

READING DR. JOHNSON: RECEPTION AND
REPRESENTATION (1750–1960)

By

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ABSTRACT

The thesis examines the response of imaginative writers to Samuel Johnson; arguing that these authors' refashioning of Johnson involved a profoundly creative process. Chapter 1 examines Johnson's own self-accounting, revealing an instability of self-imaging, linked to the different textual forms employed by Johnson. Chapter 2 argues that James Boswell's biography theatricalised the representation of Johnson, introducing Boswell into the drama of Johnson's self-reflexivity. Chapter 3 focuses on the Romantics, arguing that William Hazlitt misread Johnson's criticism as mechanical, while Lord Byron drew upon Johnson's authority to challenge Romantic orthodoxies. Chapter 4 focuses on the Victorians, arguing that Thomas Carlyle focused on Johnson's powers of self-creation, epitomised in action; while Matthew Arnold's abridged version of *The Lives of the English Poets*, helped tutor a new reading public. George Birkbeck Hill's edition of Boswell's biography represented a turn to the encyclopaedic. Chapter 5 explores the Modern response to Johnson. T. S. Eliot's critical revolution enlisted Johnson to support Eliot's anti-Romantic animus. Beckett was interested in Johnson's obsession with madness, death and numbers; themes which dominated his own writing. Jorge Luis Borges admired *Rasselas*, and was fascinated by Johnson's friendship with Boswell, which mirrored his own relationship with the writer Adolfo Bioy Casares.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

All images comprise photographs taken by the author of this thesis. Figure 1 is reproduced by permission of The Bodleian Library, The University of Oxford. Figures 2–4 are reproductions of Birkbeck Hill’s 1887 edition of Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, in the author’s possession.

Figure 1. Extract from Johnson’s Memorandum Book: 30 September–6 October 1782, Bodleian Library

Figure 2. Side-panel scenes beneath statue of Johnson by Richard Cockle Lucas

Figure 3. Pages 190–91 of Volume I of the Birkbeck Hill edition of Boswell’s *Life*

Figure 4. A Chart of Johnson’s Contemporaries from Volume VI of the Birkbeck Hill edition

NOTE ON CITATIONS

References to printed sources give the name(s) of the publisher or publishers, except where the original imprint explicitly names the printer(s) only, in which cases the reference states 'printed by' along with the name(s) and other publication details in parentheses.

The bibliography lists primary and secondary sources together.

Unless otherwise stated, all references to Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791) refer to *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. by George Birkbeck Hill, revised by L. F. Powell, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934). In Chapter 4, alone, all references to Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791), refer to *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. by George Birkbeck Hill, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1887).

INTRODUCTION

READING DR. JOHNSON: RECEPTION AND REPRESENTATION (1750–1960)

John Ruskin recounts in *Praeterita* (1885) that he read Johnson's essays when travelling abroad as a young man. He recalls that 'the turns and returns of reiterated *Rambler* and iterated *Idler* fastened themselves in my ears and mind; nor was it possible for me, till long afterwards, to quit myself of Johnsonian symmetry and balance in sentences'.¹ Johnson, according to Ruskin, 'was the one author accessible to me [...] He taught me carefully to measure life'.² Ruskin was not alone in noting how Johnson delighted in taking the measure of things, often quite literally. A number of writers explored in this thesis were also fascinated by Johnson's obsession with counting and computing the world. Although Ruskin admired Johnson, his response betrayed an anxiety of influence. Other authors discussed here reacted to Johnson wholly differently. I argue, nonetheless, that reading Johnson preoccupied a range of imaginative writers in successive generations. While Johnson's stock changed over time, he continued to attract attention from a remarkably diverse group of authors from James Boswell to Jorge Luis Borges. Sometimes seen as a conventional and limited writer, Johnson nonetheless commanded the attention of iconoclastic Modernists, such as Samuel Beckett and T. S. Eliot. Not all of the writers considered here were admirers, notably William Hazlitt, but each took from Johnson what best met their own purposes; each conceiving a Johnson, to a degree, if not in their own likeness, at least in accordance with their own predilections. Their refashioning of Johnson became a profoundly creative process.

¹ John Ruskin, *Praeterita and Dilecta* (New York, London, and Toronto: Everyman's Library, 2005), p. 198.

² Ruskin, *Praeterita and Dilecta*, p. 199.

Johnson was, furthermore, a self-reader and this thesis will also explore his own self-imaging and examine how later writers responded not only to Johnson, man and writer, but also how they over-wrote, ignored or took on board ideas developed through Johnson's own self-reflection.

What drew these writers to Johnson? Something about Johnson's striking literary character continued, over time, to attract a notably heterogeneous cast of literary readers, who might otherwise be considered to have little in common with Johnson or, indeed, each other. This may be because Johnson was a liminal figure, looking backwards to Milton, Shakespeare and the classics, but whose literary career also reached its apogee as the Romantic era and, later, the Modern age were set to subsume his world and its values. There was an obdurate solidity about Johnson's presence as the world became more complicated and less easy to digest.

Arguably, the first imaginative writer to define authoritatively his own version of the literary canon, Johnson was a figure who was hard to evade. A man who worked by instinct, rather than theory, he impressed his own age by the power of his rhetorical and verbal performance, as Boswell attested. Although Romanticism, later, constituted a break in literary history, presaging the Modern age, it was also the era most critical of Johnson.³ After the Romantics, however, the Victorians found Johnson heroic and the Modern age regarded him as strangely modern. Both the late Victorians and Modernist writers, including both Matthew Arnold and Eliot, saw him as upholder of classical values and an ally in their battle against Romantic excess. They believed that Johnson demonstrated a stubborn authenticity which went beyond the Romantic deification of the self. Unremittingly and self-critically committed to truthfulness, as his diaries showed, Johnson was a writer with uniquely hard edges. His odd

³ The Modern age is intended to denote the literary era which ran from roughly 1900 to 1950. Leading modernist writers included T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Ezra Pound.

combination of common sense, acute judgement and despairing self-doubt was the antithesis of nineteenth-century vapidty. While the Romantics and the Moderns lauded originality, Johnson considered that literature was always inhabited by the already-written, a standpoint that both Byron and Borges recognised and approved, from their respective classicist and post-modernist perspectives.⁴ Johnson was, therefore, applauded by both Boswell in his own age, but also by later writers who wished to disavow their late Victorian and Modernist roots in Romanticism, and for whom he appeared to have provided, *avant la lettre*, most of the conclusive proofs for their literary positioning.

In terms of method, the thesis adopts a different approach from that taken by other scholars who have engaged with the reception of Johnson. John Wiltshire's *The Making of Dr Johnson* (2009) explores Johnson's reputation and iconography, making use of pictorial, biographical and other sources.⁵ It is, however, a broad historical survey and is not as strongly focused on the specific response of imaginative writers to Johnson's life and work as this study. It also largely glosses over the contribution of twentieth-century authors. Kevin Hart's *Samuel Johnson and the Culture of Property* (1999) and Helen Deutsch's *Loving Dr. Johnson* (2005) take a thematic approach, rather than attempting to describe the historic reception of Johnson.⁶ Deutsch anatomises the phenomenon of author-love, depicting it as a largely male phenomenon. She is especially interested in how Johnson's 'grotesque body'

⁴ Johnson also argued in *Rasselas* (1759) that 'no man was ever great by imitation': *Rasselas and Other Tales*, ed. by Gwin J. Kolb, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), XVI (1990), p. 41. Johnson believed that the majority of writers draw upon a general stock of literary lore and knowledge; true originality was mostly confined to great writers such as Milton or Shakespeare.

⁵ John Wiltshire, *The Making of Dr. Johnson: Icon of Modern Culture* (Indiana University: Helm Information, 2009).

⁶ See, Kevin Hart, *Samuel Johnson and the Culture of Property* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Helen Deutsch, *Loving Dr. Johnson* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

has been received and imaged, and in the practices and rituals of Johnson societies across the world. Hart's study is anchored principally in the eighteenth century and explores the way in which Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson LL.D* (1791) transformed Johnson into public property. By contrast, my thesis takes a trans-historical approach, commencing with the eighteenth century, moving on to the Romantics and the Victorians, and culminating in the twentieth century.

This is the first study to examine in detail both Johnson's self-accounting and the historic development of imaginative writers' responses to Johnson and his self-imagining. George Birkbeck Hill is the only author explored here who is not generally considered to be an imaginative writer. However, his engagement with Boswell's biography and Johnson's writings, exemplified an editorial practice at its most creative and encyclopaedic, which was to have lasting influence. Any study necessarily involves a process of selection, and this thesis, accordingly, has not considered all of the writers who have written about or been influenced by Johnson. It focuses on those writers who were most strongly impacted by Johnson, who wrote about him most extensively, and who best illustrated the range of responses to Johnson from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century. The most significant omission, in this regard, is Jane Austen. While her work clearly bore the traces of Johnson's influence, the chosen focus of this thesis, in relation to the period in which Austen lived and wrote, is on the specifically Romantic response to Johnson. In that respect, Hazlitt and Byron exemplified, in their different ways, the Romantic perspective more clearly than Austen who was, perhaps, a more transitional figure.⁷

⁷ There are different views on whether Austen was a Romantic writer or not. Jocelyn Harris in *A Revolution Almost beyond Expression* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007) argues that *Persuasion* (1817), for instance, exhibits elements of Romantic ideals. Marilyn Butler, by contrast, in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) takes the more traditional view that her novels reflect Augustan values.

In relation to material, the study has made use of a range of primary, secondary and manuscript sources. In Chapter 1, my consideration of Johnson's diaries was informed by an examination of original Johnson manuscripts held by Pembroke College, Oxford and the Bodleian Library. Similarly, Chapter 4's analysis of Birkbeck Hill's Johnsonian editions was aided by inspecting the former's personal library held by Pembroke College. Chapter 5's account of Beckett's Johnsonian researches was informed by an inspection of Beckett's original notebooks held by Reading University's Special Collections Service. Before setting out the principal arguments of the thesis, it is useful to explain how the terms 'reading', 'representation' and 'reception' are used within this study. 'Reading' is employed in a number of distinct ways. Relatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to the way that imaginative writers read other writers. Harold Bloom is a notable exception, famously contending that strong poets misread each other, 'so as to clear imaginative space for themselves'.⁸ This argument has not been accepted by all scholars. Gillian Beer, for instance, objected to Bloom's representation of 'writing and reading, as embattled contraries, and survival as being possible only by the evasion or stupefying of what precedes'.⁹ Christopher Ricks also argued that writerly influence may, in fact, be benign, dismissing Bloom's 'melodramatic sub-Freudian parricidal scenario'.¹⁰ Advocates of 'intertextuality', by contrast, accuse Bloom and others of 'psychologizing lineage'; they focus instead on the relationship between texts and discourses while de-emphasising the role of the author.¹¹ I argue, however, that reading involves more than a subject-less intertextual interaction. While

⁸ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence, A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edn (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 5.

⁹ Gillian Beer, *Arguing with the Past: Essays in Narrative from Woolf to Sidney* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 5.

¹⁰ Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 6.

¹¹ See, for instance, Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, 'Figures in the Corpus: Theories of Influence and Intertextuality', in *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, ed. by Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 3–36 (p. 7).

not subscribing to Bloom's detailed theories of misprision, I contend that writers' reading of precursors possesses a heightened character and tension, compared to that of the ordinary reader or scholar, involving as it does a relationship between practitioners. Georges Poulet suggested that reading involves the displacement of the self by the 'I' who writes the book, but imaginative writers, in particular, also bring their own unique creative energies, preoccupations and cultural affiliations to the reading experience.¹² Reciprocally, the text subtly impacts the writer. Writers, accordingly, find their own space, in part, through their responses to other writers, which puts their creative identity in play.

Johnson's own 'strong' reading of other writers in the *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1779–81) demonstrated the contested nature of the act of reading in the hands of an imaginative writer. The writer's response manifests itself in different ways. Of the writers considered here, only Hazlitt betrayed any anxiety of influence in relation to Johnson. The others responded quite differently, both from each other and from Johnson. Their readings of Johnson, however, shared a common characteristic: that they involved a distinctly literary response. The form of the response varied as much as its content, including notetaking (Beckett), literary critical essays (Hazlitt, Arnold, Eliot and Borges), letters (Byron, Eliot, and Beckett) and biographical material and vignettes (Boswell, Carlyle and Borges). Additionally, I argue, Johnson influenced, in varying degrees, the creative work of Byron, Beckett and Eliot. Finally, the term 'reading' is also used to describe the way in which Johnson held himself to account through a process of self-reading, particularly in the diaries and essays.

¹² Georges Poulet, 'Phenomenology of Reading', *New Literary History*, 1 (Autumn 1969), 53–68 (p. 54).

Reading in this sense implies an active engagement, prompting the further repetition of writing. With the exception of Byron, Beckett and Eliot, Johnson did not influence the creative writing of the other authors considered here to any degree. This thesis, therefore, focuses principally on how these writers wrote about and represented Johnson. Hazlitt, for instance, defined himself, in part, by not being Johnson, in the same way that Wordsworth identified himself, according to Robert Griffin, as ‘*not Pope*’, the negation being a form of relationship.¹³ W. J. Bate famously argued that the past has become a burden for writers since the eighteenth century; accordingly, the best way to evade it, he believed, was by looking beyond one’s immediate predecessors to an earlier period as a source of authority.¹⁴ Whether such a break commenced in the eighteenth century, is debateable, but it is certainly true that Johnson was troubling to Hazlitt, as an immediate predecessor, in a way that he was not to the majority of the writers considered here. For most, Johnson was a sufficiently remote presence to be drawn upon to help challenge contemporary literary mores. Moreover, merely by dint of not being a Milton or Wordsworth, most writers did not consider that Johnson’s influence needed to be resisted.

