

Dr. Johnson and his Times.

II.

IN contemplating Johnson's social and club life, we enter upon what has been referred to as the second half of personality, viz., achievement.

Johnson was never a man who made much noise in public life. His arena was not the senate-house or the platform, but the club and the drawing-room: and it was in this tranquil sphere that he won much of his fame while living, and, as some will have it, nearly the whole of his fame after death. I cannot agree with this latter opinion, which is tantamount to claiming that, but for Boswell, Johnson's name would long ago have become a name only, or would, perhaps, have perished altogether.

Even as regards his fame in his lifetime, we must not forget that it was only in later years that he became celebrated for his conversational talents, which he could have had but little opportunity of exercising much before he was fifty-three years of age.

When and why did visitors, learned, noble and rich, begin to desire the acquaintance of the poor, shabby scholar, and to call at his mean lodgings in Gough Square and other unfashionable places? They had not yet enjoyed the flavour of his spoken wit, or felt the agreeable sting of his irony—perhaps had not even heard of it. The answer must be then: After, and because of, the reputation Johnson had gained by certain poems and essays that he had written, more particularly his "London, a poem in imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal," his poem "The Vanity of Human Wishes" (published ten years later)—"two of the noblest poems in the language," Lord Rosebery called them in his Lichfield speech: his Parliamentary Debates, published by Cave in the *Gentleman's Magazine* under the title of the "Senate of Lilliput"; and other papers in the same journal. These may be regarded as the first steps on the ladder of fame.

Then, but not till Johnson was thirty-eight and had spent some of the best years of his life in drudgery and poverty—drudgery and poverty which he was still to endure for many more years—came out the Prospectus of his Dictionary: also the *Rambler*, a bi-weekly paper something after the manner of Addison's *Spectator*. Eight

years later followed the publishing of the Dictionary ; and the degree of " Master of Arts," conferred upon him by the University which his poverty had compelled him to leave without that honour. Why was that degree conferred ? Was it because he was known to be a brilliant talker, and a distinguished figure in London society ? Not at all : but, as the Diploma runs, because he was " doctissimus "—a very learned man, and was bringing out a work that would give beauty and stability to his native language.

I do not harp upon all this with any view of belittling Boswell's book or Johnson's extraordinary powers of conversation, but simply to point out that it was as a man of letters that Johnson first achieved intellectual distinction, and—if I may prophesy—it will be as a man of letters that from the intellectual point of view his name will ultimately remain distinguished.

However this may be, it is the social and conversational aspect of Johnson to which I would now direct attention : and, perhaps, this can be done best by describing two or three little scenes in his life.

Even after the publication of the Dictionary Johnson, though no longer obscure, was still poor, and had but little time, perhaps not even the clothes, for mixing much in what is called polite society. It was probably not till after he had received his pension, when he was fifty-three years of age, that he had the leisure and the means to go out much into the world. The celebrated Literary Club, founded by Sir Joshua Reynolds and Johnson, the scene of so many of his argumentative triumphs, did not come into existence before 1764, when Johnson was fifty-five. About this time, however, he very rapidly *did* make his mark as a man to be listened to, whether you liked it or not. Most people did like it, and in fact took considerable pains to get the chance of listening to him. We need now take no further trouble about accounting for his fame during life : it would be labour wasted. He *was* famous : he had *arrived*, as the French say.

Here is a scene which his friend Bennet Langton witnessed one evening at the house of a Mr. Vesey. The company, he wrote to Boswell, consisted chiefly of ladies, among whom were the Duchess of Portland, the Duchess of Beaufort, Lady Lucan, Mrs. Boscawen, Lady Clermont and others of note. Among the men present were Lord Althorp, Lord Macartney, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Lord Lucan, Mr. Pepys, and Dr. Barnard, provost of Eton. The instant that Dr. Johnson was announced and had taken a chair, the whole com-

pany began to collect round him till they became four or five deep ; those behind standing and listening, over the heads of those that were sitting near him. At the club he always compelled the same kind of attention, and had no rival ; though Goldsmith sometimes entered the lists with him and generally got a bad fall in the combat.

