The Novel & Morality: Samuel Johnson's 'Rasselas'
Transcript

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This is now my second year as Gresham Professor of Rhetoric and my theme throughout my tenure of this wonderful post is, ‘The Mysteries of Reading and Writing’. This year – and next - I want to explore the codes - how it is that our reading is controlled and to what extent - that operate in three genres – the novel, poetry and plays – in that order. My choice of works has been informed by a desire for historical range, some breadth in terms of language – it makes more sense to talk about the ‘European novel’ than the ‘English novel’ - and by a conviction that some works by men and women show certain distinct gender traits. It is also, of course, a personal choice which includes the works which have had the most profound influence on my thinking about literature – and therefore my life.

So we begin with the novel, the preeminent genre in the modern period. I want to keep the fact of its pre-eminence at the fore while exploring its extraordinary range - in terms of what the novel treats, by way of, let’s say ‘subject matter’ or ‘material’ - and to consider what looks like a paradox. If the novel really takes off when ideas of ‘realism’ or truth to nature become its major concern, then why is it that so-called ‘great’ novels are often those which abound in ambiguity. Why are they the ones that do not tell it altogether straight? Surely that would be the way to achieve the greatest ‘realism’. Why is ambiguity and even ‘difficulty’ an intrinsic part of what we consider to be most successfully ‘literary’? Roland Barthes [Image 1], one of the most celebrated French literary theorists of the twentieth century proposed a distinction between a text which is ‘lisible’ or ‘readable’ and one which is ‘scriptible, or ‘writery’. Lesser literary works belonged to the first category. These are ‘readable’, that is easily read without much reflection on the part of the reader and relatively devoid of ambiguity. At the other end of the scale, the ‘writery’ text is one that requires a high degree of collaboration on the part of the reader. The reader is, in effect, the writer of his or her own text. One engagement is relatively passive, the other active. Now, do these distinctions work? And why do many of us choose to read ‘writery’ texts. Why this obtuse desire to tangle with ‘difficulty’? What is the nature of this seemingly masochistic pleasure? Why Jane Austen rather than chick lit? Why the existential novel rather than an ‘easy’ thriller? Why do we happily re-read ‘difficult’ novels, while leaving the easy ones, read once only, in the hotel, so convinced are we that we will never want to re-read them, despite the ‘pleasure’ it may have given us. Italo Calvino [image], the Italian writer and critic, in his brilliant book, Why Read the Classics? suggests that the ‘re-readable’ – or, we might say, ‘re-writeable’, is a definition of a ‘classic’ work of literature.

In exploring the novel as a genre I will also be making a case for the importance of the classics. These are not simply ‘difficult’ texts that belong, in a sense, only to a privileged few who have been initiated into its secrets thanks to particular educational opportunities. Great literature has an aesthetic force, but it also has a social, political, psychological and moral force; and the novel, as a genre, pre-eminently, because of its wonderful bagginess. Almost anything can be stuffed in. The novel can treat a remarkable range of ‘subjects’ and it can do it in myriad ways. So in addition to exploring four novels, before going on to four poems or collections of poems, and four plays, I would also like to focus on a number of different aspects of the novels I have chosen. Johnson’s Rasselas, tonight’s lecture, I have subtitled The Novel and Morality; next week’s is ‘Stendhal’s Le rouge et le noir (The Red and the Black) and political history’; then, ‘George Sand’s François le Champi and Idealism’, and finally ‘Edith Wharton’s The Age of Innocence and Psychology’.

[Johnson]

So tonight we begin with Samuel Johnson’s Rasselas, or, The History of Rasselas Prince of Abissinia first published in 1759. In terms of temperament Johnson is known, above all, for his misanthropy and profound pessimism. Perhaps the most famous Johnsonian couplet is one in which man [text]:

\[
\text{Hides from himself his state, and shuns to know, 
That life protracted is protracted woe}
\]

In short life is suffering, and suffering is life. Johnson is known as one of the great moralists of the 18th c. So what is the ‘moral’ of the story? Is it a profound essay in moral philosophy or is it a satire on the moralist’s search for a clue to the riddle of life and human happiness?

