Samuel Johnson and the Vocation of the Author

DPhil thesis

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Abstract

Much has been written about Samuel Johnson as a Christian, and much about him as an author; this study is about where the two meet, in the idea of the literary vocation. Though Johnson only uses the word 'vocation' a handful of times, it holds both the quotidian sense of a job and the more exalted notion of a divine call, a tension which informs Johnson's thinking.

I begin with Johnson's development as a religious writer, influenced by William Law's contention that any form of life can be devout and holy, and by Bernard Mandeville's unsentimental candour. Johnson's writing bears the marks of both. He revised *Irene*, for instance, to make it less overtly Christian: a reminder that Johnson's religious convictions bring an invisible pressure to bear on apparently secular works. In his early years on the *Gentleman's Magazine* Johnson develops the principle that authorship, being a public act, carries great responsibilities.

It is, in fact, a vocation, and unpacking this concept takes up Chapter 2. Johnson sees writing as a potential form of public service, adding that a solitary writer 'naturally sinks from omission to forgetfulness of social duties'. Too few commentators have grasped that Johnson sees morality in social terms – as a matter of answering the needs of others, according to one's place in an order overseen by divine providence. But again and again he refers to the human need 'to seek from one another assistance and support' (*Rambler* 104). Instances of mutual help 'by frequent reciprocations of beneficence unite mankind in society and friendship'. Johnson's well-known emphasis on friendship is only one expression of this deeper sense that society is held together by trust; and therefore, by the truth. Writers' communication of truth defines their own social duties.

While Johnson can sound close to Shaftesbury when he writes of mankind's sociability, there is really a significant gap between them, because Johnson's view of human nature is

more jaded. He expects people to hurt each other for the same reasons they help each other; and he recognises a strong tendency towards pride and superiority – especially among writers, who are tempted to cut themselves off from society.

Chapter 3 deals in more depth with a writer's social role, which is simply expressed as the ability to put the truth memorably. Borrowing from a tradition which stretches back to Seneca at least, Johnson believes that a writer becomes a 'benefactor of mankind' by putting the useful, but readily forgotten, principles of the good life into memorable forms. Drawing on Locke's account of the memory, and deviating from Locke's account of moral action, he suggests that literature has a power to move the reason and the passions at once – hence his demand that poetry be both true and pleasurable. While this resembles the Horatian formula of *dulce et utile*, Johnson added to it a sense of writers' and readers' experience of the text: how 'impressions' are transferred from the world, via the writer, to the text, and so to the reader. Learning how to persuade the audience, however, necessitates first-hand acquaintance with the world.

Hence the subjects of Chapters 4 and 5, which are pride and humility respectively. Pride separates the author from the social world, making them ineffectual and unable to communicate truth. The 'Lives' of Swift and Milton establish this partly through their ridicule of the two subjects: though Johnson did not think ridicule established truth, it did restore a balance upset by an author's singularity.

'Singularity' is the word Johnson uses to encapsulate Swift's faults: he was 'fond of singularity, and desirous to make a mode of happiness for himself, different from the general course of things and order of Providence'. Milton, too, is condemned for his arrogance – but even more in order to correct the idolatry of his admirers. Johnson believes that Milton is being written about with absurd reverence, and so puts him back in his place – as just another member of society, with a role to fulfil.

Accepting that place involves a measure of humility. The question of the 'dignity of literature', a contested point during the nineteenth century, was alive in Johnson's time, and through his associations with what he himself called 'Grub Street', he lived and worked among many writers who might be thought undignified. Yet in the obscurity of the hacks Johnson found something to praise – an industrious, humble service opposed to the 'letter'd arrogance' of self-satisfied authors. '[T]he humble author of journals and gazettes must be considered as a liberal dispenser of beneficial knowledge' (*Rambler* 145). By stooping to be merely useful, journalists become great. Particularly in the *Journey to the Western Islands*, Johnson divests himself of authorial dignity, drawing attention to his own mistakes and omissions.

Such a humdrum view of the writer's role, which placed the emphasis on the reader, put Johnson at odds with most of the prominent Romantics – and the scale of their revulsion from Johnson needs two chapters to be dealt with. Chapter 6 argues that their critique, especially that of Hazlitt and Coleridge, was above all about the question of the writer's vocation: and for that reason, Shakespeare was the most contested ground – for Coleridge, Johnson's Shakespeare criticism was impertinent 'filth' aimed at 'the greatest man that ever put on and put off mortality'. But that was exactly the kind of idolatrous view of authorship – what Hazlitt called *approvingly* 'overstrained enthusiasm' – which Johnson wanted to challenge.

However, many of the Romantics' criticisms misrepresented Johnson; he was a more flexible thinker than they realised. In a final chapter, I look at the aftermath of the Romantics: how their accusation that Johnson was too narrow and bigoted to understand Shakespeare is echoed in Macaulay, and even in sympathetic readers like Matthew Arnold, and has dogged Johnson all the way to the present day. And I point out that the Romantic exaltation of the author has faced its own backlash, in ways that suggest Johnson might have seen more clearly than the Romantics thought.

Acknowledgments

Profuse thanks to the Wolfson Foundation for funding this thesis, which I could not otherwise have written. The Foundation and Wolfson College have been remarkably generous and supportive throughout the last three years.

To Anselm Aston, Joseph Bailham, Johnny Church, Grace Egan, Megan Engel, Alisha Gabriel, Kathleen Griffin, Molly Gurdon, Michael Hawking, Austen Ivereigh, Jo Jackson, Nakul Krishna, Amy Owens, Nathan Pinkoski, Robert Stagg, Aaron Taylor, and a special thank you to Michael Ward for proofreading a draft.

To Freya Johnston, an exemplary supervisor whose book set off this whole train of thought in the first place.

Thanks, above all, to Mum and Dad, Ribs, Andy and Jonny.

Note on texts and abbreviations

References to Johnson's writings are mostly from *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. John H. Middendorf et al, 24 vols. to date. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956–), and are indicated by *Works* or by volume and page number.

All references to Johnson's poems are from *The Complete English Poems*, ed. J.D. Fleeman (London: Penguin, 1971).

All *Dictionary* references are to *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1st edition (London, 1755), unless otherwise stated.

Where Johnson quotes Shakespeare, I have used his text, while noting in the footnotes any differences from *The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

All biblical references are to the King James Version.

Other abbreviations:

Account – John Hawkesworth, 'An Account of the Life of the Reverend Dr. Swift, D.D., Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin', in *The Works of Dr Jonathan Swift, D.D., Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin*, ed. John Hawkesworth, 6 vols., vol. 1 (London, 1755)

Character – Isaac D'Israeli, *The Literary Character, Illustrated by the History of Men of Genius* (London, 1818).

Characteristics – Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

COS – *Coleridge on Shakespeare*, ed. Terence Hawkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).

EBW – *Early Biographical Writings of Dr. Johnson*, ed. J. D. Fleeman (Farnborough: Gregg International, 1973).

Education – John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, ed. John W. Yolton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

Fable – Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: Or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, ed. F.B. Kaye, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924).

Hazlitt - *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. Duncan Wu, 9 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998).

Journey – Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, ed. J.D. Fleeman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

Letters – *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

Life – James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D*, ed. G.B. Hill, rev. L.F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934-64).

Lives – Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets: With Critical Observations on Their Works*, ed. Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols. (Oxford University Press, 2006).

Macaulay – Thomas Babington Macaulay, 'Samuel Johnson' (1831), in *Critical and Historical Essays*, 2 vols. (London: J.M Dent, 1907), ii.524-562.

Miscellanies – *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. G.B. Hill, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897).

Observations – Patrick Delany, *Observations on Lord Orrery's Remarks on the Life and Writings of Dr. Jonathan Swift* (London, 1754).

Pensées – Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. and trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1966). References are given by the Lafuma numbering used in this edition.

Remarks – John Boyle, Fifth Earl of Cork and Orrery, *Remarks on the Life and Writings of Dr. Jonathan Swift* (1751), ed. João Fróes (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000).

Serious Call - William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (London, 1729).

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Introduction

Writers on authorship have often placed Johnson at the centre of their work. For Carlyle, he was the hero as man of letters.[1] A.S. Collins called his 1923 study *Authorship in the Age of Johnson*.[2] In the modern era – inaugurated perhaps by the biographers of the 1970s, perhaps by Paul Fussell's *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing* (1974) – much has been written on Johnson as an author.[3] This school of criticism has often drawn out tensions and inner contradictions. For Fussell, 'Johnson's sense of literature derives from a central contradiction': between a 'social sense' – literature as a rhetorical performance – and a 'religious sense' of writing as 'very like a Christian sacrament'.[4] As a social art, writing needs to fit into accepted genres – the satire, the preface – but such formalism seems to limit the honesty demanded by Christianity.

More recently, Robert DeMaria, Jr. has shown that Johnson took on a succession of literary roles shaped by history. Some of that history lay with the Renaissance humanists whom Johnson invoked in the *Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), some of it was the more recent story of 'Johnson's own emerging class of professional writers and their new 'patrons''.[5] Johnson's 'whole career as a writer' involved an effort to join 'the learned and the commercial worlds of book production'.[6] Similarly, Lawrence Lipking describes how Johnson thought of himself as a renaissance-style scholar and poet, but also a writer immersed in 'the publishing schemes and ventures of the moment… The author that he creates in his mind is partly a hack yet also partly an

[1] Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, ed. Michael K. Goldberg, Joel J. Brattin, and Mark Engel (1841; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 153-8.
[2] A.S. Collins, *Authorship in the Age of Johnson* (London: Robert Holden & Co, 1927).
[3] Three of the most influential biographies are Walter Jackson Bate, *Samuel Johnson* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1978); Christopher Hibbert, *The Personal History of Samuel Johnson* (London: Longman, 1971); John Wain, *Samuel Johnson* (London: Macmillan, 1974).
[4] Paul Fussell, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1972), 43.
[5] Robert DeMaria, Jr., *The Life of Samuel Johnson: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 113, 55.
[6] DeMaria, *Critical Biography*, 303.

eternal ideal'.[7] Again, Dustin Griffin says Johnson bridged the gap 'between "learning" and the broader body of "writing" that was increasingly finding readers, aiming to infuse what he wrote for "the common reader" with the intellectual content and moral seriousness of scholarly writing'.[8] The 'republic of letters', having denoted the international community of scholars, came to mean the literary marketplace, and Johnson lived through the change while seeming to embody both past and present.[9]

These tensions are real, and important; but this study argues that Johnson did to some extent reconcile them. I follow a principle laid down by Pat Rogers: that however we divide Johnson into lexicographer, critic, pamphleteer and so on, 'Running through all these separate endeavours, from start to finish, was the core of his creative self – Johnson the religious being."[10] Rogers goes on provocatively: 'Anyone who wishes to understand Johnson in depth should consult first not a psychoanalyst but a theologian."[11] (A rebuke, perhaps, to Walter Jackson Bate's Freud-influenced biography.) The term which I use in this study, 'vocation', derives from the Christian tradition; it puts us in touch with Johnson's profoundest sympathies and his most tenaciously-held principles. [12]

This may seem too obvious to be worth stating, but Johnson's religion played a constant and active role in his intellectual life, from at least Oxford onwards. There is a tendency in some modern portraits of Johnson to represent his religion chiefly in terms of neurosis. For instance, Peter Martin describes Johnson burning his private papers near the end of his life: 'Hour after

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[7] Lawrence Lipking, *Samuel Johnson: The Life of an Author* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 10.

[8] Dustin Griffin, *Authorship in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2014), 123.

[9] Griffin, *Authorship*, 109-41.

[10] Pat Rogers, *Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 21.

[11] Rogers, *Johnson*, 23

[12] See Paul Marshall, *A Kind of Life Imposed on Man: Vocation and Social Order from Tyndale to Locke* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); p25 of this work contains a useful discussion of Calvin's idea of vocation. On Luther's idea of vocation, see Kaethe Schwaen, 'Introduction', in Kaethe Schwaehn and L. DeAne Lagerquist, ed., *Claiming Our Calllings: Towards a New Understanding of Vocation in the Liberal Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-13: 8-9. Max Weber's writings on 'vocation' contain a broader argument about Protestant cultures. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Stephen Kalberg (1904-5; London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001).

hour Johnson fed the fire, hoping it would help consume his guilt and prepare his soul for death'.[13] The only support for this conjecture seems to be that Johnson was 'Poised dangerously between control and madness, between doubt, fear, and faith', and so such strange behaviour was only to be expected. Of course Johnson was often neurotic, and neurotic about his religion; but that does not make his religion solely a matter of frenzied self-doubt. As Thomas Kaminski has argued, Johnson's writing is at every stage in contact with religious principles. The point applies whether we consider Johnson as a moralist or an artist. 'For Johnson as well as for many of his readers, the demands of morality and religion were…the fundamental propositions of human life'.[14] The aesthetic value of a work of art, then, is partly determined by how closely it conforms to 'a widely held moral view of the world'. The 'rationally pleasing', as Kaminski calls it, is the opposite of negative capability: it means that literature can be admired for the moral and religious precepts it teaches. This was, Kaminski writes, 'an authentic aspect of eighteenth-century aesthetic experience'. Johnson's religion, then, amounts to more than a background for his writing: rather, it is a continuous pressure acting on his artistic choices. Johnson's Christian ideas, with all their tensions and ambiguities, are an impetus for his writings and help to shape them.

Though Johnson the Christian has been often studied – as a lay theologian,[15] a psychological case study,[16] a writer of sermons,[17] and (most fractiously) a Jacobite sympathiser[18] – my thesis is more about the question which Kaminski touches on: how does Johnson's religion bear on his literary thinking? I have not said much about, for instance, Johnson's changing beliefs on the atonement, his relationship to Catholicism, or his views on the subscription crisis, as

[13] Peter Martin, *Samuel Johnson: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2008), xiii.

[14] Thomas Kaminski, 'Some Alien Qualities of Johnson's Art', in Jonathan Clark and Howard Erskine-Hill, ed., *Samuel Johnson in Historical Context* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 222-38: 232–33.

[15] Quinlan, *Samuel Johnson: A Layman's Religion* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964); Michael Suarez, S.J., 'Johnson's Christian thought', in Greg Clingham, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 192-208.

[16] Charles E. Pierce, *The Religious Life of Samuel Johnson* (Hamdon: Archon, 1983).

[17] James Gray, *Johnson's Sermons: A Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

[18] J.C.D. Clark, *Samuel Johnson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); a claim debated in the two special issues of *The Age of Johnson*, 7 (1996) and 8 (1997), and frequently since then.

discussed by James Gray, Jonathan Clark and Brian Young respectively;[19] my focus is less on the internal features of Johnson's beliefs than on their contribution to his more apparently secular principles.

Almost every critic acknowledges the importance of Johnson's Christianity, but too often it is seen as imposing duties rather than as opening up possibilities. Paul Fussell, for instance, says that Johnson's 'writing…was undertaken largely as a ritual obligation in a highly self-conscious process of Christian obligation'.[20] Johnson's 'religious awareness…brought him….torment and wretchedness as he agonized over his idleness and irregularity'. That is part of the truth – no reader of Johnson's diaries could doubt it – but there is another way to look at it. Michael Suarez has justly complained about critics' failure to 'recognize that he was not only a serious Christian believer, but also an equally serious Christian *thinker*'.[21] Seeing Johnson as a religious thinker means seeing his religion as broadening his perspective: it means accepting that, if his religion could be a limiting factor, it also gave him intellectual tools and concepts he could not have acquired from anywhere else. One of these was the idea of vocation.

The word meant two things to Johnson, as it has meant two things for most of its recent history: first, the everyday sense of the work you find yourself doing – 'Trade; employment'; secondly 'Calling by the will of God' (*Dictionary*). The OED's definitions contain the same ambiguity: 'vocation' is both 'divine influence or guidance towards a definite (esp. religious) career; the fact of being so called or directed towards a special work in life', and 'One's ordinary occupation, business, or profession'. I have chosen this word in my title partly because it compacts the everyday and the eternal in a way which is itself Johnsonian: for he insisted that everyone has a 'part which providence assigns him in the general task of human nature' (*Rambler* 48, *Works*,

[19] Gray, *Johnson's Sermons,* 76-86; Jonathan Clark, 'Johnson: The Last Choices, 1775-1784', in Jonathan Clark and Howard Erskine-Hill, ed., *The Politics of Samuel Johnson* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 168-222; B.W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: Theological Debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 72.

[20] Fussell, *Life of Writing*, 10.

[21] Suarez, 'Christian Thought', in Clingham, ed., *Cambridge Companion*, 195.

ii.259). When Johnson writes 'most men have a very strong and active prejudice in favour of their own vocation' (*Rambler* 9, iii.47), he means vocation in the everyday sense. *Rambler* 145 refers to 'vocations and employments of least dignity' (v.8). However, the 'dignity' assigned by society is infinitely less important than a different standard, one applied to a character in *Rambler* 127 but relevant to everyone: 'life is only deposited in his hands to be employed in obedience to a Master who will regard his endeavours, not his success' (iv.315). Vocations become great by how they are carried out. Johnson formulated this point in 'Verses On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet':[22]

> In misery's darkest caverns known,
> His useful care was ever nigh,
> Where hopeless anguish pour'd his groan,
> And lonely want retir'd to die.

Despite the bleakness of the scene, Levet's usefulness gives his life a value in God's eyes. Although the sphere of Levet's 'virtues' was 'narrow', he became exemplary by practising them:

> His virtues walk'd their narrow round,
> Nor made a pause, nor left a void;
> And sure th'Eternal Master found
> The single talent well employed.

Both 'Levet' and *Rambler* 127 assume that vocations involve serving a 'Master' – that is, God. Sometimes the word is 'providence'. But sometimes Johnson will use the idea of each person having a 'station' without mentioning that God has assigned it. 'The petty cares and petty duties are the same in every station to every understanding' (*Idler* 51, ii.159). This is not the only place where Johnson uses a concept without making plain its theological import. *Rambler* 208 claimed that the previous essays had been 'exactly conformable to the precepts of Christianity' (v.320): so

[22] The version in Fleeman's *Poems*. For the textual variants, see *Works*, vol. vi.

it is with Johnson's use of 'station', 'duty' and so on. The idea of vocation is Christian in the sense of fitting well, conforming, with Christianity; but we cannot expect to find Johnson always signalling his theological implications. Much of his language is only obliquely religious – and as I show in Chapter 1, he deliberately under-emphasised 'the precepts of Christianity' in his early writings. It seems to have become a habit.

"I have thought of retiring," Johnson told Boswell in 1773, "and have talked of it to a friend; but I find my vocation is rather to active life" (*Life*, v.63). The friend seems to have been Joshua Reynolds, since in October 1784, just two months before Johnson's death, Johnson wrote to Richard Brocklesby: 'Sir Joshua told me long ago, that my vocation was to publick life, and I hope still to keep my station, til God shall bid me *Go in peace*' (*Letters*, iv.428). Johnson thought of 'vocation' as something enduring over time: it was the same in 1784 as it was in 1773. So 'vocation' means something that suits a particular individual; and Johnson connects this with the idea of a 'station' appointed by God. If his 'vocation' was to 'publick life' and to 'active life', then writing was part of both; it was a duty, and also where he belonged.

In his study of authorship in the long eighteenth century, Dustin Griffin briefly considers the idea of 'vocation', but suggests that it had limited significance, because the word was used to mean something mundane.[23] 'Johnson may think about the idea of a literary vocation', Griffin allows; 'but he rarely referred to writing as a vocation, perhaps out of concern that he might be sullying the sacred'.[24] Yet one point of 'Levet', and of much of Johnson's prose and poetry, is that obedience reveals the sacred even in small things, rather than sullying it. Griffin mentions Johnson's 'often-noted preoccupation with the Parable of the Talents', but thinks it 'suggests that he had a stronger sense of *obligation* – to use his talent well – than of *calling*'. Maybe so, but it is not a distinction which Johnson always makes. He writes to Boswell of the 'dutys of the station to which the Bounty of providence has called you' (*Letters*, i.240). Calling and obligation, here, are

[23] Griffin, *Authorship*, 93.
[24] Griffin, *Authorship*, 94.

one. Sermon 19 says 'we should consider every opportunity of performing a good action, as the gift of God' (xiv.212). A duty can be seen to arise from an encounter with God.

If vocation originates from God, it normally issues in some kind of service to other individuals, or to the community. Levet's life, in Johnson's idealised telling, was one of service: 'The modest wants of ev'ry day / The toil of ev'ry day supplied'. That idea runs through the tradition of writing on vocation. For John Calvin, 'no sacrifice is more pleasing to God than when each one attends to his calling and studies to live well for the common good'.[25] Robert Bellah et al's 1985 sociological study *Habits of the Heart* calls for 'a reappropriation of the idea of vocation or calling, a return in a new way to the idea of work as a contribution to the good of all and not merely a means to one's own advancement'.[26] Johnson's essays are permeated by a comparable idea of the common good. *Rambler* 81 defines the duties of a magistrate by suggesting that, in a trial, 'the parties are, in reality, on one side the criminal, and on the other the community' (iv.62). In *Adventurer* 67, Johnson looks round a London market and sees it as an example of the many ways of serving 'the community':

> When I look round upon those who are thus variously exerting their qualifications, I cannot but admire the secret concatenation of society, that links together the great and the mean, the illustrious and the obscure; and consider with benevolent satisfaction, that no man, unless his body or mind be totally disabled, has need to suffer the mortification of seeing himself useless or burdensome to the community: he that will diligently labour, in whatever occupation, will deserve the sustenance which he obtains, and the protection which he enjoys, and may lie down every night with the pleasing consciousness, of having contributed something to the happiness of life.
> (ii.386)

This shows Johnson's ease with commercialism: the marketplace, full of buyers and sellers, opens

[25] John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew Mark and Luke* (1555), trans. A.W. Morrison, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1972),ii.89 (Luke 10:38); see Ian Hart, 'The Teaching of Luther and Calvin about Ordinary Work: 2: John Calvin', *The Evangelical Quarterly*, 67 (1995), 121-135.

[26] Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 287-8.

up opportunities to serve others. In literature, too, Johnson resisted the idea that there was anything morally dubious about writing for money. This rather surprised Sir John Hawkins, who remarked to Johnson that working on Shakespeare must be more satisfying than the *Dictionary* and was told: "I look upon this as I did upon the 'Dictionary': it is all work, and my inducement to it not love or desire of fame, but the want of money, which is the only motive to writing that I know of."[27] In challenging Hawkins' assumptions, Johnson overstated his case. As the passage above implies, money is not enough: it would be a 'mortification' to be 'useless'. In a notebook which Hawkins quotes elsewhere, Johnson jotted down some ideas:

> Reasons of writing, benevolence, desire of fame, vanity, hunger, curiosity to know the rate of a man's own understanding. Which most justifiable. All may be forgiven if not persisted in, but writing for bread most… If write well, not less innocent or laudable than prescribing – pleading – judging – fighting, transacting public affairs, much better than cringing, carrying a white staff or voting. If ill, fails with less hazard to the public than others. The prescriber – pleader – judge hurt others… The greatest writers have [written] for bread – Homer – Shakespeare – Dryden – Pope…the press is crouded with many books, yet this may diffuse knowledge, and leaves less room for vanity, sometimes it may choak the way to letters, and hinder learning but rarely.[28]

Here Johnson seems to be on the defensive; he wants to know on what grounds writing is 'justifiable', 'may be forgiven', or can avoid 'harm to the public' or hindering learning. The low view of writing implied in these phrases, however, is not the only one Johnson countenances. 'The greatest writers have written for bread', but presumably not only 'for bread' – they had other motives. The first on Johnson's list is 'benevolence', and Johnson's prayers show that he meant his writings to help the reader. Johnson's emphasis on money, rather than excluding other possibilities, is meant to close the gap between 'great writers' and the obscure by recalling what they usually have in common. Although 'the press is crouded with many books', there are possible

[27] Hawkins, Sir John, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed. O.M. Brack (Athens: University of Georgia, 2009), 219.
[28] Ibid., 162

advantages: it 'may diffuse knowledge' – even a small contribution is worthwhile – and it 'leaves less room for vanity': presumably, this means that when there are thousands of writers around, it is harder for them to feel that authorship gives them a special status. Johnson's dislike of authorial vanity is one of this study's recurring subjects.

It was an 'Age of Authors', Johnson wrote in 1753 (*Adventurer* 115, ii.457); in 'A Project for the Employment of Authors' (1756) he repeated the point. '[O]f late their number have been so much increased, that they are become a very conspicuous part of the nation'.[29] Johnson saw the proliferation of self-styled writers as corresponding to a fall in standards.

> It is not now, as in former times, when men studied long, and past through the severities of discipline, and the probation of public trials, before they presumed to think themselves qualified for instructors of their countrymen; there is found a nearer way to fame and erudition, and the inclosures of literature are thrown open to every man whom idleness disposes to loiter, or whom pride inclines to set himself to view.[30]

There is a note of satire here, which rises throughout the piece, but Johnson's concern was real. He was also troubled by the tendency to vicious competition, to which he thought writers were especially prone.[31] So 'the employment of authors' was a real question to Johnson, which his writings often referred to – and not always jokingly. His last two contributions to the *Adventurer* are the closest we come to a concentrated study of authorship: what it requires, whether it is more or less miserable than other lines of work (*Works*, ii.487-97). My thesis argues that Johnson rarely left these questions alone.

'We are perpetually moralists' ('Life of Milton', *Lives*, i.249): engaged as he was with questions of authorship, Johnson's wanted to articulate an ethic of writing. In particular, he wanted to understand how the writer relates to the reader. Again, the historical background is

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[29] Samuel Johnson, 'A Project for the Employment of Authors', the *Universal Visiter*, April 1756; republished in *The Works of Samuel Johnson, L.L.D.*, 14 vols. (1788), xiv.202.

[30] Ibid.

[31] See, for instance, *Rambler* 145: 'the common interest of learning requires that her sons should cease from intestine hostilities' (*Works*, v.7. See also *Rambler* 180.)

enough to show why Johnson was interested: he lived in a time when that relationship was being reworked – by copyright laws,[32] the changing nature of patronage,[33] the growth of print culture.[34] Johnson 'was bred a bookseller, and have not forgotten my trade' (*Letters*, iii.159); it was his world in many ways. As Kevin Hart has emphasised, the *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81) and the *Dictionary* would never have existed without the initiative and the financial backing of the London booksellers.[35] Johnson knew booksellers well; he also thought a great deal about book-buyers. When he defines the activity of the writer, he puts it in terms which involve the reader. Famously, 'The only end of writing is to enable the readers better to enjoy life, or better to endure it' (Review of Soame Jenyns, *Works*, xvii.421) Writers can be useful to their readers.

What kind of talents a writer has is less important than whether they put them to good use. You might call this an egalitarian idea of authorship. On Andrew Bennett's interpretation, one characteristic of Romanticism was the 'separation of one form of authorship from another' – the genius from the hack.[36] As DeMaria and Lipking have demonstrated, Johnson exerted great efforts to reconcile these differences. Pat Rogers observes that Johnson's 'literary career shows us how a hand-to-mouth professional existence can be ennobled into a high vocation'.[37] Yet Rogers' phrase 'high vocation' betrays a way of thinking about 'high' and 'low' which Johnson himself challenged. The point about vocations is that they can be considered equally noble whatever their altitude.

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[32] Mark Rose, *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 130-42; Martha Woodmansee, 'The Genius and the Copyright: Economic and Legal Conditions of the Emergence of the Author', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 17 (1984), 425-48.

[33] Griffin, Dustin Griffin, *Literary Patronage in England, 1650-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[34] Alvin Kernan, *Printing Technology, Letters, and Samuel Johnson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 48-55.

[35] Kevin Hart, *Samuel Johnson and the Culture of Property* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 48.

[36] Andrew Bennett, 'The idea of the author', in Nicholas Roe, ed., *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 654-664: 658.

[37] Rogers, *Johnson*, 111.

For Ian Watt, 'Johnson is perhaps the supreme example of a great writer with very little sense of a specifically literary vocation'.[38] Perhaps, if 'vocation' means what it means to Watt: 'something special and set apart', established by 'the Romantics': 'the writer as a lonely genius exploring strange seas of thought and feeling'. But in the broader sense of vocation – as a 'station' in which one contributes to society – Johnson had a persistent sense of literary vocation. The conversation with Joshua Reynolds – which obviously resonated strongly with Johnson, since he recalled it over a decade later – suggests this, as does Johnson's reference to Addison abandoning his career in the House of Commons: 'He now returned to his vocation, and began to plan literary occupations for his future life' ('Life of Addison', *Lives*, iii.16).

Johnson thought that what a writer produces is formed by how they relate to those around them. And the ideal for that relationship is one of sociability, which Johnson famously exemplified. If his attachment to company was a reaction to his fear of solitude, it was also part of his authorial personality. In theory, Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* separate life from work by dealing with biography first and the poet's life second. But it is well-known that – in the 'Life of Milton', for instance – Johnson simultaneously comments on the writer and the writing. In so doing, he was being consistent with a view of authorship which implies that literature is the expression of a mind, and that the mind is formed in its habits by experience – especially its experience of the social world.

The idea of 'vocation' could be usefully applied to other areas of Johnson scholarship. I have not said much about Johnson and gender – a subject on which James G. Basker and Isobel Grundy have written persuasively.[39] Johnson has emerged as a significant figure in the rise of the woman of letters: living through and supporting this change, Johnson may have articulated an idea of

[38] Ian Watt, 'Dr. Johnson and The Literature of Experience', in Magdi Wahba, ed., *Johnsonian Studies* (Cairo: Société orientale de publicité, 1962), 15-22: 18.

[39] See James G Basker, 'Multicultural Perspectives: Johnson, Race, and Gender', in Philip Smallwood, ed., *Johnson Re-Visioned: Looking Before and After* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2001), 64-79; Isobel Grundy, 'Samuel Johnson as Patron of Women', *The Age of Johnson*, 1 (1987), 59-77.

vocation partly to serve a new set of conventions around authorship. Again, the *Dictionary* has received a lot of attention recently; it would be useful to reflect on how the *Dictionary*, for all its uniqueness, was continuous with Johnson's other literary works. Howard Weinbrot has observed that Johnson the lexicographer 'regularly views his job as one of encouraging moral education':[40] this is consistent, as I hope to show, with how Johnson viewed his 'job' more generally. And although my thesis focuses mainly on Johnson's best-known works, especially the *Rambler* (1750-2) and the *Lives of the Poets*, it points beyond these to the writings more often classed as minor works – especially since, as I hope to show, Johnson was always interested in the merits of what seemed 'obscure'.

There is, I argue, a great deal of continuity in Johnson's view of the author over the course of his life. To explain why, I begin with a chapter on Johnson's intellectual and vocational beginnings. I examine Johnson's childhood and his time at Oxford, where he was strongly influenced by William Law's *Serious Call*, and at around the same time by Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*: the tension between the piety of the one and the worldliness of the other plays out in *Irene* and Johnson's early journalism. Where Paul Fussell saw 'warfare' between Johnson's 'worldly' and 'religious' senses of literature,[41] I suggest some ways in which Johnson made peace between them. I then turn to the *Life of Savage* (1744) and its picture of the poet's relationship with 'mankind' – an early version of Johnson's preoccupation with 'the community'.

Chapter 2 begins with Johnson's distinction between useful and useless writing, expressed in several *Rambler* essays, a point which introduces a general principle about the writer's place within society. As Johnson sees it, divine providence assigns to different stations their corresponding duties: a point made throughout his work, most developed in his essays. In Johnson's letters, the language of sociability, connection and 'mutual kindness' become vivid in

[40] Howard D. Weinbrot, 'What Johnson's illustrative quotations illustrate: language and viewpoint in the *Dictionary*', in Jack Lynch and Anne McDermott, ed., *Anniversary Essays on Johnson's Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 42-60: 54-5. See Robert DeMaria, Jr., *Johnson's Dictionary and the Language of Learning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 241.

[41] Fussell, *Life of Writing*, 60.

his actual friendships. This chapter contrasts Johnson's social morality with Shaftesbury's, which is based on a more hopeful conception of human nature.

In Chapter 3 I turn from vocation in general to the writer's vocation in particular, in the light of Johnson's respect for aphorism as a literary form. Truth and memorability are what Johnson hopes for from writers, because that is how they fulfil a duty to the reader of making forgettable truths unforgettable. Johnson's account of memory borrows from Locke, though, against some recent interpretations, I distinguish Johnson's account of moral action from Locke's. I also contrast Johnson with Pascal: both are attentive to the mind's restlessness, but Johnson has more trust in the mind's ability to find and hang on to truth. Finally, I compare Johnson's ideal writer with Locke's ideal educator; both learn to teach well by mingling in society.

Writers, Johnson thinks, are disposed to avoid society and try to distinguish themselves from the rest of mankind. As *Rambler* 176 notes, 'The diversion of baiting an author has the sanction of all ages and nations' (v.165): a diversion which famously occupies Johnson in his 'Lives' of Swift and Milton. In Chapter 4 I read these two lives as expressions of Johnson's vocational thinking: authors who opt out of society, like Swift in his 'singularity', deserve to be brought back into it by ridicule. The case of Milton has as much to do with his admirers, whom Johnson thought of as idolatrous; Johnson responded by exaggerating his own criticisms.

Chapter 5 begins with the nineteenth-century image of the 'man of letters' as a figure simultaneously dignified by literature and undignified thanks to his dependence on the market. I look at Carlyle's portrait of Johnson, which wrestles with the question of authorial dignity. Johnson's own answer to that question is reflected in his various judgments on gazetteers and journalists, who for all their faults provide information to the rest of society, and unlike many of the learned, accept their station in the providential order. Johnson tried to avoid getting above his own station by giving the reader the chance to look down on him. The *Journey to the Western Islands* and the invented correspondence with Mr. Rambler display some of Johnson's arts of self-deprecation.

Chapter 6 deals with two critiques of Johnson, those of Hazlitt and Coleridge, and identifies what most provoked certain Romantics about Johnson: his depiction of authorship. My focus is on Johnson's Shakespeare edition, and the responses to it: for instance, Johnson reads the scene in which Hamlet nearly kills Claudius at prayer very differently from Hazlitt and Coleridge. Behind the specific differences, there is a divergence about how much respect Shakespeare is owed: while Hazlitt and Coleridge verge on bardolatry – and sometimes revel in it – Johnson deliberately undercuts the 'veneration' of Shakespeare.

A final chapter sets these debates within the bigger historical context, bringing in studies of Romanticism by Tim Blanning and Charles Taylor. I compare Isaac D'Israeli's image (heavily influenced by Romanticism) of the unsocial writer, a genius set apart from society, with Johnson's diametrically opposed view. Having looked at why certain Romantics took against Johnson, I look at the aftermath of their criticism. The later reception of Johnson – from Macaulay, Arnold and Strachey to Johnson's appearance in television comedy – illustrates how the Romantic idea of Johnson's 'narrowness', based to some extent on a misreading, has endured to the present day.

Finally, I suggest that in the last century the Romantic ideal has lost much of its appeal to writers and artists. For all his evasions and his weaknesses, Johnson's idea of the writer's vocation may have worn at least as well as his opponents' criticisms. T.S. Eliot made a tentative prediction: 'It remains to be seen whether the literary influence of Johnson…does not merely await a generation which has not yet been born to receive it.'[42] On the matter of authorship, Johnson has not always had the credit he deserves.

[42] T.S. Eliot, 'Johnson as Critic and Poet', in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber, 1957), 163.

1 Johnson's religious development, 1709-1744

In 1783, the year before Samuel Johnson's death, William Seward wondered aloud why 'there should be people without religion'.

> JOHNSON. 'Sir, you need not wonder at this, when you consider how large a proportion of almost every man's life is passed without thinking of it. I myself was for some years totally regardless of religion. It had dropped out of my mind. It was at an early part of my life. Sickness brought it back, and I hope I have never lost it since.'
> (*Life*, iv.215)

These remarks not only uncover an important biographical detail but also remind us of how Johnson thought about religion. On the one hand, it is 'Sickness' rather than argument, hard experience rather than intellect, which makes the difference. *Adventurer* 120 states: 'it is by affliction chiefly that the heart of man is purified' (*Works*, ii.470). But Johnson also considers the workings of the intellect. Religion, he suggests, is a more complex matter than whether you happen to believe, say, the Apostles' Creed. You can be more or less religious: it is present to the mind in varying degrees, and for 'almost every man' it is too little thought of. The writer, then, can be of great service to the forgetful mass of mankind: 'We frequently fall into error and folly,' Johnson writes in *Rambler* 175, 'not because the true principles of action are not known, but because, for a time, they are not remembered' (*Works*, v.160). For Johnson, the 'benefactors of mankind' include those who compress 'the great rules of life' into memorable formulations which will 'by frequent recollection… recur to the mind'. Johnson's religious writing – and if it is true that 'we are perpetually moralists' ('Life of Milton', *Lives*, i.249), then pretty much all of Johnson's writing has something to do with Christianity – tries to affirm 'the true principles of action', in case they drop out of the mind.

I will discuss this in more detail in chapter 3: it is at the centre of Johnson's thought about what the 'Preface to Shakespeare' calls 'a writer's duty to make the world better' (vii.71). That phrase could sound banal; but each of these terms points to a large part of Johnson's thought. Who is a 'writer'? How should they conceive of their 'duty'? What is their relationship to 'the world'? And what can they do to 'make the world better'? Johnson's complex answers to these questions were mostly formed in the first half of his life. This chapter, which ends on the brink of the *Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth* (1745) and the *Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language* (1747), studies how he came to think of the author's vocation.

The Serious Call

'I myself was for some years totally regardless of religion': this 'early part of my life' was during childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. Boswell's papers preserve the details (*Life*, iv.215n5). Seward asked when exactly religion had "dropped out" of Johnson's mind, and Johnson replied: "What, Sir, I think from ten till two and twenty." Johnson turned 22 in September 1731, over eighteen months after leaving Oxford. It was during those eighteen months that he suffered a 'severe attack of melancholia' which made him consider suicide.[43] If it brought him, instead, to Christianity, that is partly thanks to William Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, which Johnson read at Oxford and which had such an impact: according to Boswell, from the time he read Law, religion became the main object of his thoughts (*Life*, i.68-9). Yet if the *Serious Call* drew Johnson towards Christianity, and if illness made him a Christian, his exposure to religion began long before that, in the experiences, reading and friendships of Johnson's pre-Oxford years.

[43] James Clifford, *Young Samuel Johnson* (London: Heinemann, 1955), 124.

Sarah Johnson told her son about 'the two places to which the inhabitants of this world were received after death; one a fine place filled with happiness, called Heaven; the other a *sad* place, called Hell' (*Works*, i.10). Johnson remarks: 'that this account much affected my imagination, I do not remember'. This was the pattern for his parents' influence: Johnson was sufficiently well-instructed to think it noteworthy, aged seven, that George Hector did not know the Anglican Catechism (*Works*, i.13), but his parents failed to impress those beliefs very deeply. Sarah talked ineffectually about 'behaviour', Johnson later complained to Hester Piozzi, instead of telling him what he should or shouldn't do (*Miscellanies*, i.161); and Johnson by his own account harassed his mother with clever sallies against religion (*Life*, ii.14). His father Michael may have been a pious worshipper, closely involved with parish affairs, but to Samuel he seemed to talk '*ex officio*, as a priest does'.[44] Nor were the schoolmasters of Lichfield Grammar School particularly zealous: 'We were sometimes, on one of those days, asked our Catechism, but with no regularity or constancy' (*Works*, i.13). The 'frequent recollection' of *Rambler* 175 was missing.

In 1716, when Johnson was six, the family's church – St Mary's, Lichfield – closed for safety reasons, and for the next six years Johnson stayed away from church services altogether. This was less a protest than a result of shyness about his bad eyesight and other infirmities.[45] When, aged ten, Johnson experienced religious doubts, he did not go to any figure of authority for reassurance, but to a book he remembered seeing in his father's shop, Grotius's *de Veritate Religionis*.[46] Boswell sneers at Hester Piozzi's relation of this story (*Life*, i.68-9), but he seems to object mainly to her next claim: 'resolving from that time to be a Christian, he became one of the most zealous and pious ones ever known'.[47] Boswell has a point: if this really was a conversion

[44] James Boswell, *Boswell's London Journal, 1762-63*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (London: W. Heinemann, 1950), 284.
[45] Clifford, *Young Samuel Johnson*, 41; *Life*, i.67.
[46] Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale (Later Mrs. Piozzi)*, ed. Katharine C. Balderston. 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), 160-1.
[47] Ibid., i.161.

experience, it would be strange that Johnson did not return to church for two more years, in 1721,[48] and stranger still that he would refer to this period as the age when religion 'dropped out of my mind'. The rest of Piozzi's account rings true. Johnson 'took himself severely to task for this Sin' of not having looked at Grotius before, with a keen sense of guilt which often returned throughout his life. However, the discovery of the book, which he realised was beyond his Latin, was enough to comfort him.[49] The older Johnson always remarked on the power of example (see *Rambler* 60); to find a scholar defending Christianity was, for the moment, enough.

As he grew older, other adults provided the example his parents could not. Just before Johnson turned 16, he met Cornelius Ford, an older cousin who exerted a powerful influence on him.[50] Johnson remembered Ford many years later as 'a clergyman…whose abilities, instead of furnishing convivial merriment, might have enabled him to excel among the virtuous and the wise' ('Life of Fenton', *Lives*, iii.90-1). Sir John Hawkins regretted that Johnson had 'been a witness to the profligacy of his cousin Ford', which had 'nearly effaced' his 'deep sense of religion'.[51] Hawkins' comment seems incomplete, however, when we recall that Ford 'would allow no irreligious talk in his company' and declaimed against freethinking.[52] If 'Ford's example pointed Johnson towards a scholarly career',[53] it also showed that the life of the mind was consistent with the strenuous defence of Christian belief.

The other mentor, who came into Johnson's life one or two years later, was Gilbert Walmesley. In his tribute to Walmesley many years later, Johnson remarked that 'He…had never neglected the cultivation of his mind; his belief of revelation was unshaken; his learning preserved his principles; he grew first regular, and then pious' ('Life of Smith', *Lives*, ii.179). The shape of this sentence implies a virtuous circle in which intellectual credibility 'preserves' religion, and religion

[48] Aleyn Lyell Reade, *Johnsonian Gleanings*, 11 vols. (London: P. Lund Humphries, 1909-52), iii.81.
[49] Piozzi, *Thraliana*, 160.
[50] Clifford, *Young Samuel Johnson*, 83.
[51] Hawkins, *Life*, 12.
[52] Reade, *Gleanings*, x.89.
[53] Paul Monod, 'A Voyage out of Staffordshire; or, Samuel Johnson's Jacobite Journey', in Clark and Erskine-Hill, ed., *Historical Context*, 11-43: 22.

in turn assures a healthy mind. Religion, for Johnson, sustains and fortifies whatever is good in human nature. Chester F. Chapin's *The Religious Thought of Samuel Johnson* concludes: 'Johnson finds Christian doctrine and teaching so exactly consonant to the human condition that it is difficult to assume impulses in him constantly at war with his faith'.[54] Johnson said as much when he claimed in a letter that 'Christianity is the highest perfection of humanity' (*Letters*, i.269), and – in conversation – that religion is 'the highest exercise of reason'.[55] Walmesley and Ford may have helped to impress that point, even if religion was still only at the back of Johnson's mind.

The deist controversy touched Oxford in the month of Johnson's arrival, October 1728, when Nicholas Stevens was expelled from the University. Stevens was discovered to have written letters of a deistic stripe to one Robert Jennens, who had committed suicide at the Middle Temple in May of that year. The episode alarmed Oxford's Vice-Chancellor, Edward Butler, who published a *Programma* in December condemning the spreaders of unorthodox teachings. Tutors, Butler advised, should direct their students towards good books of Christian instruction.[56]

The following month, Law's *Serious Call* appeared. Whether or not the book was recommended to Johnson, he took it up with low expectations, and found it "quite an overmatch" (*Life*, i.68). Whatever may have been stirring in the University – Joseph Betty's University Sermon of September 1729 condemned 'the Witty Malice, and the Raging Insolence of *Arians* and *Atheists*, of *Libertines* and *Latitudinarians*, of *Socinians* and *Deists*'[57] – Law moved Johnson towards orthodox Christianity. 'From this time forward, religion was the predominant object of his thoughts' (*Life*, i.68-9).

Yet, as far as Johnson was concerned, this was not a conversion experience. Chapin reminds us that Johnson did not describe the *Serious Call* as the main agent of conversion: it was

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[54] Chapin, Chester F., *The Religious Thought of Samuel Johnson* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968), 156.

[55] Piozzi, *Thraliana*, 183.

[56] V.H.H. Green, 'Religion in the Colleges 1715-1800', in L.S. Sutherland and L.G. Mitchell, ed., *The History of the University of Oxford: The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 425-67: 435-6.

[57] Ibid., 437.

'Sickness' which 'brought me back' to religion.[58] Robert DeMaria similarly plays down the decisiveness of the *Serious Call*: he guesses that Johnson exaggerated the story in order to encourage Boswell to read the book himself. [59] Boswell treats Law, as Piozzi treats Grotius, as a decisive moment: both biographers place more emphasis than does Johnson on the religious power of reading. Even so, Johnson's praise of the *Serious Call* in later life – "the best piece of Parenetick Divinity" (*Life*, iv.287); 'the finest piece of hortatory theology in any language' (as reported by William Maxwell, *Life*, ii.122) – was not easily won.

The *Serious Call* did make a great impression, which changed Johnson's intellectual and scholarly life: Aleyn Lyell Reade suggests that the book 'turned his thoughts definitely towards religion as the greatest of all subjects for study and contemplation'.[60] According to Sir John Hawkins, Johnson's 'favourite objects' of study at Oxford 'were classical literature, ethics, and theology, whereof he laid the foundation by studying the Fathers'.[61] By the time he left Pembroke – after a little over a year, in December 1729 – he had devoted his attention to 'the Holy Scriptures, and the evidences of religion, to the writings of the fathers and of the Greek moralists', which had persuaded him of 'the truth of the Christian religion'.[62] If the *Serious Call* made Johnson take religion seriously, he must have read it quite soon after its publication in January 1729. Otherwise he could hardly have formed such a programme of Christian reading.

Hawkins believes that the discipline of Oxford encouraged Johnson in 'Reading the best authors', as well as by 'early calls to prayer'.[63] This account is at odds with modern biographies, which generally isolate the reading of the *Serious Call*, and its religious impact, from the larger story of Johnson's Oxford life. Peter Martin writes that, while at Oxford, Johnson 'was not systematically reading religious works, searching for spiritual truth, but he rediscovered religion

[58] Chapin, *Religious Thought*, 40.
[59] Robert DeMaria, Jr., *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading* (London: John Hopkins Press, 1997), 130.
[60] Reade, *Gleanings*, x.75.
[61] Hawkins, *Life*, 8.
[62] Ibid., 101.
[63] Ibid., 12.

through a book he happened to pick up, William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*'.[64] Yet Hawkins' narrative suggests that, following his encounter with the *Serious Call*, Johnson did indeed embark on a systematic study of Christianity. In December, Johnson left Oxford without a degree, perhaps because his 'Sickness' had first struck. David Nokes surmises that 'any thoughts that Law provoked were put aside as he journeyed back to Lichfield';[65] it seems just as likely, though, that the *Serious Call* was prominent in Johnson's thoughts as he dealt with his mental breakdown.

'Whatever the precise nature of this crisis', John Wiltshire writes, 'its effects on Johnson's subsequent life were devastating'.[66] Wiltshire suggests three major effects: Johnson lost much of his ability for hard study, he acquired several tics, and he returned to religion. Perhaps without Law's influence, and Johnson's subsequent study of Christianity, the last would not have taken place.

There are several eighteenth-century testimonies to Law's influence, which speak of him as increasing a half-hearted religious commitment into a more serious one.[67] George Whitefield came across the *Serious Call* just before University, and through it 'GOD worked powerfully upon my Soul, as he has since upon many others'.[68] Law persuaded Whitefield to take up a more disciplined life of prayer and fasting. John Venn's memoir of his father Henry, like Whitefield's account, refers to the *Serious Call* as 'a book which has been the means of exciting many to a life of holiness'.[69] The book convinced Venn to begin 'with great sincerity, to frame his life according to the Christian model there delineated'. This appears to be the pattern for those who read Law.

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[64] Martin, *Samuel Johnson*, 80.

[65] David Nokes, *Samuel Johnson: A Life* (London: Faber, 2009), 30.

[66] Wiltshire, John, *Samuel Johnson in the Medical World: The Doctor and the Patient* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 24.

[67] I was directed towards the examples below by Isabel Rivers, 'William Law and Religious Revival: The Reception of A Serious Call', *Huntingdon Library Quarterly*, 71 (2008), 633–49.

[68] Whitefield, George, *A Short Account of God's Dealings with the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield*, 3rd ed. (London, 1740), 25–6.

[69] Venn, John, 'Memoir', in *The Life and a Selection from the Letters of the Late Rev. Henry Venn, M.A.* (London: Hatchard, 1834), 13.

Thomas Scott, too, realised his own 'great remissness and negligence' when he encountered the *Serious Call*, and resolved to 'much increase my diligence' in religious practice.[70] Likewise, James Stillingfleet recommends Law's writings as 'admirably calculated to…beget in the reader a conviction of the futility of nominal profession, and mere decency of conduct'.[71]

If Johnson's experience followed the norm, the *Serious Call* may have gradually persuaded him to live the Christian life with greater intensity. S.G. Brown plausibly guesses that Johnson's resolution at Oxford to avoid sloth (*Works*, i.26) was heavily influenced by Law, who delivers some stern admonitions against sleeping in.[72] When Johnson came to the *Serious Call*, it was as a lukewarm Christian, but probably a Christian nonetheless: whether or not one accepts James Clifford's reading of 'Upon the Feast of St Simon and St Jude' as evincing 'a passionate depth of submerged Christian feeling', that poem does imply that Johnson considered himself some kind of believer before arriving at Oxford.[73] But when Johnson looked back, this seemed to him an irreligious time of his life. It was Law who made the first significant change. Even if the *Serious Call* was not the main cause of conversion, it was a book which Johnson throughout his life 'was very conversant with, and often commended'.[74]

Johnson gives no extended commentary on Law. For the next best thing, we can turn to Law's conspicuous role in the *Dictionary*. Johnson used three quotations from Law in the *Dictionary*'s first edition (1755), and 196 in the revised fourth edition (1773): as Katherine C. Balderston writes, 'Law had died in 1761, and whatever scruples Johnson had felt at quoting a contemporary were consequently removed'.[75] What did Johnson particularly seek to draw out and set before the reader?

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[70] Scott, Thomas, *The Force of Truth: An Authentic Narrative* (London, 1779), 66–7.

[71] Stillingfleet, James, 'A Short Sketch of the Life and Character of the Author', in *Posthumous Works of the Rev. Thomas Adam* (York, 1786), vi.

[72] S.G. Brown, 'Dr. Johnson and the Religious Problem', *English Studies*, 20 (1938), 1–17: 6.

[73] Clifford, *Young Samuel Johnson*, 88.

[74] Hawkins, *Life*, 341.

[75] Katherine C. Balderston, 'Dr. Johnson's Use of William Law in the Dictionary', *Philological Quarterly*, 39 (1960), 379–388: 380.

Two aspects of Law's thought come up repeatedly in Johnson's citations.[76] Firstly, the emptiness of outward elegance. For *gamester*, the citation from Law reads, with a shimmer of irony: 'Her youngest daughter is run away with a *gamester*, a man of great beauty, who in dressing and dancing has no superiour'. The disdain for glamour, dressing, dancing and the like is also present in Law's citations for *finery*, *foppish*, *gaudy*, *genteel, gentleman*, *gewgaw*, *glitter*, *gossip*, *milliner*, *musick*, *opera*, *pimple*, *plait*, *rake*, *ruddy*, *shop*, *silly*, *town* – on all of which Law's opinions can be guessed – as well as for *needless* ('*...needless* and ridiculous expences upon ourselves...'), *negligent*, *nice*, *opinion*, *personal*, *poor*, *really, running*, *sinner*, *state*, *thrive*, *world*, *yourself*, and *wearer* – of 'paint and glitter, and ridiculous ornaments'.

'Ridiculous', a favourite term of Law's, accords with the second outstanding theme in Johnson's citations: that the rational state of mind is the religious. This is not, for Law any more than for Johnson, chiefly a matter of Christian apologetics, but rather about what it means to live naturally and happily. An immoral life, on this view, is so contrary to one's own best interests that it is a kind of self-destructive eccentricity. Such is Johnson's assumption when, for instance, *Rambler* 111 refers to 'the innumerable absurdities of pride' (*Works*, iv.230); and such is Law's when (as cited for *prayer*) he writes of 'Unreasonable and absurd ways of life' as 'an offence to God'. In the citation for *rational*, Law writes:

> If it is our glory and happiness to have a rational nature, that is endued with wisdom and reason, that is capable of imitating the divine nature; then it must be our glory and happiness to improve our reason and wisdom, to act up to the excellency of our rational nature, and to imitate God in all our actions, to the utmost of our power.

