

SPECIAL ARTICLE

# Talking about madness and melancholy: Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*

Allan Beveridge

**Allan Beveridge** is a consultant psychiatrist at Queen Margaret Hospital, Dunfermline. He is Assistant Editor of the *History of Psychiatry* and *Psychiatry in Pictures* Editor for the *British Journal of Psychiatry*. His book *Portrait of the Psychiatrist as a Young Man: The Early Writing and Work of R.D. Laing, 1927–1960* was published in 2011.

**Correspondence** Allan Beveridge, Department of Psychiatry, Queen Margaret Hospital, Whitefield Road, Dunfermline KY12 0SU, UK. Email: allanbeveridge@nhs.net

## SUMMARY

This article examines James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*, his celebrated biography of his friend, the great 18th-century literary figure, Samuel Johnson. The book records their many conversations, much of which was concerned with madness and melancholy. This is not surprising as both men experienced recurrent bouts of low spirits. They also lived in an era which has been called 'The Age of Nerves'. This article will consider how they conceived of 'nervous disease' and how they tried to remedy it. It will also look at Johnson's role as a therapeutic mentor to Boswell.

## DECLARATION OF INTEREST

None.

in *Life of Samuel Johnson*, which is regarded as one of the greatest biographies in the English language, and which also contains a striking amount of material about mental disturbance. This is not surprising when we consider that both Boswell and Johnson experienced episodes of melancholy and that they lived in an era which has been variously described as 'The Age of Melancholy' or 'The Age of Nerves' (Porter 1987). 'Nervous' disease was discussed widely in medical and lay culture, and books such as Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* and George Cheyne's *The English Malady* were eagerly read (Ingram 2011; Beatty 2012).

The *Life of Samuel Johnson* allows us to eavesdrop on the conversations of Boswell and Johnson. We hear how they conceived of 'nervous' disease and how they tried to remedy it. Johnson can be seen as representative of the Augustan age with its notions of self-restraint, whereas the younger Boswell can be seen as representative of the Romantic age with its pre-occupation with the self (Wain 1975). Although Johnson preferred stoical silence in the face of mental suffering, Boswell liked to talk endlessly about his woes. The tension between these two approaches is vividly illustrated in the biography.

As well as conversing about melancholy, Boswell and Johnson also discussed happiness, friendship, madness, suicide, alcohol excess, senility, grief and dying; indeed, the entire range of human existence. This article will concentrate on their deliberations on melancholy and madness, and consider Johnson's role as Boswell's advisor on matters of the mind.<sup>a</sup>

## James Boswell (1740–1795)

James Boswell was an Edinburgh lawyer who is most renowned for his biography of Johnson. His father was Lord Auchinleck, one of Scotland's leading judges, with whom he had a troubled relationship. In later life Boswell was to have a recurring need to seek out father substitutes.

In his *Life of Samuel Johnson*, Boswell (1987 reprint) records a conversation with the great man of English letters about melancholy.

JOHNSON: A man so afflicted, Sir, must divert distressing thoughts, and must not combat with them.

BOSWELL: May not he think them down, Sir?

JOHNSON: No, Sir. To attempt to think them down is madness. He should have a lamp constantly burning in his bed-chamber during the night, and if wakefully disturbed, take a book, and read, and compose himself to rest. To have the management of the mind is a great art, and it may be attained in a considerable degree by experience and habitual exercise.

BOSWELL: Should not he provide amusements for himself? Would it not, for instance, be right for him to take a course of chymistry?

JOHNSON: Let him take a course of chymistry, or a course of rope-dancing, or a course of any thing to which he is inclined at the time. Let him contrive to have as many retreats for his mind as he can, as many things to which it can fly from itself. Burton's 'Anatomy of Melancholy' is a valuable work. It is, perhaps, overloaded with quotation. But there is a great spirit and great power in what Burton says, when he writes from his own mind' (p. 690).

This is just one of the many discussions about melancholy between Boswell and Johnson reported

a. I used a number of biographical sources in preparing this article. For Boswell: Pottle (1966) and Brady (1984); for Johnson: Wain (1975), Bate (1977), Clingham (1997) and Nokes (2009).

