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CONTENTS

SAMUEL JOHNSON AND THE LAW

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Samuel Johnson carried through his life a repressed ambition to be a lawyer. When William Scott told a middle-aged Johnson that it was a pity he did not become a lawyer because he might have risen to the post of Lord Chancellor, he replied, "Why will you vex me by suggesting this, when it is too late."[1] Boswell, his friend for twenty years and a practising lawyer, agreed with Scott and thought that Johnson would have made a fine lawyer. He wrote, "I cannot conceive a man better qualified to make a distinguished figure as a lawyer; for he would have brought to his profession a rich store of various knowledge, an uncommon acuteness, and a command of language, in which few could have equalled, and none have surpassed him."[2]

Boswell so respected Johnson's opinions on legal matters that he asked him on nearly a dozen occasions for help with law cases that were troubling him. Johnson also came to the aid of another friend, Robert Chambers, when he helped Chambers prepare a series of lectures required by his post of Professor of Law at Oxford. In addition, Johnson often spoke and wrote about the law because many of his friends were lawyers and because he felt that the law was at the heart of society. Not surprisingly, then, scholars and critics have examined Johnson's relationship to the law. But while this scholarship occasionally sheds light on Johnson's responses to particular issues, such as copyright law, it fails to answer the question of what we can learn about Johnson's mind by looking at his involvement with the law.[3] I will look at the legal opinions Johnson wrote for Boswell with this question in mind. The opinions do not give a microcosm of Johnson's thought, but they do suggest or clarify aspects of Johnson's complex and powerful mind, such as his conservatism and moral didacticism.

I will focus on only five of Johnson's opinions. They deal with the issues of natural rights, the permanence of law, and the role of authority figures in society. We do not have to be lawyers to read and understand these legal opinions. They are not written in what we today call legalese. Rather, Johnson employs the sober, powerful prose style of his <u>Rambler</u> essays in his legal writing. In addition, Johnson does not assume the role of legal scholar, though he was qualified to do so. Precedents and the language of statutes are not vital to his opinions. They are argued mostly on the level of principles, which allows Johnson to apply common sense to the issues at hand. The opinions tend to move from the general to the particular. After establishing the reasoning of his argument, he addresses the facts of the immediate case to show how they fall within the scope of that reasoning.

One case, described by Boswell as a case of pure Scotch law, concerns the act of intromission, or the intermeddling with the property of a deceased person without legitimate legal authority. It had long been held that if a person who intermeddled did not have this legal authority, he would be liable for the debts left by the deceased. Recent rulings, however, held that legal authority to intermeddle might not be needed if the effects of the deceased were not considerably interfered with. In the particular case Boswell sought Johnson's aid on, he had unsuccessfully argued that the court should strictly interpret the established law regarding intromission and not make modifications. Johnson agreed with Boswell's position and wrote an opinion articulating his own belief in the necessary permanence of laws. His opinion focuses on the questions of why laws are made and what effect they have in society.

Johnson begins with the assumption that reason lies behind every just law, and that reason by definition remains constant. Laws are made for two purposes. The first is to give every man a rule of action and to prescribe for him a mode of conduct that will entitle him to the support and protection of society. Given that laws are an important controlling force in society, it becomes imperative for Johnson that they be clear and definite. His precept is that vague laws are no laws. This argument for clarity brings Johnson to his first point about intromission. He argues that if the court holds some acts of intromission to be legal, but does not define the points at which legality becomes illegality, one cannot know beforehand if intromission is legal. The law's function of guiding the individual in his life is thus undermined.

The second function of a law is to protect and prevent. Applying this to intromission, Johnson argues that strictly adhering to the established law protects creditors seeking payment out of the property left by the deceased. The substantial liability faced by an illegal intromitter, for Johnson, would act as a deterrent. Underlying Johnson's position are his beliefs that human nature is easily corrupted and that individuals need the threat of severe penalties to remain lawful. Johnson recognises that this is an extreme position when he concedes that some may intromit without defrauding the property of the deceased, yet he emphatically holds that the law should not even allow the temptation of fraud by intromitters. Johnson writes that "He who never intromits at all, will never intromit with fraudulent intentions."[4]

We begin to see that Johnson's opinion finds its centre in his conception of human nature. To advance his implied argument that human nature has not changed throughout the ages, he cites a legal authority on intromission only to refute him. The passage he takes from Lord Kames' Historical Law Tracts reasons that the established law on intromission

was formulated centuries before to restrain a ferocious populace intent on plundering the effects left by the deceased, and since the manners of the populace have greatly improved since that earlier time, the severe penalties for intromission are no longer necessary. Johnson agrees that manners have changed, yet he feels that human nature has not, as people are still intent on stealing the property of others. Only the methods have changed, with men relying more on cunning than on brute force. There are two constants, then, for Johnson. One is human nature, and the other is the sense of reason in every just law. In ancient societies, the need to protect people from corrupt human nature gave birth to the law of intromission. Since society still feels the need to protect itself, the law's function remains unaltered and its need remains essential.

Having made this point about human nature, Johnson shifts his focus to define the two necessary conditions for a reasonable penal law. It must first prevent the crime for which it was designed. Additionally, the benefit to society from a law must be substantial if the penalties are severe. Johnson returns to the established law prohibiting intromission to show that it meets these two conditions and is, therefore, just. Nearing his conclusion, Johnson reiterates his original position that "a law, to have its effects, must be permanent and stable."[5] The permanence of laws lies at the heart of human activity. If laws are modified without sufficient reason, as in this case of intromission, their purpose is altered and their effect emasculated. Johnson concludes that without clear and definite laws, life itself becomes unsafe.

Boswell also consulted Johnson in 1776, and though his opinion does not pertain to an actual law case, it is related to his intromission opinion and will expose an added complexity in his view of the relationship between legal tradition and legal principles. Boswell's question arose from a disagreement he was having with his father over the perpetuation of the family estate. Boswell's father wanted his estate to pass to his "heirs general," that is, the estate could pass to females if there were no males in the direct line of succession. Boswell, on the other hand, felt that succession should be limited to male heirs. He based his view on a family tradition begun in feudal times. The tradition began when the laws of succession required that estates be left only to males. But as times changed, and as feudal law was eclipsed, estates could be left to "heirs general." Boswell's father taking advantage of a 1685 Scottish Act of Parliament, decided to entail the land to his family, recognising that it might fall to female heirs. The issue for Boswell, then, centres on whether established tradition instead of more recent law should guide his father's entailing of the estate.

Considering Johnson's argument for the permanence of laws in the intromission case, we should expect him to agree with Boswell's reasoning. But he does not. He reverses himself and argues that "Laws are formed by the manners and exigencies of particular times, and

it is but accidental that they last longer than their causes."[6] In informing Boswell that his father had the right to include females as heirs, Johnson relies on a more important legal principle – the existence of natural rights. For Johnson, the right to do with one's property as one pleased was paramount. He writes that "Land is, like any other possession, by natural right wholly in the power of its present owner, and may be sold, given, or bequeathed, absolutely or conditionally, as judgment shall direct or passion incite."[7]

The possible conflict between natural rights and legal tradition draws us into a brief discussion of Johnson's political views, especially his belief in monarchy. Johnson, who believed in social order, was a monarchist, but he was also sceptical about absolute authority. He concedes, for example,that a monarch might abuse his power and become tyrannical. For this there is a remedy. Johnson says that "it is better in general that a nation should have a supreme legislative authority, although it may at times be abused... if the abuse be enormous, Nature will rise up, and claiming her original rights, overturn a corrupt political system."[8] He also says that "If a sovereign oppresses his people to a great degree, they will rise up and cut off his head."[9] But what constitutes great oppression or enormous abuse? This is the problem Dryden presents in Absalom and Achitophel. Dryden suggests that David has been less than an exemplary king, but do his actions justify Absalom's intended usurpation, which would bring the greater problem of anarchy? Johnson would likely agree with Dryden that they do not. Like Johnson, Dryden imagined a compact between the king and people. The citizenry has rights in much the same way that Johnson ascribes original rights to the people in the above quotations. The maintenance of the monarchy and order for both Dryden and Johnson thus depends on the delicate balance between the king's power and the rights of the people.

Johnson's concept of social order also hinges on the seemingly contradictory ideas of human equality and social subordination. Let us look first at the opinion Johnson dictated to Boswell on the issue of slavery. The case involved a Jamaican suing for his freedom in a Scottish court. Johnson's argument turns on his understanding of man's natural condition and his natural rights. He finds it impossible to believe that men in their original condition were not equal. He deduces that if men are naturally equal, they cannot justly be subjected to slavery. But this reasoning does not exclude the taking away of a man's freedom. A criminal may forfeit his liberty because he violates the rights of others. Johnson goes on to distinguish between this legitimate process and slavery. In the former instance, the freedom of only one man is denied, while in slavery freedom is congenitally denied. The Jamaican suing for his freedom had not committed a crime justifying his enslavement. He had been afforded no redress for the condition he met with at birth. Thus, his natural rights had been denied him. Johnson sums up his argument this way: "No man is by nature the property of another. The defendant is, therefore, by nature free: The rights of nature must be some way forfeited before they can be justly taken away."[10]

All men for Johnson are born with the same natural rights. While this reductively makes all men equal, Johnson does not believe that equality between men actually exists. If you put two men in a room for thirty minutes, he says, it would be clear at the end of that time that the men are not equal.[11] Here Johnson considers the differences between men in such categories as talent and intelligence. This disparity will and should be reflected in the structure of society. Some men will advance because of their advantages, while a greater group will find advancement difficult due to a want of ability. To maintain this hierarchy, the lower groups must not be encouraged to advance beyond where their natural talent brings them. This is Johnson's idea of subordination. To disrupt this subordination is to invite anarchy. He says that "mankind are happier in a state of inequality and subordination. Were they to be in this pretty state of equality, they would soon degenerate into brutes."[12] On the one hand, then Johnson argues for a social structure that guarantees men their natural rights, such as liberty, but at the same time he wants a social structure built upon subordination that will induce people to remain where they are in the structure. For him, these ideas are compatible. He writes that "the great end of government is to give every man his own," and in the same paragraph argues that "[no] man [is] more an enemy to publick peace, than he who fills weak heads with imaginary claims and breaks the series of civil subordination, by inciting the lower classes of mankind to encroach upon the higher."[13]

Two of Johnson's most important works, The Vanity of Human Wishes and Rasselas are concerned with related aspects of this problem of filling weak minds with imaginary claims. Their focus is not restricted to the lower classes, however; rather, Johnson's concern is with mankind generally. In Rasselas, he labels the problem as the "hunger of imagination which preys incessantly upon life."[14] In both his poem and fable, Johnson urges us to recognise the inevitable difference between dreams and reality, and that we must be content to live in a world where our dreams will forever go unsatisfied.

