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DR. JOHNSON AND THE PROSE GENRES\*

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The history of English Literature has for many decades tended to divide itself - or indeed, to be divided - into periods, and no small part of the fascination of literary history stems from the attempts of scholars to label appropriately almost any given segment of our legacy. The period which extends from 1660 to approximately 1798 is no exception. Depending on the historian who is being read or upon the university catalogue being perused, the almost 140 years beginning with the Restoration of Charles II and ending with the publication of the first edition of Lyrical Balads has been referred to variously as the English Enlightenment, the Neoclassical Age, the Age of Reason, the Age of Satire, the Age of Wit, and the Age of Prose, to list only a few of the more prominent titles that purport to describe this period. Of course, none of these is entirely accurate and, therefore, cannot finally be comfortably satisfying.

My paper today, nevertheless, concerns itself tangentially with the neo-classical age as an age of prose, though all of us know and freely admit that it was much more than that. It is concerned even more particularly with Dr. Johnson's interest in several of the prose genres which he both criticised and utilised. In some of my earlier analyses which the editors of The New Rambler have been kind enough to publish, I have offered sporadic address to Johnson's interest in genre per se. Today, I should like to consider his concern with literary types that regularly and predominantly in his day took the form of prose, though some of these could, and sometimes did, appear as poetry also. It is perhaps worthwhile to examine in one place Johnson's overall views of such genres as the essay, prose fiction, biography, and criticism itself, and to mention other prose forms as well upon which he came to rely so intensely as a vehicle for personal expression.

Some thirty-six years ago, in his critical biography of Dr. Johnson, Joseph Wood Krutch observed that "to use words with a concern for their precise meaning rather than for their emotional association is, if you like, to write prose rather than poetry; but prose is important, and good prose in the sense in which the term has just been used had so rarely been written before the middle of the seventeenth century that one is almost justified in saying that England did not know how to write it." Krutch cites the prose of Dryden and Pope as exceptional. Johnson himself had little to say about prose, except

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on 15th November 1980.

Chairman: J.H. Leicester, MA



for an occasional remark which attempted to distinguish it from poetry, as in The Rambler, No. 86: "Yet versification, or the art of modulating his numbers, is indispensably necessary to a poet. Every other power by which the understanding is enlightened, or the imagination enchanted, may be exercised in prose."<sup>2</sup> His own works are sufficient evidence of the fact that he considered prose a very valuable means of discourse - a form of literary expression celebrated for its numerous and versatile functions. Though his remarks on the general nature of prose are few, his comments on various prose types are abundant.

First, the essay, which Johnson considered one of the most significant of the prose genres. The seriousness with which he viewed it is amply evident to anyone who has examined Johnson's own writings, particularly The Rambler, The Idler and The Adventurer. His definition of the form, in the Dictionary, as "a loose sally of the mind;<sup>3</sup> an irregular indigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition..." reveals more his opinion of the majority of the essays that he had read and studied than it does his view of what this genre should be and what it should undertake. The definition, however, also seems to imply a certain inherent flexibility not enjoyed by most of the literary types, though other of his comments on the purpose and place of the essay indicate his belief that flexibility in itself entails judicious responsibility. When Johnson wrote to Joseph Warton to ask him to contribute to The Adventurer, he informed Warton that it had been decided that "a paper should consist of pieces of imagination, pictures of life, and disquisitions of literature."<sup>4</sup> He acknowledged, readily enough, that he had contributed to this decision; and it may be conjectured, of course, that he likely looked with especial favour upon the second of these potential essay subjects, "pictures of Life." It was Johnson's way to view literature as a potent instructional force, and for him the essay in prose was no exception. At the same time that he himself wrote essays of moral guidance and amplitude, he could commend the levity and the informality of such writers as Addison and Steele, who had undertaken to introduce philosophy at the teatable and to reform societal manners with gentle nudges and easeful portraits. He recognised the essay as a prose form which could serve a diversity of instructive purposes; and he was sufficiently knowledgeable in the art of literature to realise that "he who endeavours to gain many readers, must try various arts of invitation, essay every avenue of pleasure, and make frequent changes in his methods of approach."<sup>5</sup>

Johnson believed that the innate flexibility of the prose essay gave it certain unusual advantages over the other literary forms. Among these were its wide circulation in periodical<sup>6</sup> format, its adaptability to public taste and circumstances, and its brevity. The essayist, too, had an advantage over other authors, as Johnson observes in The Rambler, No. 184:

The writer of essays escapes many embarrassments to which a large work would have exposed him; he seldom harasses his reason with long trains of consequence, dims his eyes with the perusal of antiquated volumes, or burthens his memory with great accumulations of preparatory knowledge. A careless glance upon a favourite author, or transient survey of the varieties of life, is sufficient to supply the first hint or seminal idea, which enlarged by the gradual accretion of matter stored in the mind, is by the warmth of fancy easily expanded into flowers, and sometimes ripened into fruit.

Such factors as these contributed to the uniqueness of the basic nature of the essay and to its particular suitability for filling a serious void in the area of social instruction known as "propriety." Thus Johnson viewed it not only as a vehicle for especially sober moral discourse, but also as the ideal literary form for teaching the public how to reform its manners as well as its conversation:

Before The Tatler and Spectator, if the writers for the theatre are excepted, England had no masters of common life. No writers had yet undertaken to reform either the savageness of neglect or the impertinence of civility; to shew when to speak, or to be silent; how to refuse, or how to comply. We had many books to teach us our more important duties, and to settle opinions in philosophy or politicks; but an Arbiter elegantiarum, a judge of propriety, was yet wanting, who should survey the track of daily conversation and free it from thorns and prickles, which tease the passer, though they do not wound him.

For this purpose nothing is so proper as the frequent publication of short papers, which we read not as study but amusement. If the subject be slight, the treatise is likewise short. The busy may find time, and the idle may find patience.

The subject matter of Johnson's essays themselves suggests that he was not in favour of restricting this genre to either light or grave instruction, but rather that he saw within it the possibilities of presenting and pursuing both.

Johnson's practical criticism of the essay is best in evidence in his observations on the work of Sir Francis Bacon and of Addison and Steele. In The Rambler, No. 106, he says of Bacon: "Bacon...seems to have pleased himself chiefly with his essays, 'which come home to mens business and bosoms,' and of which, therefore, he declares his expectation, that they 'will live as long as books last.'" It is appropriate to note that Bacon, who was one of Johnson's favourite authors, appears frequently in quotation in the Dictionary and that Johnson once remarked to Burke that the excellence and the value of

Bacon's essays "consisted in being the observations of a strong mind operating upon life; and in consequence you find there what you seldom find in other books."<sup>10</sup>

Of Addison, his criticism is equally favourable. He acknowledges the influence of The Spectator on contemporary conversation and admires the strictures on manners with which many of the essays deal.<sup>11</sup> He recommends to aspiring authors of prose Addison's avoidance of "all harshness and severity of diction": "What he attempted, he performed; he is never rapid, and he never stagnates.... Whoever wishes to attain an English style, familiar but not coarse, and elegant but not ostentatious, must give his days and nights to the volumes of Addison."<sup>12</sup>

To Johnson, then, for the essay to be nothing more than "a loose sally of the mind" was an inexcusable and deplorable waste; if it was a "sally of the mind" at all, then it should at least take a significant step toward remedying social discrepancies, if not toward relieving and satisfying the mental and moral quests of the human spirit. And it regularly and most effectively took the form of prose. Indeed, "whoever wishes to attain an English style" - an English prose style. How often has that passage from the Life of Addison been quoted!

Dr. Johnson's uninterrupted preoccupation with the various older genres, particularly poetry, drama, the essay, and biography, virtually eclipsed his interest in prose fiction, except as that interest manifests itself in Johnson's own prose tales. His comments on the "new fiction" are restricted almost altogether to his fourth Rambler, in which he distinguishes between the old tales of adventure and what he calls the new "comedy of romance," and to his miscellaneous random observations on particular novelists, who either do or do not meet the requirements which he hopes will guide their efforts in modern fiction. Some of these requirements he sets forth in the Rambler essay. The criticism which he left shows that he viewed the new genre as he viewed the other literary forms; manifestly, his interest in the novel centred primarily around the possibilities which it offers as a vehicle for moral instruction. That Johnson remained essentially unconcerned with the technique of prose fiction is quite apparent from his criticism of Richardson, as well as from his definitions, in the Dictionary of the terms "novel" and "romance."<sup>13</sup>

In his Rambler, No. 4 (March 31, 1750), Johnson emphasises the basic realism of the modern works of fiction by contrasting this realism with the far-fetched, idyllic, and often ludicrous characteristics of the older "heroick romance," in which giants snatch ladies away from nuptial rites, later to be rescued by knights, and in which there is an equal assortment of hermits and woods, battles and shipwrecks. At the same time that, in effect, he voices his disapproval of what he considers the extravagancies of the fiction of past ages, he admits

that few of its readers were so credulous as to credit the unreality which they read; and he seems to doubt that these early romances noticeably influenced human conduct for either good or bad; "In the romances formerly written, every transaction and sentiment was so remote from all that passes among men, that the reader was in very little danger of making any applications to himself; the virtues and crimes were equally beyond his sphere of activity; and he amused himself with heroes and with traitors, deliverers and persecutors, as with beings of another species, whose actions were regulated upon motives of their own, and who had neither faults nor excellencies in common with himself."<sup>14</sup> Interestingly enough, however, Johnson, who in his youth loved the romances of chivalry, is said to have attributed to these stories "that unsettled turn of mind which prevented his ever fixing in any profession."<sup>15</sup>

Such merits as these older writings possess could not, however, in Johnson's thinking, take the place of realistic portrayals which inspire virtue and make vice odious to behold and to practise.

What evidence of the maturity of the new prose fiction does Johnson acknowledge? The opening sentences of The Rambler, No. 4, provide the answer:

The works of fiction, with which the present generation seems more particularly delighted, are such as exhibit life in its true state, diversified only by accidents that daily happen in the world, and influenced by passions and qualities which are really to be found in conversing with mankind.

This kind of writing may be termed not improperly the comedy of romance, and is to be conducted nearly by the rules of comic poetry. Its province is to bring about natural events by easy means, and to keep up curiosity without the help of wonder; it is therefore precluded from the machines and expedients of the heroic romance....

The task of our present writers is very different; it requires, together with that learning which is to be gained from books, that experience which can never be attained by solitary diligence, but must arise from general converse, and accurate observation of the living world.<sup>16</sup>

In view of this realistic tendency in the prose fiction of his day, Johnson included in the fourth Rambler some requirements which he hoped would heighten the moral tone of the novel and which he believed would help to establish the genre as a literary form worthy of serious study and consideration. Among these requirements were, one, accuracy in the portrayal of character and, two, the inculcation of moral order and regularity within the reading public, many of whom were members of the



younger generation. He believed that the very closeness to real life of such works increases their influence as moral instruments; consequently, he urged novelists to write with a moral purpose and view clearly in mind.

Johnson's judgment of prose fiction on the basis of its relation to life and of its conveyance of moral guidance and regularity is in vivid evidence in his remarks on novelists such as Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, and Fanny Burney. His praise of Richardson almost invariably includes some denunciative criticism of Fielding, whose works he considered irreverent. He told Boswell that "there is all the difference in the world between characters of nature and characters of manners; and there is the difference between the characters of Fielding and those of Richardson. Characters of manners are very entertaining; but they are to be understood, by a more superficial observer, than characters of nature, where a man must dive into the recesses of the human heart."<sup>17</sup> Boswell later remarks that Johnson, in comparing the two writers, used the expression "that there was as great a difference between them as between a man who knew how a watch was made, and a man who could tell the hour by looking on the dialplate."<sup>18</sup> Mrs. Piozzi reports Johnson as saying that "Richardson had picked the kernel of life, while Fielding was contented with the husk."<sup>19</sup> To his friend Erskine, Johnson once observed that "there is more knowledge of the heart in one letter of Richardson's, than in all 'Tom Jones'..."<sup>20</sup> It is, to be sure, such opinions as these which reveal the basis of Johnson's admiration for "an author who has enlarged the knowledge of human nature, and taught the passions to move at the command of virtue."<sup>21</sup> Johnson himself went after "the kernel of life," as one would surely expect him to do; and he found it in Richardson (if somewhat to the dismay of the twentieth century). He found it in "the moral effect of the fiction."<sup>22</sup>

"In the moral effect of the fiction" — here, says Robert E. Moore, is "the phrase which gets at the centre of Clarissa."<sup>23</sup> Here is the phrase which also gets at the potential effectiveness, for Johnson, of prose fiction, a newly developing form in many ways, and a form which he himself was to utilise for Rasselas, "The Fountains," the parliamentary debates, and other works of note.