There is an inevitable overlap between the terms ‘reading’ and ‘representation’, given that any active reading of Johnson seeks to represent the meaning of his texts or life narrative. However, in this study, representation indicates a more creative engagement than, for example, literary criticism, in that the writer seeks to depict ‘Johnson the Man’ through acts of imaginative recreation. The clearest example of such a representation is Boswell’s biography, but in their notes, essays and letters, Thomas Carlyle, Beckett and Borges, each produced vignettes of Johnson through acts of creative imagining. At the heart of these

¹³ Robert J. Griffin, *Wordsworth’s Pope* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 5.

¹⁴ W. Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the English Past and the English Poet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

representations are the notions of the self and the fashioning of identity; the competing poles of speech and writing, and of style and judgement. Reading and representation intertwine at various points. Borges was not alone, for instance, in both reading Johnson's works in the literary critical sense, as well as developing a distinct representation of Johnson the Man. Both proved to be highly loaded endeavours. There may, indeed, be some truth in the words of the fictional Johnson in Beryl Bainbridge's novel *According to Queeney* (2001). Asked by one of the characters if he is offended by Boswell's maintaining a journal of their conversations, Johnson replies: 'Why should I? It will not be accurate, for man's compulsion is to replicate himself.'¹⁵

The thesis takes the 'reception' of Johnson to involve the ways in which he was read and represented by these writers in their historical context. In this regard, writers reflect their own inclinations and the cultural climate of their age. The term 'reception' is used here to indicate the ways in which observers, readers and participants make sense of texts or events. The thesis, however, does not engage with 'reception theory' in the manner of Hans Gadamer or Wolfgang Iser, or reader response theory in the mode of Stanley Fish.¹⁶

'Reception theory' broadly argues that the text forces the reader into a new comprehension of their cultural codes and framework of understanding. I argue, rather, that 'reception' involves situating the writer's response within the contemporary literary context, while also recognising the mediated nature of the act of reading, which inevitably takes place in the shadow of previous readings and interpretations. As Andrew Elfenbein argues in *Byron and the Victorians* (1995), the legacy of precursors depends not only on the texts that they have

¹⁵ Beryl Bainbridge, *According to Queeney* (London: Little, Brown & Company, 2001), p. 119.

¹⁶ See, in particular, Hans Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, [1960] reprinted 2004); Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); and Stanley Fish, 'Is Literature Language? — The Claims of Stylistics', in *Issues in Contemporary Critical Theory*, ed. by Peter Barry (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 64–70.

written, but also on ‘the apparatus whereby the work is produced, disseminated, reviewed, consecrated or forgotten’ and ‘the range of discourses through which earlier writers become accessible to later ones.’¹⁷ Carlyle for instance read Johnson, in part, *contra* Macaulay.

Johnson became the subject of others’ readings, but this thesis begins by examining how Johnson read and accounted for himself. Johnson was a self-reader, whose exploration of identity involved experimenting with a wide range of literary styles and personae. Johnson’s spiritual self-examination in the diaries, I argue, owed something to the Puritan life-writing tradition. The *Rambler* essays, by contrast, were cast in Johnson’s mature baroque style, which played more freely with the possibilities of self and authorship. In the diaries, Johnson calculates the day’s profit and loss using numbers, payments and lists to impose order on a life and make time count. The modern concept of arithmomania, a compulsive desire to count objects, may lie behind Johnson’s computational obsessions. Accounts and lists are accordingly deployed as sense-making systems, designed to subdue an ever-present disquiet. The assemblage of lists and resolutions functions as a performative act, which serves as the inscription of a divided mind, striving to construct a semblance of stability. *The Rambler* translates the diaries’ concerns into a different rhetorical register, re-framing the notion of self-accounting in the discourse of commerce. The new mercantile world of floating debt and paper credit provided a tangible parallel to the amorphous fears which beset the diaries. Johnson directly compares fraudulent trading to social dissimulation as both involve a bankruptcy of the self. Accounting for oneself, by contrast, involved establishing a ledger of recorded moments. Johnson, however, implies that the self is never fully self-present (to

¹⁷ Andrew Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 7–8.

itself), as the moment of consciousness introduces a split between both observer and the observed, and between the instant of time and the anterior and future traces which shadow it.

Chapter 2 focuses principally on Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*, specifically the way in which the text theatricalises the representation of Johnson but also stages his conversation and voice as signifiers of his wisdom, presence and authority. This biography introduced another player into the drama of Johnson's self-reflexivity, namely James Boswell. The notion of widespread theatricality disturbed Johnson. The transformation of life into theatre turned people into stage characters without agency. Boswell, I argue, consciously staged Johnson as the lead character in his biography, while portraying himself as a sort of actor-manager, reversing their normal roles in real life. The biography consists principally of dialogue which lends it a theatrical flavour. Boswell also presents Johnson's manly and combative talk as a sign of cultural mastery. In privileging Johnson's speech over his writing, Boswell was reinforcing what Jacques Derrida would refer to as the 'myth of presence'.¹⁸ The primacy of his speech reinforced Boswell's sense of Johnson as a point of origin. It also enabled Boswell to subordinate Johnson's writing by re-appropriating his wisdom through representing it in talk. Boswell's approach reflected an emerging ideology of voice, represented by writers such as Blair and Sheridan. But Boswell also describes Johnson's self-talking which staged a self-splitting beyond Johnson's control. He also explains how Johnson's voice inspired a host of imitators and parodists who served to undermine Johnson's uniqueness. However, Johnson's greatest imitator, Boswell himself, argued in the biography that he was impregnated with his hero's aether, enabling him to

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 141–57.

internalise Johnson. Boswell, thereby, assumed proprietorial rights over Johnson, and, through the writing of his biography, he mastered English and became the author of himself.

Chapter 3 briefly explores the response of some leading Romantic writers to Johnson, but principally focuses on Hazlitt and Byron's engagement with him. Many Romantic writers considered Johnson to be a writer who epitomised the rules and inflexible certainties of the eighteenth century. Whilst the diaries revealed a writer riven by self-doubt, this was not a Johnson who served well to counterpoint Romanticism's own distinct agenda. Johnson was a writer, I argue, that Hazlitt did not admire, but could not avoid. Hazlitt's criticisms of Johnson, however, illuminated his writing by reframing it. Hazlitt's ideology of style, based on the naturalness of speech, a potent Romantic conceptualisation, could not accommodate Johnson's highly rhetorical discourse. Hazlitt believed that Johnson's style entrapped him, limiting his capacity for original thought. Hazlitt also argued that Johnson's critical faculties, governed by rule and system, hampered his understanding of Shakespeare's genius. His objections to Johnson were similar to his misgivings about utilitarian thought derived from Bentham and Malthus. Hazlitt misreads Johnson, I argue, by assimilating him to the philosophers of the industrial age. Byron, by contrast, used Johnson's authority to challenge Romantic orthodoxy, seeing Romanticism's focus on 'sincerity' and the 'spontaneous' as being as equally constraining as Johnson's perceived rigidity. Byron's more rhetorically driven verse and satirical stance were influenced by Pope, Johnson and the Augustans. Opposing the Romantic emphasis on 'originality', Byron shared Johnson's sense that there was nothing was new under the sun, exemplified in 'The Vanity of Human Wishes' (1749). Johnson's poem, I argue, directly influenced Byron's poem 'Mazeppo' (1819). Johnson was a figure Byron summoned repeatedly to buttress his sense of poetic worth against rivals whom he saw as seeking to exclude his claim to literary pre-eminence.

Chapter 4 considers how three Victorian writers engaged with Johnson: Carlyle, Arnold and Birkbeck Hill. Carlyle, I argue, refashioned Johnson as a heroic figure, being less concerned with Johnson's talk or his writing, instead, framing the author through a semiotics of action. Carlyle attends to Johnson's radical powers of self-creation, epitomised in action, which Carlyle sees as the space where history attains its solidity. Carlyle saw Johnson as an individual whose 'unspeakable chaos' of thoughts challenged the status quo.¹⁹ Carlyle focuses on emblematic moments in his Hero's life where an authentic self is created through exemplary performative gestures. Arnold, by contrast, saw Johnson as a writer who, like himself, had turned from poetry to criticism and who helped to valorise and underwrite that choice. Arnold produced an abridged version of Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets*. Repackaging Johnson for the new Victorian reading public, Arnold's selection of six notable 'Lives' echoed Carlyle's distillation of Johnson's life to exemplary episodes. Repositioning the reading public was important as part of Arnold's mission to substitute literature for religion. Arnold also praised Johnson's style. In stressing the centrality of lucid English prose and its continuity with the Enlightenment, Arnold diverged from Carlyle, who believed that language needed to be broken up from its foundations. Birkbeck Hill's edition of Boswell's biography, I argue, represented the beginning of modern Johnsonian scholarship and a turn to the encyclopaedic. Birkbeck Hill, in the turbulent 1880s, sought to resurrect a more ordered civilisation and to restore the intelligibility of Boswell's text for a contemporary Victorian readership. The level of editorial care applied signalled the growing status of English Literature. Birkbeck Hill's edition was swollen with supporting material,

¹⁹ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1872), p. 165.

appearing a rival act of creation. It exposed the paradox of the encyclopaedic project, that the task of documenting a world is fated to be perpetually incomplete.

Chapter 5 explores how Eliot, Beckett and Borges were drawn to an author who was in many respects their polar opposite. I argue that they re-imagined Johnson as a radically strange and oddly modern figure. Eliot conscripted Johnson to his critical revolution, supporting his anti-Romantic animus and underpinning his attack on Milton's poetry as being remote from speech. Like Johnson, Eliot linked Milton to the Civil War, which Eliot later argued, caused the 'dissociation of sensibility' identified in an earlier essay.²⁰ Eliot and Johnson shared a similar religious temperament, both having an intense fear of damnation and a sense of the inadequacy of experience, which underlay Eliot's admiration for the elegiac tone of Johnson's poetry and which may have seeped into his own verse.²¹ Beckett looked to a darker, stranger Johnson. In the 1930s, Beckett filled notebooks with information about Johnson as a way of re-inscribing Johnson. The physical act of transcription involved a mediation between world, notebook and fictive artefact; a process which his *Molloy* (1955) re-enacted at book length, conflating existence and writing. Beckett produced an aborted play about Johnson, but the notebook's more enduring legacy lay in the numerous examples of Johnson's aberrant psychology and idiosyncrasies, recorded by Beckett, themes which surfaced, I argue, in Beckett's later fiction and drama. The notebooks also logged Johnson's interest in maths and accounting. The accounting entries in *Watt* (1953) and Krapp's ledger of past moments and failed promises may have owed something to Johnson's diaries. Later, Johnson lived on in Beckett's fiction through vestigial references. First seen in close-up,

²⁰ T. S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921), in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), pp. 59–67.

²¹ Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, for instance, detect several echoes of 'The Vanity of Human Wishes' in 'Little Gidding' (1942), in *The Annotated Text: The Poems of T. S. Eliot, Volume 1, Collected and Uncollected Poems*, ed. by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), p. 1026.

Johnson's subsequent presence survives in textual traces. In a lecture series, *A Course on English Literature* (1966), Borges devoted more space to Johnson than any other English writer. Borges found in Johnson a precursor who, in *Rasselas* (1759), had produced a meditative, weightless fiction which, like Borges' own postmodernist own stories, eschewed realist detail. Borges, I argue, shared Johnson's classical temper and saw his anti-Ossianic pronouncements as pre-emptive strikes on Romanticism *avant la lettre*. Borges' fascination with the double enabled him to re-frame the relationship of Boswell and Johnson, a relationship recapitulated in Borges' friendship with the younger writer, Adolfo Bioy Casares. Casares maintained a secret journal of Borges's conversation based upon Boswell's approach. The presence of an alter ego or rival may have troubled Borges as it may have done Johnson. Covertly articulating the repetition of the doubled relationship enabled Borges to transcend the affiliation through the further repetition of language.

