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Johnson, Steady *and* Restless

James Engell

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The older an anniversary, the more its intervening years may cloud rather than clarify the original reason for celebration or remembrance. Ask the young the origin of Veterans Day, eleventh month, eleventh hour of the eleventh day, and a quizzical or blank look may be the reply, though we're less than a century on from the end of the war to end all wars. Yet, Samuel Johnson's tercentenary of birth has been marked on every continent, save Antarctica, by new biographies, conferences, celebrations, dinners, speeches, and exhibitions. Preeminent in that last category is the extraordinary one here mounted by John Overholt and the Houghton Library. A century ago the Grolier celebrated the bicentenary of Johnson's birth with an exhibition including items contributed by the young Harry Elkins Widener.

We mark the date, but in fact we mark Johnson's thought, his life, his writing, and his conversation. To get a sense how vital and perpetually surprising these are, let us, for a moment, move to his death. William Gerard Hamilton spoke for all who knew, read, or heard Johnson when he said of his passing, "He has made a chasm, which not only nothing can fill up, but which nothing has a tendency to fill up. – Johnson is dead. – Let us go to the next best: There is nobody; no man can be said to put you in mind of Johnson" (*Boswell's Life of Johnson*, 6 vols., ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. and enlarged L. F. Powell, [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934-50], IV 420-21). Why now do investors in

Los Angeles, people in business in Chicago, students in Cairo, sheep ranchers in Australia, scholars in Tokyo, and common readers everywhere continue to discover Johnson and then return to him throughout their lives? Why did Donald and Mary Hyde, recently moved from Detroit, established in Somerville, New Jersey, and in New York, where Donald practiced law, why did they, in 1941, two years after their marriage, decide to collect Johnson? They had the collecting instinct; but, above all, they loved Johnson.

Falling in love with Johnson is a little like falling in love with the Statue of Liberty; it's hard to get one's arms around her – and even if you can, you discover that she's holding some things in her own hands already. So, how to explain this love for a lexicographer, the greatest in any language, a superb poet who turned satiric verse into enduring wisdom literature, a moderately successful playwright who single-handedly produced a landmark edition of Shakespeare, a political reporter, author of one of the perennially popular pieces of short fiction in world literature, *Rasselas*, the best moral essayist in English, a fine letter writer, and one of the supreme literary critics of all time, as well as an accomplished biographer, himself the subject of the most famous biography in English, and, finally, the best talker whose phrases have ever been preserved.

To explore this love, this fascination, for Johnson that so many have felt, let us look at two qualities. They animate everything he writes and does. Johnson is steady *and* restless. Commonly, readers and scholars regard him as a stable authority whose word or definition is final, a man who, as he admitted, talked for victory, and supposedly set up a canon of poets, a dangerous man, as T.S. Eliot put it, with whom to disagree, in short, a cultural icon, virtually a statue cast, and even during his own life preserved in his

collected works, soon thereafter in Boswell's *Life* and Mrs. Thrale's *Anecdotes*, later in Reade's *Johnsonian Gleanings* and the *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, and kept front and center by the quotation industry, simply because he is so quotable. A second marriage is "the triumph of hope over experience," not so much a cynical remark if we think of another of Johnson's statements, that "the natural flights of the human mind are not from pleasure to pleasure but from hope to hope." Or, "The vanity of being known to be trusted with a secret is generally one of the chief motives to disclose it." Admired by Jane Austen, invoked by Mary Wollstonecraft, a public figure of authority as early as the appearance of the *Dictionary* in 1755, Johnson seems the most steady figure in the history of English letters, steady with an undivided mind.

But something else is always operating in Johnson, something without which the steadiness would decline into hollow or brittle bluster, striking but ephemeral. This second quality is Johnson's constant *restlessness*, his chronic inability to be satisfied, especially to be satisfied with himself. This dialectic or movement of what William Blake calls *contraries* (not logical opposites or contradictions, but alternate states of being whose very existence and vitality comes from their continual interplay, as in Blake's *Innocence and Experience*) accounts for the earned quality of what Johnson says. That final, tamped-down tone of pronouncement we associate with him comes from something far from final. The cool and rich soils of much fertile land derive from volcanic explosions and incandescent lava, or from the thousand-mile surge of mighty rivers that never cease. The steadiness, the surprising finality that we value in Johnson – the fact that what he wrote and said was, as Ozias Humphry put it, "as *correct* as a *second*

edition” – stems not from settled ways but from a mind and person in constant flux and motion, a contingent restlessness that never sleeps and whose final-seeming statements are perhaps the only way that Johnson himself, for himself, could put even a temporary stop to his own restiveness.