Early in July 1763, not quite two months after Boswell had been introduced to Johnson in Mr. Davies' back parlour, Johnson observed to the young Scot who was to become his biographer that "Bayle's Dictionary is a very useful work for those to consult who love the biographical part of literature, which is what I love most," and which regularly across the ages has taken the form of prose. As much as he respected and enjoyed all types of serious literature, he cast his vote of preference for biography. His comment to Boswell was not the result of a desire to "talk for victory" or of hasty and impulsive decision; rather it was the sincere statement of a man whose essential humanity and intense interest in the portrayal of life in literature are virtually unparalleled in the annals of English literary history. The nature and function

of biography was one of his favourite topics both to write about and to talk about; and as Harold Nicholson has said, Johnson's scattered observations, when collected and organised, "constitute perhaps the best definition of biography as an art which has yet been formulated."<sup>25</sup>

Man's ability to associate himself sympathetically with the human aspects of biography and to profit from what he learns by applying these human truths in his own life is the outstanding factor which, for Johnson, sets biography above the other forms of writing, whether in prose or poetry. He expresses this superiority in The Rambler, No. 60:

It is not easy for the most artful writer to give us an interest in happiness or misery, which we think ourselves never likely to feel, and with which we have never yet been made acquainted....

Those parallel circumstances and kindred images, to which we readily conform our minds, are above all other writings, to be found in narratives of the lives of particular persons; and therefore no species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography, since none can be more delightful or more useful, none can more certainly enchain the heart by irresistible interest, or more widely diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition.<sup>26</sup>

Hence it is the traits of general human nature as evidenced in particular lives that make biography a form of literature that man can readily turn to his own use. Johnson unhesitatingly points out that valuable lessons applicable to private life are not to be found, for the most part, in history or fiction; for both of these forms are lacking in the vital human interest which is the essence of biographical composition. Some years after writing The Rambler, he observes in The Idler, No. 84 that "the stratagems of war, and the intrigues of courts, are read by far the greater part of mankind with the same indifference as the adventures of fabled heroes, or the revolutions of a fairy region."<sup>27</sup> He explains that the examples and events of history have seldom been brought home to men's lives convincingly enough to assist in the regulation of human conduct and that, as a result, man's knowledge of history deplorably serves primarily to "diversify conversation." Fiction comes off no better. The realisation that a story is only a representation of reality rather than an account of real lives that have been lived and of true happenings that have been experienced detracts from its credibility, in comparison with the facts, both the pleasant and the harsh realities, of biography; "From the time of life when fancy begins to be overruled by reason and corrected by experience, the most artful tale raises little curiosity when it is known to be false."<sup>28</sup> In view of these assertions, which were firmly grounded in Johnson's own experiences (he had been an avid reader and student of history, fiction, and biography since his earliest schooling), it is not surprising to find him referring to biography as "that [form of narrative writing] which is most eagerly read, and most easily applied to the purposes of life."<sup>29</sup> In this



connection, his comment to Lord Monboddo, while he was touring Scotland with Boswell, has an underscoring effect: "I esteem biography, as giving us what comes near to ourselves, what we can turn to use."<sup>30</sup> Its logical prose form allowed it to achieve its humanistic goals more readily.

Johnson's idea that biography contains lessons that are immediately applicable to the state of individual lives is, for him, hardly just a high-sounding theory devoid of practicality. Johnson himself stresses the usefulness of biography by making his general theory, as well as his many incidental references to this form of composition, quite specific and meaningful in the two essays which he devotes exclusively to the subject and from which certain pertinent passages have already been cited. In the earlier essay, for example, he elucidates some of the common denominators of human life which are responsible for the educational value and the applicability of biography. He writes:

I have often thought that there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful. For not only every man has, in the mighty mass of the world, great numbers in the same condition with himself, to whom his mistakes and miscarriages, escapes and expedients, would be of immediate and apparent use; but 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...We are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope,<sup>31</sup> obstructed by danger, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure.

And in the later essay, his remarks are designed to show the kind of helpful and directly applicable information which every man can assimilate for himself from biography: "The mischievous consequence of vice and folly, of irregular desires and predominant passions, are best discovered by those relations which are levelled with the general surface of life, which tell not how any man became great, but how he was made happy; not how he lost the favour of his prince, but how he became discontented with himself."<sup>32</sup> Johnson's profound knowledge and understanding of the human condition is revealed again and again in such passages.

Johnson assigns to the domestic view in biography a particular significance which leads him to censure any writer who imagines himself to be writing a life, when all that he ultimately exhibits is "a chronological series of actions or preferments," and who so little regards the manners of his hero, "that more knowledge may be gained of a man's real character, by a short conversation with one of his servants than from a formal and studied narrative, begun with his pedigree, and ended with his funeral."<sup>33</sup> The whole interest of biography inheres in its truthfulness, and the whole value of biography inheres in its application to life. The words which are most central to Johnson's view

of this prose genre are "use", "useful", "life", "truth" and "instruction"; and it is these which recur many times in the splendid abundance of his thoughts on biography.

Johnson once commented that he hopes he had written the Lives of the Poets in such a way as to promote piety. The promotion of piety includes, for him, the ancillary results of learning to live as one should and of mending the world for the better. The purpose of biography is moral; or, as William K. Wimsatt sums it up, "Biography is what happened to a person, like oneself."<sup>34</sup> And as indicated earlier, Johnson apparently felt that its humanistic ends could best be realised and fulfilled in prose.

Though several of his neoclassical precursors and contemporaries found poetry an effective medium for their criticism of literature (i.e. Dryden, Pope, Gay and Collins among others), Johnson seems to have preferred prose - specifically, the critical essay or the critical biography - as the most appropriate mode to suit his own style and practice. And no fact emerges more clearly from a study of Johnson's view of criticism than the consistency of his belief that criticism should aim to inculcate a sound appreciation of literature. Criticism can accomplish this purpose best, he feels, by pointing to the truth which a work of literature closely approximates and by describing the nearness to life or the remoteness from life which it depicts.

One of Johnson's best-known expressions of the idea that literary criticism must serve the cause of truth is found in The Rambler, No. 3, in which he presents his allegory of Criticism and her torch; "Criticism... was the eldest daughter of Labour and of Truth; she was, at her birth, committed to the care of Justice, and brought up by her in the palace of Wisdom."<sup>35</sup> Although Johnson was not favourably disposed, as a rule, toward allegorical composition, he nevertheless employed allegory quite effectively in this Rambler to delineate the task of literary criticism, and his allegory is written in prose.

In two later Rambler essays, Nos. 92 and 93, Johnson defines the task of criticism in language somewhat more direct and considerably more typical of his writing. In No. 92, he remarks:

It is, however, the task of criticism to establish principles; to improve opinion into knowledge; and to distinguish those means of pleasing which depend upon known causes and rational deduction, from 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. Criticism reduces those regions of literature under the dominion of science, which have hitherto known only the anarchy of ignorance, the caprices of fancy, and the tyranny of prescription.<sup>36</sup>

And in No. 93, he observes that "the duty of criticism is neither to depreciate, nor dignify by partial representations, but to hold out the light of reason, whatever it may discover; and to promulgate the determination of truth, whatever she shall dictate."<sup>37</sup> It is significant to note that in all three of these descriptions of the legitimate end of criticism, Johnson stresses the revelation and the communication of truth, as Pope had done much earlier in the century in poetic form.

In the Life of Dryden he observes that "to judge rightly of an author we must transport ourselves to his time, and examine what were the wants of his contemporaries, and what were his means of supplying them."<sup>38</sup> In addition, he insists on the need for judging a literary work as a whole, for "it is not by comparing line with line that the merit of great works is to be estimated, but by their general effects and ultimate result."<sup>39</sup> Despite the censure of numerous self-authorised critical legislators, Shakespeare continues his reign as master of the drama because he helps his readers either to enjoy life or to endure it. His general effect is one of "pleasing captivity," and his ultimate result is the communication of truth.

What Johnson, it seems, wishes most to stress in this connection is the idea that truthful criticism can lead to recognition, appreciation, and inculcation of that larger truth which literature communicates; and it is this idea that stands behind his view that criticism itself, though "to be ranked among the subordinate and instrumental arts,"<sup>40</sup> entails a precious responsibility. It is interesting to note that Johnson's best known literary criticism has come to be acknowledged as literary art itself, an attainment that many of the critical outpourings of the period, in either poetry or prose, failed to realise.

The immediacy of effect and the longevity of influence which a literary work can experience are, in Johnson's opinion, the mutual responsibility of the author and the reader. He once observed in The Rambler:

The task of an author is, either to teach what is not known, or to recommend known truths, by his manner of adorning them; either to let new light in upon the mind and open new scenes to the prospect, or to vary the dress and situation of common objects, so as to give them fresh grace and more powerful attractions, to spread such flowers over the regions through which the intellect has already made its progress, as may tempt it to return and take a second view of things hastily passed over or negligently regarded.

Either of these labours is very difficult, because that they may not be fruitless, men must not only be persuaded of their errors, but reconciled to their guide; they must not only confess their ignorance, but, what is still less pleasing, must allow that he from whom they are to learn is more knowing than themselves.<sup>41</sup>

Throughout his writings Johnson acknowledges the problems which the responsibilities of authorship entail; but he is adamant in his conviction that an author of talent, dedication, and moral earnestness can triumph. Johnson sees the various literary genres as potential sources of power which can bring man to a recognition and application of truth within the framework of his own experience, and the prose genres obviously in his theory as in his practice are central. He believes that when an author's abilities are great enough and his knowledge is deep enough, man will willingly confess his ignorance and look upon works of literature with a tolerant receptivity. Then literature will make itself felt positively in the world. Had Johnson been required to state a preference for DeQuincey's literature of knowledge or literature of power, he undoubtedly would have chosen the latter. His chief interest, as a critic and man of letters, was literature as power — as moral power — from which it behoves man to glean the hope for self-fulfillment and unlimited achievement. His interest in the prose genres only enhances and dignifies his critical theory.

Paul Fussell, in his well received book-length study of 1971 entitled Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing, enumerates the genres to which Johnson actually contributed as evidence of his versatile, multifaceted competence as a man of letters. The list is both extensive and impressive. The prose genres mentioned include tragedy, biography, the periodical essay, the oriental tale, the travel book, the political tract, the critical essay, the book review. Further, he worked in the oration, the sermon, the letter, the prayer, the dedication, the preface, the legal brief and the petition to royalty. Fussell goes on to mention that Johnson "was a master even of the advertisement, the political handbill and the medical prescription."<sup>42</sup>

In 1977, in his presidential address before the Johnson Society of Lichfield, D.W. Jefferson remarked that the extensiveness of the list of prose genres in which Johnson not only showed an interest but to which he contributed perhaps does not do him as much service as it ought, since "it deflects our attention from the special peculiarities of his genius."<sup>43</sup>

Regardless, we who today acknowledge the uniqueness of Johnson's contributions to our literary legacy are aware that no other writer of the eighteenth century wrote in so many forms, or recognised writing as "necessarily a self-expressive act verging on confession,"<sup>44</sup> or posited so authoritatively the versatility of English prose in the genres which he saw as particularly worthy.

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33. "The Rambler," No. 60, Yale Edition, III, 322.
34. William K. Wimsatt, The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson (New Haven, 1941), p.97.
35. "The Rambler," No. 3, Yale Edition, III, 16.
36. "The Rambler," No. 92, Yale Edition, IV, 122.
37. "The Rambler," No. 93, Yale Edition, IV, 134.
38. "Life of Dryden," Lives, I, 411.
39. "Life of Dryden," Lives, I, 454.
40. "The Rambler," No. 208, Yale Edition, V, 319.
41. "The Rambler," No. 3, Yale Edition, III, 14-15.

