

struggle it went very hard with me. . . . Because I had now lost the great comfort of her, my soul was wounded and my very life torn asunder, for it had been one life—made of hers and mine together.”

Augustine’s friends gathered around him, while he still tried to repress his grief: “For I was very much ashamed that these human emotions could have such power over me. . . . I felt a new grief at my grief and so was afflicted by a double sorrow.”

Augustine went to take a bath and soothe his self-division, then fell asleep and awoke feeling better. “And then, little by little, I began to recover my former feeling about Your handmaid, remembering how loving and devout was her conversation with me, of which I was thus suddenly deprived. And I found solace in weeping in Your sight both about her and for her, about myself and for myself.”

MONICA HAD ENTERED A world in which the Roman Empire dominated Europe and a rationalist philosophy dominated thinking. In his writing, Augustine uses her as an example of faith against pure rationalism, of spiritual relentlessness against worldly ambition. He would spend the rest of his life as a bishop fighting and preaching and writing, fighting and arguing. He achieved the immortality he sought in his youth, but he did it in an unexpected way. He started with the belief that he could control his own life. He had to renounce that, to sink down into a posture of openness and surrender. Then, after that retreat, he was open enough to receive grace, to feel gratitude and rise upward. This is life with an advance-retreat-advance shape. Life, death, and resurrection. Moving down to dependence to gain immeasurable height.

CHAPTER 9

SELF-EXAMINATION

SAMUEL JOHNSON WAS BORN IN LICHFIELD, ENGLAND, IN 1709. HIS father was an unsuccessful bookseller. His mother was an uneducated woman who nonetheless thought she had married beneath her. “My father and mother had not much happiness from each other,” Johnson would remember. “They seldom conversed; for my father could not bear to talk of his affairs; and my mother, being unacquainted with books, could not talk of anything else. . . . Of business she had no distinct conception; and therefore her discourse was composed only of complaint, fear, and suspicion.”¹

Johnson was a frail infant who surprised everybody by living through the ordeal of birth. He was immediately handed over to a wet nurse whose milk infected him with tuberculosis of the lymph nodes, which made him permanently blind in one eye, with poor vision in the other, and deaf in one ear. He later developed smallpox, which left his face permanently scarred. His doctors, in an attempt to relieve his disease, made an incision, without anesthesia, in his left arm. They kept the wound open with horseshair for six years, periodically discharging the fluids they associated with disease. They also cut into his neck glands. The operation was botched and Johnson went through life with deep scars running down the left side of his face from his ear to his jaw. Physically, he was large, ugly, scarred, and ogrelike.

He fought vehemently against his maladies. One day, as a child, he was walking home from school but could not see the gutter in the

street, and feared tripping on it. He got down on all fours and crawled along the street, peering closely at the curb so that he could measure his step. When a teacher offered to give him a hand, he became enraged and furiously beat her away.

All his life, Johnson was suspicious of the self-indulgence that he believed the chronically ill were prone to. "Disease produces much selfishness," he wrote toward the end of his life. "A man in pain is looking after ease." He responded to his illness, Walter Jackson Bate notes, with "a powerful sense of self demand, a feeling of complete personal responsibility. . . . What is of special interest to us now is how quickly as a small child—in discovering the physical differences between himself and others—he began groping his way to the independence and defiant disregard for physical limitations that he was always to maintain."²

Johnson's education was thorough and severe. He went to a school that trained him in the classical curriculum that was the core of Western education from the Renaissance until the twentieth century—Ovid, Virgil, Horace, the Athenians. He learned Latin and Greek. When he was lazy he was beaten. His teachers would have the boys lean over their chairs and then they'd swing at them with a rod. "And this I do to save you from the gallows," they'd say.³ Later in life, Johnson would have some complaints about the beatings. But he believed the rod was still kinder than psychological pressure and emotional manipulation—the sort of suasion many parents use today.

Johnson's most important education was self-administered. Though he never warmed to his elderly father, he read through his father's stock of books, devouring travel books, romances, and histories, with a special taste for daring tales of chivalry. He read vividly. At age nine he was reading *Hamlet* when he came upon the ghost scene. He ran frantically out into the street, terrified and desperate to be reminded of the living world. His memory was tenacious. He could read a prayer once or twice and recite it for the rest of his life. He seems to have remembered everything he read, bringing obscure authors into conversations decades after encountering them. When he was a small boy, his father would parade him before dinner parties and force him to recite for the admiring crowd. Young Sam was disgusted by his father's vanity.

When Johnson was nineteen, his mother came into a small legacy,

which was enough to pay for a single year at Oxford. Johnson promptly made the least of the opportunity. He came to Oxford fully aware of his ability, burning with ambition, panting, as he would later put it, for a name and the "pleasing hope of endless fame." But, accustomed to his independent autodidactic life and feeling financially and socially inferior to many of the students around him, he was incapable of playing by Oxford rules. Instead of submitting to the torpid system, he battled against it, reacting to the slightest touch of authority with rude aggression. "I was mad and violent," he would later recall. "It was bitterness which they mistook for frolic. I was miserably poor, and I thought to fight my way by my literature and my wit; so I disregarded all power and all authority."⁴

Johnson was recognized as a brilliant student, winning praise for his translation into Latin of a poem by Alexander Pope; Pope himself said he couldn't tell which was better, the Latin version or the original. But he was also rebellious, rude, and lazy. He told his tutor that he had neglected to attend lectures because he preferred to go sledding. He worked in a stop-and-start pattern that he would use all his life. He would sit in complete indolence for days, staring at a clock face but unable even to tell the time, and then he would rise to a feverish level of activity and fire off an assignment in a single masterful draft just before it was due.

Johnson became a Christian at Oxford, after a fashion. He sat down one day with the theological book by William Law titled *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, expecting, he wrote, "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." Law's book, like Johnson's later moral writing, is concrete and practical. He invents characters to construct satirical portraits of types who neglect their spiritual interests. He emphasized that worldly pursuits fail to fill the heart. Christianity didn't really change Johnson, but it made him more of what he already was—extremely suspicious of self-indulgence, rigorous in his moral demands of himself.

