

Essential Johnsonian Reading 3: *A Dictionary of the English Language*

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In *Love, Nina. Despatches from Family Life*, the writer Nina Stibbe – employed as a nanny in literary London in the 1980s – recounts her unexpected conversion to the pleasures of reading the dictionary. ‘Alan Bennett’, she says, ‘started reading the dictionary, and calling out odd words. Then Will got it off him and he started reading out odd words and laughing. It seemed annoying’. ‘Then,’ she adds, ‘I had a go and could see the appeal. I love the dictionary now – you should try it’.

I first encountered Johnson’s *Dictionary* around the same time, though in my case as an undergraduate reading English in Oxford. English language already featured highly in my chosen courses (a legacy of my English language A level, and compulsory study of Simeon Potter’s *Our Language*, a book which my friends hated, but which I had found oddly fascinating). Johnson, however, was new territory, and was approached with some trepidation. I had been directed to write an essay on Johnson’s strengths and weaknesses as a lexicographer, a subject which has, in various ways, been preoccupying me ever since. I’m still not sure I’ve found the answer. As I came to realise, what might from one point of view be seen as strength might from another instead be weakness. And vice versa. Johnson was, of course, commissioned to write a dictionary which would fix English for ever. That I’m writing this piece in a language which differs substantially from the English of Johnson’s time is testimony then to his failure – but also to the wisdom which allowed him, from an early point, to realise that such ‘phantoms of desire’, as they relate to lexicography, might be rather different from what is, pragmatically, possible. That Johnson’s poem on the ‘Vanity of Human Wishes’ dates from the dictionary years is, in itself, evidence of an all too telling conjunction.

Approaching Johnson’s *Dictionary* for the first time, however, the potential for distraction was plain. ‘Odd words’ abounded, coupled at times with even odder definitions. Nina Stibbe would have had a field day. *Tripudiaty*, an adjective meaning ‘Performed by dancing’, had a certain cryptic appeal. *Depascent*, another ‘odd word’, had been defined as ‘feeding greedily’, though, by the time of Johnson’s 4th edition, he had evidently changed his mind. For those of healthy appetites, this was

reassuring; the definition had lost its potentially moral weighting, and now meant merely 'feeding'. *Deprehensibleness* – a word which seemed liable to defeat its own purpose – apparently meant 'Intelligibleness; easiness to be understood', as well as 'Capableness of being caught'. Hester Thrale's exchange – recorded in her diary in January 1780 – had obvious resonances for my encounters with entries such as these: 'Someone was asking me to go hear Jackson the famous Scholar preach at the Rolls Chapel; but says another, he really uses such difficult Language, & preaches in so peculiar a Style that I question a *Lady's* understanding him – Oh never fear Mr *Jackson* said I, I live with Mr *Johnson*.'

Browsing Johnson's *Dictionary*, here in the traditional (and physical) sense of *browse*, was, then, unexpectedly rewarding. It was tempting to treat it a form of cryptic puzzle. Johnson's definitions supplied effective clues. Some could (perhaps) be guessed. Q: What is 'A concave vessel with a handle, used in eating liquids'? A: 'A spoon'. Q. What are 'Forms moulded by children of clay, in imitation of pastry'? A: Dirt pies (the fact that the eminent Dr Johnson had decided to include entries for words such as *dirt pie* seemed surprising in itself, not least given my earlier encounter with *deprehensibleness*). A raft of ordinary words nevertheless swiftly revealed themselves – from *freckly* ('full of freckles') to *dice-box* ('the box from which the dice are thrown') or *winker* ('one who winks'). Johnson's range as a lexicographer was, I concluded, surely one of the strengths I had been sent to find. *Hotcockles*, defined as 'A play in which one covers his eyes, and guesses who strikes him', was a particular favourite. So, too, was *dentition*, defined as 'The act of breeding the teeth.'