42. Paul Fussell, Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing (New York, 1971) pp. 38-39.
43. D.W. Jefferson, "Johnson the Essayist," Transactions of the Johnson Society of Lichfield (1977), p.5.

VISIT TO WESLEY'S CHAPEL, HOUSE AND MUSEUM

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On 20th September 1980 a party of twenty members and friends gathered at Wesley's Chapel in the City Road to a warm welcome from the Rev. Douglas Wollen, MA, Historian of the Chapel. He began the tour with an introductory talk in the Chapel itself, covering Wesley's life and the history of the buildings, delivered in his own delightfully inimitable manner. He pointed out the restored Adam style roof, said to have been the widest span in the land in its time, with the snake and dove, symbolising healing and deliverance, decorating the frieze below the galleries, and the few surviving pillars which had started life as dockyard masts, presented by George III.

The party then viewed the graveyard, with Wesley's tomb, reading aloud the impressive inscription, and the Foundry Chapel, containing a small organ that once belonged to Charles Wesley. The courtesy of Mr. Russell-Cobb allowed the party to sample its quality. The House and Museum, under repair but specially opened for the occasion, contained some of Wesley's clothes and furniture, his shoebuckles, his infant coral rattle, letters and books and many other personal mementoes, including a gallon teapot and a formidable electrical machine with which he treated patients suffering from melancholia. Also on view was an engraving of Wesley's Tree at Winchelsea, under which he preached. This was blown down many years ago in a storm, but your reporter was pleased to note recently that it has a flourishing descendant.

This memorable visit concluded with a truly magnificent homemade "Methodist Tea", kindly provided by two ladies of the local congregation, and a visit to the Bookshop, specially opened by a young American member of the resident community. The Society is most grateful to Mr. Wollen for inaugurating the new session with such an interesting and pleasurable visit.

S.B.S.P.





WILLIAM BOYCE: A belated bicentenary tribute

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A paper given on 16th February 1980 by Mr. Ian Bartlett, Department of Music, University of London Goldsmiths' College. Chairman: Dr. David D. Brown MA

In introducing Mr. Bartlett, the Chairman said that although Dr. Johnson had no ear or taste for music, he had musicians among his friends, and it was right that the Society should pay attention to great musicians of his time. He explained that the tribute to Boyce was belated because the commemoration of Dr. Arne had had to be postponed owing to the untimely death of the original speaker. He was glad to welcome a former colleague who had done much work on Boyce, editing works not heard since the 18th century, which had been used by the BBC in their bicentenary concerts, and had contributed articles to the musical journals.

Mr. Bartlett said that although Johnson did consider musicians odd company, six months before his death he had asked Dr. Burney for the alphabet of his language. William Boyce had been born in 1711, not far from Lombard Street, the son of a joiner, and died on 16th February 1779 at his home in Kensington Gore, from where his coffin had been carried in a funeral procession to St. Paul's where he was buried. He had been a pupil of Dr. Maurice Greene, the organist of St. Paul's, where he had begun as a chorister, and had succeeded him as Master of the King's Music. He was himself organist of St. Michael's Cornhill for 32 years, and a composer to the Chapel Royal. Cambridge gave him a Doctor's degree.

He composed for the London pleasure gardens and the stage (Garrick in particular - his 4th Symphony and the song "Heart of Oak" derived from this) and his trio sonatas were much admired and had recently entered the baroque repertoire. He also wrote many anthems and much church music, including that for the funeral of George II and the wedding and coronation of George III. His oratorio David's Lamentation over Saul and Jonathan was inspired by Handel, and his Serenata Solomon was popular for many years after his death. He is shown holding the score in his portrait by Hudson in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

His great contribution to English music was his publication Cathedral Music, a collection of Church music from Tudor times which long remained in use. Boyce was a man of the 18th century much loved and respected. Hawkins praised his taste, justice and integrity. Mr. Bartlett attributed to him vitality, directness of utterance and the power of conveying character brilliantly and succinctly.

The talk was illustrated with a selection of Boyce's secular and church music which was much enjoyed. Following a short discussion the thanks of the meeting were expressed by Mr. Steve Race.

THE WISDOM OF JOHNSON'S SHAKESPEARE\*

Graham Nicholls, Ph.D  
Curator, Johnson Birthplace Museum, Lichfield

When Johnson's edition of Shakespeare's plays appeared at last in 1765, it came at the end of a cluster of events which transformed Johnson from being the leading writer and journalist of the 1750s into a national celebrity. Within a very short period in the early 1760s Johnson had met Boswell, Henry and Hester Thrale, received the first of his honorary doctorates and, most importantly, been granted his government pension. He was metamorphosed from "Dictionary" Johnson, the wise man who had composed The Vanity of Human Wishes, Irene, The Rambler, Adventurer, and Idler essays, Rasselas, the Dictionary itself, and the '50s critical and political journalism, into the celebrity of the Boswell years, the clubman, the quirky bear, the quarrelsome wit with the soft heart and eccentricities. The distinction in fact between the Reynolds portrait of 1756, the author with pen and paper, pausing for thought in mid-composition, and the 1773 portrait, the mammoth clubman searching his mind for a memorable reply.

The literary achievements of the later years seem to have been regarded by Johnson's contemporaries (and to some extent later readers) as extensions of this public figure, 'Doctor Johnson'. A Journey to the Western Islands was quarried for the anti-Scottishness which had to be in a book whose author had so memorably put down ardent Scottish patriots in conversation; the political pamphlets of the Thrale years have to be the fanatical outpourings of George III's grovelling pensioner; the Lives of the Poets is restricted by contemporaries to Johnson's adverse comments on matters like Milton's politics, or his attempts to deflate enthusiasm for the poetaster of the hour. Before the mid-1760s this was the kind of reaction which only the handful of supposedly personal references in the Dictionary had aroused.

To his contemporary literary world the Shakespeare edition belongs with these later works, the effusions of an amusingly dictatorial figure with carefully cultivated prejudices. The Shakespeare edition is patronised by some, caricatured by others; there is a general feeling of disappointment that this time Doctor Johnson had not come up with the goods. I wish to look at that underlying sense of disappointment in the Shakespeare edition, and look at the note of wisdom which, I believe, Johnson brought to his edition of Shakespeare and which may in part account for the public's sense of anticlimax when it appeared.

\* A paper read at the Johnson Society of London Meeting on 20th December 1980  
Chairman: J.R.G. Comyn Esq.

Something of this contemporary sense of disappointment has carried over into more recent studies. (The Dictionary has been similarly treated in some quarters.) We are told that Johnson's views on Shakespeare are not original, the 'manly' Preface attacks views which nobody held anyway, that the notes frequently fail to acknowledge very recent scholarship. By 1765, we are told, many critics had already put together a more robust English common sense attitude to stage illusion which dispenses with strict neoclassical attitudes to the Unities of Time and Place.<sup>1</sup> (Though it is not part of my immediate argument I wonder just how moribund those ideas were; after all, it was still to be another seven years before Garrick was to produce under the influence of fashionable French criticism, his less flamboyant, more 'correct' version of *Hamlet*. Critical standards change at different rates for different critics.) But when modern critics trace echoes and precursors and anticipations of Johnson's Preface and notes, we may well ask with what are we left? We are left in part, in T.S. Eliot's words, with a praise of Shakespeare from a great man which the honour of a Westminster Abbey funeral could not surpass.<sup>2</sup> It is the brilliance and wisdom of Johnson's Shakespeare that makes it a matter of interest, but of no very great importance, as to how far Johnson formally acknowledges his debt to Benjamin Heath or to Thomas Edwards. It needed the certainty and weight of Johnson's prose to counter-balance European attitudes to Shakespeare, views which Voltaire and others were still putting out. When Johnson announces to the strict neoclassicist that "it is time ... to tell him, by the authority of Shakespeare, that he assumes, as an unquestionable principle, a position, which, while his breath is forming it into words, his understanding pronounces to be false,"<sup>3</sup> it is not very relevant to know whether Johnson is being an innovator with these views, whether he is delivering the final blows to a wasted doctrine, or whether he is just one of several people saying the same thing. Johnson is using his popularly endowed status to give out, as a spokesman, the native tradition centred on Shakespeare, which maintains that the Unities of Time and Place are not relevant to the English stage. An English audience, Johnson says - not of course without pride - does not look on plays and reality, or at least Shakespeare's plays, in the strange way that foreigners seem to do. Johnson puts the case for Shakespeare and his type of theatre in trenchant terms of rhetoric which have meant that for most people the question of the Unities was finished for ever.

With the originality of the notes we come on to a slightly different, but related issue. As Arthur Sherbo concedes, in his Preface Johnson pays tribute and generously acknowledges the achievements of his five earlier Shakespeare editors - four really, Theobald, Pope, Farmer and Warburton; Rowe rather oddly ignored.<sup>4</sup> We know from the cancels in Percy's copy that Johnson toned down his comments on his immediate predecessor, Warburton, before publication. These earlier editors, Johnson notes in the Preface, "have all been treated by me with

candour, which they have not been careful of observing to one another. It is not easy to discover from what cause the acrimony of a scholiast can naturally proceed." (VII, 102). At times Johnson's dry sense of humour does lead him to include wry comments at Theobald, Pope, or Warburton's expense. In Timon of Athens, IV.3, for example, Warburton had glossed

Not ev'n nature,  
To whom all sores lay seige, can bear great fortune  
But by contempt of nature,

by proposing that 'ev'n nature' meant "nature in its greatest perfection" and had seen in the lines an allusion to Alexander the Great. Johnson merely comments; "I have preserved this note rather for the sake of the commentator than of the authour." (VIII, 729) And on the most famous of all eighteenth-century Shakespearean cruxes - "a table of green fields" in Mistress Quickly's description of Falstaff's death in Henry V - Johnson quotes at length Pope's note on the phrase which maintained that it was a note to the props department to bring on a tavern table owned by a Mr. Greenfield. Despite the fact that Pope had later ignominiously withdrawn his note in the face of Theobald's universally acclaimed emendation - "a' babbled of green fields" - Johnson keeps in Pope's earlier comment on the grounds that "as it excites merriment, we are loath to part [with it]." (VIII, 541). Despite these moments of fun and scholarly needling, Johnson's critical manners in his Shakespeare are good, paying tribute when needed and frequently (if not on every occasion) acknowledging earlier successful interpretations. At a time when the world was offering honours to him and society was beginning to lionise him, Johnson is clearly unwilling to put out his Shakespeare as in any sense a definitive edition from England's leading man of letters. He had learnt from the experience ten years earlier when, fostered by Chesterfield's expectations and his belated publicity campaign, Johnson's Dictionary had been regarded as the definitive, once and for all lexicographical record of the English language. The public may have expected this, Chesterfield may have expected this, but by the time of the Dictionary Preface, we know that Johnson himself had grave doubts about this sort of dictionary. "No dictionary of a living tongue," he wrote in 1755, "ever can be perfect, since, while it is hastening to publication, some words are budding, and some falling away."