Aware of his own mental abilities, he fixed his attention all his life on the biblical parable of the talents, and the lesson that the "wicked and slothful servant" who has not fully used the talents that have been

bestowed upon him will be cast "into outer darkness, where there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Johnson's God was a rigorous God more than a loving or healing God. Johnson would spend his life with a sense of being perpetually judged, aware of his inadequacy, fearing his own damnation.

After that one year at Oxford, Johnson's money ran out, and he returned to Lichfield in disgrace. He suffered what seems to have been a bout of severe depression. As his chronicler, James Boswell, would write, "He felt himself overwhelmed with a horrible hypochondria, with perpetual irritation, fretfulness, and impatience; and with a dejection, gloom and despair, which made existence misery."³

Johnson took thirty-two-mile hikes to occupy himself. He may have contemplated suicide. He seemed completely incapable of controlling his body movements. He developed a series of tics and gestures that look to many modern experts like Tourette's syndrome. He would twist his hands, rock back and forth, roll his head in a strange and compulsive manner. He would emit a bizarre whistling sound and display symptoms of obsessive compulsive disorder, tapping his cane in odd rhythms as he walked down the street, counting the number of steps it took him to enter a room and then reentering if the number wasn't right. To dine with him was a challenge. He ate like a wild animal, devouring huge quantities of food in messy haste, spewing it over his notoriously slovenly clothing. The novelist Fanny Burney would write, "[He] has a face most ugly, a person the most awkward, & manners the most singular that ever were, or ever can be seen. He is almost perpetual convulsive motions, either of his hands, lips, feet, knees and sometimes all together." "Strangers would see him in aavern and mistake him for a village idiot, or somebody with a debilitating mental affliction. He would then astonish them by unfurling all paragraphs studded with erudition and classical allusion. He seemed to enjoy this effect.

Johnson's misery continued for years. He tried to teach, but a man with his ties was bound to generate more ridicule than respect from his students. The school he started, one historian noted, was "perhaps the most unsuccessful private school in the history of education." He married Elizabeth Porter when he was twenty-six and she was forty-six, in what many thought an odd pairing. Biographers have never

known what to make of Porter, whom he called Terry. Was she beautiful or haggard? Was she philosophical or frivolous? She, to her credit, saw a sign of the future greatness beneath the rough exterior, and he, to his credit, would remain loyal to her throughout his life. He was a very tender and grateful lover, with a great capacity for empathy and affection, but they spent many of those years apart, leading separate lives. It was her money that furnished the capital to start the school, and much of it was lost.

Until his late twenties, his life had been a steady calamity. On March 2, 1737, Johnson set off for London with his former pupil David Garrick (who would go on to become one of the most famous actors in British history). Johnson settled near Grub Street and began scratching out a living as a freelance writer. He wrote on any subject and across genres: poetry, drama, political essays, literary criticism, gossip items, casual essays, and on and on. The life of a Grub Street hack was hand-to-mouth, chaotic, disheveled, and frequently miserable. One poet, Samuel Boyce, pawned all his clothing and sat on his bed naked but for his blanket. He cut a hole in it large enough to stick his arm through and wrote poems on sheets of paper balanced on his knee. When he was writing a book, he would pawn the first few pages to raise money to pay for food so he could complete the next ones? Johnson never quite sank to that low state, but much of the time, especially in the early years, he barely scraped by.

During this time, though, Johnson performed one of the most amazing feats in the history of journalism. In 1738, the House of Commons passed a law that it would be a "breach of privilege" to publish parliamentary speeches. *The Gentleman's Magazine* decided to publish thinly veiled fictional accounts of the speeches, to let the public know what was going on. For two and a half years, Johnson was the sole author, though he set foot in Parliament only once. A source would tell him who spoke and in what order, what general positions they took and the arguments they made. Johnson would then make up eloquent speeches, as they might have been given. These speeches were so well written that the speakers themselves did not disavow them. They were taken as authentic transcripts for at least the next twenty years. As late as 1899, they were still appearing in anthologies of the world's best oratory, credited to the alleged speakers and not to

Johnson.⁸ Once, overhearing the company at a dinner party raving over the brilliance of a speech by William Pitt the Elder, Johnson interrupted, "That speech I wrote in a garret in Exeter Street."⁹

Johnson was living a life, familiar to us now but more unusual in his own day, in which he was thrown continually back on himself. Without a settled trade, like farming or teaching, separated from the rootedness of extended family life, he was compelled to live as a sort of freelancer according to his wits. His entire destiny—his financial security, his standing in his community, his friendships, his opinions and meaning as a person—were determined by the ideas that flashed through his mind.

The Germans have a word for this condition: *Zerrissenheit*—loosely, "falling-to-pieces-ness." This is the loss of internal coherence that can come from living a multitasking, pulled-in-a-hundred-directions existence. This is what Kierkegaard called "the dizziness of freedom." When the external constraints are loosened, when a person can do what he wants, when there are a thousand choices and distractions, then life can lose coherence and direction if there isn't a strong internal structure.

Johnson's internal fragmentation was exacerbated by his own nature. "Everything about his character and manners was forcible and violent," Boswell observed—the way he spoke, ate, read, loved, and lived. Moreover, many of his qualities were at odds with one another. Plagued by tics and mannerisms, he could not fully control his own body. Plagued by depression and instability, he could not fully control his own mind. He was an intensely social person who warned all his life against the perils of solitude, but he was stuck in a literary profession that required long stretches of private time for composition. He effectively lived a bachelor's life, but he had an enormously strong sexual drive and struggled all his life with what he regarded as his "polluting thoughts." He had a short attention span. "I have read few books through," he confessed; "they are generally so repulsive I cannot."¹⁰

Imagination

HE WAS ALSO PLAUGUED BY HIS OWN IMAGINATION. WE IN POST-ROMANTIC times tend to regard the imagination as an innocent, childlike faculty that provides us with creativity and sweet visions. Johnson saw the imagination as something to be feared as much as treasured. It was at its worst in the middle of the night. In those dark hours his imagination would plague him, introducing nighttime terrors, jealousies, feelings of worthlessness, and vain hopes and fantasies of superficial praise and admiration. The imagination, in Johnson's darker view, offers up ideal visions of experiences like marriage, which then leave us disappointed when the visions don't come true. It is responsible for hypochondria and the other anxieties that exist only in our heads. It invites us to make envious comparisons, imagining scenes in which we triumph over our rivals. The imagination simplifies our endless desires and causes us to fantasize that they can be fulfilled. It robs us of much of the enjoyment of our achievements by compelling us to think upon the things left undone. It distracts us from the pleasures of the moment by leaping forward to unattained future possibilities.

