

A Lexicographer Burdened With Life

James Boswell, the biographer, described him as follows:

”His figure was large and well formed, and his countenance of the cast of an ancient statue; yet his appearance was rendered strange and somewhat uncouth, by convulsive cramps, by the scars of that distemper which it was once imagined the royal touch could cure, and by a slovenly mode of dress. He had the use of only one eye; yet so much does the mind govern, and even supply the deficiency of organs, that his visual perceptions were quick and accurate. So morbid was his temperament, that he never knew the natural joy of a free and vigorous use of his limbs; when he walked, it was like the juggling gait of one in fetters.”

The individual pictured by James Boswell was Samuel Johnson (1709 – 1784), England’s most illustrious essayist, journalist, literary critic, moralist and, preeminently, lexicographer. No praise was too excessive to define Johnson’s literary accomplishments; yet his origins and the innumerable medical travails of his burdened life make his contributions to the English language all the more astonishing.

Johnson was born in Litchfield, about 115 miles northwest of London, to a 40 year-old mother, elderly by 18th Century standards. His frail, underweight appearance at birth gave little encouragement that he would survive the neonatal interlude. He was blind in one eye and by age three had developed tuberculosis involving the lymph nodes of his neck, a condition known then as scrofula and sometimes called the King’s Evil (said to be curable by the touch of a royal finger).

Johnson’s early education gave hints of his later eloquence and rhetorical brilliance. His father’s increasing penury, however, interrupted young Samuel’s education at Pembroke College. His attempts at securing a teaching position were unsuccessful partially because of a lack of a degree and partially because his many facial tics and involuntary grimaces were often accompanied by inarticulate utterances and loud wheezes. (Contemporary neurologists believe that Johnson had Tourette’s disease). His face was marred by innumerable scars caused by scrofula. And his gait was awkward, jerky as though prompted by invisible puppet-strings and dismaying if not frightening to watch. And so Johnson went to London to support himself by piecemeal journalism. He then married the widow of his friend, a woman 21 years old than he, a relationship that, if not passionate, was earnest until her death some 15 years later.

Life continued to be perilous for Johnson including close encounters with debtor’s prison and extended intervals of profound depression (his “black dogs”). He was further oppressed by chronic fears of impending insanity and assigned to life imprisonment in an asylum.

In 1746 a group of enterprising book-publishers asked Johnson whether he would undertake the monumental task of designing and assembling a dictionary of the English language.

He accepted the challenge; and nine years later he saw his scholarly labors consummated. It was an epic-making text with about 45,000 separate entries. Johnson’s dictionary was more than an alphabetic collection of definitions, however. To illustrate the meanings, nuances and evolving denotation of English words, Johnson appended over 114,000 quotations from the best of English writing, arbitrarily defining the mid-Sixteenth Century as the lower boundary of enduring British literature. The book rapidly became the criterion of proper English usage and was unmatched for over a century until the Oxford English Dictionary was published in 1928.

Fame, and particularly his later publication of Shakespeare’s plays, now annotated and corrected, made his life a bit more comfortable. And because of the Dictionary, Johnson was given a modest pension by King George III.

Yet, as Johnson approached his seventies, life became increasingly arduous, more of a self-defeating struggle. To a man who hungered for constant companionship, who reveled in crowded taverns for his evening suppers, who feared loneliness more than he feared any hint of insanity, these were years of terrible loss when friend after friend retreated to a quiet anonymity or died. Nor were these declining years kind to Johnson’s health: like a gathering storm he encountered further neurological problems, including a stroke which deprived him of his voice, gout which contributed more to his nights of insomnia, emphysema which made the simple task of walking to a tavern a monumental burden; and to augment all of these impediments, should his mind dare to dwell upon the fleeting thought of uninterrupted serenity, was added a testicular cancer.

Boswell added: “To Johnson, whose supreme enjoyment was the exercise of his reason, the disturbance or obscuration of that faculty was the evil most to be dreaded. Insanity, therefore, was the object of his most dismal apprehension; and he fancied himself seized by it, or approaching to it, at the very time when he was giving proofs of a more than ordinary soundness and vigour of judgment.”

Johnson died in the seventy-fifth year of a wearisome, onerous life. Before he lapsed into a terminal coma, he inquired of a friend about his burial. He was told that he might be interred in Westminster Abbey. And Johnson smiled.

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