If this was a lesson learnt from his study of the whole language, it would be one to which Johnson would respond when preparing the works of that language's greatest ornament. In discussing the difficulties of Shakespeare's text in the 1756 Proposals for that edition, Johnson points out that "the great excellence of Shakespeare[is] that he drew his scenes from nature, and from life. He copied the manners of the world then passing before him, and has more allusions than other poets to the



traditions and superstition of the vulgar; which must therefore be traced before he can be understood." (VII, 53) He had faced a similar problem, on a much greater scale in the Dictionary. Johnson had attempted to consult technical and practical manuals for certain areas of vocabulary and usage but he had to confess, "I could not visit caverns to learn the miner's language, nor take a voyage to perfect my skill in the dialect of navigation, nor visit the warehouses of merchants, and shops of artificers, to gain the names of wares, tools, and operations."<sup>6</sup> Thus, with the great poet of daily life — Johnson's constant praise of Shakespeare of course — the problem arises again from a poet who frequently turns to everyday life for language both physical and metaphorical. "He that will understand Shakespeare", says Johnson, "must not be content to study him in the closet, he must look for his meaning sometimes among the sports of the field, and sometimes among the manufactures of the shop." (VII, 86) Johnson realises that, as with the Dictionary, the English literary world was looking to him again for explanations and clear answers in all these areas, and although as a polymath and a man with unbounded enthusiasm for the practicalities of living Johnson could probably have performed this task better than anyone else, he deliberately leaves his editing as open-ended as possible; he admits his ignorance, he is sometimes positively destructive without offering anything of his own, he makes half suggestions, he asks the reader questions. As he had written to Thomas Warton in the early days of his Shakespearean labours, "A commentary must arise from the fortuitous discoveries of many men, in devious walks of literature." Johnson's own Shakespeare edition will be just one in a series stretching back to Heminge and Condell and forward, he hopes, to infinity:

The compleat explanation of an authour not systematick and consequential, but desultory and vagrant, abounding in casual allusions and light hints, is not to be expected from any single scholiast....What can be known, will be collected by chance, from the recesses of obscure and obsolete papers, perused commonly with some other view. Of this knowledge every man has some, and none has much; but when the authour has engaged the publick attention, those who can add any thing to his illustration, communicate their discoveries, and time produces what had eluded diligence. (VII, 103)

Johnson is now a wise Shakespeare editor who sees that the text of the thirty-six plays is a common literary property to which every intelligent man and woman is able to contribute something. And this, I think, was something which the general reading public of 1765 was not prepared to accept, and particularly not from Samuel (now Doctor) Johnson. There was still an element of Everest-climbing in the production of a Shakespeare edition; it was the literary enterprise which the major literary figure of the day was expected to tackle as a one-man marathon. And Johnson was the leading London celebrity of letters, the single-handed lexicographer who should now give the public a total once-and-for-all edition of our greatest plays which would stand unchallenged as another monument to

the eighteenth century. Johnson's more flexible approach, emphasising a community of scholarship stretching backward and forward in time, did not seem to go with the Great Man of Letters image which the public had fostered on to Johnson (and in which he certainly connived at times). Perhaps here is one of the reasons for the almost audible groans of disappointment which greeted Johnson's Shakespeare in October 1765.

Let us look in a little more detail at Johnson's deliberate attempt to militate against the public wish for one monumental, monolithic edition, the product of one genius, preferably scribbling away in a garret. One simple expedient was for Johnson to involve other respected friends in the enterprise, without in any sense releasing control of the project himself. To diminish the impression that the edition had sprung from the mind of "Doctor Johnson, Literary Giant", he interpolates and makes references and acknowledgments to other people in the notes and in the Appendix to the 1765 edition, and in the later revisions, to broaden out the community of Shakespearean scholarship. In the Appendix to the first edition, Johnson writes that "in the prosecution of this work I received many remarks from learned friends.... An appendix therefore became necessary, that I might omit nothing which could contribute to the explanation of my authour. I do not always concur with my friends in their opinion, but their abilities are such as make me less confident when I find myself differing from them." (VIII, 1049). Some of these friends' contributions are slight, but, as Johnson points out, that is how a Shakespeare commentary is built up. In the main body of the edition, "a skilful navigator" criticises Shakespeare's nautical terminology in the first scene of *The Tempest*, and "a gentleman better acquainted with falconry than myself" helps out in *2 Henry VI*. (Who was he by the way? Langton? Johnson is always well informed on Shakespeare's hunting language). Garrick makes his only appearance. I think to point out that sword-hilts have crosses on them. (VII, 117; VIII, 583; VIII, 971-72). Most of the members of the contemporaneously established Club contribute to the Appendix; Reynolds discusses Ophelia's character, Percy brings in much antiquarian research, Hawkins helps out on musicology and other historical matters. There are some pleasant surprises in these contributory notes; some time between 1765 and the revised edition of 1773 Edmund Burke passed on to Johnson (presumably by word of mouth) some perceptive comments on the relationship between the hero and Apemantus in *Timon of Athens*, and the otherwise (to my knowledge) totally silent co-founder of the Club, Anthony Chamier, breaks forth in the Appendix with two observations on *As You Like It*. The contributions of Thomas Warton are, as might be expected, amongst the most scholarly and both he and Arthur Murphy are honoured by having their opinions on *King Lear* drawn into Johnson's long concluding observation in the main body of the commentary. (VIII, 703, 705). Johnson is not, I must emphasise, shifting off responsibility as an editor; the full appreciation of any Shakespeare text can only be arrived at by the communication and intercourse of several minds gifted in different fields.



In his main editorial task of choosing between variant readings and explaining difficulties, one cannot of course always claim that Johnson was being lazy or sloppy merely to keep future Shakespeare editors in a job. As everyone knows, he did not live up to his 1756 Proposals in examining all the available quartos, and, though his knowledge of Elizabethan and Jacobean prose and lyric poetry is good, if Johnson was well acquainted with the plays of Marlowe, Webster, Middleton, and so on, it is not apparent from his edition. But at times even the gaps in Johnson's scholarship anticipate future developments. One of the most jarring notes to modern ears in Johnson's and virtually all early eighteenth-century Shakespeare criticism is the dismissal of Elizabethan and Jacobean culture as crude and naive, with Shakespeare the one great natural genius towering over the pygmies; "Shakespeare engaged in dramatick poetry with the world open before him," writes Johnson, "the rules of the ancients were yet known to few; the publick judgment was unformed; he had no examples of such fame as might force him upon imitation." (VII, 69) Just how aware Johnson was of the strengths of Shakespeare's contemporaries (even by the knowledge of his time) is questionable, but his relative ignorance does bring us all the way round to a feature of Shakespeare's earliest plays which has become increasingly apparent in modern scholarship. For as our dating of Shakespeare's first plays is pushed earlier in time and some other key plays are re-dated, then Shakespeare does indeed begin again to ~~seem~~ more of an original, more of an innovator: is it Titus Andronicus or Kyd's plays that begin the revenge tragedy tradition? Where does the Henry VI-Richard III sequence fit into the development of the English chronicle play? But if Johnson has a point here, it is of course a negative one, the result of what seems a gap in his study. Elsewhere in the notes and General Observations it is less easy to accept his desire to chase up a moral when none is required. At the conclusion of As You Like It, Johnson observes that "by hastening to the end of his work Shakespeare suppressed the dialogue between the usurper (Frederick) and the hermit, and lost an opportunity of exhibiting a moral lesson in which he might have found matter worthy of his highest powers." (VII, 265) If this is, as I think, the nearest thing in Johnson's body of criticism to a silly remark, one could at least point out that Johnson is demonstrating that Shakespeare does frequently bodge up his conclusions and suggesting, however unsuitably, how this particular finale might have been improved.

But there are clearly many moments in the edition when not through laziness, or insensitivity, or ignorance, but quite deliberately Johnson lays open his critical processes and makes the idea of Shakespearean scholarship a fluid and endless process. One of the more obvious ways Johnson does this is the traditional sign of true wisdom: he admits his ignorance of what he does not understand. Of the holy hermit in the last act of The Merchant of Venice who is reported to be returning to Belmont with Portia and Nerissa, Johnson notes: "I do not perceive the use of this hermit, of whom nothing is seen or heard afterwards." He admits defeat on Sir Toby Belch's "Peg-a-Ramsey" in Twelfth Night and on

Falstaff's joke to the Lord Chief Justice in 2 Henry IV, "The young prince hath misled me. I am the fellow with the great belly, and he is my dog", Johnson comments: "I do not understand this joke. Dogs lead the blind, but why does a dog lead the fat?" (VII, 228,215,494) (The large, fifty-six year old Johnson had never presumably taken a big, high-spirited dog for a walk.) These are hints and queries to the reader and to futurity to do some thinking and reading and come up with some answers for themselves. Sometimes Johnson's queries were taken up in his lifetime and in the critical lives of his editions. In the 1745 Miscellaneous Observations on Macbeth and in the first 1765 edition Johnson reads in Macbeth's great speech before Duncan's murder, "thou sound and firm-set earth." In the Appendix to the edition, George Steevens looks again at the Folio's "sowre" and comes up with "sure", the now commonly accepted reading. To Steevens's emendation, Johnson, like a good tutor, adds "certainly right" and in their joint edition of 1773 and 1778 Johnson drops out altogether at this point and Steevens clears up the confusion himself. (VIII, 771-72) In the first scene of Cymbeline, the only contemporary text, the Folio, reads, according to Johnson, "a glass that feared them". Johnson quite laudably pushes to one side the earlier eighteenth-century emendation, "a glass that featured them" and tries to make sense of the Folio reading. This he does to his own satisfaction in five lines of the modern Yale edition; then in the Appendix Steevens quietly adds that Johnson has misread the Folio anyway, which is, says Steevens, "very faintly printed" at this point. Johnson ignores this gibe at the state of his eyesight, and reinterprets the phrase in the later editions that Steevens had come up with. (VIII, 875) Occasionally the co-editors agree to differ; Bertram exclaims on Parolles in All's Well that Ends Well, "A pox on him, he's a cat still" which Johnson glosses (surely correctly) as "throw him how you will, he lights upon his legs" — a marvellous comment on Parolles' character. But in the Appendix Steevens offers, "he hates Parolles as much as a cat" to which Johnson adds, "I am still of my former opinion", adding in 1773 an anecdote about James I and Sir Edward Coke to support his reading. (VII, 397-98)

Sometimes we can follow the continuing process of Johnson's ideas through a single note. When Prospero discusses the mock-banquet arranged by Ariel and his fellow spirits he observes, "So with good life, / And observation strange, my meaner ministers / Their several kinds have done". Johnson is uneasy with the Folio's "with good life". He toys with "good list" and "good lief" without much confidence. However, by the 1773 edition, either with Steevens's help or, more probably following his revisions to the fourth edition of the Dictionary, he concludes this note: "'With good life' may however mean, with 'exact presentation of their several characters, with observation strange' of their particular and distinct parts. So we say, he acted to the 'life'". (VII, 131) Within an eight line note is encapsulated some fifteen years of cogitation. Occasionally, Johnson shows us his mind working. On "triple-turned whore" in Antony and Cleopatra

Johnson introduces an observation in which he has little confidence with "Shall I mention what has dropped into my imagination?" (VIII, 863). Earlier in the same play, Johnson throws out a question quite blatantly to the readership; the Folio reads "yon ribaudred nag of Egypt" and Johnson adopts 'ribauld' adding, "I do not understand, but mention it, in hopes others may raise some happy conjecture." The following year Thomas Tyrwhitt comes up with 'hag' to go with 'ribauld', but in 1773 Johnson brings in new evidence to support 'nag' as the better reading. (VIII, 856) Nobody, as far as I know, has ever picked up Johnson's challenge and satisfactorily explained the original 'ribauldred'.

Here we have the living organism of small, but essential textual scholarship. Johnson has the wisdom to appreciate that Shakespeare's text is so dense and so allusive that its explication needs multitudes of readers, audiences, with eternity at their disposal. But let us never forget that of all these contributors, the greatest contributory mind was Johnson's; he was not in any sense passing the buck, but adding from his own mighty intelligence to the on-going process of Shakespearean scholarship. Let us look at one of the great tests for any Shakespeare editor, an obscure passage in an obscure play where there is only one copy text. In Timon of Athens (IV.3) are lines which read in the Folio (the only contemporary text):

It is the pastour lards the brother's sides,  
The want that makes him leave.

Understandably enough, Johnson's eighteenth-century predecessors had had problems here and by the time Warburton got to the play the lines read:

It is the pasture lards the beggar's sides,  
The want that makes him lean.

