

The Literary Club

25 January 2010

Samuel Johnson and the Black Dog

This is the first of two papers, both of which are concerned with “personal letters,” or “familiar letters.” These are a form of social, exchange which was going strong (with allowance for historical glitches) at least since Cicero's *Epistolae ad Familiares* in the first century B.C.E. Their practice is now probably in some decline with possible implications for the postal service, the development of English style, and the literacy of the young. A number of years ago I read a paper to the Club about such letters and their electronic competitors. Afterwards the late Bob Allen came up to me, said a complementary thing or two, and then remarked, “You’re a Luddite. But you’re a cheerful one.” True, I suppose, but the question remains for one interested in the maintenance of the historical record: if the minds of, let us say, two distinguished poets--are currently meeting somewhere in cyberspace, will the results be available in some readable form in seventy-five or two hundred years? And will anyone care?

A summer ago I read through for the first time all the available letters of our distinguished predecessor of a clubman, Samuel Johnson, as they appear in five handsome and generally well-edited volumes published by Princeton in 1992. [All further references are to this edition by volume and page number.] It is about these that I write. The paper may serve as minor expiation for having entirely forgotten that in September of 2009 we might-and should -have celebrated the three hundredth anniversary of Johnson's birth.

When-or perhaps “if” -we were taught letter-writing in our various now faraway schools, we--or perhaps most of us--were very likely taught to begin with a proper salutation, say whatever we had to say and conclude with a (usually) polite valediction. We may still do this when we are not e-mailing or tweeting or

texting, which obviate the use of the older civil forms. But we are now unlikely ever to address a correspondent, as Johnson did, as "Honored Sir (or Madam)" for instance. Nor do we conclude "Your Humble Svt" (surely not in a democracy). And whatever stylistic changes have occurred since Johnson's time, we very likely use what was once called a "plain" style characterized by less rather than more formal diction and simpler rather than more complex sentence structures. The ideal of exchanging letters is generally that of carrying on a conversation by epistolary means, though the exchanges may be days, weeks, or even months apart. Johnson's expression of his ideas often falls into pairs of more or less loosely balanced parts in a sentence. The second of the pair sometimes confirms, sometimes repeats, and sometimes counters the first. The style is not so plain that it cannot admit literary allusions to multiple sources which Johnson's spacious and retentive memory provided: quotations in Greek, Latin, occasionally French, as well as from an extensive range of English literature. And easy as the conversational style might be, proprieties existed. Whatever he called her to her face, Johnson's letters to Hester Thrale, who was in his later years his dearest female friend, never begin "Dear Hester," but generally "Honoured Madam," occasionally "Dearest Lady," and only very occasionally "My dearest love," "My dear Sweeting," terms which he may also use to his stepdaughter Lucy Porter. James Boswell may be "Bozzy" in conversation (for, like a recent president of the United States, Johnson was fond of nicknames), but letters to him are regularly to "My dear friend." Johnson's usual valedictions take some form of "Yr humble svt," which can become variously complicated, or drastically simplified to "Yr humble etc."

By and large, Johnson's letters have a pretty firmly defined and often a morally serious purpose. A large number of the collection are naturally concerned with purely practical matters - arranging with booksellers for publication, transmitting or receiving funds, borrowing texts from friends or libraries for use in preparing the *Dictionary*, the edition of Shakespeare, or the *Lives of the English Poets*. There are a few in French, primarily to Mrs. Thrale, and a few in Latin to learned academicians and to his doctor Thomas Lawrence.

Though there are expressions of deep affection, there are no letters that a sentimental age would consider to be love letters, nor from a major man of letters are there many discussions of literary matters. He may be witty, he may be rather ponderously merry, but I am not aware of any letter, like that which the poet William Cowper undertook in fun to demonstrate that he could write about nothing. Nor do we go to his few volumes of letters as we may to Horace Walpole's more than four dozen substantial ones to increase our knowledge of current gossip, contemporary high society, fashions, and politics. Some of that, though little, we can find in Johnson's letters; we go to them primarily to increase our knowledge of Johnson himself and of his relationships with others.

The maintenance of friendship is of central concern throughout the letters. And as a friend he characteristically offers advice, sometimes evidently requested, sometimes not, and in many areas of knowledge. He will give counsel on medical matters as in this letter of 12 June 1779 to Mrs. Thrale regarding her husband's recent stroke:

Your account of Mr. Thrales illness [sic] is very terrible, but when I remember that he seems to have it peculiar to his constitution, that whatever distemper he has, he always has his head affected, I am less frightened. The seizure was, I think, not apoplectic but hysterical, and therefore not dangerous to life. I would have you consult such Physitians [sic] as you think you can trust .... (III.168).

And on 5 October regarding the same continuing problem:

It appears to me that Mr. Thrales [sic] disorder whether grumous or serous, must be cured by bleeding. And I would not have him Begin a course of exercise without considerable evacuation. To encrease [sic] the force of the blood, unless it be first diluted and attenuated may be dangerous. But the case is too im[por]tant for my theory (III, 185).

