the follower of Berkeley, who while he sits writing at his table, declares that he has neither table, paper, nor fingers; have all the honour at least of being deceived by fallacies not easily detected, and may plead that they did not forsake truth, but for appearances which they were not able to distinguish from it.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, during the years when we know him best, the subtleties of metaphysics had come to seem to him a mere game of paradoxes, without any roots in experience, which any man might play who had nothing more important to do. But, though intellectual paradoxes were abhorrent to him on principle, he was never beyond the temptation of them in conversation, when his instinct to oppose had led him into a tight corner; and often he could not resist the sheer fun of seeing what could be said in favour of an untenable position.

For the present purpose, it will be obvious that our terminology need not be confined to any rigorous definition. It was said earlier that he had the disposition of the subverter, the radical. The objection might be raised, that proof was still to seek. It is true that specific evidence to justify the application of such terms is scanty; and so far as is known he seldom allowed the temperament to lead him beyond argument into act. George Steevens tells an anecdote of his provoking a riot at 'Marybone' Gardens which might provide a solitary but strikingly characteristic

<sup>1</sup> *The Idler*, No. 10, *Works*, IV, 179.

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exception. His curiosity had been aroused by talk of Torr 's fireworks there, and he went with Steevens to watch the display.

The evening had proved showery; and soon after the few people present were assembled, publick notice was given, that the conductors to the wheels, suns, stars, etc. were so thoroughly water-soaked, that it was impossible any part of the exhibition should be made. 'This is a mere excuse, (says the Doctor,) to save their crackers for a more profitable company. Let us but hold up our sticks, and threaten to break those coloured lamps that surround the Orchestra, and we shall soon have our wishes gratified. The core of the fireworks cannot be injured; let the different pieces be touched in their respective centers, and they will do their offices as well as ever.'—Some young men who overheard him, immediately began the violence he had recommended, and an attempt was speedily made to fire some of the wheels which appeared to have received the smallest damage; but to little purpose were they lighted, for most of them completely failed.—The authour of 'The Rambler', however, may be considered on this occasion, as the ringleader of a successful riot, though not as a skilful pyrotechnist.<sup>1</sup>

But at least one glimpse of the young intellectual radical is on record in his own words. Talking impatiently in later years of those, like Rousseau, who were led into paradox 'by a childish desire of novelty'—innovators who, finding that Truth was a 'cow that would yield no more milk, were gone to milk the bull'—he declared:

When I was a boy, I used always to choose the wrong side of a debate, because most ingenious things, that is to say, most new things, could be said upon it.

And he proceeded at once to give an example of the technique:

Sir, there is nothing for which you may not muster up more plausible arguments, than those which are urged against wealth and other external advantages. Why now, there is stealing; why should it be thought a crime? When we consider by what unjust methods property has been often acquired, and that what was unjustly got

<sup>1</sup> *Life*, iv, 324.