What, then, was this wonderful Talk of Johnson's that rendered him supreme among his fellows ? Ah ! you must read Boswell and Mrs. Piozzi to answer this question ; and, even then, you may possibly be disappointed, for the manner, the voice, will be wanting. It is not too much to say that no reported conversation of any wit that ever lived comes up to the expectation of those who have heard of the extraordinary impression the original made upon those who listened to it. I think, however, that in comparatively modern times Johnson, and Sidney Smith, of all celebrated talkers, have best stood the test of repetition. Sidney Smith's vein was of the lighter, more jocular type : Johnson's of a heavier, more dogmatic, order, peculiar to himself. In all his reported utterances, you will notice especially three things—promptness, lucidity, and force. He is never at a loss—though Goldsmith used to say, when Johnson paused for a moment after his customary, “ Why, sir . . . ”—“ now he is thinking which side he shall take ” (for Johnson was a “ beggar to argue ”) : he is never obscure : he is never weak. Boswell once, in trying to defend hard drinking, took refuge in the maxim, “ In vino veritas,” which might be translated “ One can generally believe a man when he is drunk ” : to which Johnson retorted : “ Why, sir, that may be an argument for drinking if you suppose men in general to be liars. But, sir, I would not keep company with a fellow who lies as long as he is sober, and whom you must make drunk before you can get a word of truth out of him.” At another time Johnson was told of some man who maintained there was no distinction between virtue and vice. “ Why, sir,” replied Johnson, “ if the fellow doesn't think as he speaks, he is lying ; and I see not what honour he can propose to himself from having the character of a liar. But, if he really *thinks* that there is not distinction between virtue and vice, why, sir, when he leaves our houses—*let us count our spoons.*” Johnson's retorts were not always of the politest : as when he said to rather a dull opponent who had observed meekly, “ I don't understand you, sir ” : “ I have found you an argument, sir, but I am not obliged to find you an understanding.” Or when

he calmly told the Lady Abbess of a convent he once visited in France: "Madame, you are here not for the love of virtue, but from the fear of vice"—a remark which she confessed she should remember as long as she lived. Or again, when he said to a gentleman, who was quite needlessly lamenting that he had lost all his Greek; "I believe, sir, that happened at the same time I lost all my large estate in Yorkshire." But, whatever faults may be found with Johnson's remarks, you will not find them lacking in point and vigour; nor will you ever find him exercising his wit at the expense of morality or religion.

How did he acquire this rare precision and force in conversation? There is no secret about it. It is the old story; labour, pains, trouble, that is all: we should add, of course, combined with great natural ability. He told Boswell all about it: that, all his life, he had taken the utmost care, before speaking, both as to matter and expression: he never allowed himself the luxury of slovenly thought or speech. We might take a hint from this in these days of slipshod talking—of "don'tcher knows," and "mean to says," etc. Curiously enough, on one occasion, when enumerating the requisites for conversation: knowledge, command of words, imagination, and lastly, presence of mind and a resolution not to be overcome by failures, he added, "this last is an essential requisite; for want of it many people do not excel in conversation. *Now I want it*: I throw up the game upon losing a trick"! This, I think, shows the modesty of genius; for no one else thought so: in fact many, as they retired beaten from the stricken field, only wished it *had* been so.

Just one more scene. We have seen him in his blunt moods: let us have a look at him when on his best behaviour in an interview with George III. This occurred in 1767, when Johnson was fifty-eight, and it seems to have completed his conversion to the Hanoverian succession, which for a long time he had regarded as a usurpation—though a necessary one. They met at the Queen's House, in the library; of which Johnson had the run by special permission of the King, who one day told the librarian, Dr. Barnard, to let him know when Johnson next came there, as he was desirous of seeing him. The King was shortly informed that Johnson was in the library, and he at once went to see him. As the King entered, Mr. Barnard went up to Johnson, who was immersed in a book, and whispered to him: "Sir, here is the King." Johnson started up, and stood

still. The King at once began to converse at ease with him. I cannot, of course, give you the whole interview, which lasted some time, and which is to be found recorded at length in Boswell. But what particularly won Johnson's heart was this. The King had been urging him to continue his literary labours; to which Johnson replied that he thought he had already done his part as a writer. Then came the King's memorable compliment: "I should have thought so, too, if you had not written so well." Johnson was intensely gratified; and afterwards observed to Boswell: "No man could have paid a handsomer compliment: it was fit for a King to pay. It was decisive." When asked by some one else whether he made any reply to it, he answered: "No, sir, when the King had said it, it was to be so. It was not for me to bandy civilities with my sovereign."

We came to Johnson as a writer. As regards his posthumous, his present fame—still speaking from the intellectual standpoint—the problem again obtrudes itself, whether Johnson is indebted for it mainly to his conversational or to his literary attainments. If we accept the former view (the conversational), then we are committed to the theory that Boswell created Johnson, for what do most people know of Johnson's talk except through Boswell? But this view seems inadequate, to say the least: and I would go as far as to say that, if Johnson had not *written*, his fame would long ago have dwindled, even if there had been half a dozen Boswells to record his conversation. Depreciation of his writing, however, has so long been the fashion that any other theory will probably meet with little favour. There has been what I may term a conspiracy of detraction of Johnson the author. Macaulay, Carlyle with all his admiration of him, Lord Rosebery in his glowing eulogy, all lean to this side. The British Museum is party to the plot; for, as you gaze upon the immortal names emblazoned upon the frieze of the Reading-room, you will be surprised, I hope shocked, to discover that the name of Johnson is not there! Some names are there, greater indeed than his; but there are also others which surely might have given place to that of Samuel Johnson. There is, however, one exception at least to this unanimity of depreciation. Mr. Birrell says, in his brilliant little essay, "Johnson, the author, is not always fairly treated. We are content to repeat phrases. One of these is, that whilst everybody

