



# Resisting Insanity: Language and Disorder in Eighteenth-Century Writing about Madness

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# EPI-REVEL

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Resisting Insanity: Language and Disorder in  
Eighteenth-Century Writing about Madness

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In 1755, nine years after signing his contract with the booksellers of London, Samuel Johnson finally published the work which was to establish him unshakeably as his time's most formidable man of letters, and for which he was to receive, in stages, 1500 guineas, his *Dictionary of the English Language*. The year 1746 had been, to quote Robert DeMaria Jr, "pivotal" in Johnson's life, a year in which "everything changed," including his state of reliance upon the uncertainty of freelance work, his nomadic London existence, and even his own doubts about his future as a writer.<sup>1</sup> Johnson in his 1755 "Preface," however, is famously dismissive about his achievement, and in fact about the very nature of what he undertook to deliver back in 1746:

Of the event of this work, for which, having laboured it with so much application, I cannot but have some degree of parental fondness, it is natural to form conjectures. Those who have been persuaded to think well of my design, require that it should fix our language, and put a stop to those alterations which time and chance have hitherto been suffered to make in it without opposition. With this consequence I will confess that I flattered myself for a while; but now begin to fear that I have indulged expectation which neither reason nor experience can justify. When we see men grow old and die at a certain time one after another, from century to century, we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay, that it is in his power to change sublunary nature, or clear the world at once from folly, vanity, and affectation.

Such hopes and efforts are indeed vain: "sounds are too volatile and subtle for legal restraints" and "to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally the undertakings of pride."<sup>2</sup>

In 1747, a year into his labours, his sense of the vanity of the task was expressed in more personal terms, and with a much starker appreciation for the dangers of unsettling his native tongue. "I am frightened at its extent," he wrote to Lord Chesterfield, "and, like the soldiers of Caesar, look on Britain as a new world, which it is almost madness to invade."<sup>3</sup> If language is a country and the lexicographer an invader, then Johnson's admission refers to the vastness of the task ahead, particularly once the conqueror becomes coloniser, immersed in the details of spelling, punctuation, definition, chaining the wind. But there is too in Johnson's comment a darker edge than a mere shirking from irksome labour. Madness and fright are strong terms to use in writing to a potential patron, as Chesterfield then was, but they were not terms that Johnson used lightly. Extent hides scope for the unknown, for the infinite breadth of difference, incoherence, confusion in this "new world," and Johnson's fright is not so much at anticipated toil, but at the capacity of language to cease to mean. Johnson the lexicographer might expect drudgery, but Johnson the depressive, just behind Johnson the mad invader, fears for his sanity. Language, the last defence against chaos and disorder, is coming under threat from the lexicographer's own forces of reason and intelligence. The supreme stylist dreads to approach his native tongue, fearing that his intrusion will find only inconsistency

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Demaria Jr, *The Life of Samuel Johnson: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), pp. 110–111.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vol. (London: Johnson et al., 1799 [1755]), I, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Johnson, "Plan of an English Dictionary" in *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, 5 vol. (Oxford: William Pickering, and Talboys and Wheeler, 1825), V, 21.

and inanity. The collapse of linguistic values is also the collapse of reason and intelligence, the destruction of everything that the depressive Johnson strives to keep in place.

This paper addresses not only Johnson's capacity to construct resistances against mental instability, and the threats he feared against those resistances, but the extent to which a range of eighteenth-century writers, including Anne Finch, James Boswell, William Cowper and, later, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, adopted linguistic strategies as a last line of defence in the face of mental, and usually depressive, collapse. Foucault's well-known remark, that "*language is the first and last structure of madness*, its constituent form: on language are based all the cycles in which madness articulates its nature,"<sup>4</sup> may therefore also be applied in a pre-emptive mode: language is the first and last structure of fear of madness: on language are based the cycles in which sanity articulates the nature of its resistance.

For Johnson, that resistance, and the linguistic form it takes, is frequently in prayer. While the shaping of language was clearly a central activity of his professional and psychological life, a field of robust energies and gruff play as well as a medium for the resonant articulation of moral incumbencies, there was, apparently, in prayer, with the soothing insistence of its formalistic "givens," the opportunity for Johnson not only to confess, as he did to Chesterfield, but also to request.