Happiness was, in a sense, very much in vogue as a subject in the 18th c., particularly within political discourses. It was being proposed as an essential individual and group objective. For Thomas Jefferson, in particular, the pursuit of happiness was an inalienable individual right and a collective political goal. [Image]

I would like to explore the extent to which Johnson’s Rasselas proposes the pursuit of happiness as a fundamentally important moral precept. It should be noted that Johnson, a devout Christian, was concerned about duties and not rights, unlike his American political contemporaries. At a time when arguments about the legitimacy, or not, of slavery and equality were rife, Johnson wrote, in an essay of 1756: ‘Every man, and every society is entitled to all the happiness that can be enjoyed within the security of the whole community.’

It took Johnson a week to write Rasselas. His mother had died and he needed money for the funeral. But the ideas he explored in it were ideas which he had thought about for a long time. Because he desperately needed to sell some writing he chose to pen what was likely to attract readers of his time. He chose the genre of the Oriental or Near Eastern Tale. Shelley’s famous ‘Ozymandias’ reveals both by its setting and its ominous irony that it is related to the tradition of the Oriental Tale.

That Rasselas is a moral tale is suggested by the conventional opening [image]:

14 October 2014

The Novel and Morality: Samuel Johnson’s Rasselas

Professor Belinda Jack
Ye who listen with credulity to the whispers of fancy, and pursue with eagerness the phantoms of hope; who expect that age will perform the promises of youth, and that the deficiencies of the present day will be supplied by the morrow; attend to the history of Rasselas prince of Abissinia.'

SJ had translated a work by a Jesuit missionary, Jerônimo Lobo, about the Roman Catholic church’s attempts to subject the area to doctrinal and political control. The work was entitled A Voyage to Abissinia, published in 1735. Obviously Johnson drew on this work in Rasselas.

SJ’s work is made up of 49 chapters, the first is entitled ‘Description of a palace in a valley’.

The story is straightforward: Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia, and I quote, ‘according to the custom that has descended from age to age... was confined in a private palace, with the other sons and daughters of Abissinian royalty, till the order of succession should call him to the throne’ (OWC, p.7). The palace and its surroundings could not be more beautiful. I quote, ‘All the diversities of the world were brought together, the blessings of nature were collected, and its evils extracted and excluded.’ But for there to be a story there needs to be something to disturb the serene order and that something is Rasselas’s ‘discontent’. The other princes, we read, ‘rose in the morning, and lay down at night, pleased with each other and themselves, all but Rasselas, who, in the twenty-sixth year of his age, began to withdraw himself from their pastimes and assemblies, and to delight in solitary walks and silent meditation.’ Now the story can begin, as the reader has been presented with a puzzle and a problem. Why is Rasselas discontented? And what will cure him of his restlessness? (p.11) [gloss] ‘What’, said he, ‘makes the difference between man and all the rest of the animal creation? ’ Rasselas considers the birds and the beasts, their hunger and their satisfaction when appeased. The birds seem to enjoy song and he too can summon musicians but, ‘the sounds that pleased me yesterday weary me to day, and will grow more wearisome to morrow.... Man has surely some latent sense for which this place affords no gratification, or he has some desires distinct from sense which must be satisfied before he can be happy’. Initially when Rasselas muses in this way he enjoys some relief from his gloomy mood: ‘With observations like these this prince amused himself as he returned, uttering them with a plaintive voice, yet with a look that discovered him to feel some complacency in his own perspicacity’. Rasselas is, after all, twenty-five and the psychology that Johnson describes here is recognizably adolescent. The young man feels disconsolate, philosophises on his mood – which he takes to be not uniquely his own but common to ‘Man’- and is then cheered by his ‘own perspicacity’. We have all been adolescents.... I irony is beginning to creep in: Rasselas derives satisfaction (even a degree of happiness, perhaps) from believing he has insight into his own unhappiness!