Johnson was always impressed, puzzled, and terrified by the runaway nature of the mind. We are all a bit like Don Quixote, he observed, fighting villains of our own imagining, living within ideas of our own concoction rather than in reality as it actually is. Johnson's brain was perpetually on the move, at odds with itself. As he wrote in one of his *Adventurer* essays, "We have less reason to be surprised or offended when we find others differ from us in opinions because we very often differ from ourselves."

Johnson did not just surrender to these mental demons; he fought them. He was combative, with others and with himself. When an editor accused him of wasting time, Johnson, a large and powerful man, pushed the man over and put his foot on his neck. "He was insolent and I beat him, and he was a blockhead and I told of it."

His diaries are rife with self-criticism and vows to organize his time better. From 1738: "Oh lord, enable me . . . in redeeming the time which I have spent in Sloth." From 1757: "Almighty God. Enable me to shake off sloth." From 1769: "I purpose to rise and hope to rise . . . at eight, and by degrees at six."¹¹

At those moments when he succeeded in conquering indolence and put pen to paper, his output was torrential. He could produce twelve thousand words, or thirty book pages, in a sitting. In these bursts, he'd write eighteen hundred words an hour, or thirty words a minute.¹² Sometimes the copy boy would be standing at his elbow and would take each page to the printer as it was done so he could not go back and revise.

His modern biographer, Walter Jackson Bate, usefully reminds us that though Johnson's output as a freelancer astounds for its quantity and quality, for the first two decades not a single piece of it went out under his own name. This was partly his decision, and partly the rules of the Grub Street press at the time. Even into middle age, he had done nothing that he felt proud of, or that he thought made anything close to full use of his talents. He was little known and also anxiety-riddled and emotionally torn. His life, as he put it, had been "radically wretched."

The familiar picture we have of Johnson comes from Boswell's magisterial *Life of Johnson*. Boswell was an epicurean and an acolyte and knew Johnson only in his old age. Boswell's Johnson is anything but wretched. He is joyful, witty, complete, and compelling. In Boswell's account we find a man who has achieved some integration. But this was a construction. Through writing and mental effort he constructed a coherent worldview. He brought himself to some coherence without simplification. He became trustworthy and dependable.

Johnson also used his writing to try to serve and elevate his readers. "It is always a writer's duty to make the world better," Johnson once wrote, and by maturity he had found a way.

Humanism

HOW DID HE DO THIS? WELL, HE DID NOT DO IT ALONE ANY MORE THAN ANY of us does. Much of our character talk today is individualistic, like all our talk, but character is formed in community. Johnson happened to come to maturity at a time when Britain was home to a phenomenally talented group of writers, painters, artists, and intellectuals, ranging from Adam Smith to Joshua Reynolds to Edmund Burke. Each raised the standards of excellence for the others.

These were humanists, their knowledge derived from their deep reading of the great canonical texts of Western civilization. They were heroic, but they practiced an intellectual form of heroism, not a military one. They tried to see the world clearly, resisting the self-deceptions caused by the vanity and perversities in their own nature. They sought a sort of practical, moral wisdom that would give them inner integrity and purpose.

Johnson was the ultimate representative of the type. Johnson, as biographer Jeffrey Meyers put it, was "a mass of contradictions: lazy and energetic, aggressive and tender, melancholic and humorous, commonsensical and irrational, comforted yet tormented by religion."¹³ He fought these impulses within himself, as James Boswell put it, like a Roman gladiator in the Colosseum. He fought "the wild beasts of the Arena, ready to be let out upon him. After a conflict, he drove them back into their dens; but not killing them, they were still assailing him." All his life he combined the intellectual toughness of Achilles with the compassionate faith of a rabbi, priest, or mullah.

JOHNSON PROCESSED THE WORLD in the only way he could: with his (barely functioning) eye, with his conversation, and with his pen. Writers are not exactly known for their superlative moral character, but Johnson more or less wrote himself to virtue.

He did his work in the tavern and café. Johnson—gross, disheveled, and ugly—was an astonishingly convivial man. He also thought by talking, uttering a relentless barrage of moral maxims and witticisms, a cross between Martin Luther and Oscar Wilde. "There is no arguing with Johnson," the novelist and playwright Oliver Goldsmith once said, "for when his pistol misses fire, he knocks you down with the butt end of it." Johnson would use whatever argument came to hand and often switched sides in a debate entirely if he thought it would make the controversy more enjoyable. Many of his most famous sayings feel as if they either emerged spontaneously during a tavern conversation or were polished to give the appearance of spontaneity: "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel. . . . A decent provision for the poor is the true test of civilization. . . . When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight it concentrates his mind wonderfully. . . . When a man is tired of London he is tired of life."

His literary style had the to-and-fro structure of good conversation. He'd make a point, then balance it with a counterpoint, which in turn would be balanced by yet another counterpoint. The maxims above, which everybody quotes, give a false air of certainty to Johnson's views. His common conversational style was to raise a topic—say, card playing—list the virtues and vices associated with it, and then come down tentatively on one side. Writing of marriage, he displays his tendency to see every good linked with a bad: "I drew upon a page of my pocket book a scheme of all female virtues and vices, with the vices which border upon every virtue, and the virtues which are allied to every vice. I considered that wit was sarcastic, and magnanimity imperious; that avarice was economical and ignorance obsequious."

Johnson was a fervent dualist, believing that only tensions, paradoxes, and ironies could capture the complexity of real life. He was not a theorist, so he was comfortable with antitheses, things that didn't seem to go together but in fact do. As the literary critic Paul Fussell observed, the *but*s and *yets* that dotted his prose became the substance of his writing, part of his sense that to grasp anything you have to look at it from many vantage points, seeing all its contradictory parts.¹⁴

One certainly gets the sense that he spent a lot of time just hanging out, engaging in the sort of stupid small adventures groups of friends get into when they are just passing the time. Told that someone had drowned in a certain stretch of river, Johnson proceeded to jump right into it to see if he could survive. Told that a gun could explode if loaded with too much shot, Johnson immediately put seven balls in the barrel of one and fired it into a wall.