Almighty and most merciful Father, Creator and Preserver of mankind, look down with pity upon my troubles and maladies. Heal my body, strengthen my mind. Compose my distraction, calm my inquietude, and relieve my terrors, that if it please thee, I may run the race that is set before me with peace, patience, and confidence. Grant this O Lord, and take not from me thy Holy Spirit but pardon and bless me for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord.<sup>5</sup>

The alliterative patterns, the accumulation of clauses, the variations in phrasing and the triplication of nouns are all characteristics of Johnson's wider prose style, but here softened in tone and reduced in complexity. Above all, Johnson is conceding dependence, as if the language of prayer allows the safer articulation of his most deeply experienced mental maladies in a context where salvation is at least a rhythmic possibility if not a psychological one. The prayer, in fact, immediately follows the day's diary entry, 18 September 1768, Johnson's birthday:

I have now begun the sixtieth year of my life. How the last year has past I am unwilling to terrify myself with thinking. This day has been past in great perturbation. I was distracted at Church in an uncommon degree, and my distress has had very little intermission. I have found myself somewhat relieved by reading, which I therefore intend to practice when I am able. This day it came into my mind to write the history of my melancholy. On this I purpose to deliberate. I know not whether it may not too much disturb me.

I this day read a great part of Pascal's life.<sup>6</sup>

The diary clears the way for the prayer, specifying the nature of the "distraction" prior to expressing the request for pardon and blessing. To that extent, the linguistic calm of the prayer is made possible by the potential unruliness of the diary. But that unruliness also concerns the reliance on language in resisting mental malady. It is surprising to find Johnson at sixty apparently discovering relief in reading and resolving to practice it when he is able.<sup>7</sup> But more surprising still, because more potentially unruly, more frightening even than undertaking a dictionary of English, is the thought "to write the history of my melancholy." Here indeed is language coming close to what in many senses is its opposite. Meaning,

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4 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1997 [1967]), p. 100.

5 Samuel Johnson, prayer on 18 September 1768, cited in Allan Ingram (ed.), *Patterns of Madness in the Eighteenth Century: A Reader* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998), p. 110.

6 Samuel Johnson, diary entry for 18 September 1768, cited in Ingram, *Patterns*, pp. 109–110.

7 On Johnson's reading and its significance, see Robert DeMaria Jr, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

reason, sequence, articulation, will be brought face to face with void, indifference, inertia, self-absorption. To define melancholy, as Johnson does in the *Dictionary*, as “a disease, supposed to proceed from a redundance of black bile,” as “a kind of madness, in which the mind is always fixed on one object,” and as “a gloomy, pensive, discontented temper,” is a quite different scale of risk from bringing to the intricacies of obsession and gloom the articulations of sequential, analytical prose, orchestrated with rhythmic insistencies that would threaten to conclude not in the possibility of salvation but with the likelihood of complete psychological and linguistic collapse. Johnson, wisely, remained with the relatively stable rhythms of semi-formulaic prayer. He never, as far as we know, embarked on his history.

A sequence of writers and depressives across the eighteenth century recognised and, in some cases, negotiated, the same dilemma: the anxious and risky relation between resistance and collapse in the articulation of mental instability. It was a relation that worried James Boswell throughout his lifetime of journal keeping. “Could I extract the hypochondria from my mind, and deposit it in my journal, writing down would be very valuable”<sup>8</sup> he wrote, characteristically advising himself within the very journal which served him as confessional, conscience and apologia. Equally, the contrary view: “I really believe that these grievous complaints should not be vented; they should be considered as absurd chimeras, whose reality should not be allowed in words,”<sup>9</sup> characteristically reprimanding himself within the very journal which served as looking-glass, vanity-case and dustbin. If Johnson feared that words might crumble to nothing in the lexicographer’s fingers, Boswell, whose depression was always more linguistically accessible than Johnson’s, and consequently more frequently expressed, bestowed on language an absolute power with the capacity to render real what would otherwise, he hoped, not be permitted to exist, an attachment to the word that only breaks down with the unrelieved depression of his final years. “N.B. Understood *not well* till a change is marked,”<sup>10</sup> he writes in October 1787, thereby relinquishing a lifelong dedication to language in favour of a silence that merely acknowledges the reality he has no choice but to accept, irrespective of what the words are doing. Resistance ceases to be possible when what is to be resisted can no longer be articulated: depression ultimately overwhelms the possibility of expressing it.