Needless to say this approach to his mood brings relief only temporarily. In the third chapter Rasselas converses with his ‘old instructor’, a ‘sage’ who considers that Rasselas has been afflicted by a ‘disease of mind':[text]

‘You Sir... are the first who has complained of misery in the happy valley... Look round and tell me which of your wants is without supply: if you want nothing, how are you unhappy?’ An insight then comes to Rasselas: ‘That I want nothing, said the prince, or that I know not what I want, is the cause of my complaint....’. And some lines later he comes to this conclusion: ‘You have given me something to desire; I shall long to see the miseries of the world, since the sight of them is necessary to happiness.’

Some months later he resolves to give his ‘whole mind upon the means of escaping from the valley of happiness.’ But his thorough search, which lasts ten months, ‘clambering the mountains’ and ‘the cavern through which the waters of the lake were discharged’ etc proves fruitless: ‘He returned discouraged and dejected; but, having now known the blessings of hope, resolved never to despair.’ For Johnson, hope was, as he wrote elsewhere ‘the chief blessing of man’ (Rambler 203 (February 1752). And a few weeks after finishing Rasselas, he wrote in the Idler 58 (26 May, 1759), ’hope itself is happiness, and its frustrations, however frequent, are yet less dreadful than its extinction.’

At this point the narrative has reached a point where a number of self-contained episodes can follow. These, chapters 6 – 12, allow for the telling of a number of stories by men with whom Rasselas discourses: firstly, an ‘artist’ intent on discovering a way of flying (chapter 6), then ‘a man of learning’, Imlac (chapters 7 – 12). His interest in the artist depends, of course, on his quest to find a way to escape from the happy valley. The wings which the artist makes fail and the story ends thus: ‘the prince drew him to land, half dead with terror and vexation.’

Imlac is ‘a man of learning’ and Rasselas commands Imlac to tell his life-story. He is the son of a wealthy merchant but his education leads him to despise riches. His father gives him a large sum of money to begin his life in commerce but Imlac decides instead to travel the world, to drink ‘at the fountains of knowledge, to quench my thirst of curiosity.’ After extensive travels to Surat, Agra (capital of Indostan), Persia, and Arabia (chapters 8-9) Imlac has learnt a great deal about different cultures and the ways of life that obtain to them. His primary observation, however, is that ‘wherever I went, I found that Poetry was considered as the highest learning.’ Imlac sets about reading ‘all the poets of Persia and Arabia’ and determines to be a poet himself. ‘Being now resolved to be a poet, I saw everything with a new purpose; my sphere of attention was suddenly magnified: no kind of knowledge was to be overlooked.’ Imlac proceeds to list all that a poet must know and all that he must ‘divest himself of’ – that is the prejudices of his age. But, Imlac continues, ‘His labour is not yet at an end: he must know many languages and many sciences....’ and so on. At the beginning of chapter 11 Rasselas interrupts Imlac, ‘Enough! Thou hast convinced me, that no human being can ever be a poet. Proceed with thy narration.’ Imlac goes on to describe his travels in Syria and Palestine, where he talks to great numbers of the northern and western nations of Europe. He concludes, at the end of chapter 11, ‘The Europeans... are less unhappy than we, but they are not happy. Human life is everywhere. A state in which, much must be endured and little to be enjoyed’ (p.32). Chapter 12 begins with Rasselas saying, ‘I am not yet willing... to suppose that happiness is so parsimoniously distributed to mortals...’ If I had the choice of life I should be able to fill every day with pleasure... ‘ (p.32) Imlac takes up his story again, recounting his travels in Asia, beginning to long ‘for my native country, that I might repose after my travels... and gladden my old companions with the recital of my adventures’. I will pick up on the recurrent emphasis on storytelling later. Imlac travels to Egypt where he spends ten months ‘in contemplation of its ancient magnificence’ and from Cairo to Suez and home to Abissinia where ‘I waited for the time when the gate of the happy valley should open, that I might bid farewell to hope and fear.’ Rasselas – and the reader – are, of course, impatient to hear how he has found life, back in the happy valley: ‘Great prince, said Imlac, I shall speak the truth: I know not one of your attendants who does not lament the hour when he entered this retreat. I am less unhappy than the rest, because I have a mind replete with images, which I can vary and combine at pleasure.’ [Importance of being able to feed the imagination.] Rasselas then opens his heart and explains that he has ‘long meditated an escape from the happy valley.’ Imlac warns him against escape saying, among other
things, ‘Amidst wrongs and frauds, competitions and anxieties, you will wish a thousand times for those seats of quiet, and willingly
give hope to be free from fear.’ Rasselas, of course, will not be deterred and the chapter ends with cautious encouragement from
Imlac: ‘If your determination is fixed, I do not counsel you to despair. Few things are impossible to diligence and skill.’

