

DR. SAMUEL JOHNSON'S ACCOUNT OF A SCHIZOPHRENIC ILLNESS IN *RASSELAS* (1759)*

by

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ALTHOUGH the extensive borrowing from psychiatry by creative writers has received considerable critical commentary, the same cannot be said for the debt owed by psychiatry to literature. This is remarkable in view of Freud's various appraisals of European literature. Speaking of the creative writer, he observed that

the description of the human mind is indeed the domain which is most his own; he has from time immemorial been the precursor of science, and so too of scientific psychology . . . the creative writer cannot evade the psychiatrist nor the psychiatrist the creative writer.⁴

One example of a literary character-study which became a model for later psychiatrists was Samuel Johnson's case-history of a schizophrenic illness in *Rasselas* (1759), chapters 40–47. Johnson, it should be remarked at the outset, left Oxford without completing his Arts Degree, was never trained formally in medicine, and later received his doctorate (LL.D.) for his contribution to literature and language.

Reported accurately in one episode of *Rasselas* is the temporary retreat from reality of 'one of the most learned astronomers in the world',⁷ who had spent forty years studying the stars when Prince Rasselas' mentor, the philosopher Imlac, became acquainted with him. On their first meeting, Imlac was much impressed with the scientist's knowledge and character, although he could not avoid noticing symptoms of acute anxiety in the other. Some 'painful sentiment pressed upon his mind' and

he often looked up earnestly towards the sun and let his voice fall in the midst of his discourse. He would sometimes, when we were alone, gaze upon me in silence with the air of a man who longed to speak what he was yet resolved to suppress.⁸

Before long this important secret was revealed to Imlac: the astronomer had found a means to make the sun and rain obey his commands! With the psychotic's characteristic confidence in his own obsession and typical dislike of rational argument about his favourite subject, the scientist refused to explain his technique or elaborate his theory to the sceptical Imlac. Instead, concealing his misgivings about the power that his ego desired as well as his dissatisfaction with Imlac's unenthusiastic reception of his secret, he explained that his anxiety was the result of a hitherto fruitless search for a successor to his climatic responsibilities.

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On learning of this aberration, the young Prince Rasselas confessed both his ignorance of the subject of mental derangement and his eagerness to learn more, but his sister and her companion were only amused. Imlac at once rebuked them telling them that 'few can attain this man's knowledge, and few practise his virtues; but all may suffer his calamity'. His speech on this occasion (chapters 43 and 44) is a masterly plea for a more humanitarian attitude to mental illness. Its accurate description of the onset of a neurosis, together with the milder and also more serious forms of abnormality, justify a place for Johnson in the history of psychiatry. The speech no less than the delineation of the astronomer himself marked an important advance in eighteenth-century understanding of insanity, an advance recognized at the time but completely ignored by twentieth-century historians of either literature or psychiatry. In fact, Imlac's statement deserves to be quoted in full:

Disorders of intellect, answered Imlac, happen much more often than superficial observers will easily believe. Perhaps, if we speak with rigorous exactness, no human mind is in its right state. There is no man whose imagination does not sometimes predominate over his reason, who can regulate his attention wholly by his will, and whose ideas will come and go at his command. No man will be found in whose mind airy notions do not sometimes tyrannize, and force him to hope or fear beyond the limits of sober probability. All power of fancy over reason is a degree of insanity; but while this power is such as we can controul and repress, it is not visible to others, nor considered as any depravation of the mental faculties: it is not pronounced madness but when it becomes ungovernable, and apparently influences speech or action.

To indulge the power of fiction, and send imagination out upon the wing, is often the sport of those who delight too much in silent speculation. When we are alone we are not always busy; the labour of excogitation is too violent to last long; the ardour of inquiry will sometimes give way to idleness or satiety. He who has nothing external that can divert him, must find pleasure in his own thoughts, and must conceive himself what he is not; for who is pleased with what he is? He then expatiates in boundless futurity, and culls from all imaginable conditions that which for the present moment he should most desire, amuses his desires with impossible enjoyments, and confers upon his pride unattainable dominion. The mind dances from scene to scene, unites all pleasures in all combinations, and riots in delights, which nature and fortune, with all their bounty, cannot bestow.