He threw himself into London life. He interviewed prostitutes. He slept in parks with poets. He did not believe knowledge was best pursued as a solitary venture. He wrote, "Happiness is not found in self-contemplation; it is perceived only when it is reflected from another." He sought self-knowledge obliquely, testing his observations against the reality of a world he could see concretely in front of him. "I look upon every day to be lost in which I do not make a new acquaintance," he observed. He dreaded solitude. He was always the last one to leave the pub, preferring walking the streets throughout the night

with his dissolute friend Richard Savage to going home to the loneliness of his haunted chambers.

"The true state of every nation," he observed, "is the state of common life. The manners of a people are not to be found in schools of learning or the palaces of greatness." Johnson socialized with people at every level. Late in life he took vagabonds into his house. He also entertained and insulted lords. After Johnson had ardently completed his great dictionary, Lord Chesterfield belatedly tried to take credit as its patron. Johnson rebuked him with one of the greatest epistolary acts of revolt ever written, which climaxed with the passage:

Is not a patron, my lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached ground, encumbers him with help? The notice which you have been pleased to take of my labors, had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent, and cannot enjoy it; till I am solitary, and cannot impart it; till I am known, and do not want it.

Absolute Honesty

JOHNSON DID NOT BELIEVE THAT THE PRIMARY HUMAN PROBLEMS CAN BE solved by politics or by rearranging social conditions. He is, after all, the author of the famous couplet "How small, of all that human hearts endure, / That part which laws and kings can cause or cure." Nor was he a metaphysician or a philosopher. He liked science but thought it a secondary concern. He discounted those who led lives of pedantic research surrounded by "learned dust," and he had a deep distrust of intellectual systems that tried to explain all existence in one logical structure. He let his interests roam over the whole surface of life, wherever his natural interests took him, making connections as a generalist, from one field to another. Johnson endorsed the notion that "He who can talk only on one subject, or act only in one department, is seldom wanted, and perhaps never wished for, while the man of general knowledge can often benefit and always please."¹⁵

He was not mystical. He built his philosophy low to the ground, from reading history and literature and from direct observation—focusing relentlessly on what he would call “the living world.” As Paul Fussell observed, he confuted all determinism. He rejected the notion that behavior is shaped by impersonal iron forces. He always focused with his searing eye on the particularity of each individual. Ralph Waldo Emerson would later observe that “Souls are not saved in bundles.”¹⁶ Johnson fervently believed in each individual’s mysterious complexity and inherent dignity.

He was, through it all, a moralist, in the best sense of that term. He believed that most problems are moral problems. “The happiness of society depends on virtue,” he would write. For him, like other humanists of that age, the essential human act is the act of making strenuous moral decisions. He, like other humanists, believed that literature could be a serious force for moral improvement. Literature gives not only new information but new experiences. It can broaden the range of awareness and be an occasion for evaluation. Literature can also instruct through pleasure.

Today many writers see literature and art only in aesthetic terms, but Johnson saw them as moral enterprises. He hoped to be counted among those writers who give “ardor to virtue and confidence to truth.” He added, “It is always a writer’s duty to make the world better.” As Fussell puts it, “Johnson, then, conceives of writing as something very like a Christian sacrament, defined in the Anglican catechism as ‘an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given to us.’”

Johnson lived in a world of hack writers, but Johnson did not allow himself to write badly—even though he wrote quickly and for money. Instead, he pursued the ideal of absolute literary honesty. “The first step to greatness is to be honest” was one of Johnson’s maxims.

He had a low but sympathetic view of human nature. It was said in Greek times that Demosthenes was not a great orator despite his stammer; he was a great orator *because* he stammered. The deficiency became an incentive to perfect the associated skill. The hero becomes strongest at his weakest point. Johnson was a great moralist because of his deficiencies. He came to understand that he would never defeat them. He came to understand that his story would not be the sort of virtue-conquers-vice story people like to tell. It would be, at best, a

virtue-learns-to-live-with-vice story. He wrote that he did not seek cures for his failings, but palliatives. This awareness of permanent struggle made him sympathetic to others’ failings. He was a moralist, but a tenderhearted one.

The Compassion of the Wounded Man

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT VICES PLAQUED SAMUEL JOHNSON, JUST look at the subjects of his essays: guilt, shame, frustration, boredom, and so on. As Bate observes, one fourth of his essays in the Rambler series concern envy. Johnson understood that he was particularly prone to resent other people’s success: “The reigning error of mankind is that we are not content with the conditions on which the goods of life are granted.”

Johnson’s redeeming intellectual virtue was clarity of mind. It gave him his great facility for crystallizing and quotable observations. Most of these reveal a psychological shrewdness about human fallibility:

- A man of genius is but seldom ruined but by himself.
- If you are idle, be not solitary; if you are solitary, be not idle.
- There are people whom one should like very well to drop, but would not wish to be dropped by.
- All censure of self is oblique praise. It is in order to show how much he can spare.
- Man’s chief merit consists in resisting the impulses of his nature.
- No place affords a more striking conviction of the vanity of human hopes than a public library.
- Very few can boast of hearts which they dare lay open to themselves.
- Read over your compositions, and wherever you meet with a passage you think is particularly fine, strike it out.
- Every man naturally persuades himself he can keep his resolutions; nor is he convinced of his imbecility but by length of time and frequency of experiment.

Through his moral essays, Johnson was able to impose order on the world, to anchor his experiences in the stability of the truth. He had to still himself in order to achieve an objective perception of the world. When people are depressed, they often feel overcome by a comprehensive and yet hard to pin down sadness. But Johnson jumps directly into the pain, pins it down, dissects it, and partially disarms it. In his essay on sorrow he observes that most passions drive you to their own extinction. Hunger leads to eating and satiety, fear leads to flight, lust leads to sex. But sorrow is an exception. Sorrow doesn't direct you toward its own cure. Sorrow builds upon sorrow.