The problem facing man is how to live happily and productively in the world without his imagination getting the best of him. As Johnson saw it, a programme of moral instruction was needed. The Vanity of Human Wishes and Rasselas represent one type of instruction, while the Rambler, Idler, and Adventurer essays represent another. Unlike Johnson's abstract poem and his allegorical fable, his essays focus on the immediate problem of living in the world. But no matter what the subject, Johnson is the moral instructor. In providing "dictatorial instruction," Johnson's purpose was "to consider the moral discipline of the mind and to promote the increase of virtue rather than learning."[15] Johnson's moral vision pervades his life and literature. As a stern moralist, he links all aspects of life, including politics, to a sense of morality. The case involving

Rev. James Thomson reflects the depths to which Johnson holds moral virtue applicable to life as well as the need society has to obey its moral instructors.

As Boswell describes the facts of the case, Thomson, a Scottish minister, had heard that Robert Scotland, the aide to a local politician and a member of Thomson's congregation, had betrayed his employer and deserted to the opposing candidate for pecuniary rewards.[16] Thomson was appalled at Scotland's actions and felt compelled to allude to him disparagingly from the pulpit. In response, Scotland attacked Thomson in the newspaper. The attack angered Thomson and prompted him to sharply assail Scotland from the pulpit the following week. Scotland then brought suit against Thomson for defamation and damages. Boswell was one of Thomson's defence attorneys and believed that Thomson had the right, based on the Liberty of the Pulpit doctrine, to publicly arraign Scotland. Contemplating an appeal after having lost the case, Boswell asked Johnson for his opinion.

Johnson altogether agreed with Boswell. He bases his opinion on a minister's right and obligation to rebuke morally errant members of his congregation. In the opening paragraphs, Johnson associates the duties and responsibilities of a minister with those of a shepherd, teacher, and father. He is accountable for the moral health of the congregation, and in order to stimulate those needing additional direction, he must have the authority, as does a father concerned with his child's welfare, to punish when necessary. Johnson turns to Church history to demonstrate that ministers have always enjoyed this authority. It was the practice of the primitive Church, he says, to terrify the wicked by reproof and denunciation.[17] In the following centuries, secular justice imposed punishments only when this form of ecclesiastical justice failed. Johnson concludes this section saying that "It therefore appears from eccleastical history that the right of inflicting shame by publick censure, has always been considered as inherent in the Church."[18]

Johnson concedes that ministers might abuse this authority to inflict shame by blasting the innocent. But in an argument that reminds us of his point about the temptation to defraud in his intromission opinion, Johnson reasons that it is better to risk injuring a few while helping many than to remain silent and educate none. Having admitted that ministers can err in their denunciations, Johnson moves to the Thomson case itself to show that Thomson's attack was justified. But it is here that Johnson's moral indignation warps his reasoning. He does not light on incriminating evidence to show that Scotland deserved what he got; rather, he relies on public opinion and his own detestation of Scotland's political betrayal to condemn him. He further finds that Scotland is deserving of censure because by responding to the Minister's initial unfavourable allusion to him, he admitted his guilt. Thomson, according to Johnson, did not breach

a private confidence, nor did he intrude into secret transactions, when he censured Scotland; he only reproved his moral shortcomings, which Thomson was obligated to do. Johnson then concludes his opinion with the thought that Thomson was also obligated to denounce Scotland after Scotland had attacked him in the newspaper. If he had not done so his authority as a minister would have been weakened. It would have been as if a child had successfully rebuked his parent.

Johnson's beliefs that authority figures should be obeyed and that they needed the freedom to punish when they thought it necessary are also shown in his opinion involving a Scottish schoolmaster accused of severely punishing one of his pupils. The schoolmaster was at first ordered from the classroom, but a higher court reinstated him. An appeal followed by enemies of the schoolmaster, and Boswell, the attorney for the schoolmaster, asked Johnson for his opinion.

Johnson sees the schoolmaster acting as an agent of the child's parent and therefore is justified in punishing the child. And as children are governed only by fear, the teacher is justified in using harsh penalties on an obstinate child. In an argument that parallels his thinking in the Thomson case, Johnson writes, "for the greatest cruelty would be to desist, and have the scholar too careless for instruction."[19] Understanding that children are often unruly, Johnson sees punishment as a vital ingredient in a child's education — it had been in his. He writes, "The master who punishes, not only consults the future happiness of him who is the immediate subject of correction; but he propagates obedience through the whole school."[20]

As he does in his Thomson opinion, Johnson recognises that authority is sometimes abused. To determine if the schoolmaster abused his, Johnson applies the facts of the case to the prevailing law, which held that if the punishment, however severe, did not produce permanent damage, it was reasonable. The child disciplined by the schoolmaster, Johnson argues, was not damaged permanently; this exculpates the schoolmaster. In fact, Johnson goes on to say, "No scholar has gone from [the schoolmaster] either blind or lame... however provoked, he never exceeded the limits of moderation, for he inflicted nothing beyond the present pain."[21]

Johnson the authoritarian clearly imposes himself in this opinion as he does in his Thomson opinion. Other opinions show him to be a moralist and a conservative. The five opinions are valuable in that we see Johnson responding to particular issues. The way he structures and moves through an argument reveals his deeply held views on man, society and man's activities in society. The dominant impression that can be gleaned from the opinions is that for Johnson the law instructs and restrains. It makes clear what is right and what is wrong, giving an individual guidelines for an acceptable way of living his life. In addition, the law not only protects people from each other,

it also protects them from themselves by curbing temptations to stray from the law.

Underlying Johnson's belief that people need a proper mode of conduct mapped out for them are his convictions that civil subordination and moral instruction are necessary for them to live in the world without continually frustrated aspirations overcoming them. Without these controls, men would move through the world rudderless. Johnson's legal opinions thus categorise him also as a paternalist. He cares deeply for his children and wants to help them by outlining a proper life for them, but he also acknowledges the obligation to punish when necessary, all as a result of his concern for their welfare.

Documentation

1. Quoted in James Boswell, Life of Johnson (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970), p.961
2. Boswell, p.97
3. Two books have been written on Johnson and the law. The first was Sir Arnold McNair's Dr. Johnson and the Law (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), and the second was E.L. McAdam's Dr. Johnson and the English Law (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1951). McNair's is a bad book. His is a superficial approach that discusses Johnson's law library, his legal friends, and his views on lawyers and on different aspects of the law. It amounts to a mere extraction from Boswell's Life of Johnson of Johnson's different statements on the law. McAdam's book is better than McNair's, but it too tells us little about Johnson. Its major attraction is a discussion of Johnson's involvement with Chambers' Law Lectures. Articles focusing on Johnson and particular legal issues have also appeared. To date, there are essays on Johnson and the Law Lectures, Johnson and copyright law, and Johnson on crime and punishment. Like the books, these articles are flawed because they do not give us a better understanding of Johnson, his mind, and his world.
4. Boswell, p.498
5. Boswell, p.500
6. Boswell, p.669
7. Boswell, p.668
8. Boswell, p.300
9. Boswell, p.477
10. Boswell, p.878
11. Boswell, p.360
12. Boswell, p.514
13. Boswell, p.534
14. Samuel Johnson, Rasselas, collected in The Works of Samuel Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1825), vol. 1, p.269
15. Samuel Johnson, Rambler No. 8, collected in The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), Vol. III, p.42

16. Boswell p.757
17. Boswell p.759
18. Boswell pp. 759-760
19. Boswell p.487
20. Boswell p.487
21. Boswell p.488

JOHNSON IN THE NEWS

"Indians from the Canadian plains have protested that Britain let them down last week when Westminster voted the Canada Bill another stage onwards. These are broadly their sentiments about white men: 'Either they promised protection which they have never afforded, or instruction which they never imparted.... Their treaties are only to deceive.... ' But these words were not uttered last week. Dr Samuel Johnson put them in the mouth of an imaginary Red Indian chief, in one of his essays, in 1759."* — Richard Hall, The Observer, 21 February 1982.

"We know: history never repeats itself. But historians and leader-writers repeat each other. Some of the argument and rhetoric of our contemporary Falklands crisis had a familiar ring. We have been here before, in the Falklands crisis of just over two centuries ago.

Here is a clue: 'A contention for a few spots of earth, which, in the deserts of the Ocean had almost escaped human notice.' Unmistakably the booming eloquence of the patron saint of editorializers, Samuel Johnson." — Philip Howard, "The first Sam missile to hit the Falklands", The Times, 2 June, 1982 (article on Johnson's Thoughts on the late Transactions respecting Falkland's Islands, 1771.)

* The Idler, No. 81. — Ed.