Warburton added his own two-pennorth by altering "beggar's sides" to "weather's sides". Faced with these layers of impacted emendation, Johnson does what we would hope all wise editors would do and goes back to the original printed text. He declares, "Alterations are never to be made without necessity. Let us see what sense the genuine reading will afford." Having gently prepared his readers for the chore ahead, he takes them through the passage, making as best sense as he can of the Folio as it stands, merely altering "The want" to "'Tis want". And in conclusion he leaves the scholarly process open-ended again by saying, "The obscurity is still great. Perhaps a line is lost. I have at least given the original reading." (VIII, 729-30)

At the end of his Shakespeare Preface Johnson comments on Shakespeare's seeming indifference to the fate of his plays:

[His mind] despised its own performances when it compared them with its powers, and judged those works unworthy to be preserved, which the criticks of the following ages were to contend for the fame of restoring and explaining. Among these candidates of inferior fame, I am now to stand the judgment of the publick; and wish that I could confidently produce my commentary as equal to the encouragement which I have had the honour of receiving. Every work of this kind is by its nature deficient, and I should feel little solicitude about the sentence, were it to be pronounced only by the skilful and the learned. (VII, 112-13)

Again we hear that sad, elegiac tone at the conclusion of a major work which we heard before in the Dictionary Preface, the last Rambler and Idler essays, in Rasselas. There is a simple sadness that a great task is no longer to be performed, there is apprehension that the book is now in the hands of people who may be insensitive, ignorant, or malicious, but above all, there is that massive Johnsonian dissatisfaction arising from the glaring gap between the ideal work in the mind and the stark reality of the finished product. (Johnson, notice, ascribes this feeling to Shakespeare - "the superiority of mind, which despised its own performances, when it compared them with its powers.") The nearest parallel in language and tone to the end of this Shakespeare Preface is of course the Dictionary Preface, but there is a major distinction. That earlier work, "written with little assistance of the learned", contributed to an image of Johnson, the lonely Grub Street scholar, wrestling with an entire language and bringing it under control in one huge Dictionary. But his Shakespeare edition for which he took responsibility - in no sense was it the product of an editorial committee - had other minds which were seen to be contributing and arguing with Johnson. The editing of the plays could not be seen as the work of one lonely scholar. For whatever Johnson's final view of the Dictionary, it had been widely regarded as a national monument, giving some degree of permanence to a messy and undisciplined substance like vocabulary. In the ten years since its publication, Johnson's literary standing had risen even higher in the greatest creative decade of his life, but he was determined that the Shakespeare edition which came out in 1765 with his name as editor on the title-page was not to be regarded as a full-stop, the summation of whatever was to be said by the century's leading man of letters on the National Poet. By means we have looked at today, Johnson had the wisdom to realise that the 1765 edition and its later revisals were formidable intellectual and scholarly achievements, but still only contributions to a continuum which had begun in 1623 and which would continue throughout his lifetime and for as long as the English language was read or spoken.

#### Documentation

1. Some of these recent criticisms can be found in, amongst other books: Arthur Sherbo, Samuel Johnson, Editor of Shakespeare, With an Essay



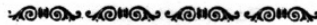
on 'The Adventurer' (Urbana, 1956); R.D. Stock, Samuel Johnson and Neoclassical Dramatic Theory. The Intellectual Context of the Preface to Shakespeare. (Lincoln, 1973); Brian Vicker's introduction to Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage. Volume 5 1765-1774 (London, Henley and Boston, 1979).

2. 'Shakespearian Criticism from Dryden to Coleridge' in A Companion to Shakespeare Studies, edited by Harley Granville Barker and G.B. Harrison (Cambridge, 1962), p.293.
3. Johnson on Shakespeare, edited by Arthur Sherbo (New Haven and London, 1968), VII, 76. Subsequent references are given in the text to volumes VII or VIII of this Yale edition of Johnson's works.
4. Sherbo, Samuel Johnson, Editor of Shakespeare, pp. 28-29.
5. Preface to the English Dictionary, The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., (Oxford, 1825), V, 50.
6. Ibid., V, 44.
7. The Letters of Samuel Johnson, with Mrs. Thrale's Genuine Letters to Him, edited by R.W. Chapman (Oxford, 1952), 14 April 1758, Letter 114.
8. For Reynolds on Ophelia's character, see Appendix in volume eight of the Johnson edition, Sig. L l 3; for examples of Percy's and Hawkins's comments, see Sigs. L l 4 and H h 7; Burke's Timon comment is in Yale, VIII, 737, and Chamier's contributions are in the Appendix volume of the original edition, Sig. I i 2.
9. For a modern parallel see the Cambridge edition of Hamlet, edited by John Dover Wilson; Wilson reads "Govern these ventages with your fingers and thumbs" because "it takes two thumbs to play a recorder". (p. 208) The editor is disabused of this notion in his Appendix "by several correspondents [who] have written to point out the error." (p.304).

#### ANNUAL COMMEMORATION 1980

The annual ceremony was held in Westminster Abbey on 20th December by courtesy of the Dean and Chapter. A wreath was laid on Dr. Johnson's grave by Dr. Graham Nicholls. In his address, Dr. Nicholls acclaimed Johnson's greatness and quoted terms he himself had used, borne out by the brief wording on his grave - "The bare name of such a man answers every purpose of a long inscription."

The theme of Dr. Nicholls' remarks was movingly supported by Dr. Carpenter's reflections on the tombs and epitaphs in the Abbey in the course of which he mentioned that Dr. Johnson was among the list of persons whom the Abbey held worthy of honour.



THE CRITICAL REVIEW'S RECEPTION OF DR. JOHNSON

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The subsequent account offers a brief view of the reception as well as of the further response Dr. Johnson received in the Critical Review, a well-known monthly reviewing periodical that was brought out continuously from 1756 to 1817. As such this article is meant to help chart the history of Johnson's reputation and, more particularly, it hopes to add valuable information to works devoted to former criticism of Johnson, such as J.J. Spittal's Contemporary Criticisms of Dr. Samuel Johnson, His Works and His Biographers (1923), and also to J.T. Boulton's recent Johnson volume (1971) for the Critical Heritage Series.

For several reasons an inquiry into early critical attitudes by a leading journal is worth making. First, it sheds interesting light on the position held by Johnson in the literary-critical landscape of his age. The fact that reviewers contributed unsigned articles only, allowed them, we may assume, to pass comments on Johnson without reserve. Furthermore, an assessment of the views taken by these men towards such a dogmatic critic as Johnson helps us gain an insight into the journal's intellectual climate as this was being shaped by successive generations of editors and reviewers. What was, for instance, in the context of the rising Romantic movement, the Critical's position with reference to Johnsonian critical tenets? It is hard to give an unqualified answer to such sweeping questions, for the Critical not only experienced a gradual development which comes natural to a serial publication with such a long-drawn existence, but, unlike all rival reviewing organs of the time, it passed through a series of phases sharply delimited by conflicting policies. Curiously enough, we find these varying backgrounds reflected in the Critical's broad spectrum of responses to Johnson. Finally, and more generally, an exploration of a major periodical's estimate of an authoritative figure like Johnson contributes to a profounder understanding of the climate of opinion of one of the most crucial periods in English literature and criticism, a region which, with respect to ephemeral writings, has been left largely uninvestigated.

Before entering on the subject proper, it is useful to make mention first of a few facts which may have carried weight with the treatment Johnson was allotted by the initial generation of Critical reviewers. To begin with, we learn from Boswell that in the early sixties Johnson was found prepared to contribute at least three reviews to the Critical, an engagement which raises a strong presumption that he was on friendly terms with the journal's editorial board. Then, too, he was well acquainted with the Critical's proprietor and publisher, Archibald Hamilton, being a regular visitor to the latter's printing-



office, where the Critical was produced<sup>3</sup>. Again, he was no stranger to the original "Set of Gentlemen" that launched the periodical in 1756<sup>4</sup> and among the men that have so far been identified as contributors, several (Goldsmith, Robertson, Steevens...) belonged to his literary entourage<sup>5</sup>. Add to this that Johnson cannot have been indifferent to the Tory and High Church bias the journal soon after its foundation revealed. During a well-known meeting with George III he compared the Critical to its rival, the Monthly, which was run on Whiggish principles, characterising the former as "done upon the best principles" and declaring that the Critical reviewers, unlike those of the Monthly, were for "supporting the constitution both in Church and State"<sup>6</sup>.

Summarising the above, it is not unreasonable to assume that Johnson had good prospects for an indulgent treatment on the part of the Critical's men, the more so as "logrolling" was occasionally practised in the journal's columns. But although, as we shall see presently, Johnson on the whole fared well in the periodical's early career, several critics, apparently encouraged by the safe shield of anonymous criticism, did not shirk serious censure.

Let us now turn our attention to the commentary delivered by the Critical on Johnson. That he had, in the latter half of the fifties, firmly established his reputation as a writer of note, appears from the Journal's early alluding to his supreme qualities as a translator and lexicographer. The "ingenious author of the Rambler", as he is also called, is agreeably remembered for his "excellent performance in translating Juvenal" (III (Jan., 1757), 87), a reference of course to his London (1738) or/and to The Vanity of Human Wishes (1749). Further on, he is distinguished as "our great national linguist" (V (May, 1758), 421), an appellation which finds several echoes in subsequent years.

Johnson came first to the Journal's more extensive notice with Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia (1759). Though this work was brought out anonymously, the reviewer felt no hesitation in identifying its author as "the learned and sensible author of the Rambler", an ascription which is scarcely surprising, for the contemporary reader could not fail to perceive the close affinity of both style and tenor of Rasselas with the Rambler essays. Besides, such early favourable references to the Rambler document the lasting prestige this serial publication lent to its author; they prove conclusively that it was this paper which prompted Johnson's rise as the prominent critical and moral teacher of his age. As to the ingredients of the Rasselas article itself (VI (April, 1759), 372-375), in keeping with the tradition of 18th-century reviewing, which "presents" rather than critically assesses

the work under review, it opens with a general remark on the excellence of the Horatian utile dulci maxim, followed by a few lines of praise for the moral purport of the tale, by a generous extract, and by a concluding observation which gently censures Johnson for having lured his readers into thinking that the title-page of his work gave promise of attractive reading-matter. As a matter of fact, the realistic novel, though still looked at askance by professional criticism, had by the middle of the century forcibly emerged as a genre catering for the taste of readers who did not take to more serious literature. The reviewer, who chose to restrict Rasselas to a fastidious audience, may have been the popular novelist Smollett, probably the Critical's leading man at that time.

In an age that was beginning to make much of an unaffected life-style, readers found it hard to give their unreserved support to Johnson's prose, ponderous and artificial as it was felt to be. Yet from the outset they realised that it presented a force not to be ignored. A reviewer in 1760, for instance, digressing on good writing, enumerates a series of writers, who, to his thinking, must be considered as paragons in this matter. Johnson is here classed with Augustan celebrities such as Swift, Temple, Addison, Dryden and Pope. He grants Johnson "dignity", but, characteristically, particularises it as "the artificial dignity of an actor, and not that natural importance which accompanies majesty" (IX(March, 1760), 178). This early judgement of the Johnsonian diction, which, recognising its genius, finds fault with its alleged theatricality, was to be followed over the years by generations of critics and readers.

In 1765, after what seemed an endless delay, Johnson offered his edition of Shakespeare to the public. With the fame Shakespeare was increasingly beginning to acquire, expectations from an editor who had made himself known as the "Great Cham of Literature" had naturally been sanguine. Yet judging from contemporary reactions, not in the least from the Critical (XX (Nov., and Dec., 1765), 321-323; 401-411; XXI (Jan., and Feb., 1766), 13-26; 81-88),<sup>8</sup> this ambitious undertaking was not warmly welcomed. "Mr. Johnson has at last brought the child to light", the Critical reviewer<sup>9</sup> opened his article, "but alas! in the delivery it has received so many unhappy squeezes, pinches, and wrenches, that the beautiful constitution of the parent alone can prevent it from being lame and deformed for ever". Throwing himself eagerly on the famous Preface, this contributor discovers a great many contentions he cannot endorse. The root of Johnson's deplorable estimate of the great poet is, as he remarks, to be traced to a servile attachment to the "rules of the French academy, and the little English writers who adopted them". He rejects Johnson's well-known passage on Shakespeare as the portrayer of "general nature", styling, to the contrary, his characters "individuals" rather than "species", a

notable disagreement from the Johnsonian doctrine; he refutes the view that the greatness of Shakespeare's art is to be seen in the "progress of his fable", not in the "splendour of particular passages"; he cannot associate himself with Johnson's degradation of Shakespeare into a writer without moral intent. In short, except for a few topics such as Johnson's approval of Shakespeare's disregard of the unities, there is little in this Preface that goes uncensured. Nor does the editing of the plays itself receive any acclaim. Stretching out his remarks over three extensive articles, the same reviewer takes great pains to exemplify Johnson's ignorance in his textual criticism as well as his rashness in making emendations. He takes the ground that most difficulties or obscurities encountered by Shakespeare editors may be smoothed over by going to older writings and the vernacular, notably Northern dialects, a procedure Johnson has largely disregarded. To use the reviewer's own words: "Mr. Johnson's chief defect as an editor, seems to consist in his being too much of a Martinet (...) in learning. He consults only the academy and the portico, without deviating into narrow turns and lanes where Shakespeare's words now lie obscure, tho' undeformed and unaltered". Apparently these unfavourable criticisms levelled at the literary oracle of the day did not find favour with a large number of readers. Amusingly enough, the Critical's editors were in the ensuing months deluged with indignant letters which set out to take up Johnson's defence. Dutifully, again the same reviewer retorted with vigour, justifying his negative verdict on Johnson (XXI (March, 1766), 238-240). Although he thought slighting of Johnson's editorial claims, yet he saw himself forced to rush to Johnson's aid against Thomas Kenrick, who in the Monthly and in a signed pamphlet had launched a most abusive attack on Johnson for reasons unconnected with the merits of the Shakespeare edition.