So, Johnson remarked that his idea of happiness was riding in a rapid coach while conversing with an intelligent, attractive woman – that is, going somewhere, progress, motion, variety of views, and at the same time active engagement, exchanging views of another kind with someone in pleasing conversation; his more abstract, remarkable definition of happiness is “multiplicity of agreeable consciousness,” nothing at rest or singularly tranquil, but more like a mental juggler at the top of her game, for those wonderful moments losing all sense of effort and engaged totally in the flow of everything up in the air, everything in motion, yet everything in its proper place. To live, Johnson says, cries out for almost relentless activity to fill what he calls the vacuities of life. This motion may be benign – he’s surprised that pipe smoking and card playing seemed on the wane, since they occupy us physically and mentally; or, this motion may turn silly and become mere “bustle,” which Johnson illustrated by the example of mounting a horse while on board ship (we might think of needless bureaucracy or paperwork as another example, what Johnson called the “epidemic conspiracy for the destruction of paper”). Or, this motion may turn ugly and become a constant canker, the ravenous moral cancer of envy, which he says is destructive, mentally pulling another down while doing nothing constructive to build one’s own self up.

All these forms of restlessness help explain why, for Johnson, the exploration of the moral life does not end in a catechism but rather with a rough compass and map of still uncharted territories; why his literary criticism doesn't culminate in a theory but rather a set of flexible principles corrected and re-calibrated by the practice of reading and by the practical experience of observing what it is that literature represents, life itself; and why his favorite kind of literature is biography, where the motion and fortunes of one life, for example, that of Richard Savage, can be brought into steady focus.

However many portraits we have of Johnson, and however they differ, from “Blinking Sam” to Sir Joshua Reynolds’ classical one of Johnson without wig, used for the Yale edition of his collected works, to Reynolds’ fancied one of the infant Johnson, and to the 19th-century one depicting Johnson reading Goldsmith’s manuscript for *The Vicar of Wakefield* while Goldsmith’s landlady waits for the rent –Johnson persuaded a bookseller to buy it and Goldsmith settled his account – the picture we have is of Johnson standing or seated, usually seated, often with book in hand. But Johnson at Oxford swam and ran; he paced his rooms at Pembroke declaring his intention to go to Italy, to Padua, and other distant seats of learning; after leaving Oxford he took long walks from his birthplace Lichfield to Birmingham and back, more than 20 miles. He and Garrick went to London on foot and horse, alternately riding, tying, and walking to share one horse. Later, Johnson claimed that mental distress might best be combated by physical motion, by violent exercise of the body. Travelling in Scotland with Boswell, Johnson thought of Australia and the recently discovered kangaroo. Then he “volunteered an imitation of the

animal ... standing up to mimic the shape and motions of a kangaroo.” This “tall, heavy, grave-looking man ... stood erect, put out his hands like feelers, and, gathering up the tails of his huge brown coat so as to resemble the pouch of the animal, made two or three vigorous bounds across the room!” (*Boswell’s Journal of A Tour to the Hebrides*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle and Charles H, Bennett [New York: Literary Guild, 1936], 98 n6, Sunday, 29 August 1773). Johnson in late middle age stretches himself out lengthwise at the top of a hill and gleefully rolls down like a five-year-old. In one situation in Scotland, a younger, married lady, playfully prompted by friends, sat on his knee, “put her hands round his neck, and kissed him. ‘Do it again,’ said he, ‘and let us see who will tire first.’ He kept her on his knee some time,” while they both drank tea (*Hebrides* 226, Monday, 27 September 1773). It was brave enough to sail the stormy Hebrides in October in a small, open boat, but when asked his ultimate travel wish, Johnson said, even in his sixties, that he would go to Cairo, then sail down the Red Sea and over to Bengal, journey through India, and visit the Great Wall of China. A stone from that wall he kept as a prized possession. “Let observation with extensive view survey mankind from China to Peru.” He did travel to France, through a trip to Italy and the Mediterranean never materialized.

In daily intercourse he was rapid, unexpected. When asked if a minor author were not a modest soul, he responded immediately, yes, and had much to be modest about, a line later stolen by Churchill. Johnson’s restlessness sometimes met its match, and he admitted it, too. Conversing with the Quaker Mary Knowles, whom he admired, he disputes with her, saying that friendship is not a Christian virtue, for Christianity teaches

universal benevolence and, “strictly speaking,” friendship means personal preferment. She replies, ““But, Doctor, our Saviour had twelve Apostles, yet there was *one* whom he *loved*. John was called “the disciple whom Jesus loved.””” At this Johnson gives up and, as Boswell describes him, “with eyes sparkling benignantly,” admits, ““Very well, indeed, Madam. You have said very well.”” To rub this in, Boswell chirps up, ““A fine application. Pray, Sir, had you ever thought of it?”” Johnson: ““I had not, Sir”” (*Life*, III 289-90).