DR. JOHNSON'S THEORY OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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In his very thorough examination of Samuel Johnson's theory of biography, Bergen Evans notes that autobiography was a valid method within Johnson's concept of the biographical art form, "particularly an autobiography written calmly for the admonition of posterity and left unpublished until the author's death."[1] However, Evans does not distinguish a specific theory of autobiography from Johnson's overall biographical theory. In paraphrasing Johnson's eighty-fourth Idler, Evans gives the autobiography the quality of truth, noting that the autobiographer "has no more reasons (though he may have different reasons) for disguising the truth than he who relates the life of another."[2] While he agrees that "a man's opinions are best learned from himself," Evans removes the possibility of a positive endorsement of autobiographical writing in Johnson's theory by observing that "others may be safer historians of his actions."[3] He supports this negative argument by noting that "men may be unaware of their own vices or uncertain of their true motives. By the substitution in our minds of single good acts for habits we persuade ourselves that we have virtues which we really lack, and faults, however frequent, may be regarded not as settled habits but as casual failures or lapses. All men do not think clearly and many in a tolerant appraisal of themselves are inclined to confuse the praise with the practice of goodness."[4] With this, Evans dismisses the use of autobiography in Johnson's overall theory of biography. However, Evans neglects Johnson's high regard for the autobiography that is properly written and appropriately distributed. A thorough analysis of Johnson's best statement on autobiography, Idler No. 84, and an analysis of the fictional autobiographical account by Johnson's character Imlac will demonstrate Johnson's auto-biographical theory and his appreciation for this very noble biographical form.

Johnson opens Idler No. 84 by speaking about the utility of biography, stating that it is "that which is most eagerly read, and most easily applied to the purposes of life."[5] Indeed, he spoke of his Lives of the Poets that they were "written, I hope, in such a manner as may tend to the promotion of piety.'"[6] In Idler No. 84, this "promotion of piety" is presented in the dilemna of how to deal properly with one's vices and folly. Johnson notes that "the mischievous consequences 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."[7] These lessons of happiness, Johnson continues, "are therefore commonly of most value in which the writer tells his own story."[8]

Thus the first principle of Johnson's theory of autobiography emerges; credibility. Johnson recognised that a personal account of one's trials in life can carry a heavy impact. The second-hand relation of such events might lack the sincerity and certainly the personality to convey properly a lesson worthy of imitation by the reader. As Johnson notes, "he that recounts the life of another, commonly dwells upon conspicuous events, lessens the familiarity of his tale to increase its dignity, shews his favourite at a distance decorated and magnified like the ancient actors in their tragic dress, and endeavours to hide the man that he may produce a hero."[9] Thus the biographer might tend to draw his subject as a fictional character while the autobiographer will draw the actual self, since "every man is yet less a hero to himself."[10]

The characteristic of humility, and thus the spirit of equality, also emerges from Johnson's theory of autobiography. Johnson demands such a humility since a man of high importance will sense the effect that such importance will have on his life. Consequently, his examples of conduct will be tempered by such humility and will offer instruction appropriate to all levels of society. As Johnson notes, "the prince feels the same pain when an invader seizes a province, as the farmer when a thief drives away his cow. Men thus equal in themselves will appear equal in honest and impartial biography and those whom fortune or nature place at the distance may afford instruction to each other."[11]

Finally, Johnson's theory of autobiography becomes complete as he notes that "the writer of his own life has at least the first qualification of an historian, the knowledge of the truth."[12] Johnson admits that such a writer has the opportunity to disguise his shortcomings but that "impartiality may be expected with equal confidence from him that relates the passages of his own life, as from him that delivers the transaction of another."[13] It is this certainty of knowledge that offers the autobiographer the possibility for veracity and thus presentation of instruction, for "certainty of knowledge not only excludes mistakes but fortifies veracity. What we collect by conjecture only can one man judge of another's motives and sentiments, is easily modified by fancy or by desire; as objects imperfectly discerned, take forms from the hope or fear of the beholder. But that which is fully known cannot be falsified but with reluctance of understanding, and alarm of conscience; of understanding, the lover of truth; of conscience, the sentinel of virtue."[14] This personal responsibility to understanding and conscience, therefore, creates the truth that is so necessary in any biography in order to offer the proper instruction towards the "promotion of piety."

Johnson does add one final stipulation to his theory of autobiography, that of posthumous publication. Autobiography should not be written for one's aggrandisement in his life but rather for the instruction of others after his death.

> He that speaks of himself has no motive to falsehood or partiality except self-love, by which all have so often been betrayed, that all are on the watch against its artifices. He that writes apology for a single action, to confute an accusation, or recommend himself to favour, is indeed always to be suspected of favouring his own cause; but he that sits down calmly and voluntarily to review his life for the admonition of posterity, or to amuse himself, and leaves this account unpublished, may be commonly presumed to tell truth, since falsehood cannot appease his own mind, and fame will not be heard beneath the tomb.[15]

In light of this condition, however, Johnson shows a positive and precise theory of autobiography. Autobiography is a valuable form of biography because it entails credibility, believability presented in a sincere fashion; humility, which allows lives of men of all stations to present instruction equally valuable to other stations; and veracity, which assures accuracy and thus truth, the highest form of instruction.

The fact that Idler No. 84 appeared in November, 1759, just seven months after the publication of The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia, offers the opportunity for an examination of Johnson's theory of autobiography as he put it into practice in a fictional personage. The life of Imlac, chapters VIII, IX, X, XI, and XII of Rasselas, has offered critics the opportunity for much discussion over the past years. Nevertheless, most critical attention has focussed on Chapter X, "A Dissertation Upon Poetry." The actual autobiographical account of Imlac's life has been neglected. But when Johnson created Imlac and his autobiographical account in this fictional setting, Johnson's ideas about autobiography, though not yet committed to paper, almost certainly were set in his mind. Thus Imlac's autobiography within Rasselas demonstrates Johnson's theory of autobiography.

Imlac's personal account of his life for such a comparison does present a few problems. First, of course, Imlac is telling the story of his life, not writing it. Second, he does not relate his story "for the admonition of posterity, or to amuse himself," but rather he is ordered by Prince Rasselas to present such a tale. Indeed, "the prince commanded Imlac to relate his history, and to tell by what

accident he was forced, or by what motive induced, to close his life in the happy valley."[16] Thus we do not have a pure example of autobiography in Imlac's tale. However, a personal account of even a fictional character's history can be a helpful example for this study of Johnson's autobiographical theory.

Imlac's tale as a history possessing credibility is established from the very beginning. Rasselas orders the tale to be told because he has "found a man who knew the world so well, and could so skilfully paint the scenes of life."[17] But it is Imlac's personal touch that truly lends his history completely believable. As Johnson had said, the teller of his own tale should "tell not how any man became great, but how he was made happy," so Imlac relates the forays from his intended journey to enhance his material wealth. He exposes his honest yet mischievous folly as he notes that he "felt an unextinguishable curiosity kindle in my mind, and resolved to snatch this opportunity of seeing the manners of other nations, and of learning sciences unknown in Abissinia."[18] He rationalises this choice of action in the fashion of the young, inexperienced traveller, with believability underlying his logic; "I remember that my father had obliged me to the improvement of my stock, not by a promise which I ought not to violate, but by a penalty which I was at liberty to incur; and therefore determined to gratify my predominant desire, and by drinking at the fountains of knowledge, to quench the thirst of curiosity."[19] Thus Imlac initiates his history with the believable tale of a youth whose folly is, by choice, a venture into experience.

This credibility within Imlac's tale allows him the opportunity to offer instruction that is "most easily applied to the purposes of life". Throughout his history, Imlac reflects on his experiences and offers the naive Rasselas lessons that can be of value. These lessons, by virtue of their first-hand credibility, are most important, and the fact that Rasselas does not heed them tends to mark Rasselas as even the greater fool. Imlac's credible discourse on knowledge is such an example. Again he relates the lesson of how he was made happy through knowledge; "Knowledge is certainly one of the means of pleasure, as is confessed by the natural desire which every mind feels of increasing its ideas. Ignorance is mere privation, by which nothing can be produced; it is a vacuity in which the soul sits motionless and torpid for want of attraction; and, without knowing why, we always rejoice when we learn, and grieve when we forget. I am therefore inclined to conclude, that, if nothing counteracts the natural consequence of learning, we grow more happy as our minds take a wider range."[20] The fact that Imlac offers this lesson makes it all the more powerful.

Finally, Imlac offers the ultimate episode to display his credibility. This portion, possessing the theme of the world's lack of true happiness, follows Rasselas' question of why Imlac chose to come to the happy valley. Imlac is a man who has known the outside world but has chosen to be isolated in the happy valley. Again the lesson he offers eludes Rasselas, yet the knowledge he implies is a knowledge of sincerity and most definite believability: "I know not of all your attendants who does not lament the hour when he entered this retreat. I am less unhappy with images, which I can vary and combine at pleasure. I can amuse my solitude by the renovation of the knowledge which begins to fade from my memory, and by recollection of the accidents of my past life. Yet all this ends in the sorrowful consideration, that my acquirements are now useless, and that none of my pleasures can be again enjoyed."[21] Thus the theme of Rasselas, the lack of worldly happiness, emerges from Imlac's tale; the theme is thus enhanced by this history of personal strife, personally and candidly told.

The second point of Johnson's theory of autobiography, that of humility, which makes lessons equally valuable to all levels of society, is presented in Imlac's history. Obviously, Imlac was originally of a wealthy society, but he chose to turn away from the materialistic world in favour of the life of the poet and teacher. Such a personage therefore is representative of a cross-section of society. It is his explicit humility that allows the reader to sense the implicit value for all of society. This very humble tone is set as Imlac prefaces his history with a modest self-portrait: "My history will not be long: the life that is devoted to knowledge passes silently away, and is very little diversified by events. To talk in public, to think in solitude, to read and to hear, to inquire, and answer inquiries, is the business of a scholar. He wanders about the world without pomp or terror, and is neither known nor valued but by men like himself."[22] Such humility is nearly ironic for Imlac who has had the many adventures later related. But it does set the tone of the life of the humble scholar, a tone of which Johnson was certainly aware as he chose to write the Lives of the Poets for the "promotion of piety."

Imlac, by virtue of his autobiographical duty, is also able to display humility in the light of his experiences. In a minor episode when Imlac relates to Rasselas his realisation that his boyhood instructors were unable to continue to offer him the instruction needed for continued challenge, Imlac's choice of words displays a unique manner of rebuke, direct but not arrogant or assertive: "As every hour taught me something new, I lived in a continual course of gratifications; but, as I advanced towards manhood, I lost much of the reverence with which I had been used to look on my instructors; because, when the lesson was ended, I did not find them wiser or better than common men."[23] Thus Imlac continues his tone of humility

in the telling of his history and this tone allows his message a universality applicable to all levels of readers.