Boswell wrote a magazine column called 'The Hypochondriack' in which, among other subjects, he discussed nervous disease. In 1785 he published *A Tour of the Hebrides* (Boswell 1807 reprint), an account of his travels around Scotland with Johnson. His personal journals, amounting to 13 volumes, were published posthumously and provide one of the most detailed accounts of any historical figure. In them Boswell attempted to record 'the history of my mind', and described his recurrent mood swings and battles with alcoholic and sexual excess (Beveridge 2000). Boswell had his first episode of low spirits when he was 16, being afflicted by 'a terrible bout of hypochondria' (Pottle 1966). Later he was to experience periods of elevated spirits. Like Johnson, Boswell believed there was a hereditary contribution to his condition: two of his uncles were mentally unstable and his brother John spent time in a private madhouse.

### Samuel Johnson (1709–1784)

Samuel Johnson was an eminent 18th-century literary figure. An essayist, poet, dramatist and critic, he was responsible for the famous Dictionary which appeared in 1755. His novel *The History of Rasselas* in 1759 (Johnson 2007 reprint) examined the quest for happiness and concluded it was an illusory undertaking. In 1775 he published *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (Johnson 1785 reprint), a tour he had undertaken with Boswell. In 1779 he published *Lives of the Eminent English Poets* (Johnson 1868 reprint), a book that greatly impressed Robert Burns, who was moved by Johnson's depiction of the poet, benighted by madness, melancholy and poverty.

#### Johnson's melancholy

Johnson was beset with physical and mental troubles throughout his life. Scarred from birth by scrofula, big-boned and clumsy, with peculiar physical mannerisms, Johnson cut a strange and forbidding figure. He claimed he had inherited from his father 'a vile melancholy' which 'made him mad all his life, at least not sober' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 27). Johnson's first severe bout of melancholy occurred when he was a young man. Boswell maintained there was a 'constitutional' element to Johnson's nervous debility and, indeed, throughout this period it was generally held that mental disorder had a physical basis (Porter 1987) (Box 1). In the *Life of Samuel Johnson*, Boswell tells us:

'The "morbid melancholy", which was lurking in his constitution [...] gathered such strength

### BOX 1 18th-century views about mental and physical health

- In the 18th century, melancholy was seen as a hereditary, physical disorder
- It was held that solitude and inactivity were detrimental to one's health, as was alcoholic excess or indeed any form of excess
- Johnson advocated a stoical silence, whereas Boswell preferred to talk about his woes

in his twentieth year, as to afflict him in a dreadful manner [...] in [...] 1729, he felt himself overwhelmed with an horrible hypochondria, with perpetual irritation, fretfulness, and impatience; and with a dejection, gloom, and despair, which made existence misery. From this dismal malady he never afterwards was perfectly relieved [...] it was, in some degree, occasioned by a defect in his nervous system' (pp. 47–48).

In this passage Boswell refers to 'hypochondria', a term that has changed its meaning over the centuries. Today it implies an excessive preoccupation with physical health and a concomitant exaggeration of the import of minor aches and pains, but in the 18th century it applied to the bodily manifestations of melancholy: the disturbances in appetite, weight, energy and sleep (Berrios 2001). Boswell continues:

'He told Mr. Paradise that he was sometimes so languid and inefficient, that he could not distinguish the hour upon the town-clock. Johnson, upon the first violent attack of this disorder, strove to overcome it by forcible exertions. He frequently walked to Birmingham and back again, and tried many other expedients, but all in vain' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 48).

Here we see Johnson trying exercise as a remedy for his low spirits: he was actually walking a distance of over 30 miles in a day.

Johnson had another bout of severe melancholy after the death of his wife, Tetty, in 1752 and took to drink. In 1764, when he was in his mid-50s, Johnson was struck down again:

'About this time he was afflicted with a very severe return of the hypochondriack disorder, which was ever lurking about him. He was so ill, as, notwithstanding his remarkable love of company, to be entirely averse to society, the most fatal symptom of that malady. Dr. Adams told me, that as an old friend he was admitted to visit him, and that he found him in a deplorable state, sighing, groaning, talking to himself, and restlessly walking from room to room. He then used this emphatical expression of the misery which he felt: 'I would consent to have a limb amputated to recover my spirits' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 342).

Although Johnson subscribed to the theory that mental disorder had a hereditary and physical basis, he also felt that spiritual factors were of great importance. He was wracked by religious questions and this contributed to and shaped how he saw his melancholy. Boswell relates:

‘Johnson suffered much from a state of mind “unsettled and perplexed”, and from that constitutional gloom, which, together with his extreme humility and anxiety with regard to his religious state, made him contemplate himself through too dark and unfavourable a medium’ (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 791).