Imaginative writers have, therefore, played a key role in the re-interpretation and re-assimilation of Johnson. Beckett's interpretation of the writer was among the first of the Freudian readings of Johnson. Beckett was also one of the earliest writers to take Johnson's 'madness' seriously. While this thesis adopts a historical approach, there are some significant thematic continuities across the chapters. Imaginative writers have been closely attuned to the ideas which permeate Johnson's writing and self-reading. For instance, Johnson's obsession with numbers, explored in Chapter 1, resurfaces in Hazlitt's criticism of Johnson's mental rigidity which he associated with the literalness of mathematics. Beckett, by contrast, considered Johnson's counting obsession to be a psychic defence mechanism. Johnson's voice was also a point of focus for a number of these writers, provoking them to re-voice Johnson through writing. Steven Connor has described the peculiar intimacy of the

human voice which connects people physically to others but emanates from within.²²

Reproducing Johnson's voice, as, for instance, Boswell and Carlyle sought to do, merely attested to the split condition of the voice: unique in its origin but iterable. Boswell, Carlyle and Birkbeck Hill were also fascinated by Johnson's relationship to notions of Englishness, which they associated with self-sufficiency and originality. Borges and Boswell explored the function of doubling in human relationships, in relation to Johnson, and ideas concerning authentic and performing selves. Byron, Eliot and Borges, sympathetic to Johnson's classicism, took Johnson's side in literary critical debates concerning the role of the general and the particular, originality versus tradition, as a means to attack Romantic ideology. Each writer re-inscribed these themes differently. Boswell, for instance, represented Johnson as exercising a confident cultural and social mastery whilst Carlyle detected a more divided consciousness. Beckett, however, sensed an underlying emotional and intellectual timidity. Boswell and Birkbeck Hill, adopted a proprietorial attitude to Johnson. By contrast, Hazlitt did not wish to own Johnson, rather to exorcise him. For Eliot, Beckett and Borges, translating Johnson into a modern was, in part, a way of confounding expectations.

Finally, I ask across this thesis, is there any difference between the way that imaginative writers and scholars or ordinary readers respond to that voice? It is perhaps a matter of degree. Imaginative writers, however, have certainly deployed distinctly literary means to engage with Johnson. Boswell staged Johnson's theatre of the self, borrowing from the techniques of contemporary drama as well as biography, while Carlyle's and Borges' vignettes of Johnson employ the techniques of imaginative writing. But just as fundamentally, imaginative writers took from Johnson what was important to their own

²² Steven Connor, *A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 3–5.

creative preoccupations. Beckett's interest in madness, self-talking and mathematics connected with themes that he found dormant in Johnson's life and writing; while Johnson's acts of self-articulation drew Carlyle's attention because they intersected with his own heroic travails as an author. The difference may also be one fundamentally of style. For instance, W. K. Wimsatt's scholarly examination of Johnson's prose is methodical and analytic; by contrast, Hazlitt's writerly anatomisation of Johnson's *Rambler* essays is characterised by a passionate and partisan rhetoric.²³ Hazlitt's hyperbolic tone was integral to a literary performance which sought to make its point through the exorbitance of style. Responding to Johnson's overpowering voice, involved for these writers a swerve into creative utterance, which liberated Johnson's difference and resistance to categorisation, originating in the very activity which dominated his own life and work: the act of reading.

²³ W. K. Wimsatt, *The Prose and Style of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963).

CHAPTER ONE

JOHNSON: ACCOUNTING FOR THE SELF

Introduction

This thesis focuses primarily on how other writers read and represented Johnson. Johnson, however, was also a self-reader, and this chapter will explore his own self-imaging. Johnson, as a self-reader, assumed a range of often contradictory personae. This instability of self-imaging was linked both to the emergence of a more fractured sense of subjectivity in the eighteenth century and to the diverse forms of textuality within which Johnson inscribed himself. The quest for self-knowledge is at the heart of Johnson's writing, and Boswell recorded that Johnson encouraged others to record their own lives. In *Rambler 24* (1750), Johnson lamented that men of learning 'appear willing to study anything rather than themselves'.¹ This chapter focuses primarily on Johnson's life-writing in the *Diaries*, *Prayers and Annals* (1785) and the understanding of self which is set out in *The Rambler* (1750–52).² It also draws upon other Johnsonian texts including the *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1779–81). I argue that Johnson's view of self was informed by the particular writing strategy that he adopted. In the *Diaries*, *Prayers and Annals*, Johnson's self-examination owed something to the Puritan life-writing tradition, with its origin in accounts and almanacs, and commitment to plain English. *The Rambler*, by contrast, was

¹ Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, ed. by W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), III (1969), p. 132.

² The *Prayers and Meditations* by Samuel Johnson was first published in 1785, in a collection put together by George Strahan (printed for T. Cadell). Later editions included additional material, but the definitive Yale edition, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, edited by E. L. McAdam Jnr with Donald and Mary Hyde, was not published until 1958.

cast in Johnson's mature baroque style, which played more freely with the possibilities of self and authorship, drawing upon moral philosophy and classical scepticism.

It is salutary to note the expansive textual arena in which Johnson deployed his skills.

Johnson, across his career, explored prefaces, plays, poetry, essays, translation, sermons, parliamentary reporting and travel writing. As Paul Fussell notes, Johnson 'inhabit[ed] a literary environment whose recognised formal species seemed more numerous'.³ He argues that Johnson's sense of literature derived from a contradiction:

One between the social sense that literature is a mere rhetorical artifice akin to legal advocacy, and the religious sense that for the literarily gifted the production of literature and the living of the life of writing are very like a Christian sacrament.⁴

Contradiction is at the heart of Johnson's literary practice. The delight in role play, which Fussell detected as key to Johnson's writing psyche, points to a sense of self that is multiple and contradictory which is, in turn, informed by a powerful rhetorical drive that constantly breaches any pre- or self-conceived notions of unitary or generic identity. Some scholars have argued that Johnson's rhetorical ploys are designed to exclude certain voices and perspectives.⁵ I argue, instead, that Johnson's writing strategies challenge simplistic orthodoxies, particularly ideas relating to the coherence of the self. Greg Clingham argues 'for the notion of a rhetorically sophisticated Johnson who sees textuality as part of (rather than opposed to) historical truth'.⁶ Steven Lynn also considers that Johnson's tendency 'to

³ Paul Fussell, *Samuel Johnson & the Life of Writing* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1972), p. 63.

⁴ Fussell, *Samuel Johnson*, p. 43.

⁵ See, in particular, Frederic V. Bogel, *The Dream of My Brother: An Essay on Johnson's Authority* (Victoria: University of Victoria, Dept. of English, 1990); Martin Wechselblatt, *Bad Behaviour: Samuel Johnson and Modern Cultural Authority* (Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 1998) and Tim Fulford, *Landscape, Liberty and Authority: Poetry, Criticism and Politics from Thomson to Wordsworth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). These writers variously argue that Johnson wields language as a rhetorical weapon to assert mastery over 'otherness', including marginal groups such as women.

⁶ Greg Clingham, *Johnson, Writing, and Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 7.

contradict himself, to contradict anyone else' shows that 'he seems after deconstruction pretty much to have been there before us'.⁷ I argue that the forms of self-knowledge that Johnson's texts encompass are also closely aligned to the discursive practices that he employed. The plain English of the diaries and the more literary style of *The Rambler* draw upon distinct intellectual cultures, which encode very different understandings of the self. But both texts are also preoccupied with the notion of how to account for oneself. Although they adopt different linguistic registers, both deploy numbers, accounts and the world of commerce as tools to interrogate the self and account for the flux of time and identity.

Johnson and the Life-Writing Tradition

Before examining Johnson's life-writing in detail, it is useful to examine the literary traditions upon which it draws. Johnson was unusual in uniting in one person the strands of classical civilisation, philosophical scepticism and elements of the Puritan religious sensibility. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that his self-understanding, and the literary forms in which it was encoded, was grounded in a fundamental contradiction. Life-writing in general was a powerfully disruptive force in the eighteenth century. Felicity Nussbaum has explored the ways in which autobiographical writings both challenged as well as confirmed definitions of 'self', 'character' and 'identity.' Nussbaum shows that conceptions of identity had deep implications for the individual's legal, moral and spiritual relationship to Church and State. The self as a form of 'capital' or 'property' was integral to the rise of a newly formed bourgeoisie who 'formed a class that would begin to keep an unprecedented record

⁷ Steven Lynn, *Samuel Johnson after Deconstruction: Rhetoric and the Rambler* (Chicago: Southern Illinois University, 2006), p. 19.

of its individual selves'.⁸ Life-writing, according to Nussbaum, particularly writing by women, often functioned to disrupt the stability of the bourgeois self. Accordingly, Johnson might be imagined to have been the sort of male writer who would have adopted forms of writing which reaffirmed the stability of the self. However, the heterogeneous discourse of the essays and diaries, with their divergent voices, and use of accounting and commercial discourses, undermines any such notion. The diaries, in particular, are full of lists, account entries, tables and quotations, which serve to disrupt any simple unitary view of self-identity.

Autobiography is described by Mary Jacobus as inherently transgressive because of the way it question the boundaries of genre.⁹ The instability of the form is inextricably linked, according to Laura Marcus, 'to the problematics of selfhood and identity, with the boundaries between "inner" and "outer", "private" and "public" becoming the sites of the greatest concern'.¹⁰ Diaries, in delineating 'private and public events in their incoherence, lack of integrity, scantiness and inconclusiveness' refuse any master narrative which would seek to delimit the meaning of the text.¹¹ As hybrid forms, they also raise questions about their generic status: are they part of literature or personal history? Life-writing also has a history which helped to shape both Johnson's writing practice and the way that he conceived the self. Autobiographical writing goes back to at least St Augustine, but the seventeenth century is generally regarded as the period in which the diary and journal forms emerged. Nussbaum notes that there is evidence of the words 'diary' and 'journal' being used in the sixteenth century.¹² Moreover, as Adam Smyth demonstrates in his *Autobiography in Early*

⁸ Felicity Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 54.

⁹ Mary Jacobus, 'The Law of/and Gender: Genre Theory and The Prelude', *Diacritics* 14 (Winter 1984), 47–57.

¹⁰ Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical discourses: Criticism, theory, practice* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 14.

¹¹ Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject*, p. 16.

¹² Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject*, p. 24.

Modern England, even before a tradition of diaries and autobiographies was established, individuals wrote about their lives using very different textual forms, including printed almanacs, financial accounts and commonplace books. Smyth explores, in particular, the links between ‘financial accounting and accounting for a life’.¹³ The notion of self-accounting is a key aspect of Johnson’s psychology, and the early modern forms in which this species of self-understanding was made manifest, particularly accounts and almanacs, left their mark on Johnson’s diaries.

A related tradition which may have informed Johnson’s life writing practice was the emergence in the seventeenth century of Puritan spiritual self-examination recorded in diaries and journals. Paul Delany has described how, following the period after 1640, a flood of spiritual autobiographies emerged, encouraged by the temporary cessation of state censorship and the newly available access to print technology.¹⁴ Linda Anderson has also explained how ‘mechanick preachers’ like John Bunyan, ‘who lacked institutional sanction or formal education for their ministry, instead founded their authority on a personal account of their special calling and journey towards grace’.¹⁵ After 1660, dissenting preachers were frequently persecuted. John Bunyan was imprisoned in Bedford for twelve years from 1660 to 1672. This placed the dissenting subject in radical and individualised opposition to the state.

Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding* (1666) is only one of a great number of spiritual testimonies that sought to identify, within the random events of a life, those marks of election that accorded

¹³ Adam Smyth, *Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 3.

¹⁴ Paul Delany, *British Autobiography in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1969), p. 81.

¹⁵ Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), p. 26.

with the providential design. A divine master narrative shadowed the account of daily experience, shaping it around the story of ‘conversion’ and ‘being saved’. The jettisoning of the authority of the Church switched the focus of religious life to the individual’s own management of their spiritual journey. The diary provided evidence and a record of that journey.

Johnson thought highly of Bunyan and of *Pilgrim’s Progress* in particular, as his recorded comments to Boswell in *Life of Johnson* (1791) attest.¹⁶ But Johnson, like many other Tories, also recoiled in horror from the dissenting culture from which Bunyan emerged, reviling in ‘Butler’:

the tumult of absurdity and clamour of contradiction, which perplexed doctrine, disordered practice, and disturbed both publick and private quiet, in that age, when subordination was broken, and awe was hissed away; [...] when every man might become a preacher, and almost every preacher could collect a congregation.¹⁷

Johnson’s faith was anchored in the Anglican Church’s established practices and doctrines, which mirrored the stability that he looked for in the social and political ordering of the state.¹⁸ Dissenting preachers, such as Bunyan, Johnson believed, had threatened to usher in an era of anarchy. Nonetheless, Johnson admired Bunyan’s religious seriousness and was assailed by the same religious doubts that Puritan life-writers described. It was one of the many contradictions at the heart of Johnson’s thinking. Leading evangelicals such as Law and Wesley, however, who both considered themselves High Churchmen in the movement’s

¹⁶ James Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, ed. by George Birkbeck Hill, D.C.L., revised by L. F. Powell, 6 vols (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1934), II, p. 238.

¹⁷ Samuel Johnson, ‘Butler’, *The Lives of the Poets*, ed. by John H. Muddendorf, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), XXI (2010), p. 222.