In his dissertation on poetry, Imlac displays himself as the victim of pride and the humble student of this lesson. Again, if the autobiographer can show his errors and his realisation of those errors, a valuable lesson might be offered. Here Imlac shows a desire to achieve greatness but realises his errors and assumes his proper role as the true poet: "I was desirous to add my name to this illustrious fraternity. I read all the poets of Persia and Arabia, and was able to repeat by memory the volumes that are suspended in the mosque of Mecca. But I soon found that no man was ever great by imitation. My desire of excellence impelled me to transfer my attention to nature and to life. Nature was to be my subject, and men to be my auditors."[24] Imlac displays his humility through his realisation of poetic technique. The lesson goes much beyond poetry for the reader.

Note here that this humility might only come through a personal account. It is one thing to speak of another's humility; it is quite another to display humility in one's own experiences. Such is also the case for veracity — the final principle in Johnson's theory of autobiography.

To isolate in Imlac's tale particular passages that would demonstrate veracity would require an opinion. Veracity communicates only when achieved within the reader of the autobiography. Therefore, Rasselas' responses to Imlac are puzzling; Rasselas does not heed the universal truths offered by Imlac; yet he rarely seems to doubt the truth that Imlac displays. Early in his history when Imlac relates his father's desire to make more money, Rasselas replies that he is "unwilling to doubt thy veracity, yet inconsistencies cannot be true."[25] Later, when Imlac relates his experiences with the traders, Rasselas again responds that he doubts "not of the facts which you relate, but imagine that you impute them to mistaken motives."[26] Indeed, the plight of Rasselas depends on his unwillingness to believe the veracity of Imlac's history. Imlac is, by virtue of his role as autobiographical narrator, truthful. Rasselas is "unwilling" but not <u>unable</u> to doubt Imlac's veracity. Indeed, he finally denies the lessons of Imlac's factual experiences, and this refusal impels him to learn the same lessons through strife and worldly hardships. This is shown after Imlac relates that "human life is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed."[27] At this point Rasselas openly denies Imlac's veracity and the stage is set for his hard lessons in life: "I am not yet willing... to suppose that happiness is so parsimoniously distributed to mortals;

nor can believe but that, if I had the choice of life, I should be able to fill every day with pleasure."[28] Thus veracity, complete conformity with the truth, is a quality of Imlac's history. As such, Johnson has used it ironically to enhance Rasselas' character as a naive student further.

As we have noted earlier, Johnson observes that self-love can be a flaw in autobiography but that the perceptive reader will recognise it as such. Imlac presents as example of self-love that also supports Johnson's plea for posthumous publication of autobiographies. At the end of his "Dissertation on Poetry," "Imlac now felt the enthusiastic fit, and was proceeding to aggrandise his own profession, when the prince cried out, 'Enough! Thou hast convinced me, that no human being can ever be a poet. Proceed with thy narration.'"[29] Fortunately, here Rasselas is a perceptive listener who recognises Imlac's brief lapse into self-aggrandisement.

Therefore, Dr. Johnson did have a distinctive theory of autobiography; it is a positive theory of autobiography as a valid form of biography, possessing credibility, humility, and veracity as shown by Idler No. 84. The demonstration of such qualities in Imlac's quasi-autobiographical history displays Johnson's faith in his theory. Furthermore, the power of these qualities comes to light in Rasselas as these very qualities enhance theme and characterisation in Johnson's long fiction.

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18. Rasselas, p.624
19. Rasselas, p.624
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21. Rasselas, p.634
22. Rasselas, p.621
23. Rasselas, p.623
24. Rasselas, pp.627-28
25. Rasselas, p.623
26. Rasselas, p.626
27. Rasselas, p.632
28. Rasselas, p.632
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Mr Clifford Musgrave

Mr Clifford Musgrave, OBE, FLA, died on September 15 at the age of 78. For nearly thirty years, from 1939 to 1968, he was the Director of The Royal Pavilion, Public Libraries, Museum and Art Gallery at Brighton. It was largely through his enthusiasm that the Royal Pavilion was restored to its original condition as completed by the Prince Regent and his architect, John Nash.

He was a founder member of the Regency Society and a notable historian of Brighton. His studies of the architecture and furniture of the late Georgian period will also be remembered.

Our own members will recall his paper on "Regency Brighton" given at the Johnson Society of London in February, 1962, when Miss Margaret Barton took the Chair.

THE JOHNSON SOCIETY OF LONDON MEETINGS 1982

When the Society was founded in 1928, its objects included "the increase of knowledge of Dr. Johnson's Life and Work; 'TO JOHNSONISE THE LAND,' and to promote union among his admirers." They went on to say: "The Johnson Society of London will not confine its activities to the study of the Life and Works of Dr. Johnson himself - the social, religious, political, literary, dramatic and artistic history of the period will be drawn upon as illustrative material."

The wide range of topics dealt with in 1982 was very much in the spirit of the founder members. We are grateful to our Secretary, Miss S.B.S. Pigrome MA, for arranging such varied Programmes and for the following summaries - taken mainly from the Minutes - which will be of particular interest to those members who were unable to attend the Meetings. - Ed.

JOHNSON AND THE ART OF TRANSLATION

John MacInery MA - 16th January 1982
Chairman: Trevor Russell-Cobb BA,BSc Econ.

Mr. MacInery said that there was often a prejudice against translations as being inferior to original poetry because their language was not that of the original experience, but translating from the classics was not really any easier than "translating" original feelings into verse. In our day such translations had not the prestige they had had in the eighteenth century when most educated persons would have known the originals and could appreciate the rendering. Dryden and Pope were the acknowledged masters of a form that had begun to take shape during the seventeenth century. Dryden had established rules for translation: follow the original closely where the languages permit, but where exact correspondence is impossible present an equivalent. Follow the style of the original but use the diction the author would have assumed had he written in English.

With examples from Dryden and the American poet Lowell, Mr. MacInery demonstrated how Johnson's imitations of the satires of Juvenal in London and The Vanity of Human Wishes differed from other versions in presenting a sense of personal experience. Reading Dryden, you knew what Juvenal was like, though Dryden had his gaiety without his gravity. Johnson restores the gravity and brings to it not only his own mass and weight, but wit, concrete as well as abstract. Johnson saw himself in a continuing tradition, but from his deep knowledge of Latin gave to his versions a transfusion of the original

thought with a contemporary flavour, achieving a marriage of Latin and English practice in verse. Members' thanks for an original and fascinating paper were expressed by Mrs. Forsyth.

DR. JOHNSON AND DAVID GARRICK : A FRIENDSHIP

Elizabeth Jenkins, OBE - 20th February 1982
Chairman: Lewis Raddon LLB DPA

Miss Jenkins said that today, when most people had enough to live on, it was difficult to imagine the sufferings of the really poor in the eighteenth century. Johnson, however, from the modest comfort of the pension awarded him in 1762, never forgot his early struggles against poverty, and his feelings were never blunted. His sympathies and behaviour were therefore not always understood. His strong sexuality was always kept under control and only really enjoyed in the early days of his marriage to Tetty, which was not perhaps so unsuitable as has been generally held. She was a sensible, comely woman, who appreciated Johnson's mind and writings, though later an ailment caused her to take to drink and the reading of romances. Their amorous dalliance in the early days was mocked by the schoolboy heartlessness of Garrick when he was a pupil at Edial school, and this may have affected Johnson's attitude to Garrick in later life: "Punch has no heart," he once said. After Tetty's death Johnson said they had loved each other, and he felt very greatly the loss of a companion with whom to share his success when it eventually came.

Johnson and Garrick travelled to London together to seek their fortunes - Garrick as a wine merchant and Johnson as a literary hack. Writers were no longer patronised by the Government and there was not yet a literate public to offer general support. Garrick, however, soon took to the stage and rapidly earned general acclaim and made a fortune. He revolutionised the theatre of his time by the naturalness of his acting, his mobility of face and his power of transforming himself so completely into different characters. As a producer he improved the standards of supporting players. Among his star parts were Richard III, Abel Drugger and Sir John Brute. His leading ladies included Mrs. Cibber, Mrs. Pritchard and Peg Woffington with whom he enjoyed a liaison for a time, before his happy marriage to Violetta.

He did well by Johnson by giving a splendid production of Irene, which ran for nine nights, and brought Johnson £300, including the sale of the text. Garrick's revivals of Shakespeare were a cause of irritation to Johnson. As an actor Garrick attached importance to

plot and character rather than to the text, and although claiming to have restored Shakespeare, he continued to present the garbled versions which were all general audiences knew of him. In preparing his Shakespeare Johnson failed to use papers made available to him by Garrick. Nevertheless, despite the coolness which marred their later years, Johnson was seen in tears at Garrick's funeral, and declared that the death of Garrick had "eclipsed the gaiety of nations".

Mrs. Davies thanked Miss Jenkins for the interesting paper which had so evidently been enjoyed by members.

THE ENGLAND JOHNSON VISITED

Cecil Farthing OBE, FSA — 20th March 1982
Chairman: J.H. Leicester MA

Mr. Farthing observed that Johnson was so much associated with London that one forgot that he did visit other places, on which he often commented. He presented an interesting collection of slides of buildings and places which Johnson had observed in the course of various journeys - for example: Birmingham, where he had lived for a time as a young man and Berwick on Tweed through which he passed on his way to Edinburgh. Douglas Wollen expressed the thanks of members to Mr. Farthing for presenting such an unusual light on Johnson.

STRANGLED WITH A BOW-STRING : A CLEAR CASE OF CHARACTER ASSASSINATION

Anthony Vaughan, Author of Born to Please — 17th April 1982
Chairman : Helen Forsyth

The Chairman introduced Mr. Anthony Vaughan, a member of the Society for Theatre Research and a collateral descendant of the family to which Hannah Pritchard (1711-1768) the subject of his critical biography, as well as of his present paper, belonged.

