

The Orbit of Pursuit in Johnson's *Rasselas*

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Abstract—*Rasselas* (1759), a story of the quest for a life of flawless happiness, could be read as a rejection of the facile assumptions and assurances of philosophical Optimism in the context of the Enlightenment. In this article an attempt is made to follow *Rasselas* along his quest and see, through his eyes, the emerging picture of the insatiability of man's desires. The aim is to throw into high relief the central humanist motif of the circular orbit of human desire as it revolves in harmony with all other particles of the material universe, and to trace the text as it recoils on itself in an allegorical manifestation of *Rasselas*' pursuit.

Index Terms—Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas*, human desire, optimism, Enlightenment

I. INTRODUCTION

Rasselas (1759) is a moral fable written by a writer who, along with Voltaire, intellectually stands alone in his "penetrating rejection of the facile assumptions and assurances of philosophical Optimism" (Barnouw, 2008, p. 441). In other words, *Rasselas* could be read, among other things, as a tale of the vanity of human wishes. Hence, the motif of the insatiable nature of man's desires becomes central. Human beings are never satisfied with their condition, but most do not fathom this and suppose a time in the future when they will have no more desires. We human beings desire not to desire; we anticipate to be freed from our longings by embracing those very longings. Samuel Johnson highlights this theme in a masterly combination of elaborate rhetoric and delightful narrative in *Rasselas*.

Johnson was an artist conscious of his craft who, in his own words, "had early laid it down as a fixed rule to do his best on every occasion" and never attempted "to deliver his *thoughts without arranging* them in the clearest manner" (Boswell, 2000, p.72, emphasis added). The occasion for writing the fable, paying off the debts due to his mother's funeral, seems to have been an excuse. In the words of Grant, "We can of course rule out totally non-literary intentions as obviously irrelevant. One intention Dr Johnson had in writing *Rasselas* was to pay for his mother's funeral, but nobody would claim that this fact bears in any significant way on the work's content" (2001, p.397).

The story is a philosophical fable, hence the 'exotic' Eastern setting and characters in line with the universalist impulse of Eighteenth-century literature – the Enlightenment thought – the story as an allegory of human desire for knowledge and happiness was to be read and relived over and over again and the quest into the inner-most corners of human mind and spirit pursued repeatedly.

II. RASSELAS

The story starts with a recommendation: if you think the future will bring absolute unchallenged happiness in this world, listen to the tale of *Rasselas*, the prince of Abssinia. Here at the very beginning, the seminal theme of the narrative is imparted, one important to Johnson as is evinced by its mention elsewhere, e.g. in *Rambler* 29: "It is generally allowed, that no man ever found the happiness of possession proportionate to that expectation which incited his desire and invigorated his pursuit" (cited in Folkenflick, 1994, p.339). It is the theme of man's aspiration for perfect happiness, the perpetual whispers of the hopeful anticipation of future bliss echoing in man's ear. Is this the echo of a ripple running ceaselessly over man's soul, like the mysterious sound of water in deep hidden caverns? If so, then every person hears his or her own spiritual whispers and cannot but listen to their resonance. Or, is it a cosmic, universal echo continually sounding throughout creation and detectable only to the human soul? If so, man can willfully choose between two options: hearkening to the invitation of bliss, or turning a deaf ear to it. The desire for perfection, in keeping with the idea of human perfectability in the Enlightenment era, is treated as a salient human disposition.

Rasselas is the fourth son of the mighty emperor of Abyssinia living in a sort of earthly paradise. The valley where he lives is perfectly safe, no one can enter or leave unless the gates are opened, which happens only once a year when the emperor comes to see his children. The talented Abyssinians compete in order to gain admission to the valley, a haven where no worldly pleasure remains unfulfilled. It is the greatest wish of any Abyssinian to enter this paradise where the blessings of nature are present but evils are excluded, and life is sheer bliss for all those who dwell there. *Rasselas*, however, is restless: not content with a life in which there is only pleasure.

The paradox in *Rasselas*' situation, naturally, provokes the reader to muse. How can pleasure be displeasing? Maybe *Rasselas* has a defective nature setting him aside from others or maybe his condition reflects a deeper, hidden truth.