In time, some particular train of ideas fixes the attention, all other intellectual gratifications are rejected, the mind, in weariness or leisure, recurs constantly to the favourite conception, and feasts on the luscious falsehood, whenever she is offended with the bitterness of truth. By degrees the reign of fancy is confirmed; she grows first imperious, and in time despotick. Then fictions begin to operate as realities, false opinions fasten upon the mind, and life passes in dreams of rapture or of anguish.

This, Sir, is one of the dangers of solitude, which the hermit has confessed not always to promote goodness, and the astronomer's misery has proved to be not always propitious to wisdom.⁹

The scientific vocabulary in this passage needs little explanation: 'fancy', for instance, connoted emotional thinking, 'airy notions' and 'fictions' connoted fantasies, a 'train of ideas' connoted a group of associated ideas or emotions, and the 'unattainable dominion' of pride connoted something similar to Adler's concept of the ego's aim towards self-assertion. Most interesting of Johnson's words is his use of the word 'repress' to describe a mental process. In his day, neither the concept of repression nor the usage of the word in a psychological

context were common. Certainly, here is a term that needs no translation into modern language and is yet another example of his contribution to the science of psychiatry.

Although the concept of repression is not fully developed in Imlac's speech, other important theories are developed in detail. Apart from the description of frustration, of insecurity, of the growth by habituation of dangerous emotional patterns, of the need for adequate ego-fulfilment, of the necessity of significant human relationships, and of the unhealthiness of a solitary state, perhaps the most striking reminder is of the fine thread that divides normality and abnormality. Yet 'reminder', though appropriate for the modern reader who is well acquainted with this idea, hardly does justice to Johnson's penetrating insight. In 1759, it was not a question of reminding his readers of a prevalent opinion: he was, in fact, introducing a new understanding and a new dimension to the study of insanity and of the normal mind. It was probably not until our own day that the concept of a close relationship between normal and abnormal states of mind was as emphatically restated. Johnson's statement is probably more explicit and certainly more expressive than Freud's exposition of the identical concept:

the frontier between states of mind described as normal and pathological is in part a conventional one and in part so fluctuating that each of us probably crosses it many times in the course of a day.⁵

After Imlac's speech, the others immediately examined their own states of mind. The princess's attendant resolved to stop imagining she was the Queen of Abyssinia with nothing to do but to regulate national ceremonies and a grateful court. The princess, on the other hand, decided to give up the eighteenth-century aristocratic fantasy of living as a shepherdess in a blissful countryside, defending all and sundry from ferocious wolves! Even Prince Rasselas, the most apparently realistic of the three young people, realized that he too had wished to evade reality. Lost in a dream-world of his own contriving, in which the government of his kingdom was perfect and all vice eradicated, he had faced the actual national and personal events in his young life with a show of imperturbable and passive security. He too had 'mused away' many years of his life; he too had shown symptoms of a schizophrenic illness, as Johnson accurately showed in the opening chapters of *Rasselas*. Only after Imlac's speech was he able to analyse his behaviour and unfeeling responses and thus gain the maturity required for a young man embarking on his career and responsibilities in life. This, after all, is the theme of *Rasselas*: thus the episode of the astronomer is no digression but an essential part in the development of the whole.

The following chapter (45), also relevant to the whole as well as to the episode on insanity, develops a second major theme in *Rasselas*: time passes quickly and the young, the middle-aged, and the old ought to accept the opportunities for action and for good at the time when they are offered. Time is not to be squandered upon 'trifles' or 'lost in idleness and vacancy'.

Spurred on by this advice and by their natural curiosity to learn more about the astronomer, Rasselas' sister and her attendant then insisted on meeting the

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old man, an introduction not easy to arrange since the astronomer had never received visits from women. After some consideration as to the best way to present themselves, they decided to tell him that they had heard of his reputation and had come to study astronomy under him. As it happened, this device was not untrue, since Pekuah, the princess's companion, had already some rudimentary knowledge of the stars and both women were eager to learn more.