The irrational person fails to pray, or wastes time, or resents a fellow-creature (cited for *foolish*), or doesn't carry out 'the reasonableness and excellence of charity' (cited for *reasonableness*). One could multiply statements of Johnson's to the same effect. For him, too, the claims of religion on

[76] The following references are to Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th edition (London, 1773).

the individual carry authority partly because they are so plain to the reasoning mind. At its simplest, Johnson sees 'religion' as (in the *Dictionary*'s first definition) 'Virtue, as founded upon reverence of God, and expectation of future rewards and punishments'. God's greatness and the afterlife, once acknowledged, rationally demand a religious and virtuous response.

Law and Johnson agree, then, that ordinary life should be lived in full awareness of these overwhelming spiritual facts. For *petition*, he quotes Law's advice that 'We must…go through all our worldly business with a heavenly spirit', rather like Johnson's good Christian who 'carries about him in the world the temper of the cloister' (Sermon 3, *Works*, xiv.33). The ordinary life, lived rationally, qualifies as a pious life. Likewise, Law's recommendation of 'some *useful*, humble employment of ourselves' as a great aid to spiritual progress (citation for *useful*) matches Johnson's well-known remarks about the innocence of earning money, and his insistence that one should not seek glory but only 'to discharge the duty which Providence assigns him' (*Rambler* 107, *Works*, iv.204). Religion, because of its reasonableness, can be lived in the midst of a normal existence, in any station of life.

Law and Johnson share many concerns – above all, with imaginative self-deception. As Balderston shows, both writers describe how people convince themselves that praising an act has the same value as performing it; judge themselves too leniently; invent competitions with their peers (the peril of envy and pride); and wander into the cul-de-sacs of the irresponsible imagination. The *Serious Call* describes irreligious life as precarious because unreal: 'We may for a while amuse our selves with *names*, and *sounds*, and *shadows* of happiness' (*Serious Call*, 186). In 'The Vanity of Human Wishes', Man also wanders the 'dreary Paths' on which nothing is as solid as it appears, and 'Shuns fancied Ills, or chases airy Good' (ll.8-10). Fantasy, by implication, is the opposite of religion.

Law does not engage as Johnson does with the causes and particular effects of these delusions. For instance, there is nothing in Law to compare with Johnson's sympathetic portrait of the astronomer in *Rasselas*. If the *Serious Call* taught Johnson about the vanity of human wishes,

as Walter Jackson Bate speculates, then Johnson only accepted part of the lesson: he treated human weakness 'With far more psychological clairvoyance than Law, and at the same time with more charity and humor'.[77]

The *Serious Call*'s admonitory tone influenced Johnson less than its positive message: that any form of life can be devout and holy. That includes a literary career, though, as Isabel Rivers says, 'Law's attitude to reading was ambivalent'.[78] On the one hand, he warns against the vanity of mere literary accomplishment. Octavius, for example, is observed on his deathbed by Eugenius, a young admirer of the older man's '*great learning*, his skill in *languages*, his knowledge of *antiquity*, his *address*, and fine manner of *expressing* himself upon all subjects!' (*Serious Call*, 211) None of this can help Octavius as he approaches death, and Eugenius is left 'thoroughly convinced' that the only life worth living is a pious one. Classicus is too learned to understand the first thing about devotion (256-7); the priest Ouranius is so wrapped up in his Homer that he cannot even help his parishioners (258). This last character resembles Gelidus in *Rambler* 24, who when he hears of a fire sweeping through a nearby town, stays where he is and limits himself to a pedantic remark about the nature of fire (*Works*, iii.133).

There is, on the other hand, a right use of learning, outlined by the wise Paternus to his son:

> I am teaching you *Latin* and *Greek*, not that you should desire to be a great *Critick*, a fine *Poet*, or an eloquent *Orator*... I teach you these languages, that at proper times you may look into the history of past ages, and learn the methods of God's providence over the world. That reading the writings of the antient *Sages*, you may see how wisdom and virtue have been the praises of great men of all ages, and fortify your mind by their wise sayings. (*Serious Call*, 240-2)

Literature does not provide its own justification; rather, it is good because it makes clear God's providence and the individual's duties. The kind of training Johnson gave his mind at Oxford had,

[77] Bate, *Samuel Johnson*, 103.

[78] Rivers, 'William Law and Religious Revival', 644.

then, a solid religious justification. As for his development as a writer, Law's literary excellence was enough to fulfil Johnson's later criteria for religious reading: "A boy should be introduced to such books, by having his attention directed to the arrangement, to the style, and other excellencies of composition; that the mind being thus engaged by an amusing variety of objects, may not grow weary" (*Life*, i.67). The character-sketches of Johnson's essays may owe something to those of the *Serious Call*; certainly, Law's readers were impressed by its 'excellencies of composition'. Thomas Scott, who rather like Johnson had expected to treat the *Serious Call* with 'contempt', was 'struck with the originality of the work, and the spirit and force of argument'.[79] John Wesley praised it for setting 'almost unequalled Standards of the Strength and Purity of our Language'.[80] The hopeful young author would find in Law confirmation that literature might serve religious ends. As DeMaria writes, 'If reading Law confirmed him in religion, it also confirmed him in his chosen task of reading'.[81] And the book's whole argument is an exhortation to develop one's talents to glorify God in the midst of life. Perhaps no sentence of Johnson's is more in the spirit of Law than this one about Milton: 'That he lived without prayer can hardly be affirmed; his studies and meditations were an habitual prayer' ('Life of Milton', *Lives*, ii.276).

Katherine C. Balderston's useful essay 'Doctor Johnson and William Law' demonstrates the closeness of Johnson and Law on such matters as the ubiquity of pride, the worthiness of cloistered religious life, and the self-deceptions of hypocrisy.[82] However, on none of these matters is Law so startlingly original that he must be claimed as Johnson's chief guide. Moreover, Chapin writes of the major differences between the two authors: 'Johnson accepted many purely secular pleasures and pursuits as worthy or at least harmless', and (for instance) wrote a play, whereas Law censured play-going.[83]

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[79] Scott, *The Force of Truth*, 66.

[80] John Wesley, *A Letter to the Reverend Mr. Law: Occasioned by Some of His Late Writings* (London, 1756), 4.

[81] DeMaria, *Critical Biography*, 23.

[82] Katherine C. Balderston, 'Doctor Johnson and William Law', *PMLA*, 75 (1960), 382–94: 385–93.

[83] Chapin, *Religious Thought*, 60–1.

The two writers have such different attitudes to secular pleasures that the first large group of *Dictionary* quotations – with their scorn for the fripperies of social life – comes as a surprise. Perhaps Johnson thought that the *Dictionary*'s polite audience could gain from Law's astringency. In any case, it reminds one that Johnson sympathised with asceticism (indeed, he quotes Law for *mortification* and *mortify*), although he never went as far as Law. Quoting *Rambler* 70, Balderston writes, 'Law is both the rare saint who has reached the summit and the "man not versed in the living world," who judges only by "speculative reason," and incidentally dooms men to despair by the rigid perfectionism of his doctrine' (see *Works*, iv.4). Johnson saw Law, then, as 'the type of moralist which he must not be', insisting on a kind of purity only possible to someone who (like Law) retreats from real life.[84]

The difference is a fundamental one, between two views of human nature and society. '*Meat*, and *drink*, and *cloathing*, are the only things necessary in life', the *Serious Call* claims (166). As for our other desires, these are 'wants which neither God, nor nature, nor reason, hath subjected us to' (*Serious Call*, 166). The simplification is notably unJohnsonian. *Rambler* 49 accepts that the 'artificial passions' of an advanced society are not 'received from nature', and depend only on 'the authority of custom' (*Works*, iii.265). None of this, however, automatically condemns such desires. Avarice and envy, of course, count as vices; but Johnson also classes 'friendship and curiosity' as artificial passions. He devotes most of this *Rambler* to the particular question of the 'love of fame' (iii.265), a passion which Law casts aside with a snort: 'this is truly an *invention* of happiness…as if a man should intend to make himself happy by *climbing* up a ladder' (*Serious Call*, 188). Law is speaking of present-day, Johnson of posthumous, fame; even so, the comparison is instructive. While acknowledging the whole case that to invoke posterity is absurd, Johnson also gives a hearing to opposing arguments: that such a desire may be a spur to live more creditably, that it resembles a wish to influence others for the better, and that (a recurrent principle in Johnson's ethical thought) it is social and acknowledges the importance of others.

[84] Balderston, 'Doctor Johnson and William Law', 394.

After discussing the various motives of fame-seekers, *Rambler* 49 offers a moderate verdict: 'the love of fame is to be regulated, rather than extinguished' (iii.267). Johnson distinguishes between the intricate roots of ambition. The *Serious Call*, by contrast, demands that all of them should be cut away as unnatural. That book's ability to simplify life into a series of dramatic choices did influence Johnson: Law's 'strict demarcation of the line between virtue and vice characterizes Johnson's attitudes throughout his life'.[85] Yet Johnson also admitted the existence of large grey areas. Against the impact of the *Serious Call*, then, should be balanced a tradition of ethical thinking which emphasises the obscurity and intricacy of moral action and motives. One work in this tradition is Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (1714), whose impact Johnson recalled: "I read Mandeville forty, or, I believe, fifty years ago. He did not puzzle me; he opened my views into real life very much" (*Life*, iii.292). ('Fifty years ago' would have been 1728, the year Johnson began at Oxford). Johnson goes on to rebut the book's claim that society, in its present state, relies on vicious motives: 'No, it is clear that the happiness of society depends on virtue' (iii.292-3). Not Mandeville's conclusions, but his 'views', were of great interest to Johnson.

Mandeville and honesty

Mandeville's imagination, like Johnson's, seeks out what is mysterious and complex, whether in individual motives or in the unconscious collaboration which takes place between members of a society. *Rambler* 9 marvels at technological progress:

> It is pleasing to contemplate a manufacture rising gradually from its first mean state by the successive labours of innumerable minds; to consider the first hollow trunk of an oak, in which, perhaps, the shepherd could scarce venture to cross a brook welled with a

[85] DeMaria, Jr., *Critical Biography*, 23.

> shower, enlarged at last into a ship of war, attacking fortresses, terrifying nations, setting storms and billows at defiance, and visiting the remotest parts of the globe.
> (*Works*, iii.49)

Johnson's prose mimics the vast, expansive process which it describes: in truth, no-one can 'contemplate' so many things all at once. The images are potentially as 'innumerable' as the 'minds' which have transformed this single object, a ship. They raise the question of how such collaboration happens and how human societies achieve things collectively – which is why Mandeville is also interested in shipbuilding. In the *Fable*, Mandeville's Cleomenes is impressed by

> what prodigious Height, from next to nothing, some Arts may be and have been raised by human Industry and Application, by the uninterrupted Labour, and joint Experience of many Ages, tho' none but Men of ordinary Capacity should ever be employ'd in them. What a Noble as well as Beautiful, what a glorious Machine is a First-Rate Man of War, when she is under Sail, well rigg'd, and well mann'd! As in Bulk and Weight it is vastly superior to any other moveable Body of human Invention, so there is no other that has an equal Variety of differently surprizing Contrivances to boast of…it is certain, that this Task would be impracticable, if it was not divided and subdivided into a great Variety of different Labours.
> (*Fable*, ii.148-9)

One difference stands out: Mandeville speaks more of impersonal processes, 'Application', 'Invention', and so forth, whereas Johnson brings forward the single figure of the shepherd, struggling across a brook. The convergence is nevertheless striking. These two sketches linger over the scenes of collective industry, which produce as if by magic a beautiful and powerful object. Such an admiring account of human endeavour could occasion all kinds of moral and political conclusions: it is not far from Burke's 'partnership in all art' between the generations,[86] and it is also open to Horatio's interpretation in the *Fable*: 'What I am most astonish'd at, and which I am now convinc'd of, is, that the Basis of all this Machinery is Pride' (*Fable*, ii.146).

[86] Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in *The French Revolution, 1790-1794*, ed. L.G. Mitchell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 147.

That is just what the older Johnson resists – but he does so by entering into Mandeville's territory, and considering the private motives which may have public benefits. He is cautious to make fine distinctions between vicious and virtuous grounds of action. For 'emulation', for instance, the *Dictionary* gives two senses. The second – 'Envy; desire of depressing another; contest; contention; discord' – is clearly to be avoided, but for the first – 'rivalry; desire of superiority' – Johnson gives Sprat as one of his quotations:

> Aristotle allows that some *emulation* may be good, and may be found in some good men; yet envy he utterly condemns, as wicked in itself, and only to be found in wicked minds.

Visiting Oxford in later life, Johnson approvingly reports that the University succeeds by "such a progressive emulation. The students are anxious to appear well to their tutors; the tutors are anxious to have their students appear well in the college; the colleges are anxious to have their students appear well in the University" (*Life*, ii.52). On the other hand, consider Johnson's argument for corporal punishment:

> A child is afraid of being whipped, and gets his task, and there's an end on't; whereas, by exciting emulation and comparisons of superiority, you lay the foundation of lasting mischief; you make brothers and sisters hate each other.
> (i.46)

This is the bad kind of emulation, compared to the 'progressive' kind at Oxford. Compare what Law's *Serious Call* has to say about any such distinction: 'I know it is said, that it is not *envy*, but *emulation*, that is intended to be awaken'd in the minds of young men... But this is vainly said...*emulation*, when it is defin'd in its best manner, is nothing else but a *refinement* upon envy, or rather the most *plausible part* of that black and venomous passion' (*Serious Call*, 332). Johnson agrees with Law about the effect of urging schoolchildren to compete with each other; he does not, however, follow Law in claiming that emulation always means envy. Mandeville, in a sense, agrees with Law, writing as though envy and emulation were interchangeable: 'If Envy was not so

riveted in Human Nature… Youth would not be so generally spurr'd on by Emulation' (*Fable*, i.143). Johnson introduces a little ethical breathing-space. With Aristotle, he argues for such a thing as 'progressive emulation'. In education, more mature students are able to look to their peers as competitors without necessarily coming to hate them. The competitive urge, even if it can give rise to 'supplantation and detraction', 'sometimes raises an honest and useful emulation of diligence' (*Rambler* 9, *Works*, iii.49). People work hard because they put an especially high value on their own efforts, so benefiting themselves and society.

Although Johnson would 'loudly…condemn' the *Fable*, he also spoke of it as 'the work of a thinking man' (Piozzi's 'Anecdotes', *Miscellanies*, i.268). Johnson did not praise Mandeville as a moral instructor, but rather as a sensitive and discerning mind, who observed closely as Johnson wanted to observe: 'he opened my views into real life'. The *Fable*'s close observation of character types is not unlike the *Rambler*'s, for instance in Mandeville's account of how people end up in different jobs. Once again, Mandeville enjoys the panoramic view of society, describing its various types, the respectable, the unlucky, those who 'have a spice of Gentility' and consequently 'turn *Actors*', the lazy ones who with 'a little Cunning' become fortune-tellers (*Fable*, i.58-61). The *Fable* declares: 'most Writers are always teaching Men what they should be, and hardly ever trouble their Heads with telling them what they really are' (*Fable*, i.25). Johnson's goal, most evidently in the *Rambler*, was to do both. Without drawing Mandeville's conclusions, he receives from the *Fable* the method of looking back along the path of individual motives. As Malcolm Jack puts it, both authors thought 'that human nature, with all its flaws, had to be understood if social relations were to be understood'.[87] Johnson sees good and bad mingled in society: human motives are to be regulated, and neither simply lamented, as in the *Serious Call*, nor, as in the *Fable*, ironically celebrated for their baseness.

[87] Malcolm Jack, 'Mandeville, Johnson, Morality and Bees', in Charles W.A. Prior, ed., *Mandeville and Augustan Ideas* (Victoria: English Literary Studies, University of Victoria, 2000), 85-96: 87.

The *Fable* may also have appealed to Johnson because of its impatience with what Mandeville calls 'Cant' (*Fable*, i.22) – a word closely associated with Johnson himself. Mandeville's suspicion of Stoicism is very like Johnson's: Mandeville writes, 'In the Theory of all this I am very perfect, but the Practice is very difficult' (*Fable*, i.151-2). Johnson agrees: 'it is overthrown by the experience of every hour' (*Rambler* 6, *Works*, iii.30). Shaftesbury's ethical system faces a similar kind of criticism. In the *Fable*'s second part, Mandeville satirises Shaftesbury's idealism about 'the Love and Natural Affection we have for our own Species' (*Fable*, ii.51). Johnson absorbed Mandeville's scepticism – he told Lady M'Leod that no man was naturally good, "no more than a wolf" (*Life*, v.211) – without turning to the more cynical view that self-interest governs society. As his ambivalence about 'emulation' shows, Johnson allowed more room for good motives. Yet Johnson believed much of Mandeville's self-image as an honest anatomist of what 'Men…really are'. And if the 'devout and holy life' was worth living, it had to be integrated with 'real life'. Paul Kent Alkon says of Johnson: 'He usually endeavoured to discover the truth, no matter how unpleasant, *before* passing moral judgment upon the facts in question';[88] Alkon adds that this allowed Johnson to scrutinise motives as closely as Hobbes or Machiavelli. But Mandeville is a likelier influence on Johnson's honesty. He used to say half-jokingly, according to Hester Piozzi, that he learnt to understand original sin from Mandeville (*Miscellanies*, i.268).

One of the defenders of private virtue who confronted Mandeville was William Law, in his *Remarks upon a late book* (1724). For Law, Mandeville is simply 'in favour of the Vices and Corruptions of Mankind'.[89] One can refute him by showing that moral behaviour is completely natural: 'let me tell, you, *Sir*, *moral Virtue* came amongst Men, in the same manner as *Seeing*, and *Hearing* came amongst them'.[90] There is no need for any Mandevillean story about the socio-political roots of virtue. Law does not address Mandeville's account of complicated social and

[88] Paul Kent Alkon, *Samuel Johnson and Moral Discipline* (Northwestern University Press, 1967), 26.
[89] William Law, *Remarks Upon a Late Book, Entitled, The Fable of the Bees, in a Letter to the Author* (London, 1724), 1.
[90] Ibid., 19.

economic mechanisms: he treats it as irrelevant. The weakness of Law's pamphlet is its failure to engage with the breadth of Mandeville's 'views into real life'. Johnson, by contrast, engages with Mandeville on his own ground, arguing that Mandeville does not distinguish between the results of a bad action, and the badness of the action itself:

> It may happen that good is produced by vice; but not as vice; for instance, a robber may take money from its owner, and give it to one who will make a better use of it. Here is good produced; but not by the robbery as robbery, but as translation of property. (*Life*, iii.292)

This double perspective, which Law does not achieve, considers the overall social good alongside the moral status of the single action, without allowing one to cancel the other. Johnson was able to find more sense in the *Fable* than Law did: it could have been partly the *Remarks upon a late book* which made Johnson call Law "no reasoner" (*Life*, iii.287).

Johnson had major differences with both the *Serious Call* and the *Fable*. Whatever kind of Christian writer he was to be, his views had to be broader than those of the *Serious Call*. Still, for all that Johnson learned from Mandeville, he would not describe human society as the fortunate result of bad motives. Johnson tested the *Fable* against his Christian principles. Law's confrontation with Mandeville suggests that an orthodox Christian cannot accept the general assumptions of the *Fable*. Johnson's aim was to look at 'real life' but without omitting religion.

Irene *and religious language*

Johnson's religion, after university, became a part of his professional duties. However, we know little about his spell as a 'lay chaplain' to the household of Sir Wolstan Dixie, when in Market Bosworth in 1732, or his time as a private tutor at Thomas Whitby's house in Great Haywood. In

the latter role Johnson would repeat much of the Sunday sermon, and provide a commentary.[91] In 1730, Johnson had acquired a new copy of the *Book of Common Prayer*.[92] It became the foundation of his prayers, to judge by the first he could remember composing, on his 29th birthday in 1738 (*Works*, i.37-8). He prays to be able 'to make use of thy Gifts to the honour of thy Name; to lead a new life in thy Faith, Fear, and Love; and finally to obtain everlasting Life'. By the time Johnson began his literary career – this was the year he moved to London – prayers were part of his writing.

Johnson's first original full-length work, *Irene* (begun 1736; first performed 1749), is an attempt at a Christian drama, and its revisions are useful evidence of Johnson's development as a religious author. The play is emphatically supernaturalist: Johnson's characters frequently refer to angels, Providence, and final judgment; some of the references are indirect, for instance in the often-used term 'Heav'n' for God. Irene's apostasy is made the dramatic centre of the play. She chooses worldly success over true religion, and so faces a death which reveals providential justice:

> Behold Irene – o'erthrown
> By crimes abhord, and treasons not her own
> Eternal justice (well th'eternal mind) thus her doom decreed
> And in the traitress bad th'apostate bleed

This was the draft for V.xiii.12-15, the last lines of the last Act. But the final version removes the mention of apostasy, the name of Irene, and her condemnation:

> When haughty Guilt exults with impious Joy,
> Mistake shall blast, or accident destroy;
> Weak man with erring rage may throw the dart,
> But Heav'n shall guide it to the guilty heart.

[91] Clifford, *Young Samuel Johnson*, 149-50.
[92] Reade, *Gleanings*, viii.109.

Johnson has sensed the critical principle which fixes itself in the *Lives of the Poets*, especially those of Milton (*Lives*, i.289) and Waller (ii.52-4): that religious subjects are too great for poetry. In the long period between first composition and first performance Johnson toned down the play's didactic content. Another example is the confrontation between Irene and Aspasia in III.viii. The draft has Aspasia warn Irene, 'The breast where guilt like this has found admission / No more shall feel *religion's* hallowed ardours' (my emphasis). In the final version, this becomes 'The soul once tainted with so foul a crime / No more shall glow with *friendship's* hallowed ardours' (III.viii.15-16; my emphasis).

Apostasy has become 'foul' in its natural, rather than supernatural aspect; Irene will lose friendship, not religion. As with the altered ending, the revision demonstrates Johnson's uncertainty about the artistic practice of a Christian author. When he went over the play, he pushed its religious message further below the surface. Although Christianity was already a major part of Johnson's literary aims, he was uncertain how exactly it should manifest itself. He never returned to drama, but he had learned much, in writing *Irene*, about the opportunities and, especially, the dilemmas, of making religious art in a secular genre.

Johnson's early biographical writings, largely dependent on other studies, are nevertheless intriguing for their consistency with each other and with Johnson's later works. His generalisations and asides stand out from these second-hand narratives, as marks of constant thought about intellectual and moral excellence, particularly when the two seem to clash. The 'Life of Boerhaave' (1739) depicts a figure, clearly admired by Johnson, who joins piety and intellectual curiosity in an 'always chearfull' character (*EBW*, 33)

> So far was this man from being made impious by Philosophy, or vain by Knowledge, that he ascribed all his Abilities to the Bounty, and all his Goodness to the Grace of God. (*EBW*, 35)

That praise implies that philosophy and knowledge often do make people impious and vain, a possibility which Johnson keeps in view. Boerhaave, on the other hand, had a sceptical 'Sense of the Greatness of the Supreme Being, and the Incomprehensibility of his Works' (*EBW*, 30). Boerhaave hesitated to go beyond 'such Qualities alone as are discoverable by Experience, or such as may be deduced from them by Mathematical Demonstration'. Theorising beyond the known facts is one form of intellectual arrogance.

Johnson attacks with equal force from the opposite direction. The 'Life of Drake' (1740) scorns those who 'value themselves upon a perpetual Scepticism, upon believing nothing but their own Senses' (*EBW*, 50). 'Sceptics' is again used as an insult later on (*EBW*, 63): Johnson struggles to define the right position between the pride of trying to explain too much, and the pride of believing too little. He is asking how rational inquiry should stand in relation to the virtue of humility. And he can give no certain account of where optimistic investigation should give way to an acceptance of human littleness before God. In *The Vision of Theodore* (1749) and elsewhere, Johnson would develop a kind of answer: that the intellect cannot make its own rules, but must look to conscience as a guide.

The swift and pervasive effects of pride and envy, which Johnson represents with great force in later essays and sermons, are already on his mind. Sarpi is accused out of 'envy' – a 'ridiculous' case is made against him, a reminder of the absurdities to which the envious man is driven ('Life of Sarpi', 1738, *EBW*, 21-2). Barretier made enemies only 'by the superior merit of his abilities' ('Life of Barretier', 1744, *EBW*, 193). Drake's fame becomes 'sufficiently advanced to incite Detraction and Opposition' (*EBW*, 50). Johnson adds to his source in the 'Life of Blake' (1740) what E.L. McAdam calls 'a highly Johnsonian comment' about the consequences for a society which overcomes turmoil:[93] 'Success is the Parent of Pride, and Pride of Jealousy and Faction; Faction makes way for Calamity' (*EBW*, 77). Johnson is equally concerned about his own literary pride: in the 'Life of Barretier', he is 'tempted to suppress' a staggering account of the prodigy's

[93] E.L. McAdam, Jr., 'Johnson's Lives of Sarpi, Blake and Drake', *PMLA*, 58 (1943), 466–476, 472.

brilliance, but resists temptation because his 'Envy may beget a Disinclination to admit so immense a Superiority' (*EBW*, 167). The same reflexive fear is evident in the later review of Soame Jenyns (1757). There, Johnson wonders whether 'envy or cruelty' might motivate him, Johnson, to deny an education to the poor (*Works*, xvii.410).

Authorship carries with it substantial risks. Apart from the danger of intellectual pride and envy, the authority of the written word gives one a special responsibility not to speak impiously or rashly. *Irene*, with its euphemisms such as 'Heav'n' and its guarded revisions, may err on the side of caution; for Johnson, Gay's epitaph errs inexcusably on the other side.

> Life is a Jest, and all Things show it;
> I thought so once, but now I know it.[94]

In an essay for the *Gentleman's Magazine*, for which – in 1738 – he was now working, Johnson responds indignantly, unrestrained by the irony with which he tempers negative remarks in the *Lives of the Poets*. The epitaph is not only 'miserable Poetry', possibly composed while the poet was drunk; it is also entirely unsuited to the form of an epitaph.

> A Tavern Joke sounds but ill in a Church, from w^{ch} it ought to be banish'd, if for no other Reason, at least for that which forbids a drunken Man to be introduced into sober Company.

The essay's later remarks show that he takes this far more seriously than a social embarrassment like a drunkard among sober company. He compares Gay to Dryden's Laius, who is said to have learned the art of deceit in hell. If Gay 'thought Eternity a Jest', Johnson adds, 'he is by this Time most certainly undeceived'. The harsh implications of this sentence bespeak a real anger provoked by more than Gay's epitaph alone: 'A childish Levity has of late infected our Conversation and Behaviour… Irreligion has corrupted the present Age, but let us not inscribe it on Marble, to be the Ruin and Scorn of another Generation'. When Johnson, closing the *Rambler*, referred to 'the

[94] In *The Gentleman's Magazine*, ed. Thomas Keymer, 16 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), viii.536-7.

licentiousness and the levity of the present age', it was to distinguish his own writing as free of such weaknesses (*Works*, v.320). In Johnson's view, the writer who accepts this 'Levity' fails in their authorial duty.

As with *Irene*, Johnson draws back from openly religious expressions. He mentions hell, but only as an image from classical literature. He argues from general principles of decorum – like those excluding 'a drunken Man' from 'sober Company' – while gesturing ('if for no other Reason') towards deeper, religious reasons. But those specifically Christian grievances are unspoken. In Johnson's letters to Edward Cave, the editor of *The Gentleman's Magazine*, we glimpse some of Johnson's anxiety about Christian writing. The notion of offering prizes for the best poems on 'Life, Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell', or 'the Divine Attributes',[95] is more characteristic of Cave than of Johnson. In his first ever letter to Cave, offering his services, Johnson refers to the first competition in a roundabout way: 'Your late offer gives me no reason to distrust your Generosity' (*Letters*, i.6). Four years later, now working for Cave, and apparently having just received a telling-off, Johnson apologises for his slowness over the translation of Sarpi, but not for his 'reluctance' to deal with the 'prize verses': 'You may, if you please still have what I can say, but I shall engage with little Spirit in an affair, which I shall *hardly* end to my own Satisfaction, and *certainly* not to the satisfaction of the parties concerned' (*Letters*, i.19).

Johnson's unease about open religious discussion grew out of his long self-reflection on authorship. Lawrence Lipking describes Johnson's meditation, at the start of his career as a 'learned author', on the role and what it meant: 'hardly anyone took the ideal more seriously than Johnson'.[96] It may be added that Johnson constantly brought his Christianity to bear on this ideal.

[95] Respectively *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1734, 560, and 1736, 58.

[96] Lipking, *Life of an Author*, 58.

Authorial caution

If Christian belief provided a motive for writing, it also provided a difficult standard for the intellectual. The 'Life of Boerhaave' touches on Johnson's anxieties about authorial duty. He is moved to a surprising equivocation when discussing the charges of heterodoxy and 'Spinosism' which stuck to Boerhaave (*EBW*, 28). Such rumours are first encouraged by the envious, Johnson observes, but 'good Men' may well help them to endure. Why? Because it is just possible that the accusations might be true, and 'Upon this Principle, that the Safety of Many is to be preferred before the Advantage of Few'. The reputation of one man, and the certain benefits of his learning, have less weight with some 'good Men' than the slight possibility that others will be led astray from Christianity.

Johnson thinks hard about just how much caution is necessary to a Christian author. His translation of Crousaz's *Commentaire sur la traduction en vers de M. Abbé Du Resnel, de l'Essai de M. Pope sur l'homme*, and his intervention in the subsequent debate between Crousaz and Warburton, return to the subject. The *Commentaire*, which Johnson translated for Cave in 1739, attacked the *Essay on Man* as dangerous and misleading in its portrayal of the moral universe and the nature of God. Johnson, to judge by the later 'Life of Pope' (1781) and his willingness to translate Crousaz, thought much the same. Just as in the 'Life of Boerhaave', he recommends a strong awareness of the potential harm done by an author. The 'ruling passion' may or may not be genuine, Johnson says in one footnote, but when discussing it, one should think first of defending 'the reader':

> it is not proper to dwell too long on the resistless power, and despotick authority of this tyrant of the soul, lest the reader should, as is very natural, take the present inclination however destructive to society or himself, for the *ruling passion*, and forbear to struggle when he despairs to conquer.
> (xvii.145-6)

'Lest the reader…' the train of consequences may be only a possibility, but even the chance of a reader being led astray means that the usual rules of open discussion are suspended. Just as 'good men' might spread rumours in a situation where religious orthodoxy is at stake, so good authors will avoid anything which might drain their audience's moral strength.

The *Commentaire* sometimes goes too far for Johnson's liking: 'Mr Crousaz is so watchful against impiety', a footnote complains, that he misrepresents Pope (xvii.74). However, Johnson only censures that watchfulness because 'The friends of a philosopher and Christian ought to be justice, charity, and truth' (xvii.75). Where a writer does not offend against those virtues, it is quite right to be 'watchful against impiety'.

In a letter to the *Gentleman's Magazine* partially defending Crousaz (1743), Johnson makes the principle of caution even plainer. Despite his manifest annoyance at Crousaz's quirks, Johnson wished to point out some of the commentator's admirable qualities. He finds one of Crousaz's remarks so piercing that 'every writer ought to impress [it] upon his mind' (xvii.383-4). A celebrated author, Crousaz warns, should ensure 'that nothing drops from his pen, from which men of corrupt inclinations may take advantages in opposing religion' (Johnson's own translation). This single observation, for Johnson, 'offers a sufficient apology for his commentary'. A writer's duty appears here as first of all a negative responsibility: not to write anything that could be exploited. 'Drops from his pen' sounds like an accident – but it could be disastrous, just as Johnson's religion 'dropped out of my mind'. The author must always strive to prevent such accidents. Again, a possible train of consequences appears before Johnson, in which something of no great significance might be seized on by 'men of corrupt inclinations' and lead to catastrophe. The *Dictionary* has no place for the likes of Shaftesbury, 'lest,' as Piozzi reports Johnson saying, 'it should send people to look in a Book that might injure them forever'.[97]

[97] Piozzi, *Thraliana*, 34.

This vigilance has something to do with one belief of Johnson's about human psychology, which he would later express in *Rambler* 4: 'the power of example is so great as to take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without the intervention of the will' (*Works*, iii.122). Here is the same fear of possible results, glimpsed far off: 'that which is likely to operate so strongly, should not be mischievous or uncertain in its effects'. These anxieties amount to a statement of faith in the enormous power of literature – even moral ambiguity may be too great a risk in fiction. And although Johnson takes the novel, in *Rambler* 4, as a special case because of its lifelikeness, the fundamental point remains. The mind can take hold of what it reads or sees and begin to copy it, 'almost without the intervention of the will'.

Elsewhere in the *Commentary* Johnson considers example and influence, with Crousaz or against him. When Crousaz recommends that the great should be judged more leniently because they have so many enemies, Johnson protests in a footnote that, instead, the great should earn less leniency because 'they set fashion on the side of wickedness, corrupt whole nations by their influence' (xvii.38). In the *Gentleman's Magazine* letter, Johnson applauds Crousaz for understanding that example can sweep away virtue. He quotes the *Commentaire* again: 'all the advantages' gained by a sincere individual trying to improve 'are destroy'd in a few moments by a free intercourse and acquaintance with libertines' (xvii.386). The *Gentleman's Magazine* letter demonstrates Johnson's uncertainties about religion and literature: while he approves of Crousaz's writing, he is also consistently worried by the power of literature to spread dangerous ideas.

The letter emphasises some of Johnson's foundational Christian principles. For Crousaz, as for Johnson, religious practice is synonymous with fulfilment and happiness, and is an encouragement to 'study and labour to cultivate and improve' one's God-given abilities (xvii.385-6). Someone obedient to God will find happiness; a rebellious person will be disappointed and restless. We are reminded that, in Johnson's view, the religious life is normal and natural, and that, whether for individuals or whole societies, all kinds of improvements are caught up in the growth of religion. In one note, Johnson states that 'I recollect no authentic relation from which it

does not appear, that civility and religion promote each other' (xvii.97). Yet the same note recalls the right order of things: after commenting that some Indian peoples are 'human and civilized almost to politeness,' Johnson adds: 'or perhaps to a generosity and good nature far preferable'. Though civilization and religion 'promote each other', civilization is a lesser end than moral goodness.

The rough edges on these early productions of Johnson's make manifest the principles which would soon be absorbed into his writing. We can sum them up, as they have so far appeared. Religion, for Johnson, has the authoritative voice on any question with a moral complexion; as Law had argued, to think reasonably is to think religiously. For Johnson, however, that does not take away the obligation to understand 'real life' and 'the living world' on their own terms, along the path which Mandeville had trodden. Because civilisation and religion mutually benefit each other, there is nothing to be feared from entering into the secular sphere; even so, a writer must be perpetually aware of the power of literature to influence and to lead astray. Johnson shrank from explicitly Christian language, and he realised when redrafting *Irene* that a work of literature should not have the tone of a sermon. The communication of the Christian message was urgent, to a generation distracted by frivolity, but it was no simple matter. To pay both religion and literature the respect they deserved: that was Johnson's task as he stepped out into public.

By the 1740s, Johnson was in many ways the Christian author we already recognise: earnest, uneasy, orthodox, austere, 'Johnson…cannot be said to have left "religion" out of anything'.[98] Yet there is an important gulf between the Johnson of these early writings and the Johnson of the *Rambler* (1750-2). His account, so far, of an author's responsibility is individualistic: writers must regulate themselves, must recognise their opportunities. In the following chapter, a new element will appear: that for authors, as for everyone else, duties towards mankind are

[98] Ian Crowe, *Patriotism and Public Spirit: Edmund Burke and the Role of the Critic in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 70.

defined by one's immediate social circumstances. It was in the *Life of Savage* that Johnson began to articulate this point.

The two main characters are Savage and 'mankind', and it is the varying relationship between them which fascinates Johnson, as a case study of how authors should and should not conceive of themselves. When Savage is praised, it is because he is on a level with the rest of mankind: at Bristol, for instance, when 'as in every other scene of his life, he made use of such opportunities as occurred of benefiting those who were more miserable than himself, and was always ready to perform any office of humanity to his fellow-prisoners' (*Lives*, iii.184). Savage lowers himself to 'those who were more miserable'. When Johnson censures Savage, it is for elevating himself above humanity, 'asserting his claim to deference and regard' (iii.167); 'he could not bear to conceive himself in a state of dependence, his pride being equally powerful with his other passions' (iii.187). Savage relates to his audience with that same pride, and here Johnson introduces a gentle, unmistakable note of irony: when a poem sells badly, Savage puts it down to bad timing, and thus 'easily reconciled himself to mankind without imputing any defect to his work' (iii.165). Pride is absurd because it imagines that 'mankind' can be guilty of some kind of offence against the author and in need of 'reconciliation'. The *Life of Savage*, with all its sympathetic balance, is a deeply moral tale about authorship. Inasmuch as Savage lowers himself to others, he is to be admired; inasmuch as he refuses to come down from his exalted literary heights, he is to be censured. It was in the *Rambler* series that Johnson would most fully elaborate these moral principles.

2 Vocation and Society

Sociability and human nature

Johnson wrote to Joshua Reynolds in August 1764: 'I know not how I can so effectually promote my own pleasure as by pleasing you' (*Letters*, i.244). In Johnson's view, pleasure seeks immediately for its reflection and, not finding it, remains incomplete. 'It is well known that the most certain way to give any man pleasure, is to persuade him that you receive pleasure from him' (*Rambler* 72, iv.14). 'Men seldom give pleasure, where they are not pleased themselves' (*Rambler* 74, iv.22). Unless a pleasure spreads to others, it can hardly be thought of as pleasure. So *Rambler* 148, speaking of the growth of friendship between parents and children, refers not only to 'the repercussion of communicated pleasure' but also to 'the natural contagion of felicity' (v.24). Pleasure cannot, by its nature, be simply solitary: it suggests a community.

That simple observation lies behind Johnson's idealisation of society, and his transference of moral questions to the social sphere. The *Dictionary* definition of 'social' quotes Locke: 'To love our neighbour as ourselves is such a fundamental truth for regulating human society, that by that alone one might determine all the cases in *social* morality'. A.T. Elder says that the nature of humans as social beings is a leading theme in 'thirty-one papers from the *Rambler*, three from the *Adventurer*, and six from the *Idler*'.[99] According to Sermon 1, experience universally testifies 'That society is necessary to the happiness of human nature… That knowledge is advanced by an intercourse of sentiments, and an exchange of observations, and that the bosom is disburthened, by a communication of its cares' (xiv.3). It is painful not to be able to share one's happiness (xiv.4).

[99] A. T. Elder, 'Thematic Patterning and Development in Johnson's Essays', *Studies in Philology*, 62 (1965), 610-632: 621.

The *Dictionary* defines *society* as 'Union of many in one general interest' and, secondly, 'Numbers united in one interest; community'. Meanwhile, *community* is 'The commonwealth; the body politic'. So within the body politic, all may consider themselves as connected, and moreover, as sharing in 'one general interest'. In Johnson's imagination, the social world consists of individuals connected, more or less strongly, more or less diversely and numerously, to one other. Such connections, which when they reach a certain strength can be called friendships, need to be built up: so Johnson writes to Bennet Langton in 1755, 'I have very seldom received an offer of Friendship which I so earnestly desire to cultivate and mature' (*Letters*, i.107). All the time, these connections are being improved and fortified by the generous sharing of experience, or damaged by selfishness, or eroded by time ("A man, Sir, should keep his friendship *in constant repair*", *Life*, i.300). Thus, to see yourself clearly, you cannot just see your own interests, or even your moral flaws and good points; you have to see yourself as part of an immense, interconnected group.

> The apparent insufficiency of every individual to his own happiness or safety, compels us to seek from one another assistance and support. The necessity of joint efforts for the execution of any great or extensive design, the variety of powers disseminated in the species, and the proportion between the defects and excellencies of different persons, demand an interchange of help, and communication of intelligence, and by frequent reciprocations of beneficence unite mankind in society and friendship.
> (*Rambler* 104, iv.190)

This paragraph is a contender for the centrepiece of Johnson's moral thought. Fulfilment, and society itself, depend on our helping one another according to our abilities. One person's 'defects' may be compensated by another's 'excellencies'. The 'frequent reciprocations of beneficence' hold individuals together in friendship, but also make 'happiness or safety' possible for all. Friendship is not identical with community, but both are enabled by the instinct of 'assistance and support'. So Johnson reacts warmly to a story he has heard from the seventeenth century, when the ties of society were strained:

> In the war between King and Parliament, Davenant was made prisoner, and condemned to die; but was spared at the request of Milton. When the turn of success brought Milton into the like danger, Davenant repaid the benefit by appearing in his favour. Here is a reciprocation of generosity and gratitude so pleasing, that the tale makes its own way to credit.
> ('Life of Milton', *Lives*, i.263)

Time and again in Johnson's writing we come across 'reciprocation', 'beneficence', and especially 'communication'. From Johnson's many uses of this last term and its cognates, we can generalise that one normally *communicates* something which, however apparently trifling, is precious and irreplaceable. It might be a secret hope (*Rambler* 68, iii.359; *Idler* 88, ii.274), or a private anxiety: 'the bosom is disburthened, by a communication of its cares' (Sermon 1, xiv.14). Communication involves trusting another to be charitable, or being charitable oneself, like 'Those, who communicate literature to the son of a poor man' (Review of Soame Jenyns, xvii.10). The ideal teacher is a communicator in the broadest sense: in the tribute to his own mentor, Gilbert Walmesley, Johnson says that to this day he still benefits from the older man's "copiousness of communication" (*Life*, i.81).

Religious overtones linger in the word, and in Johnson's usage: 'the Jews enjoyed a very ample communication of the divine will' (Sermon 10, xiv.108); death frightens not least because it precedes 'an immediate and perceptible communication with the supreme Being' (*Rambler* 78, iv.47). The *Dictionary* reminds us of the eucharistic sense of 'communicate': the first meaning given is 'To partake of the blessed sacrament'. And in the King James Version, it is St Paul's term for the sharing, in Christian charity, of another's circumstances. 'Ye have well done, that ye did communicate with my affliction' (Philippians 4:14); 'Charge them that are rich in this world… That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate' (1 Timothy 6:17-18). Human sharing, here as in Johnson, imitates divine generosity.

There is no separating religion and morality in Johnson's scheme: he habitually pairs 'virtue and piety' (*Rambler* 18, iii.103). But while religion confirms and crowns the reasonable,

virtuous life, it also provides, in Johnson's eyes, the foundation of the most tangible forms of that life. This is symbolised by the benevolent figures who pass quietly through the *Rambler*: the 'old curate' in *Rambler* 76, whose kindness sets an example to Melissa (iv.31-2); *Rambler* 181's 'Eumathes, a clergyman, whose piety and learning gave him such an ascendant over me, that I could not refuse to open my heart' (v.191); the 'old clergyman' in *Rambler* 157 who takes pity on the floundering Verecundulus in the midst of his embarrassment (v.73).

These little kindnesses are models of moral action on the small or large scale. In the *Journey to the Western Islands*, Johnson warmly notes the 'kindness of communication' when he and Boswell arrive in Aberdeen (*Journey*, 9), and when he pans out to survey extensively the social world, he finds that "Society is held together by communication and information" (*Life*, iii.293). Necessity is matched by our deepest desires, since – one of the cognates of 'communication' again appears when Johnson comes to generalise most broadly – 'To receive and to communicate assistance, constitutes the happiness of human life' (*Adventurer* 67, *Works*, ii.389).

Rowan Boyson's *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment Idea of Pleasure* reminds us that such ideas were widespread in Johnson's time. 'The modern idea of pleasure is primarily individualistic', Boyson writes; but much Enlightenment philosophy imagines pleasure as 'inherently communal rather than private or solipsistic'.[100] Many of Johnson's contemporaries took the idea for granted. According to Edmund Burke's biographer F.P. Lock, 'Burke thought of man as pre-eminently a sociable animal, happiest and best able to fulfil his nature in groups'.[101] John Hawkesworth commented in his short biography of Swift – written with Johnson's advice (*Lives*, iii.189) – of Swift's *Journal to Stella*:

> Whatever excellence we possess, or whatever honours we obtain, the pleasure which they produce, is all relative to some particular favourite, with whom we are tenderly connected, either by friendship or by love; or, at most, it terminates, like rays collected by a burning-

[100] Rowan Boyson, *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment Idea of Pleasure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1.

[101] F.P. Lock, *Edmund Burke*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998-2006), i.15.

> glass, in a very small circle, which is scarce more than a point, and, like light, becomes sensible only by reflection. Thus Swift, while he was courted and caressed by those whom others were making interest to approach, seems to have enjoyed his distinction, only in proportion as it was participated with Stella.
> (*Account*, 20)

Johnson's strong attachment to this idea can be discovered in many places, including the surprisingly impressionistic passage in Sermon 25 which describes the mingling of souls and the awfulness of a loved one's death:

> They who most endeavour the happiness of others who devote their thoughts to tenderness and pity, and studiously maintain the reciprocation of kindness, by degrees mingle their souls, in such a manner, as to feel, from separation, a total destitution of happiness, a sudden abruption of all their prospects, a cessation of all their hopes, schemes and desires. The whole mind becomes a gloomy vacuity, without any image or form of pleasure.
> (xiv.267)

Idler 41 also deals with this subject of the loss of loved ones, after which, Johnson suggests, even those enjoyable activities which remain are robbed of what made them pleasurable: namely, the possibility of sharing them. '[W]hat is success to him that has none to enjoy it. Happiness is not found in self-contemplation; it is perceived only when it is reflected from another' (ii.130). Johnson knew this from his own experience after Tetty's death. He wrote to Thomas Warton:

> I have ever since seemed to myself broken off from mankind a kind of solitary wanderer in the wild of life, without any certain direction, or fixed point of view. A gloomy gazer on a World to which I have little relation. Yet I would endeavour by the help of you and your brother to supply the want of closer union by friendship.
> (*Letters*, i.90)

'Without any certain direction': as in *Rambler* 18, friends and married couples are seen as uniting around particular goals. When an 'associate' or 'assistant' dies, the common goal, the shared 'point of view', itself disappears.

It would be a paradox, in Johnson's view, for a solitary person to be fulfilled: any improvement, in virtue, in happiness, in one's personal interests and projects, happens through banding together with others. The others need not be especially gifted or good: we are miles below the vision of friendship in a work like Cicero's *Laelius*, where (Cicero writes) 'Friendship is only possible between good men'.[102] It is something like the idealism of the *Laelius* which Johnson waves away in *Idler* 23: 'Many have talked, in very exalted language, of the perpetuity of friendship, of invincible constancy, and unalienable kindness' (ii.72). But reality breaks in: for 'common mortals', friendship depends on mutual pleasure, and ends without it.

Fortunately, these lower standards allow all kinds of people to be friends. Almost any company, says *Rambler* 80, is better than no company: 'It is scarcely possible to pass an hour in honest conversation, without being able to rise from it, to please ourselves without having given or received some advantages; but a man may shuffle cards, or rattle dice, from noon to midnight, without tracing any new idea in his mind' (iv.59).

Johnson's case for mankind's sociability looks quite similar to Shaftesbury's. For Shaftesbury, too, 'A life without natural affection, friendship or sociableness would be found a wretched one' (*Sensus Communis*, in *Characteristics* (1711), 56). Philosophers (Shaftesbury is especially thinking of Hobbes) who assume the only human motive to be 'self-interest' have overlooked how much our lives are formed by 'kindness or generosity….social or natural affection' (*Characteristics*, 54). '[T]he sense of fellowship' runs as deep in nature as 'any appetite or sense' (51). Since, for Shaftesbury, we learn morality by attending to our nature, this fellow-feeling defines morality, rather as it does for Johnson. And Johnson would find little to object to in this sentiment, from *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit*: '*to be wicked or vicious is to be miserable and unhappy*' (*Characteristics*, 229; italics in original).

[102] Cicero, *Laelius: On Friendship*, in *On the Good Life*, ed. Michael Grant (London: Penguin, 1971), 185 (5,18).

For Shaftesbury, Boyson writes, 'we must have an innate drive towards' 'social interaction'.[103] Like Johnson, Shaftesbury considers sociability so necessary a part of life that even immoral pleasures depend on it:

> What tyrant is there, what robber or open violator of the laws of society, who has not a companion or some particular set, either of his own kindred or such as he calls friends, with whom he gladly shares his good, in whose welfare he delights and whose joy and satisfaction he makes his own?... It is to this soothing expectation of friendship that almost all our actions have some reference...there is scarce a single article but what derives itself from social love and depends immediately on the natural and kind affections.
> (*Inquiry into Virtue or Merit*, *Characteristics*, 204-5)

Adventurer 50 likewise observes that – apart from lying – 'Almost every other vice' brings with it companionship and a set of social standards. Philanderers, drinkers and robbers all have followers and admirers (ii.362). 'Man is so formed for society, that even solitary wickedness quickly disgusts,' as Sermon 20 puts it (xiv.225). These parallels between Shaftesbury and Johnson demonstrate how unified eighteenth-century thought could be; but the two thinkers also demonstrate how much it could vary.

Sociability and malevolence

Shaftesbury and Johnson, while agreeing on the fact of sociability, write of it entirely differently. Johnson's view of human nature is more jaded and regretful. In the 'Preface to Shakespeare', he asserts that in Shakespeare's time, 'The contest about the original benevolence or malignity of man had not yet commenced' (vii.88). Though he does not say so, Johnson had a view on this, found in both conversation and in his writing. I have already mentioned his remark that man was

[103] Boyson, *Wordsworth*, 29.

not naturally good, "no more than a wolf" (*Life*, v.211). On another occasion he rejected an opinion he attributed to Lord Kames, "that virtue is natural to man, and that if we would but consult our own hearts we would be virtuous. Now after consulting our own hearts all we can, and with all the helps we have, we find how few of us are virtuous" (*Life*, iii.352).

William Godwin warned Thomas Wedgwood: 'Allow me to recommend to you a very cautious admission of the moral apophthegms of doctor Johnson. He had an unprecedented tendency to dwell upon the dark & unamiable part of our nature.'[104] What Godwin frowned on in 1798, William Kenrick had already noted in 1768, complaining at the 'shocking caricaturas, which Dr. Johnson so frequently exhibits, of human nature'. The Idler, Kenrick reasoned, must have spent time only with 'the most beastly of mankind'.[105] As John Wiltshire comments, Kenrick was implicitly comparing Johnson to 'a Shaftesburian or Latitudinarian assurance of the natural goodness of human beings'.[106] Those attached to such a view correctly saw Johnson as an opponent.

Johnson is more interested than Shaftesbury in how people make themselves 'unqualified' for social life. Shaftesbury, partly because he is writing against a grim Hobbesian picture of universal selfishness, emphasises the harmoniousness of society, the benevolence which arises in the course of normal interaction from our deep-rooted 'sense of fellowship' (51). Johnson does not deny that sense, but he repeatedly pictures the way it clashes with an equally inbuilt selfishness and individualism. There are strong limits to fellow-feeling: 'we are formed for society, not for combination…we are attracted towards each other by general sympathy, but kept back from contact by private interests' (*Adventurer* 45, ii.359-60). Those 'private interests' can overwhelm the claims of 'general sympathy', at which point we become less human: *Idler* 38 tells the reader that, if they are unmoved by the plight of those in debtors' prisons, 'I must leave them to be awakened

[104] 10 January 1798; in *The Letters of William Godwin*, ed. Pamela Clemit, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011-14), 6.

[105] William Kenrick, *An Epistle to James Boswell, Esq., occasioned by his heaving transmitted the moral writings of Dr. Samuel Johnson to Pascal Paoli* (London, 1768), 18, 17.

[106] John Wiltshire, *The Making of Dr. Johnson* (Hastings: Helm Information, 2009), 22.

by some other power, for I write only to human beings' (ii.121). Yet in admitting that such hard-heartedness is possible, Johnson acknowledges that there is a tension between humanity and inhumanity.

It is just possible, then, for Gloria Sybil Gross to claim that 'In effect, Johnson sees society as a mass of isolated, hostile individuals, who inflict suffering on one another as they compete for the very same goals'.[107] Clearly, that is only one way in which 'Johnson sees society', though probably not the most significant way; still, he is unillusioned about the possibilities for anti-social behaviour. Our capacity for kindness is interwoven with malice, he tells Hester Thrale in a 1768 letter:

> From that social desire of being valuable to each other, which produces kindness and officiousness, it proceeds, and must proceed, that there is some value in being [able] to give pain.
> (*Letters*, i.304)

You find the same view in Sermon 12 ('All social pleasures put us more or less in the power of others, who sometimes cannot, and sometimes will not, please us', xiv.132), Sermon 23 ('every man pursues a private and independent interest… many will desire what few can possess', xiv.23), and with Rochefoucauldian bluntness in Sermon 11:

> To feel sincere and honest joy at the success of another, though it is necessary to true friendship, is perhaps neither very common, nor very easy. There is in every mind, implanted by nature, a desire of superiority, which counteracts the pleasure, which the sight of success and happiness ought always to impart.
> (xiv.120)

He writes to Hester Thrale in 1779 that a nurse will normally enjoy being victorious over a stubborn child: 'There are few minds to which tyranny is not delightful; Power is nothing but as it

[107] Gloria Sybil Gross, *This Invisible Riot of the Mind: Samuel Johnson's Psychological Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 95-6.

is felt, and the desire of superiority is proportionate to the resistance overcome' (*Letters*, iii.194-5). When Boswell offered to teach Johnson a poem, Johnson half-humorously refused: "You shall retain your superiority by my not knowing it" (*Life*, ii.220).