There is no sign of any sort of lack or defect on Rasselas' behalf; on the contrary, the impression is that he is rather more mature than his peers so the seeming contradiction must be explained by a deeper meaning.

Rasselas is the restless, demanding, seeking soul who, though not neglecting the beauties of his valley or despising what it has to offer, simply seeks a reality of a different nature. It could be said that like Johnson himself, he does not feel at home; "For Johnson, man's nature is such that it can only be temporarily satisfied by anything on earth and therefore his discontent is a sign that he is not truly at home anywhere" (Finch, 1989, p.201).

Rasselas spends his time in reclusion, pondering over the unanswered questions which prod insistently at his confused mind. His aged instructor wants to know the reason for Rasselas' reclusiveness. "I fly from pleasure because pleasure has ceased to please." (Johnson, 1984, Ch.3 lines 16-17) is Rasselas' answer. He adds that he does not know what he wants. Here we have a principal issue.

The needs and desires of the body are self-revealing and if subject to deprivation, very demanding. The body knows what it wants and calls for what it wants. But spiritual desires are often unknown to the human subject. As Rumi, the renowned Persian poet, puts it, "Do not seek water, seek thirst, it will draw water toward you from all sides" (Rumi, n.d. 496). Seeking water is the superficial manifestation of a deeply embedded desire; the nature of this desire must be realized; thirst must be felt. Man needs to know what he truly desires and why, otherwise he will respond to any urge and the satisfaction of one fancy can only anticipate a new longing for the next. In taking the contemplative path toward which Johnson directs us, we confront some very challenging abstractions. Which desires are legitimate? Indeed, is there such a notion as an illegitimate desire? What authority can approve the extent to which a desire can be deemed legitimate or otherwise? Does human logic have the potential to analyze human desires and reveal their nature, thus determine legitimacy? If so, whose faculty of logic? That of each person for him/herself. A representative individual or group? Or is logic itself an integral part of a larger network that we call desire, functioning as the conductor of this network, interpreting the outside world in such a way as to subordinate it to and legitimize its manipulation for, desire? If so, with what scale can each individual measure his/her rationality; indeed how can he/she distinguish between logic and desire?

This ambiguous treatment of reason in *Rasselas* is understandable in the light of the verdict in Johnson's thought on the role of logic:

"We can understand much of the ground of Johnson's thinking if we recognize the very equivocal status that reason has in his work. On the one hand it is a necessary tool for understanding our feelings, prejudices and habits, and as such an important instrument in the acquisition of intellectual freedom. And on the other, it is itself terribly suspect and apt to lead man into error." (Finch, 1989, p.196)

On telling the counselor sage the cause of his discontentment, Rasselas asks the wise man to present something to him which he could desire. Having never been confronted with such a problem, the sage has no ready answer; he simply asserts that if Rasselas had seen the miseries of the world, he would not disparage his present situation. Ironically, this response intended to re-establish Rasselas' pleasure in living in the valley sparks his excitement giving him aim and direction. "This first beam of hope... rekindled youth in his cheeks and doubled the luster in his eyes" (Johnson, 1984, Ch.4 lines 15, 16). Rasselas now has a desire, even though a vague one. What is foremost is the change that this desire promises:

such are the vicissitudes of the world, through all its parts, that day and night, labour and rest, hurry and retirement, endear each other; such are the changes that keep the mind in action; we desire, we pursue, we obtain, we are satiated; we desire something else, and begin a new pursuit (Rambler 6 as cited in Pierce, 1982, p.325).

The young prince living in a haven of pleasure seeks the miseries of the world. A person living in misery would cherish the life of Rasselas whereas he himself wants change. Such is the head-after-tale chase of human desire.