Rasselas and Imlac set about digging a tunnel out of the happy valley; Rasselas’s sister, Nekayah happens across them at work and
she asks to join them in their escape. Nekayah’s ‘single favourite’, Pekuah, also accompanies them. Chapter 15 is entitled, ‘The prince
and princess leave the valley, and see many wonders’. They then take a ship to Suez and then travel to Cairo. Chapter 16 is entitled
‘They enter Cairo, and find every man happy’. They stay for two years, establish a household, learn the language and make many
friends. But Rasselas remarks to Imlac that unlike all those he sees around him he remains unhappy: ‘I am more unhappy than any of
our friends. I see them perpetually and unalterably cheerful...’ Imlac explains, ‘We are long before we are convinced that happiness is
never to be found, and each believes it possessed by others, to keep alive the hope of obtaining it for himself... In the assembly...
there appeared such sprightliness of air, and volatility of fancy... yet, believe me, prince, there was not one who did not dread the
moment when solitude should deliver him to the tyranny of reflection.’ But Imlac points out that ‘few live by choice’ and this cheers
Rasselas, ‘I am pleased to think, said the prince, that my birth has given me at least one advantage over others, by enabling me to
determine for myself. I have here the world before me. I will review it at leisure: surely happiness is somewhere to be found.’
The expression, ‘I have the world before me’ plays on Milton’s famous conclusion to Paradise Lost, after the expulsion of Adam and Eve
from Eden, ‘The world was all before them...’. The allusion provides subtle irony.

In chapter 18 we hear of Rasselas’s dissatisfaction with the sensual life of ‘young men of spirit and gaiety’, ‘Their mirth was without
images, their laughter without motive; their pleasures were gross and sensual, in which the mind had no part...’ and so on. Rasselas
is similarly disappointed in the following chapter by a philosopher. Rasselas describes him to Imlac, ‘A man who can teach all that it is
necessary to be known, who, from the unshaken throne of rational fortitude, looks down on the scenes of life changing beneath him.’
Imlac, characteristically, cautions Rasselas, ‘Be not too hasty... they discourse like angels and live like men.’ Rasselas dismisses
Imlac’s scepticism. He returns to the philosopher’s apartment and discovers that the Stoic’s daughter has died and that he is in utter
despair, ‘My views, my purposes, my hopes are at an end.’ Rasselas tries to reason with him, adopting the philosopher’s own
approach, ‘Has wisdom no strength to arm the heart against calamity? Consider, the external things are naturally variable, but truth
and reason are always the same’. The Stoic replies, ‘What comfort... can truth and reason afford me? Of what effect are they now, but
to tell me, that my daughter will not be restored?’ And the chapter closes thus:

‘The prince, whose humanity would not suffer him to insult misery with reproof, went away convinced...’