Johnson’s restlessness in life pops up all sorts of ways. He said he went to the theater to divert himself, to get out of himself, to avoid a restlessness that turned, cannibal like, on his own thoughts. But the theater outings didn’t always work exactly that way. Once he went to an oratorio at Covent Garden for this very reason, not to be alone and to fall prey to his own remorseless criticism. When he was quiet during the performance, Mrs. Thrale assumed his pleasure, but he’d grown bored, and when they returned home, he recited to her a poem in Latin, sixteen lines long, “In Theatro,” on the inability of the theater to occupy fully the mind and heart! His productive impatience found an outlet in composition, by which he’d also composed himself.

In friendships, Johnson was steady and loyal, enjoying long, often nearly life-long relations with many, including Reynolds, Anna Seward, Boswell, David Garrick, and his virtually adopted black son Frank Barber. Yet, he knew friendship isn’t static; friendships, he said, must be kept up by constant repair. And he didn’t let his friendships fall exclusively into those his own age, but sought the young, whom he said he preferred because in them there was at least the *possibility* of hope. This openness, the reverse of

becoming set in his ways, even prompted him to turn to his young friends and challenge them to a “frisk,” a long night on the town of the kind he’d enjoyed soon after he came to London.

Yet, so often, Johnson’s restlessness of criticism he turns on himself, and harshly, correcting, admonishing, or regretting, resolving, and piling on guilt even as he resolves again to reform. His *Diaries* record many painful instances, the repeated resolutions against sloth, to rise at noon and *by degrees* at eight, to throttle himself for reading many romances, to repent for insufficient labor, to demand of himself what, in his mid 60s, after revising the *Dictionary*, he could now do, worthy of a hero, an intellectual and moral one, when, in fact, he had already done enough for five. And in his restlessness of personal relationships, Johnson had the memory of an elephant – often about himself, and in not such a flattering light. When he was about twenty, his sick father, a bookseller, had asked him to man his bookstall at a neighboring town, Uttoxeter Market. Young Sam declined. Many years later, when he was more than 70, he went back to that very spot and stood on market day with his hat off, as penance, for an hour in front of the same stall, exposed to the sneers of the crowd and the inclemency of the weather.

Even “fame” itself, he insists “is a shuttlecock. If it be struck only at one end of the room, it will soon fall to the ground. To keep it up, it must be struck at both ends,” his version of the modern attitude that there is no such thing as bad publicity, except no publicity at all. And he could reverse course in his restlessness, in 1739 scornfully satirizing George II for his spring-time trips to the continent, partly to indulge himself with a mistress, but more than twenty years later conversing respectfully with George III

in the king's library. In *Rambler* 184 he recommends to readers that amid the uncertainties of life we might find solace in the superintendence of a higher being, such that all apparent evil can be seen as ultimate good; yet, this very notion, while not flatly denying, he scorns as commonplace, even trivial, and of scant moral merit when, almost 30 years later, he belittles its articulation in Pope's *Essay on Man*.

Even Johnson's fear of death, which Boswell dwells upon, is not fear of pain, but fear of one of two things: either punishment for his inadequacy, or dread of the ultimate lack of restlessness, a state of nothing, of nothingness, of no motion, no force. One friend (Arthur Murphy) noted how often he heard Johnson murmur to himself the question from *Paradise Lost*, " ... for who would lose, / Though full of pain, this intellectual being," and, more ominously, from *Measure for Measure*, "Ay, but to die and go we know not where, / To lie in cold obstruction and to rot." The fear of death, of that final rest, is his fear of having no capacity to be restless.

This is the more remarkable since twice in his life, once after he had to leave Oxford because his family was too poor, and once after he had finished many of his major works, in his 50s, he feared a restlessness of mind *so* great that it threatened loss of sanity, a depression of such a vicious, self-reinforcing cycle, a dissociation so strong it caused him to believe he was entering a state of utterly uncontrolled restlessness, of mania, in which, like those declared mad at that time, he would need to be chained up. This secret he finally confided to Mrs. Thrale.