His journalising of “*not well*” seems to have helped sustain Boswell’s capacity to resist his temperamental depressiveness, at least until the last years of his life. There is a similar relation and similar tensions perceivable between language and mental malady in a quite different form from much earlier in the period. What the journal did for Boswell, in a manner of speaking, poetry, apparently, did, for Anne Finch. So, in “The Spleen,” she writes:

O’er me alas! thou dost too much prevail:  
I feel thy Force, whilst I against thee rail:  
feel my verse decay, and my cramped Numbers fail.

Spleen, depression, melancholy, for Finch, undermines the very mode through which she attempts to resist it. Poetry itself, the vehicle for railing, cannot withstand the force of its subject: “Thro’ thy black Jaundice I all Objects see, / As Dark, and Terrible, as thee.”<sup>11</sup> The poem, “The Spleen,” is overwhelmed by the spleen: the “decay” that characterises “sublunary nature” is brought home to the formal features of the poem, the capacity to rhyme, to scan, as, equally, to the consciousness of the poet. At the same time, the very undertaking of the poem

<sup>8</sup> James Boswell, *Boswell: The Ominous Years, 1774-1776*, ed. by Charles Ryskamp and F. A. Pottle (London: William Heinemann, 1963), p. 240.

<sup>9</sup> James Boswell, *Boswell in Holland, 1763-1764*, ed. by F. A. Pottle (London: William Heinemann, 1952), p. 207.

<sup>10</sup> James Boswell, *Private Papers of James Boswell from Malahide Castle*, ed. by Geoffrey Scott and F. A. Pottle, 18 vols (New York: privately printed, 1928-34), XVII, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Anne Finch, *The Poems of Anne, Countess of Winchelsea*, ed. by Myra Reynolds (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1903), p. 250.

at all was an act of resistance to depression, a venting of anger while anger still had meaning and words the strength to express it. In an earlier poem, “Ardelia to Melancholy,” Finch describes the sequence whereby poetry is mustered, practised, and discarded, in the fight against depression. After the successive failures of mirth, of music, of friendship, of all arts, she

invok’d a Muse,  
And Poetry wou’d often use,  
To guard me from the Tyrant pow’r;  
And to oppose thee ev’ry hour  
New troops of fancy’s, did I chuse.

Poetry and its weapons, its capacity, among others, for deluding through “troops of fancy’s,” is able, for a while, to keep at bay the harsh and insistent reality that is the delusion of melancholy. Language does have the potency that Boswell was to ascribe to it over half a century later, but briefly. Meaning, apparently, is fleeting: words that can frame it can equally collapse into incoherence, the end of meaning. “Alas!,” continues Finch, “in vain, for all agree / To yeild me Captive up to thee.” “Ardelia to Melancholy” ends, as poems must, in silence, but here it is a silence explicitly identifying the defeat of all human significance, and with it the power of making meaning, in the face of the subject of the poem:

Thou, through my life, wilt with me go,  
And make ye passage, sad, and slow.  
All, that cou’d ere thy ill got rule, invade,  
Their useless arms, before thy feet have laid;  
The Fort is thine, now ruin’d, all within,  
Whilst by decays without, thy Conquest too, is seen.<sup>12</sup>

The decay of the poem is matched, again, by the decay of the poet: the silence of the poem’s end is pre-emptive of the silence awaiting the poet, the end of all sublunary decay, the final confirmation of the truth of the melancholy vision.

Around a century later, Wordsworth was apparently able to throw off a moment of melancholy insight through the speedy application of poetry. As he puts it in the “Immortality Ode”:

Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song,  
And while the young lambs bound  
As to the tabor’s sound,  
To me alone there came a thought of grief:  
A timely utterance gave that thought relief,  
And I again am strong.<sup>13</sup>

If this contrasts sharply with the perennial struggle with words and misery experienced by Finch, it also strikes a jarringly glib note alongside the long confessional, concessional narration of poetic resistance that is Coleridge’s letter to Sara Hutchinson, “Dejection.” Coleridge, by 1802, the same year as Wordsworth’s “Ode” and of his “timely utterance” (the nine-line “My heart leaps up when I behold”), had virtually lost hope in language as a means of resistance to depression, and certainly to the addiction which compounded it. “For 5 months past my mind has been strangely shut up,” he wrote in September 1803 to his friend and benefactor Tom Wedgwood:

I have taken the paper with the intention to write to you many times; but it has been all one blank Feeling, one blank idealess Feeling. I had nothing to say, I could say nothing. [...]. While I am awake, by patience, employment, effort of mind, and walking I can keep the fiend at Arm’s length; but the Night is my Hell, Sleep my tormenting Angel [...]. Dreams with me are no Shadows, but the very Substance and foot-thick Calamities of my Life.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Finch, *Poems*, pp. 15–16.