Here, Boswell suggests that Johnson’s religious outlook made him judge himself too harshly. This is certainly borne out by entries from Johnson’s journal, one of which reads:

‘When I survey my past life, I discover nothing but a barren waste of time, with some disorders of body, and disturbances of the mind, very near to madness, which I hope He that made me will suffer to extenuate many faults, and excuse many deficiencies’ (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 791).

As a result of his religious beliefs, Johnson had an abiding fear of death. Would he be punished everlastingly in hell for his sinful earthly existence? He confessed: ‘he never had a moment when death was not terrible to him’ (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 839).

### *Johnson’s obsessive–compulsive disorder and Tourette syndrome?*

Boswell’s descriptions of Johnson’s unusual behaviour in the *Life of Samuel Johnson* have convinced many commentators that Johnson had what we would now call obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD) and Tourette syndrome (Murray 1979; Pearce 1994). From his 18th-century perspective, Boswell suggested that Johnson had St Vitus’ Dance and quoted the authority of Dr Thomas Sydenham, an eminent British physician. St Vitus’ Dance, also known as Sydenham’s chorea, is characterised by rapid, uncoordinated jerking movements and has been associated with OCD and Tourette syndrome. The diagnosis of St Vitus’ Dance was questioned by Johnson’s friend, the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, who felt that Johnson’s odd movements were psychological in origin. Reynolds concluded that Johnson’s ‘convulsions’ were the outward manifestation of disturbed thoughts.

Physical and psychological explanations of mental disturbance have, of course, vied with each other throughout human history, and in the *Life of Samuel Johnson* we see both sides of the argument being advanced.

### Talking about melancholy

To Boswell, Johnson was: a father figure; his rock in a sea of mental turmoil; a mentor; an advisor; a friend; and a fellow-sufferer from melancholy. Boswell first met Johnson on 16 May 1763 in Tom Davies’ book shop in Covent Garden in London. Boswell was 23 and Johnson 64. They were to become friends and remain so until Johnson’s death in 1784. Early in their relationship, Boswell discovered that, like himself, Johnson, too, experiences bouts of melancholy. He records:

‘He mentioned to me now, for the first time, that he had been distressed by melancholy, and for that reason had been obliged to fly from study and meditation, to the dissipating variety of life. 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 said melancholy people were apt to fly to intemperance for relief, but that it sunk them much deeper in misery. He observed, that labouring men who worked hard, and live sparingly, are seldom or never troubled with low spirits’ (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 316).

There is a great deal in this passage. First, Johnson admits that melancholy had interfered with his work and that he had tried dissipation as a remedy. His advice about how to alleviate melancholy comes from at least two sources. Robert Burton’s 1621 opus *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Burton 1838 reprint) warned, ‘Be not solitary, be not idle’. These were two conditions that Johnson abhorred. He hated to be alone and sought out company to distract himself from himself. He went to taverns and eating houses, and he took in many lodgers, partly from altruism, but also to counter his solitude. However, there was a contrast between how Johnson appeared in public and how he felt in private. Boswell writes:

‘It was observed to Dr. Johnson, that it seemed strange that he, who has so often delighted his company by his lively and brilliant conversation, should say he was miserable.

JOHNSON: Alas! It is all outside; I may be cracking my joke, and cursing the sun. Sun, how I hate thy beams!’ (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 1300).

In later life, Johnson stayed in the well-ordered household of the Thrale family, where their companionship served to divert his gloom. With regard to idleness, Johnson constantly berated himself for his supposed sloth. Johnson was, of course, remarkably prolific. During the period of compiling the *Dictionary*, he found that regular occupation helped his melancholy. Sir Joshua Reynolds observed of Johnson:

‘The great business of his life (he said) was to escape from himself; this disposition he considered

as the disease of his mind, which nothing cured but company' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 106).

Johnson was later to tell Boswell:

'The great direction Burton has left to men disordered like you, is this, Be not solitary; be not idle: which I would thus modify; – If you are idle, be not solitary; if you are solitary, be not idle' (Boswell 1987 reprint: pp. 1042–1043).