Johnson had condemned Hannah Pritchard as a "vulgar idiot" who learned only her own lines and had never read Shakespeare all through, but as well as being one of Garrick's leading ladies, she had led a full and devoted family life.

Hannah Vaughan, born in 1711, was the daughter of a staymaker and tailor of Welsh origin who lived near Drury Lane Theatre. At 20 years old she eloped with William Pritchard, an engraver, who later became a respected theatre administrator and Garrick's principal Treasurer. They had three children, to whom Hannah was a devoted mother, and of whom only the third, Hannah Mary, followed her into the theatre.

She first entered the theatre in 1732, in Cibber's company, and made her name in a series of Shakespeare revivals at Drury Lane in 1740, with music by Dr. Arne. In 1747 Garrick took her into his company at Drury Lane, inaugurating a twenty year partnership in the course of which she played opposite him 652 times - more often than any other of his leading ladies.

In 1749 Garrick staged Johnson's Irene, doing what he could to make it more dramatic, but Johnson rejected most of his suggestions. The one left in - that Irene should be strangled with a bowstring on stage - nearly proved fatal to the play, and had to be discontinued. Although the play ran for nine nights and made money for Johnson, it was not played again. Johnson attributed its failure to Mrs. Pritchard, whose acting abilities he never appreciated, although, as Mr. Vaughan demonstrated with many examples of contemporary criticism, she enjoyed a long sustained reputation as an outstanding example of her art. She was an actress of great versatility, excelling both in comedy and tragedy, and of blameless character in private life.

In the course of her career she undertook over 200 different roles among which she triumphed as Lady Macbeth, Beatrice and Rosalind, as well as in the leading female parts in the two modern comedies The Suspicious Husband and The Jealous Wife. Although Johnson pronounced her a vulgar idiot she did not appear as such to other people. She had an elegant villa at Twickenham, dined at Strawberry Hill, counted eminent poets, artists and writers among her friends and was appointed dresser to Queen Charlotte for her wedding and coronation in 1761.

Although in youth she was tall and slim, she was never beautiful and later grew fat. Nevertheless her art was such that with her excellent voice and clear enunciation she was able to overcome these disabilities, and emerges as one of the most distinguished actresses of the 18th-century theatre. Soon after retirement she died in Bath at the age of 58, and was buried at Twickenham. A monument in Westministmer Abbey next to Shakespeare was later moved elsewhere, while the playwright who failed to appreciate his own heroine receives the annual tribute of a wreath.

Following an interested discussion of the paper for which the speaker was thanked by Mr. Cecil Farthing, Mrs. Forsyth presented Mr. Vaughan with an engraving of one of the Hayman portraits of Mrs. Pritchard at the Garrick Club, which he was delighted to receive.

RANDOM THOUGHTS ON RASSELAS

Charlotte Graves Taylor MA (Oxon) — 16th October 1982
Chairman: Maj-Gen H.P. Sayers OBE

The Chairman introduced Miss Charlotte Graves Taylor, a graduate of Somerville, a lecturer in 19th and 20th Century literature, a reviewer of books and a part-time worker on the Oxford English Dictionary.

The speaker explained that her talk arose from one in a different form given to students at short notice to oblige a colleague and represented the subjective response to and random thoughts on a first reading of Rasselas at a time when her personal circumstances seemed rather bleak. Relating to a series of disappointments and journeys uncompleted, it ought to have been depressing, but on the contrary she found that it stimulated, encouraged, reassured and strengthened her, becoming a formative experience.

Her first response to Rasselas was that here were truths, not new but of which one needed regular reminders, expressed with a moving eloquence. Rasselas, she said, expressed the paradox of the human condition: we were stranded in the real, we imagined the ideal. People who, like Johnson, dared to be fully alive lived in that uncomfortable gap between the real and the ideal. Johnson feared the excesses of the imagination, but it was the source of his strength. He wrote with the anguish of one who knew he must strive for the unattainable. Johnson knew about tedium vitae, accidie and depression, but he was a man of wisdom, cleverness of the heart as well as of the head, so he never gave up hoping, though having nothing to hope for. It was that combination of imagination, courage and intelligence that she found inspiring.

Johnson defined imagination as "the power of forming ideal pictures", and "the power of representing things absent" - not so very unlike the OED definition. Johnson said that fear, hope and memory were all the products of imagination, which in its extreme form became madness, because it culminated in a complete loss of reality. Insanity for Johnson was the result of subjecting reason to fancy, and it seemed that Johnson's ideas, expressed through the Astronomer and Imlac were (except for the delusions) derived from his own experience of mental illness and were the basis of his own fears for his own reason.

The hunger of the imagination much preoccupied Johnson and was the impetus behind Rasselas. The prince was not content to live like the animals, satisfied with filling their daily needs. "Man ... surely has some desires distinct from sense which must be satisfied before he can be happy." The most striking account in Rasselas of the hunger of the imagination occurred in Chapter XXXII in Imlac's meditation on the pyramids. Johnson was really doing the opposite of what he appeared to be doing: for all that he spoke of its ills, he was pro-imagination in that it was the doorway to vision, to the ideal. The old man met by the Nile had had an honourable and useful life, yet declared that he endeavoured to abstract his thoughts from hopes and cares which, though reason knew them to be vain, still tried to keep their old possession of the heart. Without hope there could be no endeavour; it was necessary to hope, for hope itself was happiness, and its frustrations, however frequent, were less dreadful than its extinction.

Johnson was an inspiring figure in his greatness and his ordinariness, and Rasselas was an inspiring book because it encouraged one to travel whilst uncertain not only of one's destination, but whether

or not indeed there was a destination at all.

Concluding the interesting discussion which followed the paper, Mr. Russell-Cobb thanked Miss Graves Taylor for sharing her stimulating thoughts with members.

JOHAN ZOFFANY

Dr. Mary Webster - 20th November 1982
Chairman: Mrs. Zandra O'Donnell

The Chairman introduced Dr. Mary Webster, a graduate of Durham, as Keeper of Works of Art at University College London, distinguished for her works on 18th-century sporting pictures, including Francis Wheatley, Hogarth and Johan Zoffany - the subject of an Exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in 1977 and of the present paper.

Dr. Webster said that although Zoffany had once been widely known, he was less so today. There was no biography, and few letters, and many papers had been destroyed after the death of his widow in 1852. He would no doubt have approved of this situation, since in a self-portrait painted for the Uffizi he had included a skull and hour-glass as symbols of transitoriness, together with the motto Ars Longa Vita Brevis.

Zoffany (an anglicised spelling of his Czech name, Zauffelij) had been born near Frankfurt in 1733, the son of a cabinet maker who, after an early apprenticeship, had received a good training as a painter in Rome. In 1757 he returned to Germany as Court Painter to the Elector and Archbishop of Trier, and three years later came to England, where he exhibited at the Society of Artists.

During his early years Zoffany decorated clock faces and painted draperies for other artists. Success came when he was commissioned by Garrick to paint a scene from his play The Farmer's Return in which the farmer is recounting the story of the Cock Lane Ghost - Zoffany's only link with Johnson, who investigated the affair, because the man in the portrait of the Garricks at their villa, long supposed to be Johnson, had been shown by Dr. Webster herself to be George Boden. The commission established Zoffany's reputation as a painter of theatrical conversation pieces, whose powers of representing the actions and facial expressions of actors "in the act" were never equalled. Other representations of Garrick included him as Jaffier in Venice Preserv'd with Mrs. Cibber and Abel Drugger in The Alchemist. In such pictures the Georgian stage was brought vividly to life in all its detail and brought fame to both painter and sitters. Among the actresses he painted were Mrs. Abington, the most elaborate of theatrical portraits, and Mrs. Pritchard.

In 1762 Zoffany stayed with the Garricks at Hampton, where he began his first essays in the domestic conversation piece, following Canaletto in painting views with figures. He produced a long series of paintings of family groups of landowners, presenting them objectively and pictorially, giving the sitters natural actions and lively features, surrounding them with objects of interest to them. In the 1760 s his pictures were painted with great care and showed a silvery sparkle in the costumes. From 1766 Zoffany enjoyed the patronage of George III, who in 1769 nominated him R.A. One of his best known portraits was that of Queen Charlotte with her eldest two sons in fancy dress. With this Royal encouragement Zoffany developed the informal portrait. In 1772 he went to Italy, where he produced a great tour de force, the Tribuna of the Uffizi with reproductions of many different painters, for Queen Charlotte. This painting enabled the King and Queen to see many art treasures they could never have seen for themselves.

Before returning to England in 1779 he had been made a baron of the Holy Roman Empire, but back at home things did not go so well, and in 1783 he went to India to restore his fortunes. There he enjoyed the patronage of Warren Hastings and painted other English families against Indian backgrounds. On his way home, he fell ill, and ceased painting after 1800. He died in 1810 and was buried at Kew.

Dr. Webster's talk was illustrated with many splendid slides of Zoffany's paintings, some not readily available to the general public, and Mrs. Dowdeswell expressed the thanks of members for a memorable afternoon.

ANNUAL COMMEMORATION 1982

The Annual Commemoration was held on Saturday 18th December at Westminster Abbey, by courtesy of the Dean and Chapter. As in previous years, the service in Poets' Corner was conducted by our President, the Dean of Westminster.

Professor Ian Jack, a Vice-President of the Society, gave the Commemorative Address and laid a wreath on Johnson's grave.

THE COMMEMORATIVE ADDRESS 1982

Professor Ian Jack, MA, D Phil, Litt D.

'A few days before Johnson's death', Boswell tells us, 'he had asked Sir John Hawkins, as one of his executors, where he should be buried; and on being answered, "Doubtless, in Westminster-Abbey", seemed to feel a satisfaction, very natural to a Poet... Accordingly, upon Monday, December 20, 1784, his remains were deposited in that noble and renowned edifice; and over his grave was placed a large blue flagstone, with the inscription' — which you see here.

