

MELANCHOLY AND THE BODY IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: THE EXAMPLE OF SAMUEL JOHNSON

ABSTRACT

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), il grande lessicografo e saggista, soffrì di malinconia per tutta la vita. Credeva che questo disturbo fosse congenito e che gli tormentasse la mente. In una certa qual misura, riteneva che il problema dipendesse dal suo corpo eccessivamente grosso e parzialmente disabile. Il fatto di individuare nel corpo la causa della sua malinconia gli dava il modo di affrontarla, e in parte alleviava in lui il senso di colpa e la vergogna che provava per quella malattia. Il più grande timore di Johnson circa la sua condizione era che essa avesse effetto non solo sulla sua mente ma anche sulla sua anima. Sotto forma di scrupoli e di apatia spirituale, la malinconia opprimeva Johnson e ingigantiva la sua paura della morte e della dannazione eterna. Johnson poteva anche avere un corpo deforme, ma era coraggioso. Non lo spaventava nessun pericolo concreto, ma trepidava per la vita della sua anima, e la malinconia, anche se era psicosomatica (*ante litteram*), fu la minaccia più grande che dovette affrontare.

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), the great lexicographer and essayist, suffered from melancholy all his life. He believed that the disorder was congenital and that it afflicted his mind. To some degree, he saw the problem as arising in his abnormally large and partially disabled body. Locating the source of melancholy in his body, gave Johnson a way to deal with it, and it partially relieved him of the guilt and shame he felt concerning the disease. Johnson's greatest fear concerning his condition was that it touched not only his mind but also his soul. In the form of scruples and spiritual torpor, melancholy weighed Johnson down and stimulated his fears of death and damnation. As a physical body, Johnson was perhaps deformed, but he was courageous. No physical danger frightened him, but he trembled for the life of his soul, and his melancholy, even if it was psycho-somatic (*avant la lettre*), was his greatest threat.

It is a well-established fact that Johnson suffered from melancholy for almost all of his life. We know the trouble began early, so early that Johnson sometimes described it as genetic in origin. In 1773 on their tour of Scotland Boswell reports that Johnson said, «I inherited a vile melancholy from my father, which has made me mad all my life, at least not sober».¹ Not everyone describes their melancholy as madness, but Johnson often described his that way. He did so even when he associated it with genetic traits – aspects of his body rather than his mind. In his diary for 30 March 1777, surveying his life, Johnson wrote, «I discover nothing but a barren waste of time with some disorders of body, and disturbances of the mind very near to madness».² Johnson does not make a causal connection between disorders of body and disturbances of mind in this statement,

¹ HILL - POWELL 1934-64, v, p. 215.

² MCADAM JR. - HYDE - HYDE 1958, p. 264.

but he clearly associated the two. It seems natural that he would since he was conscious of congenital physical disabilities. In addition to certain diseases, which he might have picked up in infancy, he was born with a kind of nervous disorder that gave him ticks and twitches that stayed with him all his life and made him something of a spectacle. But not everyone in Johnson's time connected body and mind as closely as Johnson. Boswell spoke often of his own melancholy and even exaggerated it, in Johnson's view, but he did not call it madness. He also acknowledged and perhaps exaggerated Johnson's melancholy but did not accept his friend's description of it as madness.³

The term Boswell preferred for melancholy was "hypochondria". He applied it both to himself and to Johnson, even calling his periodical publication «The Hypochondriac». "Spleen" would have been another possibility, but it was becoming quite old-fashioned by mid-century. In his *Dictionary* Johnson brings "hypochondria" back to madness, through the intermediary of "melancholy". He defines «hypochondriacal» as «Melancholy; disordered in the imagination». Such disorder for Johnson is madness. The noun "hypochondria" is not in Johnson's *Dictionary*; the closest noun is *hypochondres*, a Latin anatomical term with Greek roots going back to Hippocrates. Johnson defines it, using a quotation from John Quincy (d. 1722), a medical doctor: «The two regions lying on each side of the *cartilago ensiformis*, and those of the ribs, and the tip of the breast, which have in one the liver, and in the other the spleen». Johnson's definition of this word further explains Boswell's greater comfort with its congener "hypochondria". For Boswell, and for many other people in the eighteenth century, a physiological explanation of melancholy, tended to exonerate the sufferer from any moral implications carried by the vulgar synonym of "melancholy", "madness". There was (and is) a stigma attached to madness that does not attach to hypochondria. Again and again, Boswell finds that Johnson's melancholy is «constitutional»; it is not his fault; it belongs to his body and not his mind. Johnson, to his cost, is less inclined to make the separation. The *OED* gives S. T. Coleridge credit for the first use of the word «psychosomatic» in 1834, but I think Johnson was ahead of his time in accepting the concept, though he may not have been the only one.