In *The English Malady*, the Scottish physician George Cheyne (1733) had warned against excess, whether of food, alcohol or sex. This was advice that Johnson found sensible and he repeated it many times to Boswell, who found it impossible to follow. Cheyne also claimed that nervous disease was more likely to affect the well-to-do because they were considered to possess more refined nerves. Cheyne advised that the lower orders were not prone to melancholy. Further, he observed: 'Fools, weak or stupid persons, are seldom much troubled with vapours or lowness of spirits' (p. 52).

Boswell had examined the question as to whether mental suffering conferred some sort of distinction on the victim in his column, 'The Hypochondriack'. He began by examining this statement by Aristotle: 'Why is it that all men who have excelled in philosophy, in politicks, in poetry, or in the arts, have been subject to melancholy?' He comments:

'Aristotle [...] appears to have admitted the opinion that melancholy is the concomitant of distinguished genius [...] We Hypochondriacks may be glad to accept of this compliment from so great a master of human nature, and to console ourselves in the hour of gloomy distress, by thinking that our suffering marks our superiority' (Bailey 1951: pp. 42–47).

In the essay, Boswell does go on to undermine the notion that melancholy was always accompanied by superiority but he did appear to have a sneaking sympathy for the idea nevertheless. Although Boswell might have been tempted to congratulate himself and his fellow sufferers on being a cut above the rest by virtue of their heightened sensibility, Johnson did not feel that melancholy conferred superiority and advised his biographer: 'Read Cheyne's *English Malady* but do not let him teach you a foolish notion that melancholy is proof of acuteness' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 782).

### Talking about madness

In Johnson's many discussions of madness in the *Life of Samuel Johnson*, he offered several and sometimes contradictory perspectives, which range from the libertarian to the judgemental. These reflected Johnson's wide reading on medical matters, but also, of course, his own experiences of mental turmoil. As we have seen, Johnson claimed

to have been 'mad all his life'. This somewhat extravagant statement begins to make sense, if we consider how he defined madness. For Johnson, melancholy was a symptom of madness. Boswell objected to this theory and wrote of the Doctor:

'I am aware that he himself was too ready to call such a complaint [melancholy] by the name of madness [...] But there is surely a clear distinction between a disorder which affects only the imagination and spirits, while the judgement is sound, and a disorder by which the judgement itself is impaired' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 49).

For Boswell, the core of madness was impaired reason. Boswell admitted that he and Johnson argued about the definition of insanity.

'Dr Johnson and I had a serious conversation by ourselves on melancholy and madness; which he was, I always thought, erroneously inclined to confound together. Melancholy, like "great wit", may be "near allied to madness"; but there is, in my opinion, a distinct separation between them. When he talked of madness, he was to be understood as speaking of those who were in any great degree disturbed, or as it is commonly expressed, "troubled in mind". Some of the ancient philosophers held, that all deviations from right reason were madness' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 856).

In support of his position, Boswell referred to *Observations on the Nature, Kinds, Causes, and Prevention of Insanity* (1782) by Dr Thomas Arnold. Johnson did not make a distinction between melancholy and madness, and appears to have seen them as existing on a spectrum. This helps to explain his great fear: that mental instability would eventually lead to him losing his reason. As Boswell observed:

'To Johnson, whose supreme enjoyment was the exercise of his reason, the disturbance or obscuration of that faculty was the evil most to be dreaded. Insanity, therefore, was the object of his most dismal apprehension [...] That his own diseased imagination should have so far deceived him, is strange' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 49).

Boswell suggested that Johnson's melancholic outlook coloured his thinking about his sanity, so that he judged himself to be mad when he was not. Boswell observes:

'It is a common effect of low spirits or melancholy, to make those who are afflicted with it imagine that they are actually suffering those evils which happen to be most strongly resented to their minds' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 49).

On other occasions, Johnson maintained that madness was but the breaking of social conventions (Box 2), and cited the example of Kit Smart, the poet:

'Madness frequently discovers itself merely by unnecessary deviation from the usual modes

**BOX 2 Johnson's views on madness**

- It was at the end of a spectrum which included lesser mental afflictions
- Individuals could be labelled mad if they broke with social convention
- It could be caused by an excess of imagination
- Work and adversity militated against it

of the world. My poor friend Smart showed the disturbance of his mind, by falling upon his knees, and saying his prayers in the street, or in any other unusual place. Now although, rationally speaking, it is greater madness not to pray at all, than to pray as Smart did, I am afraid there are so many who do not pray that their understanding is not called in question' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 281).