The pastoral life (chapter 19) fails to impress them and the wealthy man with whom they stay in chapter 20, (‘The danger of
prosperity’) is so fearful of the envy of others and the dangers of robbery that he cannot live in peace. Rasselas and his companions
continue on and seek out a hermit (chapter 21, ‘The happiness of solitude. The hermit’s history’). They eat and Imlac then speaks: ‘I
do not now wonder that your reputation is so far extended... we came hither to implore your direction for this young man and maiden
in the choice of life.’ The hermit withdrew fifteen years earlier weary of high military office and extensive travelling. But he has grown
weary of the peace and solitude of his life and resolves to accompany Rasselas and his friends back to Cairo: ‘[He] accompanied them
to the city, on which, as he approached it, he gazed with rapture.’ (OWC, p.51)

In the following chapter Rasselas goes to an ‘assembly of learned men’. One of them asserts, dogmatically:

‘The way to be happy is to live according to nature.’ He then goes on to expound on this idea, concluding, ‘Let us... cease to dispute... throw away the encumbrance of precepts... and carry with us this simple and
intelligible maxim, That deviation from nature is deviation from happiness.’ Rasselas then responds and
asks, ‘Let me only know what it is to live according to nature.’ The philosopher replies that it is:

‘to act always with due regard to the fitness: [Here I ask you to pay particular attention!]’

Arising from the relations and qualities of causes and effects; to concur with the great unchangeable
disposition and tendency of the present system of things’ (!)

The irony here, of course, is that the philosopher’s language is hardly ‘fit for purpose’ if the purpose is always to be ‘natural’; his
language could hardly be more mannered and pretentious!

Ill-defined notions of terms like ‘fitness’ were characteristic of 18th deists’ writings. Here Johnson’s philosopher parodies the platitudes
of 18th c freethinkers; e.g. famously obfuscating Thomas Chubb: [text; again, your attention please!]

‘By the moral fitness of things, I mean the Fitness, which arises from, and is founded in the Nature and the
Relation of Things; taking it for granted, that there is an essential Difference betwixt Good and Evil, or
Fitness and Unfitness, arising from the Nature and the Relation of Things, antecedent to, and independent of
any divine or human Determination concerning them.’ (!) (Chubb, The Previous Question with Regard to
Religion (1725), p.7)

Again, the (unintended) irony here is dependent, of course, on the marked contrast between the complexity of the philosopher’s
rhetoric and ideas of the ‘natural’. [gloss]

Rasselas ‘soon found that this was one of the sages whom he should understand less as he heard him
longer.’

In chapter 23 Rasselas and his sister decide to divide their task: Rasselas will explore ‘the splendour of the
courts’, while Nekayah will ‘range the shades of humbler life.’ The prince soon discovers that the lives of
those ‘who stood high in employment... ‘were a continual succession of plots and detections, stratagems and
escapes, faction and treachery...’ (OWC, p.54). The princess provides a much fuller account of the
households she has visited but concludes that there is always the very real risk of ‘domestick discord’. The chapter ends with her dispiriting summing-up: ‘Marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasures.’ Rasselas and Nekayah argue about the merits of the two states for some time (chapter 27 – 29) and are finally interrupted by Imlac in chapter 30. He reproaches them, suggesting that they need to see new things and consider new ideas, not to remain in a single city and converse with one another. He persuades them to visit the pyramids which they do in chapter 31.

Soon after their arrival, however, Pekuah expresses her fear of entering what she calls ‘the dreadful gloom... a place which must surely be inhabited by unquiet souls’. (p. 69). Nekayah tries to persuade her but then agrees that she can stay behind in the tent. The prince, princess and Imlac go on their way. Rasselas’s response is this: ‘It seems to have been erected only in compliance with that hunger of imagination which preys incessantly upon life and must always be appeased by some employment’. This sentiment echoes an exchange with Johnson’s great friend Boswell who has said ‘great houses have been built and fine gardens were made’; to which Johnson responds, ‘Alas, these are only struggles for happiness’. The implication of the choice of noun, ‘struggles’, suggests failure.