The immediate effect of his death upon his friends was remarkable. 'He has made a chasm', one of them said, 'which not only nothing can fill up, but which nothing has a tendency to fill up... There is nobody who can be said to put you in mind of Johnson'. In a sense I think that remains true today, for all of us who read his writings or encounter him in the greatest of all biographies.

When we consider Johnson as a writer we find him the author of The Vanity of Human Wishes, a poem which has appealed continuously from his own day to ours, and made the deepest impression on the best judges — his fellow-writers — from Sir Walter Scott to T. S. Eliot: a poem, once read, not to be forgotten. Johnson was also the author of a prose tale, Rasselas, which expresses the same sombre yet somehow not dispiriting view of human life, and which forms, with the poem, a memorable diptych of verbal expression. Few works exemplify more clearly what Dryden meant by his phrase 'the other harmony of prose'. And of course it is above all as a prose writer that we remember Johnson. We remember him as the great moralist of The Rambler and The Idler. And we remember him as a critic, and as a student of language. Much of his work, indeed, seems to fall into place if we think of him as the first man of genius to devote himself to the task of becoming a great scholar in our own language and literature, as the scholars of the Renaissance had devoted themselves to the study of the classical languages and literatures. He produced the Dictionary of the English Language, which filled a want that had been felt from the early days of the Renaissance onwards: he edited Shakespeare: he produced a body of literary criticism which gives us, better than any other man of his time, the Augustan view of our writers, from Shakespeare to Gray: and he wrote the Lives of the Poets, a remarkable final work for an elderly man much troubled by illness and by the deaths of friends.

I do not think it unsuitable to mention such biographical details because even the most rigorous of literary critics remembers Johnson not only as a writer but also as a man. Thanks to the genius of Sir Joshua Reynolds we have a series of incomparable images of the man as he lived, that powerful tormented face in which melancholia and intellect seem for ever at war; and thanks to the genius of Boswell we know how he talked, the sort of thing that he said, his manners and his mannerisms, with more particularity, perhaps, than we know of any other man to his time.

We know a great deal about him that is calculated to appeal to us today, and a great deal, also, to which we shall be well advised to pay regard. We know that he was a man of deep compassion who often shocked the more pallid of his fellow-Christians much as Fielding's Abraham Adams, in Joseph Andrews, shocks his mean-minded and conventional colleagues. Boswell tells us how one night Johnson found 'a poor woman lying in the street, so much exhausted that she could not walk; he took her upon his back, and carried her to his house'; and when he found that she was a prostitute, 'Instead of harshly upbraiding her, he had her taken care of with all tenderness'. We know the names of five people – his 'pensioners', as he sometimes called them – who lived with him for long periods, in his house in Gough Square and elsewhere, where (in the words of Mrs Thrale) 'the lame, the blind, the sick and the sorrowful found a sure retreat'. One of these was his black servant, Francis Barber, born in Jamaica as a slave, who passed into Johnson's service. In his Will he left him a generous annuity, as well as making him his residuary legatee.

If (as I believe) we are ourselves today more compassionate towards the handicapped, those who are at a disadvantage because of race or colour or ill health, those who are infirm in body or mind, than some of our predecessors have been that may help to explain why this fiercely compassionate man – who knew in his own mind and person the suffering that can come from an unprepossessing appearance and manner, frequent and serious illnesses, strange neuroses and the constant fear of melancholy or even madness – why he should make so strong an appeal to us, and not least to those who are young.

I hope that his rigorous honesty of mind – for all his prejudices and his tendency to superstition – makes as strong an appeal. As this largely depressing year draws to a close, and we contemplate the world in which we live – the world of the media, thriving on and advertising the latest war, the latest disaster, the latest crime, the latest example of terrorism, the world of the TV personality and the bogus celebrity, in which our language seems further cheapened every day and we seem for ever more ineluctably in danger of surrendering the things which make us human to an insane idolatry of the machine – at such a time, of all times,

it is surely wise to pause and remember the great man whose remains lie here, Samuel Johnson. A man whose life was a painful struggle from which he made great literature, the critic, the moralist, the lexicographer -- who strove throughout his life to act and think justly, and to use the English language with precision and force.

The Christmas Luncheon

At the conclusion of the Annual Commemoration, members and guests adjourned to the Vitello d'Oro Restaurant, Church House, Westminster for the Christmas Luncheon. Among those present were the President and Mrs Carpenter, the speaker of the day, Vice-President Ian Jack, and Mrs Jack, and another Vice-President, Lord Harmsworth, and Lady Harmsworth. The Society also welcomed the Revd Hereward Cooke, the new Priest in Charge of St. Edmund's. On behalf of the Johnson Society of London, the Chairman expressed thanks to Mrs Dowdeswell for arranging the Luncheon.

JOHNSON AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Professor Ian Jack, MA, D Phil, Litt D, Cambridge
Chairman: J R G Comyn 18th December 1982

Introducing the speaker, the Chairman said he would not enumerate the many fields of English Literature in which Professor Jack was distinguished, but would ask him to speak on "Johnson and Autobiography".

Professor Jack said the word did not exist in Johnson's time, although the thing of course did; in his talk he would speculate on Johnson's own essays in the genre.

Johnson said that the biographical part of literature was what he loved most, and in The Idler, No. 84, said that biography was most easily applied to the purposes of life, and asserted the superiority of those "relations ... in which the writer tells his own story", since he thought they were more likely to be honest and impartial. Johnson referred to very few of the autobiographies available to him and offered no reasoned critique of any of them – "a wealth of absence of comment" – although he must have at least looked into many of them. Nevertheless, Johnson was deeply interested in the idea of autobiography. He always insisted on the importance of keeping a journal, but although he had 12 or 14 times attempted to do so himself he "never could persevere."

A few fragments of these journals came into Boswell's hands, but most were destroyed by Johnson shortly before his death. The surviving autobiographical writing included various diaries and other slight memoranda, the Annales, the records of his journeys to Wales and France and the Prayers and Meditations. There was one fragment unknown to Boswell and Hawkins, not published until 21 years after his death – Account of the Life of Dr Samuel Johnson from his birth to his eleventh year written by himself: From the Manuscript preserved by the Doctor. It was printed in 1805 by Richard Wright, Surgeon, proprietor of the Museum of Antiquities, Lichfield. It had apparently been saved from the flames by Frank Barber and was purchased from his widow, but had long been lost. Johnson destroyed a diary of two volumes before he died, but Boswell also referred to one volume of a full and curious diary, since destroyed.

It was a matter for speculation what sort of detail Johnson considered appropriate for a diary – but he would seem to have approved the exhibition of a "minute and honest register of the state of mind" and whatever illustrated character. It seemed likely that he would have laid as much or more emphasis on the history of his mind as on his achievements or on external events.

Following an interested discussion, the Chairman thanked the speaker for his excellent paper.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY

At the October 1982 Meeting of the Society, it was unanimously agreed that a message of good wishes be sent to one of our most loyal and respected members, Miss Ursula M Pye, BA, on the occasion of her eightieth birthday.

CONSIDERING BOSWELL'S POETRY

Ronald E. McFarland
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James Boswell was a relentless poet. In addition to the thirty poems and epigrams which appeared in Donaldson's Collection of Original Poems by Scotch Gentlemen in 1762 and the dozens which were printed individually or in periodicals between 1758 and 1793, there are two groups of verse manuscripts which total over seven thousand lines. Most of the published poems, including the long poems, The Cub at Newmarket (1762) and No Abolition of Slavery (1791), are listed in Frederick Pottle's Boswell's Literary Career, but despite the recent publication of Jack Werner's edition, Boswell's Book of Bad Verse, much of Boswell's poetry remains difficult of access.* His poetry is known mostly at second hand, through the accounts of biographers whose sympathies so far have not been extended to the verse.

Boswell's poems have been consulted for biographical data since the appearance of Percy Fitzgerald's Life of James Boswell in 1891, but in the process Boswell's verse has attracted remarkably unfavourable reviews. C.B. Tinker, in Young Boswell (1922), complained that Boswell's "mechanical verse proved to be as dull as a music box."[1] More recently, Frederick Pottle has confirmed his earlier judgment in the Literary Career: "When he attempted verse, he had to affect a manner, and it made him artificial all the way through. He parroted, he was content with clichés. His announced preference in metaphor was for the gaudy, the overblown, the over-explicit."[2] In a letter dated 19th September 1969, Pottle advised me that he had declined an invitation to edit a volume of the poems, in part because he felt them to be "undistinguished" if not "sheer doggerel." A release dated June 1975 from the editorial committee for the Yale editions of the Boswell papers indicates no plans for publication of Boswell's poems in the near future.[3]

Aside from the biographical applications, however, there have been no published accounts of Boswell's verse. A reconsideration of Boswell's poems as poetry rather than autobiographical appendages should leaven somewhat the prevailing view.

*See my review in Enlightenment Essays, vi (Summer 1975), 66-67. I am grateful to Professor Pottle for his introduction to Professor Russell T. Sharpe, President Emeritus of Golden Gate University, who generously supplied me with the materials used in the preparation of his unpublished paper, "An Infant Son of Appollo: A Study of the Verses of James Boswell" (1933). These included poems in manuscript from the Malahide Collection and at the Bodleian Library.

In his unpublished paper on Boswell's verse, Russell T. Sharpe observes that "James Boswell almost always thought in terms of himself" and that "his muse was a practical one, spurred into song only by experience."[4] Such a poet might aspire rather to a Rape of the Lock than to an Essay of Man, and in fact Boswell acknowledges Pope, with Dryden, as his models in the first of his ten-lines-a-day poems written from Utrecht in 1763. (Boswell's "ten-lines plan" will be considered hereafter.)