That's because sorrow is "that state of mind in which our desires are fixed upon the past, without looking forward to the future, an incessant wish that something were otherwise than it has been, a tormenting and harassing want of some enjoyment or possession we have lost." Many try to avoid sorrow by living timid lives. Many try to relieve sorrow by forcing themselves to go to social events. Johnson does not approve of these stratagems. Instead, he advises, "The safe and general antidote against sorrow is employment. . . . Sorrow is a kind of rust of the soul, which every new idea contributes in its passage to scour away. It is the putrefaction of stagnant life and is remedied by exercise and motion."

Johnson also uses his essays as exercises in self-confrontation. "Life is combat to Johnson," Fussell writes, "and the combat is moral."¹⁷ Johnson writes essays directly upon those topics that plague him: despair, pride, hunger for novelty, boredom, gluttony, guilt, and vanity. He is under no illusion that he can lecture himself to virtue. But he can plot and plan ways to train his will. For example, envy was indeed the besetting sin of his early adulthood. He understood his own talents, and also understood that others were succeeding while he failed. He devised a strategy to defeat the envy in his heart. He said that in general he did not believe that one vice should be cured by another. But envy is such a malignant state of mind that the dominance of almost any other quality is to be preferred. So he chose pride. He told himself that to envy another is to admit one's inferiority, and that it is better to insist on one's superior merit than to succumb to envy. When tempted to envy another, he persuaded himself of his own superior position.

Then, turning in a more biblical direction, he preached charity and mercy. The world is so bursting with sin and sorrow that "there are none to be envied." Everyone has some deep trouble in their lives. Almost no one truly enjoys their own achievements, since their desires are always leaping forward and torturing them with visions of goods unpossessed.

The Stability of the Truth

WHAT JOHNSON SAID OF THE ESSAYIST JOSEPH ADDISON COULD BE applied to himself: "He was a man in whose presence nothing reprehensible was out of danger; quick in observing whatever was wrong or ridiculous and not unwilling to expose it."

Through this process of strenuous observation and examination, Johnson did transform his life. As a young man, he was sickly, depressed, and a failure. By late middle age, not only were his worldly accomplishments nationally admired, but he was acknowledged as a great-souled man. The biographer Percy Hazen Houston explained how a man of such a miserable and painful upbringing could look upon the world with judgments tempered with tolerance and mercy:

The iron had entered his soul, and he approached questions of human conduct in the light of a terrible experience, which enabled him to penetrate into human motives with sureness and understanding. Vividly conscious of the pettiness of our lives and the narrow limits of human knowledge, he was content to leave the mystery of final causes to power higher than his; for God's purposes are inscrutable, and man's aim in this early existence should be to seek laws by which he may prepare himself to meet divine mercy.¹⁸

Johnson thought hard and came to settled convictions about the complex and flawed world around him. He did it by disciplining himself in the effort to see things as they are. He did it through earnestness, self-criticism, and moral ardor.

Montaigne

JOHNSON'S METHOD OF SELF-FORMATION THROUGH MORAL INQUIRY CAN be illuminated by contrast with another great essayist, the delightful sixteenth-century French writer Michel de Montaigne. As one of my students, Haley Adams, put it, Johnson is like an East Coast rapper—intense, earnest, combative. Montaigne is like a West Coast rapper—equally realistic but also relaxed, mellow, sun-drenched. Montaigne was a greater essayist than Johnson. His masterpieces created and defined the form. And in his way he was just as morally earnest, just as intent on finding a way to understand himself and pursue virtue. But they took different approaches. Johnson sought to reform himself through direct assault and earnest effort. Montaigne was more amused by himself and his foibles, and sought virtue through self-acceptance and sweet gestures of self-improvement.

Montaigne had an upbringing nothing like Johnson's. He grew up on an estate near Bordeaux as the treasured member of a wealthy, established family whose money was ample but not ancient. He was raised gently and nurturingly according to a humanist plan devised by the man he thought the best of all fathers, including being awoken sweetly each morning by the sound of a musical instrument. The upbringing was designed to make him educated, well-rounded, and gentle. He went to a prestigious boarding school and then served as a town counselor and member of the local *parlement*.

Montaigne's situation was comfortable, but his times were not. He was a public servant at a time of a series of religious civil wars, trying to play a mediating role in some of them. In his thirty-eighth year, he retired from public life. His goal was to return to his estate and lead a life of learned leisure. Johnson wrote in the teeny pub life of Grub Street; Montaigne wrote from the seclusion of his own tower library, in a large room decorated with Greek, Roman, and biblical maxims.

His initial goal was to study the ancients (Plutarch, Ovid, Tacitus) and learn from his church (at least in public, he was a Roman Catholic with orthodox views, although, with an earthy rather than an abstract slant of mind, he seemed to draw less wisdom from theology than from history). He thought he might write learned pieces on war and high policy.

But his mind did not allow that. Like Johnson, Montaigne had a midlife suspicion that he had been living wrongly in some fundamental way. Once he retired to a life of contemplation, he discovered that his own mind would not allow tranquillity. He found his mind was fragmented, liquid, and scattershot. He compared his thoughts to the shimmerings of light dancing on the ceiling when sunlight is reflected off a pool of water. His brain was constantly racing off in all directions. When he started to think about himself, all he found was some momentary perception, which was followed by some unrelated perception, which was then followed by another.

Montaigne fell into a depression, and in his suffering he became his own literary subject. "We are, I know not how, double within ourselves," he wrote. The imagination runs away. "I cannot fix my subject. He is always restless, and reels with a natural intoxication. . . . I do not portray being. I portray passing. . . . I must suit my story to the hour, for soon I may change."

Montaigne came to realize how hard it was to control one's own mind, or even one's body. He despaired over even his own penis, "which intrudes so tiresomely when we do not require it and fails us so annoyingly when we need it most." But the penis is not alone in its rebellion. "I ask you to consider whether there is a single part of our bodies that does not often refuse to work at our will, and does not often operate in defiance of it."