¹⁸ Discussions of Johnson’s Churchmanship include Charles E. Pierce Jr, *The Religious Life of Samuel Johnson* (London: The Athlone Press, 1983) and William Gibson, ‘Reflections on Johnson’s Churchmanship’, in *Samuel Johnson: New Contexts for a New Century*, ed. by Howard D. Weinbrot (San Marino, California: Huntington Library, 2014), pp. 219–40.

infancy, also echoed Puritan concerns regarding personal salvation. Melvyn New characterises Johnson's Anglicanism as 'pragmatic piety', which indicated a 'private providential dispensation operating within the smallest circles of one's own existence'.¹⁹ Texts such as *Grace Abounding* problematised the drive for unity of self, as the fear of not being saved was so strongly foregrounded. Robert Bell argues that this was due to the 'Puritan view of things, forever poised between hope and despair'.²⁰ Nussbaum comments that the early modern autobiographer often seems in search of an object, God or self, which proves elusive: 'if it *is* achieved, it is often judged provisional and precarious by its maker'.²¹

How does an individual know that they are saved? This was a question that preoccupied Johnson as it did Bunyan. The oscillating pattern of exultation and desolation found in the autobiographical writings of both authors was the by-product of a process of spiritual self-accounting which was ingrained in the Puritan tradition of religious self-examination. Smyth argues that the emergence of modern financial accounting was important for life-writing, as it established a particular idea of truthfulness, a template for recording the transactions of a life in a transparent and objective manner. Mary Poovey, in *A History of the Modern Fact*, had earlier described how accounting functioned to proclaim the honesty of the new merchant class by making 'the formal precision of the double entry system, which drew on the rule-bound system of arithmetic, seem to guarantee the accuracy of the details it recorded'.²² However, key concepts like 'money', the equating of 'book value' and 'price',

¹⁹ Melvyn New, 'Anglicanism', in *Samuel Johnson in Context*, ed. by Jack Lynch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp.101–08 (pp. 105–08).

²⁰ Robert Bell, 'Metamorphosis of a Spiritual Autobiography', *ELH*, 44 (Spring 1977), 108–26 (p. 118).

²¹ Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject*, p. 19.

²² Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 30.

also functioned ideologically, to create the balance in the accounts which itself echoed the harmony of God's creation and attested to the merchant's fundamental honesty.

The idea of self-accounting has parallels with Weber's argument that the Protestant focus on the individual underpinned the rise of an acquisitive capitalism.²³ Samuel Pepys, hardly a Puritan, nonetheless began his diary as a series of financial accounts.²⁴ Jonathan Swift, similarly no Puritan, also kept detailed accounts.²⁵ Smyth argues that Puritans sought to assert control over the exigencies of their lives through assiduous bookkeeping. Puritans focussed on the particular, because God's interventions and the individual's pre-destined path might only be revealed in the smallest detail. This fostered a culture of observation and 'self-surveillance'.²⁶ The concern for methods of recording and fear of forgetting, revealed in Puritan life-writing, flowed directly from the development of financial bookkeeping according to Smyth.

Accounting and trade also influenced the style of life-writing. Plain, unambiguous prose provided the best record of the Puritan's spiritual life, just as orderly accounts most appropriately mapped the economic life. Daniel Defoe's *Complete English Tradesman* (1726) argued that tradesmen should adopt a plain English style for performative reasons, according to Poovey, to encourage tradesman to be honest.²⁷ In addition, plain writing 'inspired in *others* the confidence that underwrote both business and credit'.²⁸ This met with

²³ See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 2005) and, in particular, Chapter 2, 'The Spirit of Capitalism', pp. 13–39 and Chapter 3, 'Luther's Conception of the Calling: Task of the Investigation', pp. 39–51, which argue for a link between protestant individualism and capitalist enterprise.

²⁴ Smyth, *Autobiography*, p. 59.

²⁵ See, for instance, *The Account Books of Jonathan Swift*, ed. by Paul V. Thompson and Dorothy Jay Thompson (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1984).

²⁶ Smyth, *Autobiography*, p. 108.

²⁷ Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact*, p. 167.

²⁸ Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact*, p. 167.

some resistance. Poovey cites Steele's *Sir Roger de Coverley* (1711) who deprecates the orderly bookkeeping habits of the merchant, contrasting these with the spontaneous nonchalance of the aristocrat, who scorns the tradesman's 'punctual dealing'.²⁹ Accounting and plain prose, therefore, are not only markers of religious sensibility and social class; they also inform Johnson's life-writing practice in the diaries, demonstrating the influence of Puritan traditions of self-examination.

Writing the Self: Johnson's Diaries

As the genres of Johnson's self-accounting were various, so too were the material forms in which he kept those textual accounts. The Yale edition of the *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, unlike Johnson's other writings, is a hybrid text assembled by the editors from sixteen different manuscript sources, including diary entries in Latin and English, account entries, lists, tables, prayers and extended sequences of description. The manuscripts range from diary entries for 1765–84, the longest and fullest of any of Johnson's diaries, which were discovered at Malahide Castle in 1937, through to the list of Johnson's receipts and expenditures between 22 September and 28 October 1776, then owned by a private individual in Staffordshire. Boswell also secretly transcribed several entries from the large quarto diary covering 1753–65 which Johnson burnt shortly before his death, along with another large quarto diary. Accordingly, there is no complete diary record. Other sources included the manuscript of the Welsh and French tours; the 1729–34 diary, which was written in Latin and consists of three leaves; and the annals, which comprised three loose

²⁹ Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact*, p. 144.

unnumbered leaves.³⁰ The only papers authorised by Johnson for publication were the manuscripts that he entitled *Prayers and Meditations*, which he gave to his friend the Reverend George Strahan to edit and publish in the last months of his life.³¹ These consisted of fourteen paper-bound volumes of various sizes. Some were fair copies, others were drafts with deletions or interlineations by Johnson. Strahan erased a number of entries because he may have considered them theologically unorthodox or too self-revealing. The redactions are so heavily executed that many have not been capable of reconstruction using scientific techniques. The papers are deposited in the library of Pembroke College Oxford and were physically inspected as part of this research. A number of the fourteen bound papers consists of leaves which have been sewn together, possibly by Johnson himself. Eight or nine of the volumes were dated and endorsed by Johnson. One of the volumes is marble-backed; another has a hand-painted decorative cover, while another is encased in a map of the Oxford University Colleges.

For reasons which remain unclear, Johnson did not want all of his diaries to be published posthumously, and he destroyed two volumes. In this context, the nineteenth-century editor, George Birkbeck Hill, considered that it passed belief that Johnson should have wished Strahan to publish all of the material that was given to him, attributing this to the weakness of his final days, causing him to ‘forget how much they contained that was meant for no eye but his own’.³² The Strahan material contained much religious matter, but much else beside.

³⁰ The manuscripts are now held in a variety of locations across the world, including: Yale University; the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford; Pembroke College, University of Oxford; the Henry E. Huntington Library and the Hyde Collection, Harvard University. Some of the original manuscripts have been lost and the material has had to be collated from later texts, such as the manuscript, *An Account of the Life of Dr. Samuel Johnson, from his birth to his eleventh year, written by himself*, published by Richard Wright in 1805.

³¹ In the ‘Preface’ to *Prayers and Meditations Composed by Samuel Johnson, LL.D. and Published from His Manuscripts*, By George Strahan, A.M. (London: T. Cadell, 1785), Strahan notes that Johnson ‘put these Papers into my hands, with instructions for committing them to the Press, and with a promise to prepare a sketch of his own life to accompany them.’ (p. v).

³² *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. by G. Birkbeck Hill, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897), I, p. B2.

In *Idler 84*, Johnson argued that ‘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’.³³ The detours of representation, and the processes of rhetorical fashioning attendant upon positioning a work in the literary market place, may have been seen by Johnson as a barrier to truthful self-imaging. Johnson in his diaries was, however, essentially writing to himself. The unvarnished quality of the prose and the disquieting honesty of the diaries reflect a self-communing, which has dispensed with the need to play to the gallery. As Jennifer Snead argues, for Johnson, ‘autobiographical impartiality [...] implies the absence of an audience’.³⁴

The sole underlying unity of these texts is provided by the chronology of Johnson’s life which holds the disparate elements together. Although his diary-keeping appears to have been intermittent, it is clear that Johnson made diary entries throughout his life, implying an on-going commitment to a process of self-recording. The diverse textual entries provide an entirely different window on the narrative of a life, unencumbered by any need to shape that life in accordance with the demands of an established literary form. Self-understanding is rather embedded in odd snatches of prose, garbled Latin quotations and records of expenses. Johnson’s life leaks into the manifold textual forms into which it is inscribed. It is a life deposited in the literary leavings, the offcuts, the off-hand record; an archive of fragments.

The emergence of self-accounting practices, described in the previous section, has profound relevance to Johnson. His diaries provide an account of his life both spiritually and financially. In *Rambler 28*, Johnson noted: ‘I think it proper to enquire how far a nearer acquaintance with ourselves is necessary to our preservation from crime and follies and how

³³ Samuel Johnson, *The Idler and The Adventurer*, ed. by W. J. Bate, J. M. Bullitt and L. F. Powell, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), II (1963), p. 264.

³⁴ Jennifer Snead, ‘The Aesthetics of The Fragment’, in *The Age of Johnson, Volume 15*, ed. by Paul J. Korshin and Jack Lynch (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 2004), pp. 37–56 (p. 42).

much the attentive study of our own minds may contribute to secure us the approbation of that being to whom we are *accountable* [my italics].³⁵

The diary is accordingly couched as an act of self-surveillance, enclosed within the all-seeing gaze of The Almighty as the absolute impartial spectator. As Johnson reads his self, so God reads and audits the adequacy of Johnson's self-accounting. Unlike Johnson's other literary texts, the diaries are not premised on any human readership, rather they enact an enclosed economy of communication. In his 'Waller', Johnson wrote that 'the intercourse between God and the human soul cannot be poetical [...] religion must be shewn as it is; suppression and addition equally corrupt it'.³⁶ Accordingly, like the tradesman, Johnson's honest accounting is rendered in the plainest prose. Johnson sees the use of literary language as an unnecessary supplement or barrier to the transparent conversation between man and his God. The plain style, however, associated ostensibly with transparency and plain-dealing, was as ideologically loaded in its way as the considered embellishments of *The Rambler*.

Puritan life-writers sought evidence of election in the smallest detail. Johnson similarly argued in *Rambler 60* that the business of the biographer was to 'display the minute details of daily life, where exterior appendages are cast aside'.³⁷ Self-review was also a thread in Anglican theology. Johnson greatly admired the Anglican Divine Robert South, and *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) illustrates the word 'Accounting' using a citation from South, which argues that spiritual self-examination is a method which 'faithfully observed, must keep a man from breaking, or running behind hand in his spiritual estate; which, without frequent accountings, he will hardly be able to prevent'.³⁸ Johnson also

³⁵ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 151.

³⁶ Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets*, XXI, p. 314.

³⁷ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 321.

³⁸ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* by Samuel Johnson, (London: Times Books, 1979), the text is not paginated. The quotation cited can be found in Robert South, *Sacramental Preparation: Set forth*

reverenced the Anglican William Law, particularly his *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1728).³⁹ Law argued that accounting for life and spirit were parallel phenomena:

It has already been observed, that a prudent and religious care is to be used in the manner of spending our money or estate, because the manner of spending our money or estate makes so great a part of our common life [...] What is more innocent than rest and retirement? And yet what more dangerous than sloth and idleness?⁴⁰

Law wants to make time count. The Christian virtues ‘are not ours’, Law wrote, ‘unless they be the virtues and tempers of our ordinary life’.⁴¹ Johnson absorbed this message, believing that religious engagement should not be confined to church attendance but should be embedded in daily life. Johnson felt that Christians should not retreat from life, but should embrace experience head-on. The diaries express Johnson’s constant anxiety that time may dissipate in a wasteful expense of spirit. As he noted: ‘My reigning sin, to which perhaps many others are appendent, is waste of time’.⁴² Idleness, in Johnson’s terms, involves a failure to be sufficiently attentive to the religious, practical and intellectual demands of the moment. It marks the periods when time disappears like improvident expenditure. The destruction of time horrified Johnson. It was as if he had not existed during these moments, reminding him of the annihilation of death. Annihilation, as Charles E. Pierce Jr argues, was worse even than damnation in Johnson’s mind, because it involved the destruction of the human soul.⁴³ It implied that God did not exist, or alternatively, was indifferent to the fate of

in a *SERMON on Matthew xxii. 12. Preach’d at Westminster Abbey on the 8th of APRIL, 1688. Being Palm Sunday from Twelve Sermons Preached on Several Occasions by Robert South, D. D.*, vol. II, 6th edn (London: Printed by J. Bettenham, for Jonah Bowyer, 1727), p. 300.

³⁹ See Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson* (1934), I, p. 68.

⁴⁰ William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life: Adapted to the State and Condition of All Orders of Christians* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2013), p. 59.

⁴¹ Law, *A Serious Call*, p. 7.

⁴² Samuel Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, ed. by E. L. McAdam Jnr, with Donald and Mary Hyde, Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), I (1986), p. 257.

⁴³ Pierce Jr, *The Religious Life of Samuel Johnson*, p. 38.

man. Both alternatives hollowed out life of meaning, leading to despair or madness. The diaries, accordingly, seek to enact a self-audit of time spent in an attempt to regain time or impose order on a life and make time count.

Counting time was key to the diaries, a philosophy which echoed the Puritan mindset. This was exemplified in Robinson Crusoe's diligent marking of the passing days and months. Johnson, himself, possessed one of the newly invented pocket-watches. These devices helped introduce a new concept of the day as being divided into small segments to be managed and examined in the smallest detail.⁴⁴ This was a useful tool to aid spiritual self-examination. In the later chapters of *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, William Law sets out the acts of devotion which should be practised, in particular recommending the hours of the day for prayer. These orderly habits were akin to a form of spiritual bookkeeping, establishing regular punctuation marks in the day's passage to ensure that time was managed optimally. Johnson's habits were often dilatory but he always marked time by praying before retiring as Law stipulated. Threaded through the diaries are a series of self-composed prayers which represent a sort of spiritual replenishment. They introduce a different discursive register, combining elements of the *Book of Common Prayer* with personal meditation. Frequently coming last in the day's narrative, they mark the point where the day's accounting merges with the formal liturgical rhythms of the prayer book. They often mark moments of despair, regret and self-recrimination, constituting intercessions to redeem time lost in waste and irresolution, as this example from April 1775 illustrates:

⁴⁴ On the rear of the watch was etched a quotation from St John's Gospel (9:4), '[...] the night cometh, when no man can work'. See Paul Tankard, "'Try to Resolve Again': Johnson and the Written Art of Everyday Life", in *New Essays on Samuel Johnson: Revaluation*, ed. by Anthony W. Lee (Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 2018), pp. 217–34 (p. 224).