So, he once remarked that "Whatever may be the cause of happiness, may be likewise made the cause of misery," whether that quality is restlessness or riches

(“Reflections on the Present State of Literature”). In the end, this means exerting an act of will to determine, as far as one can, one’s own fate. When, in *Rasselas*, Nekayah tells her brother the prince, “Flatter not yourself with contrarieties of pleasure. Of the blessings set before you, make your choice and be content. . . . No man can at the same time fill his cup from the source and from the mouth of the Nile,” Johnson is telling himself this, too: cease your restlessness and make the choice of life. But choices keep coming. Asked by Goldsmith to go over his poem *The Traveller*, Johnson did so and added, near the end, these lines, which cap the poem’s catalogue of a restless traveler’s wanderings and offer a qualified finality and steadiness: “How small, of all that human hearts endure, / That part which laws or kings can cause or cure! / Still to ourselves in every place consigned, / Our own felicity we make or find.”

Perhaps the title *The Traveller* attracted Johnson. His own works prefer motion and depict what is not settled. The very titles suggest it: *The Rambler*, the *Adventurer*, and the later, self-spoofing *Idler*, a parodic title he could afford after having produced, single-handedly, the most successful series of periodical essays in English after Addison and Steele’s *Spectator*. And in his essays, we find a proposition, an authority quoted, but then the proposition questioned or undermined, the authority pressed, even discredited, and the Rambler or Adventurer turning on himself to give the essay a fillip, a turn of the screw that no one, perhaps not even he, had expected. For Johnson wrote many of these papers at the last minute, some as the printer’s boy waited at the door for copy. Here’s a strange, an *honest* working out of procrastination, restlessness, pressure, and

performance, the final steadiness forged only after turbulence, as a hard and strong metal comes only from molten liquid heat, tempered at last in shockingly cold water.

In *Rasselas*, the prince lives in the most stable, pleasant, and steady place one can imagine, the Happy Valley: every want is supplied, desire gratified, and entertainment available. Yet, properly to judge his own state, the prince feels the only method possible is the one Johnson elsewhere says all judgment rests upon: comparison. So, the prince grows restless to leave the Happy Valley, to quit his regrets, and the time he has spent regretting wasting time on past regrets. He and his friends, including his tutor Imlac, leave to see the world. When, after some years, they return, life is more richly known, but how much more settled is it? *Rasselas* will rule the kingdom but cannot easily fix its boundaries and is always enlarging the number of its inhabitants. At the end of the tale, there is no closure; Johnson entitles the final chapter “The Conclusion, In Which Nothing Is Concluded.” During their travels, *Rasselas* and his companions visit the pyramids, which, Imlac suggests, are not only monuments to vanity, but products of “that hunger of imagination, which preys incessantly upon life.” Johnson’s point is not to excoriate the Pharaohs, but to suggest that we *all* build private pyramids and suffer these incessant pangs of mental hunger. He knew them who felt them most. Even as early as his youthful poem “The Young Author,” he imagines a writer venturing out, hoping for fame, restless and expectant, until the world sets him straight. So, too, the young scholar in “The Vanity of Human Wishes” comes to university striving to make a remarkable impression, only to have confirmed that his real talents are, in the wider view, quite ordinary, and subject to traditional enemies of the scholar, “toil, envy, want, the patron,

and the jail.” In fact, the whole of that poem is about nothing but restlessness; it runs through the sleepless motives of politicians, scholars, prelates, kings, conquerors, and even more common souls faced with the ills of old age. “Where then shall Hope and Fear their objects find?” The answer isn’t some sort of Emerald City. Religion is part of it, though Johnson won’t identify any particular religion. And even in religion we are warned against “The secret ambush of a specious prayer.” In the end, love, patience, and faith are what matter: “With these celestial Wisdom calms the mind; / And makes the happiness she does not find.” This steadiness, this finality, comes only, if it comes at all, with the full stretch of a restless life, and can be achieved only through that life, through its danger, risk, and desire, finally regulated and seen in perspective.

In his Preface to Shakespeare, Johnson praises the poet for rendering life and nature more closely observed and represented than in any other dramatist. But to appreciate this, to grasp it for what it is, entails a process of inevitable restlessness only finally reconciled into something steady; and, he says, we all go through this searching: “The irregular combinations of fanciful invention may delight awhile, by that novelty of which the common satiety of life sends us all in quest; but the pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted, and the mind can only repose on the stability of truth.” Such stability comes *only* after our attempt to break through “the common satiety of life,” a restless attempt itself the very precondition, the prerequisite, of knowing “the stability of truth.”