Jon Mee's *Conversable Worlds* studies the eighteenth-century 'emergence of the conversational paradigm' as a model for social interaction and for reading.[108] Johnson's Literary Club was one example of this, though Mee notes that 'Ability in conversation for Johnson always had a moral aspect'.[109] Johnson integrated commonplace ideas about sociability with a stress on moral responsibility. One inconvenience of conversation, according to *Idler* 44, is that 'we are pained by ignorance, but pained yet more by another's knowledge' (ii.138). In the Highlands, Johnson remarks that a people can be 'softened' by conversation and exchanging ideas, but notes a page later: 'Such seems to be the disposition of man, that whatever makes a distinction produces rivalry' (*Journey*, 34-5). Society brings out aggressive, negative impulses.

For Johnson, social life is a way to transmit both good and bad to others. As *Rambler* 180 puts it, 'Neither our virtues nor our vices are all our own. If there were no cowardice, there would be little innocence; pride cannot rise to any great degree, but by the concurrence of blandishment or the sufferance of tameness' (v.186). Johnson trusts the social world, considered in itself, less than Shaftesbury. For instance, *Characteristics* proposed that ridicule could be a test of truth, a view severely denounced in Johnson's Sermon 20, on scoffers at religion: 'It is an established maxim among them, that he who ridicules an opinion confutes it. For this reason they make no scruple of violating every rule of decency' (xiv.220). The rules are there, Johnson implies, for a reason; in its unregulated state, society will lead its members away from truth.

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[108] Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 26.

[109] Mee, *Conversable Worlds*, 90.

Solitude and opportunities for good

As we saw in the last chapter, Johnson had a qualified admiration for Mandeville, who in the second edition of *The Fable of the Bees* satirised Shaftesbury's theory as a rose-tinted fantasy.[110] If Johnson shared some of Shaftesbury's optimism about the individual urge to move outwards, towards others, he balanced it with Mandeville's perception of individual selfishness. The difference makes itself clear in Johnson's and Shaftesbury's treatment of solitude. While both believe sociability to be the secret of the happy and virtuous life, for Shaftesbury it is reflected in the individual's discovery of order in the world, which comes from 'self-study and inward converse' (*Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author*, in *Characteristics*, 124). For Johnson, meanwhile, individuals left to themselves will go wrong. So the two writers interpret the Greek tag 'Be acquainted with thyself' entirely differently: Shaftesbury infers from it a need for solitude, based on the ancients' principle 'that 'they were never less *alone* than when by *themselves*'' (*Characteristics*, 77). For Johnson in *Rambler* 24, the precept means that one must get to know other people. Gelidus, the ivory-tower misanthrope, walks around his house 'like a stranger that is there only for a day, without any tokens of regard or tenderness' (iii.133). Johnson does not spell this out, but he implies that we can only know ourselves by ceasing to be 'strangers', by knowing others: we only have a personality when it mingles with other personalities. Johnson's autobiographical Latin poem 'Γνῶθι Σεαυτόν' ('Know Thyself'), written after the *Dictionary*, may be introspective, but it begins with a human connection: Johnson addresses Scaliger and, seeing his example, realises that he is not 'your equal'. The community, this time, is a historical one.

As a result, Shaftesbury's and Johnson's respective counsels for writers are different: Shaftesbury, with his greater confidence in the individual's capacity to find the right path, tells authors to go into themselves. Johnson, preoccupied by the likelihood of becoming an anti-social

[110] Boyson, *Wordsworth*, 25.

menace, advises writers to get out of their own heads and be corrected by society. (More will be said about this later in the chapter.) But society will only do someone good if they actively try to be good. For *Rambler* 89, 'every man…who has any desire to be wise or useful…must…adopt the joys and the pains of others' (iv.107). Before acting well, one must feel 'that social desire of acting well, which produces kindness and officiousness' (to Hester Thrale, *Letters*, i.304). Sympathy is not just a good thing to feel, it is compulsory for anyone who wants to be wise and useful. And pleasure draws us towards this usefulness: we should make ourselves feel 'the want of social pleasures and amicable communication'. Sermon 11 argues that

> Sympathy, the quality recommended in the text [1 Peter 3:8], as it has now been explained, is the great source of social happiness. To gain affection, and to preserve concord, it is necessary not only to mourn with those that mourn, but to rejoice with them that rejoice. (xiv.120)

The language is of duty: it is 'necessary' to 'gain' and 'preserve' the goods of friendship. They come about through choice, not in the course of things.

All too often, we take the opportunities to hurt rather than help each other. It should be obvious, Sermon 23 remarks, to 'every man…that his own happiness is connected with that of every other man…that thousands and millions should continue together, as partakers of one common nature' (xiv.238). However, to this truth people are culpably blind: in our individualism, we seek our own ends, and 'the ties of society are broken'. Society casts out liars, according to Johnson, because they threaten those links of trust and confidence without which friendship dies out. *Idler* 20 goes as far as to argue that 'There is no crime more infamous than the violation of truth' (ii.62). Johnson does not necessarily say that lying is worse than murder; the *Dictionary* gives for *infamous* 'Publickly branded with guilt; openly censured; of bad nature'. 'The violation of guilt' offends the public openly; it is a more widely condemned crime; and this is only natural because, Johnson goes on, 'men can be social beings no longer than they believe each other. When speech is employed only as the vehicle of falshood, every man must disunite himself from others,

inhabit his own cave, and seek prey only for himself' (ii.62). In *Adventurer* 50, Johnson adds that lying, almost alone among the vices, does not bring one into any kind of a community: it is simply despised by everyone (ii.362). And he quotes Sir Thomas Browne's remark – one he also recalled in conversation (*Life*, iii.293) – that the devils do not lie because hell could not survive.

For the same reason, keeping a secret is 'a trust…of a very high nature, important as society, and sacred as truth' (*Rambler* 13, iii.73). The ease with which Johnson links 'trust', 'society', and 'truth', and the gravity of his tone, exposes his way of thinking: the scaffolding of society is everyone's confidence in everyone else. In a different way, envy also dissolves societies' ties. *Rambler* 183 suggests that, even more than selfishness, envy violates 'the great law of mutual benevolence' (v.197). Envy 'is above all other vices inconsistent with the character of a social being…one of those lawless enemies of society' (v.199-200). Again, Johnson's moral thought moves quickly and instinctively beyond the individual and into the area of social life.

Shakespeare's moral wisdom, for Johnson, is continuous with his knowledge of human affairs. Don John says self-regardingly, 'I cannot hide what I am: I must be sad when I have cause, and smile at no man's jests' (*Much Ado About Nothing*, I.iii.11). Johnson applauds 'one of our author's natural touches' (*Works*, vii.362). Don John possesses – worst of all features – 'An envious and unsocial mind'. Being unsocial, he removes himself from the natural exchange of benevolence. He is 'too proud to give pleasure, and too sullen to receive it': a kind of perverseness which, in excluding the rest of society, even denies itself good and harmless 'pleasure'. Moreover, living by oneself means living in untruth. An unsocial attitude like Don John's 'always endeavours to hide its malignity from the world and from itself, under the plainness of simple honesty, or the dignity of haughty independence'. Lying to the world and lying to oneself, in unhappy exile from the natural, social world – all this follows once an individual assumes their 'independence'.

No account of Johnson's moral thought can afford to miss out his constant moving back-and-forth between the individual being, weighing and choosing, and the social situation within which that individual moves. Johnson might have written, along with Donne, 'I am involved in

Mankind'.[111] He moves beyond exhorting the reader to follow their conscience, by showing that the reader is not alone but surrounded by fellow-creatures who depend on each other.

Johnson, believing in providence, does not imagine that opportunities for moral action need to be sought out; one is given a place within society, and in that particular place one chooses whether or not to carry out one's responsibilities. Although expressed in very different language, Johnson's is the kind of ethics which F.H. Bradley would articulate in the next century as 'My Station and its Duties'.[112] We owe something to society, and society claims it through our particular circumstances. *Rambler* 47 describes the perpetual necessity of 'social duties, and the common avocations of life', then defines those duties as taking place in 'that time which providence allows us for the task of our station' (iii.255). Sociability does not make us good, as Shaftesbury could imply; rather, for Johnson, society provides our opportunities to do good and carry out our duties.

Social duties and vocation

'[E]very particular relation', says Sermon 1,

> gives rise to a particular scheme of duties. Duties which are of utmost importance, and of the most sacred obligation, as the neglect of them would defeat all the blessings of society, and cut off even the hope of happiness… Almost all the miseries of life, almost all the wickedness that infests, and all the distresses that afflict mankind, are the consequences of some defect in these duties.
> (xiv.4-5)

[111] John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624; in *Selected Prose*, chosen by Evelyn Simpson, eds. Helen Gardner and Timothy Healy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 100 (7).
[112] F.H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies* (1876; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), 160-213.

Adventurer 95 similarly refers to 'The relations of social life, and the duties resulting from them' (ii.426).

For Johnson, then, morality cannot really be imagined except in the practical sphere, and except in relation to other people. Speaking of moral duties necessarily involves speaking of society. By being born into the human species, we are born into a dense network of ethical possibilities, which appear within our friendships and acquaintances. As early as 1738, Johnson wrote in the *Gentleman's Magazine*: 'that can never be a social duty which is not of some benefit to society' ('Pamphilus on Condolence', *Works*, x.11).

At the back of all this is the Christian God, who both asks us to fulfil our duties, and is the Father whose children owe each other help and kindness:

> The power of godliness, as it is exerted in the love of our neighbour, appears in the exact and punctual discharge of all the relative and social duties. He, whom this power actuates and direct, will…extend his care to those who have no other claim on his attention than the great community of relation to the universal Father of mankind.
> (Sermon 13, xiv, 145-6)

And so without religion, society falls apart: 'the law of God…never can be violated without destroying that confidence, which is the greatest source of mutual happiness; for how can that person be trusted, whom no principles oblige to fidelity?' (Sermon 1, xiv.15) This is not just about keeping order, though. God wants people to be happy, and has chosen that this happiness is social. Presumably, God could have created individuals capable of being fulfilled and useful by themselves; but 'It has been ordained by providence…that every creature should be drawn by some secret attraction to those of his own kind' (*Rambler* 99, iv.164-5).

In his writings on sociability and morality Johnson belonged to a major strand of the classical and Christian traditions. In *The Good Life*, an exposition of Aristotelian and Thomistic ethics, Herbert McCabe writes: 'just to be human is to have certain roles or functions… The reason

why being human entails having certain functions to fulfil and roles to play (which may be done well or badly) is that to be human is to be part of a society of other human beings.'[113] McCabe quotes Aquinas:

> Since man by his nature is a political animal, moral virtues, insofar as they are natural, are called political virtues, for on them depends his behaving well in social life.[114]

Such ideas, then, were part of Johnson's intellectual inheritance. One possible direct source is Richard Hooker's *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie* (first four books published 1593), in which Hooker writes: 'to supply those defects and imperfections which are in us living, single, and solelie by our selves, we are naturally induced to seeke communion and fellowship with others. This was the cause of mens uniting themselves at the first in politique societies'.[115] 'Communion', which Hooker later uses three times in the space of five lines when discussing the social order,[116] aligns with Johnson's term 'communication': they both involve an idea of sharing and mutual support.

The idea of vocation translates easily into secular language, as becomes clear in the writings on vocation of the sociologist Robert Bellah and his co-authors. Vocation allows a person to make 'a contribution to the whole', and it ties an individual to those they serve.[117] It responds to people's needs – the authors quote one businessman who describes the response to 'a calling' as 'contributing to the common good and responding to the needs of others as these needs become understood'.[118] The authors remark on the idea's 'biblical' roots, but their treatment is secular.[119]

In *Adventurer* 67, Johnson looks around at the remarkable diversity of trades and occupations, and 'cannot but admire the secret concatenation of society, that links together the

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[113] Herbert McCabe, *The Good Life: Ethics and the Pursuit of Happiness* (London: Continuum, 2005), 25-6.
[114] *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, 61, 5 (McCabe's translation, in McCabe, *Good Life*, 39).
[115] Richard Hooker, *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie* (first four books published 1593), in *The Folger Library Edition of The Works of Richard Hooker*, ed. W. Speed Hill, 7 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1977-98), 96 (i.10.1).
[116] Hooker, *Laws*, 107 (i.10.12).
[117] Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart*, 66,69.
[118] Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart*, 218
[119] Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart*, 66.

great and the mean, the illustrious and the obscure' (ii.386). Everyone's role derives from their responsibilities in society, which produces a kind of equality; what Burke, in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, called 'the happiness which is to be found by virtue in all conditions; in which consist the true moral equality of mankind'.[120] If Johnson avoids mentioning God, that is out of reticence, because his vision is intrinsically religious. It is God who underpins this ordering of the world, and ensures its 'secret concatenation' and the rewards for hard work.

Johnson's God is both demanding and consoling; so is Johnson's providential understanding of duty. No one, *Adventurer* 67 goes on, should

> stand a lazy spectator of incessant labour; or please himself with the mean happiness of a drone, while the active swarms are buzzing about him; no man is without some quality, by the due application of which he might deserve well of the world; and whoever he be that has but little in his power, should be in haste to do that little, lest he be confounded with him that can do nothing.
> (ii.486)

Demanding, because it tells the reader to make 'haste' and stop being 'lazy' (the fault Johnson constantly accuses himself of); consoling, because it claims that everyone can make some contribution to the common good, and should not be despondent about having 'little' to offer. Indeed, when viewed from one angle, nobody has that much to offer. 'The power, indeed, of every individual is small', *Adventurer* 137 remarks: 'Providence' has ensured that no individual has enough talent to become independent of everyone else (ii.489).

I have already discussed in the Introduction how Johnson uses the word 'vocation'. What I hope has been made clear in this section is that the idea silently permeates his thought. Moral failure, for Johnson, consists in not living in accordance with one's station. To do wrong is to do wrong as a tradesman, a writer, a politician.

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[120] Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in *The French Revolution*, 87.

Vocation and the needs of others

In Catherine of Siena's *Dialogues*, Christ tells her: 'Why do I give this person one virtue and that person another, rather than giving them all to one person?... I wanted to make you dependent on one another... So whether you will it or not, you cannot escape the exercise of charity!'[121] This echoes 1 Corinthians 12:4: 'Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit'. In this tradition of Christian thought, Johnson writes that it is God's will that we should depend on each other, so that we have to show each other charity:

> We perceive ourselves wholly unable to stand alone, and compelled to solicit, every moment, the assistance of our fellow-creatures; whom perhaps our Maker enables us at present to repay by mutual kindness, but whom we know not how soon we may be necessitated to implore, without the capacity of returning their beneficence.
> (Sermon 19, xiv.208)

There are two motives to acting virtuously: firstly – and this qualifies Johnson's sympathy for 'subordination' (see e.g. *Life*, ii.13, iii.383) – that the tables may turn, 'we know not how soon'; secondly, that it is more blessed to give than to receive, and so 'we should consider every opportunity of performing a good action, as the gift of God, one of the chief gifts which God bestows upon man, in his present state' (xiv.212).

Once we 'seize the opportunity' to do good, though, we should not be too concerned about results. Within the 'secret concatenation', no-one can see what effect they are having; moreover, to work for that effect sets one up for disappointment: 'He that studies simply his own satisfaction, will always find the proper business of his station too hard or too easy for him' (*Adventurer* 128, ii.481). All one can do is accept one's task, and do it to please 'the Father of Being', who allotted that task in the first place, and asks only that we try and perform it as best we

[121] Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 37-8 (i.7).

can. Relieved of worry about how useful we are being, whether we are worthy of our job, whether our job is worthy of us, we can work with 'chearfulness and diligence'.

For Johnson, then, the providential view should be an uplifting one. It takes away the pressure of status anxiety, places us in the hands of the God who chose the task for our particular abilities, and deepens our fellowship with the rest of humanity. Against that fellowship, personal ambition constantly rises up, focusing on 'trivial elations and discouragements' rather than the steady awareness of God's favour (*Rambler* 127, iv.315). God is 'that being whom alone we are sure to please by endeavouring to please him' (*Rambler* 190, v.233). Trying to please anyone else is an uncertain, anxiety-ridden business. Success itself often comes down to some 'accidental advantage'; without good luck, 'learning and bravery sink into the grave, without honour or remembrance' (*Rambler* 190, v.233). Insecurity afflicts even the lucky: any task, in a certain perspective, looks rather petty, can be made to look 'equally ridiculous' (*Adventurer* 128, ii.479). The last few *Adventurer* essays, taken together, have a similar argumentative structure to *The Vanity of Human Wishes*: they tend to demonstrate the uncertainty of human affairs, and finally turn to God as the sole secure foundation for hopes and ambitions. *Adventurer* 107 concludes:

> The only thought, therefore, on which we can repose with comfort, is that which presents us to the care of Providence, whose eye takes in the whole of things, and under whose direction all involuntary endeavours will terminate in happiness.
> (i.445)

The Vanity of Human Wishes referred to the ultimate authority, 'whose Eyes discern afar / The secret Ambush of a specious Pray'r' (354-5). God's providence is supreme, but its operations are secret.

Johnsonians have been slow, I think, to recognise how much providence and vocation meant to Johnson. One critic who does touch on this, though in a secular language, is Isobel Grundy. '[A]s a moralist', Grundy observes, Johnson 'supported an ideal of community which can tame the competitive struggle and compensate for individual pettiness, transience and

insufficiency'. Johnson is 'vividly aware of the pressures of competition' while valuing 'mutual assistance, either public or personal, as a frail achievement of civilized, moralized humanity; but it rests on a foundation of mutual dependence which is, as much as competition, an inescapable condition of our being'.[122] Others have noted the religious side of this vision: Robert DeMaria points out that 'the central thought of *Irene* is that Providence, though obscure to man, is immanent throughout God's creation'.[123] And he makes the telling observation that, when Johnson chose to name *London*'s speaker Thales, he was alluding to 'the first philosopher to acknowledge the eternal God and his Providence in governing the world'.[124] DeMaria shows that from the start of his career, Johnson was writing about providence. But the meaning of providence is not only in God's government of the world, but also in God's assigning different stations to different individuals.

The two full-length studies of Johnson as a moralist, by missing the importance of vocation to Johnson, make him a less interesting thinker. Robert Voitle does recognise Johnson's 'idea of an organic, mutually interdependent subordination', and traces the idea to Richard Cumberland's *De legibus naturae*.[125] But Voitle leaves it at the level of social theory, not asking how it applies to questions of what makes for a good life. So his book goes on to argue that, for Johnson, morality is not 'principally a matter of virtuous character…or in *being* anything, because above all morality to him means *doing*.'[126] But the idea of vocation makes what someone *does* a major part of what they *are*. To take an obvious example, to let down your friend involves *doing* wrong, but it also means *being* a bad friend. As McCabe writes, looking back to a long Christian and classical tradition, 'it is through belonging to the community that you can make yourself the

[122] Isobel Grundy, *Samuel Johnson and the Scale of Greatness* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1986) 120-1.
[123] DeMaria, *Critical Biography*, 41.
[124] DeMaria, *Critical Biography*, 49.
[125] Robert Voitle, *Samuel Johnson the Moralist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 107-8.
[126] Voitle, *Johnson the Moralist*, 150.

kind of person you are'.[127] Voitle's being-doing distinction implies that being is something static, rather than something constantly in development.

Similarly, Paul Kent Alkon tells the reader that his study only deals with 'Johnson's directions for the moral regulation of our inward responses to the world around us' rather than 'the different, though of course closely related, subject of his directions for the moral regulation of our outward conduct'.[128] It is not clear that these are different subjects in Johnson's mind. We respond to the world as beings who act in it. Almost nothing, in Johnson's thought, is a private matter: I should do my duty, says Johnson, because others are depending on me, however indirectly. To keep healthy, for instance, 'is a moral and religious duty' (to Elizabeth Langton, *Letters,* i.359). Not looking after one's health makes one

> a robber of the publick…a wretch that has voluntarily disqualified himself for the business of his station, and refused that part which providence assigns him in the general task of human nature.
> (*Rambler* 48, iii.259)

Excessive mourning, likewise, will distract us from 'social duties' which have a claim on us: 'we have no right to sacrifice…that time which providence allows us for the task of our station' (*Rambler* 47, iii.255).

Self-control, in *Rambler* 64, appears as the foundation of friendship and kindness: 'Multitudes are unqualified for a constant and warm reciprocation of benevolence, as they are incapacitated for any other elevated excellence, by perpetual attention to their interest, and unresisting subjection to their passions' (iii.340). Johnson concentrates into this sentence his anthropology as well as his morality: since man is – as he says over and over – 'a social being', when someone fails to live well, they also fail everyone else.

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[127] McCabe, *The Good Life*, 28.
[128] Alkon, *Moral Discipline*, 181.

The expression 'a constant and warm reciprocation of benevolence' deserves some attention, too: Johnson thinks of this exchange of generosity as an 'elevated excellence' like the mastery of some trade or skill. The skill, here, is of friendship, the art of reciprocation and sharing. By 'communication', we elevate ourselves to a greater height of achievement. And this does not come naturally: 'Multitudes are unqualified' for it. It is typical of Johnson to warn that 'he that has practised the art of silencing others with a jest, in time learns to satisfy himself in the same manner' (Sermon 20, xiv.222). Character encompasses inner and outer worlds.

Thus for Johnson it is natural to pair 'Character and Duty', the self and the self's responsibilities. In his meditation 'On the Character and Duty of an Academick' (date unknown),[129] Johnson not only expresses what he means by vocation, but also articulates how that applies to the life of the mind. It begins to tell us something about Johnson's conception of the author's duties.

Johnson begins: 'The great effect of society is, that by uniting multitudes in one general co-operation, it distributes to different orders of the community the several labours and occupations of life."[130] This 'diversified industry' gives rise to 'different obligations. Every man has his task assigned, of which, if he accepts it, he must consider himself accountable for the performance'.[131] Having stated the doctrine of vocation, Johnson applies the doctrine to academics, the professionally studious. Crucially, he sees their duty in terms of others' needs:

> The individuals of this illustrious community are set apart, and distinguished from the rest of the people, for the confirmation and promotion of national knowledge. An academick is a man supported at the public cost, and dignified with public honours, that he may attain and impart wisdom. He is maintained by the public, that he may study at leisure; he is dignified with honours, that he may teach with weight. The great duty therefore of an academick is diligence of inquiry, and liberality of communication. Of him

[129] See J.D. Fleeman, *A Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), ii.1751.
[130] Samuel Johnson, *On the Character and Duty of an Academick* (The Johnsonians, 2000), 12.
[131] Ibid., 13.

> that is appointed to teach, the first business is to learn, an unintermitted attendance to reading must qualify him to be heard with profit.

The vocabulary is all of what academics can provide to others: they 'impart', 'teach', and are 'heard', and study is their preparation for helping the other members of society. The academic must 'be always able to prove what he asserts, to give an account of his hope, and to display his opinion with such evidence as every species of argument admits'. Giving an account of one's hope is a reference to 1 Peter 3:15: 'be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear'. Though Johnson is speaking in secular terms, his language deliberately opens up a religious angle.

Johnson goes on to say that an academic should guard the truth:

> For such service he can be fitted only by laborious study, and study therefore is the business of his life; the business which he cannot neglect without breaking a virtual contract with the community. Ignorance in other men may be censured as idleness, in an academick it must be abhorred as treachery.

Again, moral duties are determined by someone's place in society. Having defined what 'service' is needed, you can see when someone fails to perform it.

The vocation of the author

Authors are not quite the same as academics; but we might expect that Johnson will see these vocations in similar terms, as both deal in truth-telling. 'On the Character and Duty of an Academick' describes the importance of defending truth, and this also applies to the critic: 'the

duty of criticism… is to hold out the light of reason' (*Rambler* 93, iv.134). The duty of a journalist is to 'carefully enquire after truth, and diligently impart it'.[132]

Rambler 96 adds: 'many arts of instruction have been invented, by which the reluctance against truth may be overcome' (iv.149). The truth must be told, but told attractively, or it is useless. More will be said about this in the next chapter. For the moment, I would like to pause over one point: that to learn the techniques of convincing the reader, a writer must venture out of the study or the garret. 'He has learned to no purpose, that is not able to teach', *Adventurer* 126 argues (ii.474). The craft of teaching, in turn, is taught by experience of people. You can acquire 'learning' in 'solitude', but 'its application must be attained by general converse'. In conversing widely, the teacher picks up the skills of 'diction or address', and so gains the power to share their thoughts.

Adventurer 85 portrays the alternative: solitary learners, entering the world unprepared, are like fencers only familiar with the posture of their fencing-master. An opponent's stance leaves them 'perplexed and amazed' (ii.415). They speak as if everyone else knows the subject as well as they do: unaccustomed to other minds, they become incomprehensible and useless as guides (ii.414). By contrast, the sociable expert is articulate, quick-witted, and authoritative. Such gifts come by steady practice:

> nothing but long habit and frequent experiments can confer the power of changing a position into various forms, presenting it in different points of view, connecting it with known and granted truths, fortifying it with intelligible arguments, and illustrating it by apt similitudes; and he, therefore, that has collected his knowledge in solitude, must learn its application by mixing with mankind.
> (*Adventurer* 85, ii.415-16)

Johnson warns that the solitary learned writer

[132] Preface to *Payne's Universal Chronicle*, in Donald Greene, ed., *The Oxford Authors: Samuel Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 545.

> naturally sinks from omission to forgetfulness of social duties; he must be therefore sometimes awakened, and recalled to the general condition of mankind.
> (*Rambler* 180, v.183)

The idea of man as a 'social being' is hardly unique to Johnson; what is unusual is the frequency with which he returns to it. For instance, the 'great philosopher' of *Rambler* 24 pursues his studies with a culpable lack of interest in 'practical virtue', which ought to claim his 'first attention' (iii.133). And the impracticality expresses itself in the philosopher's lack of sociability. He is

> insensible to every spectacle of distress, and unmoved by the loudest call of social nature, for want of considering that men are designed for the succour and comfort of each other.

Johnson often delivers his moral essays through the assumed voice of a *Rambler* correspondent: this convention pushes away the impression of a single, self-exalted tutor delivering lessons from his isolated chair. Likewise the throwaway, self-deprecating names which Johnson chooses as journalistic personae: a name like the Spectator might carry a presumption to be set apart from the rest of society, whereas someone who rambles or idles comes upon his maxims in the middle of doing something else, something less alien to 'the general condition of mankind'.

One of Piozzi's anecdotes sums up Johnson's attitude well:

> Dr. Johnson had indeed a veneration for the voice of mankind beyond what most people will own; and as he liberally confessed that all his own disappointments proceeded from himself, he hated to hear others complain of general injustice. I remember when lamentation was made of the great neglect shewed to Jeremiah Markland, a great philologist as some one ventured to call him – 'He is a scholar undoubtedly Sir (replied Dr. Johnson), but remember that he would run from the world, and that it is not the world's business to run after him. I hate a fellow who pride, or cowardice, or laziness drives into a corner, and [who] does nothing when he is there but sit and *growl*; let him come out as I do, and *bark*.'
> (*Miscellanies*, i.215)

This principle pervades Johnson's writing: one can even find it in an indignant passage of his

Thoughts on Falkland's Islands. It is not just that the 'paymasters and agents, contractors and commissaries' – those who make money from war – are cynics: it is also their distance from mankind. While others suffer, they stay at 'their desks':

> These are the men who, without virtue, labour, or hazard, are growing rich as their country is impoverished; they rejoice when obstinacy or ambition adds another year to slaughter and devastation; and laugh from their desks at bravery and science, while they are adding figure to figure, and cipher to cipher, hoping for a new contract from a new armament, and computing the profits of a siege or tempest.
> (x.371)

It is up to everyone to find their particular role in the 'secret concatenation of society' and carry it out to please 'the Father of Being'. Yet this message is especially urgent for writers, who are always trying to excuse themselves from the duties which society places on them. 'Men of learning', according to *Rambler* 24, 'imagine themselves above comparison' with the rest of society (iii.132). The rest of society repays them with contempt: they perceive that writers, by thus separating themselves, disqualify themselves from 'those offices by which the concatenation of society is preserved, and mutual tenderness excited and maintained'. Writers' arrogance renders them useless to society, and incapable of 'mutual tenderness': they become too morally shrivelled to engage in the relationships which are essential to a good and happy life. And, excluded from social bonds, even their work becomes useless.

The morality of authorship has a special urgency in what Johnson dubbed 'The Age of Authors' (*Adventurer* 115, ii.457). At a time when people of all kinds want to get into print, when 'almost every man is an author, either in act or in purpose', the responsibilities of writing need to be set out and established. Otherwise, an age of authors will be a dissociated society, in which everyone looks down on everyone else.

'There is perhaps no class of men' so liable to 'be wise in their own conceits' as are writers, he tells the hearers of Sermon 8 (xiv.87). The *Rambler* often reflects on writers' arrogance, as do

many of the *Lives of the Poets*; the rebuke to Soame Jenyns is a corrective to another writer's pride; in 'Verses On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet' Johnson specifically apostrophises 'letter'd arrogance'. Pride holds Johnson's attention as not only the supreme Christian sin, Satan's offence, but also the supreme literary sin.

As well as the mistakenly optimistic writers referred to in *Rambler* 2 (iii.13), Johnson shows his reader the 'intestine hostilities' of *Rambler* 145, in which the more dignified authors despise mere journalists (v.7); the merchant in *Rambler* 180, who discovers that scholarly life is dominated by 'competitions, jealousies, and resentments' (v.182); and the learned in *Rambler* 173, who are unable to 'descend with dignity' (v.153). These are all manifestations of the 'literary pride' described in Sermon 8 (xiv.95), a sermon addressing, as Freya Johnston puts it, 'the heights of intellect as illicitly removed from common life'.[133] The perpetual task of Johnson's ideal writer, Johnston demonstrates, is to descend from those heights. So the solitary author, 'secluded…from the world', is especially prone to literary pride (Sermon 8, xiv.95). Johnston contrasts the Watts who with 'humility' can make 'a voluntary descent from the dignity of science', and Milton, who 'never learned the art of doing little things with grace'.[134]

Rambler 157 provides a little fable of the self-elevated author. Verecundulus has been raised to believe that only literary gifts should be cultivated. But when he goes into company outside a university, he has nothing to say (v.73), and though 'an old clergyman' takes pity on him, and draws him out on a favourite subject of his, the conversation moves on again and he is left deeply embarrassed. From his previous superiority he now considers himself as needing to 'rise to a level with my fellow beings' (v.75).

Verecundulus became proud because he was by himself; he realises his inadequacy when he is among non-literary people. Johnson's suggested remedy for pride is a remade perspective, a new clarity earned by taking one's personality into the world. The consciousness of a company of

[133] Freya Johnston, *Samuel Johnson and the Art of Sinking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 79.
[134] Ibid., p. 231. The passage about Milton is at *Lives*, i.278, that on Watts at iv.108.

predecessors, who have had similar thoughts of advancement, and have been forgotten, may shake a writer out of conceit (*Rambler* 2, ii.13). Society, which allows pride to flourish so disastrously, also contains a principle of correction. Hence Johnson is never tempted to recommend withdrawal from the world as a way to escape pride. Asked to comment on an (unidentified) correspondent's manuscript, he replied that he did not 'think an author just to himself who rests in any opinion but that of the publick' (*Letters*, i.149). *Adventurer* 115 warns against 'the arrogance of writing' (ii.459). A writer should study hard to improve their style and range of knowledge. Otherwise, he will 'expose himself to the derision of those whom he aspires to instruct' (ii.461).

The learned writer is like everyone else in having a particular station, a station defined by its relations to others. Literary pride overlooks this fact by 'a voluntary neglect of common forms…an arrogant contempt of those practices, by which others endeavour to gain favour and multiply friendships' (*Adventurer* 131, ii.483-4). Those who plead to be considered as exceptions are liable to be pulled back down by laughter. As we will see in Chapter 4, it is partly because Johnson believes Milton is being exalted above his station that he derides him. And it is partly this refusal of honours to literary talent which irritates some of the Romantics and makes them Johnson's greatest critical foes.

Johnson well knew that the accusation of literary pride tends to rebound on the (literary) accuser. Solomon, who for Johnson is an exemplary moraliser, 'probably' inveighed against pride so much because he himself was 'most violently tempted' by it (Sermon 6, xiv.66). 'Well might Solomon more diligently warn us against a sin which had assaulted *him* in so many different forms' (xiv.67). Well might Johnson…not least because in his depiction of Solomon there is something of an idealised Rambler: one 'acquainted with…all ranks, ages, and denominations of mankind', whose 'long experience' has made him, to paraphrase I Kings, '*wisest amongst the sons of men*' (xiv.66). One of Johnson's early biographers, Thomas Tyers, draws the comparison with

Solomon;[135] whether or not Johnson was thinking along these lines, he was aware of the risks of rebuking pride.

Chapter 5 will say more about how Johnson responded to that risk. It is worth pointing out here another conviction of Johnson's: that there are moral reasons for remaining involved in humanity, but there are also good literary motives. Even to use language well requires an acquaintance with the world, and the haughty writer will not even be qualified to communicate their ideas. *Rambler* 177's Vivaculus, a studious but unsocial intellectual, 'began to find my mind contracted and stiffened by solitude' (v.169). He loses the ability to speak 'on common occasions', only using 'the language of books. My quickness of apprehension, and celerity of reply, had entirely deserted me'. Johnson dismisses Smith's *Phaedra* as 'a scholar's play…the work of a vigorous and elegant mind, accustomed to please itself with its own conceptions, but of little acquaintance with the course of life' ('Life of Smith', *Lives*, ii.176).

Adventurer 131 noted the distance between theory and practice: 'private meditation' is no preparation for 'the common intercourses of life' (ii.483). 'The manners of the world' can be reduced to no 'regular system, planned by philosophers'. To know the world, you must be in it. And, knowing the world, you begin to know yourself, your own smallness. Sermon 8, a treatment of literary pride, tells the conceited 'pedant' to look around at the rest of society (xiv.95). His conceit and self-importance will deflate:

> he will find that those, whom he imagined so much below his own exaltation, often flourish in the esteem of the world, while he himself is unknown; and teaching those arts, by which society is supported, and on which the happiness of the world depends; while he is pleasing himself with idle amusements, and wasting his life upon questions, of which very few desire the solution.

[135] Thomas Tyers, 'A Biographical Sketch of Dr. Samuel Johnson' (1785), in O.M Brack. Jr., and Robert E. Kelley, eds., *The Early Biographies of Samuel Johnson* (Iowa, 1974), 61-90: 86.

All of this chapter's themes run through this compressed sentence: the opposition between the self-'exaltation' of the writer and the realities of 'the world'; the use of every 'art' for the benefit of 'society'; the dignity of those who perform any task, however small, which adds to general 'happiness'; the necessity of writing something useful, rather than something 'idle' and abstruse.

Johnson's criticism keeps in view the 'secret concatenation' of society to which authors, whether they like it or not, belong and from which their usefulness derives. As soon as they forget this, through arrogance or anti-social habits, they fall into pride and even the effectiveness of their writing deteriorates. Johnson condemns the Metaphysical poets because – to quote Roger Lonsdale's reading between the lines – these writers were too conceited to arouse 'sympathy for recognisable human experience' ('Introduction', *Lives*, i.114). Excusing themselves from the norms of society, their work (as Johnson reads it) deteriorates into mere cleverness. *Idler* 36 warns against the kind of writer who considers 'how his sentiments may be received, not with most ease to his reader, but with most advantage to himself' (ii.113). Having decided to show off, his 'labours counteract themselves', and 'as he grows more elegant [he] becomes less intelligible'. Vanity produces bad prose.

Having established that writers have no 'exalted' station, it remains to say precisely what their station is. Johnson deals differently with different kinds of literary figures, but says consistently that the job of writing is one of truth-telling. A writer has a duty to mingle with the world, not just because like everyone else, writers are social beings, but because their very art is a social one: it is their job to communicate, and that means knowing the audience. Johnson's moral judgments and his critical practice flow together in his picture of the ideal writer: someone who accepts their moral duties as a member of society, and who, living in society, learns how to teach the truth.

One writer who partially exemplifies this is Addison, the only author to whom Johnson refers as having a 'vocation' to write (*Lives*, iii.16), and who was clearly something of a role model. True, Johnson's admiration for Addison is not unqualified: he says Addison had 'a very high

opinion of his own merit' along with his 'modesty' (*Lives*, iii.20); he 'drank too much wine' (iii.21); and he had a streak of 'mischief' (iii.22). But these criticisms fade by contrast with Johnson's high praise. In particular, to judge 'from his books, of his moral character' gives an impression of 'purity and excellence' (iii.22); as an example of writing turned to moral ends, Addison is supreme. In his encomium, Johnson expresses the view that, since Addison's example, 'wit…has been generally subservient to the cause of reason and of truth' (*Lives*, iii.22). Moreover,

> he has restored virtue to its dignity, and taught virtue not to be ashamed. This is an elevation of literary character, *above all Greek, above all Roman fame*. No greater felicity can genius attain than that of having purified intellectual pleasure, separated mirth from indecency, and wit from licentiousness; of having taught a succession of writers to bring elegance and gaiety to the aid of goodness; and, if I may use expressions yet more awful, of having *turned many to righteousness* [Daniel 12:3].
> (*Lives*, iii.22-3)

Johnson admires Addison for combining literary skill with moral excellence, and for making his writing an instrument of helping the reader towards truth and virtue. How did Addison do it? Part of the answer comes two paragraphs before. Despite being shy, Addison 'had conversed with many distinct classes of men, had surveyed their ways with very diligent observation, and marked with great acuteness the effects of different modes of life' (*Lives*, iii.22). His moral depth was a result of his wide range of social experience.

Johnson also remarks admiringly that Addison varied his style to attract the reader: 'Truth…wears a thousand dresses, and in all is pleasing' (*Lives*, iii.38). Addison was a social author, and one who gave his readers pleasure. Johnson thought the two naturally went together.

3 Truth, Memory and the Reader

In Book VIII of *Paradise Lost*, Raphael breaks off a discussion of astronomy to remind Adam that not all knowledge is equally useful:

> Solicit not thy thoughts with matters hid,
> Leave them to God above, him serve and fear…
> Think only what concerns thee and thy being;
> Dream not of other worlds.[136]

Adam quickly comes round to Raphael's view:

> not to know at large of things remote
> From use, obscure and subtle, but to know
> That which before us lies in daily life,
> Is the prime wisdom, what is more, is fume…
> (191-4)

Johnson twice quoted Raphael's advice with great approval (*Rambler* 180, v.183; 'Life of Milton', *Lives*, i.286). But he also believed that 'Curiosity is, in great and generous minds, the first passion and the last' (*Rambler* 150, *Works*, v.34); and so, as soon as the Rambler has praised Raphael's lines – 'this angelick counsel', implying both 'from an angel' and 'angelically perceptive' – he adds: 'I am far from any intention to limit curiosity' (*Rambler* 180, v.183). On the contrary, he says, progress depends on curiosity. Nevertheless, the 'man of letters' is much more likely to forget the value of simple quotidian morality than of curiosity; and Johnson directs more attention to what is likely to be forgotten. Praising curiosity is, for his present purposes, less important than rebuking its excesses. Curiosity can draw a writer away from the seriousness of the job:

[136] John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667), ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London: Longman, 1968), viii.167-76.

> Let it be deeply impressed and frequently recollected, that he who has not obtained the proper qualifications of an author, can have no excuse for the arrogance of writing, but the power of imparting to mankind something necessary to be known.
> (*Adventurer* 115, ii.459)

Practical usefulness guides Johnson's moral thought, as it guided, in his view, two model teachers. 'The great praise of Socrates' was his influencing 'the wits of Greece' to leave behind natural science and consider moral questions (*Rambler* 24, iii.131-2). Johnson may well be paraphrasing Cicero's *Discussions at Tusculum*. This work, which he once wanted to translate into English (*Life*, iv.381), similarly notes how Socrates attended to the immediate questions of human life.[137] Like Cicero, Johnson takes Socrates as the model of intellectual inquiry, turning 'philosophy from the study of nature to speculations upon life' ('Life of Milton', *Lives*, i.249). The same principle, of pragmatism before speculation, characterises a still more important model: Jesus Christ, as described in the Gospels. Rather than reward 'the vanity of inquisitiveness' and 'curiosity', Christ preferred 'to relieve distress'; he wanted his followers to 'excel in goodness' rather than 'in knowledge' (*Rambler* 81, iv.61). His 'precepts' have more to do with 'moral principles' and 'daily conduct'; they are delivered 'without ostentation' and their practical import is, says Johnson, unmistakable.

Clarity, immediacy, and motivational force are the marks of Christ's teaching, and for Johnson that divine authority cannot be surpassed as a model. 'The direction of daily conduct' likewise calls for the nearest attention in the Raphael discussion: 'duties which must daily be performed, and…dangers which must daily be incurred' (v.183). Yet daily duties, in their particularity, must sometimes evade the reach of general moral principles; so to accept Socrates and Jesus as models complicates, rather than simplifies, a moralist's task.

[137] *Discussions at Tusculum*, in Cicero, *Good life*, 57 (V, 4; 10).

That task requires a descent to the easily-overlooked, a movement Freya Johnston has observed throughout Johnson's work.[138] So much of happiness, according to the correspondent Philomides, depends on 'those petty qualities, which grow important only by their frequency, and which though they produce no single acts of heroism…yet are every moment exerting their influence upon us' (*Rambler* 72, iv.12). Here, it is the quality of being good-humoured, of pleasing others in company. In *Rambler* 56, it is 'the common forms of civility' and 'established laws of conversation' (iii.300), in *Rambler* 57 frugality, *Rambler* 98 awareness of the insecurities of other people, and so on. These petty qualities have in common that they are difficult to define, and that they appear over and over again. Morality, for Johnson, goes all the way through life without interruption. 'It is unworthy of a reasonable being to spend any of the little time allotted us, without some tendency, either direct or oblique, to the end of our existence' (*Rambler* 80, iv.59).

Because moral duties never go away, whereas intellectual inquiry only accounts for part of time, and because 'the end of our existence' is a moral rather than intellectual matter, Johnson agrees with Raphael on the proper order of our interests. Piozzi remembers that

> when he talked of authors, his praise went spontaneously to such passages as are sure in his own phrase to leave something behind them useful on common occasions, or observant of common manners… It was not King Lear cursing his daughters, or deprecating the storm, that I remember his commendations of; but Iago's ingenious malice, and subtle revenge; or prince Hal's gay compliance with Falstaff, whom he all along despised.
> (*Miscellanies*, 182-3)

Because 'malice' and false friendship are part of common experience, Johnson was drawn to these parts of Shakespeare rather than towards more unusual moments. Johnson admired Shakespeare for his usefulness – his ability, which defines the author's vocation, to help the reader change their life.

[138] See Johnston, *Art of Sinking*.

The uses of aphorism

There is a line and a half in *Macbeth* which Johnson thinks so magnificent that, if all the rest of Shakespeare were to disappear, it would be enough to prove his genius to posterity. Lady Macbeth is telling her husband that he isn't a real man if he shrinks from the prospect of assassinating Duncan. Now, the appeal to courage

> has dazzled mankind from age to age…but this sophism Macbeth has destroyed by distinguishing true from false fortitude, in a line and a half; of which it may also be said, that they ought to bestow immortality on the author, though all his other productions had been lost.
> (Notes on *Macbeth*, *Works*, viii.767)

Here is Macbeth's supposedly imperishable reply:

> I dare do all that may become a man,
> Who dares do more, is none.[139]

That Johnson prizes these lines so highly reveals much about his critical priorities. He admires the way they 'destroy' a 'sophism'; but he also seems impressed that Macbeth manages the feat 'in a line and a half'. Johnson set great store by aphorisms – "I fancy mankind will write all aphoristically, except in narrative" (*Life*, v.39), he rather whimsically told Boswell – because they squeeze a useful truth into a vessel small enough for even the shortest attention span. Macbeth's point testified to no special insight, but by putting it briefly and memorably Shakespeare had bestowed a gift on mankind. In 1743, Johnson had praised a line of Crousaz's (discussed in Chapter

[139] *The Complete Works*, ed. Wells and Taylor, gives two minor difference of punctuation for these lines (at I.vii.46-7):
I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more is none.

1) in similar terms: a single remark was so valuable that 'every writer ought to impress [it] upon his mind' (xvii.383-4). Just as Macbeth's line might secure Shakespeare's reputation by itself, so Crousaz's 'offers a sufficient apology for his commentary'. In 1743 and in 1765, Johnson thought highly of aphorisms. In a *Rambler* written in between those dates, he explained why.

> …perhaps, the excellence of aphorisms consists not so much in the expression of some rare or abstruse sentiment, as in the comprehension of some obvious and useful truth in a few words. We frequently fall into error and folly, not because the true principles of action are not known, but because, for a time, they are not remembered; and he may therefore be numbered among the benefactors of mankind, who contracts the great rules of life into short sentences, that may be easily impressed on the memory, and taught by frequent recollection to recur to the mind.
> (*Rambler* 175, *Works*, v.160)

Clearly, Johnson counts on writers to take an active role in the education of their readers; and like any teacher, they have to be prepared to state what is so 'obvious' it should hardly need saying. '[M]en more frequently require to be reminded than informed' (*Rambler* 2, iii.14). That is itself an obvious point, which Johnson almost certainly did not come up with in a moment of inspiration. In Seneca's letters (to which Johnson alludes in *Rambler* 152, v.43), there is a similar sentiment:

> 'What good is there', he asks, 'in pointing out the evident?' A great deal. Sometimes we know yet are not alert. A reminder doesn't teach, but it directs the attention, rouses us, rounds up the memory and prevents it from straying… The soul often pretends that the evident is not there, and consequently its acquaintance even with the most familiar features must be thrust upon it.[140]

More recently, David Foster Wallace's fiction and non-fiction has proclaimed the indispensable truth of clichés: for Foster Wallace, platitudes are necessary for daily life, however much the

[140] Letter 94, *Seneca's Letters to Lucilius*, trans. E Phillips Barker, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), ii.125

ironic, educated mind recoils from them.[141] The writer's vocation, for Johnson – the writer's particular way of serving and benefitting mankind – is to communicate the truth, however obvious. '[T]here are many truths which every human being acknowledges and forgets' (*Idler* 2, ii.6): writers may not say anything new, but they keep fresh what would otherwise decay.

Aldous Huxley's 1931 essay 'Art and the Obvious' lamented that the obvious was now the province of bad artists: great truths had been stated so wearyingly that people were now sick of hearing them.[142] He called on artists to lose their self-consciousness and bring the obvious into genuine art. While Huxley insisted on artistic quality, Johnson's standard was simpler – and perhaps cruder: he appraised literature in terms of its staying power, its endurance in the reader's mind.

This connects with his interest in mental processes. W.K. Wimsatt claims that the *Rambler* essays 'exhibit perhaps the most concentrated use in English literature of mechanical imagery turned inwards to the analysis of the soul'.[143] This was no idle philosophical interest for Johnson, but the conceptual language which made sense of what, as a writer, he was trying to do. 'Johnson probes the unconscious mind…with a brilliant, stubborn persistence unrivalled before Freud', according to James Engell;[144] Johnson, however, noted that the study of the mind had gathered pace since Shakespeare's time. Since then there had been widespread attempts

> to analyse the mind, to trace the passions to their sources, to unfold the seminal principles of vice and virtue, or sound the depths of the heart for the motives of action…human nature became the fashionable study…
> ('Preface to Shakespeare', vii.88)

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[141] David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, About Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009), 8-9; on the hidden depths of clichés, see *Infinite Jest* (London: Abacus, 1997), 271; 369.

[142] Aldous Huxley, 'Art and the Obvious', in *Music at Night* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1931), 23-31.

[143] W.K. Wimsatt, *Philosophic Words: A Study of Style and Meaning in the* Rambler *and* Dictionary *of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 104.

[144] James Engell, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 61.

Yet even in Johnson's time the terminology for the mind's operations – as philosophers including Locke and Mandeville complained a few years before – had not settled into any kind of agreed system.[145] Johnson made no great effort to regularise his own terms. The passage just quoted nonchalantly mixes its metaphors: the 'source' of the passions, as though they were rivers, the 'seminal principles' which 'unfold' like flowers, the 'depths' of the heart (an ocean?): these are images selected for their closeness to experience, not in order to fit a scheme. Not that Johnson is sloppy; it is rather, as Christopher Ricks remarked of Johnson's criticism, that he prefers principles to theory. Having established the principles of a particular matter, Johnson chose 'to think thereafter about the application of the principles rather than to elaborate principle into theory'.[146]

For instance, Johnson proposes no watertight account of what he means by the 'reason', but attributes to it several linked functions – checking the correspondence of ideas with reality, dividing, concatenating, moderating, abstracting.[147] *Idler* 44 does distinguish between imagination, which combines images; memory, which collects and distributes; and judgment and ratiocination, which act on experience; but Johnson skips through these distinctions in a few lines (ii.137), without the careful elaboration you would find in (say) Locke. What Johnson really wants to discuss is memory's role in youth, middle age and old age, its ability to give pain and pleasure; in other words, he abandons the pursuit of philosophical exactness in order to concentrate on the truth of experience. Still, Johnson's relaxed attitude to terminology did not prevent his holding fast to some consistent principles about the relationship between the author and the reader.

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[145] Christopher Fox, 'Defining Eighteenth-Century Psychology', in Christopher Fox, ed., *Psychology and Literature in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: AMS Press, 1987), 1-22: 13.

[146] Christopher Ricks, 'Literary Principles as Against Theory', in *Essays in Appreciation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 322-3.

[147] Jean Hagstrum, *Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 15.

In studying that relationship closely, Johnson looked back to seventeenth-century literary theory, which according to Robert L. Montgomery 'exhibits an increasingly powerful emphasis on the interests of the audience'.[148] As the study of the reader's mind gained in sophistication, he adds, the reader was seen as less of a subject for moral improvement. Montgomery compares Sidney's

> Who readeth Aeneas carrying old Anchises on his back, that wisheth not it were his fortune to perform so excellent an act?[149]

to Addison's

> ...we have the Power of retaining, altering and compounding those Images, which we have once received, into all the varieties of Picture and Vision that are most agreeable to the Imagination...[150]

Addison's chief interest, here as in the eleven 'Pleasures of the Imagination' essays, is with pleasure, where Sidney's was with behaviour. Johnson combines the two: he is as moralistic as Sidney, but he takes on the language of perception which Addison had also used. *Spectator* 417 acclaims *Paradise Lost* for its impact on the imagination because nothing can be conceived 'greater', 'more beautiful', or 'more strange' than parts of Milton's narrative.[151] Johnson, without disagreeing, pointed out the drawback that 'it can give little assistance to human conduct. Its end is to raise the thoughts above sublunary cares or pleasures' ('Life of Milton', *Lives*, i.286). Pleasing the imagination might mean neglecting the obvious.

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[148] Robert L. Montgomery, 'Addison and Hutcheson: Literary Theory and the Psychology of the Audience', in Fox, ed. *Psychology and Literature*, 149-66: 149.

[149] Sir Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan van Dorsten (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 92.

[150] Joseph Addison, *Spectator* 411, in *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), iii.537.

[151] Addison, *Spectator*, iii.566.

As Hagstrum remarks, Johnson may sound as though he is just reiterating the Horatian motto that literature consists in 'delight' and 'instruction', but Johnson invests that tradition with an intense awareness of readers' responses. A poem 'was for Johnson a moral and psychological instrument of communication that pointed outside itself to the empirical reality which it 'imitated" – and to the mind of the writer and the reader.[152] In order to make a strong impression on the reader, an author has to retain the impressions which were made on them. Johnson tells Bennet Langton: 'It is a rule never to be forgotten, that whatever strikes strongly should be described while the first impression remains fresh upon the mind.' (*Letters*, i.186) And he congratulates Boswell on his *Account of Corsica* by telling him: 'You express images which operated strongly upon yourself and you have impressed them with great force upon your readers' (*Letters*, i.329). Writers must look to their own experience, then transmit it to the reader:

> All ideas influence our conduct with more or less force, as they are more or less strongly impressed upon the mind; and they are impressed more strongly, as they are more frequently recollected or renewed… By dwelling upon, and indulging any idea, we may increase its efficacy and force, make it by degrees predominant in the soul…
> (Sermon 9, xiv.101)

Good writers impress the right ideas strongly; bad writers either have the wrong ideas, or lack the skill to make a lasting impression. Johnson's image of the memory can be found as early as Plato's *Theaetus*, in which Socrates posits

> an imprint-receiving piece of wax in our minds… And let's say it's the gift of Memory, the mother of the Muses; and that if there's anything we want to remember, among the things we see, hear, or ourselves conceive, we hold it under the perceptions and conceptions and imprint them on it, as if we were taking the impressions of signet rings. Whatever is imprinted, we remember and know, as long as the image is present; but whatever is smudged out or proves unable to be imprinted, we've forgotten and don't know.[153]

[152] Hagstrum, *Literary Criticism*, 37.

[153] Plato, *Theaetus*, trans. John McDowell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 78 (191c-e).

Another source is Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), which formed much of Johnson's thinking.[154] Memory, says Locke, includes 'the Power to revive again in our Minds those *Ideas*, which, after imprinting have disappeared, or have been as it were laid out of Sight'.[155] Memory, for Locke, is 'the Store-house of our *Ideas*'.[156] We can take ideas out of this storehouse, and they stay in our minds to varying degrees: '*Attention* and *Repetition help* much to the fixing any *Ideas* in the *Memory*'. While Locke does not spend much time on the subject, Johnson routinely alludes to the way ideas 'impress' themselves on the memory.