The popular book *The English Malady* by George Cheyne (1671/2-1743), which Johnson often recommended to Boswell, provides a complete explanation of the physiology of melancholy. Cheyne's book came out in 1733, and it undoubtedly spoke directly to Johnson who was at the time still in the midst of his most debilitating bout of the disease, the one that probably forced him to leave Pembroke College in 1729. Cheyne discusses several nervous disorders of the kind that Johnson suffered, and he attributes them to causes that Johnson either found or imagined in himself. For example, Cheyne finds that scrofula, tuberculosis of the lymph nodes, which Johnson had, causes nervous tics of the kind Johnson suffered. He also traces the origins of melancholy to a tender sensibility, to laziness, and to other corruptions of the «Habit», all of which Johnson felt he had in abundance. («Habit» for Cheyne means constitution or temper, like Greek ἔξις and not one's customary ways of behaving, but Johnson may

³ HILL - POWELL 1934-64, I, pp. 165-166 and II, p. 262 nt. 2.

have understood the word in both senses.) Moreover, Cheyne sees melancholy generally as a disorder of the «Animal Machine» and the «Mechanism» of the body controllable through diet and exercise.⁴ This must have appealed to Johnson for its science but also because it was a condemnation of his body rather than his soul. He felt a responsibility to adjust his congenital «habit» through diet and exercise, but he could perhaps still take comfort in the extenuating circumstance that he was born with the condition, and that it was not his fault. I think this comfort did not last for Johnson because he did connect body and mind so closely, but it was at least available.

Johnson's first definition of "melancholy" in the *Dictionary* reflects his sense of the disease as physiological and comes straight from a medical doctor; according, again, to John Quincy, melancholy is «A disease [...] known to arise from too heavy and too viscid blood: its cure is in evacuation, nervous medicines, and powerful stimuli». The third and last definition in the *Dictionary* reflects the common and general usage of the word – «A gloomy pensive, discontented temper». Johnson is usually more precise than this, and the second definition in the *Dictionary* comes closer to his own main use of the word in non-technical speech, including the sort of language he usually employed to talk about himself. This second definition conflates the melancholic condition of the body with its effect. Johnson writes that melancholy in this sense is, «A kind of madness, in which the mind is always fixed on one object». This is where Boswell did not want to go, but Johnson elaborates this line of thinking. In illustration of sense two, Johnson quotes at length Jacques's little disquisition on melancholy in *As You Like It*. The length of the quotation – a length usually reserved for descriptions taken out of technical works (such as Miller's *Gardener's Dictionary* or Harris's *Lexicon Technicum*) and rare even then, especially in the revised 4th edition of the *Dictionary* (1773), suggests that Johnson regarded the passage either as definitive or as expressive of an important truth. He may also have felt the passage doubled as a kind of self-expression. The *Dictionary* contains many such instances of self-expression: some, like the definition of "lexicographer" as «a harmless drudge» or the salute to Lichfield (*salva magna parens!*) are very personal and many are in Latin or Greek (*e.g.* Grubstreet, caitiff). There are other moments like this one, however, in which Johnson gives unusual space to an important truth that he seems to hold dear.⁵ The passage from *As You Like It*, is also recorded in the *Dictionary* with great accuracy, as not all passages are:

I have neither the scholar's melancholy, which is emulation; nor the musician's, which is fantastical; nor the courtier's, which is proud; nor the soldier's, which is ambitious; nor the lawyer's, which is politick; nor the lady's which is nice; nor the lover's which is all these; but it is a melancholy of mine own, compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects, and, indeed, the sundry contemplation of my travels, in which my often rumination wraps me in a most humorous sadness.⁶

⁴ CHEYNE 1733, p. 353.