Although somewhat outside the scope of the present article, it may not be out of place here to devote a few words to the further reception given by the Critical to Shakespeare's plays as prepared by Johnson in collaboration with other scholars. The Plays of William Shakespeare in 10 volumes, brought out by both Johnson and Steevens in 1773, fared much better in the journal's pages (XXXVI (Nov. and Dec. 1773), 345-358; 407-416), the reason manifestly being the preponderance of Steevens's Notes, which to the Critical's satisfaction made a serious attempt to elucidate Shakesperian textual problems by drawing on Elizabethan writings. The article is therefore a tribute to Steevens's workmanship, Johnson scarcely entering into it. Isaac Reed's edition of 1785, based on Johnson's and Steevens's, was hailed as "very valuable and greatly superior to every one which has preceded it" (LXII (Nov. 1786), 321-329; LXIII (Jan. 1787), 17-25). Parenthetically, Malone's Shakespeare (1790), the most scholarly by that time, was discussed with many reservations (III (Dec. 1791), 361-369), the reviewer, perhaps Steevens, who resented Malone's alleged editorial competence, focussing on all sorts of irrelevancies.

Resuming our exploration of the Critical's appreciation of Johnson, we are pleasantly surprised by the notice given to Hugh Downman's The Land of the Muses and Poems on Several Occasions (1768). For unlike the numerous lukewarm reviews on poetry the journal in the sixties carried, we find here a contributor offering criticisms which reveal commitment as well as a thorough, if Neo-classically oriented, acquaintance with the history of English poetry and its prosody. In addition, and relevant for our purposes, his observations clearly carry Johnsonian undertones, vividly recalling Johnson's stylistic ponderousness and decidedness as well. In fact, one would be tempted to attribute the article to Johnson, who acted as a contributor in these years and who is still remembered by a reviewer as a "former coadjutor" as late as 1793 (VIII (July, 1793), 291), were it not for the simple fact that it contains an allusion to Johnson himself. The least we may assume is that this critic assimilated Johnson's views on versification as expressed in, inter alia, the Rambler, and that he made a not unsuccessful imitation of Johnsonese; perhaps he belonged to the literary dictator's circle of devotees.

This critic, in the article concerned (XXVI (Sept. 1768), 195ff), tries hard to persuade his readers that the contemporary tendency to revive the Pindaric ode, the sonnet and the Spenserian stanza, with which Downman has experimented, must be utterly repudiated. Describing Pindarics as "a monstrous species of composition, first introduced among us by Cowley", he denies that any "poetical harmony" can be achieved by the return of the strophe and antistrophe, thereby also censuring the irregular disposition of the rhymes as well as the inequality of the length of the verses, both characteristics of the Pindaric ode. Whereas in Greek Poetry, he goes on to argue, each verse is in itself harmonious, all harmony in English verse "arises from the just proportion of one line to another, because the ear naturally expects a return of the rhyme upon an equal number of syllables". He therefore concludes: "in our most perfectly lyric measures, the corresponding lines are of the same length, and the rhymes at just and stated distances". Needless to say, these speculations on the Pindaric species directly derive from the cramped Neo-classical doctrine of prosodic regularity, of which Johnson was such an outspoken advocate. In various parts of his Lives of the Poets he gives vent to his dislike of the English Pindaric ode. Of Cowley he says that he ought "to have preserved a constant return of the same numbers, and to have supplied smoothness of transition and continuity of thought", adding: "The great pleasure of verse arises from the known measure of the lines and uniform structure of the stanzas, by which the voice is regulated and the memory relieved"<sup>10</sup>. He praises Congreve because to him "we are indebted for the correction of a national error, and for the cure of our 'Pindarick madness' and because "he has shewn us that enthusiasm has its rules, and that in mere confusion there is neither grace nor greatness"<sup>11</sup>. He characterised Pope's Pindarics as wanting "the essential constituent of metrical compositions, the stated recurrence of settled numbers"<sup>12</sup>.



The same reviewer also upbraids Downman with "affectation" because of "his attempts to revive the antiquated sonnet". It is "disagreeable to our language", he says, and in mentioning Milton as having failed in this genre he offers criticism reminiscent of Johnson. Dismissing Milton's sonnets -- only two deserve "slender commendation", -- Johnson also banished this verse form from English poetry. "The fabrick of a sonnet", he writes, "however adapted to the Italian language, has never succeeded in ours, which, having greater variety of termination, requires the rhymes to be often changed".<sup>13</sup> Further, Downman's critic "wholly" ascribes "the defects" in the Fairy Queen to Spenser's "unfortunate choice of measure", because, he holds, "by repetition of rhyme, he was forced upon exploded words; and to the continuance of the stanza he was obliged to accommodate his construction." This remark is drawn almost verbatim from Edward Bysshe's Art of English Poetry (1702), where he describes the Spenserian stanza as "very difficult to maintain", and says that "the unlucky choice of it reduc'd him (i.e. Spenser) often to the necessity of making use of many exploded Words".<sup>14</sup> We know from Jean H. Hagstrum that "Johnson's metrical system was essentially that of Edward Bysshe".<sup>15</sup>

Downman's vindication of his use of the nine-line stanza by appeal to the great Spenser is flatly rejected. The latter, in adopting it, did without metrical tradition as in his age "our versification was resigned to uncertainty and caprice, and every writer would think himself at liberty to set up ... a model." Further on the reviewer styles the Spenserian stanza "unmusical and tiresome", for "the nature of the English language" does not tolerate such a structure, and he adds, this "has been already shewn by a writer, whose meanest praise is the certainty of his critical decisions". No doubt, this is a fine tribute to Johnson's critical acumen, as this is exemplified, according to this reviewer, in a passage of the Rambler of 14th May, 1751 (No. 121), too long to be quoted here, where Johnson censures the Spenserian stanza and its contemporary practitioners.

Nor does the Johnsonian affinity, apparent from these remarks, end here. The critic, in order to validate his strictures on the Spenserian stanza, provides a brief account of the chiefly adverse attitudes taken up towards it by some former versifiers. Amongst them he mentions Prior, and referring to the latter's Ode to the Queen (1706), he says: "so sensible was he of its defects (i.e. of the Spenserian measure) and so desirous to avoid them, that he willingly hazarded the greater impropriety of writing in a measure wholly different from that of the Faery Queen". Once more, this remark brings Johnson to mind where he writes of the versification of this Ode: "He has altered the stanza of Spenser, as a house is altered by building another in its place of a different form... he has avoided difficulties nor am I sure that he

has lost any of the power of pleasing; but he no longer imitates Spenser",<sup>16</sup> All these unflattering observations on the Spenserian stanza lead the anonymous critic to conclude constructively that the heroic couplet presents itself as "the universally acknowledged" verse form of modern English poetry, thereby elevating Sandys as the poet who "shewed the writers of his time what superior convenience and success this measure (i.e. the couplet) could be employed in works of length". Johnson, it must be remembered, in his Lives makes several passing references to Sandys as the introducer of the couplet into English poetry.

To round off his argument, this Critical reviewer imputes the popularity of the Spenserian stanza with the coming race of poets to their "tendency ... to be absurd", which is, as he has it, a fine practical demonstration of the following (Johnsonian) worldly wisdom: "When all the natural means of engaging notice are exhausted, men are glad to exchange what is just for what is uncommon."

I have purposely dwelt at some length on this article. For next to showing that Johnson's authority looms large indeed in late 18th century criticism, the piece may serve as one of the countless specimens contained in the Critical which amply demonstrate that this journal had a damper-like impact on attempts at renewal. Although going into the intricate problem of movements in pre-Romantic criticism does not come within the scheme of the present investigation, I wish to observe that the Critical, for the most part, emerges as a literary organ firmly rooted in conservative and even reactionary principles, whatever students have argued about "liberalising tendencies" in late 18th-century periodical criticism<sup>17</sup>.

Between 1770 and 1774 Johnson published anonymously four political pamphlets which took a line in support of the reigning Tory administration. Whereas the larger bulk of journals and several individual critics bombarded the author, whom they had readily identified, the Critical, going by that time through its Tory apex, understandably took up the cudgels for Johnson. The False Alarm (1770), in which Johnson entered the controversy concerning John Wilkes's election is respectfully considered (XXIX (Jan. 1770), 54-57)<sup>18</sup>. The reviewer of Thoughts on the Late Transactions respecting Falkland's Islands (1771), apart from wholly sustaining Johnson's argument, seizes the opportunity to highlight his supreme qualities as a moral preceptor and stylist (XXX (March 1771), 193-196). Similarly, The Patriot (1774), a sort of electoral tract containing the gist of Johnson's political principles, is highly commended to the body of voters (XXXVIII (Oct. 1774), 296-301). Finally, Taxation, No Tyranny (1775), Johnson's vindication of the government's policy towards the American colonies, which J.W. Krutch

has called "his most unfortunate piece of writing",<sup>19</sup> once more receives the Critical's nod of approval (XXXIX (March 1775), 190-196). This publication, as the reviewer concludes, has given "the deepest wounds to the American pretensions, which either argument or ridicule can inflict."

This trend of favourable commentary gathers further momentum in the article on A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland (1775) (XXXIX (Jan. 1775), 34-44). Johnson's initial conception of the narrative is applauded as "a fortunate event in the annals of literature." Again priority of attention is given to his uncommon abilities as a moral and intellectual writer, for the reflections on natural scenery and people these gifts engender, lend, as the critic repeatedly observes, added charm to the travel account.

Johnson's final major achievement, The Lives of the Poets (1779-1781) naturally provoked numerous critics, both professional and other, to dash to their pens. The overall response to such a work, substantial and kaleidoscopic as it appeared, was, as might be expected, uneven, the Critical, however, swelling the ranks of the robust praisers, at least at the outset (XLVII (May, June, 1779), 354-362; 450-453; LIII (Aug. 1781), 81-92)<sup>20</sup>. In the reviewer's introductory observations Johnson is designated as the very man equipped to undertake so laborious a task as writing both a novel and entertaining account of the English poets. Whereas the main body of critics took particular offence at Johnson's adverse commentary on Milton's and Waller's republican politics and unorthodox religion, the Critical adopted a non-committal attitude, quoting copiously from the sections on these poets and merely holding that here the author was perhaps "rather too severe". Similarly, Johnson's degradation of Gray to a minor poet provided much strong feeling, but the Critical reviewer entirely concurred in Johnson's censures, believing that Gray "received such great wages for so little work" and that his Odes and other lyrics were "much over-rated."

As to the final verdict on the Lives, it is difficult to imagine a more sympathetic one when we read in the conclusion: "this performance is one of the most acute, agreeable and entertaining works that has passed under our inspection."

So far Johnson could, generally speaking, relish the generous approval of a journal that embraced his own orthodox views and that, as I have suggested, numbered many of his admirers among its contributors. From the eighties onwards and notably after his death in 1784, dissenting voices against his person and critical supremacy began to be raised, voices which became clamorous by the end of the century.