'The terminology and concepts of the *Essay*', according to John W. Yolton, were 'widely diffused throughout theological as well as secular writings' by the middle of the century.[157] What Johnson appreciated in Locke was, first, what Yolton calls Locke's 'critical attitude towards all knowledge', his rigour in testing what had been assumed;[158] and secondly, his empiricist account of how the mind grasps things. It would be inexact to call Johnson an empiricist, but in Hagstrum's words, 'experience for Johnson did remain the foundation of all knowledge'.[159]

Johnson can strongly disagree with Locke. In *Rasselas*, Imlac dismisses (with no substantial response) the suggestion that matter might be given the power of thinking: 'I can scarcely believe that any man has thought it, who knew how to think' (xvi.170). Locke is not mentioned, but many of Locke's eighteenth-century opponents targeted this suggestion from the *Essay*.[160] Johnson's opinions of Locke's philosophy run the full range, from veneration to something like contempt. We need to be cautious, then, with critics who read Johnson as a Lockean on so contentious a question as the role of the reason and the passions in moral action.

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[154] See Elizabeth Hedrick, 'Locke's Theory of Language and Johnson's *Dictionary*', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 20 (1987), 422-44.

[155] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (1689; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 149.

[156] Locke, *Essay*, 150.

[157] John W. Yolton, *John Locke and the Way of Ideas* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1956), 206.

[158] Yolton, *Locke*, 26.

[159] Hagstrum, *Literary Criticism*, 5.

[160] Yolton, *Locke*, 148-66.

Since the reader's moral action is the final point to which writing is directed, Johnson's answer will shape his literary theory.

Locke argues that 'due consideration' of a 'good proposed' allows us to 'raise our desires' and so influence the will.[161] Like Johnson, Locke accepts that it is quite easy to know the true good and not carry it out. So, Locke says, we must change our desires, strengthening the desire for good until we feel 'uneasie' in not having it. 'Good, though appearing, and allowed never so great, yet till it has raised desires in our Minds, and thereby made us *uneasie* in its want, it reaches not our *wills*; we are not within the Sphere of its activity'.

Nicholas Hudson notes that this 'departed from the traditional understanding of moral conduct as a simple conflict between the reason and the passions':[162] it is by changing one's desires, Locke thought, not by using the reason, that one does good and avoids acting wrongly. Hudson goes on to contend that Johnson thought along similar lines: his view was 'essentially that of Hobbes, probably as revised by Locke', Hudson argues, citing *Rambler* 7:

> The great art therefore of piety, and the end for which all the rites of religion seem to be instituted, is the perpetual renovation of the motives to virtue, by a voluntary employment of our mind in the contemplation of its excellence, its importance, and its necessity, which, in proportion as they are more frequently and more willingly revolved, gain a more forcible and permanent influence, 'till in time they become the reigning ideas, the standing principles of action, and the test by which every thing proposed to the judgment is rejected or approved.
> (*Works*, iii.40)

Even here, Johnson differs from Locke: he enthrones 'reigning ideas' and 'standing principles' which sound very much like the reason which traditionally governs the passions. Hudson is right, though, that Johnson could speak of raising desires without reference to a reason-passion contest. To Boswell, for instance, he writes in 1763 of competing motives and desires:

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[161] Locke, *Essay*, ii.21; 262.

[162] Nicholas Hudson, *Samuel Johnson and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 91.

> the dissipation of which you complain is nothing more than the Vacillation of a mind suspended between different motives and changing its direction as any motive gains or loses Strength. If you can but kindle in your mind any strong desire, if you can but keep predominant any Wish for some particular excellence or attainment, the Gusts of imagination will break away without any effect upon your conduct and commonly without any traces left upon the Memory.
> (*Letters*, i.238-9)

Like Hudson, Gloria Sybil Gross portrays Johnson as a rebel against the sclerotic conventions of traditional moral thought. For previous moralists, Gross claims, 'cool rationality' had been set up against 'the passions…snarling derivatives of the subhuman'. On the standard view of things, 'the great god of Reason served a zealous penchant for complacency and maintenance of the status quo'. Questioning this authoritarian model, Johnson discovered 'that Reason was not master in its own house. Thus he challenged many talismans of certitude'.[163]

There is something to Hudson's and Gross's view. Johnson is not tied to a dull, rigid language of reason as a mighty emperor and the passions as unruly subjects. Yet it is hard to find a revolutionary in the author of *Idler* 91: 'Of morality little is necessary to be said because it is comprehended in practical divinity, and is perhaps better taught in English sermons than in any other books ancient or modern' (*Works*, ii.283). Gross's image of Johnson as radically undermining traditional categories of moral thought – 'No legions of devils or choirs of angels inhabit his cosmos' – sounds, in this context, one-sided.[164]

Moreover, Hudson and Gross misread Johnson by systematising only one part – and a small part – of his thought. Depending on where you open Johnson, he uses various imagery and language for moral action, responsive to different sides of experience. But reason is never actually dismissed; and if anything, it was the traditional scheme which dominated. Johnson consistently speaks of reason as the natural ruler of the passions, from the 'Preface' to the *Voyage to Abyssinia* in 1735 – 'wherever human nature is to be found there is…a contest of passion and reason' (*Works*,

[163] Gross, *Invisible Riot*, 6.
[164] Gross, *Invisible Riot*, 58.

xv.3-4) – to the 'Life of Milton' in the late 1770s: 'he did not very vigilantly watch the influence of his own passions…and desire superinduced conviction' (*Lives*, ii.253). If this is not quite the straightforward language of reason asserting supremacy over the passions, it is closer to such an image than to Locke's competing uneasinesses.

Both full-length studies of Johnson the moralist, by Robert Voitle and Paul Kent Alkon, appreciate the major role he allows to the reason: Voitle points out that, though Johnson accepted the place of other mental faculties in moral decision-making, such as 'moral senses, instincts, and emotions', he named the reason as the most important of all.[165] Alkon, meanwhile, notes that 'because he viewed reason as our most celestial faculty, Johnson vigorously reaffirmed the classical doctrine that reason ought to predominate over imagination at all times and, with the possible exception of the divinely irrational impulse towards compassion, over the passions as well'.[166] The evidence supports those readings. *Rambler* 8 recommends: 'He therefore that would govern his actions by the laws of virtue, must regulate his thoughts by those of reason' (iii.46). Sermon 3 describes someone who has lost the fear of God as 'the slave of his own desires, and the sport of his own passions. He acts without a rule of action' (xiv.38). *Rambler* 64 pities those in 'unresisting subjection to their passions' (iii.340). Sermon 9 encourages the hearer to dwell on an idea 'and raise it to an ascendant over our passions, so that it shall easily overrule those affections or appetites which formerly tyrannized within us' (xiv.101). Johnson may have complicated the traditional picture, but he hardly rejected it outright.

Johnson drew out of Locke what seemed useful to him – the idea of memory as a storehouse, for instance, or the usefulness of repetition in fixing 'impressions'. Locke's theory of moral action was only useful up to a point, for Johnson did not want to jettison the reason. The mind is acted on by passions and reason simultaneously; indeed, they need each other. The passions without the reason are indeed unruly and untrustworthy. But reason without the

[165] Voitle, *Johnson the Moralist*, 12.
[166] Alkon, *Moral Discipline*, 65.

passions is ineffectual, as Johnson often said, especially in his literary criticism. To stir the passions while exalting the reason was, for Johnson, the task of literature, and especially poetry. *Rambler* 88 refers to poetry's 'harmony that adds force to reason…that shackles attention, and governs passion' (iv.99). Harmony reaches at once towards the reason and the passions, and yokes together things which had seemed heterogeneous. Poetry can be 'a faculty of joining musick with reason, and of acting at once upon the sense and the passions' (*Rambler* 86, iv.89). In the 'Life of Milton', 'Poetry is the art of uniting pleasure with truth, by calling imagination to the aid of reason' (*Lives*, i.282). Reason may be in charge, but it needs to be in coalition with the imagination. He told Hill Boothby: 'Of the fallaciousness of hope, and the uncertainty of Schemes every day gives some new proof, but it is seldom heeded till something felt rather than seen awakens attention' (*Letters*, i.117). 'Proof' was not enough to make itself 'felt'.

Addison said that 'the Imagination…gives an Embellishment to good Sense'.[167] Though Johnson does talk of 'embellishment' (e.g. the 'Life of Pope', *Lives*, iv.77), he has a more strenuous ideal of bringing together sense and imagination to make something new. It is more like the grafting of one plant onto other, or even the interbreeding of different species, than like decoration.

T.S. Eliot noticed 'the strictness with which pleasure and edification are joined in Johnson's mind'.[168] As Eliot saw, for Johnson

> The edification is not a separable addition to a poem, it is organically essential to it. We do not have *two* experiences, one of pleasure and one of edification: it is one experience which we analyse into constituents.

The 'Life of Thomson' describes how our minds both expand, and 'kindle with his sentiments' (*Lives*, iv.104). The mixed metaphor, while again departing from philosophical rigour, nevertheless evinces what Johnson wanted from literature: 'sentiments' which set the mind alight. Literature

[167] Addison, *Spectator* 421, iii.578.
[168] Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*, 183.

makes reason more than reason. If '*Rhetoric* and *Poetry* supply Life with its highest intellectual Pleasures',[169] those pleasures can aid the communication of truth. Greg Clingham claims persuasively that 'Consciousness, and how and with what objects it is to be filled in the course of time, might be said to be Johnson's great subject, not only in the moral essays and the religious writing, but also in his politics and in the biographies and criticism'.[170] Especially the criticism, it might be said, because literature makes a special appeal to consciousness which can, for good and for ill, be hard to resist.

If you want to read and write literature sensitively, Johnson thinks, you have to understand what it is doing to the mind. 'Alert to the intricate workings of a mental apparatus', as Gross writes, he thinks constantly about the mental effects of a piece of writing. 'What will *shock* the mind and what will *please* the mind are his most basic conceptual gauges'.[171] Both shock (maybe 'surprise' is a better term) and pleasure are meant to fix something in the memory: 'What has been always known, and very often said, as it impresses the mind with no new images, excites no attention, and is suffered to lie unheeded in the memory' (Sermon 15, xiv.159). It was a drawback of *Paradise Lost* that, dealing as it did with familiar stories, 'what is not unexpected, cannot surprise' ('Life of Milton', *Lives*, i.289); whereas the Metaphysicals were given (some) praise because 'their acuteness often surprises' ('Life of Cowley', *Lives*, i.201). Surprise gives pleasure, and as Roger Lonsdale has said, 'Johnson's demand for poetic pleasure is insistent' ('Introduction', *Lives*, i.110-11). Writers impress images by recognising that their readers have strong appetites.

[169] 'Preface' to the *Preceptor*, in *Samuel Johnson's Prefaces and Dedications*, ed. Allen T. Hazen (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1937), 183.
[170] Greg Clingham, 'Resisting Johnson', in Smallwood, ed., *Johnson Re-Visioned*, 19-36: 31.
[171] Gross, *Invisible Riot*, 114.

In this, to a limited extent, Johnson had some affinity with David Hume. In the *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume ridiculed the idea 'of the combat of passion and reason' and the 'suppos'd pre-eminence of reason over passion'.[172] This was partly because he subscribed to a far more limited idea than Johnson's of what reason could establish: while Johnson could write that 'The sentence most dreaded is that of reason and conscience' (*Rambler* 76, iv.37), Hume attributed no such power to the reason: it could be wrong about the facts, but given his famous is-ought distinction,[173] reason could not be involved in condemning or justifying anything.[174] If there was a 'struggle' it was between stronger and weaker emotions, 'violent and calm passions'.[175]

I have already shown that Johnson preserved much of the reason-passion distinction, and the idea of a struggle; but he did not see this as a simple matter. As Pat Rogers has said of twentieth-century Johnson criticism, 'Above all, we have learnt never to underrate the element of passion in his overtly rational world-view."[176] Literature should not just appeal to the reader's reason; it also had to appeal to the passions. Though Johnson would not have agreed with Hume that ''Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger',[177] he would have accepted that it might need more than reason to overturn such a conviction. He made room for irrationality.

The mind, for Johnson, bears out both the scale of human potential and our lamentable failure to live up to it. He echoes the Stoic idea that our mental faculties are our common ground, so to speak, with God: 'Reason is the great distinction of human nature, the faculty by which we

[172] Hume, David, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40; London: Penguin, 1985), 460.
[173] Hume *Treatise*, 521.
[174] Hume, *Treatise*, 463.
[175] Hume, *Treatise*, 484.
[176] Rogers, *Johnson*, 109-10.
[177] Hume, *Treatise*, 463.

approach to some degree of association with celestial intelligences' (*Rambler* 95, *Works*, v.95). But our minds are faulty devices. They develop obsessions (as with the astronomer in *Rasselas*), they raise up anxious worries (*Rambler* 134, iv.347), they busy themselves with pointless curiosity (*Rambler* 103, iv.187), they procrastinate (*Rambler* 134), they get distracted (*Rambler* 89, iv.105) and – above all – they wander off into private fantasies. When the present moment fails to satisfy us (*Rambler* 203, v.291), we fill our thoughts with dreams of future triumphs.

Left to itself, the mind will not ascend to higher things, but will run amok in its limited space. *Rambler* 89 warns that the life of students has special pitfalls, because 'Study requires solitude, and solitude is a state dangerous to those who are too much accustomed to sink into themselves' (iv.107). Sinking into oneself includes wrapping oneself in comfortable fantasies: the 'invisible riot of the mind', in which the imagination plays over unlikely prospects (iv.107). The more such ideas predominate, the more one drifts out of touch with reality, and so becomes irritable and ineffective. Thus 'every man…who has any desire to be wise or useful…must…teach his desires to fix upon external things; he must adopt the joys and the pains of others, and excite in his mind the want of social pleasures and amicable communication'. As ever, Johnson exhorts the reader to look beyond the self, towards the needs of others.

Harold Bloom said that the best insight he had ever read about Johnson was Walter Jackson Bate's: 'that no other writer is so obsessed by the realization that the mind is an activity, one that will turn to destructiveness of the self or of others unless it is directed to labor'.[178] I would qualify the word 'labor'. So persuaded is Johnson of the mind's destructiveness that he believes we should seek out any other state – even the passive reception of neutral objects. He recommends contemplating the natural world, because its beauties will occupy the mind but, unlike man-made things, are unlikely to cause 'envy or malevolence' (*Rambler* 5, iii.28-9).

[178] Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (London: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 235. Bloom is paraphrasing Bate, *Samuel Johnson*, 300-1.

If it does nothing else, writing serves up the mental objects which need to be provided from somewhere or other. *Idler* 2 slyly and only half-jokingly describes the 'innumerable multitudes…who awake in the morning, vacant of thought, with minds gaping for the intellectual food, which some kind essayist has been accustomed to supply' (ii.11). Innocuous material, which 'busies the mind without corrupting it, has at least this use, that it rescues the day from idleness, and he that is never idle will not often be vitious' (*Rambler* 177, v.172). 'Idleness', here, seems to mean a state which is already degenerating towards envy or self-delusion. Merely distracting the mind from its own malign tendencies is one way in which writers can help readers.

In which case, worthy but unreadably dull writing has less to offer the world than frothy but innocent entertainment. There might be, to adapt Lionel Trilling's phrase, a moral obligation to be entertaining. Johnson doubtless knew *Spectator* 411: 'There are, indeed, but very few who know how to be idle and innocent… A Man should endeavour, therefore, to make the Sphere of his innocent Pleasures as wide as possible, that he may retire into them with Safety'.[179] Eulogising Garrick in a 1779 conversation, Johnson was prepared to state the case even more strongly: "harmless pleasure is the highest praise" (*Life*, iii.388). That was hyperbole, though. Johnson was not so afraid of the mind's capacity for malignity that he gave up on its ability to 'approach' the 'celestial'.

In this he was more hopeful than another philosophical influence whom he thought worthy to be mentioned in the same breath as Locke. Johnson wrote to Frances Reynolds that her draft of the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Taste* exhibited 'such force of comprehension, and such nicety of observation as Locke or Pascal might be proud of' (*Letters*, iii.355). Whenever Johnson mentioned Pascal it was with admiration. (Locke, incidentally, refers in his chapter on memory to 'that prodigy of Parts, Monsieur *Pascal*'.)[180] On April 2, 1779, Good Friday, Johnson 'gave Boswel [sic] Les Pensées de Pascal that he might not disturb me' (*Works*, i.294), implying

[179] Addison, *Spectator*, iii.538-9.
[180] Locke, *Essay*, 154.

that the *Pensées* (1670) are both sufficiently devout to be read on Good Friday and sufficiently absorbing to hold Boswell's attention. He once told Hannah More he was pleased she was reading this 'pious' book (*Miscellanies*, ii.194). On his fifty-ninth birthday, a day of 'great perturbation', Johnson 'found myself somewhat relieved by reading…I this day read a great part of Pascal's Life' (*Works*, i.119). Johnson's interest in Pascal, then, is certain; and several critics have found a resemblance between the two writers, especially in their psychological insights.

'The moment one glances into Pascal,' Donald Greene writes, 'one recognizes, almost with a start, that there is here the same cast of mind and feeling, the same basic religious psychology and philosophy, that one senses in his fellow-Christians and near contemporaries, Swift and Johnson'.[181] Greene pairs 'psychology and philosophy', and the two are hard to disentangle: both authors begin with conscious states of mind, and build on them their conclusions about human nature.

The state of mind which fascinates Johnson and Pascal resembles what Peter Toohey has called 'existential boredom': 'a philosophical sickness…melancholia, depression, ennui, *mal de vivre*, world-weariness, tristesse…the French 'existentialist' nausea and despair…'[182] Pascal's word, 'ennui', has to be translated in Johnson's time as 'melancholy', 'spleen', 'weariness'.[183] As Patricia Meyer Spacks has said, this second concept of 'boredom' enters the language too late for Johnson's *Dictionary*, even though Johnson is well aware of the psychological state itself.[184] The *OED*'s first recorded instance of 'ennui' is John Evelyn's complaint that 'We have hardly any words that do fully express the French naivete, ennui…' Chesterfield and Berkeley use the word, but without that sense of existential plight which it has for Pascal.

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[181] Donald J. Greene, 'Samuel Johnson and "Natural Law"', *Journal of British Studies*, 2: 59-75, 71.

[182] Peter Toohey, *Boredom: A Lively History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 5-6.

[183] In, for instance, *Monsieur Pascall's thoughts, meditations, and prayers, touching matters moral and divine*, trans. Joseph Walker (London, 1688); *Thoughts on religion, and other subjects. By Monsieur Pascal*, trans. Basil Kennett (London, 1704).

[184] See Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 151.

Pascal describes 'man's condition' as 'inconstancy, boredom [*ennui*], anxiety' (*Pensées*, 24). For Johnson, similarly, the mind is ill-at-ease, hungry and capricious. As Claude Rawson writes, Pascal and Johnson (and Swift) share a vision of 'the psychologically rooted restlessness of human nature'.[185] As Johnson put it: "That man is never happy for the present is so true, that all his relief from unhappiness is only forgetting himself for a little while. Life is a progress from want to want, not from enjoyment to enjoyment" (*Life*, iii. 53; the second sentence also appears in Sermon 12, *Works*, xiv.127). The mind's bursts for freedom are temporary, unstable, because its normal condition is wretched. Gloria Sybil Gross draws attention to *Idler* 31's Sober, Johnson's self-portrait of a restlessly imaginative man. It is 'a hectic, unmanageable world', as Gross says, 'where one feels little more than subjective, ever-churning sources of agitation'.[186]

Johnson and Pascal believe that most of our psychological effort is devoted to getting rid of this unease. When Mrs. Williams complained about drunkenness: "I wonder what pleasure men can take in making beasts of themselves!" Johnson replied: "I wonder, Madam, that you have not penetration to see the strong inducement to this excess; for he who makes a *beast* of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man" (*Miscellanies*, ii.333). 'The pain of being a man' is not far from Pascal's 'the present usually hurts us' (*Pensées*, 47).

The building of pyramids, for Imlac in *Rasselas*, is just another example of this discomfort: they were

> erected only in compliance with that hunger of imagination which preys incessantly upon life, and must always be appeased by some employment… I consider this mighty structure as a monument of the insufficiency of human enjoyments. A king…is compelled to solace, by the erection of a pyramid, the satiety of dominion and tastelessness of pleasures. (*Works*, xvi.119)

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[185] Claude Rawson, *Gulliver and the Gentle Reader: Studies in Swift and our Time* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 58. See also 162n61. D.V. Boyd makes a similar comparison with Pascal: see 'Vanity and Vacuity: A Reading of Johnson's Verse Satires', *English Literary History*, 29 (1972): 387-403, 388.

[186] Gross, *Invisible Riot*, 92.

For Pascal, the experience of helpless unrest is only what we would expect in a being who has suffered a catastrophic separation from God.[187] 'It is good to be tired and weary from seeking the true good, so that one can stretch out one's arms to the Redeemer' (*Pensées* , 631). He assumes that *ennui* explains humanity's plight, as does *Rambler* 41: 'I cannot but consider this necessity of searching on every side for matter on which the attention may be employed, as a strong proof of the superior and celestial nature of the soul of man' (*Works*, iii.221-2). In *The Vanity of Human Wishes* Johnson refers to 'celestial wisdom', alluding to God without using Christian language (l. 367); here 'celestial nature', without directly referring to theology, supports a strong statement of belief in immortality. Johnson compares humankind to 'other creatures' who 'seem always to be fully employed, or to be completely at ease without employment'. Rasselas is unable to be specific about his discontent in the Happy Valley: 'I can discover within me no power of perception which is not glutted with its proper pleasure, yet I do not feel myself delighted. Man has surely some latent sense for which this place affords no gratification, or he has some desires distinct from sense which must be satisfied before he can be happy' (*Works*, xvi.13). Robert G. Walker has shown that the opening of *Rasselas* echoes the 'argument from desire' for the immortality of the soul, a common feature of Christian apologetics in the first half of the eighteenth century.[188]

Pascal insists on the unhappiness of human life; so, frequently, does Johnson: 'Such is the emptiness of human enjoyment, that we are always impatient of the present' (*Rambler* 207, *Works*, v.310). But that is only one side of Johnson; in general, he refuses the satisfying rhetoric of despondency. Pascal rarely concedes an inch to optimism. He says baldly: 'If our condition were truly happy we should not need to divert ourselves from thinking about it' (*Pensées* 70). The *Pensées* provide, apart from anything else, a version of what Johnson might be like were his

[187] See Chester F. Chapin, 'Johnson and Pascal', in John H. Middendorf, ed., *English Writers of the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971): 3-16, 9.

[188] See Robert G. Walker, *Eighteenth-Century Arguments for Immortality and Johnson's* Rasselas (Victoria: English Literary Studies, 1977), 40.

pessimism so absolute as is sometimes believed. Pascal refers to our entire condition as miserable, whereas Johnson is more cautious about generalising from particular miseries.

For instance, Johnson's observation that 'when a man cannot bear his own company there is something wrong' at least implies that it could be put right (*Rambler* 5, *Works*, iii.27). Imlac tells his companions that 'no mind is much employed upon the present: recollection and anticipation fill up almost all our moments' (*Rasselas*, *Works*, xvi.112). That constant looking forward and backward was also remarked on by Pascal: 'Let each of us examine his thoughts. He will find them wholly concerned with the past or the future' (*Pensées* , 47). The thought is similar, but Johnson says 'almost all our moments' where Pascal says 'wholly concerned'.

Into that small gap enter Johnson's ideals for literature. If there is some space where the mind can close down its pointless churning and turn towards the good, then literature can come into that space and bring both reason and imagination: reason to order the contents of the mind and give it some control over this 'agitation', imagination to fill up the 'vacancy' which lies at the bottom of its unease.

Unlike Pascal, Johnson writes as though mental processes can themselves help people out of their condition. Even without reference to God, much of the moral life consists of bringing the right idea out of the storehouse at the right moment. When Johnson proposes a remedy for some difficulty, it often takes a form such as 'keep this thought always prevalent…' (*Rasselas*, *Works*, xvi.163) As Johnson knew, that was easier said than done.

The art of pleasing

Memory, for Johnson, is 'the primary and fundamental power, without which there could be no other intellectual operation' (*Idler* 44, ii.137). Memory 'may be said to place us in the class of moral

agents'. If we lacked it, 'we should be pushed forward by an invincible fatality', unable to choose between one thing and another, unless they both happened to be present (*Rambler* 41, iii.223). *Rambler* 41 goes on to praise 'memory, which makes so large a part of the excellence of the human soul…the purveyor of reason, the power which places those images before the mind upon which the judgment is to be exercised, and which treasures up the determinations that are once passed, as the rules of future action, or grounds of subsequent conclusions.' Memory allows the 'judgment' to operate and good habits of mind to form.

So, if you are troubled by some bad habit, you can dwell on an idea which will draw you away from it. 'Would men therefore deeply imprint upon their minds the true notions of repentance in its whole extent, many temptations would lose their force' (Sermon 2, xiv.23). The point applies not only to clearly immoral acts, but also to self-absorption and neurosis. *Rambler* 159's suggested cure for 'bashfulness', or self-consciousness in company, is to make a thought predominate: that no-one is watching you with any particular interest. 'He that considers how little he dwells upon the condition of others, will learn how little the attention of others is attracted by himself' (v.84). *Rambler* 47, meanwhile, proposes 'employment' as an 'antidote against sorrow': practical concerns will displace sad thoughts from the mind (iii.257). Ideas should be put into people's heads, both to make us act better and to avoid depressing or dangerous trains of thought.

Given Johnson's didactic ideals, it should not surprise us to find him sounding so much like Locke's *Some Thoughts on Education* (1693). Though nowhere near as systematic as the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, this later work builds on the *Essay*'s conclusions when Locke puzzles over how to 'impress' good ideas on children. 'What the Mind is intent upon, and careful of,' Locke writes, 'that it remembers best' (*Education*, 232). So a teacher cannot be indifferent to a child's pleasure. Once a child can read, he should be handed 'some easy pleasant Book suited to his Capacity' (211). There 'the entertainment, that he finds, might draw him on' (212). Johnson made the same point about literary pleasure coaxing the mind towards truth. Rhetoric and poetry,

says the 'Preface' to the *Preceptor* (1748), 'in the Hands of Virtue are of great Use for the Impression of just Sentiments and illustrious Examples'.[189]

Locke singles out Aesop's fables (a favourite of Johnson's)[190] as containing life lessons which will be worth remembering in adulthood, while being 'apt to delight and entertain a Child' (*Education*, 212). Picture-books will increase the child's interest, as will open discussion of the stories, and being encouraged to relate them himself. 'These Baits seem wholly neglected in the ordinary Method', Locke notes. 'Baits' seems a cynical way of putting it, but Johnson is not above saying similar things: 'many arts of instruction have been invented, by which the reluctance against truth may be overcome; and as physick is given to children in confections, precepts have been hidden under a thousand appearances, that mankind may be bribed by pleasure to escape destruction' (*Rambler* 96, iv.149). When it comes to moral education, you have to treat adults like children – with bribes.

Either Johnson had a higher opinion of children than Locke did, or Locke had a higher opinion of adults. For instance, Locke worries about the effect on children of the merely new: 'Novelty alone takes them; whatever that presents, they are presently eager to have a Taste of, and are as soon satiated with it. They quickly grow weary of the same thing, and so have almost their whole delight in change and variety' (*Education*, 221). Johnson sees it the other way round: children may be better at resisting novelty than adults.

> In childhood, while our minds are yet unoccupied, religion is impressed upon them, and the first years of almost all who have been well educated are passed in a regular discharge of the duties of piety. But as we advance forward into the crowds of life, innumerable delights sollicit our inclinations, and innumerable cares distract our attention; the time of youth is passed in noisy frolicks; manhood is led on from hope to hope, and from project to project; the dissoluteness of pleasure, the inebriation of success, the ardour of expectation, and the vehemence of competition, chain down the mind alike to the present

[189] Hazen, *Prefaces and Dedications*, 183; the 1754 revision has 'just Sentiments, and Recommendation of illustrious Examples'.
[190] See DeMaria, *Life of Reading*, 132.

scene.
(*Idler* 89, ii.277-8)

As the mind gets older, it might become more susceptible to distraction and 'delights'. Locke's concerns about the mind's distractability were mainly related to the nursery and the schoolroom. In teaching generally, Locke writes, children's 'lasting continued Attention' is very hard to earn, and must be gained by making lessons 'as grateful and agreeable as possible' (*Education*, 221). Johnson agrees with that: but he does not restrict it to the early years of life. Where Locke writes, 'It is a contradiction to the Natural state of Childhood for them to fix their fleeting Thoughts' (221), one can imagine Johnson replacing the word 'Childhood' with, say, 'intellectual beings'. Fixing the thoughts is the work of a lifetime, not something which comes with maturity.

Locke condemns the 'Fault' of 'The Charging of Children's memories, upon all Occasions, with *Rules* and Precepts, which they often do not understand, and constantly forget as soon as given' (120). Once people are grown up: then, they need not act only by habit, but can draw on 'Memory, or Reflection, the Concomitant of Prudence and Age'. But for Johnson, the concomitants of prudence and age are just the same as those of childhood and immaturity: 'those obligations which are best known, are sometimes, from the security to which the consciousness of our knowledge naturally betrays us, most easily forgotten' (Sermon 19, *Works*, xiv.203).

Without going as far as Pascal, Johnson was more pessimistic than Locke about the mind's powers of concentration. With his doubts over the adult memory, Johnson sees the writer as engaged in a contest, in which some combatants are gaining an advantage while others are falling off the edge of the battlefield. So Johnson writes that 'Forgetfulness is necessary to remembrance. Ideas are retained by renovation of that impression which time is always wearing away, and which new images are striving to obliterate' (*Idler* 72, ii.225). Religious observance, says Sermon 3, is an aid in that contest, renewing 'impressions which the converse of mankind, and the solicitations of sense and fancy, are constantly labouring to efface, and which we must therefore renew by such practices as religion prescribes' (xiv.34). These phrases – 'striving to obliterate', 'labouring to

efface', show that Johnson thought of the mind as pitched into a battle, where not to resist is to be overwhelmed. And if religious practice played a part in the defence, so did literature.

Indeed, writing is better adapted to the struggle than other arts. Compared to painting, poetry 'is capable of conveying more ideas, for men have thought and spoken of many things which they do not see' (*Idler* 34, ii.105). The possibilities of language carry with them a responsibility to make the right choices from among the 'numberless objects striving for our notice' (*Rambler* 78, iv.46). Novels worried Johnson because they could so easily corrupt a reader:

> …care ought to be taken that, when the choice is unrestrained, the best examples only should be exhibited; and that which is likely to operate so strongly, should not be mischievous or uncertain in its effects.
> (*Rambler* 4, iii.22)

Whereas for Locke, commanding the memory is a task for someone bringing up a child, for Johnson it is an intervention in the moral drama of adult life. Someone tempted falls 'before he can recal to his mind those reasonings, which, if attended to, would stifle every rebellious thought' (Sermon 16, xiv.173). The narrator of *Adventurer* 32, leading an immoral life, finds himself ill at ease: 'I knew very well…that such proceedings must terminate in the destruction of health and fortune; but to admit thoughts of this kind, was to live upon the rack' (ii.342). He will do anything to shut down his conscience. 'I fled, therefore, to the regions of mirth and jollity, as they are called, and endeavoured with burgundy, and a continual rotation of company, to free myself from the pangs of reflection'. To someone like this, the author's responsibility is to increase and strengthen 'the pangs of reflection'. The writer is a 'monitor':

> men will always be tempted to deviate from their duty, and will, therefore, always want a monitor to recall them…to deserve well of mankind, by conveying instruction to them in a grateful vehicle.
> (*Adventurer* 95, ii.426)

With different ideas swirling around the human mind, the writer chooses to impress some rather than others. Sermon 1 lays out Johnson's moral vision of society, as described in the last chapter. 'Every particular relation gives rise to a particular scheme of duties' (xiv.4); yet these duties are not always present to the mind. Objections to the duties of marriage, Johnson writes, are 'weak', but can have a strong effect upon minds 'already adapted to receive impressions from them, by habits of debauchery' (xiv.7). Over time, bad impressions prepare the way for bad habits. Much of the moral struggle is 'to dwell upon these duties', so that 'deep impressions of them may be formed and renewed' (xiv.6). The problem is not so much ignorance as neglect: the mind drifts away from what it should attend to. From the preacher's point of view, 'It is…no less useful to rouse the thoughtless, than instruct the ignorant; to awaken the attention, than enlighten the understanding' (xiv.5). Simply drawing 'attention' to principles is half the struggle.

And it is a struggle. Johnson thought most pious books were dull – as he expected Law's *Serious Call* to be. He wrote to Hill Boothby when she sent him a Christian book: 'It affords me a new conviction that in these books there is little new, except new forms of expression, which may be sometimes taken even by the writer, for new doctrines' (*Letters*, i.120). Such works were generally unexciting and predictable, which was not necessarily the author's fault. Religion is at a natural disadvantage in the fight for attention, Johnson suggests; that is one reason for belonging to a church community:

> To be of no church, is dangerous. Religion, of which the rewards are distant, and which is animated only by Faith and Hope, will glide by degrees out of the mind, unless it be invigorated and reimpressed by external ordinances, by stated calls to worship, and the salutary influence of example.
> ('Life of Milton', *Lives*, i.275)

Adventurer 137, more optimistically, suggested that reading religious books must do some good:

> Books have always a secret influence on the understanding; we cannot at pleasure obliterate ideas…he that entertains himself with moral or religious treatises, will

> imperceptibly advance in goodness.
> (ii.491)

But to have that 'secret influence', books must first command the attention. For children, at least, they cannot be expected to stand on their own merits. 'A boy should be introduced to such books, by having his attention directed to the arrangement, to the style, and other excellencies of composition; that the mind being thus engaged by an amusing variety of objects, may not grow weary' (*Life*, i.67).

Literature is one of the most effective weapons in the mental battle, partly because it does not resemble a weapon. We do not like being told our duty, so it takes a good writer to get past our defences: 'All the force of reason and all the charms of language are indeed necessary to support positions which every man hears with a wish to confute them' (*Rambler* 165, v.110-11). The 'Life of Milton' defines poetry as 'the art of uniting pleasure with truth, by calling imagination to the aid of reason' (*Lives*, i.282). Literature can impress the ideas which we need in order to live. The argument is familiar (for instance from Sidney's *Defence of Poetry*): poetry teaches by pleasing. What Johnson adds to this is a preoccupation with how the mind yearns for intellectual food, how its hunger can lead it to latch onto ideas, and how easily it can forget them.

The Social Author

Locke's governor and Johnson's author could be the same person. The governor, or tutor, is in Locke's view, worth any price: you should scrutinise your son's potential tutor as you should his future wife (*Education*, 149). And it is not just a matter of finding a clever, well-read person. No, the governor should be

> well bred, understand the Ways of Carriage, and Measures of Civility in all the Variety of Persons, Times and Places; and keep his Pupil, as much as his Age requires, constantly to the Observation of them. This is an Art not to be learnt, nor taught by Books. Nothing can give it but good Company, and Observation joyn'd together.
> (150)

In case this sounds rather superficial, Locke clarifies that good breeding and 'Civility' determine whether every virtue comes to fruition: 'Courage in an ill-bred Man, has the Air, and scapes not the Opinion of brutality; learning becomes Pedantry; Wit Buffoonry; Plainness Rusticity; Good Nature Fawning…in most cases the manner of doing is of more Consequence, than the thing done' (150-1).

Johnson also recognised the importance of good breeding – "I am well-bred to a degree of needless scrupulosity", he claimed (*Miscellanies*, i.169) – but in his 1755 letter to Lord Chesterfield he admitted: 'When I had once addressed your Lordship in public, I had exhausted all the Art of pleasing which a retired and uncourtly scholar can possess' (*Letters*, i.95). There may be some theatricality here, but Johnson saw this as a necessary challenge for every 'scholar': to shun retirement, to go out into the world and learn the 'art of pleasing'. For there is no book which can tell you how to please others. And that does not just apply to addressing a Lord in public. Even on the page, the unsocialised writer will lack the ability to persuade:

> Argumentation may be taught in colleges, and theories formed in retirement, but the artifice of embellishment, and the powers of attraction, can be gained only by general converse.
> (*Rambler* 168, v.129)

Writers, as discussed in the last chapter, have a tendency to excuse themselves from 'general converse' on the grounds of having something terribly important to do in their study. But this makes them ineffectual as soon as they leave it. Poor Vivaculus in *Rambler* 177 'spoke, on common

occasions, the language of books. My quickness of apprehension, and celerity of reply, had entirely deserted me' (v.169). As Locke put it, 'learning becomes Pedantry'.

Far better that 'learning', once 'conferred by solitude', may have its 'application… attained by general converse' (*Adventurer* 126, ii.474). Learning is pointless, Johnson reasons, if you have no way of passing it on: 'and he will always teach unsuccessfully, who cannot recommend his sentiments by his diction or address.' Eventually, the 'application' of learning becomes habitual, and the ideal writer must be something like Locke's description of the governor, with 'Knowledge of the World…worn into him by Use, and Conversation, and a long forming of himself by what he has observed to be practised and observed in the best Company' (*Education*, 158). Both speak of this facility as something earned over time by continuous exchange with others.

Writers are part of the social world, and if they disconnect themselves, their writing runs out of energy. This is just Locke's point about education: a child needs contact with the world, mediated by a worldly, but virtuous, figure.

> The great Work of a *Governour* is to fashion the Carriage, and form the Mind; to settle in his Pupil good Habits, and the Principles of Vertue and Wisdom; to give him by little and little a view of Mankind; and work him into a love and imitation of what is Excellent and Praise-worthy; and in the Prosecution of it to give him Vigour, Activity, and Industry. (156)

Johnson likewise sees the author as an instructor and a motivator, and – necessarily for both – a man or woman of the world. It is, in the end, the literary work which touches the reader's mind and heart, but in the 'Age of Authors' Johnson wanted to give an account of how writers could maximise their chances of producing such a work.

In this spirit, he writes to Frances Reynolds: 'Many of your notions seem not very clear in your own mind, many are not sufficiently developed and expanded for the common reader; the expression almost everywhere wants to be made clearer and smoother' (*Letters*, iii.356). By knowing the customs of the world and learning the language of 'the common reader' to whom

Johnson awarded the final judgment of literary matters, a writer learns what has the power to interest and persuade; and so, the art of being memorable. Admittedly, the correspondent in *Rambler* 57 criticises the Rambler for writing too ornately, since 'common readers' need only 'a few plain and cogent instructions, which may sink into the mind by their own weight' (iii.305). Gelaleddin, in *Idler* 75, wastes his eloquence on the uneducated, who don't care for rhetorical cleverness. On the other hand, Johnson thinks Swift's style (dealing in 'common words and common things') only 'instructs, but it does not persuade' (iii.209). Different audiences demand different styles; but Johnson did not think you could hit on the right style – even a plain one – without personal knowledge of your audience. Both the Rambler and Gelaleddin had failed to understand whom they were addressing.

Johnson noted in his 'Preface' that though the writers of Shakespeare's day lived before the philosophical study of human nature, they had an alternative method: 'he that would know the world' could do it 'by mingling as he could in its business and amusements' (vii.88). Johnson's tone is delicately ambiguous, but he implies that this was preferable to studying 'Mankind' 'in the closet'.

The usefulness of writing depends on its joining two different things – the truth and an appeal to the reader's responses – so closely that they cannot be separated: 'he that communicates truth with success, must be numbered among the first benefactors of mankind' (*Adventurer* 95, ii.426). Literature can do great things; but its moral ambiguity means that writers have to go about their task with a sense of responsibility. Not the least of their responsibilities is to leave the narrow circle of their own solitude. 'To know the world is necessary, since we were born for the help of one another' (*Idler* 80, ii.251). For writers, born to help others through communicating knowledge, that is especially true; and to refer to an example discussed earlier, *Idler* 36 portrays the writer who shows off and ends up losing the reader's attention.

One supposed correspondent, Philomides, speaks in Johnson's voice when he writes: 'Those who exalt themselves into the chair of instruction…have not sufficiently considered how

much of human life passes in little incidents, cursory conversation, slight business, and casual amusements.' *Rambler* 25 notes satirically: 'It is natural for those who have raised a reputation by any science, to exalt themselves as endowed by heaven with peculiar powers, or marked out by an extraordinary designation for their profession' (iii.139). Exalting oneself, in the Christian tradition, backfires: 'Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted', Christ says in Matthew 23:12. Johnson describes this abasement in the 'Life of Pope', when his subject 'exalted himself into the chair of wisdom' but, as Johnson tells the story, only embarrassed himself (*Lives*, iv.76).

'There is perhaps no class of men' so liable to 'be wise in their own conceits' as are writers, Johnson tells the hearers of Sermon 8 (xiv.87). To live out his or her vocation, a writer needs to remember their own littleness; it is pride which stifles communication, and humility which enables it. The next two chapters show how much that principle matters in Johnson's biography and criticism.

4 Singularity and Enthusiasm

Baiting authors

On May 3, 1777, Johnson received a visit from a lawyer called Henry Lucas who had written a bad play. At least, Johnson thought so: *The Earl of Somerset* was 'but a poor performance', Johnson wrote that evening to John Taylor (*Letters*, iii.21). However, he added that 'it contains nothing immoral or indecent, and therefore, we may very reasonably wish it success.' Not only did Johnson give his best wishes to the play, he also suggested some changes to Lucas. Johnson the Christian won out over Johnson the literary critic: since the play was morally faultless, he withheld his aesthetic disapproval.

But the story is not quite so simple. When the play was published, Lucas added a preface thanking Johnson for 'the peculiar kindness of his perusal, emendations, and good opinion of this work'.[191] That was too much for Johnson, who 'was not pleased with young Lucas' for publicising Johnson's assistance.[192] As long as it was kept private, he was happy to help innocent literature; but he had a public role as a critic, which was compromised if he supported third-rate writing.

We are in the middle of what was, for Johnson, an unavoidable problem: where Christian charity ends and critical judgment begins. One twentieth-century critic, Philip Toynbee, wrote that as a 'near-Christian', it would make his life far easier if he could only read books he admired.[193] In theory, condemning a book does not imply that much about the author. Yet a negative review – or critical reading – frequently comes across as a personal insult. It will certainly

[191] James Boswell, *Boswell, Laird of Auchinleck, 1778-1782*, ed. Joseph W. Reed and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), 75 and n9.
[192] Ibid.
[193] Philip Toynbee, *Part of a Journey: An Autobiographical Journal 1977-79* (London: William Collins & Sons, 1981), 26.

wound. Criticism is not outside the bounds of civility and personal morality, Johnson argues in *Rambler* 93:

> …there is indeed some tenderness due to living writers, when they attack none of those truths which are of importance to the happiness of mankind, and have committed no other offence than that of betraying their own ignorance or dullness.
> (iv.133)

However, an author does not necessarily deserve the same respect and gentleness that anybody else does:

> Yet I am far from thinking this tenderness universally necessary; for he that writes may be considered as a kind of general challenger, whom every one has a right to attack; since he quits the common rank of life, steps forward beyond the lists, and offers his merit to the publick judgment.

Once again, Johnson addresses the relationship between the writer and the public: the writer has created that relationship, has left behind 'the common rank' of life, but in so distinguishing themselves gives the public certain rights: a 'general challenger' denies their commonness, and so forfeits some of their social privileges. Adverse criticism is not only justifiable, it is natural. And, as *Rambler* 176 notes, 'The diversion of baiting an author has the sanction of all ages and nations' (v.165). It is common across civilisations because 'for the most part he comes voluntarily to the stake'. Writers choose to be set apart: if, instead of praise, they receive opprobrium, it does not necessarily offend against 'the laws of benevolence'.

Johnson's legal mind is at work here, weighing those laws – in obedience to which most social life is conducted – against the special case of the author. And precedent – drawn from 'all ages and nations' – suggests that the author has less right to object. Writing is itself a form of self-assertion: so *Adventurer* 115 claims that an author needs 'an excuse for the arrogance of writing' (ii.459). The same essay notes that a writer without knowledge or a good style will 'expose himself

to the derision of those whom he aspires to instruct' (ii.461). 'Derision' is presented as a natural, inevitable force, which exists to correct what Johnson's 'Levet' called 'letter'd arrogance'. Authors' self-satisfaction is an immutable fact; it must have a counterbalance in the order of things; and this counterbalance is society's habit of mocking authors.

John Mullan has a persuasive essay on Johnson's 'apparent determination', in the *Lives of the Poets*, 'to remember the faults of the poets'.[194] Mullan sees this as Johnson's consciously chosen method: believing as he does that 'good criticism involves undeceiving the reader', that 'Praise has been the medium in which poets have basked', and that 'poetry should not fool us',[195] Johnson finds fault with poets as an act of resistance: resistance to cheap praise, to inattentive reading.

Mullan's reading appeals because it accounts for Johnson's critical habits without referring to personal animus. But of course some of the *Lives* do contain personal criticism. I would like to suggest that here, too, Johnson has a reason for his sharpness. The 'Lives' of Swift and Milton, Mullan says, are 'notoriously' marked by Johnson's 'evident dislike' of his subjects.[196] That may be so, but they also illustrate some of Johnson's convictions about authorship. Swift and Milton are negative examples: authors who, in different ways, suggest themselves as candidates for 'The diversion of baiting an author'.

Ridicule and singularity

Johnson often wrote and spoke against the vice of singularity – the habit of being different for the sake of it. 'All desire of distinction had a sure enemy in Mr. Johnson', Boswell commented (i.286),

[194] 'Fault Finding in Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*', in Freya Johnston and Lynda Mugglestone, ed., *Samuel Johnson: The Arc of the Pendulum* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 72-82: 79.
[195] Ibid., 80-1.
[196] Ibid., 72.

recording a time when Johnson mocked a man for driving six very small ponies. This was attempting 'the distinction of doing something worse than the common way' – the assumption being that to deviate from the norm would mean a deterioration. *Idler* 36 – to take one example of many – mocks those who 'seem to think nothing so much the characteristick of a genius, as to do common things in an uncommon way' (ii.112). The last two chapters were about Johnson's conviction that the essential truths of life are easily found; if that is so, then it is an abuse of intellectual gifts to employ them in being different from everybody else. A self-satisfied Johnson told Boswell, "you may be long enough with me, without finding any thing extraordinary" – unlike Burke, he claimed (*Life*, ii.34). Yet Burke took up a similar theme in the *Reflections*:

> Many of our men of speculation, instead of exploding general prejudices, employ their sagacity to discover the latent wisdom which prevails in them.... Your literary men and your politicians, and so do the whole clan of the enlightened among us, essentially differ in these points. They have no respect for the wisdom of others, but they pay it off by a very full measure of confidence in their own.[197]

Like Johnson, Burke sees eccentricity as the flipside of disdain ('no respect') for others. According to *Rambler* 151, singularity cannot last long: 'those whose abilities or knowledge incline them most to deviate from the general round of life, are recalled from excentricity by the laws of their existence' (v.39). There is a disguised contempt, Johnson suggests, in such a habit, but it is hard to remain out of 'the general round of life'. A singular person cannot be surprised

> if his arrogance is punished with ridicule; if those, whose example he superciliously overlooks, point him out to derision, and hoot him back again into the common road. (*Adventurer* 131, ii.485-6)

As we saw in Chapter 2, Johnson's Sermon 20 denounced Shaftesbury's notion that ridicule could establish truth by itself. The 'Life of Akenside' returned to the point, arguing that one needs a test

[197] Burke, *Reflections*, 138.

of whether ridicule is just or unjust; and this throws one back on 'the application of truth, as the test of ridicule' (*Lives*, iv.172). Ridicule – only a minor skill, since it 'terminates in mere amusement' – cannot replace the search for the truth of a matter.

Yet though ridicule does not establish truth in a real debate, it does – Johnson thinks – have a social function. It restores the way things should be. This applies at a private level: Johnson writes to Hester Thrale in 1755, 'As to my hopes and my wishes I can keep them to myself. They will perhaps grow less as they are laughed at' (*Letters*, ii.233). 'Whatever is true will bear to be related', but if 'the bare mention' of our fantasy 'would expose us to derision or contempt', we should abandon it (ii.393). In *Rasselas*, Nekayah and Pekuah laugh cruelly when Imlac tells them about the disturbed astronomer, and he advises them to be more merciful (xvi.149); but in another case, less psychologically serious and less morally innocent, the reaction might shake the sufferer out of his misapprehension.

In public, too, ridicule can demolish illusions. *Taxation No Tyranny* confronts the threatening language used by Congress: 'if such writers hope to deceive, let us rather repel them with scorn, than refute them by disputation' (x.443). Ridicule is a kind of speedy justice against those who have publicly neglected their duties – whether by (allegedly) lying or even by writing badly. These are the grounds on which Johnson defends the *Dunciad*: it was a corrective. Though Johnson declares himself 'not convinced' that Pope wrote from a moral urge, that does not mean that the poem's aggression cannot be justified:

> An author places himself uncalled before the tribunal of Criticism, and solicits fame at the hazard of disgrace. Dulness or deformity are not culpable in themselves, but may very justly be reproached when they pretend to the honour of wit or the influence of beauty… All truth is valuable, and satirical criticism may be considered as useful when it rectifies error and improves judgement; he that refines the publick taste is a publick benefactor. (*Lives*, iv.75)

Johnson's views on ridicule suggest how he thought in general about criticism: it restores a

balance which is constantly upset by the arrogance of writers. It is both a literary and moral failing to opt out of society or 'the world'; the critic corrects this. The idea of regulation and correction recurs in Johnson's thought, as in *Adventurer* 95: 'men will always be tempted to deviate from their duty, and will, therefore, always want a monitor to recall them' (ii.426). *Idler* 60 placed limits on the power of criticism – 'No genius was ever blasted by the breath of criticks' (ii.185) – but critics do have a destructive power, which can be used for good: the critic recalls a work, or an author, when they deviate from that social duty which defines them and enables them to help others. '[S]atirical criticism may be considered as useful when it rectifies error or improves judgement'. So may satirical biography.

Seen this way, the astringency of the *Lives of the Poets* turns out to be something subtler than literary politics or irritability or envy: it is, from Johnson's point of view, a dutiful recalling of authors and readers to what has been forgotten. Ridicule can enact that rebalancing, as described in *Idler* 28:

> It is very easy for a man who sits idle at home, and has no body to please but himself, to ridicule or to censure the common practices of mankind…but let the author or his readers mingle with common life, they will find themselves irresistibly born away by the stream of custom, and must submit, after they have laughed at others, to give others the same opportunity of laughing at them.
> (ii.86)

Restorative justice demands that someone who laughs at mankind should, in turn, be laughed at: not that mankind is not ridiculous – after all, such ridicule 'is very easy' – but that nobody should, on the pretext of their satirical brilliance, exalt themselves above 'mankind'. That is singularity, arrogance, and it needs to be answered with equivalent force. If the passage just quoted contains a silent reference to any author, it might well be Swift, the master of ridicule, who disdains much of mankind and in a famous letter to Pope revealed that 'I have ever hated all Nations professions and Communityes and all my love is towards individualls' and that *Gulliver's Travels* was built

'Upon this great foundation of Misanthropy'.[198] However one takes such teasing statements, it is certain that the later Swift isolated himself, both physically and in his behaviour: and that was central to Johnson's critical remarks in the 'Life of Swift.

Singularity, as Johnson calls it, is infectious. The singular writer creates singular readers: so *Idler* 28 recommends that 'the author or his readers mingle with common life' to cure themselves of despising mankind (ii.86). It is worth recalling a writer, then, even if they are dead, because you are recalling their disciples. When Johnson alerts the reader to Swift's deviations, he offers a corrective to everyone influenced by Swift's writings and example.

Johnson was well aware of the ongoing debate about Swift's life. In 1752 Lord Orrery had published his provocative *Remarks on the Life and Writings of Dr. Jonathan Swift*. The book is not exactly a character assassination, but it does not spare Swift's weaknesses. 'He was open to adulation' (*Remarks*, 67); he treated Stella 'cruelly' (94); he exhibited 'Ambition and pride' (82) as well as 'misanthropy' (125); Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels* is 'a real insult upon mankind' (217). Orrery qualifies his criticisms: for instance, while noting Swift's 'parsimony', he insists that it 'will be forgiven, or, at least, excused by all honest men': it came from a desire for independence (248). And Orrery concludes that 'few characters could have afforded so great a variety of faults and beauties' (322).

This was not diplomatic enough for Patrick Delany, who in the *Observations upon Lord Orrery's Remarks* (1755) wrote that Orrery had been deceived by a 'misrepresentation' of Swift's character, put about by supposed friends who had smeared him after death with 'calumny' (*Observations*, 2-3). Delany does not try to refute everything in Orrery's account; at moments, his is the harsher account. He does adjust the record a little: whereas Orrery plays down his criticism of Swift's miserliness, Delany says that the criticism only applies to old age: before then, Swift displayed 'a very distinguished generosity' (4). Delany denies Orrery's claim that Swift welcomed

[198] Letter to Alexander Pope, September 29, 1725; in *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift, D.D.*, ed. David Woolley, 5 vols. (Oxford: Lang, 1999-2014), ii.606-7.

flattery: his friends were too awed even to try, and he was averse to it (18, 61). While Orrery suggests that Swift was ambitious, Delany deflects the suggestion: his ambition 'was always directed to public and unselfish ends' (266). Perhaps Swift seemed 'churlish' to his servants, Delany allows, but this was 'only in appearance; for he was, in truth, one of the best masters in the world' (185). He writes as though correcting Orrery's shallowness.