> I seek not sallies elegant and terse,
> But to acquire the power of making verse;
> And sure, by practice I may freely hope
> To turn a line like Dryden or like Pope.[5]

A more extensive catalogue of Boswell's favourite poets and writers is provided in the 120 lines written in 1774 as an extension of the metaphor, "knowledge is the proper food o' the mind." Among the prominent names, including classic poets who are usually juxtaposed with what Boswell apparently considers their English counterparts, are Horace and Percy (ballads), Homer and Shakespeare, Juvenal and Samuel Johnson, Milton, Pope, Virgil, Martial and Goldsmith. Elsewhere in the ten-lines poems Boswell chides poets who compose from Horatian hermitages and boasts that he can turn a line in a crowded room "With as much ease as country lasses churn." Boswell also finds occasion to applaud the courtier poets of Charles II's reign. His verse is concerned mostly with personalities, with human nature; and it is often satiric, almost always public rather than private or meditative, even when, as in "B[oswell], A Song," in which he concludes that "There is no better fellow alive," he is himself the subject of the poem.[6] In that poem, Boswell also prides himself on his ease and grace in conversation, and it is that ease which he attempts to bring to his poetry. If, as Pottle has suggested, Boswell's metaphors are "over-explicit," it is at least some virtue in his poetry that the figures are not contrived or convoluted. In fact, Boswell's diction is everywhere clear, declining from what Johnson disparaged as metaphysical wit. In short, as is often the case with minor writers, Boswell's work reflects the conventions, or foibles, of his age more clearly than the work of most of the important figures. Whether good or bad, Boswell's is clearly an Augustan poetic.

Boswell's best poetry is occasional, springing from his direct apprehension of an event or a personality, and it is not often the product of extensive reflection or systematic thinking. That explains, in part, why he is a minor poet. He attempts most of the traditional forms: epigrams, odes, verse epistles, songs, ballads, mock heroics theatrical prologues, paraphrases of the Psalms, and even a nonsense poem. His favourite metrical unit is the heroic couplet, the staple of the theatrical prologues and the ten-lines verses, but he prefers octosyllabic

couplets for the verse letters and for such longer poems as The Cub at Newmarket and No Abolition of Slavery. The epigrams are usually composed in either octosyllabic couplets or ballad stanza, and in these, and in some of the songs, he uses anapaestic feet. His first published poem, "An Evening Walk in the Abbey Church of Holyroodhouse" (1758), is unusual for Boswell because it is reflective in nature and is written in blank verse. There are no sonnets among Boswell's poems, and he indulges hardly at all in what could be called prosodic virtuosity.

The studies of Pottle and Sharpe demonstrate that Boswell was most attentive to the publication and distribution of his poems. Probably the most curious evidence of Boswell's promotion of his own poetic reputation concerns his "Verses in the Character of a Corsican," a broadside which he planned to release in 1769 during the Shakespeare Jubilee at Stratford-upon-Avon. He intended to wear the costume of a Corsican chief and to distribute the poem at the masquerade ball which was to highlight the festivities. When the poem failed to issue from the printer's shop in time, Boswell handed it out the next day.[7] Subsequently, following his usual practice and the journalistic convention of the day, he had the poem printed in the London Chronicle, London Magazine, and Scots Magazine, all within a month of the Jubilee. Boswell followed the poem with a flattering self-portrait, "Verses on Seeing the Print of James Boswell in the Corsican Dress," which appeared in the same three periodicals. The appearance of his verses in both newspapers and magazines was the rule rather than the exception. Sharpe's study shows that one poem, the "Prologue for the Opening of the Theatre Royal" in Edinburgh (1767), was printed in eight periodicals, four in England and four in Scotland.[8] In examining the Malahide manuscripts, Pottle discovered two tables of contents for a projected volume of poems, the second of which is headed, "Plans for a Volume of Poems to be published for me by Becket and Dehondt," but the book was never printed.[9]

Included in the projected collection of his poems were, according to one list, a hundred lines of epigrams. Boswell's epigrams generally lack the sharpness and precision necessary to the form as it had been described since the seventeenth century. He is closer, perhaps, to the "loose" epigrams of Sir John Davies than to the taut, pointed, and polished Martialian masterpieces of Ben Jonson. "Brisk Nell," which is included in the Donaldson volume, exemplifies Boswell's tendency to ramble.

> Brisk Nell, t'other day, (not suspecting a crime),
> Was telling she lately had coupled a rhyme;
> A right rev'rend parson, who chanc'd to be there,
> Composing his face with a serious air,
> Declar'd it had been his opinion jampridem,
> That poetess and lighthead were unum et idem
> I agree with you, Doctor, entirely, says Nell,
> For a heavy head never can write verses well;
> Yet spare your sage maxims, for surely 'tis true,
> Cork becomes us much better than lead becomes you.

By introducing two characters into the poem, Boswell limits the extent to which he can tighten his statement. Given this qualification however the epigram is reasonably successful. The "right rev'rend parson" composes his face and rattles off some Latin phrases against the frothy poetess, but she gets the better of him. Her response is disarming, for she pretends to agree, but then turns upon him in the closing couplet to assail his dull, leaden wit, the stuffiness of which has just been witnessed. Much of the effect of this epigram lies in Boswell's manipulation of the rapidly paced anapaestic feet, for which he can easily substitute spondees to gain a sometimes scornful emphasis (Brísk Néll, ríght rév'rend, wríte vérses, ságe máxims).

Epigrams account for ten of the thirty poems Boswell contributed to the Donaldson anthology in 1762, and they remained a favourite form. Among the last of his poems to appear in print is his "Epigram on the Pusillanimous Conduct of the French at Tournay," which appeared in the Edinburgh Advertiser on 15th May 1792 and was reprinted the same month in the European Magazine and the Scots Magazine. Although Boswell's decasyllabic couplets berate the French army for its retreat from Tournai (which fell later in the year), their real mark is the new French republic. Boswell shared Johnson's respect for monarchy.

> While loyal honour warmed a Frenchman's breast,
> The Field of battle was a glorious test;
> Nobly ambitious for his King to fight,
> To die or conquer was a soldier's right.
> A strange reverse the Democrats display,
> And prove the right of man to run away.[10]

Most of the wit of this political epigram comes from the play between "soldier's right" (what is "right" for a soldier is to win or to die trying) and the "right of man" (the "right" of man is to life). The second part of Thomas Paine's The Rights of Man had been published in London in February 1792, and it had raised an immediate controversy with which Boswell would surely have been familiar, whether he knew the book or not.

Boswell's songs and odes are less effective than his epigrams, but he continued to work at them throughout his life. He was inordinately fond of singing his own creations publicly and, if newspaper accounts are to be credited, they were well received. His "Ode to Miss Wells" (1760) exemplifies Boswell's early lyrical efforts. A single stanza will suffice.

When any rival's name is heard,
My soul quick kindles at the word;
Dire envy poisons all the place;
Resentment flushes in my face,
And headstrong passion loudly tells
How much I love the charming WELLS![11]

Since Jeanie Wells was a prominent prostitute, one may surmise that Boswell's soul kindled and face flushed quite often. Each stanza states a condition, beginning with her absence, "When absent from my heart's delight," and concluding when "propitious" Venus answers his prayer. The last couplet of each stanza is a refrain which alters in the penultimate line from "pensive melancholy" to "my whole existence." But if the poem is structurally sound, it is also open to the charge of mechanical regularity of the sort that may lead more easily to monotony than music.

Although the quality of Boswell's lyric poetry did not improve greatly over the years, he did apply his efforts, occasionally, to more probable subjects. Perhaps his most noteworthy lyrical effort if "The Grocer of London" (1790), a short poem intended for the ears of the title character, William Pitt, a member of the Grocer's company and then Prime Minister. The song praises Pitt for his recent diplomatic coup over the Spanish, and Boswell sang it six times over before a gathering at Guildhall for the new Lord Mayor. Whether Pitt actually was present during the rendition is uncertain. The opening anapaests may give some sense of Boswell grandioso.

Fell Faction be silent, and clamour no more
Against Government, Laws, and the Times,
Our Glory triumphant from shore sounds to shore—
There's both reason and truth in my rhymes.
Let no dark suspicion our bosoms invade,
And make gloomy November more dull;
There's a GROCER OF LONDON who watches our trade,
And takes care of th'Estate of JOHN BULL.[12]

There is no record of the Prime Minister's response to this poem, although he had acknowledged a letter published by Boswell several years earlier.

As representative of Boswell's longer poems it is tempting to cite the "Epistle to Sterne" or the "Epistle to Temple", both of which run two hundred or more lines in length, if only because of the subjects. But in fact Boswell is least effective when he is most serious in his verse. One of the most interesting long poems is No Abolition of Slavery (1791), in which Boswell stands against

Wilberforce and other parliamentary abolitionists in defence of agrarian needs in the West Indies, private property rights, the crown, natural subordination of the human condition, and the supposed beneficence of the system. The "joys of slavery" are celebrated in the following passage:

> Ev'n at their labour hear them sing,
> While time flies quick on downy wing;
> Finish'd the bus'ness of the day
> No human beings are more gay:
> Of food, clothes, cleanly lodging sure,
> Each has his property secure;
> Their wives and children are protected,
> In sickness they are not neglected;
> And when old age brings a release,
> Their grateful days they end in peace.[13]

Clearly, Boswell was not, in his social and political views, ahead of his time, but he was always vociferous, never reluctant, even well past his youth, to assert his beliefs.

His 62-line mock heroic, "Currant-Jelly" (1762), shows Boswell in a more favourable light. The poem begins with the invocation of Minerva, from whom he requests "instruction" (the recipe) rather than assistance with "metaphor or trope," the tools of ornamental beauty." For, Boswell claims,

> ... I attempt no slight fantastic tale;
> No motley syllabub, with frothy head,
> No posset, sacred to the night we wed;
> No vain whipp'd cream, which foplings ne'er refuse,
> But currant-jelly, fav'rite of the muse.[14]

From this enunciation of his epic subject, Boswell moves directly to an apostrophe:

> O more than viand! more than angels' food!
> O solace sweet! superlatively good!
> O dear dessert of each poetic elf!
> To E[rski]n grateful to myself ,
> Oft would my eyes forsake the fairest lass,
> To view thee sparkling through the crystal glass.

Next, Boswell invokes Phoebus, "god of wit," who can tell that even in "company sedate, demure," the poet-hero is unable to resist the ambrosial confection.

