

The melancholy of Dr. Samuel Johnson

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All of us get depressed in certain circumstances. Depression, like cheerfulness or the taste of cake, is created by minute electric and biochemical changes in the body that are probably too complex for human understanding. But it is more than a chemical disorder, such as gout, for it is influenced by upbringing, personality and fortune.

Many old descriptions of depressive illness ring true today, although the muscular prose of modern medicine usually omits the ingredients of self-loathing and horror that make the illness so dreadful.

Some excellent descriptions come from *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, which Sir William Osler called "the greatest medical treatise written by a layman". Published in 1621, this vast work by Robert Burton was occupational therapy for the author's own despair.

It is a liberal and ironic book that describes and defines melancholy — "a kind of dotage, without a fever, having for his ordinary companions fear and sadness without any apparent occasion" — and deals with its cure.

Lord Byron, like many others, achieved a pretence of erudition with maxims culled from its

pages; John Keats's poem *Lamia* is based on a tale from Burton.

Samuel Johnson, that martyr to neurotic indolence, was also an expert on melancholy, finding that depression "took [him] out of bed two hours sooner than he wanted to rise".

Little is known of Johnson's childhood. His father was a

badly and was soon near bankruptcy. He was, "... A very pious and worthy man but wrong-headed, positive and afflicted with melancholy". His nagging wife was little support, and they rarely spoke.

Johnson believed his depressive temperament came from his father, but it was probably from

"Ah, Sir, I was rude and violent. It was bitterness which they mistook for frolic."

52-year-old bookseller when Johnson was born in 1709; as a baby he contracted an infection that left him almost blind in his left eye and almost deaf in his left ear. An "issue", or incision, was made in his left arm and kept open for several years to drain away the infection. He also had tuberculous cervical adenitis, the so-called king's evil, and was "touched" for this by Queen Anne and given a gold piece that he wore constantly.

His parents had an unhappy marriage. His father, silent and sorrowing, managed money

both parents. The emotional atmosphere of his boyhood sounds un nourishing and glum.

Myopia and clumsiness forced Johnson to excel at school. At 19 years he went to Oxford for a year, and read Greek, literature, ethics and theology. His first breakdown occurred there.

Poverty, the anxiety of being away from home and fears for his future caused a deepening depression that was camouflaged at first by prankishness: "Ah, Sir, I was rude and violent. It was bitterness which they mistook for frolic. I was miserably poor, and I

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thought to fight my way by my literature and my wit; so I disregarded all power and all authority."

When depression worsened, he feared madness, "... overwhelmed with a horrible hypochondria, with perpetual irritation ... with a dejection, gloom and despair which made existence misery".

This fear of insanity is com-

mon in depression, rarely confided and as rarely asked about.

He fled home to Lichfield but derived scant comfort from his doleful parents or from his physician godfather, Dr. Swynfen, for whom he wrote an account of his symptoms. The Latin was so elegant Swynfen showed it to his friends, making Johnson furious. The doctor then rubbed salt in the wound: "I could think nothing better of this disorder than that it had a tendency to insanity and without great care might possibly terminate in the deprivation of his initial faculties."

Swynfen had implanted a dread that never left Johnson.

He was invited to Birmingham to rest his nerves, and there this gauche and rawboned lad, scarred by scrofula and ludicrous from "convulsive starts and odd mannerisms" endeared himself to Elizabeth Porter, his host's wife. When her husband died she married Johnson, outraging relatives because she was 20 years his senior. But the young man, so sad and exhausted that he could only work from bed, doubtless needed a mother. He called her Tetty, and their life was not easy. When they returned to London they moved often, were usually

poor and pawned their goods. His sexual appetite was hearty, perhaps inflamed by tension, but Tetty's had waned, perhaps from age and animosity: Johnson could be a taciturn and carping husband.

Their home life crumbled, and he preferred to spend his evenings elsewhere — "a tavern chair is the throne of human felicity". Tetty, left alone, sought

praise."

There was little tranquillity in his dismal household. It now contained a general factotum, "Dr." Robert Levett, a taciturn toper who practised a sort of medicine for paupers; Francis, a 7-year-old boy given to Johnson as a present, and Anna Williams, whose cataracts were operated upon at Johnson's urging and who then went blind.

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comfort from religion, novels and "cordials", sometimes laced with opium.