The scheme worked beautifully: the astronomer was surprised, curious and pleased to be thus sought out by two attractive young women, who were totally unaware that a cure for his delusion might be effected by such means. At first, unused to women, the old man was shy and awkward, but later he became delighted with his new role as teacher and adviser and begged them to continue their lessons. Pekuah, in particular, who had studied astronomy a little, he regarded as a prodigy of genius. So the lessons continued for several months, during which time the old man came to look forward to the arrival of his pupils with more and more enthusiasm. He tried to amuse them, for he found he was more cheerful in their company and he wished them to prolong their visits.

During all this time the teacher never once let slip any hint about his secret power over the weather. Instead, whenever the women tried to introduce the subject, he cunningly avoided it and went on to some other topic. At length, they settled down into an easy and informal relationship. The princess invited him frequently to their house; in return, the astronomer outdid himself in thinking of ways to please and entertain them. At this point they entrusted him with the question that preoccupied them on their travels: what, for each one individually, should be his occupation and way of life? His opinions on this subject—he told them he had himself chosen the wrong way—are less important than his emotional reaction to the question. Touched by their evident affection and trust, he pondered the question and he considered his own condition, his own hopes and fears. Finally he declared that he was no longer confident of the powers which he had once so confidently held. Imlac at once realized that the astronomer was almost cured; wisely the philosopher decided to keep the old man from his planetary studies until he had completely regained his sanity. Imlac's attention was rewarded before long when the astronomer admitted that his fantasy returned to him only when alone. In the company of his friends, he remarked, he was unconcerned about the management of the sun and the rain:

I am like a man habitually afraid of spectres, who is set at ease by a lamp, and wonders at the dread which harassed him in the dark; yet, if his lamp be extinguished, feels again the terrors which he knows that when it is light he shall feel no more.¹⁰

In response to this revelation, Imlac again counselled him in words strangely unfamiliar, in this context, to the eighteenth century:

No disease of the imagination, answered Imlac, is so difficult of cure, as that which is complicated with the dread of guilt: fancy and conscience then act interchangeably upon us, and . . . the illusions of one are not distinguished from the dictates of the other . . . when melancholick notions take the form of duty, they lay hold on the faculties without opposition, because we are

afraid to exclude or banish them. . . . But do not let the suggestions of timidity overpower your better reason. . . . Open your heart to the influence of the light, which from time to time breaks in upon you: when scruples importune you, which you in your lucid moments know to be vain, do not stand to parley, but fly to business or to Pekuah, and keep this thought always prevalent, that you are only one atom of the mass of humanity, and have neither such virtue nor vice, as that you should be singled out for supernatural favours or afflictions.¹¹

Fortified, thus, by new self-esteem, new interests, a new occupation, no less than by the rational insights provided him by his own lucid intervals and by Imlac's counsel—especially on the dangerous complications of guilt feelings—the astronomer began to feel relief in the wise care of his friends. He now realized that he should have disclosed his fatal obsession much earlier; instead, he had been 'subjugated' to his fantasy and, like every neurotic, avoided a completely open disclosure of his anxieties. 'I now see', he remarked to Imlac,

how fatally I betrayed my quiet, by suffering chimeras to prey upon me in secret; but melancholy shrinks from communication, and I never found a man before, to whom I could impart my troubles, though I had been certain of relief. I rejoice to find my own sentiments confirmed by yours, who are not easily deceived, and can have no motive or purpose to deceive.¹²

Through this episode, it can be readily seen that Johnson presented three reactions to insanity which are typical of our age as well as his own. There is the ordinary well-informed layman, Prince Rasselas, who is inexperienced in observing mental illness either in himself or in others; there is the point of view of Imlac, who represents enlightened medical authority; finally, there is the uninformed and, at first, unsympathetic reaction of the two women. Curiously, once the women have learned through Imlac to be sympathetic and sensitive to mental disorder, it is they rather than Imlac who were responsible for the cure. From this we may assume that Johnson realized that to fulfil, though unselfconsciously, the sick man's needs—desire for friendship, usefulness, and ego-satisfaction—was a more important therapy than rational explanation of his condition.