Almighty God, heavenly Father, whose mercy is over all thy works, look with pity on my miseries and sins. Suffer me to commemorate in thy presence my redemption by thy son Jesus Christ. Enable me so to repent of my misspent time that I may pass the residue of my time in thy fear and to thy glory.⁴⁵

Counting, however, also preoccupied Johnson in quite a different way. Numbers, payments and lists are also scattered throughout the diaries, representing the trace of daily activity. They also fulfil a performative function, to impose order on a diarised life which often threatened to descend into madness and despair. Poovey argues that to assign numbers to ‘observed particulars is to make them amenable to the kind of knowledge system that privileges quantity over quality and equivalence over difference’.⁴⁶ Numbers had emerged since the seventeenth century as the indices of systems of knowledge based on deduction rather than received wisdom. Mathematics appears to have been important to Johnson. At his death, Johnson had in his library four books on mathematics and trigonometry.⁴⁷ On the last page of his account of the Scottish tour, Johnson chooses to portray himself, teaching a young girl mathematics in a local school.⁴⁸ Earlier in that account he records presenting a copy of Cocker’s *Arithmetic* (1678) to a young girl.⁴⁹ His interest in mathematics is attested by Mrs Thrale who noted that:

⁴⁵ Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, pp. 226–27.

⁴⁶ Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact*, p. 5.

⁴⁷ The mathematical books included in the *Sale Catalogue of Dr. Johnson’s Library*, with an Essay by A. Edward Newton (London: Elkin Mathews, Ltd., 1925) are: *Wolfii Elementa Matheseos*, 2 t. H Magd, 1717, by Baron Christian Friedrich Von Wolff (Lot 297, p. 15 of sale catalogue); *Payne’s Trigonometry*, by William Payne (Lot 362, p. 18 of sale catalogue); *Elementa Mathematica*, a Gravesande LB 1720, by William Jakob Storm Van’s Gravesande (Lot 420, p. 20 of sale catalogue) and *Hatton’s Arithmetic*, by Edward Hatton (Lot 454, p. 21 of sale catalogue).

⁴⁸ Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, ed. by Mary Lascelles, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), IX (1971), p. 164.

⁴⁹ Johnson, *A Journey*, IX, p. 37.

Mr Johnson had a consummate Knowledge of Figures and an uncommon delight in Arithmetical Speculations [...] He used indeed to be always tormenting one with shewing how much Time might be lost by squandering two hours a day, how much Money might be saved by laying up five Shillings a day.⁵⁰

For Johnson, numbers were linked to certainty. Boswell recorded Johnson as stating, ‘That Sir, is the good of counting. It brings everything to a certainty, which before floated in the mind indefinitely’.⁵¹ Accordingly, the tables and accounts in the diaries not only contribute to a discourse of truthfulness, but are used to impose an extra-linguistic order on a world teeming with atomic facts which threatened to spin apart. There is also something akin to the modern concept of arithmomania at play in Johnson’s diaries and his writing more generally. An obsessive-compulsive disorder, individuals suffering from arithmomania have a strong need to count their actions or objects in their surroundings. Boswell recorded such patterns of behaviour in his biography, such as the obsessive tapping of the top of the railings outside Johnson’s home with his stick. It is almost as though Johnson were trying to command his environment, to be reassured of its on-going objectivity and existence.

Johnson had an ingrained compulsion to compute. In church, he calculated the time that each element of the service took.⁵² The diary entry for 15 August 1783 notes that Johnson cut forty-one vine leaves, which he weighed, then dried, and re-weighed to establish the weight difference accomplished by the drying process.⁵³ On 12 October 1778, Johnson records how he shaved the hair on his arms to see how long it would take to grow back.⁵⁴ Experimenting on his own body, he sought to determine how quickly it regenerated, as though calibrating

⁵⁰ Hester Thrale, *Dr Johnson by Mrs Thrale: The ‘Anecdotes’ In Their Original Form*, ed. by Richard Ingrams (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), p. 49.

⁵¹ Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson* (1934), IV, p. 204.

⁵² Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, pp. 277.

⁵³ Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, pp. 362.

⁵⁴ Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, pp. 278.

the forces defying death and decay. Such activity resembled the experiments of other amateurs of the time who also dabbled in natural philosophy. It also typified Johnson's restless curiosity about the world, his attempt to fix time and space in both words and numbers. Elsewhere he records his bodily activity, including micturition and excretion, using a private code. Johnson obsessively surveys the discourse of his own bodily functions for signs and portents of health in the same way that Puritans scrutinised their inward and outward lives for signs of election. As he grew older and frailer, he often records changes in bodily activity in Latin, as though to protect such information from the prying eyes of the uneducated. The discourses of medicine and classical culture are intermixed to enable Johnson to demonstrate authority as his own physician.

Johnson's experiments extended to the mapping of the external environment. He investigated, for instance, the manufacturing processes operating in Thrale's brewery and Boulton's Soho foundry.⁵⁵ This was ostensibly a demonstration of deductive reasoning in the spirit of Bacon. However, as the diaries demonstrate, Johnson's efforts to fix the world in numbers were, on occasion, exercises in 'confirmation bias', or in plainer terms, a 'fix'. He estimated the 'long isle' of Worcester Cathedral to be 'neither so wide nor so high as that of Lichfield'.⁵⁶ He was in fact wrong: the nave at Worcester measured 170 feet compared with 140 feet at Lichfield.⁵⁷ Johnson's computational skills were often deployed to support pre-conceived notions of the relative merits of national or cultural institutions. Lichfield was Johnson's home cathedral. He, therefore, considered that it must, *de facto*, be bigger and grander than others. Similarly, in his Welsh journals, Johnson took careful account of the

⁵⁵ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson* (1934), IV, pp. 490–91.

⁵⁶ Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, pp. 217.

⁵⁷ Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, pp. 217. The editors comment that, 'Johnson's opinion that the "long aisle" [...] of the cathedral is narrower and lower than that of Lichfield is wrong.'

dimensions of the buildings he visited, noting for instance that ‘the Hall at Llewenny is 40 feet long and 28 broad. The Gallery 120 feet long (all paced). The dining parlour 30 foot long 26 broad’.⁵⁸ Pacing the building to take its measure, bespoke a mode of apprehension which computed worth by reference to the universe’s solidity and extent. Buildings exhibited social worth, which landscapes singularly failed to do, lacking human imprint.⁵⁹ Johnson’s intent was hardly neutral; he was fashioning a comparison of the Welsh to the English gentry. The adjective ‘mean’ is applied three times on a visit to the Welshman Sir Thomas Wynne: to the dinner provided, his residence, and the surrounding town. In *A Dictionary of the English Language*, Johnson defines the word ‘mean’ as ‘of low rank or birth’; ‘ungenerous’ and ‘low in the degree of any property’ and ‘low in worth’.⁶⁰ Johnson, therefore, counted a gentleman’s worth, rank and liberality by reference to property. Johnson believed that without property there is no subordination. Accordingly, as Kevin Hart notes, texts such as *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* are explicitly ‘concerned with proper place, proper names, propriety and the connections these have with property’.⁶¹ Johnson’s pacing of buildings established self-identity and differentiation. In this instance, his depreciation of the residences of the Welsh gentry re-affirmed his English identity, based upon the perceived superiority of English buildings.

Worth was important to Johnson. It was also linked to business sense. Johnson had an intense fear of improvidence which may have derived from the example set by his father.

⁵⁸ Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, pp. 180.

⁵⁹ See, for instance, Charles Saumarez Smith, *The Rise of Design: Design and Domestic Interior in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Pimlico, 2000) for a discussion of the significance of interior furnishings and decorations as signifiers of status.

⁶⁰ Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*.

⁶¹ Kevin Hart, *Samuel Johnson and the Culture of Property* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 111.

Johnson deprecated his father's lack of business acumen and in the diaries notes of his parents that:

Neither of them ever tried to calculate the profits of trade, or the expenses of living [...] my father having in the early part of his life contracted debts, never had trade sufficient to enable him to pay them, and maintain his family; he got something but not enough. It was not until about 1768, that I thought to calculate the returns of my father's trade, and by that estimate his probable profits. This, I believe, my parents never did.⁶²

Johnson's father had not applied the prudent and religious care in his business affairs, which William Law had stipulated as being the foundation of the Christian character. He failed as a founding father figure precisely because he could not compute his own worth, a task left to his son to complete, retrospectively bringing his father's affairs into balance. The son, accordingly, took the place of his father, becoming the originator of himself.

Johnson craved orderliness in order to quell, what Tankard has described, as Johnson's 'fear of disorder'.⁶³ Accounting, tabulation and lists are often deployed in the diaries seemingly as hard-edged sense-making systems, designed to subdue the amorphous fears and dreads, which crowd the text. Johnson, like the Puritan autobiographers, feared death greatly, and what lay beyond it, judgement. The extent of his fears went well beyond what might have been considered reasonable, as Mrs Thrale recorded:

No one had however higher notions of the hard task of true Christianity than Johnson, whose daily terror lest he had not done enough, originated in piety, but ended in little less than disease [...] and finding his good works ever below his desires and intent, filled his imagination with fears that he should never obtain forgiveness for omissions of duty and criminal waste of time. These ideas kept him in constant anxiety concerning his salvation.⁶⁴

⁶² Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, pp. 8–9.

⁶³ Tankard, "“Try to Resolve Again”", p. 227.

⁶⁴ Quoted by Pierce Jr, *The Religious Life of Samuel Johnson*, p. 56.

Johnson's fears also appeared excessive to other contemporaries. He went so far as to record in March 1771 that he had 'committed many crimes'.⁶⁵ When Johnson considered his spiritual conduct, it was as though he were an infant who could never placate a despotic parent. Any positive vision of the afterlife, such as Heaven being a sociable place, which some early modern theologians proclaimed, hardly featured at all in Johnson's discourse.⁶⁶ The provisionality of his salvation gave an existential edge to Johnson's self-accounting. Whilst Mrs Thrale may have considered his fears unseemly, they may seem less so, when contextualised within the Puritan tradition. For instance, Johnson recorded on the day before Easter, 'a doubt like Baxter of my State'.⁶⁷ Johnson was referring to the great Puritan Richard Baxter, whose autobiography, *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (1696) documented his spiritual anguish.⁶⁸ Baxter experienced a near-death experience and recorded how:

I was yet more awakened to be serious and solicitous about my soul's everlasting state; and I came so short of that sense and seriousness which a matter of such infinite weight required, that I was in many years' doubt of my sincerity, and thought I had no spiritual life at all [...] Thus was I long kept with the calls of approaching death at one ear and the questionings of a doubtful conscience at the other.⁶⁹

James Gray argues that fear is seen as integral to the path to salvation. He goes on to point to the similarities between certain passages in the *Reliquiae Baxterianae* and the diaries, noting that both Johnson and Baxter 'grappled till the last with the problem of reconciling their severe physical sufferings with the notion of a merciful God'.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, p. 139.

⁶⁶ See for instance, Ralph Halbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family in England, 1480–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁶⁷ Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, p. 105.

⁶⁸ The *Sale Catalogue of Dr. Johnson's Library* includes two texts by Baxter: *Baxter's Christian Directory*, 1673 (Lot 360, p. 17 of catalogue) and *Baxter on Apparitions* (Lot 510, p. 23 of catalogue).

⁶⁹ James Gray, *Johnson's Sermons: A Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 94.

⁷⁰ Gray, *Johnson's Sermons*, p. 96.

Johnson's concerns about salvation were allied to fears about sensuality and madness. On Easter Day 1753, Johnson composed a prayer beseeching that the loss of his wife should 'mortify all inordinate affections in me'.⁷¹ On Easter Day 1777, he also noted that 'When I survey my past life, I discover nothing but a barren waste of time with some disorders of body, and disturbances of mind very near to madness'.⁷² Johnson saw madness as an abyss, from which there could be no return, extinguishing what is distinctively human: the reflexive self. Madness appeared to be linked in Johnson's mind to a fear of death. In Johnson's later years, this fear became so powerful that it seemed to overwhelm his linguistic capacity. Some diary entries are merely staccato shards of verbal shorthand, verging on incoherence. Fragments of Latin butt up against passages of telegraphed prose. The ragbag of lists, accounts and resolutions proliferate as the inscriptions of a divided mind striving to construct a semblance of stability in the face of swarming fears. Resolutions are repeatedly recorded but frequently not kept. A typical example is this entry, recorded on 18 September 1766:

PURPOSES

To keep a journal. To begin this day.
To spend four hours every day in Study, and as much more as I can:
To read a portion of the Scriptures in Greek every Sunday
To combat scruples.
To rise at eight.⁷³

By 3 October, having returned from a visit to the Thrales, Johnson records that his resolutions had been in vain. Many of his resolutions were couched in the form of prayer. Johnson alludes in the diaries to Taylor's statement that 'a vow to God is an act of prayer'.⁷⁴ Failed resolutions, accordingly, represent the breaking of a religious promise; they are

⁷¹ Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, p. 51.