<sup>13</sup> William Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, ed. by Thomas Hutchinson, revised by Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 460.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, letter to Tom Wedgwood, 16 September 1803, cited in Ingram, *Patterns*, p. 221.

The curiously lobotomised language of much of “Dejection: A Letter” is indicative of a writer, unlike Finch and Boswell, who has at this stage ceased to resist. Just capable of getting through the day, night-time sees his sleeping mind ravaged unresistingly by the satanic forces of his dreams. His poem, for the most part, narrates what is unavoidably the case, rather than participating in the struggle to prevent, or delay, or alter, his “foot-thick Calamities.”

“Dejection” exists in the gap between language and emptiness, between the language that rightly pertains to objects and creatures and sensations of health, and the emptiness of the collapsed self, essentially inexpressible, imparted only through the most commonplace linguistic gestures:

A Grief without a pang, void, dark and drear,  
A stifling, drowsy, unimpassion'd Grief  
That finds no natural outlet, no Relief  
In word, or sigh, or tear —  
This, Sara! well thou know'st,  
Is that sore Evil, which I dread the most,  
And oft'nest suffer! In this heartless Mood,  
To other thoughts by yonder Throstle woo'd,  
That pipes within the Larch tree, not unseen,  
(The Larch, which pushes out in tassels green  
It's bundled Leafits) woo'd to mild Delights  
By all the tender Sounds and gentle Sights  
Of this sweet Primrose-month — and vainly woo'd  
O dearest Sara! in this heartless Mood  
All this long Eve, so balmy and serene,  
Have I been gazing on the western Sky.<sup>15</sup>

What the poem describes is a state of well-being, the state of nature and of Sara, to which the poet has no access. His language, far from resisting depression, belongs to another world: the details the poet sees fill out his lines, provide the visual context for the narration, but only in order to contradict the true speechlessness of dejection. In the context of his spiritual collapse, they are “lifeless Shapes,” the language that pertains to them stand-in language, substituting for the non-language in which Coleridge would, if he could, describe his state of mind. As it is, his mental state has to make do with its opposite: plenitude, energies, beauties, filtered through an inert, unresisting linguistic consciousness.

Far closer to Coleridge in this than Wordsworth was William Cowper. Convinced from the age of forty-one that he was unalterably damned for all eternity, life and language took on an inevitably different perspective for Cowper, while the notion of resistance had no real validity at all. How can one resist eternity? Cowper's poetry, therefore, is frequently an exercise in displacement, a concentration on objects adjacent to Cowper's accepted dilemma but differently angled, seen in a kinder light. He writes, for example, an “Epitaph on Johnson”:

Here Johnson lies — a sage, by all allow'd,  
Whom to have bred may well make England proud;  
Whose prose was eloquence by wisdom taught,  
The graceful vehicle of virtuous thought;  
Whose verse may claim — grave, masculine, and strong,  
Superior praise to the mere poet's song;  
Who many a noble gift from heav'n possess'd,  
And faith at last — alone worth all the rest.  
Oh man immortal by a double prize!  
By Fame on earth — by Glory in the skies!<sup>16</sup>

The death of a poet, clearly, was a subject to engage Cowper, but his treatment of Johnson's case is apparently calculated to contrast, though silently, with his own. Here is a figure of

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15 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Penguin Book of English Romantic Verse*, ed. by David Wright (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 181–190.

16 William Cowper, *Poetical Works*, ed. by H. S. Milford (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 363.

whom his country may justly boast, one of the righteous in verse and prose, thought and deed. Language in Johnson's hands, far from crumbling, springs forth with added grace and strength, while language, for Cowper, is best utilised in enabling attention to be directed elsewhere, to the achievements of another. No language can express, least of all resist, the source of Cowper's despair. Better to speak of certainties abroad: Johnson is blessed with faith and is rewarded, as the equally faithful Cowper will not be, with "Glory in the skies."

Cowper's conviction may or may not be mad: his poetry, however, is sane. Its capacity to concentrate attentiveness represents a genuine engagement with other life forms, other lives, external issues and events, anything but Cowper's own despair. In the sense of distracting his own attention, poetry was indeed a species of resistance for almost thirty years until his death in 1800. But the awful knowledge remained, a bedrock beneath the shifting linguistic forms of his verse. As such, he is drawn to subjects, such as Alexander Selkirk in "Verses, Supposed to be Written by Alexander Selkirk," and the castaway in the poem of the same name, whose fates have some scope to act as metaphors for his own.<sup>17</sup> "Yardley Oak," equally, is distinctive and discrete, but utilisable as a means for edging towards the core of Cowper's untouchable wound.