Johnson himself said that combining Orrery and Delany would result in a fair judgment of Swift (*Life*, iii.349), and at times, Delany sounds like Swift's defender; but at other points, he makes acute criticisms of Swift's character and choices, criticisms which anticipate Johnson's 'Life'. He openly passes 'censure upon his [Swift's] very mistaken conduct, in relation to Stella' – though Swift's intentions were not malicious, he did her harm by refusing to acknowledge her publicly as his wife (*Observations*, 60-1). Delany paints an unflattering picture of Swift's later life: 'his sourness of temper…and the indulgence of his passions perpetually increased' and his 'avarice' left him alone, so that 'His passions impaired his memory, and his solitude unfurnished it' (144-5). Even later in life, 'the outrageous reign of his passions' came into view.

While a more sympathetic biographer than Orrery, Delany is not that far from his predecessor. There are two much more laudatory accounts. One is by Deane Swift, *An Essay upon the Life, Writings, and Character, of Dr. Jonathan Swift* (1755). The author was the son of Swift's cousin, and there is something more than ordinary family loyalty in this impassioned book. Orrery, Deane tells the reader, had no 'Regard to Candor, Humanity, or Decency', and offered in place of the truth a 'Burlesque…a thousand Caricaturas'.[199] Nor was Delany's account any better; if anything, Delany comes off worse: 'Safe in the Covert of his Obscurity he degrades, he reviles the DOCTOR, with whom he had the honour to be acquainted'. His distrust of Swift's family leads him to 'False and groundless Accusations; the Work of Darkness, forged in Hell'.[200] Deane Swift follows up these denunciations with a variety of further criticisms, whose vehemence of tone

[199] Deane Swift, *An Essay upon the Life, Writings, and Character, of Dr. Jonathan Swift* (London, 1755), 279.
[200] Ibid.,, 320.

seems hardly justified by the subject matter: there is, for example, a strangely vitriolic discussion of the composition date of *Gulliver's Travels*.[201] He forcefully rejects other accusations against his relative: if Swift had made his marriage to Stella public, Deane tells us, his enemies would have snobbishly denounced him, his heart would have broken, and he would have 'died in a Twelvemonth'.[202] Swift's behaviour towards the Ministry is no more culpable, since 'SWIFT courted not the Ministry; but the Ministry courted Swift'; besides, Deane asserts, *The Conduct of the Allies* saved the Ministry in 1711.[203]

Less of a whitewash, but still highly complimentary, is John Hawkesworth's biography. Johnson refers to it at the beginning of the 'Life of Swift' as containing 'so much elegance of language and force of sentiment' (*Lives*, iii.189). And Johnson says that Hawkesworth constructed his biography 'according to a scheme which I had laid before him'. It is surprising, then, to see that Hawkesworth has so little of Johnson's animosity to Swift. Swift's self-assertive dealings with the Ministry were 'to the honour of Dr Swift' (*Account*, 13). He was not motivated by vanity; 'Neither was this conduct the effect of pride and self-sufficiency, but of true dignity of mind' (27). Hawkesworth quotes frequently from both Orrery and Delany, and gives the impression of offering a scholarly, impartial account; in fact, his book contains less criticism of Swift than either. On the uncomfortable question of Swift's treatment of Stella, Hawkesworth simply notes that the questions surrounding this episode are so mysterious as to be 'unprofitable objects of speculation'. The most he will say by way of judgment is that 'the Dean's intention was upright, though his judgment might be erroneous' (50).

Swift, for Hawkesworth, was 'remarkable' and 'meritorious' as a 'companion' or as a 'master' (*Account*, 63); unconsciously echoing Delany, he writes that Swift was 'one of the best masters in the world' (64). Swift 'appears to have been free from envy' (73); his 'disinterested integrity' was 'striking' (32). Only rarely does a more critical tone come in, perhaps from Johnson,

[201] Ibid., 292-5.
[202] Ibid., 90.
[203] Ibid., 333; 350.

perhaps from Orrery. Hawkins notes that 'His solitude…prevented the diversion of his mind by conversation from brooding over his disappointments' (55). Most suggestive of Johnson's influence is this sentence: 'Among his singularities, were his resolution never to wear spectacles; and his obstinate perseverance in the use of too much exercise' (74). The word 'singularity' would be a defining term of Johnson's 'Life of Swift'. Beyond that, however, the impression of Swift's character from Hawkesworth's account has little in common with the impression from Johnson's.

To summarise, this was the conversation into which the 'Life of Swift' entered: one unconvincing panegyric from a relative, Hawkesworth's reserved but overwhelmingly positive account, and two biographies which, while ostensibly disagreeing, both drew attention to Swift's pride and later small-mindedness, alongside his diligence and efforts at virtue. By the standards of Orrery and Delany, Johnson's biography is not especially ungenerous. Lonsdale comments that Johnson's 'dislike of [Swift] was well known' (*Lives*, iii.427), and the 'Life of Swift' gives evidence of that dislike, but what is really significant is where it appears. Most of the 'Life' refrains from condemning Swift. There are a few references to Swift's pride: when the Earl of Berkeley first offers, then takes away a position, Johnson writes: 'In a man like Swift, such circumvention and inconstancy must have excited violent indignation' (*Lives*, iii.192). Still, Orrery and Delany also accuse Swift of pride (*Remarks*, 82; *Observations*, 150). Johnson is sceptical about Swift's efforts to hide his religious devotion: 'He forgot what he himself had formerly asserted, that hypocrisy is less mischievous than open impiety' (iii.210). Again, exactly the same point is made by Delany (*Observations*, 43-5, 287).

These criticisms are balanced by unmixed respect for Swift's hard work and talent, and by glimpses of his good qualities: in his clerical position at Laracor, he 'performed all the offices of his profession with great decency and exactness' (iii.192). If Johnson had a general habit of being unfair to Swift, the 'Life of Swift' does not display it especially glaringly. It does not possess that constant animosity to which Boswell referred ('He attacked Swift, as he used to do upon all occasions', *Life*, ii.318). But it does suggest what was at the root of Johnson's dislike. There is really

one great criticism which most of the other criticisms in the 'Life' refer back to: of Swift's singularity.

> Whatever he did, he seemed willing to do in a manner peculiar to himself, without sufficiently considering that singularity, as it implies a contempt of the general practice, is a kind of defiance which justly provokes the hostility of ridicule; he therefore who indulges peculiar habits is worse than others, if he is not better.
> (*Lives*, iii.211)

Singularity 'justly provokes' a hostile response from those whom it implicitly despises. Johnson provides the response not in the form of ridicule, but of indignant coldness towards Swift's efforts to be different. The disdain is there when Johnson dismisses the question whether Swift was born in England or Ireland: 'The question may, without much regret, be left in the obscurity in which he delighted to involve it' (iii.189). Swift, Johnson believes, drew attention to himself by deliberately being unstraightforward: Johnson sees this as singularity, and refuses to play along. Martin Maner argues that this is simply a misrepresentation of Swift, who said plainly that he was born in Dublin; and that the 'Life of Swift' is full of such 'errors and distortions'.[204] Perhaps Johnson's Swift was a figment of his imagination, perhaps a projection of Johnson's fears about himself; but wherever the image came from, this Swift is an image of singularity.

This is the key to 'Whatever he did', and its influence is poisonous. His letters to Pope imply that 'they, with Arbuthnot and Gay, had engrossed all the understanding and virtue of mankind' (iii.212). Even in his friendships, Swift cuts himself off from 'mankind'. On the unhappy Stella:

> The man whom she had the misfortune to love was, as Delany observes, fond of singularity, and desirous to make a mode of happiness for himself, different from the general course of things and order of Providence.
> (iii.204)

[204] Martin Maner, 'Johnson's Redaction of Hawkesworth's *Swift*', *The Age of Johnson* 2 (1989), 311-334: 312-13.

'Providence' is the reference point for all one's duties to God and mankind: Swift loses his bearings by singularity, and so hurts others. His relationship with the Tory Ministry is characterised by a lack of respect for authority which Johnson classes as a 'transgression of regularity' and a denial of 'those ceremonies which custom has established' (iii.212).

As the reference to Delany indicates, this criticism was not wholly original. Delany, after partially exonerating Swift's actions towards Stella, says:

> nothing is more dangerous than a too great love and affectation of singularity: such singularities especially, as carry us out of the known ways, and established course of God's providence, into the by-paths of our own prudence, and superior sagacity.
> (*Observations*, 62)

Had Swift married Stella in public, he would have been 'happier' and 'more honoured' after death. Singularity, by carrying us away from God's will, carries us away from our happiness. And Delany, like Johnson, considers this a central theme of Swift's life: it was 'by a strange singularity of temper' that as Swift lost friends and position, his passions actually increased (56). *Gulliver's Travels*, a book Delany found 'unimportant', was disfigured by 'wild singularities' (205). As for Swift's strict exercise regime in old age, it was good for him – 'But he carried this contention, (as he was apt to do every other) too far' (147).

Yet Delany believes that some of Swift's singularity was positive: it was one of 'SWIFT's singularities' that he tried to combat his avarice by acts of charity (12). And his unwillingness to intervene in Stella's disposal of her estate after death was to his credit: 'as singularly remarkable' an aspect of his life 'as any other part of it' (287).

Orrery, too, notes Swift's singularity; but, as in Delany, it is an ambiguous quality. Of Stella, Orrery writes, 'his manner of living with her will shew you, how much he deviated from the common order of men' (*Remarks*, 82). And after describing Swift's secretiveness, he comments, 'A great genius must tread in unbeaten paths, and deviate from the common road of life' (82). It is

hard to tell from that sentence whether Orrery disapproves of such deviations, assumes they are inevitable in so 'great' a mind as Swift's, or welcomes them as signs of 'genius'. Presumably, since he condemns Swift as a cruel husband, he does not approve. But, like Delany, he gives no clear condemnation of singularity. Orrery uses the phrase 'the common road', as Johnson did in *Adventurer* 131; but only Johnson insisted on the duty to 'hoot him back again into the common road'.

Johnson was not the first person to note Swift's singularity; but no previous biographer had been so clearly disapproving on this point, or explicitly made it the key to Swift's life. 'Singular' is a term of disapproval for Johnson, and it recurs, along with 'peculiar', throughout the 'Life of Swift', as Lonsdale says (*Lives*, iii.458). Swift 'practised a peculiar and offensive parsimony' (iii.210); when he attempted 'his own peculiar mode of jocularity', it came across as 'arrogance' (iii.212). For Johnson, Swift's singularity was worked into 'Whatever he did'. Johnson's emphasis has two explanations: firstly, that singularity was a major preoccupation of his (see, for instance, *Life*, i.500; iv.325); secondly, that it is a fault which demands a critic respond, as a matter of restoring the balance.

Gifted minds easily find ways to establish their difference from others. So Johnson is impressed by geniuses who resist the temptation. For example, it was reportedly said of Newton (by Fontenelle) that 'he was not distinguished from other men, by any singularity either natural or affected'. *Adventurer* 131 quotes this and calls it 'an eminent instance of Newton's superiority to the rest of mankind' (*Works*, ii.482). Paradoxically, by looking completely normal, Newton revealed his greatness; whereas by taking pains to be different, Swift shows he is an archetypally vain sort of author. The biblical reversal – 'Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted' – is, again, Johnson's unnamed reference-point.

Adventurer 131 concludes: 'Singularity is, I think, in its own nature universally and invariably displeasing…let no man be in haste to conclude his own merit so great or conspicuous, as to require or justify singularity' (ii.485). Tetty is praised because 'She never wished to signalize

herself by the singularity of paradox' (Sermon 25, xiv. 269). The 'Preface to Shakespeare' assures the reader: 'I know not how much I have concurred with the current opinion; but I have not, by any affectation of singularity, deviated from it' (vii.104). If he had, he would have invited the reader's hostility.

Domestic life

In his writings on singularity, Johnson mentions two major consequences; Swift exemplifies only one. The first is that the writer becomes unintelligible. By turning inward instead of outward, writing loses its purpose of helping others to live, and the result is incoherence. 'If an author…wishes to be admired rather than understood, he counteracts the first end of writing' (*Idler* 70, ii.217). This does not apply to Swift: his writing was clear – indeed, to a fault: 'it instructs, but it does not persuade', lacking attractive ornament (iii.209).

The second consequence of singularity is more serious, and it explains Johnson's diagnosis of Swift. It is the loss of normal social relationships. By contrast with the heroically ordinary Newton, Francis Bacon was too singular, and 'failed so much in the conduct of domestic affairs' (*Adventurer* 131, ii.482). That small word 'domestic' carries as much positive charge for Johnson as 'singularity' does negative. Although in the *Dictionary* it is straightforwardly 'Belonging to the house' or 'not public', Johnson uses the word to indicate sanity and stability. For 'To be happy at home is the ultimate result of all ambition' (*Rambler* 68, iii.360). Johnson's highest praise for Shakespeare is that he provided 'domestick wisdom' ('Preface to Shakespeare', *Works*, vii.63); if Menander's comedies had not been lost in the fire at Alexandria, we would have had 'all the maxims of domestick life' (*Idler* 66, ii.205).

Domestic affairs are the proper topics of great minds. To succeed at understanding daily life, both in theory and practice, is the real point of being intelligent. And singularity, in Swift's case, undermines that possibility:

> In the intercourse of familiar life… He predominated over his companions with very high ascendancy, and probably would bear none over who he could not predominate… This customary superiority soon grew too delicate for truth; and Swift, with all his penetration, allowed himself to be delighted with low flattery.
> (iii.212)

Swift failed at 'familiar life' by taking on a 'very high ascendancy': not content to be among equals, he had to 'predominate'. A healthy social life restrains this urge, because society answers contempt with contempt, and preserves the balance; but Swift corrupts even this, by restricting his social circle to flatterers. Johnson's criticism does what Swift's friends failed to do: it returns the author to his place within common humanity, subject to the same judgments.

Even this company dies away, as Swift retreats from mankind into himself: 'His asperity continually increasing, condemned him to solitude; and his resentment of solitude sharpened his asperity' (iii.206). Then, too mean to entertain ('his avarice grew too powerful for his kindness', iii.207), too ill to think or work, he falls into total unsociability:

> Having thus excluded conversation, and desisted from study, he had neither business nor amusement; for having, by some ridiculous resolution or mad vow, determined never to wear spectacles, he could make little use of books in his later years; his ideas, therefore, being neither renovated by discourse, nor increased by reading, wore gradually away, and left his mind vacant to the vexations of the hour, till at last his anger was heightened into madness.
> (iii.207)

Johnson may be borrowing here from Delany's analysis, which is similar: Swift's 'avarice' meant 'he could not bear the very moderate expense of entertaining' (*Observations*, 145). Delany's summation even sounds Johnsonian: 'His passions impaired his memory, and his solitude

unfurnished it.' Swift symbolises all the peril of solitary life. Johnson's writing includes characters who have found themselves along the same path as Swift. We have already met *Rambler* 177's Vivaculus, whose solitary life left his 'mind contracted and stiffened' and lost his quickness of mind (v.169).

Vivaculus, unlike Swift, has books; but writers desperately need company, Johnson says again and again, to learn how to make their thoughts intelligible and attractive. Solitude makes for abstractedness, impracticality, and ineffectiveness. These seem unlikely charges to level at Swift, who not only sold a lot of books but also influenced the course of political events. Yet Johnson did think Swift's prose lacked the ornament which was necessary to be really appealing. Moreover, he often criticises Swift for being impractical. In the 'Life', he says that the *Project for the Advancement of Religion* 'supposes more zeal, concord, and perseverance, than a view of mankind gives reason for expecting' (iii.194). Swift's idea of an academy for the English language is a delusion – people would have gladly ignored it, and it would have ended up contradicting itself (iii.195).

Similarly, *Rambler* 4 attacks Swift as aloof from real 'life': 'men are observed by Swift to be "grateful in the same degree that they are resentful"' (iii.23). But, Johnson argues, one can choose whether to be grateful or resentful, so 'this sagacious maxim becomes an empty sound, without any relation to practice or life'. The *Yale* editors point out, in a note, that the observation was actually made by Pope, not Swift; did Johnson's memory deceive him because he associated Swift with impracticality?

Idler 70 does quote Swift accurately, but the point is similar: Swift holds 'Mankind' in contempt:

> 'Every man (says Swift) is more able to explain the subject of an art than its professors; a farmer will tell you, in two words, that he has broken his leg; but a surgeon, after a long discourse, shall leave you as ignorant as you were before.' This could only have been said by such an exact observer of life, in gratification of malignity, or in ostentation of acuteness. Every hour produces instances of the necessity of terms of art. Mankind could

> never conspire in uniform affectation; it is not but by necessity that every science and every trade has its peculiar language.
> (ii.218-19)

Swift was by nature 'an exact observer of life'; but his gifts would have been more use if he had been more social. It may have been 'malignity' or it may have been 'ostentation': both stem from the desire to be different. Swift, perhaps unfairly, became in Johnson's mind a symbol of singularity.

Deifying poets

For W.B.C. Watkins, 'After all is said' about Johnson's 'Life of Swift', 'a residue of sheer, inexplicable prejudice remains.'[205] There is room to explain some of the hostility in terms of literary strategy: hooting back to the common road a genius who had wandered well out of it. Lord Orrery seems to have had a similar motive. He wrote to Richard Pococke in 1752 that he wanted

> to shew at least, that he [Swift] was not absolutely above the human species in perfection, and yet many of his Survivors would make him a Deity that they might make themselves one of his *Dii minores*. They may as well make him a planet, in hopes of being one of his Satellites.
> (*Remarks*, 399)

Here, Orrery echoes a Johnsonian theme. If writers need to be held back from self-aggrandisement, then their partisans should also be restrained from unquestioning devotion. Sermon 7 warns that the vice of singularity extends itself from authors to readers:

[205] W.B. C. Watkins, *Perilous Balance: The Tragic Genius of Swift, Johnson and Sterne* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939), 27.

> The pride of singularity influences the teacher, and a love of novelty corrupts the follower, till the delusion, extending itself by degrees, becomes at length general, and overspreads a people.
> (xiv.76)

Johnson's 'Life of Milton', the most acerbic of the *Lives*, can be read as a restoration of balance: an attempt to correct the faults of those 'determined to find in Milton an assemblage of all the excellencies which have ennobled all other poets' (*Rambler* 94, iv.142). Johnson often wrote of these 'votaries' of Milton: a 'votary' being, according to the *Dictionary*, 'One devoted, as by a vow, to any particular service, worship, study, or state of life'. All five of the illustrative quotations refer to false objects of worship, which suggests that Johnson associated the word with ironic cautions against idolatry. Before turning to Johnson's 'Life of Milton', we can try to identify the votaries.

From the 1730s onwards there were many critics who wrote about Milton with unrestrained ardour. Johnson was not the first to notice that veneration of Milton was being taken to extremes. As R.D. Havens relates,

> ...it came to require courage to say anything whatever against "the favourite poet of this nation", as John Jortin called him. 'Whoever,' remarked the *Monthly Review* of 1760, 'at this time ventures to carp at...Paradise Lost, must whisper his criticism with caution'."[206]

In 1749, two years before the *Rambler*s on Milton, William Warburton referred to 'all the silly adorers of Milton, who deserve to be laughed at.'[207] Johnson seems to have been of the same opinion; and 'adorers' is a weak word for some Miltonists of the day. 'For many' in the eighteenth century, writes Dustin Griffin, 'Milton simply paralyzed the critical faculty and gave rise to what

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[206] R.D. Havens, *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1922), 24. *Monthly Review*, 22 (1760), 119. The quotations from Miltonists in the rest of this paragraph are taken from pp. 6-32 of Havens's book.

[207] Letter to Richard Hurd, December 23 1749; in William Warburton, *Letters from an eminent prelate to one of his friends* (2nd edition: London, 1809), 29.

one might call the idolatrous tradition: "the divine…the immortal…the incomparable Milton.'"[208] G.S. Green's 'Preface' to his *A New Version of Paradise Lost* recognised that his attempt to improve on Milton might meet with resistance, Milton's 'Popularity being immeasurably great, and his Reverence little less than divine'.[209] Thomas Hollis referred to 'The divine Milton'.[210] In 1802 Richard Edgeworth thought criticism of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* might be viewed as 'a species of literary sacrilege'.[211] Milton was being exalted to godlike status.

This is all in the background to William Lauder's project, at first endorsed by Johnson, to examine the sources of *Paradise Lost* and so chip away at Milton's uniqueness. These 'sources' were later exposed as bogus, but not before Johnson had written a 1750 'Preface'. Johnson (ghost-writing for Lauder) notes that Milton was at first unpopular; now 'mankind…have endeavoured to compensate the error of their first neglect, by lavish praises and boundless veneration. There seems to have arisen a contest, among men of genius and literature, who should most advance its honour, or best distinguish its beauties.'[212] Johnson refers to 'this ardour of criticism' – a phrase which might also apply, with a different meaning, to Johnson's ill-considered intervention.

'Lauder's avowed purpose for manufacturing evidence', according to John T. Shawcross in his Introduction to *Milton: The Critical Heritage*, 'was to correct the excesses of Miltonic idolatry'.[213] Johnson shared that purpose. 'Idolatry' was one word which cropped up at the time. George Hardinge wrote of Milton's 'Idolators', adding: 'Few, if any, can out-idolize me.'[214] William

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[208] Dustin Griffin, *Regaining Paradise: Milton and the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 33.

[209] 'A Gentleman of Oxford' [G.S. Green], *A New Version of Paradise Lost, or, Milton Paraphrased* (London, 1756), iii.

[210] Francis Blackburne, *Memoirs of Thomas Hollis* (London, 1780), 74.

[211] Richard Edgeworth, *Poetry Explained for the Use of Young People* (London, 1802), ix.

[212] [Samuel Johnson], 'Preface', in William Lauder, *An Essay on Milton's Use and Imitation of the Moderns, in his Paradise Lost* (London, 1750), 3.

[213] 'Introduction', John T. Shawcross, ed., *Milton, 1732-1801: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 29.

[214] *The Miscellaneous Works, in Prose and Verse, of George Hardinge*, ed. J. Nichols, 3 vols. (London, 1818), iii.120.

Cowper wrote to William Hayley about Milton, 'your idol and mine'.[215] Is this apologetic or unapologetic? One wonders because Cowper wrote an angry poem 'On the Late Indecent Liberties Taken with the Remains of the Great Milton'. The eye is caught by Cowper's description of the offence not only as 'unblest' and 'profane', but also as 'idolatrous':

> Oh ill-requited bard! Neglect
> Thy living worth repay'd,
> And blind idolatrous respect
> As much affronts thee dead.[216]

There must be some unease in Cowper applying the accusation of idolatry, given that he had confessed to it. Moreover, 'blind' is a strange term of abuse, given Milton's blindness. The poem, which sets itself up as a polemic, brushes against some unresolved questions about how one should treat authors, and whether idolatry can be justified.

Perhaps that is part of the explanation for Cowper's famous reaction to Johnson's 'Life of Milton', that it made him want to 'thresh' Johnson.[217] Cowper's responses to the *Lives* are sometimes more complex and ambivalent. The same letter (to William Unwin in October 1779) said that Johnson's 'unmerciful' treatment of Milton was the sole 'Exception' in the *Lives* to Johnson's 'usual Good Sense & Sufficiency'.[218] Four and a half years later, he was still torn. 'I am very much the Biographer's humble admirer', he told Unwin; but he added that in the lives of Milton and Prior 'he has offended me'.[219] Admittedly, in 1793 Cowper referred to Johnson as Milton's 'abominable Critic', suggesting that over time his dedication to Milton as an 'idol' (the

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[215] *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979-86), iv.430.

[216] 'Stanzas on the late indecent Liberties taken with the Remains of the great Milton', in *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols. (Oxford University Press, 1980-95), iii.64-5, 65: ll.21-4.

[217] Cowper, *Letters*, i.308.

[218] Ibid., i.307.

[219] Ibid., ii.226-7.

phrase appears in the same letter) hardened his opposition to Johnson.[220] In this, Cowper was not alone. Attacks on the 'Life of Milton', some of them quite severe, began as soon as it was published and came regularly for the rest of 1779.[221] Johnson, who often relished negative criticism of his work, noted laconically that 'There is a very furious fellow writing with might and main against the life of Milton' (to Hester Thrale, *Letters*, iii.199).

Johnson had been provoking Milton's supporters for some time. Dick Minim, the satirical creation of *Idler* 61, finds that when he reads Milton's description of coldness 'he could shiver in a hot-house' (iii.191). Johnson warned against the 'enthusiasm' of finding these resemblances everywhere, and added that they were a minor concern: 'a single sentiment of moral or religious truth, a single image of life or nature, would have been cheaply lost for a thousand echoes of the cadence to the sense' (*Rambler* 94, iv.142). Johnson considered these features little more than pleasant novelties, insignificant when compared to the scale of *Paradise Lost*. One possible source for Minim's opinions – though part of the point is that it could have been many people – is William Benson. In his *Letters Concerning Poetical Translations* (1839), Benson referred to Milton's skill at '*The adapting the Sound to the Sense*.'[222] Benson went on:

> Who does not hear the Warbling of a *Brook*, the Rustling of *Wings*, the rough Sound of *Trumpets* and *Clarions*, and the soft one of *Flutes* and *Recorders* in the following lines?
>
> Fountains, and ye that warble as ye flow
> Melodious Murmur warbling, tune his Praise.
> [V, 195-6][223]

Benson might also be an example of making Milton the model of all poetic excellencies: he writes,

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[220] Ibid., iv.430.

[221] H.L. McGuffie, *Samuel Johnson in the British Press* (New York: Garland, 1976), 234-41.

[222] William Benson, *Letters Concerning Poetical Translations* (London, 1839), 42. I was led to this and to the following examples of Milton criticism by Shawcross, ed., *Critical Heritage*.

[223] Carey and Fowler's edition has a few variations: 'Fountains, and ye, that warble, as ye flow, / Melodious murmurs, warbling tune his praise.'

for instance, that 'I may venture to affirm that the Verse is varied at least with as much Skill in the *Paradise Lost*, as even in the *Georgick* itself' – that is, Virgil's *Georgics*.[224] The variation of Milton's verse was also a theme of James Harris's. The start of *Paradise Lost*, for Harris, exemplified 'that artful variation of the *Caesura* or *Pause*, so essential to the Harmony of every good Poem.'[225] *Rambler* 90, in a lengthy discussion, praised Milton's use of pauses, suggesting that 'he has performed all that our language will admit' (iv.115). But it added that some of Milton's pauses were misplaced – on the third or seventh syllable, rather than the fourth or sixth – which 'leaves the ear unsatisfied' (iv.113). The detail and close analysis of the *Rambler*s on Milton are untypical, suggesting perhaps that Johnson had a point to prove: the point being that, under close scrutiny, Milton turned out to have faults, and his being Milton did not oblige the critic to call them virtues.

John Mason's *An Essay on the Power of Numbers* (1749) conceded that 'this great Master of Poetick Numbers was not without his Faults' – he was sometimes too 'negligent'.[226] This is a small criticism, though, in the midst of much praise: Mason goes painstakingly through the first 16 lines of *Paradise Lost*, and praises 'this just and judicious Mixture of the short Numbers with the long, and the quick with the slow'.[227] Like Homer, Milton sometimes slipped up because his 'Mind was so warmed and possessed with the Grandeur of his Subject'.[228] Mason's *An Essay on the Power and Harmony of Prosaic Numbers* (1749) remarked that 'If the antient Poetry was too lax in its Numbers, the modern is certainly too strict.'[229] But a 'just Medium between these two Extreams' has been found – by Milton, in the unrhymed pentameter. '[T]he Numbers are neither too free nor too confined'.

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[224] Ibid., 40.

[225] James Harris, 'A Discourse on Music, Painting, and Poetry', in *Three Treatises* (London, 1744), 92-3.

[226] John Mason, *An Essay on the Power of Numbers* (1749; Menston: Scolar Press, 1967), 57.

[227] Ibid., 57.

[228] Ibid., 55.

[229] John Mason, *An Essay on the Power and Harmony of Prosaic Numbers* (1749; Menston: Scolar Press, 1967), 47

Another critic whom Johnson might have had in mind was Francis Peck, who in *New Memoirs of the Life and Poetical Works of Mr. John Milton* (1740) attempted to account for the 'singularity' of Milton's style by listing 'what particulars that singularity consists of'.[230] These particulars are 49 in number ('VI. He very often *drops* a word… XIII. He often makes the substantive a *verb*…XLVII. His *mixtures* of *opposite passions* are admirable'), all with approval.[231] This comes close to making Milton the sole standard of poetic excellence.

Peck ends by quoting Adam's words of praise to Raphael, and applying them to Milton himself.[232] Describing Milton as an angel is already on the brink of idolatry, but Sneyd Davis's 'Rhapsody to Milton' goes even further (1740):

> Soul of the Muses! Thou supreme of Verse!
> Unskill'd and Novice in the sacred Art
> May I unblam'd approach thee? May I crave
> Thy Blessing, Sire harmonious! amply pleas'd
> Shou'd'st thou vouchsafe to own me for thy Son…[233]

This is clearly echoing the invocation which begins Book III of *Paradise Lost*:

> Hail [,] holy light, offspring of heaven first-born,
> Or of the eternal co-eternal beam
> May I express thee unblamed?[234]

Given that the invocation is to Christ, the second person of the Trinity, and that what follows is a meditation on the relation of Father to Son, Davis is using some daring language. And he treats Milton with solemn reverence. One can only admire Milton, says Davis, not imitate him:

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[230] Francis Peck, *New Memoirs of the Life and Poetical Works of Mr. John Milton* (London, 1740), 106.
[231] Ibid., 109, 113, 129.
[232] Ibid., 132.
[233] Sneyd Davis, 'Rhapsody to Milton' (1740), in John Whaley, ed., *A Collection Of Original Poems and Translations* (London, 1745), 182-6: 182; quoted in Shawcross, ed., *Milton: The Critical Heritage*, 118.
[234] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, iii.1-3

> Or if we follow thy bright Track, advance
> With Reverence, and shew that not Desire
> To Rival, but Resemble, is our Aim:
> Resemble thee, tho' in inferior Strain.

For someone as sensitive to 'superstitious veneration' as was Johnson, this would sound an unpleasant note. And Davis was not alone in exalting Milton to these heights. This kind of language even steals into the writing of Edward Manwaring, who takes a sceptical view of Milton's versification, then adds, 'But whenever this most incomparable Poet has his Imagination inflamed by a divine Enthusiasm, he is all harmony'.[235]

'Enthusiasm' was, in the *Dictionary*, first of all 'A vain belief of private revelation; a vain confidence of divine favour or communication'. The *Dictionary* gives one different, but equally hostile, sense ('Heat of imagination; violence of passion; confidence of opinion') and one neutral one ('Elevation of fancy; exaltation of ideas'), but Johnson generally uses the word with disapproval. When he allows that the sound can prove an echo to the sense in Milton, he phrases it like this: 'We may, however, without giving way to enthusiasm, admit that some beauties of this kind may be produced' (iv.140) Manwaring doesn't deify Milton, but he does bring him rather close to the divine.

So does William Hayley in two striking tributes to Milton. 'An Essay on Epic Poetry', first published in 1782, imagines:

> Apart, and on a sacred hill retir'd,
> Beyond all mortal inspiration fir'd,
> The mighty MILTON sits – an host around
> Of list'ning Angels guard the holy ground;
> Amaz'd they see a human form aspire
> To grasp with daring hand a Seraph's lyre…
> And celebrate, with sanctity divine,

[235] Edward Manwaring, *Of Harmony and Numbers, in Latin and English Prose, and in English Poetry* (London, 1744), 50.

> The starry field from warring Angels won…
> Round the blest Bard his raptur'd audience throng,
> And feel their souls imparadis'd in song.[236]
> (411-32)

The angels look up to Milton, and in his 'song' they feel themselves 'imparadis'd'. This hardly requires comment, but perhaps Hayley himself – in his biography of Milton – gives the most apposite gloss. To form a 'real taste for Milton', Hayley writes,

> a reader must possess, what was superlatively possessed by the poet, a mixture of two different species of enthusiasm, the poetical and the religious. To relish Homer, it is sufficient to have a passion for excellent verse; but the reader of Milton, who is only a lover of the Muses, loses half, and certainly the best half, of that transcendent delight which the poems of this divine enthusiast are capable of imparting. A devotional taste is as requisite for the full enjoyment of Milton as a taste for poetry.[237]

Critics such as Dryden didn't understand Milton's genius because they lacked 'Milton's religious enthusiasm'. If a reader shares it, 'his heart appears to be purified, in proportion to the pleasure he derives from the poet, and his mind to become angelic'. The reader can almost pass into heaven, with Milton's help.

Where Johnson strictly divides literature from religion, Hayley absorbs them into each other; and Milton, because he writes of God and angels, is a particularly suitable subject. The personal animus in Johnson's 'Life of Milton' is well-known; but it is not just Milton against whom the animus is directed but Milton's admirers. In Joseph Anthony Wittreich's words, 'The unprecedented and unrestrained admiration of Milton by Dr. Johnson's contemporaries doubtless intensified his strictures on the man and his poetry.'[238] Hayley's own response to those strictures rather confirms the point: he wrote to Anna Seward that 'When I see him [Johnson] vilifying an exalted and immortal poet, I consider him as the Satan of Milton cursing the Sun for shining in

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[236] William Hayley, 'An Essay on Epic Poetry: Epistle The Third', in *Poems and Plays*, 6 vols. (London, 1785), iii.73

[237] William Hayley, *The Life of John Milton, in Three Parts* (2nd edition: London, 1796), 278.

[238] 'Introduction', Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr., ed, *The Romantics on Milton: Formal Essays and Critical Asides*, (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1970), 10.

that sphere from which he is for ever excluded.'[239] Again, this is not quite identifying Milton with God, but it is not quite excluding the possibility, either. The word 'exalted', which Johnson generally uses as a warning against pride, is for Hayley a term of approval; just as Edward Manwaring used 'enthusiasm' to describe the right approach to Milton.

Chiding Milton's advocates

The 'Life of Milton' continues the effort which Johnson had begun when he (rashly) supported Lauder, and had extended – rather more cautiously – in those six *Rambler* essays: a project to rebalance the account, to bring Milton back into common humanity. It is the same principle which drives the 'Life of Swift', but with a difference. The 'Life of Swift' aims at Swift himself, whereas the 'Life of Milton' satirises the poet's biographers along with the poet. As Dustin Griffin observes, 'The target of Johnson's critical attack then is often not so much Milton…but adulatory critics and readers in the middle and latter part of the eighteenth century for whom "the divine Milton" could do no wrong.'[240] If Johnson bridled at Swift's 'singularity', its effects were at least mainly confined to Swift; but Milton's singularity had been raised by his admirers into angelic or godlike brilliance.

Roger Lonsdale remarks of the Lauder episode that, though 'there is no reason to doubt' Johnson's ignorance of Lauder's mischievous methods, Johnson probably found the whole idea 'appealing' because it meant 'deflating M[ilton]'s more effusive admirers, if not M[ilton] himself' (*Lives*, i.367). That could apply to all of Johnson's deflations of Milton: his doubts about the man and the poetry were genuine, but he had an eye on the Miltonists, too. Their biographies had

[239] Letter of 5 August 1782, quoted in *Lives*, i.369.

[240] Griffin, *Regaining Paradise*, 207. A similar point is made by Vereen M. Bell, 'Johnson's Milton Criticism in Context', *Studies in English Literature*, 8: 3 (1968), 127-32.

become, in Lonsdale's words, 'increasingly reverent' (*Lives*, i.365). According to Edmond Malone, Johnson had remarked that 'we have had too many honey-suckle lives of Milton, and that his should be in another strain'.[241]

Johnson slightly concealed or toned down his irritation at the 'honey-suckle' venerators of Milton. We know this from a revealing manuscript emendation. Discussing evidence that Milton was rusticated from Cambridge, Johnson originally wrote,

> I cannot find any meaning but this, which even his most bigoted advocates can give to the term, *vetiti laris*, "a habitation from which he is excluded".
> (*Lives*, i.244)

For the published version, Johnson replaced 'his most bigoted advocates' with 'kindness and reverence'. Lonsdale observes that Johnson had used the term before: *Rambler* 139 refers to the 'bigotry' of those who acclaim *Samson Agonistes* (*Works*, iv.376), *Rambler* 140 (published four days later) translates Horace's words to refer to a 'doating bigot' who is 'blind' to Milton's 'faults' (iv.376).[242] Bigotry implies blindness: a 'bigot', in the *Dictionary*, is 'a blind zealot'; 'bigoted' means 'Blindly prepossessed…irrationally zealous', and 'bigotry' is 'blind zeal'. Milton's physical blindness had been passed to his idolaters as a critical blindness.

Presumably, Johnson felt that in a full biography the accusation of 'bigotry' was out-of-place and sounded splenetic; or perhaps he was just less indignant than he had been 30 years earlier. In any case, it confirms that his purpose had much to do with Milton's advocates. The deleted phrase is echoed later in the 'Life', when Johnson says that Milton's 'warmest advocates must allow, that he never spared any asperity of reproach or brutality of insolence' (*Lives*, i.268). 'Warmest advocates' is kinder than 'most bigoted advocates', but it is still a little jab at those who – Johnson believes – overrate Milton.

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[241] Quoted in Malone to Lord Charlemont, 5 April 1779, in *Miscellanies*, i.483.

[242] Lonsdale's note is at *Lives*, i.375.

The 'Life' does not always single out the 'warmest advocates'. They are, nevertheless, kept constantly in mind. After the Restoration, Milton was left to his studies 'without persecution, molestation, or insult. Such is the reverence paid to great abilities, however misused' (i.269). It is typical of Johnson to pay the compliment ('great abilities') in the same breath in which he makes the criticism ('however misused'). The 'Such is' formula is used soon afterwards with the same effect, in Johnson's remarks on *Lycidas*:

> Such is the power of reputation justly acquired, that its blaze drives away the eye from nice examination. Surely no man could have fancied that he read *Lycidas* with pleasure, had he not known its author.
> (i.279)

Milton's admirers, this seems to say, are not Milton's fault: he happened to possess a great mind, and greatness makes readers abandon their usual critical standards. Johnson channels his impatience with Milton's advocates into these subtle, easily-missed comments. It makes the 'Life of Milton' one of the best examples of what Robert Folfenflik calls 'the pervasive irony to which he [Johnson] exposes his subjects' words and deeds'.[243] The moment when Milton 'hastens home because his countrymen are contending for their liberty, and, when he reaches the scene of action, vapours away his patriotism in a private boarding-school' is, Johnson says, irresistibly funny: 'Let not our veneration for Milton forbid us to look with some degree of merriment on great promises and small performance' (*Lives*, i.248). The true Miltonist, while venerating him, can allow that Milton is sometimes undignified.

The advocates have failed this test: 'This is the period of his life from which all his biographers seem inclined to shrink. They are unwilling that Milton should be degraded to a school-master' (*Lives*, i.248) , and so invent a noble story about his motives. But, says Johnson, there is no need to protect Milton like this. The job was 'honest and useful', and taking it was 'an

[243] Robert Folkenflik, *Samuel Johnson, Biographer* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 217.

act which no wise man will consider in itself disgraceful'. It merely requires us to lay aside our prejudices about what greatness means.

The point arises when Philips tries to argue that Milton only tutored the children of relatives and distinguished friends, rather than being an all-purpose schoolmaster. Johnson asks us to forget exalted, 'warm' views of authorial dignity: 'Milton was not a man who could become mean by a mean employment. This, however, his warmest friends seem not to have found; they therefore shift and palliate. He did not sell literature to all comers at an open shop; he was a chamber-milliner, and measured his commodities only to his friends' (i.253). Johnson mocks Philips for seeing this as a 'state of degradation…and, to raise his character again, has a mind to invest him with military splendour': Philips chases a rumour that Milton might have had a military post.

Philips is one of the few Miltonists to be named and criticised in the 'Life'. Another is Jonathan Richardson, who writes too excitedly for Johnson's liking. When he discusses Milton's sudden bursts of composition, Richardson 'discovers always a wish to find Milton discriminated from other men' (i.267). Johnson immediately attacks that singularity, qualifying Milton's working habits to reduce them to an ordinary level:

> [Y]et something of this inequality happens to every man in every mode of exertion, manual or mental. The mechanic cannot handle his hammer and his file at all times with equal dexterity; there are hours, he knows not why, when *his hand is out*.
> (i.268)

A mechanic or a great poet is still, before everything else, a human being. Cowper wrote angrily in the margin when he got to this point: 'Let us by all means make an ordinary man of him if we can.'[244] That was precisely Johnson's intention. 'Here are three insolent pages', Cowper scribbled next to Johnson's account of Milton's composition, 'considering who is the subject.' Johnson

[244] See J. Copley, 'Cowper on Johnson's *Life of Milton*', *Notes and Queries*, 24 (1977): 311-317, 314.

treated Milton with less respect than another writer; Cowper's instinct was the opposite. As Cowper was offended on Milton's behalf, so some Romantic critics were offended by Johnson's insolence towards Shakespeare.

Johnson implies that Milton's behaviour had encouraged his admirers to single him out. When in Florence, the applause which Milton's poems earned 'appears to have exalted him in his own opinion' (i.246). 'Exalted', here as elsewhere, signifies that dangerous kind of authorial pride which Johnson likes to chip away at. And Johnson repeats the accusation at other points, as when he describes Milton's dispute with his wife, who refused to return to him: 'In a man whose opinion of his own merit was like Milton's, less provocation than this might have raised violent resentment' (i.251). When Milton denounces the wrong person, then discovers his mistake and keeps it quiet, 'Milton's pride operated against his malignity' (i.256). By such glancing references, Johnson builds up a picture of Milton as the self-exalted author, who even in small things has to preserve his high opinion of himself.

The irony has a darker tone when Johnson writes of Milton's turning against the Presbyterians: 'He that changes his party by his humour, is not more virtuous than he that changes it by his interest; he loves himself rather than truth' (i.252). That reminds us of what were, for Johnson, the serious consequences of pride: it leads to conflict and to an irrational hatred whose results could be far-reaching. Hence Johnson's strong words about Milton's politics. It is not just that Milton is a republican; but his republicanism 'was, I am afraid, founded in an envious hatred of greatness, and a sullen desire of independence; in petulance impatient of controul, and pride desirous of superiority… It is to be suspected, that his predominant desire was to destroy rather than establish' (i.276).

Sermon 7 warned that 'The pride of singularity' leads to 'a love of novelty' which 'becomes at length general, and overspreads a people' (*Works*, xiv.76). Milton the pamphleteer is, for Johnson, the perfect example of individual pride becoming influential; the reception of *Defensio pro Populo Anglicano* is taken by Johnson – not entirely charitably – as evidence of how the

politics of envy succeeds: 'he who told every man that he was equal to his King, could hardly want an audience' (*Lives*, i.255). Pride and singularity are infectious.

The 'Life of Milton' takes care to establish that Milton does deserve his reputation. More than that, some episodes in Milton's life exemplified what an author should be. Not only is he 'entitle[d]...to our veneration', he was able to descend from his elevation to do something workmanlike, simple and useful – the *Accedence Commenc't Grammar* (1669):

> a little book which has nothing remarkable, but that its author, who had been lately defending the supreme powers of his country, and was then writing *Paradise Lost*, could descend from his elevation to rescue children from the perplexity of grammatical confusion, and the trouble of lessons unnecessarily repeated.
> (i.264)

Milton did not think the 'perplexity' and 'trouble' of children was beneath him, and this humility complements his bigger and better-known achievements:

> To that multiplicity of attainments, and extent of comprehension that entitle this great author to our veneration, may be added a kind of humble dignity, which did not disdain the meanest services to literature. The epic poet, the controvertist, the politician, having already descended to accommodate children with a book of rudiments, now, in the last years of his life, composed a book of Logick, for the initiation of students in philosophy.
> (i.272)

Johnson will even excuse, at times, the enthusiasm of the Miltonists. If the biographers always name the places where Milton stayed, with an unusual exactness – well, that is their unconscious tribute to this 'great man' (i.262). The places in question were 'honoured by his presence'. As for *Comus*, though Johnson goes on to criticise its structural and dramatic qualities, he allows that 'As a series of lines...it may be considered as worthy of all the admiration with which the votaries have received it' (i.281). Johnson can see why the 'votaries' are so excited by Milton; but the word-choice is hardly neutral. Votaries are always likely to take things too far. When Milton publishes

his early academic exercises, Johnson writes that 'nothing but veneration for his name could now procure a reader' (i.273). These were not literary masterpieces, and only 'veneration' gave them an audience. That is the problem with veneration, for Johnson: it skews true judgment. While conceding Milton's greatness, Johnson emphasises his limitations.

> Those who admire the beauties of this great poet, sometimes force their own judgement into false approbation of his little pieces, and prevail upon themselves to think that admirable which is only singular.
> (i.273)

The 'singular' can easily masquerade as the 'admirable' – and because the mind is easily led into 'false approbation', Johnson corrects the balance.

Stephen Fix argues that the 'Life of Milton' is really an attempt to rescue Milton from the Miltonists: Johnson wanted 'to make Milton's reputation more durable and persuasive by challenging the "blind confidence" and uncritical enthusiasm' which surrounded the poet.[245] This is convincing, but it neglects the vast importance to Johnson of challenging pride and singularity. In a letter to Hester Piozzi's daughter Queeney, written four months before his death, Johnson suggested 'two Maxims' other than which 'I have nothing to impress' (12 August 1784, *Letters*, iv.367). Critics have not given this letter the weight it deserves: it is Johnson's own summation, in a few sentences, of what he thought mattered most. It may reflect Johnson's anger and disappointment at Hester Piozzi's marriage a few weeks before, but it repeats what he had been saying for decades. The first maxim one might expect: it is 'to please God' above everything else, and to 'Think frequently' on eternity. The second maxim is this:

> In matters of human judgement, and prudential consideration, consider the publick voice of general opinion as always worthy of great attention; remember that such practices can very seldom be right, which all the world concluded to be wrong.

[245] Stephen Fix, 'The Contexts and Motives of Johnson's *Life of Milton*', in David Wheeler, ed., *Domestick Privacies: Samuel Johnson and the Art of Biography* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1987), 107-132: 132.

> Obey God. Reverence Fame.
> Thus you will go safely through this life, and pass happily to the next.

There cannot be many major thinkers who have thought it a vital principle that 'general opinion' should be trusted; but Johnson does insist repeatedly that people who deviate from 'the common road' should be 'hooted back' to it. Along with their other functions, the 'Lives' of Milton and Swift are polemics against singularity, and that theme is central to all Johnson's thinking about authorship. Whether Milton and Swift really were as Johnson saw them is another matter; but he portrayed them as images of what he most feared in authors – perhaps because he had seen something of their pride and singularity in himself.

5 The Undignified Author

Being a writer – Johnson liked to imply in iconoclastic mode – is nothing special. Milton's creative off-days were just like those of a mechanic with a hammer; Swift's 'singularity' was pitiable rather than awe-inspiring because he wouldn't accept that he was part of humanity. Johnson may seem, here, to be taking a particular view of the author: as an undistinguished toiler rather than an inspired genius. This division, however, is better applied to nineteenth-century debates over authorship. As Richard Salmon has recently argued, the two stereotypes coexisted during the Victorian era, competing within a single literary culture and within individual minds.[246] There were some writers who downgraded the status of the author: Thackeray, for instance, resisted the sentimentalization of writing by referring to it as another form of 'labour' – a deliberate provocation which some contemporaries found unacceptable.[247]

In these debates, Salmon writes, 'the eighteenth-century man of letters is a polysemic figure, called to stand simultaneously for the degradation of authorial labour and its heroic consecration'.[248] Victorians succeeded in looking up at authors while looking down on them – Carlyle's 'heroic Soul…with his copy-rights and copy-wrongs, in his squalid garret, in his rusty coat, modelled on Samuel Johnson, being a particularly influential case in point'. Johnson became a symbol of the conflict. The nineteenth-century debates over authorship were partly his creation, and they often referred back to him. But in some ways Johnson evaded both categories – the genius and the hack – and Victorians who saw him in those terms missed something.

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[246] Richard Salmon, *The Formation of the Victorian Literary Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[247] Clare Pettitt, *Patent Inventions: Intellectual Property and the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 160.

[248] Salmon, *Literary Profession*, 15.

The hack and the ideal

Carlyle put the contrast in a single image when he wrote of the eighteenth-century author as a 'Great Soul living apart in that anomalous manner: endeavouring to speak forth the inspiration that was in him by Printed Books, and find place and subsistence by what the world would please to give him for doing that' (*On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, 1841).[249] The literary hero could be down and out in London. Johnson would have frowned at the phrase 'living apart' and at Carlyle's casual idolatry, for instance the claim that 'Authors unlike heroes do not need to be illuminated by others; they are of themselves luminous'.[250] Carlyle's authors were luminously inspired by virtue of their mystical perceptiveness. Teufeldröckh in *Sartor Resartus* (1833-4) can 'look through the Shows of things into Things themselves';[251] in *On Heroes*, Carlyle writes: 'the Art of Writing is the most miraculous of all things man has devised'.[252] Because of the matchless insight granted to the true writer, Carlyle feared the degrading of authorship to the level of manufacture.[253]

Lawrence Lipking has placed Johnson in the middle of the same tension. Johnson lived when ideas of authorship were being forced into new shapes. Even if, Lipking writes, it is an exaggeration to say that 'the modern author was born exactly when Johnson was…it is certainly true that contracts between writers, patrons, and the public were renegotiated in his time and with his help'.[254] In particular, Johnson's work with booksellers and journalists – and, through them, his relationship to the reading public – means that 'No previous author, or at any rate no

[249] Carlyle, *On Heroes*, 133.

[250] Thomas Carlyle, *Lectures on The History of Literature* (1838) [transcription], ed. J, Reay Greene (London: Ellis and Elvey, 1892), 2; quoted in Salmon, *Literary Profession*, 46.

[251] Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufeldröckh in Three Books*, ed. Mark Engel and Rodger L. Tarr (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 152; quoted in Salmon, *Literary Profession*, 52.

[252] Carlyle, *On Heroes*, 138; quoted in Salmon, *Literary Profession*, 56.

[253] Salmon, *Literary Profession*, 42.

[254] Lipking, *Life of an Author*, 9.

celebrated author, can be so firmly associated with hackwork'. Johnson styled himself in some ways as a Renaissance-style scholar and poet, but he was also immersed in 'the publishing schemes and ventures of the moment… The author that he creates in his mind is partly a hack yet also partly an eternal ideal'.[255]

Clare Pettitt uses similar terms, identifying the 'stereotypes' of 'the Romantic creator and the middle-class professional', and suggests that they jointly 'maintained currency throughout the nineteenth century'.[256] The financial metaphor has a point to it: in debates over copyright law, Dickens and the Guild of Literature and Art made the case for authors' rights by using both stereotypes. The Romantic ideal fused author and work, affirming that the creator had proprietary rights; the professional image suggested that writers, like scientists, should be financially rewarded.[257] In the end, Johnson affirmed neither the hack nor the eternal ideal, neither the Romantic creator nor the Victorian artisan. It is true that, according to Boswell, nobody had 'a higher notion of the dignity of literature than Johnson, or was more determined in maintaining the respect which he justly considered as due to it.' As evidence, Boswell tells the story of Johnson remaining at the head of a table of booksellers, despite the discomfort of the heat from the nearby fireplace (*Life*, iii.310-11). But Boswell provides enough evidence of Johnson's arguing for literature's indignity; at any rate, it is fairly unRomantic to assert that "No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money" (*Life*, iii.19).

Though he anticipated both sides of the genius-hack divide, Johnson did not see the matter in those terms, and suggested another way of looking at it. And perhaps he can be given some credit for articulating that view as early as he did. As Pettitt writes, the mid-nineteenth-century campaigners for an international copyright law manifested 'a profound uncertainty about the precise nature of the value of literature'.[258] As I hope to have shown already, Johnson was less

[255] Lipking, *Life of an Author*, 10.
[256] Pettitt, *Patent Inventions*, 12.
[257] Pettitt, *Patent Inventions*, 158-9.
[258] Pettitt, *Patent Inventions*, 158.

uncertain on that question. The role of an author, Johnson believed, is to help the reader towards the truth. Authors become absurd or unpleasant figures when they direct attention to themselves, rather than towards useful principles. The truths authors elucidate earn them their dignity – even if they are very minor truths.

This ethical standard shapes much of Johnson's criticism: it leads him to single out for special praise Milton's instructional work on logic (*Lives*, i.272), as well as Isaac Watts's educational book, *The Improvement of the Mind*. Johnson recommended Watts's book for anyone charged with 'instructing others' – it is 'in the highest degree useful and pleasing' (*Lives*, iv.109). As Johnson writes, 'A voluntary descent from the dignity of science is perhaps the hardest lesson that humility can teach' (*Lives*, iv.108) And according to Piozzi, 'no man was more struck than Mr. Johnson with voluntary descent from possible splendour to painful duty' (*Miscellanies*, i.157).