reads Boswell, nobody reads Johnson. The facts are otherwise. Everybody does not read Boswell, and a great many people do read Johnson. If it be asked what do the general public know of Johnson's nine volumes octavo? I reply, beshrew the general public. What in the name of the Bodleian has the general public got to do with literature? The general public subscribes to Mudie, and has its intellectual, like its lacteal sustenance, sent round to it in carts. It is not a question of the general public, but of the lover of letters. Do Mr. Browning, Mr. Arnold, Mr. Lowell, Mr. Trevelyan, Mr. Stephen, Mr. Morley, know their Johnson? 'To doubt would be disloyalty.' And what these big men know in their big way, hundreds of little men know in their little way. *We have no writer* with a more genuine literary flavour than the Great Cham of literature. He knew literature in all its branches. He had read books, written books, sold books, bought books, and borrowed books."

Some may possibly be thinking—what *did* Johnson write, except his tiresome dictionary? What did Johnson *not* write? would be a more difficult question to answer. A good many of his works have already been referred to in the course of this lecture.

Let us see: he wrote poems, two at least of which have been pronounced, by no mean judges, two of the noblest poems in the English language: let me quote half a dozen lines from one of them, "The Vanity of Human Wishes." Warning the virtuous scholar that he must not hope to escape the disappointments and calamities of the world, Johnson writes—

There mark what ills the Scholar's life assail,
Toil, envy, want, the patron, and the jail.
See nations, slowly wise and meanly just,
To buried merit raise the tardy bust.
If dreams yet flatter, once again attend:
Hear Lydiat's life, and Galileo's end.

There is an interesting little detail in connexion with that word "patron." In the first instance, Boswell tell us, Johnson had written "garret" here; but, after his painful experience of Lord Chesterfield's patronage, he substituted the word "patron" for it. Lord Chesterfield had certainly proved himself a disappointing patron; but I think Johnson was a trifle hyper-sensitive, and inclined to exaggerate the slights he received. However, the line is no doubt improved by this little touch of bitter humour.

To proceed with our list: Johnson wrote a tragedy, "Irene";

which, excellent from a literary point of view, was a dramatic failure, and was, unfortunately, the cause of some estrangement between him and Garrick, as he fancied that Garrick had not done his best to ensure success for the play. In other respects he took his defeat philosophically; and, indeed, in this case, and generally, he was ready and wise enough to accept the verdict of public opinion. When he was told that a certain Mr. Pott had expressed the view that "Irene" was the best tragedy of modern times: "If Pott says so, Pott lies," was his conclusive answer.

Johnson wrote a very great number of essays in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, *The Rambler*, *The Idler*, *The Adventurer*, and elsewhere, most of which are full of thought and wisdom, and all of which are models of lucid, logical, scholarly English. He wrote sermons for the clergy who had not sufficient confidence in their own productions: prologues to plays, prefaces for the books of others, and epitaphs; for a prologue or a preface or an epitaph from Johnson was supposed to ensure success to the living, or fame to the dead. All will recognize these few lines from Johnson's prologue written for Garrick on his opening Drury Lane Theatre in 1747. Johnson appeals to the audience to do their utmost to elevate the tone of the Drama: for it rests with them, he maintains, to accomplish this, and not with poor authors and players who have no option but to follow the public taste, which they are powerless to lead:

Ah! let not censure term our fate our choice,
The stage but echoes back the public voice;
The drama's laws, the drama's patrons give,
For we that live to please, *must please*—to live.

Johnson, in quite another line, wrote many beautiful prayers and meditations, in which it might be truly said that scholarship is sublimed to devotional ecstasy. Let no one for a moment presume that these were mere academical exercises: you have only to read them to see at once that they spring from the heart even more than from the head.

He wrote his "Journey to the Hebrides"; "Rasselas," which he composed in the evenings of one week, and sold for £100, to defray the cost of his mother's funeral. Boswell said he used to read this little story nearly every year.

His edition of Shakespeare must not be omitted from our list. As a commentary it has not found much favour; but the preface

is a masterly piece of original criticism, as brilliantly written as anything Johnson ever wrote—which is saying a good deal. Then, in his old age, came that great classic, the “Lives of the Poets.”