Johnson was not the only writer to anticipate Pinel's emphasis on psychological methods of cure. Nor was he the only writer to observe that insanity could be caused by solitary intellectual concentration on one subject. Only a year before the publication of *Rasselas*, the physician William Battie (*Treatise on Madness*, 1758) observed that many philosophers 'cracked their brains' after spending days and nights attempting to 'reconcile metaphysical contradictions, to square the circle, to discover the Longitude or grand Secret'.³ But it would be hard to discover a physician before Johnson who described with such detail and accuracy the whole course of a schizophrenic illness from start to finish. The onset of schizophrenic tendencies were correctly diagnosed not only by Imlac but also by the astronomer, Rasselas, and the two women, in an interesting retrospective self-analysis. In addition, there is a complete account of the causes, contributing factors, the symptoms characteristic of the slow growth, peak and decline, and the gradual cure. There is no doubt that Johnson, though not a

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physician, was basing his portrait on a schizophrenic whom he had actually observed.

Thomas Arnold, a writer studied by Pinel, was the first to ensure that Samuel Johnson was not forgotten by contemporary psychiatrists. In his *Observations on Insanity* (1782), he distinguished 'notional insanity of the delusive type' as a separate category of mental disease. A patient with this illness, he believed, suffers from fantasies about an imaginary power or achievement; he derives his ideas from fancy and invariably reveals pride in his supposed excellence.² As an example of this type of insanity, he used Johnson's astronomer:

Though I can produce nothing better than poetical authority for this instance, yet as it is perfectly consonant to what I myself have experienced to be fact, I have ventured to set it down as such. The authority I allude to, is that of DR. JOHNSON, in his *Rasselas*; where he has beautifully illustrated this variety, in the character of an astronomer, who fancied he had such a power. The whole story, and the observations upon insanity which accompany it, are as just, and philosophical, as they are elegant . . . I shall only make a short extract.³

Several other physicians concerned with mental disease similarly commented on Johnson's contribution to psychiatry. Dr. Robert Anderson stated (1795) that the great essayist was a

master of all the recesses of the human mind . . . possessed of a corrosive to eradicate, or a lenitive to assuage the follies and sorrows of the heart.¹

William Perfect, M.D. (*Annals of Insanity*, 1787) opened his Preface with a quotation from *Rasselas*,¹³ and John Haslam, M.D. (*Observations on Madness and Melancholy*, 1809) used the same quotation on his title-page. The sentence that caught their imagination was Imlac's remark that 'of the uncertainties of our present state, the most dreadful and alarming is the uncertain continuance of reason', a remark which evidently contributed to the increased interest in insanity at the time. In the same work, Haslam again referred to *Rasselas* when he discussed the varying and complex forms taken by lucid intervals in mental disease. It is easy to be deceived by a temporary coherence, he observed, just as Imlac was at first deceived by the astronomer; it was only when the sick man discussed his favourite obsession that his derangement was manifest to Imlac. As it was with Johnson's astronomer, so it is with many insane persons, stated Haslam.⁶

Johnson's *Rasselas* continued to be praised by nineteenth-century writers on the mind. Peter Townsend of Columbia (1816) in an M.D. dissertation on the passions, frequently cited Johnson's opinions and even compared him to Shakespeare for his knowledge of the heart.¹⁵ Johnson's remarks on grief particularly impressed him:

The mournful ideas, first violently impressed, and afterwards willingly received, so much engross the attention, as to predominate in every thought, to darken gaiety, and perplex ratiocination. An habitual sadness seizes upon the soul and the faculties are chained to a single object, which can never be contemplated but with hopeless uneasiness.¹⁶

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Another medical writer, William Sweetser (*Mental Hygiene*, 1850), in discussing abnormal obsessions praised Johnson's astronomer as highly as the commentators a century before. The scientist, he observed, is an excellent portrait of a man whose mind was 'too ardently devoted to a particular theme'.¹⁴

Thus, in the case of *Rasselas*, this literary contribution to psychiatry was recognized by physicians for at least a hundred years. But in the rest of Johnson's works, no less than in the works of other creative writers, are insights into both the normal and abnormal mind, the impact of which on the history of psychiatry has never been fully explored.

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