Johnson was suggesting that the attribution of madness to others was, to some extent, a social judgement. Further, he was critical of confining people if they were a bit different, but not actually harmful to others. Using the example of Kit Smart, he observed:

'I did not think he ought to be shut up. His infirmities were not noxious to society. He insisted on people praying with him; and I'd as lief pray with Kit Smart as any one else. Another charge was, that he did not love clean linen; and I have no passion for it' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 281).

Being something of a misfit himself, perhaps Johnson feared that he too might be locked up (Porter 1985). In another discussion, Johnson was asked by the writer Mrs Fanny Burney about the new homes being built between Bedlam and St Luke's Hospital. Was it a good idea for residents to look out onto an asylum, she wondered:

'JOHNSON: Nay, Madam, [...] it is right that we should be kept mind of madness, which is occasioned by too much indulgence in imagination. I think a very moral use may be made of these new buildings: I would have those who have heated imaginations live there, and take warning.

MRS BURNEY: But, Sir, many of the poor people that are mad, have become so from disease, or from distressing events. It is, therefore, not their fault, but their misfortune; and, therefore, to think of them, is a melancholy consideration' (Boswell 1987 reprint: pp. 1225–1226).

In associating an excess of imagination with the origins of madness, Johnson was participating in a long-held tradition (Porter 1987). He had depicted this idea in *The History of Rasselas* (Johnson 2007 reprint), with his account of the mad astronomer, whose 'airy notions' tip him over into the delusion that he can control the elements.

Fanny Burney adopts a more sympathetic view that exonerates 'the poor people' of blame. Of

course, we have to remember that Johnson was a contrarian, who delighted in adopting the opposite view to his interlocutors, so this statement might not have represented his considered opinion.

Elsewhere, Johnson and Boswell discussed the management of the mad. The Doctor tells his friend: 'A madman loves to be with people whom he fears; not as a dog fears the lash; but of whom he stands in awe' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 857). Dr Francis Willis, the mad-doctor who treated George III, argued that the physician should take control of his patients by instilling fear in them. Wiltshire (1991) maintains that, although Willis and Johnson appear to be expressing similar views, Johnson was saying that the mad person could improve command of himself by being in the presence of someone for whom he had great respect. Wiltshire claims that Johnson was anticipating the 'moral treatment' practised at the York Retreat some decades later.

Possibly thinking of himself and his relationship with Johnson, Boswell reflects:

'I was struck with the justice of this observation. To be with those of whom a person, whose mind is wavering and dejected, stands in awe, represses and composes an uneasy tumult of spirits, and consoles him with the contemplation of something steady, and at least comparatively great' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 857).

In the same passage, Johnson advocates work and adversity as a remedy against insanity. He observed: 'Employment, Sir, and hardships, prevent melancholy. I suppose in all our army in America there was not one man who went mad' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 857).

**Johnson's advice to Boswell**

Boswell repeatedly asked Johnson for advice in dealing with his own mental woes, and the *Life of Samuel Johnson* records many examples of Johnson's responses.

**Johnson as Socratic questioner**

When Boswell fell out with his London landlord, Johnson reassured him: 'Consider, Sir, how insignificant this will appear a twelvemonth hence'. Years later, Boswell reflected:

'Were this consideration to be applied to most of the little vexatious incidents of life, by which our quiet is too often disturbed, it would prevent many painful sensations. I have tried it frequently, with good effect' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 299).

Johnson was suggesting to Boswell that he alter his perspective on his misfortunes: to get them in proportion. In another exchange, Johnson makes much the same point: 'make the most and best of your lot, and compare yourself not with the few

that are above you, but with the multitudes which are below you' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 1362).

However, Boswell did not always agree with Johnson's advice. On one occasion, Boswell recounts:

'I expressed to him a weakness of mind which I could not help; an uneasy apprehension that my wife and children, who were at a great distance from me, might, perhaps, be ill.'

Johnson replies: 'Sir, (said he,) consider how foolish you would think it in them to be apprehensive that you are ill'. Boswell is temporarily comforted, but finds a flaw in Johnson's argument. He observes:

'This sudden turn relieved me for the moment; but I afterwards perceived it to be an ingenious fallacy. I might, to be sure, be satisfied that they had no reason to be apprehensive about me, because I knew that I myself was well' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 720).