And last of all—not chronologically, but to wind up our imperfect catalogue with his greatest labour—there is the tiresome Dictionary. No small output this: all, as Mr. Birrell has told us, of the finest literary quality! A few words concerning this Dictionary. In these days of splendid illustrated dictionaries, brought carefully and minutely up to date, Johnson’s work has become no doubt obsolete—a back number. This is the fate of all scientific books. But, for the age in which it was written—a century and a half ago—it was a grand achievement. I think you would realize this more intimately if you would some day turn out of Fleet Street, past the “Cheshire Cheese,” one of Johnson’s resorts, and thread your way through a network of old courts and alleys to Gough Square, and there have a good look at the house where Johnson wrote his dictionary. In this unpromising spot the needy, ragged scholar, with only one good eye (for of the other Johnson once said, “the dog has never been of much use to me”), toiled on for eight years, with his six amanuenses, of whom five, humorously enough, were Scotchmen. When the last sheet, somewhat belated, was sent off to Millar, the publisher, Johnson asked the messenger who had taken it what Millar said. The messenger answered, “He said, sir, ‘Thank God I have done with him.’” “I am glad,” replied Johnson, “that he thanks God for anything.” So was the work ended. He got £1,575 for it, all of which had been expended long before he had finished his task. So much for the making of the Dictionary. Now for the made article. Leaving Gough Square, find your way to the British Museum, and ask for the first edition of Johnson’s Dictionary. When you have seen those two stately folios, and spent, if but an hour in looking over the pathetic preface, the learned introduction, and some few of the definitions, you will, I am very confident, feel nothing but admiration for so great an undertaking so nobly accomplished. The French Academy of forty members took forty years to compile their Dictionary. Johnson, with his one eye and six assistants, completed his in eight. Time has, no doubt, brought to light many little blemishes in his work: but what of that? Nothing short of a miracle could ensure perfection to any dictionary. He made a few downright blunders; when, for instance, he described

“pastern” as “the knee of an horse.” A lady once asked him *why* he gave such a definition, fully expecting some learned justification of it; but his very candid answer was, “Ignorance, madam, pure ignorance.” He also gave exactly the same definition for “leeward” and “windward”—“towards the wind.” This *was* rather a “howler,” we must admit, and dangerous too as an explanation for the amateur boatman! Sometimes he could not resist betraying his well-known prejudices: as in the case of the definitions of “Pension and Pensioner,” which, as we have seen, put him in rather an unpleasant fix at one time; or “Excise,” described as “a hateful tax levied upon commodities and adjudged not by the common judges of property, but by wretches hired by those to whom excise is paid”; or, again, “Stock-jobber,” “a low wretch who gets money by buying and selling shares in the funds.” Once at least, he indulged in a little pleasantry at his own expense. He defined “Lexicographer” as “a writer of dictionaries, a *harmless drudge* that busies himself in tracing the origin and detailing the significance of words.” But these trifling eccentricities do not impair the merit of the work in the least. I mention them only to give a glimpse of the lighter side of the mighty scholar.

Let Johnson himself say a word here of his own aim in writing, in a passage which gives, at the same time, no bad example of his style: “Whatever shall be the final sentence of mankind, I have at least endeavoured to deserve their kindness. I have laboured to refine our language to grammatical purity; and to clear it from colloquial barbarisms, licentious idioms, and irregular combinations. Something, perhaps, I have added to the elegance of its construction, and something to the harmony of its cadence.” A fine ideal surely! And who will say it was not realized?

Let us take one more look, the last, at Johnson, the man. The scene is the sick-room; the bed, his death-bed. His illness was painful, distressing—and mortal. How then did Johnson comport himself in this dreadful hour? He had once written, “Philosophy may infuse stubbornness, Religion only can give patience.” He was going to prove this: he did prove it, and something more—that *his* religion gave him not only patience, but courage, hope, and peace. Once only during those last days, after great pain, did something of his old despondency come upon him, and he broke out into those pathetic words, which even he could not have composed:

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased ;
 Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow ;
 Raze out the written troubles of the brain ;
 And, with some sweet oblivious antidote,
 Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff
 Which weighs upon the heart ?

To which Dr. Brocklesby replied with readiness—

Therein the patient
 Must minister to himself.

“ Well applied,” murmured Johnson, “that is more than poetically true.” Sociable to the last, he loved to have his friends around his bed. One day Bennet Langton found Burke and four or five other friends sitting with him. Burke said, “ I am afraid, sir, such a number of us may be oppressive to you.” “ No, sir,” replied Johnson, “ it is not so ; and I must be in a wretched state indeed when your company would not be a delight to me.” Could anyone have made a more courteous, more touching response ?

As the end he had dreaded all his life drew nearer, his fears grew fainter, his faith firmer ; and in complete resignation this great and pious spirit passed from this earth.

B. BRAITHWAITE.