Considering that Rasselas wants to flee from pleasure to see misery, wants to turn away from that which others want to embrace, in order to experience that which others turn away from, the question which arises here is: Does there exist a condition in which man would not want change? Johnson does not offer an explicit answer. Maybe Rasselas's personal quest for his own choice of life argues for individual inquiry – that each person should seek the summit of contentment for him or herself. He does, however, portray a vivid picture of the trajectory of this quest. The central paradox of *Rasselas* for Knoblauch is that "the process of discovering significance is always more valuable than the significance discovered" (1980, p.262)

In time Rasselas makes up his mind to escape, but the valley is bordered on all sides. What once may have seemed to be the cause of safety, of tranquility, is now the cause of imprisonment, "the Valley is, paradoxically, not only a refuge but a prison" (Whitley, 1956, p.55). The outside world changes shade in accordance with man's vantage; a mountain range can be a temple for worship of the Deity, it can be the killing snare for any outside enemy, it can, also, be the depressing monotonous and never-ending wall of a prison, even if that prison be a small paradise. But is not living in Paradise the aspiration of mankind? Johnson's Rasselas is curious to see what there is beyond utmost pleasure. Adam and Eve gave way to Satan's temptation. Is Satan now whispering in Rasselas ear? Or is there an urge from within? Or is it that he does have a real desire originating from his inner being but not knowing what it is, the Devil can play on his doubts and mislead him to moving forward instead of rising up to a higher level of consciousness? Whatever the case, Johnson has Rasselas seek what he wants in the outside world which is probably a reflection of his own temperament: 'Johnson greatly enjoyed travel, and according to Boswell "talked with an uncommon animation of travelling into

distant countries; that the mind was enlarged by it, and that an acquisition of dignity of character was derived from it...his chief longing, he declares, is to observe mankind, and "to obtain some knowledge in the ways of men" (Donaldson, 1986, pp.784-785).

Rasselas is now impatient. As if he had heard an ancient call from the distant past of his own lost history and was now hurrying to seek its origin. As if the high-flying eagle of his being were caged in the sensuous prison of the beautiful valley: "He was now as impatient as an eagle in a grate" (Johnson, 1984, Ch.5 line 5). Johnson found no stable place in man's constitution for uniformity. As Havens puts it, he admitted that "upon the whole, all pleasure consists in variety," that "novelty is the great source of pleasure"; uniformity, "must tire at last, though it be uniformity of excellence. We love to expect" (1943, p.249). Johnson recognized "that insatiable demand of new gratifications, which seems particularly to characterize the nature of man" (Havens, 1943, p.249). This quest, however, was not one to avail easy success; the more he sought the less he found. "He met a thousand amusements which beguiled his labour ... and found the place replete with wonders" (Johnson, 1984, Ch.5 line 22-25). Rasselas, is as a restless soul; the valley as his body. As he searches for a way to free himself from the bonds of bodily imprisonment he experiences novelties to which he finds himself a complete stranger. It seems that Johnson's prose indirectly answers a principal question: Is the search for spiritual freedom from worldly pleasure worthwhile on condition that it end with success, or is it an aim within itself? Johnson's answer is: "[Rasselas] found the place replete with wonders, of which he proposed to solace himself with the contemplation, if he should never be able to accomplish his flight, rejoicing that his endeavours though yet unsuccessful had supplied him with a source of inexhaustible inquiry" (Johnson, 1984, Ch.5; lines 24-28).

At this point in the story, external forces take over and give the story its first major turn; Rasselas who has up till now been seeking alone meets Imlac, the wise, mature, experienced poet, one with whom Cameron believes a figure such as Shelley might have identified himself (1943, p.63). Rain introduces Imlac to Rasselas. Rasselas has no choice than to postpone his search for a way of escape till later and his remaining indoors leads to his acquaintance with the poet without whom his later episodes would never have taken effect. Maybe Johnson's implication here is that fate puts the seeker on the right path of his quest when finding it is beyond his voluntary reach. Johnson was a believer in Providence; as Fisher in his comparison of Johnson and Hawthorne asserts "Both men [Hawthorne and Johnson] believed implicitly in the workings of Providence and in the futility and downright danger of attempting to alter or even hasten the inscrutable processes of a force superior to human means.....They were both emancipated puritans – men who found that a devoutly spiritual attitude would contribute to, rather than hinder, a man's life among other men." (1958, pp.195, 196)