On another matter regarding Johnson’s writing, it’s astonishing how many corrections and revisions he made in his essays, in his 3-volume *Lives of the Poets*, and in

revisions to *The Dictionary*. We know this from comparing the different authorized editions and from proof sheets he marked, often in copious detail. Unlike some authors today, particularly celebrities (the cartoon: celebrity author being interviewed on late night show: “I haven’t read my book yet but am amazed how good it is!”), no comma, phrase, or choice of words is too insignificant for Johnson to alter. This isn’t pedantry, it’s a mind ever unsatisfied with its own craft. He praises Pope’s poetical genius as in large part the product of restless compositional revision, and the only time that Sir Richard Blackmore raised his verse above mediocrity, says Johnson, was when he constantly revised his poem *Creation*.

Johnson’s wit and much of his laughing humor stem from restlessness of mind transformed into restless, unforgettable phrasing. The sharp point is immediately felt, but its trajectory to the target entirely unexpected. One person remarked to John Hawkins, Johnson’s first biographer, “In general, you may tell what the man to whom you are speaking will say next: this you can never do with Johnson” (see *Life*, IV 421 n1). Moreover, Johnson loved nonsense. The celebrated novelist Frances Burney said he had more of it “than almost anybody I ever saw.” He loved mimicry (much like John le Carré), and not only of kangaroos. He loved, too, what Jack Bate calls his buffoonery; in other words, he relished the absurdities of life as things that could be handled, but handled chiefly through laughter and humor. It’s hard to reconcile the gloomy, pessimistic Johnson berating himself with Johnson the comedian, the mimic, even the extempore stand-up. But there it is; he’s both, much like the circus clown who paints a

frown and makes us laugh, or paints a smile that we recognize belatedly as the wince of irony.

His wit could pop the balloons of others, too. When Garrick had somewhat hypocritically ventured in a poem, “I’d smile with the simple and feed with the poor,” Johnson instantly commented, “let me smile with the wise, and feed with the rich.”

Much has been written about Johnson’s religion, but here it would be apposite simply to mention that in his faith he seemed never comfortably settled. Doubt and scruples are the internal restlessness of faith, and even when that doubt is overcome, the individual soul may doubt itself capable of living up to the tenets of its own hard-won belief. When Johnson was at college, he even talked against religion; taking up William Law’s *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, he expected to dismiss it as dull. But, he said, “I found Law quite an overmatch for me.” Throughout his life, Johnson tries to worship and to read scripture, and succeeds, but only partially, for he objects, at least in private, to the poor quality of sermons, neglects church, and seems not fully to succeed in the Bible study program he outlines for himself. Anyone who says that he was simply a Church of England man speaks a half-truth; the other half lies in Johnson’s vexed relation to a divinity he accepted but worshipped rarely. And it lies, perhaps, in Johnson’s heart, in his deeply sensitive awareness of a world of suffering and sorrow in which a God both omnibenevolent and omnipotent seems to falter in one or the other.

In language itself, the medium that Johnson gives to us, we see both his steady and restless natures. When he plans the *Dictionary* in 1746, he proposes to “fix” language, that is, to make it permanent, correct, and unchanging. By the time he

publishes it nine years later, he accepts that all words and their definitions are, in the end, determined by use, and that usage changes over time. Yes, he endeavors to give definitions and examples drawn from the best authors. As an authority, he yields to those authors and to the verbal evolution worked by time, remarking, “Every quotation contributes something to the stability *or* enlargement of the language.” The *Dictionary* itself is a grand working out of the desire for relative permanence in the face of inevitable expansion and change, the building of a city on ground that the architect knows crosses a fault line. “I am not yet so lost in lexicography, as to forget that words are the daughters of earth, and that things are the sons of heaven ... words are but the signs of ideas.”

Finally, in literary criticism, Johnson’s tidal pull between high and low, steady and restless, produces incisive results, one of which we’ve already seen in his comments on Shakespeare. In his *Life of Pope*, he defines genius as “that quality without which judgment is cold and knowledge is inert; that energy which collects, combines, amplifies, and animates.” Restless curiosity is so essential to good writing that Johnson declares, “tediousness is the most fatal of all faults” (*Life of Prior*), a maxim he reinforced with a vengeance by *not* reading things through if he found them boring. He prized novelty in literature but prized originality more, for novelty represents mere restlessness, and eventual boredom mere steadiness, while originality is that stronger alloy of the two. As he said about the work of James Thomson – *The Seasons* had transformed poetry and given fresh words to the description and experience of common nature in its detailed glory – the essence of such lasting poetry is that it displays “the two most engaging

powers of an author: new things are made familiar, and familiar things are made new.”

The restless becomes steady, the steady restless.