In 1783 Johnson's decisions "in respect of the sublime, and what relates purely to the imagination are not always to be trusted" (LV (Feb. 1783), 154), a comment the Romantics were to carry to extremes. Further, allusions are made to his deficiency of "taste" in literary matters (LVI (Aug. 1783), 83), and to his indelicate conversational manners (LIX (April 1785), 261). Biographers are warned not to puff Johnson "into a faultless monster" (LIX (Feb. 1785), 142). His Poetical Works (1785), published a year after his death, receives the following ungracious comment: "As this is the whole of our author's poetry, we presume that neither the quantity nor the quality will entitle him to a very elevated situation on Parnassus. When some historian shall add his life to the poets of Great Britain, we hope, for the sake of his future fame, that they will not be so rigidly exact, so minutely scrupulous, as he has been in weighing the merits of his poetical brethren" (LIX (April 1785), 261). Prayers and Meditations (1785), which allowed the contemporary reviewer to cast a glance into Johnson's essentially tormented soul, came as a bitter disillusion to the Critical reviewer (LX (Oct. 1785), 310-311). The journal's earlier blessing given to Johnson's belittling remarks on Gray is reconsidered. On going through the preface of Wakefield's edition of Gray's poems (1786), a reviewer brings up Johnson's defective "sensibility evidenced in his approach to Gray". "What was beautiful and pleasing he appears seldom to have felt," he more generally remarks (LXII (Aug. 1786), 133). In 1788 apparently the same critic writes: "Dr. Johnson wanted taste to discriminate the nicer beauties of composition; . . . he wanted the feeling to which poetic fire is chiefly directed" (LXV (March 1788), 180). To Mrs. Piozzi's contention in her Anecdotes (1786) that her illustrious friend owed more to "genius" than to "study", the Critical reviewer reacts as follows: "We must change the terms. A vigorous comprehensive mind, a clear recollection, and a retentive memory, may perform without much study, everything attributed to Dr. Johnson; but these talents deserve not the name of genius, which at least requires, if not invention, a new and original combination, which we seek for, in vain, in the Rambler" (LXI (March 1786), 274). This comment must be read in the context of the increased significance granted by late 18th-century criticism to the concept of genius, which came to be the prerogative of a distinctly separate class of men, for whom comprehension, memory, learning and other faculties, rather passive attributes of the mind, had less importance.

Interestingly enough, and perhaps not surprisingly, from the mid-nineties onwards, when the periodical, having thrown off its Toryism, set out on a liberal career, sympathetic to Dissent and Reform, it developed a peculiar hostility to Johnson, the climax of which was reached in the article on William Hayley's Poetical Works of John Milton. Writing in a flowery, impassioned language, the critic makes use of well over two pages to contrast Milton with Johnson. Not granting the latter a single positive quality, he draws a portrait of Johnson which



distorted as it is, clearly sprang from political animus. Here is a part of his profile: "Johnson was a German boor, inattentive to decorum, and regardless of the feelings, which the insolence of his conversation too often excited ... the strength of Johnson's constitution preserved him frequently from drunkenness, but he was with difficulty roused from the bed of sloth, and in his diet he was a glutton ... Johnson's mind was elevated by a slight mark of distinction from superior rank, and he delighted in being the king of inferior wits, and the dictator of booksellers ... Johnson refused not the lower frolics of the midnight hour, aimed at the character of a scholar, but was content with cursory glances and multifarious reading ... Johnson professed to delight in cloathing a common sentiment in the splendour of words, and in building his fame on an inflated diction" (XIV (May 1795), 2).

The fault-finding references to Johnson continue under Samuel Hamilton's distinctly emancipated editorship, several of his contributors — they included Coleridge, Southey and William Taylor — emphatically proclaiming that Johnson was ignorant of "the more delicate beauties of literary composition" (XXXVIII (June 1803), 218). "Was Johnson, then, always wise, and discreet, intelligent and judicious?... Must such a man be always heard without an observation, without a reply?" a contributor exclaims irritatedly, adding: "The period of belief in infallibility is at an end" (XXXIX (Nov. 1803), 269).

From 1805 onwards such sceptical remarks made room for more generous ones: Johnson's authority both as a moralist and critic once more stands high with the reviewers. This tendency, which forms part of a sweeping shift in the journal's intellectual climate, coincides with a fresh management and new set of contributors; on Hamilton's bankruptcy in 1804 the Critical became the property of John Higgs Hunt, a young Anglican clergyman,<sup>21</sup> who decided to edit his journal as well. As I have shown elsewhere<sup>21</sup>, under his supervision the Critical embraced political as well as religious orthodoxy, at the same time tending to criticise literary works on the basis of distinctly Augustan standards. Apparently Hunt's men found in the Johnsonian canon ample support for justifying their reactionary views. The issue for October 1805, for instance, abounds in favourable references to and quotations from Johnson. He is approvingly cited as an authority on translating (VI (Oct. 1805), 123); censuring Erasmus Darwin's poetry for its "laboured minuteness", a reviewer points to the famous maxim in the mouth of Imlac that "The poet...does not count the colours of the rainbow, or number the streaks of the tulip" (VI (Oct. 1805) 159); his remarks on the progress of English style, as embodied in the Preface to his Dictionary, are quoted with full approval (VI (Oct. 1805), 162). While many contemporary readers and critics found it difficult to digest Johnson's style, the journal is prepared to stand

up for it. "The truth is", it declares, "Johnson's mind not only embraced the whole range of arts and sciences, but entered most deeply into the intricacies of the human heart. He knew his fellow creatures thoroughly, from mixing with them where they are most undisguised, in the inferior walks of life; and as his reflections were profound, he was obliged to search the depths of language for words equal to them in recondite power, and to make the resources of his style answer the calls of his information" (VI (Oct. 1805), 164). These casual tributes to Johnson's genius continued unabated in subsequent issues. A reviewer "shuts" Critical Remarks on Shakespeare's Plays (1806) "with disgust" because its author, E.H. Seymour, has dared to question Johnson's originality (IX (Dec. 1806), 382). C.V. Le Grice, in his abusive article on Southey's Madoc (1805), throws discredit on the "Revolutionary Poets", that is, the Lakists, by pointing to Johnson's strictures on the Metaphysical Poets (VII (Jan. 1806), 74), and some compositions contained in Wordsworth's Poems in Two Volumes (1807), remind the reviewer, perhaps Hunt, of Johnson's parody of Thomas Warton and Romantic attitudes (App. vol. XI (1807), 536).

Manifestly, between 1805 and 1808 Johnson was regarded in the Critical as a nonpareil mentor whose eminence was frequently enlisted for adding to the journal's image as a markedly conservative publication. In an age which was notoriously turbulent in all respects, these critics sought, it seems, in Johnson a rock of certainty. Shocked as they were at the chaotic career English poetry was entering on, they looked upon the literary despot as the very incarnation of sound values and classical taste, who could guide them in their critical assessments.

Early in 1808 Hunt and his team of reviewers abdicated, the editorial mantle falling on Robert Fellowes, a Dissenting minister. The Critical under his sway rapidly developed into a periodical firmly dedicated to liberalism and Dissent. Characteristically, his critics scarcely bring up Johnson in their arguments, and when they do, it is to abuse him as in the subsequent representative observation which stands in glaring contrast to those recorded in the foregoing phase: "The majesty of his (i.e. Johnson's) language often hides the mean and ignoble physiognomy of his ideas, the commonplaces of Johnson occasionally make such a parade of wisdom, from the gorgeous apparel in which they are arrayed, that they are sometimes mistaken for novel observations, or for new and profound discoveries in ethics" (XXIII (June 1811), 181).

As to the editorial backgrounds of the Critical's next phase (1814 - May 1816), we are so far left largely in the dark. However, an inspection of the issues puts it beyond the reach of doubt that again

these unknown men had forced the journal into Tory and High Church channels, a conclusion which is corroborated by two statements of intention on top of a number of issues: these are Johnson's brief descriptions of the journal's politics quoted above. At a time when the Tory government led by Liverpool was seriously tried by social convulsions, amongst which the Luddite agitations, such unambiguous declarations speak volumes with respect to the Critical's political bias.

One final application of Johnson's name in the Critical deserves mention. In an advertisement to the May issue 1816 the last proprietors, the Colliers, declared that henceforth their criticisms would bear the same distinguished qualities as those outlined by Johnson in the original Declaration of Principles, prefaced to the journal's first issue of 1756. I have argued elsewhere that this remarkable attribution is extremely doubtful<sup>22</sup>. What is interesting is that in the heart of the Romantic Age, the editor, John Dyer Collier, one of the rare contemporary sympathisers with Wordsworth and Coleridge, believed that an avowed promise to model his criticism on Johnsonian standards would attract new readers and thus revitalise his languishing journal.

Although only a small selection of references to Johnson has been taken into consideration, the above survey has shown that his authority both as a moralist and critic remained a powerful influence to contemporary as well as Romantic Critical reviewers. His name has been found to crop up repeatedly in the periodical's numerous issues. To be sure, several contributors opposed his doctrine or deprecated his dogmatic personality, yet at all times he emerged as a critic to be reckoned with. Of course, the Critical was not alone in giving such marked attention to Johnson. What is, however, distinctive of this journal is that Johnson's reputation was apparently closely tied to the journal's changing politics. The fact that he was not highly esteemed by the journal in its liberal nineties, must, I believe, be attributed largely to political and religious factors. Not surprisingly, under Hunt's conservative command, he enjoys great consideration. Anyhow, such swings of critical attitude within relatively short time-spans, well exemplify the Critical's weakest point, namely a conspicuous lack of consistency, which, unfortunately, was not confined to its treatment of Johnson.

#### Documentation

1. See Derek Roper, Reviewing before the Edinburgh, 1788-1802 (London 1978), p.21ff., and "The Politics of the 'Critical Review', 1756-1817", Durham University Journal, XXII (1961), 117-122. See also Oskar Wellens, "The Critical Review: New Light on Its Last Phase", Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire, LVI (1978), 678-694, as well as "The Critical Review: 1805-1808", forthcoming in Neophilologus.

2. Boswell's Life of Johnson, ed. G.B.Hill; rev. L.F. Powell (Oxford, 1934-1950; repr. 1964-1971), vol. I p.411, 481, and 481 n.4.
3. See J. Cradock, Literary and Miscellaneous Memoirs (London, 1828), vol. I, pp. 39-41.
4. See D. Roper, "Smollett's 'Four Gentlemen': The First Contributors to the Critical Review", RES, X(1959), 38-44.
5. See Claude E. Jones, "Contributors to The Critical Review, 1756-1785", MLN, LXI (1946), 433-441. A list of Critical reviewers, meant to supersede Jones's, is in course of preparation both by Mr. Derek Roper and myself.
6. Boswell's Life ed. Hill; rev. Powell, II,40; III,32.
7. See, for instance, LII (Oct. 1781), 234 and LIII (Feb.1782),97.
8. Partly reprinted in Shakespeare - The Critical Heritage, ed. Brian Vickers, vol. V(1765-1774) (London,1979), pp.211-230.
9. Identified as William Guthrie; see Ibidem, "Introduction", XII-XV.
10. Lives of the English Poets, ed. G.B. Hill (Oxford, 1905; repr. New York,1967), Vol. I, p.47.
11. Ibidem, II,234.
12. Ibid., III,227.
13. Lives of the English Poets, ed. Hill, I, 169-170.
14. Quoted by E.P. Morton, "The Spenserian Stanza in the Eighteenth Century", MP, X (1912-1913), 365.
15. Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism (1952; reissued Chicago and London,1967), pp.193-194 n.16.
16. Lives of the English Poets, ed. Hill, II, 209-210. Johnson's avowed preference for the couplet is well-known.
17. See, for instance, E.N. Hooker, "The Reviewers and the New Criticism, 1754-1770", PQ, XIII (1934), 189-202, and "The Reviewers and the New Trends in Poetry, 1754-1770", MLN, LI (1936), 207-214.
18. Reprinted in Johnson - The Critical Heritage, ed. Boulton, pp.204-207.
19. Samuel Johnson (London, 1944), p.395.
20. Partly reprinted in Johnson - The Critical Heritage, ed. Boulton, pp. 270-272.
21. "The Critical Review: 1805-1808", forthcoming in Neophilologus.
22. "The Critical Review: New Light on Its Last Phase", loc.cit.691-692.