Writing, then, was an act of self-integration. Montaigne's theory was that much of the fanaticism and violence he saw around him was caused by the panic and uncertainty people feel because they can't grasp the elusiveness within themselves. The push for worldly splendor and eternal glory are futile efforts by people who are seeking external means to achieve internal tranquillity and friendship with themselves. As he put it, "Every man rushes elsewhere into the future, because no man has arrived at himself." Montaigne would use his essays to arrive at himself. He would, through writing, create a viewpoint and a prose style that would impose order and equanimity on the fragmented self inside.

Both Johnson and Montaigne were seeking deep self-awareness, but they went about it by different methods. Johnson described other people and the outer world, hoping to define himself obliquely. Sometimes he would write a biography of someone else, but so many of his

own traits peeped through that his portrait seems like an autobiography in disguise. Montaigne started from the other end. He described himself, and his responses to things, and through self-examination hoped to define the nature that all men and women share, observing, "Each man bears within himself the entire form of man's estate."

Johnson's essays sound authoritative, but Montaigne's are written in a style that is modest, provisional, and tentative. They were not organized formally. They do not follow a clear logical structure; they accrete. He would make a point, and if some related point came to him months later, he'd scrawl it in the margins for inclusion in the final edition. That haphazard method disguised the seriousness of his enterprise. He made it look easy, but he did not take his mission lightly. He understood how original his project was: completely honest self-revelation, and through that, a vision of the moral life. He understood he was trying to create a new method of character formation and implying a new type of hero, a hero of ruthlessly honest but sympathetic self-understanding. The manner was carefree, but the task was arduous: "We must really strain our soul to be aware of our own fallibility." The idea was not simply to expand his knowledge of himself, or to play around in his own mind, or to expose himself for the sake of fame or attention or success. His goal was to confront himself in order to lead a coherent and disciplined life: "Greatness of the soul is not so much pressing upward and forward as knowing how to set oneself in order and circumscribe oneself."

Montaigne sought to address his moral problems through self-knowledge and self-reform. He argued that this sort of self-confrontation imposes even harsher demands than those placed on an Alexander the Great or a Socrates. Those figures operate in public and are rewarded with glory and renown. The solitary seeker after honest self-knowledge works in private. Other people seek the approval of the crowd; Montaigne sought self-respect. "Every one can play his part in the farce, and act an honest role on the stage. But to be disciplined within, in one's own breast, where all is permissible and all is concealed. That is the point."

Montaigne cut short a successful career because he felt the struggle for internal depth and self-respect was more important. He did it by bravely facing the truth about himself. Even during the act of self-confrontation he created an attitude of equipoise that has charmed

readers throughout the centuries since. He was willing to face unpleasant truths about himself without getting defensive or trying to rationalize them away. Most of the time his own deficiencies just made him smile.

He had, in the first place, a humble but secure view of himself. He admits that he is a small and uncharismatic man. If he rides around with his staff, people can't tell who is master and who is servant. If he has a poor memory, he will tell you. If he is bad at chess and other games, he will tell you. If he has a small penis, he will tell you. If he is decaying with age, he will tell you.

Like most people, he observes, he's a bit venal: "Let anyone search his heart and we will find that our inward wishes are for the most part born and nourished at the expense of others." He notes that most of the things we struggle for are ephemeral and fragile. A philosopher can cultivate the greatest mind in history, but one bite from a rabid dog could turn him into a raving idiot. Montaigne is the author of the take-you-down-a-peg saying that "on the loftiest throne in the world we are still only sitting on our own rump." He argues that "if others examined themselves attentively, as I do, they would find themselves, as I do, full of inanity and nonsense. Get rid of it I cannot without getting rid of myself. We are all steeped in it, one as much as another; but those who are aware of it are a little better off—though I don't know." As Sarah Bakewell observes in her superb book on the man, *How to Live*, that final coda "though I don't know" is pure Montaigne.

One day, one of his servants, who was riding behind him, took off at full gallop and crashed right into Montaigne and his horse. Montaigne was thrown ten paces behind his horse and lay unconscious, spread on the ground, as if dead. His terrified servants began carrying his lifeless form back to the castle. As they did, he began to come to. His servants later told him how he had behaved—gasping for air, scratching furiously at his chest, ripping at his clothes as if to free himself, apparently in agony. Inside, though, the mental scene was quite different. "I felt infinite sweetness and repose," he recalled, and took pleasure in "growing languid and letting myself go." He had the sensation of being gently carried aloft on a magic carpet.

What a difference, Montaigne later reflected, between the outward appearance and the inner experience. How astonishing. One sanguine lesson he drew is that nobody has to bother learning how to die: "If

you don't know how to die, don't worry; Nature will tell you what to do on the spot, fully and adequately. She will do the job perfectly for you; don't bother your head about it."¹⁹

It's almost as if Montaigne's temperament could be reduced to an equation: a low but accurate view of one's own nature plus a capacity for wonder and astonishment at the bizarreness of creation equals a calming spirit of equipoise. He was, as Bakewell puts it, "liberated to lightheartedness."²⁰ He seemed to maintain an even keel, neither surrendering to exuberance when things were going well nor falling into despair when they weren't. He created a prose style that embodied graceful nonchalance and then tried to become as cool as his writing. "I seek only to grow indifferent and relaxed," he writes at one point, not entirely convincingly. "I avoid subjecting myself to obligation, he observes (or advises). In essay after essay you can practically see him trying to will himself into easy self-acceptance: "I may wish on the whole, to be otherwise; I may condemn my general character, and implore God to reform me throughout, and to excuse my natural weakness. But I should not, I think, give the name of repentance to this, any more than I should to my dissatisfaction at not being an angel or Cato. My actions are controlled and shaped to what I am and to my condition of life. I can do no better." He gave himself a moderating slogan: "I hold back."

He's a slow reader, so he focuses on just a few books. He's a little lazy, so he learns to relax. (Johnson gave himself fervent self-improvement sermons, but Montaigne would not. Johnson was filled with moral sternness; Montaigne was not.) Montaigne's mind naturally wanders, so he takes advantage and learns to see things from multiple perspectives. Every flaw comes with its own compensation.