The useful, humble book, written to offer instruction, by an author known for other things: this might remind us of a writer known as a poet, satirist, and critic, who in 1746 agreed to take that most workmanlike and purely useful task, a *Dictionary of the English Language*. The *Rambler* essays on the place of the author were written in the middle of the *Dictionary* years: it was then that Johnson's picture of the author – to some extent an idealised self-portrait – emerged. Lexicography allowed little room for the arrogance or self-absorption which Johnson saw as the great temptations of authorship; it was a collaborative effort, the opposite of the solitary stewing to which Johnson thought authors were especially prone. Above all, lexicography had to privilege the reader's needs over the author's self-assertion. And so, when Johnson did add a dash of individuality to the *Dictionary*, it was to emphasise the undignified, plodding nature of his task:

> *Lexicographer*… A writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words.

For *dull*, sense 8 is 'Not exhilaterating [sic]; not delightful; as, *to make dictionaries is* dull *work*'.

Johnson emphasises the mundanity of his job, rather than its intellectual demands. As for *dull* in the sense of 'stupid', he chooses a quotation from Dryden which rebukes the intellectually gifted: 'Every man, even the *dullest*, is thinking more than the most eloquent can teach him how to utter.' Similarly, in the definition for *lexicon* ('A dictionary; a book teaching the signification of words'), his quotation is from Milton:

> Though a linguist should pride himself to have all the tongues that Babel cleft the world into, yet if he had not studied the solid things in them as well as the words and *lexicons*, yet he were nothing so much to be esteemed a learned man as any yeoman completely wise in his mother dialect only.

The opposition between learning and humility, between intellectual ambition and the integrity of the unlettered yeoman, has a Johnsonian flavour. Milton suggests – and this may have appealed to Johnson – that dictionaries keep the learned humble, by reminding them of what they do not know.

The definition of *author*, similarly, puts authors in their place. Sense 1 is 'The first beginner or mover of any thing; he to whom any thing owes its original'. Four of the quotations refer to the Christian God; one refers to Saturn, the other, from *Coriolanus*, runs '...as if a man was *author* of himself...', implying that he is not. Sense 2 – 'The efficient; he that effects or produces any thing' – is far broader than the literary. Sense 3 is literary, but in a technical sense: 'The first writer of any thing; distinct from the *translator* or *compiler*'. Only the final sense – 'A writer in general' – corresponds with the way Johnson most frequently uses the word. His single quotation is from *Henry V*: 'Yet their own *authors* faithfully affirm, / That the land Salike lies in Germany.' These authors are scholars and perhaps propagandists; it is hardly an exalted idea of the writer. Lipking suggests that these definitions enact 'a dramatic slippage' – from divinity to 'a mere producer',

from priority to generality.[259] That might ring truer if they obviously referred to literature at all. In fact, they nudge aside the sense of an author as a creator.

The definition of *writer* again suggests a distinct scepticism about the pretensions of writers. All four quotations contain some kind of reproach or warning:

> 1. One who practises the art of writing.
> 2. An authour.
> All three were ruled by justice and sentence, as delinquents; and all three famous *writers*. *Bacon.*
> Peacable times are best to live in, though not so proper to furnish materials for a *writer*. *Addison's Freeholder.*
> *Writers* are often more influenced by a desire of fame, than a regard to the publick good. *Addison's Freeholder.*
> Would a *writer* know how to behave himself with relation to posterity; let him consider in old books what he finds that he is glad to know, and what omissions he most laments. *Swift*.

Bacon and Addison both imply that 'the publick good' may be endangered by fame-seeking writers. Indeed, the first quotation from Addison suggests that the interests of society and of writers are fundamentally opposed. Swift's recommendation is perhaps the most neutral, but even here the writer is considered as having a duty to posterity – a duty, at the very least, not to leave future readers lamenting any omissions.

For *writing*, meanwhile, Johnson offers first 'A legal instrument', then 'A composure; a book'; then 'A written paper of any kind'. Again, the creative is subordinated to the technical. Johnson defines 'Literature' more narrowly than he might have, as 'Learning; skill in letters'. The entry brings us on a step, however, because of the illustration from Addison's *Freeholder*, number 377, which so closely mirrors Johnson's own beliefs:

> When men of learning are acted by a knowledge of the world, they give a reputation to *literature*, and convince the world of its usefulness.

[259] Lipking, *Life of an Author*, 5-6.

Literature may have dignity, but not on its own account. '[T]he world always has a right to be regarded', Johnson told John Taylor (*Letters*, i.233): he was talking about Taylor's separation from his wife, but it was a general principle of Johnson's. The world would be the judge of literature's usefulness and, therefore, its claim to reputation. I have already quoted Johnson saying he did not 'think an author just to himself who rests in any opinion but that of the publick' (*Letters*, i.149). The hack and the genius are both images which assume the author is defined by their own character; Johnson's authors are defined by their relationship to the reader.

Useful obscurity

When Johnson first stood outside the office of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, he 'beheld it with reverence' (*Life*, i.112); and that reverence had not expired, as Boswell notes, by the time Johnson wrote the 'Life of Cave' in 1754 (*EBW*, 409). But having spent a year toiling as a journalist, he was trying to get out, into schoolteaching, and was apparently prepared to go to Dublin if that was what it took to gain the required degree. Lord Gower, writing on Johnson's behalf, reported that the young hack writer would rather 'die upon the road, *than be starved to death in translating for the booksellers*; which has been his only subsistence for some time past' (*Life*, i.133).

Those different tones – serious respect and exhausted contempt – return in Johnson's later writings about the world for which the easiest shorthand is 'Grub Street'. He would later describe his life in the 1750s, in the midst of

> the schemes, and the hopes and the fears, of a crowd of inferior writers, "who," he said, in the words of Roger Ascham, "lived *men knew not how, and died obscure, men marked not when.*" He believed that he could give a better history of Grub-street than any man living.

> (Arthur Murphy, 'An Essay on the *Life and Genius* of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.' *Miscellanies*, i.414)

Those obscure lives and deaths cannot help bringing to mind Robert Levet:

> Yet still he fills affection's eye,
> Obscurely wise, and coarsely kind;
> Nor, letter'd arrogance, deny
> Thy praise to merit unrefin'd.
> ('Verses On the Death of Dr Robert Levet', 9-12)

Obscurity becomes a word of praise when it is joined to kindness; being obscure – whether in one's manner of speech or one's unknown life – puts 'letter'd arrogance' to shame. When Johnson said he could write the history of Grub Street's unknown scribblers, he was asserting his solidarity with these invisible people. Johnson felt there could be a wisdom in avoiding attention: "There is in human nature….a general inclination to make people stare; and every wise man has himself to cure of it, and does cure himself" (*Life*, ii.74-5). The unseen 'inferior writers' teach a kind of lesson to those who wish to be stared at. Had Johnson written that history, in other words, it would have been in the same genre as 'Levet': a memorial for the unseen.

Unseen but useful: *Rambler* 145, Johnson's tribute to the 'authors of London', allows that, like Levet, they are 'obscure and…indigent' (v.10); but just as importantly, and again like Levet, they are useful. Their unseen usefulness becomes a rebuke – like that apostrophe to 'letter'd arrogance' – aimed at the grander kind of writer. Because 'their usefulness is less obvious to vulgar apprehensions', these 'thousands' of authors 'live unrewarded and die unpitied, and…have been long exposed to insult without a defender, and to censure without an apologist.' Johnson appoints himself as the defender and apologist. The terms of the defence themselves reveal a telling ambivalence. Of news writers he says:

> That such authors are not to be rewarded with praise is evident, since nothing can be

> admired when it ceases to exist; but surely though they cannot aspire to honour, they may be exempted from ignominy, and adopted into that order of men which deserves our kindness though not our reverence. These papers of the day, the Ephemerae of learning, have uses more adequate to the purposes of common life than more pompous and durable volumes. If it is necessary for every man to be more acquainted with his contemporaries than with past generations, and to rather know the events which may immediately affect his fortune or quiet, than the revolutions of antient kingdoms, in which he has neither possessions nor expectations; if it be pleasing to hear of the preferment and dismission of statesmen, the birth of heirs, and the marriage of beauties, the humble author of journals and gazettes must be considered as a liberal dispenser of beneficial knowledge.
> (v.11)

Mr Rambler strictly defines the limits of his approval – no question of 'praise', 'honour', or 'reverence' – but what follows seems to break through those limits. From that guarded opening, Johnson's tone grows steadily more impressed: after all, this is the 'fortune' and 'quiet' of human beings we are talking about, as well as their 'pleasure'; what is more, they are hearing of great things like the affairs of state and the movements of international diplomacy. No, these news writers are liberal dispensers of knowledge – their work is a labour of intellectual generosity.

The paragraph unfolds into something unexpectedly eulogistic, and it changes with the phrase 'the purposes of common life'. When considered on a literary level, or in terms of their appeal to posterity, these writers receive the faintest praise; but Johnson admires them because they have a clearly-defined social role which gives their writing its dignity. The phrase about the 'purposes of common life' even suggests, by an echo of the previous month's *Rambler* 137, that news writers represent a kind of authorial ideal:

> "Books," says Bacon, "can never teach the use of books." The student must learn by commerce with mankind to reduce his speculations to practice, and accommodate his knowledge to the purposes of life.
> (iv.363)

Authors' efforts should aspire to the usefulness which news writers have already achieved.

The curious expression 'the humble author of journals and gazettes' reveals that these are hidden authors: since journals and gazettes are collaborative, 'the humble author' is a composite figure, in which all these unseen individuals participate. And yet, without ever being heard of, they dispense knowledge to those hungry for it – something which cannot necessarily be said of the isolated scholar or the self-exalted author, who in their pursuit of honours have forgotten the rest of mankind. Sermon 8 shook its head at the scholar 'wasting his life upon questions, of which very few desire the solution' (xiv.95): that accusation, at least, could not be thrown at news writers.

Johnson's prose plays off the wisdom of mankind against the folly of the supposedly wise. For instance, he defends playing sport by saying: 'It is too frequently the pride of students to despise those amusements and recreations which give to the rest of mankind strength of limbs and cheerfulness of heart' (*Rambler* 85, iv.84). Students are divided from the rest of mankind by their attitude to sport: and by dividing themselves, they choose something self-destructive (pride) when they could be stronger and more cheerful. The *Rambler* contains a number of fables on this point, like the story of Liberalis in *Rambler* 163: 'I was received with civilities, which my academick rudeness made me unable to repay' (v.103). These scholarly types become, in Johnson's hands, objects of sympathy rather than scorn; they have underestimated the importance of common life, and so find themselves lame in ordinary situations.

Reading the news is a small thing, perhaps; good manners are a small thing. But as Johnson often insisted, such minor concerns, added together, make the difference between happiness and unhappiness. "It is by studying little things that we attain the great art of having as little misery and as much happiness as possible" (*Life*, i.433). What matters is not whether something is done at all, but whether it is done for the right reasons:

> Man is seldom willing…to believe that he does little only because every individual is a very little being…a being who with respect to the multitudes about him is himself little more than nothing. Every man is obliged by the supreme master of the universe to improve all

> the opportunities of good which are afforded him, and to keep in continual activity such abilities as are bestowed upon him. But he has no reason to repine though his abilities are small and his opportunities few. He that has improved the virtue or advanced the happiness of one fellow-creature, he that has ascertained a single moral proposition, or added one useful experiment to natural knowledge, may be contented with his own performance, and, with respect to mortals like himself, may demand, like Augustus, to be dismissed at his departure with applause.
> (*Idler* 89, ii.274)

'The common reader' is, like 'the humble author', one of those figures so small that they become anonymous: to have 'advanced the happiness of one fellow-creature' is enough, even though they are merely a fellow-creature, too insignificant to have a name.

That connection of anonymity with wisdom and usefulness bears upon Johnson's conviction that, in everyday life, the standard, unremarkable practice is likely to be the correct one, because it has proved its usefulness. When, in the Hebrides, Johnson tried and failed to work out why the castles tended to be built next to the sea, he eventually concluded that there must be a justification: 'for uniformity of practice seldom continues long without good reason' (*Journey*, 128). The exception, not the rule, requires justification. So it is with literature – when Johnson 'rejoice[d] to concur with the common reader' over Gray's *Elegy*, he was only applying to literature what he held true in general (*Lives,* iv.184). 'I have found reason', says *Rambler* 25, implying a weight of experience, 'to pay great regard to the voice of the people, in cases where knowledge has been forced upon them by experience, without long deductions or deep researches' (iii.136). 'Experience', like 'the purposes of common life', cannot be ignored. And both belong more abundantly to 'mankind' than to even the cleverest individual.

It has often been remarked that, as A.S. Collins put it in 1923, 'Johnson was born into one world and died in another' – he saw the change from a literary world dependent on patronage, to one responsive to a large and growing reading public.[260] The 1709 Copyright Act is often seen as a turning-point; Kevin Hart writes that 'the law concerning literary property reset the very idea of

[260] Collins, *Authorship*, 213.

authorship'; the *Lives of the Poets* and the *Dictionary*, he points out, were proposed and funded by London booksellers.[261] John Cannon warns us against taking Johnson's letter to Chesterfield as a decisive moment – for one thing, it was only made public in 1790. Even so, it epitomised the change whereby 'The system of artistic patronage broke down almost completely during Johnson's lifetime, particularly in literature'.[262] Dustin Griffin has complicated this picture: for one thing, patronage thrived in different forms well into the second half of the eighteenth century.[263] However, Johnson himself felt that a major change had taken place. He told Boswell, while visiting St. Andrews, that 'We have done with patronage' (*Life*, v.59).

Whether this counted as liberty or enslavement was a vexed question, and Boswell said he regretted the change. Johnson argued back, with a strong statement of the case for the common reader: 'With patronage, what flattery! What falsehood! While a man is in equilibrio, he throws truth among the multitude, and lets them take it as they please.' A new acquaintance, Dr Watson, made the obvious response that it might now be necessary to flatter and lie to the multitude. Johnson waved that away: 'No, sir. The world always lets a man tell what he thinks, his own way.' Ten years later, Johnson reiterated his confidence in the reading public: 'I never knew a man of merit neglected: it was generally by his own fault that he failed of success' (*Life*, iv.172). Johnson placed a high degree of trust in the public, and so he observed with some pleasure the 'growth in the London book trades' which, as Paula McDowell writes, 'was giving rise to a recognizably modern literary marketplace' and to the subculture of Grub Street.[264]

Pat Rogers has shown that the multitudinous authors of London presented an easy target: 'As used by the Augustan satirists, Grub Street stood as a concrete image of folly and depravity'.[265] Later, 'The Grub Street Myth' came to signify 'fecklessness, eccentricity and poverty'; but for the

[261] Hart, *Culture of Property*, 48.
[262] John Cannon, *Samuel Johnson and the Politics of Hanoverian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 178-9.
[263] Griffin, *Authorship*, 171-2; and also Griffin, *Literary Patronage*.
[264] Paula McDowell, *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace 1678-1730* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 5.
[265] Pat Rogers, *Grub Street: Studies in a Subculture* (London: Methuen, 1972), 350.

first satirists these attributes were far less significant than the scribblers' 'literary incompetence'.[266] Johnson's *Life of Savage*, according to Rogers, was a major reason for the romanticising of Grub Street: in that work, 'Savage is presented pretty much as the first Outsider'.[267] The writer is an undeserving victim of calamity, who dies a martyr to social convention. As Rogers allows, it was not Johnson's fault that the myth took off from the *Life of Savage*.[268] And Johnson headed off an overly sympathetic reading of Savage by inserting, in a later draft, the final paragraph with its warning against 'Negligence and irregularity' (*Lives*, ii.188). That addition shows Johnson's early wariness about the idolatry of authorship – and his awareness of its power. Savage is neither excused outright for being an author, nor censured outright for being irresponsible. Johnson uses a different standard. As I argued in Chapter 1, the *Life of Savage* asks repeatedly how Savage stands in relation to 'mankind', the question which either justifies or condemns the author – and in Savage's case does both.

So it was with the growing trade of journalism. Edward A. Bloom goes too far, I think, in attributing to Johnson a belief 'that newspapers and magazines were literary corruptions and that journalism was an undignified trade'.[269] True, *Idler* 7 accuses cheap journalism of 'negligence and depravation', identifies many of its authors as 'narrow and mercenary minds, not qualified for the task of delighting or instructing', and dismisses much public debate as 'superficial' and ill-informed (ii.23). Yet, with a characteristically direct antithesis, the same essay argues that 'the writers of news' are 'necessary' (ii.22); more than that, by keeping the public informed, they extend national culture beyond that of other European nations: 'the knowledge of the common people of England is greater than that of any other vulgar' (ii.23). Johnson's tone, far from being contemptuous, is gentle: 'It is discovered by Reaumur, that spiders might make silk, if they could be persuaded to live in peace together. The writers of news, if they could be confederated, might

[266] Rogers, *Grub Street*, 351.
[267] Rogers, *Grub Street*, 368.
[268] Rogers, *Grub Street*, 363.
[269] Edward A. Bloom, *Samuel Johnson in Grub Street* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1957), 117.

give more pleasure to the publick' (ii.24). By implication, the writers already give pleasure, and could give more. Johnson chooses the image with care: for spiders are hardly dignified, and yet, by applying themselves peaceably to their appointed task, they can produce something as useful and pleasing as silk.

Crucially, Johnson frames the whole question in terms of what authors, as a matter of duty, owe to readers. Johnson felt ambivalent about what he called the 'Age of Authors' (ii.457); in *Adventurer* 115, where he coined that phrase, he condemns the majority of books and pamphlets for falling below his high standards. To write such a book, one needs either the 'proper qualifications of an author' – expertise and literary skill – or some important piece of information to impart (ii.460). The reality is that many books just give a helping hand to 'the depravation of taste and the corruption of language' – a damning phrase which concludes the essay (ii.461). Yet Johnson's condemnation bears little resemblance to that of a Pope or Swift. He is not mocking the authors as, in themselves, pathetic and talentless; rather, he worries that they are failing the reading public.

The undignified author

For all his affirmation of the dignity of literature, Johnson believed that its dignity was dependent on authors making themselves useful to readers. And he recognises this priority by little moments of self-abnegation. Take this aside from the 'Life of Milton': 'I should not have expected that Cowley, whose ideas of excellence were so different from his own, would have had much of his approbation' (*Lives*, i.305). There are other ways of putting that thought on paper: Johnson might have made it less personal ('It is curious, that…'), or have omitted that he was at all surprised. But he brings himself into the centre simply to remind the reader that he is not omniscient.

The 'Preface' to the *Dictionary* similarly records a mistake: having begun with high hopes for a comprehensive dictionary which would supersede every other lexicon, even the most specialist, Johnson tells us: 'these were the dreams of a poet doomed at last to wake a lexicographer' (xviii.100). His fault, for being so unrealistic. Lexicographers should abandon high hopes, being 'unhappy mortals' whose task ranks among 'the lower employments of life' (xviii.73); at best a 'drudge', the word which will come up again in the definition of *lexicographer*. That definition signifies more than a wry sense of humour: it shows Johnson willing to accept the custom of dismissing lexicographers, a practice at which he might have bridled.

In their Introduction to the *Yale* volume *Johnson on the English Language*, Gwin J. Kolb and Robert DeMaria, Jr., place Johnson in 'the tradition of lugubrious lexicographers' (xviii.xxv). Besides the obvious difficulty of making a dictionary, goes this established line of complaint, the lexicographer tends to be neglected by the rest of the literary world. As Ephraim Chambers had protested,

> It is known what Figure Lexicographers make in the Republick of Letters; with what Contempt they are treated by those who hold the first Rank therein; and how often, even the best of them, receive the Lash at the Hands of the Critics, for the Faults they unavoidably fall into. If the View of being useful did not operate stronger on some Minds than the love of Fame, few would engage themselves in Works of this Kind, where all the Credit that will be allowed them, is that of being laborious Compilers.[270]

Johnson's version appears to repeat Chambers' sentiments; on closer inspection, it replays them with the resentment taken out:

> ...the writer of dictionaries; whom mankind have considered, not as the pupil, but the slave of science, the pioneer of literature, doomed only to remove rubbish and clear obstructions from the paths through which Learning and Genius press forward to conquest and glory, without bestowing a smile on the humble drudge that facilitates their progress. Every other authour may aspire to praise; the lexicographer can only hope to

[270] [Ephraim Chambers], *Some Considerations Offered to the Publick, Preparatory to a Second Edition of a Cyclopedia*, (London, 1735), 4.

> escape reproach, and even this negative recompence has been yet granted to very few.
> (xviii.73)

Where Chambers speaks peevishly of 'Contempt' and 'the Lash' – marks of cruelty – Johnson only speaks of being 'considered' as insignificant. Chambers implies that the 'Critics' treat unjustly 'the Faults' lexicographers 'unavoidably fall into'; Johnson doffs his hat to 'Learning and Genius', depersonalises the matter, and later on notes that 'there never can be wanting some who distinguish desert' and will give the *Dictionary* the praise it deserves (110). Above all, for Chambers, the lexicographers have been traduced by the rest of 'the Republic of Letters'; whereas Johnson attributes their low status to the verdict of 'mankind'.

The *Plan of a Dictionary* had already covered this subject: 'the work in which I engaged is generally considered as drudgery for the blind' (xviii.24). We half-expect a denial; instead Johnson expands this general consideration – lexicography needs no great knowledge or intellectual ability, it favours only 'sluggish resolution' (26) – and then leaves that general picture unchallenged.

> Whether this opinion, so long transmitted and so widely propagated, had its beginning from truth and nature, or from accident and prejudice, whether it be decreed by the authority of reason, or the tyranny of ignorance, that of all the candidates for literary praise, the unhappy lexicographer holds the lowest place, neither vanity nor interest incited me to inquire.
> (xviii.26)

Johnson steps back and lets the general opinion of mankind have the floor. Who is he, an author, to demur at what is 'so widely propagated'? He may have his doubts over whether 'truth' or 'prejudice' has brought about the opinion; but he will not try to overturn mankind's judgment. This may seem paradoxical, given that Johnson's aim in the *Dictionary* was to intervene in a language itself formed by mankind. Yet when it comes to authorship, Johnson lets mankind have

the final word. And besides, lexicography was 'useful' enough to make thankless drudgery worthwhile (xviii.27).

The *Rambler* also lays itself open to criticism and disparagement. *Rambler* 10 deals with some of the increasing correspondence the author was supposedly receiving, including both 'encomiums' and 'reproaches' (iii.51). The *Rambler* mentions Flirtilla, who seems to be a spoilt aristocrat whose opinions – among them that the Rambler is 'old and ugly' – he might easily disregard; and two other letters (actually composed by Hester Mulso) are 'reproduced', which seem similarly frivolous: some women request more 'gay and humorous' numbers, for the 'minds softened by perpetual amusements', and an unnamed 'lady' asks whether he is 'now alive, and in town?' (iii.52). But one of Johnson's major themes shows through the joke – that the author has to be part of the social world, that Flirtilla and the others have a legitimate claim on his attention. In one sentence – replying to the inquiry about whether he is in town – Johnson segues from playful silliness to something like a mission statement:

> But, though she is never to know my name, she may often see my face; for I am of her opinion, that a diurnal writer ought to view the world, and that he who neglects his cotemporaries, may be with justice, neglected by them.
> (iii.52)

The Rambler's moral solemnity, it turns out, relies on his joining in with society, and nothing need be beneath him. Turning down an invitation to play cards, he nevertheless refuses to scorn the idea: 'My business has been to view, as opportunity was offered, every place in which mankind was to be seen' (iii.53). Johnson tells another correspondent, the hopeful young writer Misellus, that 'the presses of England are open, let him try the judgment of the public' – a judgment to which the Rambler is showing himself open (54).

Soon after, Misellus returns to admonish the Rambler for giving irresponsible advice. Misellus finds himself in 'perplexities' thanks to the Rambler's 'counsel, however innocent in its intention' (iii.87). Having become successful, he has discovered that he is surrounded by the

obsequious on one hand, and the envious on the other; he is paralysed by his fame and anxious about people taking advantage of him. Was the Rambler wrong, then? Johnson opens the way to that conclusion; he is conceding ground to his readers. But from another angle, Misellus proves the truth of everything Johnson has been claiming about the author's need to live in society.

Misellus's central misfortune is finding himself 'too great for friendship and society, and condemned to solitude'. He has elevated himself: he 'soar[s] above the rest of mankind' in 'unhappy elevation, and dreaded ascendency'; now he longs to 'descend' to a more ordinary, 'quiet' existence (iii.90-1). Johnson's strategy, in publishing these letters, and letting the reader have the best of it, is to establish that connection with the rest of mankind which Misellus has disastrously broken off. In the letters, for all their light-heartedness, Johnson reminds himself and us that the author only exists in the vast network of human relationships. *Rambler* 12, Johnson's first 'Letter to the Rambler', began with a mild reproach to the unworldly writer – 'I cannot forbear to inform you of one species of cruelty, with which the life of a man of letters perhaps does not often make him acquainted' (iii.62).

Admittedly, *Rambler* 23 confronts the letter-writers, cheerfully recording that all their criticisms contradict each other, so that 'I may, without scruple, neglect them' (iii.130). The Rambler will court the public 'by following the direction of my own reason'. However, the detailed rehearsal of readers' criticisms – that the Rambler has not introduced himself, that he is 'dictatorial' and without 'mirth and humour', that he should take a leaf out of the Spectator's book and visit London clubs, that he lacks 'the politeness of his predecessors', that he has provided no sartorial advice for women, and that he lays down advice 'without the illustration of examples and characters' – destabilises the Rambler's authority (iii.129). Dictators tend to silence criticism, and for all the Rambler's insistence that he will follow his own mind, he makes himself vulnerable by giving up space to so many objections.

Johnson might have presented his complainants as isolated and eccentric; instead, he implies a large number of disappointed readers. 'Among the various censures' which have

emerged from comparison with 'my predecessors', *Rambler* 107 begins, 'there is none more general than that of uniformity' (iv.204). Other essayists have varied the 'colours' of their prose, as well as their 'subjects' (205), but not the Rambler. 'Many of my readers' have made this observation, he informs us, playing up the level of discontent. The comparison with the *Tatler* and *Spectator* becomes a motif; and yet, when push comes to shove, the Rambler is to defer to the reader, not to Addison and Steele. Generosa's letter in *Rambler* 127 demonstrates this: she lumps together the Spectator ('Your great predecessor') and the Rambler as advocates for women's education, then rebukes them both for omitting to give practical advice (iv.310).

The letter-writers do not always send up the Rambler; some offer their gratitude for being allowed to express themselves, others mention that the Rambler's known qualities mean he will surely be interested in their case; or, like *Rambler* 84's Myrtylla, they ask for his judgment. The relationship can be collaborative. In *Rambler* 72, Philomides approves of the Rambler's interest in the lesser-noticed virtues, while suggesting that he also include 'good humour' (iv.12-13). Sometimes the device simply allows Johnson to tell a first-person story; and in 200 – which contains the very last letter – he gives himself the final word, suggesting that Asper is too harsh a friend (v.280). Still, letting in another person raises the possibility that they will be more interesting than the usual fare. Misocapelus suspects in *Rambler* 123 that, since his previous letter in 116, 'you and your readers are impatient for my performance; and that the sons of learning have laid down several of your late papers with discontent, when they found that Misocapelus had delayed to continue his narrative' (iv.291). The *Rambler* can be Sternean in its anticipations of readers' impatience.

Johnson uses the letters to mount a running commentary on the series, a commentary which often reflects badly on the author. Some of the correspondents are frankly irreverent, like the author of *Rambler* 153 who admits that he is relying on the Rambler's 'vanity' (v.48). Some seem to be ruder than they intend: Euphelia says frankly that, being 'no admirer of grave writings', she generally fails to finish an instalment. Still, she admits, 'by slow degrees, you have raised my

opinion of your understanding' (*Rambler* 42, iii.227). As William Empson once wrote, 'An irony has no point unless it is true, in some degree, in both senses'.[271] Although Euphelia's patronising tone makes her one target of the irony, the other target is the Rambler – and, by extension, Johnson; and I think Johnson believes her criticism deserves respect; for the reader has a right to be bored.

Heartened by the *Rambler*'s indulgence of publishing her letter, Euphelia writes another; again, the joke suddenly unveils Johnson's deeply-held principles of authorship. Euphelia writes in *Rambler* 46 of her impatience with writers. The terms she uses confirm Johnson's reader-centric view of what authors are for:

> I..suspect that…you have very little sincerity; that you either write what you do not think, and impose upon mankind, or that you take no care to think right, but while you set up yourself as guides mislead your followers by credulity, or negligence; that you produce to the publick whatever notions you can speciously maintain, or elegantly express, without enquiring whether they are just; and transcribe hereditary falsehoods from old authors perhaps as ignorant and careless as yourselves.
> (iii.248-9)

The many accusations of moral and intellectual failure ('very little sincerity', 'take no care to think right', 'ignorant and careless') only come into focus because of the other figure in this passage, namely, the reader – 'mankind', 'your followers', 'the publick'. The chief crime identified here – of untruth – represented to Johnson the breakdown of society. Authors are found wanting, not by abstract principles, but because they fail to serve their readers.

The Rambler steps down from his elevation by another means: becoming one of the readers. When the 'correspondents' ask the Rambler to read something, and anticipate his reactions, they are speaking to author and audience alike. So when the writer of *Rambler* 55 asks the Rambler to 'divest yourself of partiality' (iii.295), the request creates a kind of solidarity between the invisible Mr Rambler and the reader sitting with the paper in his or her hand. An

[271] William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1935), 56.

apostrophe such as 'You will easily imagine, Mr. Rambler' has the same effect (*Rambler* 62, iii.332). Hymenaeus announces that he 'will lay my case honestly before you, that you or your readers may at length decide it' (*Rambler* 113, iv.237). Not 'you *and* your readers': the Rambler cannot assume that he will have any say whatsoever in the judgment.

By sending up the Rambler, Johnson places himself alongside the reader. The very title of the *Idler* does the same: in the first number, Johnson remarked that 'There is perhaps no appellation by which a writer can better denote his kindred to the human species' (ii.4). An idler need not fear 'envy or competition', which so regularly steal into the literary world. *Idler* 94, similarly, observes that 'The idler never applauds his own idleness' (ii.290); the *Idler*, then, can be trusted not to applaud himself for being a writer.

Much as Johnson admired Addison, these artistic choices set him firmly apart from his predecessor. *Spectator* 1 announced: 'I live in the World, rather as a Spectator of Mankind, than as one of the Species... I have acted in all the Parts of my Life as a Looker-on, which is the Character I intend to preserve in this Paper'.[272] The Spectator is a 'Speculative' rather than 'Practical' essayist, he tells us frankly. Johnson's essayistic personae are the opposite: whenever tempted to withdraw into the position of an onlooker, they are sharply reminded that they are one of the species.

Of course, the seriousness of the joke varies. When a correspondent accuses the Rambler of vanity, we know it is only a comic game. But when they compare him to the *Spectator*, or say he is too solemn, they are echoing the criticisms made by real readers of the real Johnson. And Johnson even exposed his own melancholy, when a letter promises to discuss 'a species of wretchedness', then digresses:

> I cannot but imagine the start of attention awakened by this welcome hint; and at this instant see the Rambler snuffing his candle, rubbing his spectacles, stirring his fire, locking out interruption, and settling himself in his easy chair, that he may enjoy a new calamity without disturbance. For...it is certain, that whatever be your subject, melancholy for the most part bursts in upon your speculation, your gaiety is quickly overcast, and

[272] Addison, *Spectator*, i.4-5

> though your readers may be flattered with hopes of pleasantry, they are seldom dismissed but with heavy hearts.
> (*Rambler* 109, iv.215-16)

If this begins as a joke, it becomes painfully autobiographical; and whether we laugh at the Rambler or pity Johnson, it demystifies the figure of the author. The correspondent in *Rambler* 147 cannot have been a regular reader if he hoped 'that you will not think the dignity of your character impaired by an account of a ludicrous persecution' (v.18). That dignity had already been resigned.

Disappearing acts

Johnson went to some lengths to reduce his own dignity of character. Did he also try and hide his name from readers? Much of his work was published anonymously. Twice in Boswell's *Life*, Johnson discusses an author's difficulties in concealing his identity (iii.377; iv.305-6). The discussions centre on the morality of lying; Johnson does not deny that a writer might have excellent reasons for preferring to remain unknown. In a 1756 letter to Robert Chambers, Johnson said of his numerous contributions to the *Literary Magazine*: 'you must not tell that I have any thing in it. For though it is known conjecturally I would not have it made certain' (*Letters*, i.138). Bloom writes of 'Johnson's consistent desire for journalistic anonymity',[273] though it was not only in journalism that Johnson preferred invisibility. He told William Strahan, the publisher of *Rasselas*: 'I will not print my name, but expect it to be known' (i.179). The coyness is striking.

Not all of Johnson's anonymity need have been a matter of principle. His efforts to rescue William Dodd from execution remained a secret for a long time, but it might be said that he

[273] Bloom, *Johnson in Grub Street*, 92.

wanted to avoid publicity. His work helping Chambers on the Vinerian lectures, not revealed until long after, had to be kept under wraps for the sake of Chambers's reputation. And as Adam Rounce writes, Johnson's journalism and minor pieces were often anonymous according to the convention of the time.[274] Yet in other matters, Johnson seems to remain anonymous almost for its own sake. He did not think the *Adventurer* was low hackwork, or feel the need to preserve secrecy to spare others; yet 'Johnson, who was very zealous in promoting the success of the *Adventurer*, maintained great reticence about his share in it'.[275]

Johnson made a habit of reticence. The 'Life of Milton' remarks: 'It has been observed that they who most loudly clamour for liberty do not most liberally grant it'. (*Lives*, i.276). Observed by whom? Donald Greene wonders whether Johnson was referring to his own rhetorical question in *Taxation No Tyranny*: 'how is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?' (x.454)[276] Greene's suggestion gains circumstantial evidence from Johnson's other disappearing acts. *Idler* 31 introduced the character of Sober, a hyperactive friend of the Idler whose 'strong desires and quick imagination' are equalled by his 'love of ease', so that he fritters his time away on unimportant tasks (ii.97). The Idler ends by hoping that, at last, 'Poor Sober' will be provoked to 'reformation' by reading this paper – but perhaps he will only 'read it and laugh' (ii.98). We discover from Hester Piozzi that Sober was 'intended as his own portrait' (*Miscellanies*, i.178). Tom Tyers said that Johnson was like a ghost in conversation, because he only spoke when someone addressed him – an observation which Johnson quoted with a smile: "Tom Tyers described me the best" (*Life*, v.73). He liked to think of himself as ghostlike and unobtrusive. Johnson puts himself at the centre of his work, but so quietly that nobody notices. It happens in *Rambler* 140, too, when Johnson alludes to 'a late writer' who introduced an anachronistic reference to Harvey's work on circulation; the writer is Johnson, in *Irene*, 1:2:58-9

[274] Adam Rounce, 'Editions', in Jack Lynch, ed., *Samuel Johnson in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 31-7: 31-2.
[275] See L.F. Powell's 'Introduction' to the *Adventurer* in *Works*, ii.323.
[276] See Greene's note, *Works*, x.454n9.

(iv.377 and n3). Knowing this, we might wonder about another 'late writer', the one who appears at the end of the review of Soame Jenyns:

> A system has been raised, which is so ready to fall to pieces of itself, that no great praise can be derived from its destruction. To object is always easy, and it has been well observed by a late writer, that *the hand which cannot build a hovel, may demolish a temple*.
> (xvii.432)

The Jenyns review is the most aggressive review Johnson ever wrote. I advance this only tentatively, but is it possible that, at the close of the article, Johnson wanted to give way to somebody else, to avoid the appearance of triumphing over a hapless opponent? The somebody else may have been a fiction, but Johnson had used 'late writer' in that sense a few years previously. Greene made efforts to trace the reference for his 1984 anthology, but to no avail;[277] the 2004 *Yale* editors do not offer any source either. A 1757 edition said that the phrase was from *New Practice of Physic*, but according to the editors, no known work of this title includes the phrase. Whether or not there is anything in the suggestion, Johnson certainly distances himself from 'praise', and earlier in the review he tries to holds himself accountable. He is discussing Jenyns' ideas about limiting education:

> I am always afraid of determining on the side of envy or cruelty. The privileges of education may sometimes be improperly bestowed, but I shall always fear to with-hold them, lest I should be yielding to the suggestions of pride, while I persuade myself that I am following the maxims of policy; and under the appearance of salutary restraints, should be indulging the lust of dominion, and that malevolence which delights in seeing others depressed.
> (xvii.410)

The paragraph descends into an unexpectedly searching examination of conscience. First Johnson is merely 'afraid' and in a state of 'fear' – all of which might be to his credit. As he goes on,

[277] *The Oxford Authors: Samuel Johnson*, ed. Donald Greene, 819.

however, he implies that the self-deception, the hunger for power and the inhumanity all come naturally to him. If he was going to hold Jenyns to high moral standards, then he would have to face those standards too. True, Johnson's self-accusations reflect back upon Jenyns; but in another way they place the reviewer and the author in the same category, as weak individuals vulnerable to the same moral risks. Tellingly, Johnson does not say that he knows exactly how to conquer those temptations. He deflects some of the admiration which he might consider as his due – just as one 'correspondent' to the *Rambler* will expose the shallowness of a previous instalment.

Here as before, Johnson displays his own weakness, and his fear of insisting on his own authority. Though the 'dictator' image has some truth – you can hardly compile a *Dictionary* if you privately doubt that any of your opinions have all that much validity – he liked to remind the reader that these were only the thoughts of a fallible individual. In the *Journey to the Western Islands*, that ambitious portrait of a society which touches on so many economic, political, historical and anthropological questions, Johnson keeps breaking off to remark on his own deficiencies as a reporter. At Coirechatachan in Skye, he confesses: 'Where many questions are to be asked, some will be omitted. I forgot to inquire how they were supplied with so much exotic luxury' (*Journey*, 45). That omission might have been omitted, but Johnson wanted to bring it up. Puzzled by a rock formation on Col, he suggests a possible hypothesis, then admits that 'I forgot to examine' whether it might be true (104). Sailing from Ardtun to Iona, and having just delivered a warning that, unless the traveller writes down observations, they will slip out of the memory, he tells us: 'I committed the fault which I have just been censuring, in neglecting, as we passed, to note the series of this placid navigation' (123).

Not so much the great dictator, here, as the great self-deprecator, Johnson will even note that a competing work is more reliable:

> I brought away rude measures of the buildings, such as I cannot trust myself, inaccurately taken, and obscurely noted. Mr. Pennant's delineations, which are doubtless exact, have

> made my unskilful description less necessary.
> (*Journey*, 124)

The book ends with an apologetic passage in which Johnson allows that his are 'the thoughts of one who has seen but little' (137). Given all the other examples in this chapter, only the most cynical could claim that Johnson means this self-undermining as a rhetorical ploy. And yet he does not want the reader to discount his conclusions. The self-deprecation signals, instead, that his authority is secondary to the reader's. If he has been negligent, if he knows too little, it is a fault because he has failed his audience. 'Whether I spent the hour well I know not; for here I first conceived the thought of this narration' (31). Only one person has the right to say definitively whether that hour was well spent: the man or woman with the book in their hands.

Johnson plays with an image of the author which, according to John Sitter, rose to prominence in the 1740s, of 'a lonely poet surrounded by "nature"'.[278] Sitter identifies 'the particular consciousness mid-eighteenth-century authors had of themselves as solitary writers for solitary readers'. The story of the *Journey*'s origins goes like this:

> I sat down on a bank, such as a writer of Romance might have delighted to feign. I had indeed no trees to whisper over my head, but a clear rivulet streamed at my feet. The day was calm, the air soft, and all was rudeness, silence, and solitude. Before me, and on either side, were high hills, which by hindering the eye from ranging, forced the mind to find entertainment for itself. Whether I spent the hour well I know not; for here I first conceived the thought of this narration.
> (*Journey*, 31)

Until that final quip, Johnson drifts along with the Romantic ideal: an author in 'solitude', communing with the natural world, but also turned inwards where the 'mind' had to 'find entertainment for itself'. The scene makes Johnson think of 'Romance' in the sense of 'a tale of

[278] John Sitter, *Literary Loneliness in Mid-Eighteenth-Century England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 9.

wild adventures in war and love' (*Dictionary*); but his self-image brings to mind a later literary tradition, especially compared with the letter to Mrs Thrale in which he described the same scene:

> I sat down to make notes on a green bank, with a small stream running at my feet, in the midst of savage solitude, with Mountains before me, and on either hand covered with heath. I looked round me, and wondered that I was not more affected, but the mind is not at all times equally ready to be put in motion.
> (*Letters*, ii.73)

When Johnson wrote the scene up for the *Journey*, he did not mention the 'notes' or his lack of responsiveness; in effect, he exaggerated his own spontaneity of mind. He leads the reader to focus on Samuel Johnson sitting contemplatively on a bank, a picture of authorial isolation; and then turns round and announces that it may all have been a waste of time, unless the reader thinks otherwise.

This little move strikes me as a microcosm of something which, according to Richard Cronin's *Romantic Historians*, is especially evident in post-Romantic writing. Where, in Romantic thought, writing came *ex nihilo* from 'a secret, inexplicable origin enclosed in the mind of the poet', their successors treated artistic creation with a more grounded sense that 'Writing has its origin in a shared world, and achieves its proper end only when it is recovered by that world' – a world which includes 'books and book publishers'.[279] Johnson comes close to endorsing the Romantic image when he sits on the bank, but when he turns the notes into a book, he returns to society; and by emphasising his inadequacy, he demystifies the author's role. As Pat Rogers writes, 'If our own age has seen, wishfully at least, the death of the author, then Johnson presides over his or her birth': he has a 'special clarity' about both 'the human impulses which feed into the act of creation', and the 'social circumstances' which shape that act.[280] Through his curiosity and

[279] Richard Cronin, *Romantic Victorians: English Literature, 1824-1840* (London: Palgrave, 2002), 259.
[280] Rogers, *Johnson*, 17-18.

honesty about the act of writing, Johnson resists the exalted treatment which dismayed him when applied to Swift and Milton.

I began this chapter with the professionalization of authorship, and have been trying to find a place for Johnson in the middle of a debate which divided the craftsmen from the Romantics. He resisted both ideals – the *sui generis* figure of inspiration and the middle-class professional – but he did so because his emphasis was different. Authors were valuable, not for anything in their personal qualities, but because of how they helped others; and so Johnson, in his own works, self-effaces and self-deprecates. If it was an Age of Authors, they could only be justified by their service to an Age of Readers.

6 The Romantic Reaction

It was not only the minor figures of the Romantic period, but its greatest authors, who disliked Samuel Johnson and wrote against him with, in some cases, almost unhinged aggression. So Coleridge found himself hissed at during a lecture for contemptuously referring to Johnson as a 'fellow'; he replied that 'it was in the nature of evil to beget evil & that he had therefore in censuring Johnson fallen into the same fault.'[281] In 1817, Keats annotated an edition of Shakespeare including Johnson's critical remarks. At one point he writes 'Fie' next to Johnson's name, which is a reasonable summary of his general response.[282] Beside Johnson's comments on *The Merchant of Venice*, he quotes a line from the play: 'Which pries not to the interior'. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, he uses Charmian's line against Johnson: 'Your crown's awry / I'll mend it'.

A third example: Hazlitt's manuscript of the 'Lectures on the English Poets', where he writes that 'Chaucer, Spenser, Shakspeare…are excluded, from Dr Johnson's Lives of the Poets…Milton is admitted with a reluctant and churlish welcome' (Hazlitt, ii.207). He has then crossed out the sentence: '~~But that is his affair, not mine~~' (374n4). It is hard to decide whether Hazlitt makes the change because the remark is too catty, or because he has decided that, in fact, it is very much his affair to rebut Johnson.

Criticism of Johnson proliferated during his lifetime. It included such works as John Callender's *Deformities of Dr Johnson* (1782). The *Monthly Review* commented that Callender was hardly original: there were 'few spots in this literary luminary that have not been discovered before', and Callender's project displayed more 'malignity' than 'wit'.[283] So the Romantic critics stood in a tradition. Their opposition to Johnson had, nevertheless, a distinct character. James T.

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[281] Henry Crabb Robinson's diary, 16 January 1812; quoted in *Coleridge on Writers and Writing*, ed. Seamus Perry (London: Continuum, 2008), 275.

[282] Robert Gittings, *John Keats* (London: Heinemann, 1968), 134.

[283] *Monthly Review*, 68 (1783), in John Ker Spittal, ed., *Contemporary Criticisms of Johnson, His Works and his Biographers* (London: John Murray, 1923), 371.

Boulton writes of 'the Romantics' realization that Johnson epitomized supremely the assumptions about man, nature, and human life which had to be rejected if their own were to prevail… Johnson provided a sacrificial victim essential to the success of the literary and moral revolution'.[284] This accounts for some of the violence with which Johnson was attacked; but his Romantic critics, in a sense, picked the right target. There were vast differences between Hazlitt and Coleridge – the two critics who I will focus on – and Johnson, especially over the nature of the author's role. Those principles which I have tried to show Johnson enunciating were just what provoked his Romantic opponents.

Coleridge's 'reluctance to think Shakespeare wrong'

According to Rosemary Ashton, 'Johnson was a *bête noire* of Coleridge's. Many a notebook entry shows him working out his ideas in reaction to Johnson.'[285] Donald Greene remarks that Coleridge 'dropped some of the most scathing comments on Johnson ever uttered, and generally regarded him as the symbol of everything he had ever revolted against' (*Works*, x.409). In 1804 Coleridge thought of writing an essay 'on the supposed Genius, Style, critical powers, & morals of Dr S. Johnson'.[286] '…& morals' follows naturally from the others, for – as Norman Fruman remarks – 'Coleridge himself did not normally question the existence of a profound correlation between moral character and genius'.[287] There was an obligation to attack Johnson: on another occasion, he

[284] John T. Boulton, *Johnson: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), 8.
[285] Rosemary Ashton, *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 274.
[286] *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-71), ii.1054. Quoted in Norman Fruman, *Coleridge: The Damaged Archangel* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972), 470n146.
[287] Fruman, *Coleridge*, 13.

planned to denounce Johnson's complaints about the length of *Paradise Lost* 'with all due severity'.[288]

So Coleridge's strong, nearly obsessive, aversion to Johnson appeared to him as a positive duty. Why? For R.H. Fogle, Coleridge's 'extreme distaste' for Johnson has to do with Coleridge being a 'reconciler', Johnson 'a great master of antithesis'.[289] This seems a rather weak and abstract *casus belli*, given the persistence and resourcefulness with which Coleridge attacked Johnson. Yet it has a truth in it, which I will come back to.

Turn to Coleridge's writings and conversation, and his stated disagreements with Johnson, and the mystery is not immediately cleared up. Coleridge picks fight after fight with Johnson, especially when it comes to Shakespeare. When Johnson's name appears, you can feel Coleridge tensing. Johnson suggests at the end of *Othello* that 'Had the scene opened in Cyprus…there had been little wanting to a drama of the most exact and scrupulous regularity' (viii.1048). Not only does Coleridge disagree with Johnson, he demands satisfaction:

> Here then is the place to determine whether such a change would or would not be an improvement, nay (to throw down the glove with a full challenge), whether or not the tragedy would by such an arrangement become *more regular*.
> (*COS*, 190)

There is a note of resentment, if not all-out hostility, whenever Johnson enters the room. Coleridge is incapable of cordial, respectful disagreement with his opponent. Is Richard II 'pious', as Johnson says? Coleridge writes: 'if we are to believe Dr Johnson, he is humane and pious' (*COS*, 256), before disagreeing. If we are to believe Dr Johnson, the reader infers, it is because we have not yet read Coleridge.

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[288] *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn and Merton Christensen, 5 vols. in 10 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957-2002), ii.2026f8; quoted in Donald Sultana, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge in Malta and Italy* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969), 132.

[289] John Bayley, 'Coleridge and Criticism: II: Critical Practice', in R.L. Brett, ed., *Writers and their Background: S.T. Coleridge* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1971), 147-66: 156.

Johnson's regret at Shakespeare's puns is well-known; it is expressed in a few merciless sentences in the 'Preface':

> He is not long soft and pathetick without some idle conceit, or contemptible equivocation…
>
> A quibble is to *Shakespeare*, what luminous vapours are to the traveller; he follows it at all adventures, it is sure to lead him out of his way, and sure to engulf him in the mire. It has some malignant power over his mind, and its fascinations are irresistible. Whatever be the dignity or profundity of his disquisition, whether he be enlarging knowledge or exalting affection, whether he be amusing attention with incidents, or enchaining it in suspense, let but a quibble spring up before him, and he leaves his work unfinished. A quibble is the golden apple for which he will always turn aside from his career, or stoop from his elevation. A quibble poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight, that he was content to purchase it, by the sacrifice of reason, propriety and truth. A quibble was to him the fatal *Cleopatra* for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it.
> (vii.84)

You sense that Johnson is rather enjoying himself at Shakespeare's expense: repetition is one of his techniques of ridicule, and Johnson is himself led into digression by the subject of the quibble, so parodying Shakespeare's susceptibility. It is just this cheerful irreverence, this treatment of Shakespeare as occasionally muddleheaded and easily distracted, which drives Coleridge to a haughty, irritable riposte. There are, he tells us, many occasions on which puns are appropriate. What is more:

> I feel the importance of these remarks strongly, because the greater part of the abuse, I might say filth, thrown out and heaped upon Shakespeare has originated in want of consideration. Dr Johnson asserts that Shakespeare loses the world for a toy, and can no more withstand a pun, or a play upon words, than his Antony could resist Cleopatra…
> (*COS*, 255)

Coleridge, while slightly misremembering Johnson's remarks, does not quite name him as the inconsiderate heaper of filth and thrower-out of abuse, but he does not mention any other critics

who might come under these headings. Nor is this Coleridge's only contribution to the wordplay debate. He voices 'a candid doubt' over whether, in using puns, 'Shakespeare may not have followed rules and principles that merit and stand the test of philosophic examination' (*COS*, 208). In his notes on *The Tempest*, he allows that Shakespeare's wordplay is a sign of his era's sense of humour, but adds that 'a pun, if it be congruous with the feeling of the scene, is not only allowable in the dramatic dialogue, but oftentimes one of the most effectual intensives of passion' (*COS*, 250). Coleridge is trying hard to give Shakespeare the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps, he muses, there were 'rules and principles' of the greatest intellectual rigour behind Shakespeare's conceits. On the right occasion – though Coleridge does not say whether Shakespeare ever chose the wrong occasion – a pun is 'oftentimes' exactly what the drama needs.

We may or may not call this special pleading; but it is arguable that Coleridge devotes himself to the question of puns not so much because it holds any special interest for him as because it is a point on which Shakespeare is attacked. He comes close to saying so himself. According to a newspaper report of an 1813 lecture, Coleridge alludes to 'the hollow sneers of critics' against puns (*COS*, 263). Again, this can hardly mean anyone if not Johnson. He tells the audience on another occasion that

> It has been stated from the first that one of my purposes in these lectures is to meet and refute popular objections to particular points in the works of our great dramatic poet. (*COS*, 253)

Then, yet again, he defends Shakespeare the punster. In other words, a great deal of Coleridge's motive and goal in his Shakespeare criticism is defensive. 'Providence has given England the greatest man that ever put on and put off mortality' (*COS*, 101); 'our great dramatic poet' is being sneered at, and the critic should protect him.

Plainly, no sneerer was more prominent, more influential or more celebrated than Johnson. And this, I suggest, is the true point of difference between Coleridge and Johnson: not

whether Shakespeare observed the unities or made use of dramatic illusion or was too fond of wordplay, but whether Shakespeare deserves our reverence.

Reverence may be too weak a word, in fact, for what Coleridge offers Shakespeare. The greatest mortal ever – but not only that: 'Shakespeare possessed all the powers of a man, and more than a man' (*COS*, 80). He is like a Greek god, as J.P. Collier reports Coleridge saying: 'it was this great and mighty being changing himself into the Nurse or the blundering Constable… He [Coleridge] might compare it to Proteus…it was not only the resemblance, but it was the divinity that appeared in it, and assumed the character' (*COS*, 78). Or perhaps he is a Gnostic god, as the quarrel between Brutus and Cassius suggests:

> I know no part of Shakespeare that more impresses on me the belief of his genius being superhuman than this scene. In the Gnostic heresy it might have been credited with less absurdity than most of their dogmas, that the Supreme had employed him to *create* previously to his function of representing.
> (*COS*, 268)

Or the god of pantheism:

> Shakespeare is the Spinozistic deity – an omnipresent creativeness. Milton is the deity of prescience… Shakespeare's poetry is characterless, that is, it does not reflect the individual Shakespeare; but John Milton himself is in every line of the *Paradise Lost*.
> (*Table Talk*, *COS*, 107)

Coleridge is not entirely serious. But when someone jokes about something repeatedly, it suggests that they partly mean what they say. '[S]hall we not feel and acknowledge the purity and holiness of genius – a light which, however it might shine on a dunghill, was as pure as the divine effluence which created all the beauty of nature?' (*COS*, 78) That may be said with tongue in cheek; so may Coleridge's description of Shakespeare's confidence: 'when the creation in its outline is once perfect, then he seems to rest from his labour, and to smile upon his work, and tell himself that it is very good' (*Table Talk*, *COS*, 108). In the same way, he was not entirely sincere when he told the

actor Daniel Terry, who advanced the view that Byron was closer to Dante than was Milton: 'Sir! I was talking Nonsense, not blasphemy.'[290]

Try to imagine any of these expressions coming from Johnson, though, and you can see the difference: a deep contrast, so deep it hardly reveals itself explicitly, in how the author is conceived. Coleridge's author rises to the status of divinity: he thinks of Shakespeare as a kind of god. For Johnson, on the other hand, the whole point is that God is God, and authors should adapt themselves to God's existence, accepting that their task is defined by His providential allotment of gifts, and that they should use those gifts in order to do His will.