Embowell'd now, and of thy ancient self  
Possessing nought but the scoop'd rind, that seems  
An huge throat calling to the clouds for drink,  
Which it would give in riv'lets to thy root,  
Thou temptest none, but rather much forbid'st  
The feller's toil, which thou couldst ill requite.  
Yet is thy root sincere, sound as the rock,  
A quarry of stout spurs and knotted fangs,  
Which, crook'd into a thousand whimsies, clasp  
The stubborn soil, and hold thee still erect.<sup>18</sup>

The play of similarity and unbridgeable difference here is intricate. Like the oak, the poet is a living shell, his spiritual hope dead within him, and like the oak he hugely yearns for nourishment from above. Like the oak his felling would bring no profit: the death of one of the damned, unlike the death of Johnson, takes only a worthless soul to an unspeakable place. Like the oak the poet lives on, clinging to the "stubborn soil," in the face of death, but tragically unlike the oak Cowper's "root" is far from "sincere, sound as the rock." Where the oak has the strength and health of its "ancient self" still powering the life within its shell, the poet has only the shell, a travesty life, insecure, a pretence, a sequence of appearances, distracting utterances, waiting for the inevitable. Yardley Oak may be a "semblance only of itself" to the outward eye, but Cowper, in appearance in health and fitness, is a more dire "semblance," being spiritually wholly unfit, wholly isolated from the life he describes.

Cowper, then, is curiously absent from the poetry that relies so paradoxically on his reflective voice. The language of his verse might suggest a personal register, intimate intonations, but the self is remote, in spiritual agony, its predicament paralleled but essentially unvoiced. Coleridge at least could conceive of a voice capable of expressing something approaching the pain of his inner world: "What a Scream / Of agony, by Torture lengthen'd out? That Lute sent forth!" In the midst of his reflections, the poet is distracted from the stand-in by something real, or at least by something capable of bearing more closely on his true state. The storm is allowed for a while to speak for disorder and destructive potential, as out of place, apparently, in "dejection" as the poet is among energy and beauty:

O thou wild Storm without!  
Jagg'd Rock, or mountain Pond, or blasted Tree,  
Or Pine-Grove, whither Woodman never clomb,

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<sup>17</sup> I have written elsewhere on this. See Allan Ingram, *The Madhouse of Language: Writing and Reading Madness in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 181–182.

<sup>18</sup> Cowper, *Poetical Works*, pp. 410–414.

Or lonely House, long held the Witches' Home,  
Methinks were fitter Instruments for Thee,  
Mad Lutanist! that in this month of Showers,  
Of dark brown Gardens and of peeping Flowers,  
Mak'st Devil's Yule with worse than wintry Song  
The Blossoms, Buds, and timorous Leaves among!

The wind, in fact, becomes for Coleridge almost an ideal poet, capable of expressing in its one voice all tales of suffering, even, perhaps, Coleridge's own:

Thou Actor, perfect in all tragic Sounds!  
Thou mighty Poet, even to frenzy bold!  
What tell'st thou now about?  
'Tis of the rushing of an Host in Rout  
And many groans for men with smarting Wounds —  
At once they groan with smart, and shudder with the cold!

If the approach of death is implicit in the "shudder" that accompanies the "groan," it is apt: Coleridge leaves the wind's voice, the only utterance coming close to his own condition. The unpoetic "groan" has more affinity with the poet than does poetry. As he moves to things of life, he departs once again into stand-in language, and significantly to Wordsworth:

'Tis hush'd! there is a Trance of deepest Silence,  
Again! but all that Sound, as of a rushing Crowd,  
And Groans and tremulous Shudderings, all are over.  
And it has other Sounds, and all less deep, less loud!  
A Tale of less Affright,  
And tempered with Delight,  
As William's self had made the tender Lay —  
'Tis of a little Child  
Upon a heathy Wild,  
Not far from home, but it has lost it's way —  
And now moans low in utter grief and fear —  
And now screams loud, and hopes to make it's Mother hear!

Wordsworth is the poet of health, of language that resists and casts casually aside in the poetic managment of melancholy. Coleridge moves on.