The ardent and the self-demanding have never admired Montaigne. They find his emotional register too narrow, his aspirations too modest, his settledness too bland. They have trouble refuting him (he doesn't write in traditional logical structures, so it's hard to find the *there* there to refute), but they conclude that his pervasive skepticism and self-acceptance just lead to self-satisfaction, even a tinge of nihilism. They dismiss him as the master of emotional distance and conflict avoidance.

There's some truth to that view, as Montaigne, of course, would have been the first to admit: "A painful notion takes hold of me; I find

it quicker to change it than subdue it. I substitute a contrary one for it, or, if I cannot, at all events a different one. Variation always solaces, dissolves and dissipates. If I cannot combat it, I escape it; and in fleeing I dodge. I am tricky."

Montaigne's example teaches that if you have realistically low expectations, you'll end up pleased in most circumstances. But he is not merely a mellow fellow, a sixteenth-century beach bum with an estate. He sometimes pretends to nonchalance, and he often hides his earnest intent, but he does have a higher vision of the good life and the good society. It is not based on ultimate salvation or ultimate justice, as more ambitious souls would prefer, but on friendship.

His essay on friendship is one of the most moving pieces he produced. It was written to celebrate the bond he shared with his dear friend Étienne de la Boétie, who died about five years into their relationship. They were both writers and thinkers. As we would say nowadays, they were genuine soul mates.

Everything in such a friendship is held in common—will, thoughts, opinions, property, families, children, honor, life. "Our souls travelled so unitedly together, they felt so strong an affection for one another and with this same affection saw in the very depths of each other's hearts, that not only did I know his as well as my own, but I should certainly have trusted myself more freely to him than to myself." If you were to construct a perfect society, he concludes, this sort of friendship would be at its peak.

Two Styles of Goodness

BOTH MONTAIGNE AND JOHNSON WERE BRILLIANT ESSAYISTS, MASTERS OF shifting perspective. Both were humanists in their way, heroically trying to use literature to find the great truths they believed the human mind is capable of comprehending but also doing so with a sense of humility, compassion, and charity. Both tried to pin down the chaos of existence in prose and create a sense of internal order and discipline. But Johnson is all emotional extremes; Montaigne is emotionally moderate. Johnson issues stern self-demands; Montaigne aims at nonchalance and ironic self-acceptance. Johnson is about struggle and suffering, Montaigne is a more genial character, wryly amused by the

foibles of the world. Johnson investigated the world to become his desired self; Montaigne investigated himself to see the world. Johnson is a demanding moralist in a sensual, competitive city. He's trying to fire moral ardor and get ambitious bourgeois people to focus on ultimate truths. Montaigne is a calming presence in a country filled with civil war and religious zealotry. Johnson tried to lift people up to emulate heroes. Montaigne feared that those who try to rise above what is realistically human end up sinking into the subhuman. In search of purity they end up burning people at the stake.

We can each of us decide if we are a little more like Montaigne or a little more like Johnson, or which master we can learn from on which occasion. For my part I'd say that Johnson, through arduous effort, built a superior greatness. He was more a creature of the active world. Montaigne's equivoise grew in part from the fact that he grew up rich, with a secure title, and could retire from the messiness of history to the comfort of his estate. Most important, Johnson understood that it takes some hard pressure to sculpt a character. The material is resistant. There has to be some pushing, some sharp cutting, and hacking. It has to be done in confrontation with the intense events of the real world, not in retreat from them. Montaigne had such a genial nature, maybe he could be shaped through gentle observation. Most of us will end up mediocre and self-forgiving if we try to do that.

Industry

IN 1746, JOHNSON SIGNED A CONTRACT TO CREATE AN ENGLISH DICTIONARY. Just as he was slowly bringing order to his own internal life, he would also bring order to his language. The French Academy had embarked on a similar project in the previous century. It had taken forty scholars fifty-five years to complete the task. Johnson and six clerks completed their task in eight. He defined 42,000 words and included roughly 116,000 illustrative quotations to show how the words were used. He culled an additional hundred thousand quotations that he ended up not using.

Johnson would pore over all the English literature he could get his hands on, marking the word usage and the usable quotations. He would have these copied onto slips of paper and then collate them in

a vast organizational structure. The work was tedious, but Johnson saw a virtue in the tedium. He thought the dictionary would be good for the country and calming to himself. He entered the work, he wrote, "with the pleasing hope that, if it was low, it likewise would be safe. I was drawn forward with the prospect of employment, which, though not splendid, would be useful, and which, though it could not make my life envied, would keep it innocent; which would awaken no passion, engage me in no contention, nor throw in my way any temptation to disturb the quiet of others by censure, or my own by flattery."²¹

While Johnson was working on the dictionary, his wife, Tetty, died. She had suffered from poor health and she drank more and more as the years went by. One day she was upstairs sick in bed when there was a knock on the door. A maid answered and told the visitor that Tetty was ill. It turned out the man was Tetty's grown son from her first marriage. He had become estranged from her when she married Johnson and had not seen her in all the years since. When Tetty heard a few moments later that her son had been at the door, she threw on some clothes and rushed down to find him. But he had left, and she would never see him again.

Johnson was hit hard by her passing. His journals are filled with vows to honor her memory in one way or another. "Enable me to begin and perfect that reformation which I promised her. . . . I kept this day as the anniversary of my Tetty's death with prayer & tears. . . . Resolved . . . to consult my resolves on Tetty's coffin. . . . Thought on Tetty, dear poor Tetty, with my eyes full."

The dictionary made Johnson famous and, if never rich, at least financially secure. He emerged as one of the great figures of British literary life. He spent his days, as usual, in cafés and taverns. He was in the Club, a group of men who met together regularly to dine and discuss. It was probably the single greatest collection of intellectual and artistic friends in British history, and maybe beyond. Its members included not only Johnson but the statesman Edmund Burke, the economist Adam Smith, the painter Joshua Reynolds, the actor (and Johnson's former pupil) David Garrick, the novelist and playwright Oliver Goldsmith, and the historian Edward Gibbon.

Johnson socialized with the lords and intellectuals but spent his domestic life with the down and out. His home was perpetually oc-

cupied by a strange collection of indigents and the marginalized. A former slave lived with him, as did an impoverished doctor and a blind poetess. One night he found a prostitute lying ill and exhausted on the street. He put her on his back, brought her home, and gave her a place to live. The beneficiaries of his mercy fought with each other and with him, and they made the home a crowded, fractious place, but Johnson was loath to turn them out.