True, Coleridge and Johnson shared a religion. And Coleridge did not actually propound any new Gnostic heresy which would give Shakespeare co-creator status. Nevertheless, all the talk about Shakespeare's divine effluence and superhuman genius revealed a sincere – and, for a Christian believer, not entirely consistent – attitude, one which tended, now and then, to slip from admiration into awe and from critical appraisal into worship. *The Tempest* is 'this, almost miraculous, drama' (*COS*, 237). The author of *Love's Labour's Lost* was a 'youthful god of poetry' (*COS*, 128). This, surely, was the kind of thing Johnson meant when he spoke of Shakespeareans who engaged in 'superstitious veneration' (*Works*, vii.71).

It is highly appropriate that Coleridge took Johnson as his great antagonist, because Johnson's criticism was directed at Coleridge's predecessors in bardolatry. As Chapters 2 and 4 made clear, whenever a writer – or one of their supporters – imagines that great writing raises one above the common herd, Johnson starts throwing eggs – or, as Coleridge saw it, abusive filth. The two critics really are in conversation, and if it is a particularly heated conversation, that is only to be expected when an iconoclast like Johnson comes up against a pious devotee like Coleridge.

Assume, for the sake of criticism, that Shakespeare really is God. It follows that nothing immoral could come from his mind. This Coleridge is happy to affirm:

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[290] See Paul M. Zall, 'A Coleridge Inscription', *Times Literary Supplement*, 2677 (May 22, 1953), 333.

> With him there were no innocent adulteries; he never rendered that amiable which religion and reason taught us to detest; he never clothed vice in the garb and virtue, like Beaumont and Fletcher… Shakespeare was a writer of all others the most calculated to make his readers better as well as wiser.
> (*COS*, 112-14)

Of *The Tempest*, Coleridge says: 'Shakespeare may sometimes be gross, but I boldly say that he is always moral and modest' (*COS*, 227). 'Never' could be Coleridge's favourite adverb in his Shakespeare criticism. 'Shakespeare…never introduces a word or a thought in vain or out of place' (*COS*, 155); 'I fearlessly say that he never penned a line that he knew would degrade him' (*COS*, 100). Shakespeare's plays are not only works of genius, not merely, as a general rule, on the side of the angels; they are immaculately conceived without a single blemish.

One imagines Johnson's incredulous laughter at all this. He was sure that Shakespeare sometimes 'seems to write without any moral purpose' (vii.71). Curiously enough, though, there is scarcely any other area in which Johnson and Coleridge can so neatly overlap as in this one of Shakespeare's morality. Coleridge, at times, comes across as the severer, more didactic, writer. Their respective judgments on *Hamlet* throw into doubt any notion of the Romantic Coleridge appealing to emotion while the neo-classical Johnson searches for moral significance. It is Coleridge who finds the moral in *Hamlet* – 'Shakespeare wished to impress upon us the truth that action is the chief end of existence' (*COS*, 182) – while Johnson confines himself to praising the literary 'variety' of the play (viii.1011). Rejecting Johnson's view that Shakespeare rather carelessly took on the plot details of his source, Coleridge argues that Shakespeare 'never' accepted someone else's story except when it 'contributed to enforce or to explain some great truth inherent in human nature' (*COS*, 181). This idea of 'general nature' is indeed crucial to Johnson's 'Preface' (*Works*, vii.61, 65).

Coleridge and Johnson converge in their treatment of Iago's character. Compare Johnson:

> There is always danger lest wickedness conjoined with abilities should steal upon esteem, though it misses of approbation; but the character of Iago is so conducted, that he is from the first scene to the last hated and despised.
> (viii.1047)

with Coleridge:

> it becomes both morally and poetically unsafe to present what is admirable – what our nature compels us to admire – in the mind, and what is most detestable in the heart, as co-existing in the same individual without any apparent connection or any modification of the one by the other. That Shakespeare has in one instance, that of Iago, approached to this, and that he has done it successfully, is perhaps the most astonishing proof of his genius, and the opulence of his resources.
> (*COS*, 200-1)

What is 'unsafe' for Coleridge was a 'danger' for Johnson; the two critics discuss exactly the same problem, of an impressive but wicked character, and both see Iago as a great counter-example.

You can also hear the sound of Johnson's voice within Coleridge's when they discuss the blinding of Gloucester. Johnson pleads in mitigation that Regan's and Goneril's cruelty 'is an historical fact';

> But I am not able to apologise with equal plausibility for the extrusion of Gloucester's eyes, which seems an act too horrid to be endured in dramatic exhibition, and such as must always compel the mind to relieve its distress by incredulity. Yet let it be remembered that our authour well knew what would please the audience for which he wrote.
> (viii.703)

Johnson cannot quite excuse Shakespeare for putting such graphic inhumanity on the stage; nor can he quite condemn it outright. Characteristically, he makes the audience the determining factor: it is, after all, the author's job to please them. Now here is Coleridge: 'What can I say of this scene? My reluctance to think Shakespeare wrong, and yet' – like Johnson, reaching out for some excuse – 'it is necessary to harmonize their cruelty to their father' (*COS*, 207). For Johnson, the

audience's expectations justify the scene. For Coleridge, it is a matter of the play's inner necessity: the sisters' cruelty to Gloucester parallels their treatment of Lear.

Elsewhere Coleridge implies – but in a rather bets-hedging parenthesis – that the scene is too much: '(for I will not disguise my conviction that in this one point the tragic has been urged beyond the outermost mark and *ne plus ultra* of the dramatic)' (*COS*, 199-200). He avoids, by that formula, quite saying that Shakespeare should not have written it. He goes on to propose that it may satisfy justice, because we have been told of Gloucester's inexcusable adultery: this is presented with 'with excellent judgement, and provident for the claims of the moral sense'. Like Johnson, he tries to find a justification: though a little softer on Shakespeare, he is no less disturbed by the moral qualities of the scene.

Coleridge and Johnson, then, have surprisingly similar moral responses; it is when the judgment comes in that they differ. 'My reluctance to think Shakespeare wrong' – an understatement, perhaps, coming from Coleridge, but an honest admission which throws his difference from Johnson into relief. Johnson quite liked thinking Shakespeare wrong – when he finds a weak point (like puns), he is not especially agonised about raising objections. Coleridge is – always, perhaps? – inclined to give Shakespeare the benefit of the doubt. Partly this difference reflects the different contexts of their remarks. Coleridge's comments are taken from lectures, and may be read as personal reflections meant to convey a love of Shakespeare to his audience. Johnson's are the comments of an editor who is meant to be scrutinising the text closely: he is meant to show scepticism and reserve.

Even so, Johnson and Coleridge are different kinds of reader. One of Johnson's biggest reservations was over Act 3 Scene 3 of *Hamlet*. Here, the Prince sees Claudius at his prayers and decides not to kill him:

> Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent:
> When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,

> Or in th'incestuous pleasure of his bed,
> At game a-swearing, or about some act
> That hath no relish of salvation in't,
> Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven
> And that his soul may be as damn'd and black
> As hell, whereto it goes.
> (III.iii.88-95)

Johnson is appalled: 'This speech, in which Hamlet, represented as a virtuous character, is not content with taking blood for blood, but contrives damnation for the man he would punish, is too horrible to be read or to be uttered' (viii.990).

But this calls forth all of Coleridge's defensive instincts: 'Dr Johnson's mistaking of the marks of reluctance and procrastination for impetuous, horror-striking fiendishness! Of such importance is it to understand the *germ* of a character' (*COS*, 171). Coleridge explains at another point:

> ...the fact, however, is that Dr Johnson did not understand the character of Hamlet, and censured accordingly: the determination to allow the guilty king to escape at such a moment is only part of the indecision and irresoluteness of the hero. Hamlet seizes hold of a pretext for not acting...This, allow me to impress upon you most emphatically, was merely the excuse Hamlet made to himself.
> (*COS*, 181)

This is simply a head-on clash between two ways of reading the play. Johnson, less fascinated by Hamlet, just sees that an apparently sympathetic character is being made to say something as contrary to Christian love as possible. *Rambler* 4's discussion of the novel set strict limits to what can be depicted – 'that which is likely to operate so strongly, should not be mischievous or uncertain in its effects' (*Works*, iii.22) – to which Shakespeare here seems indifferent. To Coleridge, the speech means something else: it adds a few brushstrokes to a mesmerising figure. Hamlet's personality is the great subject of *Hamlet*: what he says and does (and fails to do) only means something because it reflects a little light from his dazzling, flawed personality.

Coleridge's 'reluctance to think Shakespeare wrong' produces some odd effects. According to a newspaper report, Coleridge asked his audience at a lecture to

> …contrast his *morality* with the writers of his own or the succeeding age, or with those of the present day, who boast of their superiority. He never….made his lovers openly gross or profane; for common candour must allow that his images were incomparably less so than those of his contemporaries.
> (*COS*, 114)

Coleridge begins with an absolute judgment – Shakespeare is *never* gross or profane – which transforms into a relative one: Shakespeare is *less* gross or profane than his contemporaries. Johnson thought moral objections could not be taken away by gesturing towards contemporaries who were even worse: 'This fault the barbarity of his age cannot extenuate; for it is always a writer's duty to make the world better, and justice is a virtue independant on time or place' (vii.71). Coleridge goes on:

> The writings of Beaumont and Fletcher bear no comparison; the grossest passages of Shakespeare were purity to theirs; and it should be remembered that, though he might occasionally disgust a sense of delicacy, he never injured the mind…with him vice never walked, as it were, in twilight.
> (*COS*, 114)

This time, it is the other way round: a relative vindication – Shakespeare was much purer than Beaumont and Fletcher – becomes absolute – he (once more) 'never' recommended vice. Coleridge adds, significantly, 'If a man speak injuriously of a friend, our vindication of him is naturally warm.' Once again, Coleridge admits a bias and a hesitation ever to say anything less than complimentary about Shakespeare.

Just three words in Johnson's edition of Shakespeare will demonstrate how far he is from Coleridge in this matter. When Isabella forgives Angelo at the end of *Measure for Measure*, Johnson comments: 'I am afraid our varlet poet intended to inculcate, that women think ill of nothing that raises the credit of their own beauty' (vii.213). Johnson is genuinely disappointed by

what he sees as Shakespeare's misogyny, and the phrase 'Our varlet poet' is a condemnation. But again, Johnson quite enjoys the chance to knock Shakespeare off his perch. Even the word 'our' has a particular ring. When Coleridge calls Shakespeare 'our poet', he means 'the poet of England, whom it is impiety and treason to attack'. When Johnson says 'our poet', he means 'the poet who is still a man, one of us, belonging to society, and who sometimes needs a sharp reminder of the fact'. All in all, 'Our varlet poet' is an expression as far from Coleridge's perception of Shakespeare as 'the divine effluence' is from Johnson's.

Without taking anything away from the absurdity of Coleridge at his most bardolatrous, he was in some ways a braver critic than Johnson. What Johnson marked off as beyond the borders of criticism – those 'enchantresses of the soul' which poetry brings forth (*Rambler* 92, iv.122) – Coleridge tried to describe and account for. Johnson halts at the threshold of the mysterious. Johnson emphasised that writers must attract the reader while forming them; but he sometimes found that the two sides of the balance – music and reason, passions and sense, pleasure and truth, enjoyment and attention, imagination and principles – to be heterogeneous, only to be yoked together with some violence. So he lays aside those mysteriously effective parts of poetry which can only be called 'the enchantresses of the soul' (*Rambler* 92, iv.122); he confesses that moments in Shakespeare, Pope and Milton prevail over his critical faculties. Even false theories, in Pope's hands, can 'enchain philosophy, suspend criticism, and oppress judgment by overpowering pleasure' (*Lives*. iv.77). *Rambler* 8 warns the reader that 'the pleasures of fancy, and the emotions of desire are more dangerous as they are more hidden' (iii.46). Lonsdale puts it well: Johnson is 'At times disconcerted by the intensity of his own emotional responses to drama, particularly to Shakespeare' ('Introduction', *Lives*, 111).

For Johnson, Shakespeare's plays 'are read without any other desire than the desire of pleasure, and are therefore praised only as pleasure is obtained' ('Preface to Shakespeare', vii.61). The truths Shakespeare expresses give pleasure because they imitate nature so closely. But for Coleridge, there is more that draws one to Shakespeare than pleasure:

> The poet is not only the man made to solve the riddle of the universe, but he is also the man who feels where it is not solved.
> (*COS*, 50)

and he tries to explain what relation the poet bears to this great 'riddle'. As Walter Jackson Bate writes, for Coleridge,

> when Shakespeare lays bare the working of a given passion or reaction in one of his characters, we have not a mere abstraction, description, or even presentation of that passion as a passion, as we do in the run-of-the-mill neoclassic dramatist, but rather the living fluctuation of feeling taking its natural outlets, so that we see not the passion but the actual man.[291]

This is something quite foreign to Johnson's idea of Shakespeare: not that he is insensitive to character, but he does not give the impression that he is dealing with subjects too big and mysterious to be entirely apprehended. Speaking of romantic love, for instance, Johnson approves of Shakespeare for not giving it much emphasis in his plays: 'love is only one of many passions, and as it has no great influence upon the sum of life, it has little operation in the dramas of a poet, who caught his ideas from the living world' (vii.63). The assumption there is that we know what love is, and that we know what the course of life is. Now contrast Coleridge's lengthy digression on the subject when discussing *Romeo and Juliet*: for Coleridge, Shakespeare has carried us into the secret of what love is and what it signifies for man, and has shown how 'in this, as in all, the image of the Deity is impressed upon him' (*COS*, 153). On this point, Coleridge adds:

> It has been too much the custom, when anything that happened in his dramas could not easily be explained by the few words the poet has employed, to pass it idly over, and to say that it is beyond our reach, and beyond the power of philosophy - a sort of *terra incognita* for discoverers - a great ocean to be hereafter explored.
> (*COS*, 155)

[291] Walter Jackson Bate, *Coleridge* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), 148.

Not so, says Coleridge: we should do everything to 'detect his meaning…the smallest fragment of his mind not unfrequently gives a clue to the most perfect, regular and consistent whole'. Coleridge pursues truth through Shakespeare, confident not only that we should do everything to know the mind of Shakespeare, but also that Shakespeare's mind can be discerned in the universe he creates. Once more, Coleridge's approach borders on the theological. Yet Johnson's was to dismiss the 'terra incognita' – and this was clearly inadequate.

It is a representative point that 'the Neoplatonism of Jakob Boehme could appeal so much to Coleridge',[292] whereas for Johnson Boehme was a classic case of enthusiasm making suspicious claims to knowledge:

> '[William] Law, (said he,) fell latterly into the reveries of Jacob Behmen, whom Law alledged to have been somewhat in the same state with St. Paul, and to have seen *unutterable things*. Were it even so, (said Johnson,) Jacob would have resembled St. Paul still more, by not attempting to utter them…'
> (*Life*, ii.122-3)

Boehme's insights into what lay beyond ordinary apprehension interested Coleridge; for Johnson, they were imprudent ventures into what should not be spoken of – even if, as with Paul, the speaker's testimony was valid.

For Coleridge, an artwork expresses the universal (say, the nature of love) in the concrete (say, the tale of two lovers in Verona). And, since it is the artist who shows the way into the mysterious universal, the mind of the artist has itself a kind of sacredness about it. Bate is not merely being mischievous when he says that 'we begin to feel, in reading Coleridge's criticism, that Shakespeare is almost the only poet, and Coleridge is his prophet'.[293] Bate revealingly quotes Coleridge saying that Shakespeare had a special capacity 'to have the *universal* which is potentially

[292] Bate, *Coleridge*, 151.
[293] Bate, *Coleridge*, 152.

in each *particular*, opened out to him'.[294] If art is capable of solving such riddles, then the mind of the artist is unusual, exalted – things are 'opened out' to it which are not theirs. And out of this comes, almost inevitably, a tendency to worship the artist's mind. Johnson, by sealing off the mysteriousness of poetry, avoided that problem; he also rather too easily avoided what Coleridge confronted: the power of poetry to speak of mysteries, and to *seem*, at least, to be solving and uniting what is otherwise insoluble and scattered.

It is, once again, a matter of psychology. The mind, in Johnson's Lockean view, is apart from the external world, receiving constant impressions, and interpreting them, but not mingling or creating. For Coleridge – again, stepping out into an uncertain place – the mind has some role in making reality. The poet can 'produce that ultimate end of human thought and human feeling, unity, and thereby the reduction of the spirit to its principle and fountain, who alone is truly *One*' (*COS,* 65). Coleridge is not just speaking of the mind perceiving realty, but of the mind and the person experiencing it. Again, it is more than a metaphor when Coleridge writes of Shakespeare:

> in his very first productions he projected his mind out of his own particular being, and made others feel…by…that sublime faculty by which a great mind becomes that which it meditates on.
> (*COS*, 63)

A less Lockean, and less Johnsonian, idea of the mind's functions can hardly be imagined. These are deep waters, and this chapter is not going to spend long in them; only enough time to suggest some implications. For Coleridge, the artist is privy to such 'sublime' perception, rising to the act of creation, that they must be slightly different from the rest of us. And so Coleridge is more inclined to think Shakespeare godlike, and Johnson more inclined to think Shakespeare an unreliable character, like the rest of us, who sometimes needed a strong corrective, and sometimes to be laughed out of self-importance. Coleridge can be like Kent, exceptionally loyal

[294] *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn and Bart Keith Winer, 16 vols. in 34 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969-2002), V.ii.148.

('[T]he nearest to perfect goodness of all Shakespeare's characters', *COS*, 203) and reluctant, under the strongest provocation, to criticise his master. Johnson, at his most mischievous, plays the Fool – bringing the smothering atmosphere of court flattery back down to earth.

This returns us to the perceptiveness of R.H. Fogle's remark that 'Johnson was of course a great master of antithesis, which goes a long way towards explaining the reconciler Coleridge's extreme distaste for all his works.'[295] It is not just that Coleridge has a taste for reconciliation. His whole understanding of art as a revelation of the universal in the concrete, as an insight into the riddle of the universe, demands that one approach the artwork with reverence, abandoning oneself to the ineffable truths it opens up. That reverence is easily transferred to the artist. Johnson's 'damnable rage of judging by the faults', as Coleridge put it in a conversation with Southey he afterwards wrote up in his notebooks,[296] in effect denies that the artist has any such power. Coleridge compares 'The Poet' with Plato's Demiurge, the shaper of the physical universe; Shakespeare should be treated with due awe, not with the

> vile Johnsonian Antithesis of Black & White/One would suppose from Johnson's Preface that Sh. Was a pie-bald Poet – & that he, the Critic, was standing by, in the worthy employment of counting & pointing out, black spot~~s~~ against white – hence: a black spots [sic] on his right ear, just half an inch in diameter – but just on his forehead there is a white spot, of the same size – & so on thro' the whole skin of the poor becritick'd A~~min~~nimal.

Johnson, in Coleridge's opinion, cannot see past the concrete to the universal. Coleridge, presented with this pie-bald animal, would be more concerned with what it said about the animal as a universal. Here is Coleridge defending fairy tales for children:

> I know no other way of giving the mind a love of 'the Great', & 'the Whole'. – Those who have been led to the same truths step by step thro' the constant testimony of their senses,

[295] 'Coleridge and Criticism: II: Critical Practice', 147-166, in R.L. Brett, ed., *Writers and their Background: S.T. Coleridge* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1971), 156.
[296] Coleridge, *Notebooks*, iii.3952-3.

> seem to me to want a sense which I possess – They contemplate nothing but *parts* – and all *parts* are necessarily little – and the Universe to them is but a mass of *little things*.[297]

For Johnson, according to Boswell, it is precisely "by studying little things that we attain the great art of having as little misery and as much happiness as possible" (*Life*, i.433).

Coleridge is more interested in what a poet, qua poet, is like: 'One character attaches to all true poets: they write from a principle within, independent of everything without' (*COS*, 108). '[T]he poet is one who carries the simplicity of childhood into the powers of manhood' (*COS*, 50). Here, then, is the point of conflict: does the author see into the heart of things, and bring otherwise inaccessible truths, as much as possible, down to our level? Or does he, as *Adventurer* 107 recommended, start from the basis that 'Life is not the object of science: we see a little, very little' (*Adventurer* 107, ii.445), and merely express that 'little' more clearly and more fruitfully, for the reader's use? It is more than a question of critical practice. It means that Coleridge and Johnson are arguing not just over Shakespeare, but over the whole question of authorship, and thus over their own lives.

Hazlitt's 'overstrained enthusiasm'

Hazlitt's quarrel with Johnson is a less bloody affair than Coleridge's, and in many ways it produces more light and less heat. Even so, Johnson is still the sacrificial victim or straw man. Hazlitt finishes the 'Preface' to his *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* with the declaration that 'If Dr Johnson's opinion was right, the following observations on Shakespear's plays must be greatly exaggerated, if not ridiculous' (Hazlitt, i.91). And as it turns out, Hazlitt's whole 'Preface' is almost

[297] Coleridge, *Letters*, i.354. Quoted in John Bayley, 'Coleridge and Poetry: I. Poems of the Supernatural', 45-90, in R.L. Brett, ed., *Writers and their Background: S.T. Coleridge* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1971), 52;

as much about Johnson as it is about Shakespeare. It begins by quoting Pope on the individuality of Shakespeare's characters, partly so that he can then use this as evidence against Johnson. He then quotes a series of extracts from August Wilhelm von Schlegel, which mention only one other critic – Johnson – and only to reply to Johnson's doubts over Shakespeare's affected pathos. Those doubts are misplaced, Hazlitt thinks; but he does not set up Schlegel as the hero and Johnson as the villain, as Coleridge might have done it. Hazlitt translates Schlegel as writing: 'He has never, in fact, varnished over wild and blood-thirsty passions with a pleasing exterior, – never clothed crime and want of principle with a false show of greatness of soul; and in that respect he is in every way deserving of praise' (i.87).

The Coleridgean 'never' has reappeared, and Hazlitt is capable – as we will see – of such enthusiasm. But he refuses to go as far as Schlegel: reviewing the German's *Lectures on Dramatic Literature* on a separate occasion, he writes, 'If Shakespeare never found a thorough partisan before, he has found one now.... He defends him on all points' (Hazlitt, i.299). Hazlitt distances himself from this: 'It is no part of our poetical creed, that genius can do no wrong.' Even so:

> Take the whole of these faults, throw them into one scale, heap them up double, and then double that, and we will throw into the opposite scale single excellencies, single characters, or even single passages, that shall outweigh them all! All his faults have not prevented him from showing as much knowledge of human nature, in all possible shapes, as is to be found in all other poets put together; and that, we conceive, is quite enough for one writer. Compared with this magical power, his faults are just as much consequence as his bad spelling, and to be accounted for in the same way.

In that expression 'magical power', the language of idolatry is creeping back. Hazlitt himself cheerfully refers to 'Our idolatry of Shakespear' (i.266). Of course this is not entirely serious, but nor is it entirely a joke. Hazlitt uses the language of Shakespeare-as-creator, Shakespeare-as-originator, Shakespeare-as-beyond-the-limits-of-ordinary-mortality so frequently as to be dependent on it. 'Shakspeare's mind...contained a universe of thought and feeling within itself... He was nothing in himself; but he was all that others were, or that they could become....all the

people that ever lived are there' (*Lectures on the English Poets*, Hazlitt, ii.208). 'He had only to think of any thing in order to become that thing, with all the circumstances belonging to it…as if by touching a secret spring' (i.209). '[A]ll that passed through the mind of Macbeth passes, without the loss of a tittle, through ours' (i.99).

He is rather more sober about the *Henry IV* plays: 'He appears to have been all the characters, and in all the situations he describes. It is as if either he had their feelings, or had lent them all his genius to express themselves' (i.193). Again: 'Each of his characters is as much itself, and as absolutely independent of the rest, as if they were living persons, not fictions of the mind' (i.300). Just as often Hazlitt dispenses with the 'appears' and the 'as if', and straightforwardly claims that 'Shakespear does not stand reasoning on what his characters would do or say, but at once *becomes* them, and speaks and acts for them…he brings living men and women on the scene, who speak and act from real feelings.' This could be taken as an enthusiastic way of describing Shakespeare's enthusiasm. But it is more than that:

> Hamlet is a name; his speeches and sayings are but the idle coinage of the poet's brain. What then, are they not real? They are as real as our own thoughts. Their reality is in the reader's mind. It is *we* who are Hamlet. The play has a prophetic truth, which is above that of history.
> (i.143)

Hazlitt thought that Shakespeare's genius could dissolve the borders between reality and fiction: the reader becomes Hamlet. Johnson thought this kind of reality-bending talk absurd. On a closely related point, he once asked John Philip Kemble:

> 'Are you, Sir, one of those enthusiasts who believe yourself transformed into the very character you represent?' Upon Mr Kemble's answering that he had never felt so strong a persuasion himself; 'To be sure not, Sir (said Johnson). The thing is impossible. And if Garrick really believed himself to be that monster Richard the Third, he deserved to be hanged every time he performed it.'
> (*Life*, v.243-4)

The word 'enthusiasts' indicates that, for Johnson, the language of out-of-body experience, applied to drama, was too close for comfort to false religious experience. That critique would go for Coleridge's images of Shakespeare as Proteus or 'the Spinozistic deity'.

Hazlitt's critique of Johnson is less antagonistic than Coleridge's. Indeed, he encourages 'those who have a prejudice against Johnson' to 'read Boswell's Life of him'. (Hazlitt, i.89) He confesses to 'a high respect for Dr Johnson's character and understanding, mixed with something like personal attachment' (i.88). He disagrees with Johnson frequently, but many of his references are courteous: 'Much as we like Shakespear's comedies, we cannot agree with Dr Johnson that they are better than his tragedies' (i.222). Sometimes Hazlitt is rather ambiguous: on *Henry VIII*, he quotes Johnson saying that only in the character of Katherine is Shakespeare's genius present. 'This is easily said; but with all due deference to so great a reputed authority as that of Johnson, it is not true' (i.211-12). What is the force of 'reputed' here? Does Johnson deserve his authoritative reputation? And what 'deference' is 'due' to him, exactly? Hazlitt's words could be read as respectful or disrespectful, or both.

Hazlitt lays the following charges against Johnson: he was 'without any particular fineness of organic sensibility' or 'intenseness of passion' (i.90); 'he was neither a poet nor a judge of poetry' (i.88); and – most condescendingly – 'Johnson's understanding dealt only in round numbers' (i.89). Before examining those charges, we might usefully define Hazlitt's terms, and ask what he means by 'passion', 'poetry', and 'round numbers'.

'Passion', for Hazlitt, is something felt and sensed. Quoting some lines of Perdita's describing flowers, he comments: 'No one who does not feel the passion which these objects inspire can go along with the imagination which seeks to express that passion and the uneasy sense of delight accompanying it…and no one can feel this passionate love of nature without quick natural sensibility' (i.90). Shakespeare's characters 'speak and act from real feelings, according to the ebbs and flows of passion, without the least tincture of pedantry of logic or rhetoric' (i.139). 'Passion', then, is distinct from reflection. Johnson would not challenge Hazlitt on this point:

Shakespeare's characters, he writes in the 'Preface', are subject to 'the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated' (vii.62). Passions, this suggests, have a different role from the 'principles' which result from conscious decision-making. 'Passion', in the *Dictionary*, is 'Any effect caused by external agency'; there follows a series of more psychological definitions, 'Violent commotion of the mind', 'Anger', 'Zeal; ardour', 'Love', 'Eagerness'. These have in common that they seem to take over the mind. The most relevant definitions for 'Principle', meanwhile, are 'Ground of action; motive', and 'Tenet on which morality is founded'. These imply a process of reflection. Johnson likes *Macbeth* because 'The passions are directed to their true end.' The passions, finally, do not have the answer within themselves; they must be 'directed', or to use a favourite Johnsonian term, 'regulated' by reason (*Rambler* 49, iii.266).

And here Hazlitt differs from Johnson: he allows the passions their autonomy, indeed he will tolerate the passions claiming domination over reason. When Hazlitt accuses Johnson of wanting 'to regulate the passions according to reason' (Hazlitt, i.90), Johnson would surely have pleaded guilty. It is poets, Hazlitt says, who enthrone passions over the reason:

> Matters of fact they embellish at their will, and reason is the play-thing of their passions, their caprice, or interest…
> ('On Poetical Versatility', ii.150)

This seems to accept the slur that poets are liars. Hazlitt neither confirms nor denies it; instead, he explains that there is more than one kind of truth:

> …the imagination is that power which represents objects, not as they are, but as they are moulded according to our fancies and feelings…the language of the imagination…is not the less true to nature because it is false in point of fact; but so much the more true and natural, if it conveys the impression which the object under the influence of passion makes upon the mind.
> (Review of W.A. Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Literature*, i.275-6)

The 'fact' is one thing, the mind's 'impression' another. And Hazlitt does not merely say that these are incommensurable: he allows that they may contradict each other. A famous passage on

Coriolanus argues that 'The language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power' (i.125-6). While 'the understanding', by 'dividing and measuring', gives everything its due, and so embodies justice, the imagination distorts: it aims 'to give the greatest possible effect to a favourite object'. Poetry 'seeks the greatest quantity of present excitement... It admits of no medium. It is every thing by excess... It has its altars and its victims, sacrifices, human sacrifices.' Hazlitt is not entirely comfortable that poetry, which he loves, can be put to the service of injustice; but his tone suggests that he would rather keep the poetry than eliminate the injustice. Poetry distorts the truth and creates its own truth: to Johnson, that is exactly why poetry's passions have to be reined in by reason; to Hazlitt, it is why we have to adapt our expectations.

The alternative, for Hazlitt, is a brutish insensitivity. If you will not allow the passions their head, allow them to drive away reason and truth and justice, you are doomed to misunderstand human nature. That this path leads to 'human sacrifice' troubles Hazlitt a little, but not enough. The risk is worth taking for the sake of poetic truth. Johnson (Hazlitt believes) cannot face the passions, cannot face poetry. He keeps his head stuck in the rulebook. To come, at last, to Hazlitt's critique:

> Johnson's understanding dealt only in round numbers: the fractions were lost upon him... To him an excess of beauty was a fault; for it appeared to him like an excrescence; and his imagination was dazzled by the blaze of light. The shifting shapes of fancy, the rainbow hues of things, made no impression on him: he seized only on the permanent and tangible...he could not quit his hold of the common-place and mechanical, and apply the general rule to the particular exception, or shew how the nature of man was modified by the workings of passion.
> (i.89)

Hazlitt gives us an absolute choice: a critic can either confront 'the workings of passion', or they can only cling to the 'general rule'. They can respond to beauty, or they can call it a fault. This stark division ends by doing Johnson an injustice. If only Hazlitt had confined himself to saying that Johnson was less interested in 'the rainbow hues' than he should have been, he would have

avoided overstatement. But he reaches for the dangerous language of 'only', 'all', and 'no interest'. So, as his great example of Johnson's round-numbers mind, he offers this:

> Thus he says of Shakespear's characters, in contradiction to what Pope has observed, and to what every one feels, that each character is a species, instead of being an individual. He in fact found the general species or *didactic* form in Shakespear's characters, which was all he cared for; he did not find the individual traits…because he felt no interest in them.
> (i.89-90)

If Hazlitt was right about Johnson's algebraic, passionless mind, this is just what we would expect: Johnson would see Shakespeare's characters not in their beautiful variety and individuality, but in containers marked 'jealousy', 'courage' and so on. But does Johnson really think this?

> His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places… His persons speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated… In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species.
> (*Works*, vii.62)

'Too often' is the key phrase: for Johnson, a character is uninteresting if it does not relate at all to our own experience. A 'species' of human nature need not be a stereotype: it may just be a believable and recognisable 'type'. Yet this does not rule out a great range of personality. And Johnson's qualifying comment punctures Hazlitt's criticism. Hazlitt claims that Johnson refused to see Shakespeare's characters as 'individuals' with 'individual traits'. Yet here are Johnson's actual words:

> Characters thus ample and general were not easily discriminated and preserved, yet perhaps no poet ever kept his personages more distinct from each other.
> (vii.64)

Shakespeare, then, produced characters of universal relevance; and yet they are magnificently 'distinct' and diverse. One critic who echoes Johnson extremely closely on this point is Coleridge. 'Shakespeare's characters', J.P. Collier reports Coleridge saying, '…may be termed ideal realities…

Take Dogberry… he is not the creature of the day, to disappear with the day, but the representative and aspect of truth which must ever be true' (*COS*, 99). 'Sometimes the ideal is more prominent, sometimes the individual' (*COS* , 104).

That chimes with Johnson's careful remark that Shakespeare's characters are 'commonly' representative of a species. And Collier reports Coleridge saying 'that Shakespeare was almost the only dramatic poet who by his characters represented a class and not an individual' (*COS*, 117): even the phrasing is close to Johnson's 'too often an individual…commonly a species'. There may be a submerged difference between Johnson and Hazlitt over how much humankind can be generalised about. Johnson, with a strong belief in universal human nature, is more likely to believe that society can be analysed in terms of types. 'Men…forget the common nature of humanity,' he writes in Sermon 19 (*Works*, xiv.211). *Rambler* 60 claims 'There is such a uniformity in the state of man, considered apart from adventitious and separable decorations and disguises, that there is scarce any possibility of good or ill, but is common to human kind' (iii.320). Leave that aside, though: Hazlitt's portrait of Johnson, on this point, must be seen as sheer caricature. Hazlitt sets up a division – characters as individuals versus as species – which does not apply to Johnson, and then arbitrarily assigns to Johnson one half of the choice.

Like Coleridge, though to a lesser extent, Hazlitt's reading of Johnson suffers from zealous exaggeration. The claim that Johnson can only deal with round numbers is vulnerable to close scrutiny. To quote *Rambler* 92 again, Johnson distinguishes between those parts of literature which can be reasoned about and, on the other hand, 'the nameless and inexplicable elegancies which appeal wholly to the fancy, from which we feel delight, but know not how they produce it, and which may well be termed the enchantresses of the soul' (iv.122). Johnson was prepared to 'delight' in the 'inexplicable' – hardly a statement you would expect from a critic who only welcomed round numbers.

Hazlitt is surely onto something, but he believes Johnson to be utterly insensitive, when it is more a matter of different priorities. As with Coleridge, there is something more at stake. And Hazlitt is explicit about it. Johnson is not enthusiastic enough. He keeps too much distance:

> …our own countryman, Dr Johnson, has not been so favourable to him. It may be said of Shakespear, that 'those who are not for him are against him:' for indifference is here the height of injustice. We may sometimes, in order 'to do a great right, do a little wrong.' An overstrained enthusiasm is more pardonable with respect to Shakespear than the want of it; for our admiration cannot easily surpass his genius.
> (Hazlitt, i.88)

No reader of Johnson's 'Preface' could believe him to be 'against' Shakespeare; but for Hazlitt, as for Coleridge, to be 'for' Shakespeare means something more than Johnson can offer. It means a kind of surrender, an 'overstrained enthusiasm'. This enthusiasm washes away doubts and reservations; as with Coleridge's scorn for Johnson's 'pie-bald' Shakespeare, Hazlitt is incredulous that Johnson can balance praise and criticism so casually: he 'seems more bent on maintaining the equilibrium of his style than the consistency of his opinions' (Hazlitt, i.91).

Johnson certainly seeks out mistakes more keenly than does Hazlitt. Johnson is not so preoccupied with what the 'Preface to Shakespeare' calls 'the pleasures of sudden wonder' but rather with 'general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated' (*Works*, vii.61-2). The most important response to literature is not excitement, but a more rational contemplation. And so when reading poetry, he is far more inclined to keep the critical judgment switched on, to be looking for faults even in the writers he most admires. Bertrand Bronson, in his edition of Johnson's Shakespeare, remarks that 'Johnson's fault-finding, exaggerated by some critics, was no new departure in Shakespeare criticism… Indeed, most of his criticism in this part of the Preface follows well-travelled roads' (*Works*, vii.71n7). In some ways Johnson was a representative of eighteenth-century criticism. But his prominence made him a target for enthusiastic bardolaters. His later criticism also offended literary pieties. Tom Mason and Adam Rounce point out that

Johnson's irreverence towards poetry was frequently cited against *The Lives of the Poets*: 'He obtruded coarse witticism where, as his detractors saw it, angels should fear to tread'.[298]

Johnson writes in the 'Preface': 'Shakespeare with his excellencies has likewise faults, and faults sufficient to obscure and overwhelm any other merit' (*Works*, vii.71). John Mullan calls this sentence 'remarkable…because Johnson unnecessarily suggests that Shakespeare's faults might be enough to cancel out all that is admirable in his work.'[299] In the same essay, he suggests that Johnson sometimes offers 'a counterbalance to praise that has too easily been given to a poet'.[300] This last reason seems to be a major cause: Johnson thinks that others would deny or gloss over the faults of an acclaimed poet, especially one so acclaimed as Shakespeare. He goes on, a little defensively, to justify his fault-finding:

> I shall shew them in the proportion in which they appear to me, without envious malignity or superstitious veneration. No question can be more innocently discussed than a dead poet's pretensions to renown; and little regard is due to that bigotry which sets candour higher than truth.
> (vii.71)

Coleridge might have accused Johnson of 'envious malignity'. Johnson would probably have found Coleridge and Hazlitt guilty of 'superstitious veneration and of sacrificing truth to 'candour' ('kindness' – *Dictionary*). For Hazlitt, there comes a moment when, in order really to experience Shakespeare, the reader must put aside objections; Johnson is more likely to be worried by a bad literary example. So in *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth's soliloquy at I.v.40-54 ('Come all you spirits…') draws forth very different responses. Hazlitt just says that the Macbeths' 'deliberate sacrifice of all other considerations' except power 'is gorgeously expressed in her invocation' (i.101). Johnson, by contrast, in *Rambler* 168, is disappointed by the speech's vocabulary.

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[298] Adam Rounce and Tom Mason, '"Looking Before and After"? Reflections on the Early Reception of Johnson's Critical Judgments', in Smallwood, ed., *Johnson Re-Visioned*, 134-66: 136.
[299] Mullan, 'Fault Finding', in Johnston and Mugglestone, ed., *Arc of the Pendulum*, 73.
[300] Ibid., 75.

> Come, thick night!
> And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
> That my keen knife see not the wound it makes…[301]

For Johnson 'dunnest' is 'an epithet now seldom heard but in the stable, and *dun* night may come and go without any other notice than contempt' (v.127). Moreover, 'we do not immediately conceive that any crime of importance is to be committed with a *knife*' (v.128). The word seems more suited to the kitchen. It is a failure of decorum.

To Hazlitt, this would prove the point about Johnson referring to the rulebook when a properly responsive mind would be caught up in the action. But Johnson seems deeply affected by Lady Macbeth's speech:

> In this passage is exerted all the force of poetry, that force which calls new powers into being, which embodies sentiment, and animates matter… What can be more dreadful than to implore the presence of night, invested not in common obscurity, but in the smoke of hell?…we cannot surely but sympathise with the horrors of a wretch about to murder his master, his friend, his benefactor, who suspects that the weapon will refuse its office, and start back from the breast which he is preparing to violate.'
> (v.128)

This indicates a stronger, more passionate reaction than Hazlitt's phrase 'gorgeously expressed'. Again, Hazlitt states as an either-or what can be a both-and: Johnson's high standards coexist with his strong emotional response.

Hazlitt's portrayal of Johnson as a cold, unfeeling critic seems especially false in the light of Johnson's words on the ending of *Lear*:

> I might relate, that I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor.
> (*Works*, viii.704)

[301] *The Complete Works*, ed. Wells and Taylor, gives 'Come, thick night, / And' etc.

Still, this admission is exceptional in Johnson's criticism. He is less likely than Hazlitt to record his strongest feelings. Both critics admit that criticism cannot really do justice to the greatest literature; it is telling that they react to this in different ways. Johnson says of *Othello*: 'the beauties of this play impress themselves so strongly upon the attention of the reader, that they can draw no aid from critical illustration' (viii.1047). It is not just that criticism shouldn't deal with the enchantresses of the soul, but that it can't. Hazlitt nearly agrees with this way of thinking, saying of *Lear*: 'We wish that we could pass this play over, and say nothing about it. All that we can say must fall far short of the subject; or even of what we ourselves conceive of it. To attempt to give a description of the play itself or of its effect upon the mind, is mere impertinence' (Hazlitt, i.167). But then he adds: 'yet we must say something.' The urge to 'say something', to respond, was not felt by Johnson.

These are different styles of criticism, and behind them lie different ways of seeing the world. Coleridge defends Shakespeare against charges of immorality with rather unpersuasive stridency; Hazlitt turns the charge on its head. He accepts at one moment that 'Shakespear was in one sense the least moral of all writers' (Hazlitt, i.255); but he hastens to qualify the point:

> for morality (commonly so called) is made up of antipathies; and his talent consisted in sympathy with human nature, in all its shapes, degrees, depressions, and elevations. The object of the pedantic moralist is to find out the bad in every thing; his was to shew that 'there is some soul of goodness in things evil' [Henry V, IV.i.5]... In one sense, Shakespear was no moralist at all: in another, he was the greatest of all moralists. He was a moralist in the same sense in which nature is one. He taught what he had learnt from her. He shewed the greatest knowledge of humanity with the greatest fellow-feeling for it.

There are two types of morality, Hazlitt claims: one, the boring, rule-bound kind, which tries to turn human life into an exercise in logic, and so to 'find out the bad'; the other, the untrammelled, thrilling engagement with human nature in all its complex reality. Johnson, on the evidence of the 'Preface', would disagree with that division. It is precisely the rules of morality which answer to the complex reality of human nature, he would argue; the rules are not an alternative to realism,

but a necessary part (if only a part) of it. 'He that thinks reasonably must think morally': a reasonable play must have a strong moral form.

> His first defect is that to which may be imputed most of the evil in books or in men. He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose. From his writings indeed a system of social duty may be selected, for he that thinks reasonably must think morally; but his precepts and axioms drop casually from him; he makes no just distribution of good or evil, nor is always careful to shew in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked; he carries his persons indifferently though right and wrong, and at the close dismisses them without further care, and leaves their examples to operate by chance.
> ('Preface to Shakespeare', *Works*, vii.71)

The ideal writer would have a definite 'moral purpose', and so take care to 'instruct' even when it would be easier to entertain. They would display clearly intelligible 'examples' of good and bad characters, good and bad actions. The 'wicked' would be openly condemned, and the characters' final position 'at the close' would demonstrate the wisdom of acting well. *Rambler* 4 outlines similar positions: 'when the choice' of incidents and characters 'is unrestrained, the best examples only should be exhibited' (iii.22) and 'Vice, for vice is necessary to be shewn, should always disgust' (iii.24) – a principle Johnson would later apply to Iago.

However, Johnson knew that this kind of moralistic reading had its limits. He half-accepts the ending of *Lear* because 'A play in which the wicked prosper, and the virtuous miscarry, may doubtless be good, because it is a just representation of the common events of human life; but since all human beings naturally love justice,' it would be better to have a just ending 'if other excellencies are equal' (viii.704). John Wain reasonably comments: 'when our business is with tragedy, we must sometimes plumb the depths, so that other 'excellencies' cannot be equal'.[302] But it shows that Johnson knew a good play was not just a moral play.

Hazlitt is not indifferent to a play's moral bearing. It is he, not Johnson, who acclaims the justice in *Antony and Cleopatra* of Antony meeting 'a merited punishment' (Hazlitt, i.142); it is

[302] 'Introduction', John Wain, ed., *Johnson as Critic* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 49.

Hazlitt who says of *Othello* that 'the moral it conveys has a closer application to the concerns of human life than that of almost any other of Shakespear's plays' (i.112). Johnson's summative judgment makes no reference to this, rather concentrating on 'the beauties of this play' (*Works*, viii.1047). Hazlitt can be a moralist, and Johnson can be an aesthete. Over the whole body of work, however, their critical personalities are drawn in different directions. For Johnson, the moral implications of a literary work are one of the first things that should be investigated. For Hazlitt, finally, the rules of morality should not be applied too closely: 'the drab-coloured quakerism of morality' is an alternative to interesting literature. Here he is on Hamlet:

> The moral perfection of this character has been called in question, we think, by those who did not understand it. It is more interesting than according to rules; amiable, though not faultless. The ethical delineations of 'that noble and liberal casuist' (as Shakespeare has well been called [by Lamb]) do not exhibit the drab-coloured quakerism of morality. His plays are not copied either from the Whole Duty of man, or from the Academy of Compliments!'
> (Hazlitt, i.146)

And so Hazlitt is with Coleridge on the innocuousness of Hamlet's plotting to damn Claudius. Hamlet's words are 'in truth only an excuse for his own want of resolution' (i.144). Morality is not the important issue in the scene; the important matter is psychological realism. Or Shakespeare is bringing before us a certain kind of perfectionism: 'He is the prince of philosophical speculators; and because he cannot have his revenge perfect, according to the most refined idea his wish can form, he declines it altogether' (i.145). Like Coleridge, Hazlitt does not deny the moral ugliness which Johnson points out; but both Romantic critics reduce the moral aspect to very small importance, and suggest that the real issues raised by the scene are much more interesting. Johnson is more interested in morality, more convinced of its importance in a literary work. For Hazlitt, moral questions must be transformed into questions of artistic excellence if they are really to count.

As with Coleridge, there is an implied dispute here about the operations of the mind. Hazlitt suspects that Shakespeare's art, for instance in *Romeo and Juliet*, is at odds with

> The modern philosophy, which reduces the whole theory of the mind to habitual impressions, and leaves the natural impulses of passion and imagination out of the account.
> (i.159)

That 'philosophy' is the background of Johnson's thought, and Hazlitt is right to say that 'passion and imagination' are not easily reconciled with it. That was why Johnson mostly left them out of his critical account, referring to 'beauties', 'enchantresses' and so on, and leaving the matter there. Yet there was a certain practical use in this, as Hazlitt unwittingly suggests when he develops his argument. Against the Platonic theory of a forgotten infant perception, which Wordsworth adumbrated in the Immortality Ode, Hazlitt says

> There is no need to resort to any mystical union of transmission of feeling through different states of being to account for the romantic enthusiasm of youth; nor to plant the root of hope in the grave, nor to derive it from the skies. Its root is in the heart of man.... Desire and imagination are inmates of the human breast.
> (i.160)

Even a mildly sceptical reader might wonder how Hazlitt's references to 'the human breast' and 'the heart' are any less mystical than Wordsworth's Platonism. Now, Johnson thought Burke's *Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* 'an example of true criticism' because it addresses itself to direct personal responses: "You must shew how terror is impressed on the human heart" (*Life*, ii.90). He criticises Addison's *Cato* because 'its hopes and fears communicate no vibration to the heart' (*Lives*, iii.26). Yet Johnson, while acknowledging the 'passion and imagination' which literature raised, did not engage with them as directly as Hazlitt does.

He avoided, to put it simply, language which smacked of religious fervour and 'superstition'. Johnson has his doubts about the transformative power of literature alone. M.H. Abrams usefully summarises this difference: Johnson conceives of poetry as prompting us, by

'telling and demonstrating what to do', to become better, whereas for Wordsworth, 'poetry, by sanitizing, purifying, and strengthening the feelings, directly *makes* us better'.[303] Again, this comes close to literature as a religion. Hazlitt and Coleridge both spoke in such terms, and they were right to see Johnson as an opponent.

The exact nature of that opposition would take another thesis to explain. It is a difference in historical period and philosophical conviction. It has to do, also, with a tendency of Johnson's well summed up in Christopher Ricks's words (quoted earlier). Johnson tackled questions by identifying certain useful principles; he chose 'to think thereafter about the application of the principles rather than to elaborate principle into theory'.[304] Elaborating principle into theory came more naturally to the authors of *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* and the *Biographia Literaria* respectively.

Ridicule of Johnson

Johnson's resistance to theory could be a strength, but it also left him silent on matters which the Romantics thought of prime importance. Hazlitt and Coleridge were more interested in, and more reverent towards, literature and its creators; at the same time, they were fascinated by kinds of experience which Johnson preferred not to investigate too closely, though he knew that they existed. So it suited the Romantic authors to portray Johnson as narrow (limited to 'round numbers') – too narrow to understand what intrigued them; or as angry – which would also explain his insensitivity. The two accusations feed off each other: Johnson can be depicted as

[303] M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 330.
[304] Ricks, *Essays in Appreciation*, 323.

raging impotently against what he does not understand, or as so consumed with malignity that he excludes himself from common human experience.

Coleridge and Hazlitt did not invent this tradition by themselves. As James L. Clifford and Donald Greene note, even within Johnson's lifetime, the familiar lines of criticism were emerging: 'Johnson's prose is abominable, his knowledge of lexicography and Shakespeare editing is inadequate to the tasks he undertakes, as a political writer he can be dismissed as a blind Tory bigot, his criticism and biography suffer from rancor and prejudice.'[305] In Gillray's *Apollo and the Muses, inflicting Penance on Dr. Pomposo, round Parnassus* (1783), published a year before Johnson's death, Johnson appears stripped to the waist, with a rope around his neck, being scourged by the Muses as he walks round the mountain of the poets. He is wearing a dunce's cap on which the names of various defenceless victims of Johnson's malice, such as Milton and Gray, are written.

Many things might be noted about Gillray's cartoon, including the strange delight in Johnson's physical bulk, the better to humiliate him. Two other aspects are particularly interesting, as examples of how Johnson is approached. Firstly, the assumption that he has some dark motivation: the sign he has to carry reads 'For defaming that Genius I could never emulate, by criticism without Judgment'. Johnson is seen as so frustrated by the superiority of others that he has to pull them down. This seems inconsistent with Johnson's character – he was frequently rude, but not a bearer of grudges, and in fact notably generous – and so Gillray divides up Johnson into two: a pair of winged books, one 'An ESSAY on ENVY, dedicated to D^{r}. Johnson as an Author'; the other 'An ESSAY on the Milk of Human Kindness, dedicated to D^{r}. Johnson as a Man'. A split personality is foisted on Johnson, to explain his critical aberrations.

Within Johnson's lifetime the outlines of Romantic criticism were already visible. The *Monthly Review* of 1782 praised the *Lives of the Poets*, but the reviewer noticed that Johnson had a

[305] James L. Clifford and Donald J. Greene, *Samuel Johnson: A Survey and Bibliography of Critical Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970), 6.

blind spot: he liked 'method, ratiocination, and argument', especially when they were delivered in rhyme; but 'the bold and enthusiastic, though perhaps irregular, flights of imagination, are past by with perverse and obstinate indifference.'[306] Again, the reviewer sees 'enthusiastic' as a term of approval or neutrality, where Johnson saw it as a condemnation. Rather than accepting this as a different set of standards, the reviewer puts it down to Johnson's personal flaws: 'Instances too frequently occur, in which the Critic's judgment seems altogether under the dominion of predilection or prejudice.'

This review presages much Romantic criticism by moving quickly from a lack of sympathy into the *ad hominem*; and if memory of Johnson's personal goodness comes to mind, a distinct character, Johnson the malicious writer, is created. Some of the approaches are wild: so William Mudford claims Johnson is so gloomy that 'he must have turned away with visible horror and disgust from all that bore the smiles of happiness, or the gaiety of mirth'.[307] William Cowper, meanwhile, believes Johnson incapable of writing 'upon the subject of love, a passion which I suppose he never felt in his life'.[308] Neither of those judgments could survive even a shallow acquaintance with Boswell's *Life*.

Johnson's attitudes are explained by making him less than human, incapable of humour or of love; an extremism to which we have already seen Coleridge tending. Gillray intimates that Johnson's literary opinions are formed by envy: likewise, de Quincey speaks of Johnson's 'eternal malice'.[309] For Anna Seward, 'he is too perpetually stimulated by rival-hating envy'.[310] The three words one sees again and again are 'malignity', 'envy', and 'prejudice': all, in different ways, cut

[306] *Monthly Review*, 66 (1782), in Spittal, ed., *Contemporary Criticisms*, 291.
[307] *Critical Enquiry into the Moral Writings of Dr. Samuel Johnson* (London, 1802), quoted in Boulton, *Critical Heritage*, 77.
[308] Letter to William Unwin, 5 January 1782, *Letters*, ii.5.
[309] *Critical Suggestions on Style and Rhetoric, with German Tales, and Other Narrative Papers* (1859), in *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Frederick Burwick et al, 21 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000-2003), xx.120.
[310] Letter to T.S. Whalley, 7 April 1789, quoted in Boulton, ed., *Critical Heritage*, 311.

Johnson off from ordinary human standards. His errors, then, proceed from flaws in his character. We have already traced this line of thought in Coleridge.