⁵ For further details, see DEMARIA 1986, p. 30.

⁶ SHAKESPEARE 1975, *As You Like It*, iv.i.10-20.

Johnson may well have felt he, like Jacques, had «a melancholy of [his] own», but it was proper not only to his occupation and his memories but also to his body.

There is plenty of evidence that Johnson believed in a strong connection between body and mind. He tried at various time to follow the motto of Juvenal, the Roman poet whom he knew best in the conclusion of his tenth satire, the model for Johnson's best poem, *The Vanity of Human Wishes: Mens sana in corpore sano*. Like Jonathan Swift, who walked briskly several times a day to keep off mental illness and torpor, Johnson thought he could control his melancholy and madness with exercise. There may have been another reason for his physical approach to the disease, however, one that gets to the heart of Johnson's fears of madness. That is that there was a close connection for Johnson between his melancholy and his religion. For one thing, Johnson dated the rise of his religious conviction to the same period as his most disturbing bout of melancholy. Boswell quotes Johnson as saying to William Seward, a Lichfield friend, in 1783, «I myself was for some years totally regardless of religion. It had dropped out of my mind. It was at an early part of my life. Sickness brought it back, and I hope I have never lost it since».⁷ Aleyn Lyell Reade in his monumental collection *Johnsonian Gleanings* describes this «sickness» as «Johnson's acute attack of melancholia, when his reason almost failed».⁸ Reade believes the illness came on while Johnson was at Oxford and that its growing seriousness was the reason he left college in December 1729 after thirteen months in residence.⁹

At Oxford, Johnson encountered William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, which was published early in 1729. He told Boswell that he had fallen «into an inattention to religion» in his «ninth year» and become a «lax talker» against it by age fourteen. «When at Oxford», he said, «I took up "Law's Serious Call to a Holy Life", expecting 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».¹⁰ This is a different explanation of his religious reawakening than the story about sickness causing its revival in him, but the two may merely be different ways of talking about the same thing.

Equally moved by Law at Oxford were a group of students with religious fervor called the Holy Club of Oxonians. This group was formed by John Wesley, who left Oxford just before Johnson arrived, and returned as a tutor in Lincoln College, just after Johnson departed. The Holy Club practiced various rites of primitive Christianity, such as adult baptism, and they were known above all for their perfectionism. The Holy Club and its practices were attacked in a letter to *Fog's Weekly Journal* for December 9, 1732, to which Wesley's pamphlet *The Oxford Methodists* (1733) was a reply. *Fog's* correspondent proposes that the Club's practices could lead to melancholy, and he believes that melancholy is a sickness, even a «sickness unto death», as Kierkegaard would later call religious despair:

⁷ HILL - POWELL 1934-64, IV, p. 215.

⁸ READE 1909-52, VIII, p. 108.

⁹ Ivi, v, pp. 26-27 and 43-44.

¹⁰ HILL - POWELL 1934-64, I, pp. 67-68.

Sir,

Our Countrymen are observ'd to be naturally of a gloomy and melancholy Temper; and it is owing to this (as is generally thought) that a great many different and wrong Notions of Religion sprout up among us. [...] An Age or two ago we find it was a Fashion in several Parts of England, but especially at Oxford for every one that would be thought to live up to the Principles of Christianity, to doom themselves to this absurd and perpetual Melancholy; and I am afraid it will take place again very soon; for the University at present is not a little pester'd with those Sons of Sorrow, whose Number daily receives addition [...].

Johnson was not a Methodist, but he felt an affinity for Wesley's views, as he did for Law's, and he might have felt, with his congenital melancholy, that he was a «son of sorrow». Like Wesley, Johnson entertained thoughts of perfectionism with respect to religion, and he had a strong tendency to despair about his own religious failure. He chastised himself in his diaries for many things but chief among them is sloth, and he closely associated sloth with impiety, torpor, and melancholy. In his entry for Easter Day, 1776, for example, he wrote, «My reigning sin, to which perhaps many others are appendent [*sic*], is waste of time, and general sluggishness, to which I was always inclined and in part of my life have been almost compelled by morbid melancholy and disturbance of mind».¹¹