Imlac relates the many ups and down's of his adventurous life to Rasselas. He tells him how after having experienced all that experience has to offer he secluded himself to the safety of this valley. He portrays a picture of the ruthless life of the outside world and contrasts it with the heavenly tranquility of their dwelling place. Rasselas listens eagerly to Imlac, but does not "feel" what he says. Eventually Rasselas confides in Imlac and tells him of his plan to flee. The poet warns him of the harsh life in the outside world but seeing the prince's determination admits his own tendency to leave the valley. The interesting point here is Imlac's desire to depart. Rasselas is curious, knows no other life, wants new experience, but Imlac has seen all there is to be seen in the outside world, has in fact taken refuge from that very world to this small paradise; nevertheless he wants to go back to where he once dreaded and escaped from. Imlac wants to go back to where he started. His life and his desires circulate; starting and ending and starting again in the same place; revolving on one plane, going nowhere. He is supposedly a wise, mature poet, but either this world does not offer a new course for him to take or, if it does, he does not know of its direction. He is caught within the circular orbit of desire; his choice of path is one in which he returns involuntarily whence he began.

After a long, tortuous journey our travelers reach Cairo and having taken gold and jewelry from their home valley where such things are not valued highly, become prominent members of society who are able to choose and do whatever they may please. Rasselas is happy in his new circumstances. He does not realize that his circumstances have changed and the shadow of dull repetition has yet to fall on this new life, as it had done so before. The resonant call for change which had reached so high a pitch as to compel him to do what no other had done in his home valley, again, begins to echo. In time he loses his initial vigour for life and gloom begins to set in.

All around, he sees people with happy smiles on their faces and wonders of the reason for his own dullness and their gaiety. He presents the matter to Imlac. The poet introduces the concept of dual personality to the innocent prince. He tells the prince that people show gaiety on their countenance and hide what manifests in their heart. Sometimes man has such strange logic; he shows liveliness when in fact he is bored, only for the sake of proving to others that he is not. Is it a matter of proving to others, or does he also want to prove it to himself by denying its contrary? If he admits that there is a lack in his life, he may suppose it incumbent on himself to contemplate seriously on his habits; this, not many people are willing to do due to their enjoyment of the transient pleasures of life even at the expense of long intervals of stagnation. Whatever the case may be, in most minds, the faculty of logic does not question the validity of the reasoning behind such action. This adds emphasis to what was previously mentioned regarding the ambiguous role of logic. On the other hand he knows of his own emotions, of his own never ending dissatisfaction just as he knows that the emotional elements are basically the same in all humans, yet heartily believes that others are different; that whereas he has not yet reached true happiness, others have. Why? Johnson may not give a complete answer, but he does give a sure direction, "We are long before we are convinced that happiness is never to be found, and each believes it to be

possessed by others to keep alive the hope of obtaining it for himself" (Johnson, 1984, Ch.16 line 60-63). As long as this hope is alive, the orbit of desire is there.

The quest for the most suitable choice of life goes on; Rasselas is far from the idea that true happiness is unattainable. He decides to be in the company of those in the prime of life but finds their ways crude and far from wisdom. Therefore he looks towards more mature people and finds what he deems maturity in the person of a sage whom he first sees giving lecture to an audience as he is passing one day. The sage is phrasing wonderful rhetoric on the virtues of contentment in life, of parting from greed, of siding with simplicity in one's life. After hearing his enchanting speech Rasselas asks the man to accept his company in response to which the man does not show much enthusiasm, but being offered a bag of gold changes his mind quickly. A man who has barely finished warning his audience of the dangers of seeking material life, of being strapped down by the bonds of earthly wishes, accepts to give guidance to a young man desirous of finding the best way of life in return for a purse of gold which he accepts with a mixture of joy and wonder! Thus is human nature presented by Johnson.

Johnson's prose raises the reader so high that everything is clearly to be seen; the episode of the rhetorician – which according to Kolb (1953) Johnson aimed at stoical pretensions – is presented so vividly that the value of rhetoric in the storms of emotion in real life is all too evident. Rasselas also sees the obvious and is convinced of "the emptiness of rhetorical sound and the inefficacy of polished periods and studied sentences" (Johnson, 1984, ch.18 last two lines).