In 1746, aged 37, he had the idea of making a dictionary, with the meaning of each word concisely defined and illustrated by literary quotations. It was a huge task — one that took French academicians 40 years. Johnson did it alone in 9 years, and at the same time also wrote a set of brilliant, moral essays that were published twice a week, called *The Rambler*.

Tetty died before the dictionary was finished. He was devastated, self-blaming and so extravagant in grief that friends feared for his reason. Thereafter, when depressed, his sadness focused on her memory so even 12 years after her death he "thought on Tetty, poor dear Tetty with my eyes full".

His masterpiece, the great dictionary, earned him glory, but part of his preface made one envious viewer weep: "It was written ... amidst inconvenience and distraction, in sickness and in sorrow. ... Most of those, whom I wished to please, have sunk into the grave. ... I, therefore, dismiss it with frigid tranquillity, having little to fear or hope from censure or from

He founded a club at the King's Head and buoyed his self-esteem with brilliant talk. His big frame had become massive and startling with its slovenly clothes and a small wig scorched from writing near a candle. But this uncouthness vanished when he spoke. Like many famous comedians, who explode tension in laughter, his depressive and eccentric personality could be infectiously gay and humorous, delighting in nonsense and buffoonery. He talked late into the night, dreading a return home to insomnia.

Those believing themselves unloved often seek solace in food and sexuality. He loved "Bishop" a blend of wine, sugar and orange juice, and was a hearty, even alarming, trencher man. He hated swearing but had once remarked, with Hogarthian relish, that life's greatest pleasure was "fucking".

Time passed. He continued his creative literary labours and, despite an often boisterous humour, wrote "from that kind of melancholy indisposition which I had when we lived together at Birmingham, I have never been free, but have always had it operating against my health and my life with more or less violence."

His hard work may have had a narcotic effect, as well as tamping down depression and raising self-esteem.

In his middle 50s a deepening gloom and the bounding Boswell entered his life. James Boswell, who wrote the best biography of Johnson, was three decades Johnson's junior and the son of a vinegary Scots law lord. His humour, charm and resilience to

and later toured the Hebrides together.

Another sovereign remedy for Johnson was his friendship with the Thrales. Henry Thrale was a rich brewer and the tiny, cultivated and vivacious Hester was no "honeysuckle wife", although her marriage had been for money. They once dropped in on Johnson and were horrified to find him, "... in a deplorable

Johnson carried his burdens with great courage. When he died, probably from heart and kidney failure, he was at peace.

rebuff endeared themselves to the gruff and lonely Johnson, and a happy friendship blossomed.

Boswell soon pressed him about the fear of death, which Johnson affirmed was quite natural: "So much so, Sir, that the whole of life is but keeping away the thoughts of it. ... It matters not how a man dies, but how he lives. The act of dying is not of importance; it lasts so short a time. A man knows it must be so, and submits. It will do him no good to whine."

When his biography appeared, Boswell was half a century old — depressed, broken by unemployment, poverty and loneliness. His wife had recently died from phthisis, and 4 years later he died from drink. He had been attacked by gloom all his life, and had asked Johnson for a remedy: "Against melancholy he recommended constant occupation of mind, a great deal of exercise, moderation in eating and drinking, and especially to shun drinking at night. ... He observed that labouring men who work hard, and live sparingly, are seldom or never troubled with low spirits."

Johnson and Boswell found a sovereign remedy for melancholy and "the vacuity of life" in travel

state, sighing, groaning, talking to himself, and restlessly walking from room to room. ... He was troubled with melancholy and dejection of spirit." He had not left his room for days.

On another visit they found him on his knees beseeching God to spare him his reason. All his palliatives, like giving up wine, arising early, fasting and prayer, had failed him. He cried out, "I would suffer a limb to be amputated to recover my spirits."

Johnson carried his burdens through life with great courage: his physical ungainliness and idiotic, compulsive gesticulations that made him a target for ridicule, his dismal sight and hearing, his poverty, loneliness and terror, guilt and depression. Throughout it all, he remained a generous, kind and creative man. When he died, probably from heart and kidney failure, he was at peace and all his fears of death and hell had gone.

A portrait of him hangs in the office of the Wisconsin scholars who are compiling a monumental Dictionary of American Regional English, for Johnson is their exemplar of clarity and diligence. The portrait could also represent grace and humanity under calamity and duress. ■

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