Johnson did not invent the connection between melancholy, mental illness, and sin. He found it not only in *Fogg's Weekly*, if he read that journal, but in the sermons of the many orthodox divines whom he quoted in his *Dictionary*. Francis Atterbury (1663-1732), for example, asks, «Have their reasoning Faculties been eclips'd at any time by some accidental Stroke? By the mad Joys of Wine, or the Excess of Religious Melancholy?»¹² Another divine oft quoted in the *Dictionary*, Edward Stillingfleet (1635-1699), says, «Nothing is so uncomfortable, nothing so ungovernable as a restless Imagination; and when it is oppressed with a Religious Melancholy, then every thing seems dark and confused».¹³ But, best and most thorough of the Anglican divine's statements on this subject is the sermon of Samuel Clarke (1675-1729) entitled «Of Religious Melancholy». Clarke finds that there are six causes of religious melancholy: 1) «a mere Indisposition or Distemper of Body»; 2) «Want of Improvement under the Exercise of Religious Duties»; 3) «An Apprehension of being excluded from Mercy, by some positive Decree and Fore-appointment of God»; 4) «A Fear of having committed the Sin against the Holy Ghost»; 5) «An Uneasiness arising from Wicked and Blasphemous Thoughts»; and 6) «a Terrour arising from the Consciousness of past Sins».¹⁴

Johnson probably felt that three of Clarke's causes obviously applied to him. Johnson certainly felt (1) an indisposition of body that inclined him to melancholy deep enough to be called madness, and (2) want of improvement: his diaries show that he was perpetually dissatisfied with his spiritual progress. Perhaps most of all, however, he felt (5) «an uneasiness arising from Wicked and Blasphemous Thoughts». In addition, and

¹¹ MCADAM JR. - HYDE - HYDE 1958, I, p. 257.

¹² ATTERBURY 1709, p. 21.

¹³ STILLINGFLEET 1710, p. 9.

¹⁴ CLARKE 1730-31, x, p. 317.

as a kind of summary and capstone on his religious sadness he frequently entertained and rebuked himself for entertaining religious scruples. Johnson defines «scruple» in the *Dictionary* as «Doubt; difficulty of determination; perplexity: generally about minute things». Johnson's scruples are most often about his religious state. He complains about his scruples in his diaries almost as often as he complains about his sloth. On the day before Easter 1766 Johnson recorded some temporary remission of his problem. It is interesting to see how physically he describes the feeling:

I was yesterday very heavy; I do not feel myself to day so much impressed with the awe of the approaching Mystery. I had this day a doubt like Baxter of my State, and found that my Faith though weak, was yet Faith. O God strengthen it.¹⁵

Later on the same day he prays to God for relief from scruples, though here he does not use the word itself:

Almighty and most merciful Father, before whom I now appear laden with the Sins of another year, suffer me yet again to call upon thee for pardon and peace. O God, grant me repentance, grant me reformation. Grant that I may be no longer disturbed with doubts and harassed with vain terrors. Grant that I may no more linger in perplexity, nor waste in idleness that life which thou hast given and preserved.¹⁶

Doubt, perplexity, and «vain terrors» are the stuff of scruples and religious melancholy. They make him «heavy» and «laden». The scruples seem to have a physical dimension and to act on Johnson as a physical body, as much as they do on his spirit. There is nothing more common than a metaphor of body for spirit, of course, but in Johnson's case the metaphor is particularly lively.

Johnson was clearly appalled by some aspects of his melancholy disorder, and it seems likely that those aspects involved what he calls in his diaries «sinful and corrupt imaginations», «loose thoughts», «vain terrors», «terrors and perplexities», «vain imaginations», and «tumultuous imaginations».¹⁷ A modern psychologist might term them «obsessive intrusive thoughts», part of the syndrome of obsessive-compulsive disorder. The language Johnson uses to describe these thoughts and what we can tell about their content connects them to religious scruples. They too are somewhat bodily in being «loose» and «tumultuous». They are also «vain», which means «empty; unreal; shadowy», according to the *Dictionary* (sense 2), but the meaning is still rendered in terms of body, rather than mind, because it is about the absence of body, rather than presence of something else.