Progress, however, has been made: the poet, if not himself capable of the wind's eloquence or of speaking in tongues that convey all meaning to all men, nevertheless can now conceive of such a voice, can even sound to be celebrating it, though not possessing it:

And would we aught behold of higher Worth  
Than that inanimate cold World allow'd  
To that poor loveless ever anxious Crowd,  
Ah! from the Soul itself must issue forth  
A Light, a Glory, and a luminous Cloud  
Enveloping the Earth!  
And from the Soul itself must there be sent  
A sweet and potent Voice, of it's own Birth,  
Of all sweet Sounds, the Life and Element.

Coleridge himself might fear his own perpetual enmeshment in the enervation of "that inanimate cold World," but his language, for a while, resists the inertness of dejection and, in speaking of the voice he does not possess, of its purity and potency, and of the joy from which it derives, which is not his own — "*Joy, innocent Sara! that ne'er was given / Save to the pure, and in their purest Hour, / Joy, Sara!*" — he manages to reach the conclusion of the poem in a manner wholly undermining of "Dejection":

Thus, thus, should'st thou rejoice!

To thee would all things live from Pole to Pole;  
Their Life the Eddying of thy living Soul —  
O dear! O Innocent! O full of Love!  
A very Friend! A sister of my Choice —  
O dear, as Light and Impulse from above,  
Thus may'st thou ever, evermore rejoice!



To the extent that the “Joy” is not Coleridge’s, this rapture is stand-in rapture; but to the extent that his poem has brought meaning in the face of despair, and has articulated a celebration while encountering dejection, resistance has effectively been mounted not only against “foot-thick Calamities” but, more impressively, against “blank idealess Feeling.”

The search for meaning is complicated, of course, by religion. Johnson had no doubts in his prayers that he was addressing the “Almighty and most merciful Father,” a sanctuary, or asylum, of calm in the swell of distraction and incoherence. George Trosse, on the other hand, found his first encounter with the almighty force altogether more ambiguous. The event described dates from 1656, a religious context of quite a different complexion to Johnson’s. It was written, however, in the 1690s, with Trosse some thirty years on in his later career as a Nonconformist minister. In 1656 he was a drunken ne’er-do-well, apparently visited early one morning by the “*Holy God*,” whose disembodied voice instructs him repeatedly “*Yet more humble; Yet more humble*,” as Trosse kneels, pulls down his stockings and hose, and sprinkles earth and dust on his head, in attempted compliance with the injunction. “At length,” relates Trosse,

standing up before the *Window*, I either *heard a Voice*, which bid me, or *had a strong Impulse*, which excited me, to *cut off my Hair*; to which I reply’d, *I have no Scissars*. It was then hinted, that a *Knife would do it*; but I answer’d, *I have none*. Had I one, I verily believe, this *Voice* would have gone from my *Hair* to my *Throat*, and have commanded me to *cut it*: For I have all Reason to conclude, that the *Voice* was the *Voice of Satan*, and that his Design was, to *humble me as low as Hell*.

“Thus,” continues Trosse, as the awful truth comes through to him, “pretending the *Worship of God*, I fell, in effect, to the *Worshipping of the Devil*.”<sup>19</sup> Satan might not be “the Word” but he does have mastery over language and the capacity to speak in voices not his own. Trosse narrates this formative phase in his relations with spiritual powers, having mistaken, almost disastrously, the malevolent for the benign. When the devil comes as God, it is crucial to decide whom to resist. When language is endowed with absolute authority, plausible darkness may stand in for the silence of light.

Trosse’s late recognition brought about a mental and spiritual collapse with several periods in asylums before the confirmation of his faith. A misplaced reliance on language can be as devastating as a terror at its potential collapse. “I wish,” wrote Johnson to his childhood friend Edmund Hector in 1755, sending him a copy of the *Dictionary*, “come of wishes what will, that my work may please you, as much as it now and then pleased me, for I did not find dictionary making so very unpleasant as it may be thought.”<sup>20</sup> As the examples of Finch, Boswell, Coleridge, even Cowper suggest, language can prove more resilient, more fundamentally orderly, perhaps, than Johnson feared. The threat of disorder, unsustainability, collapse into incoherence was, after all, a “vanity,” or “madness,” within his own mind.

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<sup>19</sup> George Trosse, *The Life of the Reverend Mr. George Trosse*, ed. by A. W. Brink (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1974), pp. 86–87.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, 6 vols, ed. by Bruce Redford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), I, 105.