If Johnson in his 'Preface' to the *Dictionary* warns of the 'dusty deserts of philology', it was modern dictionaries which, however, suddenly seemed to smack of lexicographical aridity. A definition of *mouse* with reference to 'Any of numerous small rodents of the family Muridae' (as in the *Oxford English Dictionary*) was, at least in some ways, a poor substitute for Johnson's evocative 'The smallest of all beasts; a little animal haunting houses and corn fields, destroyed by cats'. Johnson's definition might lack scientific accuracy but its capacity to suggest a sort of quintessential 'mousiness' more than made up for this. *Cat* in Johnson's work had a pleasing parallelism: 'A domestick animal that catches mice, commonly reckoned by naturalists the lowest order of the leonine species'.

As I found, then, Johnson's *Dictionary* was, in these and other ways, fertile ground for any reader's curiosity (that sense of 'inquisitiveness; inclination to inquiry' as the relevant entry in the *Dictionary* explains this word). Yet, as Johnson notes in another carefully-calibrated sense-division, curiosity can also be a form of 'nice experiment' – a prompt to find out for oneself, and to venture where one might not hitherto have been or thought to go. Jack Lynch, in an earlier essay in this series, has already picked out Johnson's tendency to interrogate received wisdom in the essays of the *Rambler*. The *Dictionary* can participate in very similar processes; we are, in reading Johnson as dictionary-maker, not always where we might expect to be.

Expectation – and its delusions – is, of course, a quintessentially Johnsonian theme, if not one which we usually encounter in a dictionary. Reading the prescribed secondary literature on Johnson as an undergraduate, I had, for example, expected the dictionary-maker to act as tyrant, arbitrarily decreeing what words should and should not mean. 'I had long lamented that we had no lawful standard of our language set up, for those to repair to, who might chuse to speak and write it grammatically and correctly', as Lord Chesterfield wrote in 1754, promising obeisance to the dictates that the dictionary, in Johnson's hands, should now provide. 'We must have recourse to the old Roman expedient in times of confusion, and chuse a dictator. Upon this principle I give my vote for Mr. Johnson to fill that great and arduous post,' as Chesterfield famously declared.

Nevertheless, the reality of reading the *Dictionary* often served to yield something more complex – and much more interesting. One can, of course, come across Johnson as an authoritarian presence in the pages of the *Dictionary*. By definition, the dictionary as reference book must offer guidance on the use of words. It is regulative, setting out norms for the wider populace to observe. That Johnson's guidance includes a stated dislike for *shabby* (given as 'A word that has crept into conversation and low writing; but ought not to be admitted into the language'), or for *disannul* (which 'ought ... to be rejected as ungrammatical and barbarous') has become a commonplace of modern comment.

Yet as my own ventures in reading Johnson confirmed, proscriptions of this kind were far outnumbered by entries in which Johnson's voice was very different. Johnson as dictionary-maker did not, by any means, seem to have all the answers.

Moreover, he did not seem at all perturbed by the fact of revealing this. Particularly disconcerting was, for example, the number of definitions in which Johnson's voice was tentative or speculative, hesitant or oddly uncertain – or, indeed, sought to disclaim knowledge altogether. 'I know not well the meaning in this passage, perhaps rocky,' Johnson states, for instance, under *shelfy*. 'Of this word I know not the etymology, nor any other example', he declares under *scrannel*, a word he defines as 'Vile; worthless. Perhaps grating by the sound'. Johnson's sense of conjecture or hypothesis is marked. 'A tree suffered to grow for coarse and common uses, as posts or rails. Of this meaning I am doubtful', Johnson proffers under *staddle*. The definition is, in effect, withdrawn almost as soon as it is given, leaving reader – and the entry – in a curious state of ambiguity.