He also did amazing amounts of writing for friends. The man who said “no man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money” composed thousands of pages for free. An eighty-two-year-old former physician had spent years trying to come up with a more accurate way to determine longitude while at sea. He was now dying, his work having come to nothing. Johnson, feeling compassion for the man, studied up on navigation and the man’s theories on it and wrote a book, which he put out under the man’s name, titled *An Account of an Attempt to Ascertain the Longitude of the Sea*, just to give him the sense at the end of his life that his ideas would live on. Another friend, a twenty-nine-year-old man named Robert Chambers, was elected to a professorship of law at Oxford. Chambers, sadly, was neither a noted legal mind nor a good writer. Johnson agreed to help him out by ghostwriting his law lectures. Johnson wrote sixty separate lectures for him stretching over sixteen hundred pages.

Johnson worked feverishly nearly until his death. Between the ages of sixty-eight and seventy-two he wrote his *Lives of the Poets*, fifty-two biographies covering 378,000 words, at a time when age seventy really was elderly. He never achieved the equanimity that seems to have marked Montaigne’s mature years, or the calmness and reserve he admired in others. He lived all his life with periodic feelings of despair, depression, shame, masochism, and guilt. In old age he asked a friend to hold a padlock for him that could be used if he should go insane and require physical restraint.

Nonetheless, there is an unmistakable largeness to Johnson’s character in his final few years. Late in life, with his companion and biographer Boswell, he became one of the most famous conversationalists of all time. He could unfurl long paragraphs of repartee on almost any subject and for almost any occasion. These observations didn’t just arise spontaneously. They were the product of a lifetime of mental labor.

He also built a consistent point of view. It began with an awareness of the constant presence of egotism, self-centeredness, and self-deception. But it was fueled by his own rebel spirit. From childhood and university days up through adult life he had a deep instinct to revolt against authority. He turned that rebellious spirit against his own nature. He turned it against evil, interior and exterior. He used it as fuel to propel him into self-combat.

Self-combat was his path to redemption. He defined a different type of courage, the courage of honesty (Montaigne had it, too). He believed that the expressive powers of literature, if used with utter moral sincerity, could conquer demons. Truth was his bondage breaker. As Bate puts it, “Johnson time and again walks up to almost every anxiety and fear the human heart can feel. As he puts his hands directly upon it and looks at it closely, the lion’s skin falls off, and we often find beneath it only a donkey, maybe only a frame of wood. That is why we so often find ourselves laughing as we read what he has to say. We laugh partly through sheer relief.”²²

Everything was a moral contest for Johnson, a chance to improve, to degrade or repent. His conversation, even when uproarious, was meant to be improving. When he was an old man he recalled an episode in his youth. His father had asked him to man the family bookstall in the market square of a town called Urtoxeter. Johnson, feeling superior to his father, had refused. Now elderly, feeling the lingering shame, he made a special trip to the market square of Urtoxeter and stood on the spot where his father’s stall had been. As he later recalled:

Pride was the source of that refusal, and the remembrance of it was painful. A few years ago I desired to atone for this fault. I went to Urtoxeter in very bad weather and stood for a considerable time bareheaded in the rain. . . . In contrition I stood, and I hope that the penance was expiatory.

Johnson never triumphed, but he integrated, he built a more stable whole than would have seemed possible from his fragmented nature. As Adam Gopnick wrote in *The New Yorker* in 2012, “He was his own whale, and brought himself home.”

Finally, when Johnson was seventy-five, death approached. He had a powerful fear of damnation. He put a text on his watch, “The night

cometh," to remind himself to commit no sins that would lead to a bad final judgment. Nonetheless it hung passionately upon his mind. Boswell records an exchange with a friend:

Johnson: I am afraid I may be one of those who shall be damned (looking dismally).

Dr. Adams: What do you mean by damned?

Johnson: (passionately and loudly). Sent to Hell, Sir, and punished everlastingly.

IN HIS FINAL WEEK his doctor told him he would surely die soon. He asked to be taken off the opium so he would not meet God "in a state of idiocy." When his doctor made some incisions in his legs to drain fluid, Johnson cried out, "Deeper, deeper; I want length of life, and you are afraid to give me pain, which I do not value." Later Johnson got some scissors and plunged them into his own legs in a further attempt to drain them. His pronouncement in the face of death was of a piece with his manner in life: "I will be conquered; I will not capitulate."

Johnson stands now as an example of humane wisdom. From his scattered youth, his diverse faculties cohered into a single faculty—a mode of seeing and judging the world that was as much emotional as intellectual. Especially toward the end of his life, it becomes hard to categorize his writing. His journalism rose to the level of literature; his biographies contained ethics; his theology was filled with practical advice. He became a universal thinker.

The foundation of it all was his tremendous capacity for sympathy. His life story begins with physical suffering. As a teenager and young man he was one of the world's outcasts, disfigured by fate. He seems never to have shaken that vulnerability, but he succeeded in turning his handicaps and limitations into advantages through sheer hard work. For a man who continually castigated himself for his sloth, his capacity for labor was enormous.

He wrestled, really wrestled with matters that were of real importance, matters of his very being. "To strive with difficulties, and to conquer them, is the highest human felicity," he wrote in one of his essays. "The next is to strive and deserve to conquer; but he whose life

has passed without contest, and who can boast neither success nor merit can survey himself only as a useless filler of existence."

That wrestling was undertaken on behalf of an unblinking honesty. The Victorian writer John Ruskin wrote, "The more I think of it I find this conclusion more impressed upon me—that the greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to *see* something, and tell what it *saw* in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see."

Johnson's genius for epigram and for pithy observation emerged also out of his extraordinary sensitivity to the world around him. It was nurtured, too, by his skepticism about himself—his ability to doubt his motives, see through his rationalizations, laugh at his vanities, and understand that he was just as foolish as others were.

After his death, the nation mourned. A reaction from William Gerard Hamilton is the most often quoted and most accurately captures the achievement of the man and the void his death created: "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 with the next best: There is nobody; no man can be said to put you in mind of Johnson."