### *Boswell as his own tormentor: stoicism v. self-absorption*

Where Johnson advocated stoical silence in the face of mental anguish, Boswell preferred to talk. Johnson advised him:

'When any fit of anxiety, or gloominess, or perversion of mind, lays hold upon you, make it a rule not to publish it by complaints, but exert your whole care to hide it; by endeavouring to hide it, you will drive it away' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 1007).

Johnson suspected that Boswell rather enjoyed talking about his problems and said to him: 'Of the exaltations and depressions of your mind you delight to talk, and I hate to hear. Drive all such fancies from you' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 1256).

On 8 April 1780, Johnson was evidently becoming frustrated with Boswell's constant moaning. He said to him:

'You are always complaining of melancholy, and I conclude from those complaints that you are fond of it. No man talks of that which he is desirous to conceal, and every man desires to conceal that of which he is ashamed [...] make it an invariable and obligatory law to yourself, never to mention your own mental diseases; if you are never to speak of them, you will think on them but little, and if you think little of them, they will molest you rarely. When you talk of them, it is plain that you want either praise or pity; for praise there is no room, and pity will do you no good; therefore, from this hour speak no more, think no more, about them' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 1048).

Johnson however also used humour to deal with Boswell's self-preoccupation. Boswell records:

'I teized him with fanciful apprehensions of unhappiness. A moth having fluttered round the candle, and burnt itself, he laid hold of this little

incident to admonish me; saying, with a sly look, and in a solemn but quiet tone, "That creature was its own tormentor, and I believe its name was BOSWELL"' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 333).

### *Johnson as a therapeutic presence*

For Boswell, just being in the presence of Johnson was enough to alleviate his problems. For example, Boswell writes:

'In a moment he was in a full glow of conversation, and I felt myself elevated as if brought into another state of being [...] I exclaimed [...] 'I am now, intellectually, Hermippus redivivus [restored], I am quite restored by him, by transfusion of mind' (Boswell 1987 reprint: pp. 680–681).

In another passage, Boswell explained how Johnson exercised his therapeutic influence over him:

'I complained of a wretched changefulness, so that I could not preserve, for any long continuance, the same views of any thing. It was most comfortable to me to experience, in Dr. Johnson's company, a relief from this uneasiness. His steady vigorous mind held firm before me those objects which my own feeble and tremulous imagination frequently presented, in such a wavering state, that my reason could not judge well of them' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 870).

When Boswell was away from Johnson, he missed his comforting presence, as he revealed in a letter to him:

'My mind has been somewhat dark this summer. I have need of your warming and vivifying rays; and I hope I shall have them frequently' (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 639).

Wiltshire (1991) suggests that Boswell had an idealised view of Johnson and tended to minimise the Doctor's own struggles. It was important to Boswell that Johnson was a strong, stable figure. He also represented to Boswell an ideal of manliness manifest by firmness, resolution and self-control (Wiltshire 1991). It was an ideal that Boswell repeatedly tried to attain, and repeatedly failed to achieve. Boswell, whose real father viewed him with disdain, regarded Johnson as a substitute father, and one who treated him with kindness and concern.

### **Concluding remarks**

Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* lets us see how madness and melancholy were talked about in Georgian Britain. Compared with today, there are differences but also many similarities in the way people thought about and tried to remedy mental affliction. Certainly much of Johnson's advice to Boswell, with its emphasis on activity, social engagement and moderation, corresponds to our thinking on the subject. In their discussions of

their struggles, Boswell and Johnson illustrate the essential individual, human dimension of mental illness, and their words have struck an emotional chord with later generations across diverse cultural periods.

At the heart of the *Life of Samuel Johnson* is the very human story of friendship. In the book, on the eve of his return to Scotland, Boswell records his feelings for Johnson, while they are at a social gathering where music is being played:

‘This evening, while some of the tunes of ordinary composition were played with no great skill, my frame was agitated, and I was conscious of a generous attachment to Dr. Johnson, as my preceptor and friend, mixed with an affectionate regret that he was an old man, whom I should probably lose in a short time [...] My reverence and affection for him were in full glow. I said to him, “My dear Sir, we must meet every year”’ (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 874).

In response, Johnson also expressed his affection for Boswell, but with a characteristic warning to his biographer to stop badgering him about it:

‘My regard for you is greater almost than I have words to express; but I do not choose to be always repeating it; write it down in the first leaf of your pocket-book, and never doubt of it again’ (Boswell 1987 reprint: p. 874).

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