It is reassuring that he knows when to question his own opinion. He is also knowledgeable in the law. As a recently fledged attorney practicing

in Scotland, Boswell seeks his counsel on a case of sheep stealing which he has taken in Edinburgh. He assists significantly to save the Thrale brewery from bankruptcy, and on Henry Thrale's death serves actively as an executor in settling his estate. Johnson also substantially aided the apprehensive and procrastinating young Robert Chambers in writing his lectures as the second holder of the Vinerian chair in law at Oxford. Chambers succeeded Sir William Blackstone, whose lectures were published as *Commentaries on the Laws of England* - a succession which might give any young professor writer's block.

Whatever the professed function of a letter, as Johnson remarks in 1756 to his old schoolfellow John Taylor, "There is this use in the most useless letter, that it shows one not to be forgotten" (I, 139). And the continuance of a correspondence signifies the continuance of a friendship, though the time between letters may be weeks or months. A letter to the Italian Giuseppe Baretti in Italy opens,

You reproach me very often with parsimony of writing: but you may discover by the extent of my paper that I design to recompense rarity by length. A short letter to a distant friend is, in my opinion an insult like that of a slight bow or cursory salutation - a proof of unwillingness to do much, even where there is a necessity of doing something. Yet it must be remembered, that he who continues the same course of life in the same place, will have little to tell (I, 196).

Johnson's great biographer James Boswell is particularly touchy about the possibility that a tardy letter from Johnson indicates a lessening of Johnson's continuing affection for him. Thus Johnson to Boswell on 11 September 1777:

Do not fancy that an intermission of writing is a decay of kindness. No man is always in a disposition to write; nor has any man at all times something to say.

That distrust which intrudes so often on your mind is a mode of

melancholy, which, if it be the business of a wise man to be happy, it is foolish to indulge; and if it be a duty to preserve our faculties entire for their proper use, it is criminal. Suspicion is very often a useless pain. From that, and all other pains, I wish you free and safe; for I am, dear Sir, most affectionately yours,

Sam. Johnson" (III, 63-4)

That letter, like the preceding one to Baretti, exemplifies two other characteristics of Johnson's letter-writing: one is his recurring tendency to move from the particular case to the general moral to be drawn from it, or to consider the particular case in terms of what he conceived to be "the general experience of mankind." A second, suggested by the comments to Boswell, is his concern with what was known to some as the "black dog" of melancholy, what is probably known to us as depression. It is the case that the melancholy mood was something of a fashion in England in the eighteenth century, when its varying degrees were identified as "the spleen/the vapours," or lithe hyp" for "hypocondria." James Boswell himself wrote a short-lived periodical called *The Hypochondriac* and was subject to the condition, as Johnson's letter to him indicates. That it was not just a literary mood is clear from the belief that it could lead to madness and suicide, and by the various attempts to ascertain its sources. It was discussed as a clinical condition by Dr. George Cheney in a volume called *The English Malady* (which was published in 1733). The recurrence of melancholy in Johnson's letters as an affliction but one which allows the demonstration of friendship will occupy the final several pages of this paper.

Melancholy as the "black dog," recurs especially in his letters regarding Henry Thrale's illness. But Johnson uses it elsewhere too. Writing to Boswell in 1779 he asks "... what will you do to keep away the *black dog* [sic] that worries you at home? (III, 200). The beast is familiar enough to occur implicitly in a letter to Mrs. Thrale on the family's return from Brighton in the fall of 1778:

...I really think I shall be very glad to see you all safe at home. I shall easily forgive my Master [Thrale] his long stay, if he leaves

the dog behind him. We will watch as well as we can that the dog shall never be let in again, for when he comes the first thing he does is to worry my Master. This time he gnawed him to the bone. (14 November, 1778; III, 139)

And so on. When he writes to Thrale himself six months later when his health seems confirmed, it is to counsel those two familiar remedies - a cheerful mind and an active body. In Thrale's case his advice is to ride often, but not to the point of weariness. In a good example of a Johnsonian pairing, he concludes, "Labour is exercise continued to fatigue. Exercise is labour used only while it produces pleasure" (III, 175).

At more length, consider the case of the Reverend John Taylor, vicar of Ashbourne in Derbyshire. He had been a school friend of Johnson's since their early days in Lichfield, whence both matriculated in Oxford in the late 1720's. Despite appearing to a reader of Johnson's letters as very likely a somewhat dull fellow, he and Johnson both nourished their friendship, and Johnson visited him regularly as long as he was able to travel. Taylor must have been a perfect example of an eighteenth-century vicar as husbandman, priding himself upon his land and his increasing number of outbuildings and beasts, particularly his „great bull," which he must show Johnson, and which Johnson treats with some amusement. Such concerns did not satisfy Taylor completely, however. He tended to be melancholy especially because he wanted preferment in the Church and specifically a deanship, which never came to him. He also suffered from an errant wife who left him sometime in 1763, and a substantial part of Johnson's early correspondence with him is devoted to this problem, both legally and psychologically.