Dictionaries, at least in my experience, did not usually behave like this. As I had rather naively thought, the good dictionary ought to reduce the reader to a state of receptive passivity. One consults the dictionary in search of information. All one needs to do is find the right entry and then move on, after assimilating the information one had not known before. Johnson's fondness for leaving information literally open-ended, as in his use of 'perhaps' was, in this light, perplexing. If Johnson's entries are reasoned and deductive, and laden with his carefully gathered evidence, they included, too, a striking honesty. 'The meaning of this compound is doubtful', as Johnson writes under *dew-burning*, for example; 'perhaps it alludes to the sparkling of dew'. Or perhaps not. Johnson as dictionary-maker moved in directions I had not expected. Modern dictionaries likewise did not try and engage readers in a dialogue or conversation, as Johnson does under *pun*, another entry which began by stressing what is not, rather than what is, known: 'I know not whence this word is to be deduced: to *pun*, is to grind or beat with a pestle; can *pun* mean an empty sound, like that of a mortar beaten, as *clench*, the old word for *pun*, seems only a corruption of *clink*?'. Nor did modern dictionaries tap so explicitly into a sense of shared heritage, irrespective of the passing of time, as in Johnson's reminder that *dark-house* is 'Our old word for a madhouse' or in his pondering on the idiosyncrasies of use under *beloved*: 'It is observable, that, though the participle be of very frequent use, the verb is seldom or never admitted; as we say, you are much *beloved* by me, but not, I *belove* you'.

Against what increasingly came to seem the bland anonymity of modern dictionaries, a sense of Johnson as writer could therefore be intriguingly present in the *Dictionary*, not only in his often cited references to Lichfield (as under *lich*) or his pointed comments about taxation, but also in definitions which suggest, say, the dubious joys of fox-hunting, as in the decision to define *fox-hunter* as 'A man whose chief ambition is to shew his bravery in hunting foxes'. If bravery is specified, it is also undercut in yet another definition which turns back upon itself, inviting another reading. And yet another. Entries such as these offered puzzles of a different kind for my undergraduate essay – were these strengths or weaknesses? They certainly made the *Dictionary* more memorable.

If, as a student, I wasn't entirely converted to the joys of dictionary-making (it was with a certain relief that I moved on from my essay on Johnson and ventured elsewhere), this first engagement with the *Dictionary* stayed with me. Dictionary-making could suddenly seem human, complicated, nuanced. It offered insights into a harsher past, as in Johnson's bleak entry for *cancer* ('A virulent swelling, or sore, not to be cured'). Yet it also foregrounded the modern, as in Johnson's entry for *magazine* or *barbeque*, or his comments on 'modern writers' and the changes they can also reveal within the use of words. In what became a pre-occupation which continued long after my rather confused undergraduate essay, I returned again and again to the ways in which Johnson as dictionary-maker can require an active participation in thinking about how meaning might work -- or proffer a shared process of deduction, inviting us to contemplate the patterns of change and variation or to examine the plays of knowledge between dictionary-maker and evidence, rather than presenting readers with the unequivocal fixity or rigidity they might initially have expected. Johnson's delicate apprehension of change can pervade the dictionary, as the intricately worded entry for *dealbation*: 'The act of bleaching or whitening; rendering things white, which were not so before: a word which is now almost grown into disuse'. Words can fade before our eyes.

Reading Johnson's *Dictionary*, we are, then, often brought up against the difficulties of lexicography – and the challenge of determining meaning and sense in a language which remained, as Johnson stressed, a moving target, 'falling away' and 'budding' even as the dictionary 'hastened to publication.' What Johnson's *Dictionary* does is not necessarily what we, or Chesterfield, nor Johnson's original

audience, might expect or have expected. As I might remind my undergraduate self, Johnson's *Dictionary* is a work that resists, and continues to resist easy definition – but which, by the same token, rewards close reading, and even closer rereading. Displaying his own forms of 'nice experiment', Johnson probes, scrutinizes, and interrogates the evidence he laboriously gathered up across the long years of dictionary-making. That language, like life, isn't as neat as we might prefer, is merely part of the ordinary texture of existence. Words, too, can be bound in an eloquent exploration of hope and desire, as well as realism and truth.

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