‘A prey to melancholy’*

HANNAH MORE

[Letter to her sister dated April 1784] Did I tell you I went to see Dr Johnson? Miss Monckton¹ carried me, and we paid him a very long visit. He received me with the greatest kindness and affection, and as to the Bas Bleu,² all the flattery I ever received from everybody together would not make up the sum. He said – but I seriously insist you do not tell anybody, for I am ashamed of writing it even to you – he said there was no name in poetry that might not be glad to own it. You cannot imagine how I stared: all this from Johnson, that parsimonious praiser! I told him I was delighted at his approbation; he answered quite characteristically, ‘And so you may, for I give you the opinion of a man who does not rate his judgment in these things very low, I can tell you.’

[Letter to Mrs Boscawen, referring to Johnson’s visit to Oxford in November 1784] My appointment at Oxford was to flirt with Dr Johnson, but he was a recreant knight, and had deserted. He had been for a fortnight at the house of my friend Dr Adams, the head of Pembroke, with Mr Boswell; but the latter being obliged to go to town, Johnson was not thought well enough to remain behind, and afterwards to travel by himself; so that he left my friend’s house the very day I got thither, though they told me he did me the honour to be very angry and out of humour, that I did not come so soon as I had promised. I am grieved to find that his mind is still a prey to melancholy, and that the fear of death operates on him to the destruction of his peace. It is grievous – it is unaccountable! He who has the Christian hope upon the best foundation; whose faith is strong, whose morals are irreproachable! But I am willing to ascribe it to bad nerves, and bodily disease.

[Letter of December 1784] Poor dear Johnson! He is past all hope. The dropsy has brought him to the point of death; his legs are scarified; but nothing will do. I have, however, the comfort to hear that his dread of dying is in a great measure subdued; and now he says ‘the bitterness of death is past’.

In another letter to a friend, Hannah More recounts ‘a conversation which I had with the late Revd Mr Storry, of Colchester...’. We were riding together near Colchester, when I asked Mr Storry whether he had ever heard that Dr Johnson expressed great dissatisfaction with himself on the approach of death, and that in reply to friends, who, in order to comfort him spoke of his writings in defence of virtue and religion, he had said, ‘admitting all you urge to be true, how can I tell when I have done enough’.

Mr S. assured me that what I had just mentioned was perfectly correct; and then added the following interesting particulars.

Dr Johnson, said he, did feel as you describe, and was not to be comforted by the ordinary topics of consolation which were addressed to him. In consequence he desired to see a clergyman, and particularly described the views and character of the person whom he wished to consult. After some consideration a Mr Winstanley was named, and the Doctor requested Sir John Hawkins to write a note in his name, requesting Mr W.’s attendance as a minister.

Mr W., who was in a very weak state of health, was quite overpowered on receiving the note, and felt appalled by the very thought of encountering the talents and learning of Dr Johnson. In his embarrassment he went to his friend Colonel Pownall, and told him what had happened, asking, at the same time for his advice how to act. The Colonel, who was a pious man, urged him immediately to follow what appeared to be a remarkable leading of providence, and for the time argued his friend out of his nervous apprehension: but after he had left Colonel Pownall, Mr W.’s fears returned in so great a degree as to prevail upon him to abandon the thought of a personal interview with the Doctor. He determined in consequence to write him a letter: that letter I think Mr Storry said he had seen, at least a copy of it, and part of it he repeated to me as follows.

Sir – I beg to acknowledge the honour of your note, and am very sorry that the state of my health prevents my compliance with your request: but my nerves are so shattered that I feel as if I should be quite confounded by your presence, and instead of promoting, should only injure the cause in which you desire my aid. Permit me therefore to write what I should wish to say were I present. I can easily conceive what would be the subjects of your inquiry. I can conceive that the views of yourself have changed with your condition, and that on the near approach of death, what you once considered mere peccadillos have risen into mountains of guilt, while your best actions have dwindled into nothing. On whichever side you look, you see only positive transgressions or defective obedience; and hence, in self-despair, are eagerly inquiring, ‘What shall I do to be saved?’ I say to you, in the language of the Baptist, ‘Behold the Lamb of God!’ &c. &c.

When Sir John Hawkins came to this part of Mr W.’s letter, the