Still the quest goes on. Here again, it seems we are given a foreshadowing of the circular nature of this inquiry; that there is no end to the search for the best life just as there is no end to human desires. Hearing of a hermit whose life passes in solitude, the four – Rasselas, Imlac, Nekayah and her maid – set off to find the hermit's dwelling. When they find the man, we are faced with a situation not unlike that of Imlac himself.

The hermit, an older version of Thales in "London: A Poem" according to Bogel (1979, p.468), relates his story of how he fled from society and evil to a life of recluse. But now he regrets his choice and wants to go back to the very place from where he fled. Imlac's own revolving path of life comes immediately to mind; his flee to the hidden valley and his subsequent regret. The hermit has realized that he not only fled from evil, he also deprived himself of the virtues of association with good people. "In solitude if I escape the example of bad men, I want likewise the counsel and conversation of the good" (Johnson, 1984, Ch.21; lines 61-62). Where there is vice and virtue, avoiding the first and seeking the other can be promising, but fleeing from both to a life of meaningless recluse has no fruit. The hermit, like Imlac had chosen to go back to where he began. He too, only knew the orbit of all other particles of the material universe. By accompanying the seekers back to Cairo he gives the answer to the seekers' question as to the virtues of a life in reclusion.

They go back whence they had set off and the quest starts again. The prince is to continue the inquiry within the circles of power, and the princess within the confines of domestic life.

Rasselas not only finds the realm of power and politics outside the compass of his quest but also quite intolerable: "almost every man who stood high in employment hated all the rest and was hated by them...and every eye was searching for a fault" (Johnson, 1984, Ch.24; lines 18-23). Perpetual suspicion, hatred, and desire for higher office are the fruits which grow on the tree of power. Nekayah finds much the same situation in domestic life, the difference being only in the level of social hierarchy; high office sparking bitter hatred, household affairs evoking petty competitions. Even among the poor the situation is the same, "their pleasures, poor as they were, could not be preserved pure, but were embittered by petty competitions and worthless emulation" (Johnson, 1984, Ch.25 line 8-10).

By matching various levels of social hierarchy and presenting a general profile of similarity Johnson expresses a very fundamental issue. The corruption that the prince sees, implies that it is not the world of politics that corrupts the politician, it is the corruption embedded in the politician – as human – that makes a world called politics. Why? Because the conflicting elements embedded in human character are seen by Nekayah in everyday life just as vividly as they are seen by him in the rivalry of political competition; whether in the heart of the politician or the layman, the propensity for rivalry and hatred is equally strong. The prince and the princess's experience expand greatly but their quest remains without answer. The ideal life, complete tranquility and the satisfaction of desire is still beyond reach.

On a visit to the great pyramid Imlac states what may be the essence of the whole story, "it seems to have been erected only in compliance with that hunger of imagination which preys incessantly upon life...those who have already all that they can enjoy must enlarge their desires" (Johnson, 1984, Ch. 32 line 18-22). In Imlac's view new desire is a "must". Johnson's final verdict on the fate of his character's wishes, however, is: "of these wishes that they had formed they well knew that none could be obtained" (Johnson, 1984, Ch. 49; line 26-27).

Ironically one of these "wishes" is to go back to Abyssinia. But we should remember that, in the words of Jeffrey Barnouw,

"Rasselas and the other characters in Johnson's moral fable do not return to Abyssinia or anywhere; they 'deliberated' and 'resolved' to return, and Johnson has forcefully revealed the danger of confusing resolution with actual doing in chapter 4. [...] Rasselas and his sister make considering and resolving into alternatives to engagement and action. They are unwilling to risk disappointment and take the 'hap' out of happiness. Johnson reveals an obstacle to earthly happiness in the mind-set of which his main characters all develop some variant." (2008, p. 441)

Could it be that Johnson wants to imply that it is providence that circumscribes man's life, hence the orbit-like course of man's wishes, its vanity? Or do we have a more subtle hint here, that the world of desire is, in nature, the same as the

orbits of the material world whence it nourishes and develops: circular. The whole universe is revolving; heavenly bodies revolve around themselves or around other bodies, beginning and ending at the same point, each particle pursuing the ones in front of it, never reaching the end of its pursuit, yet never realizing there is no end.

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