At the beginning of the next chapter (33) Nekayah expresses a sentiment that will later be picked up by Imlac. They are leaving the pyramid and ‘the princess prepared for her favourite a long narrative of dark labyrinths, and costly rooms, and of the different impressions which the varieties of the way had made upon her.’

The phrase structure consists of an adjective followed by a noun, followed by an adjective followed by a noun. This symmetry perhaps invites an inversion, subliminally.

The ‘long narrative of dark labyrinths’ can be inverted to read, ‘the labyrinths of dark narratives’. ‘Narrative’ and ‘labyrinths’ are brought into relationship. Both are linear – and we lose ourselves in both. Pekuah has missed out on the real experience of circulating in the labyrinth but will enjoy the parallel experience of the ‘dark labyrinth of narrative’. Is the suggestion that this is superior to the ‘real’ experience? The actual experience, as far as Rasselas is concerned, is one which leads to the following conclusion:

[Image of pyramid]: I consider this structure a monument to the insufficiency of human enjoyments.

When they reach their tent they are told that Pekuah has been kidnapped and this provides the pretext for an exploration of guilt (Nekayah regrets having allowed Pekuah to part company with them) and bereavement, those ultimate inhibitors of happiness.

Imlac counsels her:

‘Our minds, like our bodies, are in continual flux; something is hourly lost, and something acquired... Distance has the same effect on the mind as on the eye, and while we glide along the stream of time, whatever we leave behind us is always lessening, and that which we approach increasing in magnitude. Do not suffer life to stagnate; it will grow muddy for want of motion: commit yourself again to the current of the world.’ (p.77)

Johnson expressed the same sentiment in his *Rambler* (periodical, or set of essays):

Sorrow, he wrote, ‘is the putrification of stagnant life’ and ‘the stream of life, if it is not ruffled by obstructions, will grow putrid by stagnation.’ Again a parallel suggests itself between life and narratives.

By the end of chapter 36, we read that Nekayah ‘sometimes forgot what she was indeed afraid to remember, and, at last, wholly released herself from the duty of periodical affliction’, but, ‘Her real love of Pekuah was not yet diminished.’

But, at the same time, Nekayah resists embracing life fully: ‘I shall henceforward fear to yield my heart to excellence, however bright, or to fondness, however, tender, lest I should lose again what I have lost in Pekuah.’

Again this seems to be Johnson speaking. In the *Rambler* he wrote, ‘However we may debar ourselves from happiness, misery will find its way at many inlets... it cannot be reasonable not to gain happiness for fear of losing it.’

But Pekuah is then brought back and chapters 38 & 39 are accounts of her adventures. Again the importance of narrative is embedded in the narrative.

Her audience is delighted by her story, ‘Nekayah, having heard her favourite’s relation, rose and embraced her, and Rasselas gave her an hundred ounces of gold, which she presented to the Arab [who had returned her], for the fifty that were promised.’ Again, the storyteller brings pleasure, if not happiness, to others.

They return to Cairo and Rasselas begins to see the purpose of learning. But Imlac advises, ‘Before you make your final choice... you ought to examine its hazards, and converse with some of those who are grown old in the company of themselves.’ (p.88) [gloss Gresham] Imlac knows a learned astronomer and describes his frequent meetings with him and the climax of these, ‘Hear Imlac, what thou will not without difficulty credit. I have possessed for five years the regulation of the weather, and the distribution of the seasons: the sun has listened to my dictates, and passed from tropick to tropick by my direction; the clouds, at my call, have poured their waters, and the Nile has overflowed at my command; I have restrained the rage of the dog-star, and mitigated the fervours of the crab.’ (p.90) [dog-star associated with heat induced madness; the ‘crab’ = tropic of cancer = tropical heat]
He continues, ‘I am, probably, the first of human beings to whom this trust has been imparted. Nor do I know whether to deem this distinction as reward or punishment; since I have possessed it I have been far less happy than before.’

The astronomer had then asked Imlac to take over his role.