#### Memorial Tablet to Dean Matthews

A Memorial Tablet to the Very Reverend W.R. Matthews, CH, KCVO, D Litt, DD, STD, FRSL, was unveiled in the Crypt of St. Paul's Cathedral on 12th November 1980. Dean Matthews was President of the Johnson Society of London for many years. At the Dedication Service, the Society was represented by Dean Carpenter, Canon A.R. Winnett, Mrs. A.G. Dowdeswell and Mr. J.H. Leicester.



"THREE HALFPENCE AND TWOPENCE HALFPENNY": DAVID GARRICK AND SAMUEL JOHNSON

A paper given on 15th March 1980 by Mr. E.D. M. Forbes, BA, M Litt, FRSA.  
Chairman: Mr. Lewis Raddon, LL B, DPA.

The Chairman introduced Mr. Derek Forbes as a graduate of Bristol who had taught English and drama in schools and colleges, and had been county drama organiser for Oxfordshire. He had been Head of the Drama Department of Trent Park College of Education, now merged into the Middlesex Polytechnic, where he was now Head of Department. He was also on the Committee of the Society for Theatre Research and a producer of plays and pageants.

Mr. Forbes said that in 1737 two penurious young men set out to conquer London — and did so. Sam Johnson became the supreme literary figure, and David Garrick became the superman of the theatre of his day, and one of the greatest actors of all time. It took Johnson 25 years to achieve a competence; Garrick made a fortune in ten. The relationship between them was strange, complex, fateful and fascinating.

Garrick was the son of an army officer, and had a happy childhood. His letters showed him an affable man, taking responsibility lightly but seriously. He attended Johnson's school at Edial, opened after his marriage to Tetty Porter, and in later years amused friends at private parties with imitations of the married pair.

In London Garrick first entered the wine trade but took to the professional stage after the death of his parents. He had already begun to write plays, and could have achieved fame as a playwright alone. His first great theatrical triumph was as Richard III at Goodman's Fields in 1741. The next year he began his long association with Drury Lane, acquiring a part share in 1747 and only selling out to Sheridan on his retirement in 1776. He appeared with many of the great actresses of the time, including Mrs. Cibber and Mrs. Pritchard. He enjoyed a popular social life, married an Austrian dancer, Eva-Marie Weigel, and lived in the Adelphi, with a country villa at Hampton.

Apart from his work with Shakespeare — he played many of the great parts, and restored his popularity in the theatre, although many of the versions he used were "improved" adaptations — his great merit was to bring fresh life to the artificial 18th-century stage style and introduce a measure of naturalness into acting. He formed the classical repertory, and improved theatre techniques of production and rehearsal, scenery and machinery. Among his most popular parts outside Shakespeare were Sir John Brute and Abel Drugger.

In 1749 Garrick produced Irene for nine nights — a long run for those days, including three benefit nights for Johnson.

There was for a time a coolness between Garrick and Johnson, who kept him out of the Club for a number of years, but they were observed to have an affection for each other, and Johnson was seen in tears at Garrick's funeral. Johnson often said petty things but in his considered judgments he gave Garrick his due. They had many shared memories from their boyhood. Mr. Forbes suggested that the tensions of their relationship may have been due to Garrick's feeling guilty at enjoying such early success while Johnson, whose gifts he thought superior to his own, fared less well, while Johnson, on the other hand, beset with indolence, envied Garrick the energy which brought him success.

In dealing with Garrick's play Harlequin's Invasion, for which his song Heart of Oak had been set by William Boyce, Mr. Forbes not only sang the song, but created a precedent by inducing his audience to join in with him. A short period of questions and discussion was concluded by an appreciative vote of thanks by Professor Brack.

S.B.S.P.

#### BRIEF CHRONOLOGY OF DAVID GARRICK AND SAMUEL JOHNSON

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Events concerning both are written across the page. Otherwise, David Garrick left column, Samuel Johnson right column.  
DL = Drury Lane (Theatre Royal)

- |      |                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                     |
|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1709 |                                                                                                                                                                        | SJ born (18th Sept) at Lichfield, where he was brought up. (Father a bookseller). One younger brother. Family poor. |
| 1717 | DG born at Hereford (19th Feb.); brought up in Lichfield. (Father an army captain). Second of four brothers, three (two younger) sisters. Family poor,                 | SJ started as pupil at Lichfield G.S; notable for physical disorders and outstanding intellectual abilities.        |
| 1727 | DG tries to get SJ to write prologue for boyhood play-performance (unsuccessfully, probably because of SJ's procrastination, a life-long result of chronic indolence). |                                                                                                                     |
| 1728 |                                                                                                                                                                        | SJ to pembroke College, Oxford.                                                                                     |

- 1731 SJ leaves Oxford without degree through lack of means. Father dies.
- 1735 SJ marries Mrs. Elizabeth Porter ('Tetty'), a widow 20 years his senior.
- 1736 Tetty's portion used to set SJ up as schoolmaster at Edial, with DG as boarding pupil. Both DG and SJ attempt playwriting (DG comedy, SJ tragedy).
- 1737 Edial academy fails. SJ and DG (ex master-and-pupil, friends for ten years by now) set out together for London (on 2nd March), "riding and tying" with one horse between them, and "2½d and 1½d respectively in their pockets. SJ enters Grub Street.
- 1738 DG engages in wine-trade; off-duty hob-nobs with theatrical society. SJ surviving as hack journalist; publishes London: a poem (13 May) for 10 guineas.
- 1740 DG's farce, Lethe, performed at Drury Lane theatre (15 April +), the first of 20 original plays and as many adaptations by DG. SJ writes prologue for Lethe (but in common with his other work of this period is not named as author).
- DG active in unsuccessfully attempting to get SJ's tragedy accepted for performance.
- 1741 DG makes first appearances as actor; Oct-Nov. makes huge success as Richard III at Goodman's Fields (non-patent theatre).
- 1742 DG joins Drury Lane company in May for £500 pa (greatest actor's salary to date). Continues professional triumph; is lionised.
- 1744 SJ publishes Life of Savage for 15 guineas (anonymously).
- (DG's professional and social careers continue to prosper throughout this decade - and after.) (Through most of this decade SJ grinds on in journalism and on the fringes of the literary world, in poverty and unnamed.)

- 1747 DG embarks on theatrical management, purchasing part-share in DL for £8,000. SJ announces his "Plan for a Dictionary of the English Language".

SJ writes Prologue for opening night (15th Sept) of new season at DL under DG's control.

(During next ten years DG stages 24 of Shakespeare's plays; some he plays in adapted versions, but is responsible for the restoration of Shakespeare's popularity in the theatre).

SJ and DG are companions, but DG's busy life prevents their seeing so much of each other as they would like; also, SJ's strength of moral character makes him give up the visits to the Drury Lane green-room as DG's guest — not so much because he finds the theatre immoral (though he is constantly disapproving about the laxity of players and scathing about the players' pretensions) but because he finds the need to remove himself from the physical temptation that the casual attire of the actresses arouses in him.

- 1749 DG presents SJ's tragedy Irene at DL theatre on 6th February and for total of nine performances to 20th February. It was received with respect but was a financial non-runner. SJ did not have full confidence that the actors had done his play justice. Probably because DG as manager prolonged the run into three author's benefit nights, SJ received £236 (some accounts say £195) from the theatre (£112 + £77 + £47).

DG, after a difficult courtship, marries Eva-Maria Violetta (22nd June), an Austrian danseuse taken up by fashionable society. She is 7 years his junior. (Their marriage develops ideally save for being childless.) Following its production, SJ is able to publish Irene (for £100); Also publishes Vanity of Human Wishes (for 15 gns). These works makes his name.

- 1750 SJ begins publication of Rambler periodical, one of which contains attack on DG.

- 1752 After a marriage not without vicissitudes, and childless, SJ's wife Tetty dies. SJ discontinues Rambler periodical, mainly because, while much respected, it is insufficiently profitable.



- 1754 Garrick's continuing prosperity enables him to buy villa at Hampton.
- 1755 (Throughout this decade DG continues to run DL Theatre, consolidates his position in fashionable society, and goes from strength to strength as the country's supreme actor). SJ publishes Dictionary, for which over the years of compilation he had received £1,575, + 1 gn. per sheet of copy in the final years (out of which he had to find all expenses including assistants' salaries of which he had up to six). This unique achievement establishes his primacy in the world of letters of his day, but he continues to need to scratch about for a living by his pen. Hon. MA (Oxford).
- 1756 SJ prepares a new edition of Shakespeare; DG offers SJ the use of his extensive library at Hampton (containing many Shakespearean quartos etc.), but is spurned.
- 1758 SJ begins Idler papers (April), which continue for two years.
- 1759 SJ's mother dies; he writes Rasselas to pay for her funeral etc., receiving £100 + £25 for a subsequent 2nd edition.
- 1762 SJ is awarded a pension of £300 p.a. and achieves respectable financial stability.
- 1763 DG and Mrs. G embark on a 3-year tour of Europe. SJ and James Boswell meet.
- 1764 SJ founds "the Club", admission to which he refuses to DG on his return from Europe.
- 1765 DG's contribution to Shakespearean popularity is ignored by SJ in his edition of Shakespeare, now published.
- DG institutes, and contributes largely to, the DL Fund for infirm players. (Privately he lends money, consistently and often in hundreds of pounds, to a series of petitioners over the years, not all of whom repay him and some of whom vilify him.)
- SJ is consistently charitable to a group of indigents and hangers-on; the tension and dismay they bring to his homelife are alleviated by the Thrales, whom he meets this year and from whom he receives much hospitality and a home-from-home. Receives degree of LL.D from

- 1769 DG organises the Shakespeare Jubilee at Stratford-upon-Avon. SJ does not attend the Shakespeare Jubilee. (Boswell does attend).
- 1772 DG introduces de Louthembourg to DL (innovative designer and machinist).
- 1772 DG is received into membership of the Club, still presided over by SJ. Mutual friends have noticed that they display affection for each other; SJ's is marked by "possessiveness" —he allows no-one to criticise DG in his hearing but himself. When not in SJ's presence DG can be persuaded to do a hilarious act of imitation.
- 1775 DG announces retirement from the stage at end of 1775-76 season. SJ receives degree of DCL from Oxford; publishes Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland (visited with Boswell two years previously).
- 1776 DG retires from the stage, selling his rights in Drury Lane Theatre to R.B. Sheridan for £35,000.
- 1779 DG dies, aged 62 (20th Jan.) after short severe illness; outburst of national mourning. Buried in Westminster Abbey (Poets' Corner) with equivalent of State Funeral (1st Feb.) costing £1,500. SJ, who has a morbid fear of death, refuses to accept that DG's illness may be fatal. SJ attends DG's funeral as one of the official mourners; after the interment SJ is seen to be "bathed in tears."
- DG's estate is predicted to be £100,000 (probably nearer £50,000). SJ is not impressed at size of DG's estate.
- First part of SJ's Lives of the Poets appears this year, and includes a commendatory reference to late DG (his death "eclipsed the gaiety of nations").
- The widowed Mrs. Garrick refuses SJ's offer to be her husband's biographer.
- 1781 SJ completes Lives of the Poets (total remuneration £400).
- 1782 Undertaker still not paid for DG's funeral and goes bankrupt. (When DG's estate is finally SJ's health seriously begins to fail; and following Thrale's death the previous year he loses the comforts

cleared Mrs. Garrick is the main beneficiary, subject to her not remarrying).

of the home-from-home. SJ now in much pain - and despair, despite his strong Christian faith.

1784

S.J. dies, aged 75 (13th Dec.), finally serene.

SJ is buried in Westminster Abbey (Poets' Corner) beside grave of DG (20th December).

SJ's estate thought to be about £1,000. (His main beneficiary is his negro servant Francis Barber).

1791

Boswell immortalises SJ for posterity with The Life of Samuel Johnson.

1822 Mrs. Garrick dies, aged 98, having preserved DG's extensive archive.

E.D.M. Forbes.

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Garrick Portrait Acquired for the Nation

The nation has acquired a splendid portrait of David Garrick and his wife by Sir Joshua Reynolds. It is said to be the finest portrayal of Garrick and one of Reynold's best works.

The painting was to have come up at Christie's, but the National Portrait Gallery, helped by the Minister for the Arts, intervened.

The portrait is 54 inches by 66 and shows the couple in the garden of their house at Hampton. It is in perfect condition. - The Guardian 20th November 1980.

Ed.