The turning point occurs at line 33, about the middle of the poem, just after a brief lyrical passage celebrating the "rapture" of the poet's palate occasioned by the jelly. Having indulged his fancy for currant jelly one afternoon at the home of the "inchanting" Katherine (Kitty) Colquhoun (kuh-hoon), Boswell is confronted by Minerva (Pallas) herself, the very goddess he had invoked at the start.

> When, on a sudden, Pallas rose to view;
> I think her hat was white, her gown was blue;
> Perhaps I did mistake, or have forgot;
> be this true or false, it matters not.

The goddess warns him that to seek the secret of currant jelly is "to usurp the province of the fair":

> You think, forsooth, I should your mind inspire
> With the great science of a proper fire,
> With the best method berries how to chuse,
> How best to pick 'em, how squeeze out their juice;
> In what proportion sugar to apply,
> How keep it nor too moist nor over dry.

Then she cautions him not to pursue his quest for such concealed knowledge. In tones reminiscent of Paradise Lost (VIII,167-8) Minerva admonishes:

> Such mighty matters seek not to explore,
> Nor strive beyond your destin'd tract to soar.
> If Wisdom's deity you ought revere,
> Her wisest maxim with attention hear.
> Whate'er you can, with freedom's taste enjoy,
> Nor how 'twas made a curious search employ.
> Dunces for this oft fight a combat tough;
> If it exists, be that to you enough.

If Boswell's mock epic needs an epigraph, perhaps that, too, may be taken from Paradise Lost:

> But knowledge is as food, and needs no less
> Her Temperance over Appetite, to know
> In measure what the mind may well contain,
> Oppresses else with Surfet, and soon turns
> Wisdom to Folly, as Nourishment to Winde. (VII, 126-130)

Minerva concludes the poem with advice by way of a tightly constructed epigrammatic couplet:

Whene'er you can with currant-jelly meet,
To boil is not your business, but to eat.

This mock heroic contains some of Boswell's best lines. It is well constructed, the first half dealing with the speaker's hyperbolic adoration of currant jelly and the second half with Minerva's equally hyperbolic warning. Within the narrow confines of the poem, Boswell effectively exploits the appropriate epic conventions, and his control of the heroic couplet is generally more sure here than in other poems in which he uses that form. Like most of his poems, "Currant-Jelly" probably derives from an actual experience; in this case, from his courtship of Kitty Colquhoun, a young woman to whom he inscribed two other poems in the Donaldson collection. (She eventually married a captain of the Guards.) The poem is not mentioned by Pottle in his early survey of the literary career or in his more recent critical biography of Boswell's youth, but it exemplifies Boswell's potential for writing a certain sort of light verse, and it indicates some talent when the subject is suitable to his natural inclinations.

Besides "Currant-Jelly," Boswell's best poetry is to be found at various moments in the ten-lines-a-day verse. These poems were undertaken in 1763 as therapy to dispel his melancholy, which increased in intensity during his law studies in the dank city of Utrecht. Boswell set for himself the task of writing ten lines a day, and he adhered to his project for over two years (1763-1765) missing scarcely a day. He resumed this practice in 1774, 1778, 1779, and 1780, but only in brief spurts. These verses, all in decasyllabic couplets, were acquired with the Malahide collection in 1927. Among the noteworthy achievements in the ten-lines poems are 120 lines, composed in June of 1774 (cited earlier) on knowledge as food of the mind, and 180 lines composed soon afterwards, which appear to constitute a sort of Celtic epic. But the best among the ten-lines verses are those which concern particular experiences or characters. In these poems Boswell's natural dramatic tendences are allowed full sway.

On what one may suppose to have been a dreary, cold evening in late November 1763, Boswell "went to Lady Racket's rout" for a card party hoping, no doubt, to strike up an acquaintance with a promising woman. Instead, as the poem for that day attests, he was placed beside an "honourable hag,"

A Maiden lean, upon the town grown old,
And dead to ev'ry wish but the lust of gold.
On my affections she made no attack,
But 'gainst my guineas she the cards could pack.

Here, Boswell demonstrates a more alert ear than is evident elsewhere in his verse. Note, for example, the interior vowel sounds in such combinations as "Maiden lean" and "town grown," which produce slant and eye rhymes, and the alliteration of "'gainst my guineas."

In his entry for 30 September 1763 Boswell assumes the character of a huntsman impatient to be afield. The lines are made choppy with occasional caesura and firm end-stoppage, and he shifts his subject in each couplet, from boots, to horse, to dog, to stable, to gun, thus adding to the portrait of haste and frustration.

> That Dog is good for nothing; he's so rash,
> I think my whip will never have a lash.
> The Stable allways is a perfect Stye;
> You Blockhead, would you hay at tenpence buy?
> Now John, take care and rinse my Spanish gun,
> And tell my wife I shall be home at one.

The reader may wonder whether Boswell, who writes of rinsing a gun, was ever a hunter, but the speaker's care to have his servant make his excuses to his wife is certainly familiar enough.

Another effective character, also belonging to the gallery of the impatient, is that of the distraught merchant, á la Shylock, perhaps, in the lines for 13 January 1764. He begins with two couplets in which the merchant is discovered fretting over his endangered cargo.

> See how pale anguish quivers on his lip,
> Who from the shore beholds his sinking ship.
> See how he frantic stands upon the key,
> His redd'ning eyes fast fix'd upon the sea.

Much of the effectiveness of these lines derives from the keen sense of sound, both the obvious alliteration ("sinking ship," "fast fix'd") and the more subtle assonantal pairs ("anguish quivers," "frantic stands"). The next couplet is the pivot:

> He feels no pity for the hapless crew:
> To save his cargo is his only view.

Then the two concluding couplets return to the merchant who, in the last line, actually speaks his mind.

> And while he hears their melancholy guns,
> A ruefull sweat a-down his visage runs.
> Of his lean Clerk he grasps the aukward hand:
> "Were my tobacco, John, but safe on land."

When, as in this poem, Boswell employs his dramatic skills, his poetry is successful in several ways. The structure of the poem, its individual pace or tempo, is natural and coherent. The reality of the dramatic moment frees Boswell from a tendency to fall into conventional poetic diction at the same time that it provides content of interest, or at least curiosity, in its own right. The rhythms of the dramatic event cause him to be more flexible within the couplet form than he generally is, and somehow his sense of sound is also awakened in these poems.

Conversely, many of Boswell's worst poems are of a reflective nature. The verse epistles and dramatic prologues, for example, fairly lumber along. Nor does he have a lyric gift. Much of his doggerel occurs when he attempts song. But Boswell's obvious shortcomings as a poet or versifier have already been celebrated, and very likely the egregiously self-conscious Scot knew his own weaknesses, whether he knew his strengths or not. Boswell's "poetic" may be derived from the ten-lines poems. He found, in preparing the diary of verse, that there was ample time to consider what poetry was all about, and within a month he seems to have realised, if he had not known before, that he was not a born poet with a natural gift or genius for verse: "For I to rhime mechanic labour use,/ And make my lines [as] Rhymer makes his Shoes" (24 October 1763). Boswell was a determined poet and he was inordinately proud of his efforts, but in a rare moment of humility (3 January 1780) he confesses his limitations.

> In real poetry there still should be
> Exalted sparks or glowing energy,
> Whilst to mere verse each living man may mount
> Who like myself ten syllables can count.

In sum, Boswell is a type of the versifier whose aspiration falls always short of his talent.

Documentation

1. Chauncey Brewster Tinker, Young Boswell (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1922), p.1. See also: Percy Fitzgerald, Life of James Boswell II (London: Chatto and Windus 1891), p.74; C.E. Vulliamy, James Boswell (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1932), p.8
2. Frederick Pottle, James Boswell: The Earlier Years, 1740-1769 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p.59
3. "The Yale Editions of the Private Papers of James Boswell," (New Haven: Yale University Library, 1975), p.7
4. Russell T. Sharpe, "An Infant Son of Apollo: A Study of the Verses of James Boswell," Unpublished Thesis (Yale University, 1933), p.126.

5. References to the ten-lines poems and to other poems from manuscript will not be noted hereafter except in the text. These were provided to me by Russell T. Sharpe and are available at the Yale Library or at the Bodleian Library, Douce MS 193.
6. Thomas Blacklock, ed., A Collection of Original Poems by Scotch Gentlemen, II (Edinburgh: A.J. Donaldson, 1762), p.91. Blacklock, a contributor to the volume, was blind, and most of the actual editing appears to have been done by Donaldson, the printer; therefore, references in the text and further citations will be to Donaldson.
7. The story is recounted by Sharpe and by Pottle, The Literary Career of James Boswell (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1929; rpr. 1965),p.85.
8. Reprinted in Pottle Literary Career pp. xxxvi-xxxvii.
9. Included in Sharpe's materials. The lists are in the Douce MS, Bodleian Library. There would have been over 2000 lines of verse and from 110 to 150 pages, by Boswell's calculations.
10. Reprinted in Fitzgerald, Life, II, p.78
11. Reprinted in Pottle, JB: Earlier Years, p.62
12. Edinburgh Advertiser, 16 November 1790, p.317
13. James Boswell, No Abolition of Slavery; or the Universal Empire of Love (London: R. Faulder, 1791), p.21. This is a 24-page pamphlet, 298 lines of verse inscribed to "the Respectable Body of West-India Planters and Merchants." See my article,"'No abolition of Slavery': Boswell and the Slave Trade," New Rambler (Spring 1972), 55-64.
14. Donaldson, ed., p.88.

Revd Leslie Whiteside

The 1982/83 Session of the Johnson Society of London opened on a sad note when the Chairman announced with regret the death in August of Mr Whiteside, the former Rector of St. Edmund the King.

Since our move to Lombard Street in 1976, the Society has enjoyed the support, friendship and hospitality of the Rector at the Vestry Hall in which we have been privileged to hold our Meetings. At the Memorial Service to Mr. Whiteside, held at St. Edmund's, the Society was represented by our Chairman, Mr J R G Comyn, and a number of members.