Rasselas takes all that the astronomer has to say earnestly, but, ‘the princess smiled, and Pekuah convulsed with laughter.’ (p.93). The prince, in short, is the last to realise that the astronomer is not of sound mind:

‘Rasselas, more deeply affected, enquired of Imlac, whether he thought such maladies of the mind frequent.’ Imlac replies (well over a century before that clever man in Vienna – Sigmund Freud) ‘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.’

This episode ends with deft and sensitive humour – v. typical...

‘The princess and her lady retired; the madness of the astronomer hung upon their minds, and they desired Imlac to enter upon his office, and delay next morning the rising of the sun.’

Through shared society and conversation the astronomer becomes increasingly rational:

‘Imlac was delighted to find that the sage’s understanding was breaking through its mists.’

It’s a wonderful metaphor for mental illness – a mist that descends inexplicably...

And in another powerful metaphor: Imlac encourages him to open his heart ‘to the influence of the light, which, from time to time, breaks in upon you.’ In other words fully to embrace intimations of happiness, the smallest hint of happiness, when they are sensed. And he goes on to say [text], ‘Keep this thought always prevalent, that you are only one atom of the mass of humanity, and have neither such virtue or vice, as that you should be singled out for supernatural favours or afflictions.’ Here, Johnson is surely talking to himself.

In the final chapter, the four are ‘confined to their house’ by the rising ‘inundation of the Nile... They diverted themselves with comparisons of the different forms of life which they had observed, and with various schemes of happiness which each of them had formed’:

Pekuah – prioress of her own order
Nekayah – college of learned women – preside
Prince – kingdom – ruler

‘Imlac and the astronomer were contented to be driven along the stream of life without directing their course to any particular port. Of these wishes... they well knew that none could be obtained. They deliberated a while what was to be done, and resolved, when the inundation should cease, to return to Abissinia.’

But not necessarily to The Happy Valley...

So, to return to the question I posed earlier: is Rasselas a profound essay in moral philosophy, or a satire on the moralist’s pointless search for a clue to the riddle of human life and happiness? Critics have, I believe, been too quick to assume the former – in part because of the biographical fact that Johnson had just lost his mother. I would like to consider a few extracts that strengthen the more light-hearted interpretation. In Chapter 18, we heard of Rasselas’s relationship with the Stoic philosopher, and Imlac’s warning against too hasty an embrace of another ‘theory of life’. When Rasselas next visits him his daughter has died and the Stoic is in despair. Rasselas asks, ‘Have you forgot the precepts... which you so powerfully enforced? The Stoic answers: ‘What comfort... can truth and reason afford me? Of what effect are they now, but to tell me that my daughter will not be restored.’ As the episode draws to a conclusion we witness one of Johnson’s characteristic gestures of ironic collusion in the nonsense of the difference between principle and practice [text]: ‘[Rasselas]... went away, convinced of the emptiness of rhetorical sound, and the inefficacy of polished periods and studied sentences.’ Those final alliterations are just obtrusive enough to make one register that the disenchantment with rhetoric is itself expressed as a ‘polished period and a studied sentence’. The complex turn of irony here is characteristic of the work as a whole. In chapter 4, we read that Rasselas ‘for a few hours regretted his regret’. In chapter 28 Rasselas addresses his sister with the wonderfully pompous and pretentious retort: [text] ‘Dear Princess’, said Rasselas, ‘you fall into the common errors of exaggeratory declaration, by producing, in a familiar disquisition, examples of national calamities.’ In other words he accuses Nekayah of exaggeration, of inflating a local problem into a national one. But Rasselas’s retort could hardly itself be more exaggerated.