⁷² Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, p. 265.

⁷³ Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, p. 110.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, p. 414.

effectively failed performatives. Intended to address fears about salvation by instituting orderly schemes of conduct, they repeatedly fall flat. His determination to rise early, intending to catch and count the time, lapses. His resolution to keep a regular journal also wavers. Enlisting mathematical techniques, Johnson calculates how much of the Bible he could read in Greek, assuming a rate of six verses a minute.⁷⁵ These calculations seemed to have a performative function: to perform faith by an act of will and to find salvation through computation. Johnson may have found support for this approach in the work of Samuel Clark. On Easter Day 1781, Johnson records that ‘I read some of Clark’s sermons’.⁷⁶ He considered Clark’s sermons to be the best in the language and told the Reverend Richard Robinson that if ‘he was saved, he should be “indebted for his salvation to the sermons of Dr Clarke”’.⁷⁷ Clarke, an Anglican theologian and philosopher, argued that there was no opposition between reason and revelation and that the order and harmony of nature attested to the existence of a benign Maker. Nature’s laws were demonstrably true in the same way as mathematical propositions. Clarke’s rationalist justification of faith was a counterpoint to the Baxterian scruples of faith that Johnson endured, and complemented the diurnal disciplines recommended by Law. Clarke offered a path through reason to salvation, which his instinctual belief systems could not provide.

Computation and tabulation were accordingly important elements in the way that Johnson sought to account for and give order to his spiritual life. Although some of the accounting entries included in the *Diaries, Prayers and Annals* are free-standing texts, many are embedded in the diary entries and evidently formed part of Johnson’s habits of life-writing. Autobiography, as Smyth argues, had its origins in almanacs and account books; Johnson’s

⁷⁵ Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, p. 135.

⁷⁶ Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, p. 305.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Gray, *Johnson’s Sermons*, p. 66.

practice recalls that tradition. Johnson's diary entries for 1782 were written in *The Gentleman's New Memorandum Book improv'd: or, The Merchant's and Tradesman's Daily Pocket Journal for the Year 1765*, when the days of weeks and months corresponded with those in 1782.⁷⁸ The manuscript, which I examined at the Bodleian Library, includes these sample entries for September 1782, shown in Figure 1 (below).⁷⁹

Figure 1: Extract from Johnson's Memorandum Book: 30 September–6 October 1782, Bodleian Library

SEPTEMBER 1765.		SEPTEMBER 1765.	
Appointments.	Occasional Memoranda.	WEEK'S ACCOUNT.	Paid.
30. At Little Dutch Mr Compton and Mr Mad- beam dined with me.	Mr Compton & Mr Mad- beam in the evening, with the lady of the house and several others.	To White	1 1 0
Tu. [OCT. 1.] At Little Dutch I went to Street here	Mr. Fisher will visit the school, and I fear will be here for several days Monday and Tuesday direct to Strahan.	From Strahan	2 10 0
W. At Little Dutch Gold continues. I went to Bank in past.		To White for Dutch	0 7 0
Th. I came home with Ben- ney. Gold continues. At Little Dutch		20 0 0	3 9
Fr. At home. At Little Dutch Gold continues.		At Strahan To Francis To Johnson To White Shobers to	2 2 0 1 1 0 1 11 6 0 10 0
Sat. I came to Strahan with Harney at Little Dutch	I dined at Strahan	At Strahan in Pocket Book Silver	5 4 6 13 13 0 0 16 6
Sun. I went to Church at Strahan. Templo salutis cum gregis.	My health has failed and I expect several days sore. I came home yesterday		19 14 0

⁷⁸ The *Memorandum Book* was published by J. Dodsley, who was a member of the 'Congeries', a club of booksellers that published Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*. The frontispiece advertises the volume as being 'Disposed in a Manner more useful and convenient for all Sorts of Business, than any of those who have pretended to imitate it.' As well as the accounting tables, its information includes: lists of Members of Parliament the Houses of Peers and the dates for Payment of Dividends. More copies of almanacs were sold in the eighteenth century than any other type of publication: see James Raven, *Publishing Business in Eighteenth-Century England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2014).

⁷⁹ Samuel Johnson: *Manuscript Diary for 1782 entered onto Gentleman's New Memorandum Book Improv'd: or The Merchant's and Tradesman's Daily Pocket Journal for the year 1765*, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley Don. f. 6.

The manuscript shows that before August, Johnson only made diary entries in May, then made continuous entries from August to December. In a letter to Boswell of 24 August 1782, Johnson lamented that from January to June he had been very unwell but was now ‘much recovered’ which may explain some of the gaps in the journal.⁸⁰ Johnson records his daily activities in the first column under “Appointments”. In the second column, “Occasional Memorandums,” he enters additional comments that mostly relate to the same day. Opposite these columns, he keeps his “Week’s Account”, which represents the random debris of a life, refracted through a different grid of knowledge. The first column, for 30 September 1782, records that Johnson has learned a little Dutch and dined with Mr Compton and Macbean. The second column expands on the first by stating that Mr Compton is on his way to Dr Vyse with testimonials, whilst the “Week’s Account” records payments to White and receipts from Strahan, his clergyman friend, to whom he had entrusted the *Prayers and Meditations* for publication. Life and finances intertwine in the makeshift textuality of the memorandum book. The first two columns contain the bare bones of a narrative, but the accounts columns are not framed in narrative terms, but rather pinpoint, through financial transactions, particular relationships in which Johnson’s life was entangled. The book splices financial and biographical data together, resulting, as Linda Woodbridge has argued in *Money and the Age of Shakespeare*, in the assimilation ‘of unlikes to a single scale’.⁸¹ The tradesman’s daily pocket journal accordingly provides a template, enabling the writer to inventorise his self’s unfolding, in the same way that a tradesman records his day’s business. Johnson, with his uncomplicated attitude to money, would have found no contradiction in the

⁸⁰ *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. by Bruce Redford, 5 vols (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1994), IV, p. 70.

⁸¹ Linda Woodbridge, *Money and the Age of Shakespeare: Essays in New Economic Criticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), p. 8.

workaday nature of the textual format. It is a record of life on the fly, written in a tradesman's hand, the antithesis of *The Rambler's* rhetorical embellishments.

Although Johnson knew the value of money, his diary entries demonstrate that his accounting often followed the dilatory pattern common to other parts of his life. The Yale editors note that Johnson often recorded events in the order that they returned to his mind rather than the order in which they occurred.⁸² Ironically, Johnson had resolved in 1766 to write a history of memory.⁸³ Johnson's accounting principles had little, therefore, in common with the Puritan diarist's or bookkeeper's concern to capture life accurately in all its orderly particulars. While *The Rambler* argued that biography should capture the minute details of daily life, Johnson's journals largely reflected the desultory practices of the mind's retrospective workings. His history of memory was in part a history of forgetting. Forgetting, however, was anathema to the Puritan conscience as God's trace in the track of time might be missed.

The transactions that stuck in Johnson's memory told their own oblique story. The entry for 2 January 1767 states:

Rose before 9, trifled. Pr. with Reynolds. Used the new prayer both night and morning.
Uxbridge 13–9
Wicomb 10–6
Tetsworth 10–6
If my Mother had lived till March she would have been eighty nine.⁸⁴

The entries are telegraphed. There are also bald leaps between the disparate subjects with little transition, these being the sparse highlights of a January day. The expenditure entries

⁸² Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, p. 101.

⁸³ Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, p. 100.

⁸⁴ Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, p. 113.

relate to three towns *en route* from London to Oxford, a journey he was then making, which the Yale editors suggest were coach stops. By following the money, it is possible to track Johnson's movements. We see how the account entry is sandwiched between the day's lived experience, which is reduced to an episode of prayer, and a meditation on his mother, probably provoked by the recent trip to Lichfield. It is the bare outline of a life, where the enveloping context, which would make narrative sense of what is recounted, is not stated, but has to be inferred. Events which intersect with his wider literary life are rare and they are dismissed in terse testaments, such as 'finished the life of Cowley'.⁸⁵ It is as though the diarist and the writer were separate people.

In other parts of the diaries, the account entries represent the sediment of a domestic life, covering, for instance, disbursements on napkins, tablecloths, coffeepots, spoons, candlesticks, snuff boxes and small salvers. They trace the mundane appurtenances of an eighteenth-century gentleman's life, upon which Johnson the writer would have scorned to expend prose, but which are brought into view through the lens of money. Johnson notes down expenditure even when others are paying. On 5 July 1774, he records travelling costs footed by the Thrales. In the prosaic but revealing world of money, Johnson's tacit patronage by the Thrales is laid bare. The part of Johnson's mind which downloaded numbers and financial detail, seemingly on auto-pilot, was sharply split off from the writer's verbal consciousness which eschewed such detail. *Homo economicus* was evidently Johnson's alter ego.

Johnson's self-accounting, perhaps unconsciously, revealed hidden aspects of his life. In particular, Johnson's charitable instincts, or the Christian concept of *caritas*, are inscribed in

⁸⁵ Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, p. 279.

the numbers which permeate the text.⁸⁶ Throughout the diaries, references are made to payments to individuals. Reading the entries, it is not immediately obvious that many commemorate acts of giving. It is only when we disinter the people behind the names that we realise that Johnson kept afloat a network of contacts, friends and dependents. This was attested by contemporary accounts. Johnson himself did not advertise his charitable giving, but the diaries' accounting makes this plain. For instance, on 25 July 1776, Johnson records that payments made or 'given away' totalled £1 14s.⁸⁷ On 6 November 1777, Johnson pays money to Mrs Desmoulins and to Miss Carmichael, two of the occupants who made up the extended menagerie that Johnson supported at Bolt Court. The entry for 23 October 1777, which includes a payment to 'Woman at door', provides a rare set of balanced accounts but characteristically his November expenditure is recorded out of order. They are failed accounts, like his failed resolutions: performatives which fail to perform. This was due to Johnson's accounting methods being driven by the random exigencies of memory, rather than by any methodical bookkeeping principles.

Johnson's accounting methods, however, also seemed to be designed to obscure rather than reveal his charitable giving. For instance, on 11 August 1777, the diaries record that Johnson disburses a total of £2 17s., a not inconsiderable sum, to four individuals in Lichfield including a 'Girl at door' and 'little Godwin'.⁸⁸ In relation to this entry, the Yale editors note that the blank after 'money given to strangers' may explain why Johnson was unable to make his books balance: he simply gave away the money in his pocket as long as it lasted. The 'balance' which merchants strove to achieve in their accounts frequently eluded Johnson. On

⁸⁶ In Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, Johnson defines 'charity' as 'Tenderness; kindness; love'. Johnson includes five quotations, including a citation from Hooker and one from Atterbury: '*Charity*, or a love of God, which works by a love of our neighbor, is greater than faith or hope'.

⁸⁷ Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, p. 261.

⁸⁸ Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, p. 274.

this occasion, the balance was made up of a missing sum represented by acts of giving to anonymous parties. The deficit in Johnson's financial accounts is balanced off by a surplus in moral worth. Characteristically, the story is narrated through numbers, not words. Johnson sometimes deliberately fudges his accounts. On 16 September 1782, he notes that Mrs White owes him 9s. 6d. but then crosses out the entry and marks it paid.⁸⁹ He treats a loan to his servant Frank Barber similarly the following day. In accounting terms, he is writing off a loan as though it were a bad debt when it is no such thing. In reality, the loan was a gift. Johnson's self-accounting was, therefore, informed by a different model of rationality. Erasing loans outstanding and missing out entries (representing pocket change given out as alms), Johnson was manipulating the accounts to assimilate the universe to his own idiosyncratic economic template, in a parody of hard-nosed business practice.

Johnson's accounting links the self to other selves in an economy of giving.⁹⁰ Marcel Mauss was later to argue that reciprocity underpinned cultures of giving and that property and money 'were for balancing accounts'.⁹¹ Johnson, by contrast, deliberately failed to balance his accounts and expected no return from his charitable giving. The inherent generosity of spirit, which is covert in the diaries, was overt in his other writings, and particularly in the sermons that he wrote for his friend Taylor, where charity is a central theme. 'Charity sermons', in fact, became a popular feature of mid-eighteenth-century preaching. 'Sermon 19' argues for the 'importance and necessity of the practice of charity', and the need to 'lay hold on the present opportunity' for its exercise.⁹² This was the essence of making time

⁸⁹ Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, p. 332.

⁹⁰ There is, of course, a considerable sociological literature associated with the concept of 'giving', following on from Marcel Mauss' seminal work of 1925, *The Gift* (London: Routledge, 2011).

⁹¹ Mauss, *The Gift*, p. 18.