Others, like Hazlitt, see him as entirely insensitive to large areas of human experience. It is interesting to note how Johnson is repeatedly pictured as an isolated figure, unable to connect with anything outside his own narrow intellectual bounds. So Robert Potter thinks of Johnson as utterly lacking in 'that ethereal flame that animates the poet: he is therefore as little qualified to judge of these works of imagination, as the shivering inhabitants of the caverns of the North to form an idea of the glowing sun that flames over the plains of Chili'.[311] Hazlitt pictures him in a state of 'morbid apprehension' on 'the rock' 'of established authority and received dogmas', while 'the waves and billows of uncertain and dangerous opinion roar and heave for evermore' (v.94). Johnson is closed off from experience.

Perhaps it is this which leads to the view of Johnson as first and foremost a personality rather than a writer. The criticism of him, with its frequently personal tone, is building up a character sketch which, if not accurate, is at least imaginatively appealing. So Gillray's 'author' and 'man' are conflated, at the expense of serious treatment of Johnson. He is reduced, caricatured – and then made endearing. Both Wordsworth and Hazlitt temper their stern censure of Johnson with compliments to him as (to quote Wordsworth's faint praise) an 'able writer and amiable man'.[312] Yet, by making Johnson's intellectual preferences a matter of character, these readings focus attention on the biographical figure of Johnson. Hazlitt writes: 'The most triumphant record of the talents and character of Johnson is to be found in Boswell's Life of him. The man was superior to the author' (Hazlitt, *Works*, v. 94).

Admittedly, this was also Burke's position: he agreed with James Mackintosh's assessment that Boswell's *Life* 'was a greater monument to Johnson's fame, than all his writings put

[311] Robert Potter, *Inquiry into some passages in Dr. Johnson's Lives of the Poets* (London, 1783), 38.

[312] 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface' (1815), in *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, ed. W.J. B. Owen (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 201.

together.'[313] And the attacks on Johnson were not without foundation. As this chapter has indicated, Johnson's criticism did exclude important matters. But he was a much more flexible and broadminded critic than either Hazlitt or Coleridge allowed. The caricature of Johnson exaggerated some real features and ignored others. There may have been ulterior motives for dismissing Johnson as a red-faced bigot. 'He became', as Clifford and Greene remark, 'a symbol of reaction to the young poets of the next age. The Romantics, with the exception of Scott and Byron, used him as a whipping boy to advance their own theories of art.'[314] What were those theories, and why was Johnson a useful antagonist for them? That question needs another chapter.

[313] Robert James Mackintosh, *Memoirs of the Life of the Right Honourable Sir James Mackintosh*, 2 vols. (London, 1835), i.92; quoted in *Life*, i.10n1.

[314] Clifford and Greene, *Survey and Bibliography*, 3.

7 The Romantic Author and the Johnsonian Author

Generalising about 'Romanticism' elides many differences. Even in their attitudes to Johnson, Romantic authors were not identical. Byron lionised Johnson, for instance.[315] But the form that much criticism of Johnson takes, as discussed in the last chapter, does seem to be a microcosm of bigger movements of thought which have been noted in studies of Romanticism.

Tim Blanning's *The Romantic Revolution* identifies the 'elevation of genius' as a key aspect of Romanticism.[316] 'By 1800 "genius" had ceased to be one characteristic among many that an individual might possess and had progressed to encompass the whole person.'[317] One important factor was 'the secularisation of European society and the simultaneous sacralisation of its culture…. For a growing number of educated Europeans, both traditional doctrines and traditional institutions were no longer sufficient.' Art came to 'fill the transcendental gap' left by the absence of religion. This corresponds with the reverence towards authors with which Johnson contended.

As Blanning goes on to say, for Johnson 'art' was roughly synonymous with 'skill'; whereas 'A generation later, art had advanced to become the supreme form of human activity.'[318] At Beethoven's death, he was celebrated as a 'secular redeemer'. For Novalis, 'books and art and nature' were a 'secret church' where one could find 'a lover and a friend, a fatherland and a God'; for Goethe, 'True poetry' was 'a secular gospel'.[319] Part of this sacralisation was protective: Blanning notes that this was also the age when 'philistine' acquired its meaning. Art, being sacred, must be at a distance from the careless, ignorant public.[320] Rousseau had launched 'a revolution,

[315] See Freya Johnston, 'Byron's Johnson', in Howard D. Weinbrot, ed., *Samuel Johnson: New Contexts for a New Century* (San Marino: Huntington Library Press, 2014), 295-311.
[316] Tim Blanning, *The Romantic Revolution* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2010), 36.
[317] Ibid., 36.
[318] Ibid., 37.
[319] Ibid., 45-6.
[320] Ibid., 48.

one which placed the creator, not the created, at the centre of aesthetic activity'.[321] Blanning identifies a 'truly radical departure': instead of a 'mimetic aesthetic centred on the work', Romantic thought tended towards

> an *expressive* aesthetic which put the creator at the centre… This was the essence of the romantic revolution: from now on artistic creativity was to be *from the inside out*. In Hegel's pithy formulation, romanticism was 'absolute inwardness'.[322]

Here Blanning is close to Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, which approaches the same phenomenon from the viewpoint of a philosopher rather than a historian. What Taylor calls 'The Expressivist Turn' is not to be identified with Romanticism, he says; but 'the crucial justifying concepts of the Romantic rebellion' included a 'notion of an inner voice or impulse' and 'the idea that we can find the truth within us, and in particular in our feelings'.[323] This view, though it is compatible with 'some form of Christian faith', nevertheless strains against orthodox Christianity: 'What is primary is the voice within', which is something different from traditional formulations of Christian belief.[324] And if art can express this inwardness, then it makes sense that art 'has come to take a central place in our spiritual life, in some respects replacing religion'.[325] Quoting Schleiermacher's description of the artist as a priest, Taylor suggests that for the Romantic mind the artist is a 'soothsayer or seer…a mediator of spiritual reality to humans'.[326] All this can be seen stirring in Johnson's time – and it is just when the artist (specifically, the writer) is put on such a pedestal that Johnson's criticism becomes acerbic. This criticism – notably of Milton and Shakespeare – offended the Romantics, as might be expected.

We have already seen this play out in Hazlitt and Coleridge, and seen how deep the difference runs. It is also an emotive difference, since these are writers discussing the very nature

[321] Ibid., 17.
[322] Ibid., 21.
[323] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 368-9.
[324] Ibid., 370-1.
[325] Ibid., 376.
[326] Ibid., 378.

of being a writer. Freya Johnston, writing of Hazlitt's usual claim that Johnson cannot appreciate anything without inflating its significance, notes that 'This descent or condescension involves a humbling of the authorial self'.[327] It is not only 'theories of art' which are at stake, but theories of the artist. Johnson puts less trust in the writer to make the right decision from their own sense of what works. Compare, for example, the justifications of metre offered by Johnson and Coleridge. Johnson writes:

> perhaps, of poetry as a mental operation, metre or musick is no necessary adjunct; it is, however, by the musick of metre that poetry has been discriminated in all languages. ('Life of Milton', *Lives*, i.294)

Here, by contrast, is Coleridge, when defining poetry:

> There Metre introduces its claims where the feeling calls for it.[328]

The 'mental operation', for Johnson, cannot provide the rules of poetry; to find those, you have to look at the history of literature. For Coleridge, on the other hand, it is the single mind of the poet which will make the decision, based on its correspondence with a particular 'feeling'.

That is only one example, but it fits with a remark made by M.H. Abrams that 'one decisive change marks off the criticism in the Age of Wordsworth from that in the Age of Johnson.'[329] In the later age, Abrams writes, 'The poet has moved into the center of the critical system and taken over many of the prerogatives which had once been exercised by his readers, the nature of the world in which he found himself, and the inherited precepts and examples of his poetic art'.

'The poet has moved into the centre'. It was much of the effort of Johnson's critical writing to put the author into the context of other demands – of the reader, of the truth, of the neglected members of their household. Where Johnson saw the poet moving into the centre, he responded

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[327] Johnston, *Art of Sinking*, 134.

[328] Coleridge, 'Lectures and Notes on Literature' (John Payne Collier's notes), *Works*, V.i. 206.

[329] Abrams, *Mirror and the Lamp*, 29.

with mockery. *Rambler* 94 satirised 'Those who are determined to find in Milton an assemblage of all the excellencies which have ennobled all other poets' (iv.142). Milton, like every other writer, is answerable to others. 'Thus much at least may be required of him [the author], that he shall not act worse than others because he writes better, nor imagine that, by the merits of his genius, he may claim indulgence beyond mortals of the lower classes, and be excused for want of prudence, or neglect of virtue' (*Rambler* 14, *Works*, iii.77). As I wrote in the last chapter, Johnson was responding to his contemporaries; but in so doing, he offered a way of looking at authors which was incipiently anti-Romantic. He drew attention to what writers have in common with everyone else. He tried to bring them back down to earth.

Johnson puts the writer in the context of the past, in that he begins by trusting the established view, and only deviates from it with trepidation (as in the discussion of the unities). Coleridge declares that George Farquhar's *Discourse upon Comedy in Reference to the English Stage* (1702) 'exposed the ludicrous absurdities involved in the supposition, and demolished as with the single sweep of a careless hand the whole edifice of French criticism respecting the so-called unities of time and place' (*COS*, 221). That image of an individual's power over a whole human tradition would not have suited Johnson. For *Rambler* 154, 'The mental disease of the present generation, is impatience of study, contempt of the great masters of ancient wisdom, and a disposition to rely wholly upon unassisted genius and natural sagacity' (v.55). The writer should approach the past with respectful caution.

The Romantic critic cannot accept Johnson's account of the author and the author's role, an account which in the previous five chapters I have been trying to elucidate. There is a chasm between Johnson's view of the author – a servant of the truth, a member of the providential order, at risk of pride – and Wordsworth's, expressed in the 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballad.* Not, admittedly, when Wordsworth begins:

> What is a Poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him? He is a man speaking to men…[330]

That, at least, Johnson would agree with; just as there is a Johnsonian ring to Wordsworth's

> Farewell, farewell the Heart that lives alone,
> Hous'd in a dream, at distance from the Kind!
> Such happiness, wherever it be known,
> Is to be pitied; for 'tis surely blind.[331]

Wordsworth, like Johnson, thinks a poet, like anybody, should be situated among other human beings. But Wordsworth extends the point:

> He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them.[332]

Having established the identity of the poet with others, Wordsworth distances the two from each other:

> To these qualities he has added a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present; an ability of conjuring up in himself passions, which are indeed far from being the same as those produced by real events, yet (especially in those parts of the general sympathy which are pleasing and delightful) do more nearly resemble the passions produced by real events, than any thing which, from the motions of their own minds merely, other men are accustomed to feel in themselves…

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[330] *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, 77.

[331] William Wordsworth, 'Elegiac Stanzas, Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle, in a Storm, painted by Sir George Beaumont', in *Poems, in Two Volumes*, 1807; ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 268.

[332] *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, 77-8.

There is no statement here which necessarily contradicts anything in Johnson's critical writings; but there is something bigger, a shift of focus – a close attention to the poet himself, a semi-mystical attention to 'the goings-on of the Universe', an emphasis on what divides the poet from all the non-poets, and a tendency to assume that the poet is more alive, and superior to others in important ways. Susan Manning recognises just what is so revolutionary about Wordsworth's definition:

> this passage stresses not so much common humanity, as the quantitative *difference* – which becomes in effect a qualitative one – of the poet's sensibilities from those of his audience. His special ability to give pleasure comes from his peculiar affinity with the fundamental elements of the universe, and is not a 'common' but a quite exceptional degree of human sensibility. And, when he does not 'find' the necessary sympathetic emotions in the world beyond, he is 'habitually impelled to *create*' them within the magic circle of his own self.[333]

As Manning notes, the eighteenth century was engrossed by 'sympathy', in ethics as in literature: but if Wordsworth is right, sympathy now means not recognising the other, but turning inwards to those finer, truer, stronger, livelier responses. And so 'aesthetics can become a one-man show able to dispense entirely with the 'other', moving easily from community to transcendence.' Andrew Bennett, similarly, writes that Wordsworth's 1800 'Preface' 'places at the centre of the literary work the subject who creates the work, the inspired author as original and originating genius'.[334] Implicitly, it rejected Johnson's emphasis on the author's responsibility to a community.

[333] Susan Manning, 'Burns and Wordsworth: Art and 'The Pleasure which there is in life itself'', in Roy Porter and Marie Mulvey Roberts, ed., *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 182-206: 191.
[334] Bennett, 'The idea of the author', 654.

The solitary author

One text which reflects this new set of assumptions is Isaac D'Israeli's *The Literary Character, Illustrated by the History of Men of Genius* (1839). Everywhere it presents a conception of the author at odds with Johnson's. For instance, D'Israeli draws a line between the real authors and the mere crowd of scribblers: 'The pursuits of literature have been openly or insidiously lowered', D'Israeli complains, by lax critical standards: they have been 'maliciously conferring the honours of authorship on that "Ten Thousand" whose recent list is not so much a muster-roll of heroes, as a table of population' (*Character*, 5). The dismay at the number of authors goes back to Hazlitt: 'the only danger seems to be that every one, high and low, rich and poor, should turn author, and the whole world be converted into waste paper'.[335] And it goes back further, to Swift's *Tale of a Tub* (published 1704). It also has much in common with Johnson's description of an 'Age of Authors' (ii.457) but part of the point of *Adventurer* 115 was to confer 'the honours of authorship', in some degree, even on the masses of undistinguished writers.

As Dustin Griffin points out, the alarm felt by Swift and Pope at the proliferation of authors was not shared by Johnson to anything like the same degree. When D'Israeli insists that 'the man of letters is not an author' (*Character*, 313), he is making much of a distinction which Johnson liked to see undone: as when Milton and Watts changed from ambitious literary projects to less spectacular ones, or when Johnson himself wrote prefaces and pamphlets (and, for that matter, a dictionary) instead of novels and poems.

But D'Israeli wishes to keep literature sealed off from the marketplace. He quotes a passage from Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776), about 'That unprosperous race of men commonly called men of letters', whose situation echoes the times when 'a scholar and a beggar

[335] William Hazlitt, 'The Influence of Books on the Progress of Manners', in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols. (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1867-1922), xvii.327

seem to have been terms very nearly synonymous'.[336] D'Israeli comments with dismay at Smith's economic analysis of authorship: 'They would yoke and harness the loftier spirits to one common and vulgar destination' (*Character*, 3). The contrast between 'high' and 'low' work, assumed here, is just what Johnson, in the elegy for Levet and elsewhere, tested and found wanting. And the distaste for the economics of writing again contrasts with Johnson's pragmatism, whether in his private hyperbole – 'No man but a blockhead…' – or in his lifelong engagement with the book trade.

D'Israeli's 'literary character' is ideally independent, not only from market forces but from the social world. As Richard Salmon has written of D'Israeli, 'the conception of authorship on which his illustrations of martyred genius rest is fundamentally asocial and solipsistic'.[337] In solitude, D'Israeli believes, a mind 'fixes on the immutable nature of things' (*Character*, 122). Writers should be kept apart, D'Israeli thinks, to nurture their own genius: a loaded word and one on which D'Israeli disagrees, this time explicitly, from Johnson. D'Israeli regrets that whereas, in the age of Addison and Pope, writers were isolated, 'The man of genius is now trammelled with the artificial and mechanical forms of life; and in too close an intercourse with society, the loneliness and raciness of society is modified away in its seductive conventions' (*Character*, 116). The expression 'too close an intercourse with society' is hard to imagine coming from Johnson. Moreover, the word 'genius', which D'Israeli uses in his title elsewhere, means something different from Johnson's *Dictionary* definition (the fourth): 'Disposition of nature by which any one is qualified for some peculiar employment'. For D'Israeli, the 'man of genius' is an exception; whereas for Johnson, as Lawrence Lipking writes in his essay 'Johnson and Genius', the 'unvarying

[336] D'Israeli slightly misquotes and compacts the original quotation, which I have used here. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 2 vols. (London, 1776), i.165.
[337] Salmon, *Literary Profession*, 11.

principle' of Johnson's use of the word is that 'even supremely gifted minds are always and only human'.[338] That sense of limitation is hard to find in D'Israeli's book.

On one thing D'Israeli agrees with Johnson: literary characters, both say, have a tendency to look ridiculous when they are in company. For Johnson this is a judgment on the writers: whether it is Swift, whose 'singularity' made him look ridiculous, or Gelidus, the distant scholar of *Rambler* 24. D'Israeli notes that 'Ridicule is…the terror of genius', but he draws the opposite conclusion (*Character*, 122). Ridicule is just a way for 'the men and women of the world' to cope with 'their deficient comprehension… The habits of the literary character seem inevitably repulsive to persons of the world'. Being thought ridiculous may be a proof of genius.

D'Israeli makes a catalogue of the *faux pas* of literary men: Adam Smith, he tells us, had 'the embarrassed manners of a recluse', and seemed 'distant and reserved'; Newton would lapse into silence; Nicole, introduced to a princess, had nothing to say; Hume, asked to act a part in an impromptu sketch, put on a miserable performance, 'repeating the same awkward gesture, and the same ridiculous exclamation, without end' (*Character*, 128). But D'Israeli assures us: 'If HUME made a ridiculous figure in these circles, the error did not lie on the side of that cheerful and profound philosopher.' Ridicule exposes the limitations of the common mind, not the excesses of the author ridiculed. Solitude, then, is a need: it 'tends to keep alive those concentrated feelings which cannot be indulged with security, or even without ridicule in general society' (318). So 'men of genius' will naturally develop away from society's standards: 'that deficient agreeableness in social life with which men of genius have been often reproached, may really result from the nature of those qualities which conduce to the greatness of their public character' (132).

In reading Hazlitt and Coleridge, I argued that they had a quasi-religious conception of Shakespeare. In D'Israeli's study, too, the writer acquires an aura of holiness: 'Even the most common objects are consecrated when associated with the memory of the man of genius'

[338] Lawrence Lipking, 'Johnson and Genius', in Freya Johnston and Lynda Mugglestone, ed., *Samuel Johnson: The Arc of the Pendulum* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 83-94: 90.

(*Character*, 356). True, Johnson was touched by Milton's biographers and their habit of recording all the poet's former addresses: but he put this down to their 'respect' ('Life of Milton', *Lives,* i.262*),* not a process of 'consecration'. That would seem close to the 'enthusiasm' which Johnson warned of (not least in the case of Milton). Here again, one of Johnson's pejorative words returns in D'Israeli with the opposite meaning. 'Solitude is the parent of enthusiasm, and enthusiasm is the true parent of genius', D'Israeli believes: 'No considerable work was ever composed, till its author, like an ancient magician, first retired to the grove, or to the closet, to invocate' (*Character*, 146). An 'enthusiast', he writes later, has 'one closely pursued act of meditation, carrying the enthusiast of genius beyond the precinct of actual existence' (186). D'Israeli compares this flight from reality with 'The illusion produced by drama on persons of great sensibility': D'Israeli, then, is also with Coleridge and against Johnson on the question of dramatic suspension of disbelief.

In D'Israeli's book, Johnson becomes part of the very thing he feared. For D'Israeli hails Johnson as his predecessor in describing the literary character. Johnson wrote mournfully about the struggles of the author, D'Israeli thought, in his 'sad probationary years of genius… Not yet conscious that he himself was devoting his days to cast the minds of his contemporaries and of the succeeding age in the mighty mould of his own; for JOHNSON was of that order of men whose individual genius becomes that of a people' (*Character*, 3). Johnson may have played down the importance of the author's inner life, but so much of his writing was on that very theme.

Macaulay and after

The Romantic period was a low point for Johnson's reputation as a thinker, but it also helped to define the Dr Johnson of legend. Johnson the writer was absorbed into Johnson the character. Hazlitt told his readers to consult Boswell more closely, not to read Johnson more carefully. 'The

man was superior to the author'; in which case, the author should be read in the light of the man; and that makes it easier to explain Johnson's opinions in terms of his personal quirks, or indeed personal limitations. The *Monthly Review* remarked of the *Prayers and Meditations* when they were published in 1785: 'In a word, while we pity the moral weaknesses of Dr. Johnson, let us revere his intellectual strength; while we lament his superstitious turn of mind, let us take example from his piety and benevolence'.[339] That was a typical division.

Even when the controversies of the Romantic period had been left behind, the Romantic view of Johnson persisted – most influentially in the mind of Lord Macaulay. As Clifford and Greene remark, Macaulay wrote of Johnson as a Whig writing of a Tory; but 'Perhaps even more important, he was one of the first generation upon which the Romantic writers had a profound impact, and was no doubt affected by the casual and often misconceived slurs on Johnson tossed off by men like Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and De Quincey…for whom Johnson was symbolic of the older generation of writers against whom they were revolting.'[340] Not that Macaulay's writings about Johnson – his review of Croker's edition of Boswell, and his *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry – were as venomous as Coleridge's, or as suspicious as De Quincey's; but they accepted the view of Johnson's personality which had flourished around the turn of the century, and the accompanying conviction that the personality trumped the writings.

Macaulay wrote in his 1831 review: 'Johnson, as Mr. Burke observed, appears far greater in Boswell's books than in his own, his conversation appears to have been quite equal to his writings in matter, and far superior to them in manners' (Macaulay, 559-60). And, in a famous and beautifully-written conclusion, he told the reader:

> …the reputation of those writings, which he probably expected to be immortal, is every day fading; while those peculiarities of manner and that careless table-talk the memory of which, he probably thought, would die with him, are likely to be remembered as long as the English language is spoken in any corner of the globe.

[339] *Monthly Review*, 73 (1785), in Spittal, ed., *Contemporary Criticisms*, 394.
[340] Clifford and Greene, *Survey and Bibliography*, 8.

(Macaulay, 562)

It is in the little things that Macaulay's opinion of Johnson reveals itself: 'he probably expected' that his writings would be 'immortal' – thus, the reader might infer, proving the waywardness of his critical judgments, and his tendency to hubris. To say that someone's conversation will last as long 'as the English language' looks like a fine compliment, but as we have seen, talk of Johnson's marvellous personality tends to crowd out a serious engagement with his writings. It marginalises Johnson as an intellect and turns him into a lovable eccentric. The adjective 'careless' reveals this: much of Johnson's conversation is a cautious, thoughtful grappling with intellectual complexity; but Macaulay's interest is in the more superficial side of Johnson's talk.

For Clifford and Greene, 'It was Macaulay's own brilliant emphasis on Johnson's idiosyncrasies rather than his ideas which set the tone for succeeding generations.'[341] The nineteenth-century Johnson 'was essentially an amusing and somewhat lovable eccentric, who had a place in their affections comparable to their favourite Dickens character or to Falstaff.' Or, indeed 'a mythical John Bull – a symbolic caricature of the nation's rugged strength and bullheadedness, its insular point of view'.

Bullheadedness and insularity could be euphemisms for the two chief accusations made against Johnson: that he was angry and narrow-minded. Macaulay repeated both charges. As it happens, he writes with perceptive sympathy about the reasons for Johnson's impatience and irritability: 'The roughness and violence which he showed in society were to be expected from a man whose temper, not naturally gentle, had been long tried by the bitterest calamities' (Macaulay, 549). He suggests that Johnson took others' hurt feelings less seriously because he himself had known real hardship.

Macaulay's 1831 review most closely follows the Hazlitt-Coleridge line in his treatment of Johnson as narrow, bigoted, prejudiced and so on. It is almost the main theme of the article. 'The characteristic peculiarity of his intellect was the union of great powers with low prejudices',

[341] Clifford and Greene, *Survey and Bibliography*, 3-4.

Macaulay writes, adding that at Johnson's worst he was even more foolish than Boswell – which, for Macaulay, is very foolish indeed (550). Johnson could be 'a wary and acute reasoner' until he fell 'under the influence of some strange scruple, or some domineering passion.' His 'childish prejudices, such as would excite laughter in a well-managed nursery', would take command: 'His mind dwindled away under the spell from gigantic elevation to dwarfish littleness' (550-1) Macaulay attributes this odd change to some kind of magic: it seems, on the face of it, implausible.

Johnson relied on unexamined first principles, according to Macaulay: his 'whole code of criticism rested on pure assumption' (555). His literary opinions were often no more rooted in reason than his obsessive-compulsive need to touch all the lampposts in the street (556). Once more, Johnson's writings are absorbed into his eccentric personality. And, just as Hazlitt pictured Johnson as sheltering on 'the rock' 'of established authority and received dogmas', while 'the waves and billows of uncertain and dangerous opinion roar and heave for evermore', so Macaulay sees Johnson's 'strong but enslaved understanding' as carefully sealed off from contradiction:

> The mind of the critic was hedged round by an uninterrupted fence of prejudices and suspicions. Within his narrow limits, he displayed a vigour and activity which ought to have enabled him to clear the barrier that confined him.
> (Macaulay, 554)

Macaulay relishes the rhetorical contrast between Johnson the mighty reasoner and Johnson the toddler clinging to bizarre prejudices: it is, he marvels, 'one of the great mysteries of human nature'.

It might be objected that Macaulay makes it more mysterious than it needs to be, by enlarging Johnson's prejudices. For instance, he is appalled by Johnson's interest in the supernatural: 'He went himself on a ghost-hunt to Cock Lane, and was angry with John Wesley for not following up another scent of the same kind' (550). This is presented as evidence for Johnson's childishness. But both charges are rather misleading: for Johnson concluded, after investigating

Cock Lane, that it was a fake, 'and related, with much satisfaction, how he had assisted in detecting the cheat, and had published an account of it in the news-papers' (*Life*, iii.268). As for Wesley, Johnson was not 'angry' for Wesley's incuriosity, but rather sceptical of how easily Wesley had been convinced. Wesley 'believes it; but not on sufficient authority', Johnson opined (iii.297). And when he added 'I am sorry that John did not take more pains to inquire into the evidence for it', this was not because he was so eager to lend his belief to a ghost story, but because he wished an admired friend had been less credulous. In both cases, Johnson comes across as significantly more sceptical than his contemporaries; but Macaulay does not let these facts get in the way of a good story.

Again, Macaulay raises Johnson's supposed indifference to travel and history as evidence of his incurably parochial intellect: 'it never occurred to him to doubt that there must be something eternally and immutably good in the usages to which he had been accustomed' (Macaulay, 559). Macaulay is given pause by the passage at the end of the *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, in which Johnson notes his own lack of travel and of knowledge: 'Having passed my time wholly in cities... I cannot but be conscious that my thoughts on national manners, are the thoughts of one who has seen but little' (*Journey*, 137). But it does not divert Macaulay: 'This feeling, however, soon passed away. It is remarkable that to the last he entertained a fixed contempt for all those modes of life and those studies which tend to emancipate the mind from the prejudices of a particular age or a particular nation' (Macaulay, 559). Again, Johnson's narrowness is the all-purpose hermeneutic.

There is something in itself quite Johnsonian about criticising harshly one moment, and praising lavishly the next. Macaulay even echoes Johnson (probably by accident), referring to the 'superstitious veneration' with which Johnson's contemporaries regarded his literary opinions – exactly the phrase Johnson used against uncritical Shakespeareans (554). In the *Encyclopedia Britannica* article of 1857, Macaulay softens his tone. The assaults of 1831 on Johnson's 'pompous and unbending style' had been moderated by a real appreciation of, for instance, the essays: if

'their diction was…now and then turgid to absurdity' there was still an 'acuteness' to 'his observations on morals and on manners, and his language possessed a 'constant precision and frequent brilliancy' (561). In 1857, Macaulay extends this praise: what he had previously called a 'load of words' under which 'his maxims perished' (556), he now praised as the 'magnificent eloquence of many serious passages, and…the solemn yet pleasing humour of some of the lighter papers.'[342] Addison was the greater essayist, he says; but Macaulay gives more credit to Johnson's writings than before, allowing that the *Dictionary* is a pleasure to read and the edition of Shakespeare contains some deep observation of human nature.[343]

On the other hand, 'Johnson was a wretched etymologist', and it would be hard to find 'a more slovenly, a more worthless, edition of any great classic' than Johnson's Shakespeare. There is always a fairly large 'but' in Macaulay's praise. He is kindest about the *Lives of the Poets*:

> The criticisms are often excellent, and, even when grossly and provokingly unjust, well deserve to be studied. For, however erroneous they may be, they are never silly. They are the judgments of a mind trammelled by prejudice and deficient in sensibility, but vigorous and acute.[344]

Macaulay cannot rid himself of the picture of Johnson as fenced in by unexamined prejudice. Apparently 'He was a Tory, not from rational conviction…but from mere passion, such as inflamed the Capulets against the Montagues.'[345] And in the closing paragraph, which lacks the memorable antitheses of the 1831 review, it has the same judgment: Johnson's writings have fallen out of favour since his death. But, though the celebrity of the writings may have declined, the celebrity of the writer, strange to say, is as great as ever. Boswell's book has done for him more than the

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[342] 'Samuel Johnson' (1857), in Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Selected Writings*, ed. John Clive and Thomas Pinney (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 126-162: 141

[343] Ibid., 143, 148.

[344] Ibid., 157.

[345] Ibid., 134.

best of his own books could do'.[346] Like Hazlitt, Macaulay prefers Boswell's Johnson to Johnson's writings.

Macaulay's hugely influential reading of Johnson inherited, developed and passed on an irresistible portrait of Johnson which, though seriously incomplete, had great human interest: the superb intellect made ludicrous by its unexamined bigotry. The 1831 review puts it in a phrase: 'a mind at least as remarkable for narrowness as for strength'.[347]

Macaulay's version won, as Clifford and Greene point out. In 1857, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* replaced George Gleig's 'admirably balanced and judicious article…which had first appeared in 1797, with Macaulay's much shallower and more limited one…both it and the essay on Croker were reprinted innumerable times and used as school textbooks for decades all over the world; probably most adult Johnsonians even today [1970] were introduced to Johnson by them.' Macaulay's Johnson became the standard authorised version just as English Literature became an academic subject, and as literary histories began to be written.[348]

The reinterpretation of Johnson begun by Coleridge, Hazlitt and others became in Macaulay an authoritative reading and then a truism. Clifford and Greene are able to quote nineteenth-century judgments which must seem to us ridiculous. A writer for *Temple Bar* in 1892 declares: 'But for Boswell, the man was gone, past power of recall…not one man in a thousand…has ever dipped into any single thing that Johnson wrote'.[349] A *Times* leader on 10 October 1884, the centenary year of Johnson's death, said: 'The infatuate admiration which he inspired…is not wholly comprehensible to this generation'.[350] Johnson, the *Times* explained, had 'little disposition towards abstract thinking and no lively imagination, so that he cannot be ranked high as a philosopher or poet.' The breeziness of these judgments – made with some confidence

[346] Ibid., 161.
[347] Ibid., 557.
[348] Clifford and Greene, *Survey and Bibliography*, 7.
[349] Ibid., 9.
[350] Ibid., 8.

by writers who evidently knew little of Johnson – suggests how deeply the caricature of Johnson had sunk in.

When an idea has really gained an ascendancy, it begins to influence even those whom you might expect to disagree with it. So perhaps the clearest proof that the Coleridgean-Macaulayan picture had triumphed is how it affects an admirer of Johnson such as Matthew Arnold. Arnold was writing in defence of Johnson, against a critic who called the 'Life of Milton' 'an elaborate libel', when he gave this account of Johnson:

> In Johnson's *Life of Milton* we have the straightforward remarks, on Milton, of a very acute and robust mind. Often they are thoroughly sound... But Johnson's mind, acute and robust as it was, was at many points bounded, at many points warped. He was neither sufficiently disinterested, nor sufficiently flexible, nor sufficiently receptive, to be a satisfying critic of a poet like Milton.[351]

Arnold knew and admired Johnson's criticism. Still, in Arnold's praise – 'straightforward', 'robust' – there are traces of the John Bull character; and his reservations have much of Hazlitt's sense that Johnson was too narrow to understand poetry. His mind was 'bounded', 'warped', inflexible, unreceptive. To doubt that Johnson was 'sufficiently disinterested' is to suggest that Johnson was led astray by his prejudices.

The Romantic view, then, had even formed much of the opinion of a professed admirer of Johnson – such as Arnold, who in 1878, published a selection from Johnson's *Lives* with a commendatory introduction:

> I know of no such first-rate piece of literature, for supplying in this way the wants of the literary student, existing at all in any other language; or existing in our own language for any period except the period which Johnson's six lives cover.[352]

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[351] Matthew Arnold, 'A French Critic on Milton' (1877), in *Essays Religious and Mixed*, ed. R.H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 165-87: 173-4.

[352] 'Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*' (1878), in *Essays Religious and Mixed*, 306-320: 310.

Arnold still holds that Johnson had the wrong mental apparatus for judging poetry: his century was a great century in the establishment of English prose, and the cost of this is that a major eighteenth-century mind will find it harder to understand English poetry. 'Yet even on poetry Johnson's utterances are valuable, because they are the utterances of a great and original man.'[353] Again, the writer is collapsed into the man. It makes sense that Arnold appended to his selection a biographical sketch of Johnson taken from – where else? – Lord Macaulay's *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry. 'That Life is a work which shows Macaulay at his very best… The subject, too was one which he knew thoroughly, and for which he felt cordial sympathy'.[354] Even to Johnson's admirers, Macaulay was definitive.

In 1858, the young Algernon Charles Swinburne was writing of Johnson in an undergraduate essay at Oxford:

> His works are not now admired as they were, but his memory is not less honoured, and will not be as long as the memory of his life shall last – even though that life was written by an admirer, and even though that admirer was Boswell.[355]

It is, again, the type sketched by Coleridge and Hazlitt, and painted in magnificent colours by Macaulay (from whom Swinburne perhaps took his contempt for Boswell). Johnson is a great character, but his writings are justly forgotten. Indeed, Swinburne's whole essay does not mention Johnson's writings, except to refer to the speed with which *Rasselas* was composed. This was often how the Victorian age approached Johnson:[356] that a clever undergraduate naturally assimilated Macaulay's view suggests that Clifford and Greene are right about its influence. Macaulay's simplifications, simplified further, became the standard assessment.

That assessment now seems seriously dated. As James Boulton remarks, twentieth-century critics of the stature of Eliot and Leavis praised Johnson and found his example a model for 'their

[353] Ibid., 319.
[354] Ibid., 319-20.
[355] Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Character and Opinions of Dr. Johnson* (1858; London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1918), 11.
[356] On Johnson's transformation from admired writer to icon, see Wiltshire, *Making of Dr. Johnson*, 146-77.

insistence on the necessity for close attention to the detail of a literary text, their studious avoidance of generalizations except on the basis of such detailed scrutiny, and their sensitivity to the relationship between literature and morality.'[357] Johnson the thinker and critic has been thoroughly rehabilitated. 'The wheel has made a full turn,' Clifford and Greene note, while warning that the old disparagement of Johnson has stubbornly continued. 'Of all nineteenth-century ghosts it is one of the most difficult to lay.'[358]

Certainly the ghost was still haunting critics after the nineteenth century. Strachey, the great satirist of the Victorians, was nonetheless of their time when he wrote of the *Lives of the Poets*:

> as serious criticism, they can hardly appear to the modern reader to be very far removed from the futile. Johnson's aesthetic judgments are almost invariably subtle, or solid, or bold; they have always some good quality to recommend them – except one: they are never right.[359]

Boulton points out: 'the scholarly reappraisal of Johnson has meant that Strachey himself now appears demonstrably wrong; his wit has ossified his folly'.[360]

It is not only Johnson's criticism which made a comeback in the twentieth century: his essays, poetry, political writings and religious thought are taken seriously to a degree which might have shocked the *Times* leader-writer of 1884. For Clifford and Greene, writing in 1970, the 'dogma' of 'Romantic sensibility' has itself gone out of fashion, and Johnson has come back in. 'During the last four decades the turnabout has been overwhelming.'[361] And the four decades since those words were written have confirmed the 'turnabout'.

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[357] Boulton, *Critical Heritage*, 36.

[358] Clifford and Greene, *Survey and Bibliography*, 33.

[359] Lytton Strachey, 'The Lives of the Poets' (1906), *Literary Essays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), 94-100: 95.

[360] Boulton, *Critical Heritage*, 35.

[361] Clifford and Greene, *Survey and Bibliography*, 31.

There has always been a tradition of loving Dr Johnson, to quote the title of Helen Deutsch's book: in some quarters there has always been what Deutsch calls 'the peculiarly uncritical worship of Johnson's ghost'.[362] Yet the tradition of disparagement has gone on, and in much the same terms, up to the present day.

Kicking the stone

For Anthony Pagden in *The Enlightenment: And Why it Still Matters*, he is 'the cantankerous, obese, arch-conservative Samuel Johnson'.[363] Pagden's choice of words is revealing. There are such things as just anger and righteous indignation; but there is no dignified way to be 'cantankerous'. Johnson is plausibly portrayed as a 'conservative', but 'arch-conservative' makes him sound extreme, so echoing the Romantic allegations against him: it hints that his views are so far to the right that he cannot think straight. The unnecessary word 'obese' is redolent of Gillray's caricature, with Johnson stripped to the waist; it helps to drive Johnson into a corner, as a man of extremes, impossible to sympathise with, and unlikely to sympathise with anyone else. In 2001, Lydia Davis published a short story collection titled *Samuel Johnson is Indignant*.[364] For Samuel Johnson to be indignant is just common knowledge – it is a cliché of popular literary history.

Great powers, low prejudices: Macaulay's vivid sketch has lived on in the minds of those who do not know Johnson all that well. In Iris Murdoch's *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, for instance, Johnson becomes a standard-bearer of plain, unphilosophical common sense. Murdoch discusses how an 'essential thing' may be built into a philosopher's system at the start, to prevent

[362] Helen Deutsch, *Loving Dr Johnson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 131.
[363] Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment: And Why it Still Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 108.
[364] *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), 50.

it becoming problematic later on: for instance, the idea of the material world. So, faced with Berkeley and Hume,

> laymen, and other philosophers, may say, 'But surely the idea of the material object is primary.'... Dr Johnson, that excellent philosopher, who would not have liked structuralism, refuted Berkeley by kicking a stone, and determinism by saying to Boswell, 'Sir, we know the will is free, and there's an end on't.'[365]

So Johnson is no worse than Wittgenstein in making certain unproven assumptions; indeed, he is an 'excellent philosopher', though there is something patronising in that phrase. Philosophers do not tend to refer to other philosophers as 'excellent philosophers'; it is a phrase more likely to occur when the author is finding something unexpectedly profound in a line from *The Simpsons*. And as Murdoch goes on, Johnson becomes more and more the plain, unphilosophical man. Murdoch thinks that kicking a stone has value as a challenge, but it is not the same as deep thinking:

> McTaggart says time is unreal, Moore says he has had his breakfast. Perhaps Moore had not 'really tried' to understand McTaggart, and clearly Dr Johnson, when he refuted Berkeley by kicking a stone, had not 'really tried' to understand Berkeley, but these 'accusations' are pertinent and must be dealt with.[366]

Murdoch assumes – wrongly – that the stone-kicking incident represents all of Johnson's reflection on Berkeley's thesis. The mistake is forgivable, since the episode has played a large part in perceptions of Berkeley's reputation and in establishing the Johnson caricature. One Berkeley scholar writes that Berkeley 'was rightly anxious' about misinterpretations of his ideas, 'as the reactions of such plain men as Dr Johnson were to show'.[367] Is Johnson a 'plain man', though, and is it 'certainly' the case that he had not tried to understand Berkeley? Not on the strength of *Idler*

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[365] Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992), 55.

[366] Ibid., 197.

[367] E.J. Furlong, 'Berkeley and the Tree in the Quad', in C.B. Martin and D.M. Armstrong, ed., *Locke and Berkeley: A Collection of Critical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 400-408: 402.

10, in which Johnson mentions Berkeley's idealism along with similarly counter-intuitive theories put forward by Descartes and Malebranche. Johnson writes that adherents of such theories

> have all the honour at least of being deceived by fallacies not easily detected, and may plead that they did not forsake truth, but for appearances which they were not able to distinguish from it.
> (ii.33)

In other words, although Johnson disagrees with Berkeley, he can quite see why an intelligent person of 'honour' might be a Berkeleyan, and that the weaknesses of that position are 'not easily detected'. Murdoch does only a minor injustice to Johnson, but it is the nature of that injustice that is interesting: she considers Johnson a significant figure, but not a deep-thinking one; more significant because he expresses, in a particularly poetic way, the universal bloody-mindedness of humanity.

Philosophers, Murdoch writes, 'are wise to attend to critics of the Dr Johnson variety'.[368] It is a good exercise to 'attempt a laborious expression in ordinary language of 'what one is thinking' and 'how one sees it'.' Johnson has become the ignoramus's spokesman. Murdoch does have a lot of respect for the voice of mere prejudice in the conversation of mankind:

> How does language refer to the world? Wittgenstein's early answer, in accord with what Dr Johnson would say, is that it just does.[369]

One cannot miss the condescension here – and it is condescension to a Johnson very like the stubborn creature Macaulay half-created.

Even a critic who does know Johnson's work well has a tendency to adopt the assumptions of Hazlitt and Coleridge. David Daiches' critical history of English literature contains the following judgment on Johnson's thought:

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[368] Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 212.
[369] Ibid., 233-4.

> His Toryism was based on a profound pessimism, and his devotion to the Church of England sprang from his conviction that Christianity *must* be true if the universe is not a meaningless horror… His pessimism about man in general, his contempt for reformers and innovators, his almost desperate conservatism in politics and religion as a bulwark against despair, went side by side with great personal charity and generosity.[370]

The relief is palpable at the end of that sentence: to get away from Johnson's thought, to Johnson's personality, gives us a little uplift. And it is hardly a portrait of a deep thinker – rather, we are getting close to the frightened Johnson, on the rock of conventional opinion, cowering at alternative perspectives. He is 'almost desperate', running away from 'despair' at a 'meaningless horror', his mind beclouded by 'pessimism'. This from a critic who has read Johnson sympathetically and intelligently, while concluding that 'Johnson is remembered more as a great personality and a great talker than as a poet or critic'.[371] Daiches finds 'no great originality or profundity in Johnson's moral essays, and they do not have that belligerent concentration on the moment of expression which gives so much of his conversation, as reported by Boswell, its special flavour.'[372] The best one can expect from Johnson is not profundity but 'belligerent concentration'. It is not a great compliment.

Yet it is a 1987 episode of the BBC historical comedy *Blackadder* which has done most in the last 50 years to form the popular image of Johnson; for over half of the people to whom I have mentioned the subject of my thesis, their first reaction is to mention *Blackadder*. This character seems to be assembled from a random series of memories about Johnson: that he wrote a *Dictionary*, that he quarrelled with its patron, that he scolded some readers for looking up rude words in it, that he produced aphorisms, and so on. It is a series of clichés about Johnson, and among them are the judgments passed down by Coleridge, Hazlitt and Macaulay: that Johnson was angry, and that his great intellectual powers were strangely hemmed in by prejudice.

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[370] David Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature, Volume II: The Restoration to the Present Day*, revised edition (London: Mandarin Paperbacks, 1994), 775.
[371] Ibid., 774.
[372] Ibid., 777.

From the first, a gulf opens between Johnson's reputed intelligence and his actual mental inadequacy. For the moronic Prince George, Johnson is a 'renowned brainbox', 'the cleverest man in England'.[373] Baldrick is sufficiently taken in to call Johnson, similarly, 'the cleverest gentleman in England'. It is the worldly Blackadder who replies: 'Baldrick, I'd bump into cleverer people at a lodge meeting of the Guild of Village Idiots.' Blackadder – at his own estimation, anyway, has the measure of Johnson: he sees through the sycophancy to the 'globulous fraud' behind it all. Like Gillray's caricature of Johnson, the episode is interested in Johnson's physical bulk, a kind of proof of his untrustworthiness: Blackadder calls him 'a fat dullard', and after referring satirically to 'the great Doctor',[374] declares: 'Let's see just how damn smart Dr Fatty Know-It-All really *is*.' And of course, Johnson's literary taste is inexplicably perverse: of Baldrick's one-sentence novel about a sausage, Blackadder sighs: 'it's completely utterly awful. Dr Johnson will probably love it.'

This union of great powers with low intellect, already somewhat shown up by Blackadder's scepticism, finally enters and announces that he has just finished the *Dictionary*: 'I celebrated last night the encyclopaedic implementation of my premeditated orchestration of demotic Anglo-Saxon.'[375] This is Macaulay's 'load of words', a needless obscurantist pomposity. Then Johnson is proud enough to tell the room that the *Dictionary* is 'A very cornerstone of English scholarship. This book contains every word in our beloved language.' Much of the comedy of the episode derives from Johnson's furious astonishment when he discovers that he has not, in fact, covered the entire English language, and has left out 'sausage', for instance. He shouts 'Sausage! Sausage! Blast your eyes!', before storming angrily out of the room.[376]

This image of the great pompous man being deflated is a long way from the Samuel Johnson who wrote in the 'Preface' to the *Dictionary*:

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[373] 'Ink and Incapability', in *Blackadder: the Whole Damn Dynasty* (London: Michael Joseph, 1998), 253-269: 254.
[374] Ibid., 255.
[375] Ibid., 256.
[376] Ibid., 269.

> …no dictionary of a living tongue can ever be perfect, since while it is hastening to publication, some words are budding, and some falling away…what is obvious is not always known, and what is known is not always present…casual eclipses of the mind will darken learning.
> (xviii.11)

The Johnson of *Blackadder* is detached from the historical Johnson; he has been reduced to an easily-angered, strangely narrow-minded figure, whose intellectual greatness is acknowledged and unexplained. We are left with an amusing caricature.

Such cultural images are not unimportant: beneath them are many layers, some of them hundreds of years old. One of the deepest layers is Johnson's own character – nobody could doubt that Johnson was narrow-minded and cantankerous on occasion. Yet there are many other ways of characterising him as a writer and a man. The Romantics – perhaps most of all Coleridge and Hazlitt – did a great deal to raise these elements of Johnson's character to prominence. They did so partly because his view of authorship was such a challenge, and needed to be explained – or explained away as the result of personality flaws. Yet, in a way, the Romantic criticism was a real tribute to Johnson. It identified one of his greatest themes: that the author was nobody special, and must make way for the demands of society, of humdrum moral obligation, and of the truth. The critics may have disagreed, but they picked the right target for their disagreement.

Doubting Romanticicsm

Andrew Bennett has noted how deep the division ran between Johnson's ideas and those which dominated in the Romantic period. These placed 'a crucial emphasis on the idea of the author as fundamentally apart from, fundamentally separate from, society.'[377] The Romantic idea of the

[377] Bennett, 'The idea of the author', 659.

excluded, neglected artist led to 'an aesthetics of obscurity which was specifically designed to resist the bourgeois satisfactions of what Samuel Johnson called the 'common reader''. Bennett sees Johnson as the natural foil of the Romantics in another way. Part of Romantic mythology was the idea of a great division between kinds of writing: 'the separation of the solitary, inspired, autonomous, intellectually or culturally aristocratic and even prophetic figure of the genius on the one hand, from the hack who writes for money or immediate acclaim, the professional writer, the 'useful drudge' (in Wordsworth's phrase), the hourly paid artist or the professional wordsmith, on the other.'[378] Johnson's 'blockhead' line, as Bennett says, had been partly meant to break down just that distinction; and the same could be said of how, in the *Dictionary*, Johnson appropriates the term 'drudge' for himself.

Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault identified the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the time the modern conception of the author was born.[379] And both questioned that conception. For Barthes, it was time to dispense with the idea of an 'Author-God'; rather, 'The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture'.[380] For Foucault, the idea of the 'author' was only a function of certain kinds of discourse: 'We can easily imagine a culture where discourse would circulate without any need for an author'.[381] Whether or not we go as far as they do, both Barthes and Foucault registered a definite downgrading of the artist's special status. According to Deborah J. Haynes, Caspar David Friedrich and, more recently, Kasimir Malevich conceived of the artist as a specially gifted individual, something like a mystic; but 'it is by now commonplace to say that the artist can no longer be seen as either a privileged or an idiosyncratic

[378] Ibid., 658

[379] Andrew Bennett, *The Author* (London: Routledge, 2005), 55.

[380] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', trans. Stephen Heath, in *Image, Music. Text*, trans. and ed. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 142-8: 146.

[381] Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 113-38: 138.

visionary with special access to the prophetic sphere'.[382] And it has been artists and writers, as much as anybody, who have rejected the Romantic ideal.

Andrew Bennett cites Robert Frost, J.G. Ballard and Robert Lowell as among the twentieth-century writers who have deliberately resisted the idea of the writer's authority.[383] To his example of the decline of Romantic authorship, one could add Philip Larkin, who wrote of the Beat generation:

> There are always people who, on the pretext of having to do with art, choose to live in a way that strikes the rest of society as reprehensible. But every so often they get a militant fit, and come rampaging out of the *Quartier* castigating and vilifying like nobody's business, making it clear that since the artist is the only man cosmically in step it's okay for him to commit adultery, leave the washing-up, and generally *épater* the contemptible dupes of the social Mammon who make up the rest of the world.[384]

This is the same point, expressed more intemperately, as *Rambler* 14's admonition of the author not to 'act worse than others because he writes better' (*Works*, iii.77). And when Larkin mocks the idea that he artist could be 'cosmically in step', he echoes Johnson's warnings about enthusiasm.

Virginia Woolf titled an essay collection *The Common Reader* in tribute to one of Johnson's main critical principles. Katerina Koutsantoni suggests that 'Bridging the gap between reader and writer is the essential theme pervading Woolf's essays', and quotes from the essay 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1923), in which she addresses the reader:

> In your modesty you seem to consider that writers are of different blood and bone from yourselves; that they know more of Mrs Brown than you do. Never was there a more fatal mistake. It is this division between reader and writer, this humility on your part, these

[382] Deborah J. Haynes, *The Vocation of the Artist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 20.
[383] Bennett, *The Author*, 68.
[384] Philip Larkin, 'Carnival in Venice', in *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber, 1983), 117-19: 117.

> professional airs and graces on ours, that corrupt and emasculate the books which should be the healthy offspring of a close and equal alliance between us.[385]

Yet Woolf can only gesture at that 'close and equal alliance'; like Larkin's though to a lesser degree, her statement is a reaction. What seems remarkable about Johnson is that, as much as he warned against and mocked the 'Expressivist Turn', he also articulated what its alternative might look like.

Perhaps, then, Johnson's understanding of the writer's vocation might have its uses to writers and others who find the Romantic ideal lacking. And there cannot be many contemporary writers and artists who do believe in it as Coleridge and Hazlitt did. The exaltation of the writer may have had its day. To take two examples from popular culture, here is David Byrne, frontman of the Talking Heads, in the opening chapter of *How Music Works*, entitled 'Creation in Reverse':

> I had an extremely slow-dawning insight about creation. That insight is that context largely determines what is written, painted, sculpted, sung, or performed. That doesn't sound like much of an insight, but it's actually the opposite of conventional wisdom, which maintains that creation emerges out of some interior emotion, from an upwelling of passion or feeling… This is the romantic notion of how creative work comes to be, but I think the path of creation is almost 180° from this model. I believe that we unconsciously and instinctively make work to fit pre-existing formats.[386]

Byrne distinguishes a small-r 'romantic' notion that creation begins with 'feeling' from what he thinks is more accurate: that creative work is a response to 'pre-existing formats'. This sounds rather like the difference, mentioned above, between how Coleridge justifies metre – that sometimes 'the feeling calls for it'[387] – and how Johnson puts it: metre is just how 'poetry has been discriminated in all languages' ('Life of Milton', *Lives*, i.294). Byrne's language is itself loaded with

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[385] Katerina Koutsantoni, *Virginia Woolf's Common Reader* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 183; Virginia Woolf, 'Mrs Bennett and Mr Brown' (1923), *Collected Essays*, 4 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1966-7), i.337.

[386] David Byrne, *How Music Works* (London: Canongate, 2012), 13.

[387] 'Lectures and Notes on Literature' (John Payne Collier's notes), *Works*, V.i.206.

unJohnsonian beliefs about the creator as the source of work: it is the 'unconscious' and the 'instinct' which respond to the existing context. He acknowledges that, for him, it has taken a while to think outside the 'romantic' categories: it was a 'slow-dawning insight'. The 'conventional wisdom' – which, I suggest, is closely connected to Charles Taylor's 'Expressivist Turn' – turns out to be unsatisfactory.

Johnson's understanding of the writer's role was limited; he evaded or suppressed some aspects of what literature could do, and narrowed its focus. But his understanding was more interesting than the Romantics knew, and more than many readers of Johnson have realised. Jacques Barzun rightly sees Johnson as a promoter of the benefits of 'literature before its spiritual rise'.[388] But he reduces it to Johnson's 'terse' statement that the "end of writing is to enable the readers better to enjoy life, or better to endure it."'[389] For Barzun, this means something humdrum: music should be 'therapeutic and a pastime", portrait painting was – here Barzun quotes *Idler* 45 – '"a reasonable and natural consequence of affection"' (Johnson actually writes 'natural and reasonable', ii.140). Barzun makes Johnson sound pedestrian. He makes the author seem an incidental figure. But for Johnson, the author can be someone who serves others, who makes a contribution to their whole community; and speaking out of a tradition, an author might 'endeavour that something may be added by his industry to the hereditary aggregate of knowledge and happiness' (*Rambler* 129, iv.325).

[388] Jacques Barzun, *The Use and Abuse of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 30.

[389] Ibid., 31; the quotation is from the review of Soame Jenyns, *Works*, xvii.421.

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