Then there is the complex but humane irony of Nekayah’s commitment to everlasting grief when Pekuah dies: (Parker, in Cambridge Companion, p.139):

‘Nekayah believes that she will mourn for Pekuah with a perpetual and undiminishing grief; Imlac, and Johnson, [and the reader], know that she will not. But the irony that attends upon her endeavour to keep her grief going is itself inconclusive. At the same time we admire her deep loyalty. Nekayah meets uneducated women whose approach to life and death is significantly different from her own: ‘Their grief, however, like their joy, was transient; everything floated in their mind unconnected with their past and future, so that one desire easily gave way to another, as a second stone cast into the water effaces and confounds the circles of the first’. They ‘have but one mind’, in opposition to individual conscience. Nekayah’s conscious commitment to grieving wanes but ‘her real love of Pekuah was yet not diminished’. [‘yet not’ ‘not yet’]

Further evidence of a subtler and more humorous, even self-parodying, interpretation arises from a comparison of Johnson’s poem, on ‘The Vanity of Human Wishes’, with Rasselas. As one John critic puts it, ‘The poem is really a work of tragic or quasi-tragic power: and this is expressed, above all, by its conclusiveness’. This contrasts with Rasselas. What could be more explicit than entitling the final concluding chapter, ‘The conclusion, in which nothing is concluded’? As Fred Parker has argued:
What this play of irony confesses – and is unexpectedly at ease with – is the instability of disillusionment, the impossibility of summing up, of stepping outside the condition of humanity for long enough to draw any final conclusions, or rising to general truths which will always be the same. (‘The Skepticism of Johnson’s Rasselas’ The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson, ed Greg Clingham (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

But there are, undeniably, certain conclusions one can draw, not least because some views expressed in the fiction were expressed by Johnson elsewhere, often in *The Rambler*. These are essentially pointers to human happiness. These would include, I think, Imlac’s advice to Rasselas when he says, ‘Do not suffer life to stagnate; it will grow muddy for want of motion: commit yourself again to the current of the world’ (Imlac) or his observation: ‘It seems to me’, said Imlac, ‘that while you are making the choice of life, you neglect to live.’

So life needs to be *lived*; we need imaginative lives and the imagination is stimulated by experience. Imagination stands in opposition to stagnation, and risks of intellectual and political stagnation. The imaginative interpretation of life is also stressed in repeated references to the importance of storytelling: Imlac imagining re return to Happy Valley and telling his friends about his adventures; Nekuyah telling Pekuah about their adventures in the tombs; Pekuah telling the other three about her experiences when kidnapped, and so on.

If there is one single moral of the tale which is preeminent it is that the pursuit of a single all-embracing truth will be illusory; it is not Johnson’s vision of things. This is where much of the comedy of Rasselas can be found. Johnson, the moralist, is frequently self-parodying and there is a moral in this too: we mustn’t take ourselves too seriously! There are other more straightforward morals, however: the dangers of a solitary life; importance of thinking about the happiness of others as well as of ourselves; the dangers of dogma, the importance of being ‘in the stream of life’, recognising that our fears may not happen, that we are but one small atom, that others suffer too, despite appearances.

So this extraordinary piece of 18th c. writing achieves two things/goals simultaneously, and it is this simultaneity which is its greatest achievement: it is a very funny send-up of the earnest moral philosopher, and ponderous moral philosophising, and a deeply moral and serious tale that can counter melancholy and pessimism – both in each of us individually and as a broader political idea from which societies as a whole can learn. It draws our attention to language and the ironies of language and this in turn warns us against political dogma and its jargons. Finally, its ambiguities qualify it both in Barthes’ terms of being a ‘writery’ text – we have to put in some work fully to understand and enjoy it, and in terms of Calvino’s criterion of believing in the desire to re-read as testimony of a ‘classic’. I read it first when I was eighteen and wondered whether it mightn’t be the most important piece of writing ever written. And I’ve gone on re-reading it all my life. When I’m asked what my most important hobby is I struggle. I don’t play sport, bridge or watch many films. To answer ‘reading’, would be dull. So like Rasselas, his sister, Imlac and Pekuah, I tend to say, ‘travelling hopefully’. Thank you.

[Image; Audio: Hogwood, Handel, Fireworks]


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