⁹² Samuel Johnson, *Sermons*, ed. by Jean Hagstrum and James Gray, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson 23 vols (New Haven and London Yale: University Press, 1958–2019), XIV (1978), p. 206.

count; to prevent the poor from languishing ‘in the streets in miseries and in want’.⁹³ Moreover, ‘Sermon 19’ argues, that alms-giving should not be motivated by ‘desire of applause’ but should be visible only to ‘our Father which seeth in secret’.⁹⁴ Johnson’s accounting in the diary evades human readership, but is readily legible within God’s enclosed field of vision. Johnson’s open-handedness had little in common with the aristocrat’s insouciant liberality lauded by Steele. It was a recognition of the worth of others, irrespective of rank. Although Johnson equated property and rank with worth, he also argued vigorously, particularly in his famous critique of Soames Jenyns’ review, against the ‘miserics’ imposed by poverty, and against the view that poverty should be entailed on succeeding generations merely because ‘the ancestor happened to be poor’.⁹⁵

Mrs Thrale wrote that Johnson loved the poor as she has never seen anyone else do. Johnson argued, ‘what signifies, says someone, giving halfpence to common beggars? They only lay it out in gin or tobacco. And why should they be denied such sweeteners of their existence’.⁹⁶ Johnson’s munificence did not ostensibly chime with his Tory politics, but, as Greene and others have argued, Johnson was a far more complicated figure than the reactionary Tory stereotype of Macaulay’s imagining.⁹⁷ As ever, Johnson was a contradiction: he opposed radical views but adopted radical behaviour. In this respect, he followed William Law, who opposed the traditional view that charity was a means of finding favour with God, arguing that it flowed from the commandment to love thy neighbour as thyself. Johnson had argued in ‘Sermon 11’ that charitable giving should not be judgemental,

⁹³ Johnson, *Sermons*, XIV, p. 205.

⁹⁴ Johnson, *Sermons*, XIV, p. 210.

⁹⁵ Samuel Johnson, ‘Review Of ‘A Free Enquiry Into The Nature And Origin of Evil’ (1756), in *A Commentary on Mr Pope’s Principles of Morality, Or Essay on Man*, ed. by O. M. Brack, Jr, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London Yale: University Press, 1958–2019), XVII (2004) p. 409.

⁹⁶ Thrale, *Dr Johnson by Mrs Thrale*, p. 42.

⁹⁷ See in particular Donald Greene, *The Politics of Samuel Johnson*, 2nd edn (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1990), which argued that Johnson was a ‘radical conservative’.

rather ‘it is sufficient that our brother is in want; by which way he brought his want upon him, let us not too curiously inquire’.⁹⁸ The diaries demonstrated that charity was a way of connecting things through the language of money. They did not preach a spirit of giving, like the sermons; rather, in spite of Johnson’s inherent modesty, they actualised and performed it. Society institutionalised difference through its social and economic structures; Johnson’s giving erased difference.

Johnson, accordingly, stands revealed in the scrappy financial details, resolutions and lists imprinted in the diaries, which echoed the emergence of autobiography in account books in the early modern period. There was, however, one further way in which the material within the diaries reflected early modern practices, in particular, in relation to the use of commonplace books. According to Smyth, early modern life-writers used commonplace books to ‘curate’ their lives.⁹⁹ Johnson followed an analogous path. Boswell records that Johnson maintained a commonplace book, which was subsequently lost. *The Dictionary* itself was one vast commonplace book, stocked with the quotations and lore of a lifetime’s learning, as, indeed, was the *Lives of the English Poets*. Commonplace books were improvised texts with no clear boundaries. Assembling passages from favourite writers, the commonplace book represented an externalised map of self, constructed intertextually. Johnson’s diaries, and his wider writing, reflected a similar textual approach. Numerous quotations in various languages are embedded within the diaries. The diaries also included, in the final year of Johnson’s life, a text which became known as the *Repertorium*, consisting of eight leaves stitched together.¹⁰⁰ It comprises a miscellany of notes about reading in the tradition of the commonplace book, covering for instance, Pope’s *Letter to Savage*,

⁹⁸ Johnson, *Sermons*, XIV, p. 124.

⁹⁹ Smyth, *Autobiography*, pp. 123–59.

¹⁰⁰ See diary entry for ‘31 October 1784’, Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers and Annals*, I, p. 332.

Roscommon's *Life*, a list of early Church Fathers, as well as notes on a book of prayers which Johnson was thinking of compiling. It remained an incomplete project, like his *History of Memory*. Whilst the project foundered, it is salutary that Johnson's diaries begin with writing and accounts, but end in reading. Johnson's accounting was often despairingly self-critical; yet the numbers revealed how he had transcended the limitations of self through the economy of giving. His self-accounting, in the diaries, is couched in the plainest prose. *The Rambler*, by contrast, addresses similar concerns in a very different style, to which I turn in the remainder of this chapter.

The Ramblers: Property and the Self

The Rambler, published between 1750 and 1752, was composed in a relatively concentrated span of time, compared to the diaries which were written over a lifetime. The essays also explore a broader canvas of ideas than the diaries and make use of a wider field of learning and knowledge. The anxieties transmuted so starkly through the journals, also preoccupy Johnson the periodical writer, but are recast within the more measured formalities of the essay form. Where Baxter, Taylor, Bunyan and Clarke are the presiding spirits of the diaries, *The Rambler* cites, by contrast, Locke, Bacon and Montaigne. The essays are both more rhetorically fashioned and sceptical in temper than the diaries.

In this section, I argue that *The Rambler* reframes the notion of self-accounting, central to the diaries, in the discourse of commerce. Illustrations are also drawn from other Johnsonian texts, including *The Idler* (1758–60) and the *Lives of the English Poets*, to support the argument. In *The Rambler*, the self is seen as a form of property. Accounting for oneself, I argue, involves reclaiming possession of time by establishing a ledger of past and present

moments. This proves an elusive project. Self-possession, associated with the solidity of land and property and the virtues of frugality, is threatened by the destabilising values of the new mercantile world based around floating debt. In particular, Johnson links the increased incidence of fraudulent trading, associated with commerce, to dissimulation in the social sphere. For Johnson, both involve a bankruptcy of the self. Yet paradoxically, Johnson as author, adopted different roles, wearing the ‘mask’ of the Rambler, and in certain essays appeared to question whether the self has any real substance. The instability of the self however is counterpointed by rare moments of self-actualisation when the mind is positively engaged in action which connects with the outer world. In particular, the idea of obligation re-orientates the self towards others, forming the basis for human relations in the accounting, legal, and religious spheres.

The trope of property was an apt means for Johnson to interrogate notions of selfhood and, the essay, the ideal vehicle for these explorations. The essay was Johnson’s natural literary medium and, like the diary, had a considerable pre-history. The originators of the modern essay form, Montaigne and Bacon, are not only cited extensively throughout *The Rambler*, but also clearly influenced Johnson’s literary practice. The essay form tracked the change from knowledge systems based on traditional authority and citation to a more empirical approach, which tested truth by reference to personal experience or scientific experiment. In Foucault’s words, ‘*Commentary*, has yielded to *criticism*’.¹⁰¹ The essay constituted a sort of experiment, operating outside the traditional disciplines of knowledge and conventions of literary form. Montaigne famously had a medal struck, inscribed ‘What do I know?’.¹⁰² Graham Good argues that the essay does not seek certainty, but rather ‘accepts its

¹⁰¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), p. 80.

¹⁰² Richard Scholar, *Montaigne and the Art of Free Thinking* (Witney: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 98.

occasional, even accidental, nature'.¹⁰³ The essay offers 'knowledge of the moment' whose only unity is the informing self or creator of the text.¹⁰⁴ Theodor Adorno's apt analogy for the essay's unstructured ruminations is of a man compelled to speak a foreign language in a remote country without access to a dictionary, having to learn by trial and error.¹⁰⁵

The essay, rather than the extended narrative flow of the novel or the sustained argumentation of philosophic prose, suited Johnson's inclinations, precisely because he was not interested in imparting systematic knowledge, but was seeking to map the flicker and movement of thought itself. Johnson's writing often held together in uneasy suspension, contradictory currents of thought, giving rise to the presence of a 'double voice' or 'double register', as Lawrence Lipking has described it.¹⁰⁶ The title, *The Rambler*, attests to the loose-limbed intention behind the series. In *Rambler 5*, Johnson notes that 'few [men] know how to take a walk with a prospect of any other pleasure, than the same company would have afforded them at home'.¹⁰⁷ Whereas pacing in the diaries is used to fix worth, rambling in the essays figures the mind's freedom to engage with the plurality of experience on its own terms, rather than following a strict path. Johnson's vast serpentine sentences mimicked the proliferating flow of thought. The language used, whilst formal, is also conversational. John Bender argues that formal oral persuasion, the motivating force behind classical rhetoric, was increasingly replaced during the eighteenth century by socially motivated forms, such as conversation, letters and essays.¹⁰⁸ The essay is, in part, a conversation with an imagined reader, whereas the voice of the diaries is intended only for 'The Almighty's'

¹⁰³ Graham Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 4.

¹⁰⁴ Good, *The Observing Self*, p. 8.

¹⁰⁵ T. W. Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', *New German Critique*, 32 (1984), 151–71 (p. 161).

¹⁰⁶ Lawrence Lipking, *Samuel Johnson: The Life of an Author* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 243.

¹⁰⁷ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 28.

¹⁰⁸ John Bender, *Ends of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 4

hearing. If it is a conversation, however, as in life, it is one constructed on Johnson's own terms. Johnson is also, in part, writing letters to himself as *Rambler 115* indicates:

This art of happiness has long been practiced by periodical writers [...] When we think our excellences overlooked [...] we sit down with great composure and write a letter to ourselves. The correspondent whose character we assume, always addresses us with the deference due to a superior intelligence.¹⁰⁹

At the heart of *The Rambler*, I argue, is the notion of time as a possession or property, which must not be squandered, but prudently conserved in the same way as a physical asset. This conceit is a rhetorical re-fashioning of the idea of making time count, found in the diaries. The notion of property is also linked to the self and the necessity of making an account of oneself. The integrity of the self is associated with physical assets, land and property, which the new commercial world with its more intangible systems of credit and debt, appeared to challenge. It was perhaps unsurprising that Johnson used property as a trope to explore issues of identity. Property was a central fact of eighteenth-century life, as a number of scholars have argued.¹¹⁰ To be eligible to vote in parliamentary elections, a man needed to possess land with a taxable value of at least 40s. per annum, and only landowners with considerable holdings were permitted to stand for a seat or borough. Between the Restoration and the death of George III, 190 capital offences were added to the statute books in England and Wales, the bulk of which related to crimes against property.¹¹¹ Land or property accordingly represented a bulwark against 'the new world of floating debt, international trade and paper credit'.¹¹² Johnson was himself a man of property, leaving in his will £2,300 in cash and 3%

¹⁰⁹ Johnson, *The Rambler*, V, p. 247.

¹¹⁰ See for instance: *Property: Mainstream and Critical Positions*, ed. by C. B. Macpherson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978); Mark Rose, *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) and James Raven, *Judging New Wealth: Popular Publishing and Response to Commerce in England, 1750–1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

¹¹¹ Leon Radzinowicz, *A History of English Criminal Law and its Administration from 1750: The Movement for Reform*, vol. 1 (London: Stevens and Sons, 1948), p. 4.

¹¹² Hart, *Samuel Johnson and the Culture of Property*, p. 3.

annuities as well as his Lichfield property. Chambers' *A Course of Lectures on the English Law* (1767–73), to which Johnson contributed, is on one level a disquisition on personal and property rights. Property underwrote the stability of society.

Property was however contested in terms of its signification. As C. B. Macpherson has argued, the meaning of property changes over time, particularly in relation to the expectations that society, or its dominant classes, have about the purposes that the institution of property serves.¹¹³ In the seventeenth century, Macpherson argues:

[...] the word property was often used, as a matter of course, in a sense that was extraordinarily wide: men were said to have a property not only in land and goods and in claims on revenue from leases, mortgages, patents, monopolies, and so on, but also a property in their lives and liberties.¹¹⁴

The narrowing of the word's meaning to things owned or sold started at the end of the seventeenth century with the emergence of the capitalist market economy and the replacement of the old limited rights in land and objects by virtually unlimited rights.

Johnson's writings reflected the older understanding of property as relating both to objects but also to life and liberty.

In *The Rambler*, eighteenth-century anxieties about property rights and the defence of property are transferred to the domain of time and identity. In *Idler 14*, Johnson was to later argue that 'Time, therefore ought, above all other kinds of property, to be free from invasion'.¹¹⁵ Time is seen as a possession of precarious solidity which is linked to the being of the subject. The intertwining of property and identity was a preoccupation of late

¹¹³ *Property*, ed. by Macpherson, p. 1.

¹¹⁴ *Property*, ed. by Macpherson, p. 7.

¹¹⁵ Johnson, *The Idler and The Adventurer*, II, p. 46.

seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century thinkers. Locke, who is cited widely throughout *The Rambler*, was the first writer to argue for an ‘individual right of unlimited appropriation’.¹¹⁶ Locke famously stated in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), that ‘Though the Earth, and all inferior Creatures be common to all Men, yet every man has a *Property* in his own *Person*. This nobody has a right to but himself’.¹¹⁷ The stability of the self was premised upon self-possession. Whilst property underpinned subordination, Johnson also argued in *Rambler* 58 that ‘Wealth cannot confer greatness’ and that self-possession is every man’s right, which explained in part his vehement opposition to slavery.¹¹⁸

Self-possession, as in the diaries, is linked to an individual’s ability to possess and account for how they have spent their time. Time is seen as a property which can be dissipated.