"Your first care," Johnson writes in mid-August of 1763, "must be to procure to yourself such diversions as may preserve you from melancholy and depression of mind, which is a greater evil than a disobedient wife. Do not give way to grief, nor nurse vexation in solitude,

consider that your case is not uncommon, and that many live very happily who have like you succeeded ill in their [n]upti[al] connexion." (1,229-30) And later in September of the same year: "I cannot but think that by short journeys, and variety of scenes you may dissipate your vexation, and restore your health, which will certainly be impaired by living where every thing seen or heard impresses your misfortunes on your mind." (1, 237)

This use of some replacement or diversionary activity to assuage melancholy is Johnson's regular treatment for depression, and it is not just theoretical, but like most of his opinions, has its base in his own experience. Here is one last set of quotations from a letter to Taylor nine years later. Johnson has just learned from both Taylor and some of Taylor's neighbors that he is unwell.

The Langleys impute a great part of your complaints to a mind unsettled and discontented ... Yet there is no distemper, not in the highest degree acute, on which the mind has not some influence, and which is not better resisted by a cheerful than a gloomy temper .... "

Johnson recommends reading something, and if Taylor's mind is not sufficiently composed for that, to supply himself with

... a little apparatus for chimistry [*sic*] or experimental philosophy ... or if you made some little purchase at a small distance, or took some petty farm into your own hands, it would break your thoughts when they become tyrannous and troublesome, and supply you at once with exercise and amusement.

Then after another short paragraph:

Your uneasiness at the misfortunes of your Relations, I comprehend perhaps too well. It was an irresistible obtrusion of a disagreeable image, which you always wished away but could not dismiss, an incessant persecution of a troublesome thought neither to be pacified nor ejected.

Such has of late been the state of my own mind. I had formerly great command of my attention, and what I did not like could forbear to think on. But this power which is of the highest importance to the tranquility of life, I have for some time past ... so much exhausted, that I do not go into company towards night in which I foresee anything disagreeable, nor enquire into any thing to which I am not indifferent, lest some-thing, which I know to be nothing, should fasten upon my imagination, and hinder me from sleep. Thus it is that the progress of life brings often with it diseases not of body only, but of the mind.

And he concludes as perhaps an uncomfortable but committed Christian may, that for the mind "it is very seldom that any help can be had, but what prayer and reason shall supply." (I, 395-96)

Almost but not quite finally, consider James Boswell once more, the indefatigable pre-photographic *paparazzo*, whose notes on himself and on Johnson, whenever he was nearby to take them, ultimately produced a major biography as well as a series of fascinating self-revelatory journals. Boswell was some thirty years Johnson's junior, and Johnson's approach to his melancholy is occasionally more direct, even parentally peremptory, than to his older friends. Here he is, writing in 1776, when Boswell has written to him earnestly about his own dejection:

Let me warn you very earnestly against scruples .... Do not, however, hope wholly to reason away your troubles; do not feed them with attention, and they will die imperceptibly away. Fix your thoughts upon your business, fill your intervals with company, and sunshine will again break in upon your mind. (5 March, 1776, II, 299)

Or much later, in 1781, obviously out of patience with the younger man, Johnson writes in response to a letter complaining about his perplexity concerning predestination (we must remember the establishment of Presbyterianism in Scotland):

Dear Sir,

I hoped that you had got rid of all this hypocrisy of misery. What have you to do with Liberty and Necessity? Or what more than hold your tongue about it? Do not doubt but I shall be heartily glad to see you here again, for I love every part about you but your affectation of distress.

I have at last finished my Lives, and have laid up for you a load of copy all out of order, so that it will amuse you a long time to set it right. Come to me, my dear Bozzy, and let us be as happy as we can. We will go again to the Mitre, and talk old times over. I am, dear Sir, Yours, affectionately,

SAM. JOHNSON [14 March, 1781; III,328-29]

It is reasonable to suppose that Johnson's interest in and general sympathy with the unhappiness of his correspondents - and his attempts to instruct them - reflect his own experience with melancholy. We know of his intense fear of death and his awareness of the edge that he himself trod between sanity and insanity. Biographers speak of 1763-65 as a particularly distressing time for him. That was, interestingly, also the time of his first meeting with Boswell, the establishment of his relationship with the Thrale family, who brought him friendship and domestic stability in a more than comfortable home. It was also the time of the founding of the Club, which was proposed by Sir Joshua Reynolds late in 1763 and had its first meetings in early 1764. W.J. Bate in his fine biography (1975, p. 366) suggests that Reynolds no doubt had Johnson's current depression in mind when he made the suggestion. All of these, like the ill-assorted and contentious artificial "family" with which he lived in his own house, helped keep his thoughts outside himself and occupied him when he was not at work. A favorite piece of advice, which he repeats in letters to both Boswell and Mrs. Thrale is quoted from Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*: "Be not solitary; be not idle" (II, 313 and n. 3; III, 201). Easier said than done, as Johnson surely knew, but as advice it might serve for anyone as

well as provide a sound rationale for the founding of a literary club.

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