Johnson's melancholy reached into his deepest fears, those having to do with religion and ultimately with death and damnation. He was much more worried about his soul than his body. Seeing melancholy in bodily terms gave him a way of dealing with it, both practically and intellectually, that in some ways separated it from the religious horror he felt much of his life. There is a long entry for «fear of death» in the

¹⁵ MCADAM JR. - HYDE - HYDE 1958, p. 107.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ Ivi, pp. 138, 92, 76, 73, 63, and 46, respectively.

index to the Hill-Powell edition of Boswell's *Life*, and this fear is always religious for Johnson. It is always about damnation, which Johnson glossed passionately in his last conversation with the Master of Pembroke College, «Sent to Hell, Sir, and punished everlastingly».¹⁸

Johnson constantly feared for his soul. All accounts of him, on the other hand, suggest that he had boundless physical courage and confidence, despite his many physical ills. Boswell delights in describing Johnson's animal ferocity, sometimes when eating, but more startlingly in passages such as this one from his *Tour to the Hebrides*, where he is, as Boswell often imagines him, like Hercules:

I have heard him say, that he is afraid of no dog. "He would take him [a guard dog] up by the hinder legs, which would render him quite helpless, —and then knock his head against a stone, and beat out his brains." Topham Beauclerc told me, that at his house in the country, two large ferocious dogs were fighting. Dr. Johnson looked steadily at them for a little while; and then, as one would separate two little boys, who are foolishly hurting each other, he ran up to them, and cuffed their heads till he drove them asunder. But few men have his intrepidity, Herculean strength, or presence of mind. Most thieves or robbers would be afraid to encounter a mastiff.¹⁹

Johnson did not have such confidence about the fate of his soul on Judgment Day. He knew that his melancholy was one of the dangers to his soul, and he often felt himself to be in mortal and eternal jeopardy partly because of it. If he could, on the other hand, think of his melancholy as a bodily affliction, he could face it with more confidence. Alas, Johnson was too intelligent to restrict melancholy, like James Battie, President of the College of Physicians in 1764, to some kind hydraulic action of the nerves.²⁰ Johnson inevitably describes melancholy in psychological as well as physical terms, and he knows he is exposed to it in every aspect of his being. His only solace, if it is solace, is that we all are so exposed. As he says in *Rasselas* when discussing madness, «Perhaps, if we speak with rigorous exactness, no human mind is in its right state».²¹

Robert DeMaria
Vassar College
demaria@vassar.edu

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

ATTERBURY 1709 : Francis Atterbury, *A Sermon Preached before the Right Honourable Lord Mayor*, London, Henry Clements, 1709.

¹⁸ HILL - POWELL 1934-64, IV, p. 299.

¹⁹ HILL - POWELL, V, p. 329.

²⁰ WILTSHIRE 1991, p. 168.

²¹ KOLB 1990, p. 150.

- CHEYNE 1733 : George Cheyne, *The English Malady*, London, G. Strahan, 1733.
- CLARKE 1730-31 : Samuel Clarke, *Sermons on the Following Subjects*, 10 vols., London, James and John Knapton, 1730-1731.
- DEMARIA 1986 : Robert DeMaria Jr., *Johnson's Dictionary and the Language of Learning*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986.
- HILL - POWELL 1934-64 : James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LLD*, ed. by George Birkbeck Hill and Lawrence F. Powell, 6 vols., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1934-1964 (1 ed. 1791).
- KOLB 1990 : *Rasselas and other Tales*, ed. by Gwin J. Kolb, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990.
- MCADAM JR. - HYDE - HYDE 1958 : *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, ed. by E. L. McAdam Jr., with Donald and Mary Hyde, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1958.
- READE 1909-52 : Aleya Lyell Reade, *Johnsonian Gleanings*, 11 vols., Privately Printed, 1909-1952.
- SHAKESPEARE 1975 : William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. by Agnes Latham, London, Methuen, 1975.
- STILLINGFLEET 1710 : Edward Stillingfleet, *Reformation of Manners the True Way of Honoring God*, London, H. Hills, 1710.
- WILTSHIRE 1991 : John Wiltshire, *Samuel Johnson in the Medical World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.