Rambler 8 encapsulates this view eloquently:

If the most active and industrious of mankind was able, at the close of life, to recollect distinctly his past moments, and distribute them, in a regular account, according to the manner in which they have been spent, it is scarcely to be imagined how few would be marked out to the mind, by any permanent or visible effects how small a proportion his real action would bear to his seeing possibilities of action, how many chasms he would find of wide and continued vacuity, and how many interstitial spaces unfilled, even in the most tumultuous hurries of business, and the most eager vehemence of pursuit.¹¹⁹

Accounting for oneself involves establishing a ledger of recorded moments. The re-collection of these moments is, accordingly, an act of self-creation and a tallying up of what the expenditure of time has amounted to. Johnson doggedly believed in free will; accordingly, each instant of time represents an opportunity to exercise moral choice. The *Dictionary* defines free will as ‘the power of directing our actions without restraint by

¹¹⁶ *Property*, ed. by Macpherson, p. 13.

¹¹⁷ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. by Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 305–06.

¹¹⁸ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 313.

¹¹⁹ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 41.

necessity or fate' and illustrates the definition via a supporting citation from Locke.¹²⁰

Johnson sees the inactive life as full of holes, and time as somehow incomplete, if thought does not lead to active performance. This results in another version of the failed performative: breaching a promise to oneself to link the intangible world of thought with the physical realm of action.

Johnson develops this thought through an extended metaphor in which he cites 'modern philosophers' who maintain that 'if all matter were compressed to perfect solidity, it might be contained in a cube of a few feet'.¹²¹ In the same way, Johnson argues:

[...] if all the employment of life were crowded into the time which it really occupied, perhaps a few weeks, days, or hours, would be sufficient for its accomplishment, so far as the mind was engaged in the performance. For such is the inequality of our intellectual faculties, that we contrive in minutes what we execute in years, and the soul often stands an idle spectator of the labour of hands, and expedition of the feet.¹²²

The dualism invoked by Johnson, where the mind seemingly functions only as a passive witness to events, is expanded on in *Rambler 108* which argues that when time spent in sleep and ephemeral activity is 'deducted' from the total time available 'we shall find that part of our duration very small of which we can truly call ourselves masters'.¹²³ Performance is to be distinguished from social dissimulation or acting; rather it is linked to work or the positive 'employment' of the mind. Less active in later life, the indefatigable Samuel Pepys

¹²⁰ Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*: the Locke citation states: 'We have a power to suspend the prosecution of this or that desire; this seems to me the source of all liberty; in this seems to consist that which is improperly called freewill'.

¹²¹ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 41. It is not clear which 'philosophers' are referred to here by Johnson, but it may be relevant that Isaac Newton, in the first of his 'Four Letters to Bentley' (1692), speculated that if space were finite, and matter were scattered evenly throughout space, the matter on the outside would, by its gravity, be attracted to the matter on the inside, and compose 'one great spherical mass.' See *The Newton Project*, 4r–5r <<http://www.newtonproject.ox.ac.uk/view/texts/normalized/THEM00254>> [accessed 8 July 2019].

¹²² Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 41.

¹²³ Johnson, *The Rambler*, IV, p. 210.

nonetheless consoled himself by reflecting, ‘thinking, I take it, is working’.¹²⁴ The *Dictionary* defines the term in explicitly performative terms: ‘the execution of something promised’.¹²⁵ Locke also argued that a man is only a ‘free agent’ when ‘the mind regains the power to stop or continue [...] any of these motions of the body without’.¹²⁶ The dissociation of mind and body leads to a loss of agency, reducing the self to an ‘idle spectator.’ The diaries’ pervading tension between bodily passions and spiritual will is, accordingly, translated into the language of eighteenth-century rationalism. Merely going through the motions is seen as a form of spiritual death as *Rambler 41* argues: ‘Life, in which nothing has been done or suffered to distinguish one day from another, is to him that has passed it, as if it had never been’.¹²⁷ This deadening of sensibility is also associated in *Rambler 78* with habit or ‘custom’, accordingly ‘nothing can strongly strike or affect us, but what is rare and sudden’.¹²⁸ Such events leave a mark in time due to their singular forcefulness but are ‘very little subject to the regulation of the will’.¹²⁹ The redemption of time is paradoxically associated both with active mental ‘performance’ but also with violent sensations which bypass the mind’s filters.

The re-collection of time enables individuals to account for themselves and also acts as a self-reflective spur to action as *Rambler 41* argues: ‘[memory] places those images before the mind upon which the judgment is to be exercised, and which treasures up the determinations that are once passed, as the rules of future actions’.¹³⁰ *The Rambler* also

¹²⁴ *Particular Friends: The Correspondence of Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn*, ed. by Guy de la Bedoyere (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1997), p. 274.

¹²⁵ Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*: the entry includes a citation from Robert South, ‘The only means to make him successful in the performance of these great works, was to be above contempt’.

¹²⁶ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by John W. Yolton (London: J. M. Dent, 1977), p. 110.

¹²⁷ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 225

¹²⁸ Johnson, *The Rambler*, IV, p. 46.

¹²⁹ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 46.

¹³⁰ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 223.

argues that introspection may lead to a splitting of the self. In *Rambler 29*, Johnson argues for the ‘necessity of setting the world at a distance from us, when we are to take a survey of ourselves’.¹³¹ The notion of the ‘surveyor’, or the ‘spectator’ referred to in *Rambler 8*, introduces an element of self-objectification. Johnson argues that a man must consider his self ‘as if there were no other beings in the world but God and ourselves’.¹³² Only by weakening ‘the influence of external objects’ can self-knowledge flower.¹³³ Johnson’s self-accounting, here, is less concerned with how the self is actualised in action than how it sees itself plain. Adam Smith’s notion of the ‘impartial spectator’ is frequently referenced in discussions of how conceptions of the self evolved in eighteenth-century thought. The idea of the ‘impartial spectator’ involves a sense of doubleness which undermines stability of identity, as Dror Wahrman has argued.¹³⁴ Similar ideas were expressed by Shaftesbury whom Johnson had also read. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Smith, although not a writer congenial to Johnson, noted that:

When I endeavour to examine my own conduct [...] it is evident that, in all such cases, I divide myself, as it were, into two persons; and that I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined and judged of.¹³⁵

There is, however, no vantage point from which the self can be observed without recourse to meta-analysis. Only God, who sits outside the contingent world, as the Perpetual Superintendent of *Rambler 185*, is able to hold identity and being in one gaze.¹³⁶ *Rambler 41* argues that so few are the hours in which a person can be said to be fully alive and present to

¹³¹ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 156.

¹³² Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 156: Johnson cites the churchman, William Chillingworth here.

¹³³ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 156.

¹³⁴ Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 189.

¹³⁵ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 135.

¹³⁶ Johnson, *The Rambler*, V, p. 205.

themselves, that ‘we are forced to have recourse every moment to the past and future for supplemental satisfactions, and relieve the vacuities of our being, by recollection of former passages, or anticipation of events to come’.¹³⁷ Every instant is divided from itself by proleptic or anterior visions of self-actualisation. The self cannot be accounted for as it is perpetually displaced at each instant by the ghost of a future yet to happen or by the shadow of a past already vanished. Whilst the past has a degree of solidity, and can form the basis for action, the present is self-divided and in ‘perpetual motion’ and futurity is seen as ‘floating at large’.¹³⁸

Accordingly, as in the diaries, Johnson’s self-accounting yields mixed results: it can form the basis for action but can also lead to paralysis of the will. Johnson, therefore, argued in *Rambler 47* that the only ‘safe and general antidote against sorrow, is employment’.¹³⁹ It was a common eighteenth-century nostrum. David Hume found that he could only escape the inhibiting consequences of his radically sceptical enquires by embracing ‘action and employment, and the occupations of common life’.¹⁴⁰ John Locke argued more broadly that employment or ‘*Labour*, in the Beginning, gave a *Right of Property*’, establishing employment or useful activity as the foundation of identity.¹⁴¹

Self-accounting also involves maintaining the integrity of identity as though it were personal property which might be dissipated through profligacy or indebtedness. Identity may be further weakened through dissimulation which is seen as a form of false trading. The trope of property, therefore, engages the psychological and economic spheres simultaneously.

¹³⁷ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 221.

¹³⁸ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 45.

¹³⁹ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 257.

¹⁴⁰ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Peter Millican (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 115.

¹⁴¹ *Property*, ed. by Macpherson, p. 25.

Johnson's concerns paralleled and arose from the emergence of a more free-wheeling commercial world. In the diaries, sound economy was a function of the religious care that a Christian should apply to their business affairs. In *The Rambler*, by contrast, Johnson's emphasis on the importance of frugality is grounded in principles of rational economic orderliness. *Rambler 53* pronounces that:

It appears that frugality is necessary even to complete the pleasure of expense; for it may be generally remarked of those who squander what they know their fortune not sufficient to allow, that in their most jovial expense, there always breaks out some proof of discontent [...] they murmur at their own enjoyments, and poison the bowl of pleasure by reflexion on the cost.¹⁴²

Unnecessary expense is seen as a form of self-depletion, where the asset of pleasure is negated by the liability of cost. Johnson states in *Rambler 58* that:

it may be laid down as a rule never to be broken, that 'a man's voluntary expense should not exceed his revenue.' A maxim so obvious and incontrovertible, that the civil law ranks the prodigal with the madman, and debars them equally from the conduct of their own affairs.¹⁴³

Johnson equates prodigality with madness, both involving a bankruptcy of the self. Too much expenditure of self may even result, as *Rambler 53* argues, in a form of death-wish where the prodigal continue their free-spending 'with a kind of wild desperation [...] as criminals brave the gallows'.¹⁴⁴

The ultimate consequence of profligacy was bankruptcy. The intertwining of financial and spiritual ruin was a common topos of eighteenth-century culture. Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress* (1732–33) vividly chronicled the consequences of moral and spiritual ruin.

Johnson's concerns about moral dissipation, therefore, reflected wider concerns throughout

¹⁴² Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 288.

¹⁴³ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 308.

¹⁴⁴ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 288.

society. The Bankruptcy Acts of 1705 and 1732 were a response to rising concerns about the more unsavoury aspects of mercantile trade. Linda Colley argues that because of the Mint's inability to produce sufficient coinage, credit assumed a key role in Britain's economy.¹⁴⁵ Shopkeepers purchased goods on credit and were in turn paid in credit since many of their customers had no regular income. Wholesale merchants encouraged generous credit arrangements for export traders, who would take a year or more to repay their debt. John Brewer also describes how ordinary people were often trapped in a complex web of financial indebtedness:

Inland bills of exchange passed between the provincial shopkeeper and the London wholesaler; small masters, craftsmen and farmers raised money by signing short-term bonds or mortgaging their property; local attorneys encouraged widows to lend to those in need of capital; shop-keepers allowed their customers to 'pay on tick'; tradesmen extended credit to one another; even labourers' pay was sometimes given in the form of credit rather than cash.¹⁴⁶

The wealth of the merchant class reached a 'critical mass' in the 1750s as Nicholas Hudson argues, which coincided with the publication of *The Rambler*.¹⁴⁷ Whilst Johnson was not opposed to the market economy, Boswell quoted him as stating dismissively that 'Trade is like gaming'.¹⁴⁸ Many feared, particularly on the Tory side, that commerce would destabilise society. Johnson echoed these fears in *Rambler 189*:

The commercial world is very frequently put into confusion by the bankruptcy of merchants, that assumed the splendour of wealth only to obtain the privilege of trading with the stock of other men, and of contracting debts which nothing but lucky

¹⁴⁵ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging The Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 66–67.

¹⁴⁶ John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1990) p. 18.

¹⁴⁷ Nicholas Hudson, 'Johnson, the 1750s, and the Rise of the Middle Class', in *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*, vol. 13, ed. by Paul J. Korshin and Jack Lynch (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 2002), pp. 31–51 (p. 32).

¹⁴⁸ James Boswell, *Journal of a Tour to The Hebrides with Samuel Johnson L.L.D, 1773*, ed. by Frederick A. Pottle and Charles H. Bennett, The Yale Edition of the Private Papers of James Boswell, (Melbourne, London, Toronto: Heinemann, 1963), p. 193.

casualties could enable them to pay; till after having supported their appearance while by a tumultuary magnificence of boundless traffick, they sink at once, and drag down into poverty those whom their equipages has induced to trust them.’¹⁴⁹

Johnson regarded the commercial world as a place of exorbitant representations, challenging older traditions where a gentleman’s word acted as his bond. Promises to repay may have appeared less binding when filtered via intermediaries rather than by direct agreement between two parties. Johnson was consistently critical of the role of intermediary functions or persons interposing themselves as supplements between individuals and between seller and consumer.¹⁵⁰ He saw speculation and credit as akin to forms of aborted performance which might spread the contagion of debt more widely throughout society. They were not only a threat to the social order but also provided a parallel to the amorphous fears that invaded his inner life, which the diaries describe. Johnson appeared to be engaging two registers of discourse simultaneously. He associated self-possession with the solidity of physical objects: coinage, land and property. By contrast, credit lacked tangibility and intermediary arrangements threatened self-possession by placing access to the world at one remove. Boswell compared Johnson’s shadowy apprehensions to the wild beasts of the Arena at the ‘Colisaeum’ in Rome, which Johnson the gladiator had perpetually to stave off.¹⁵¹ In *The Rambler*, these fears are associated symbolically with the sea which threatens to engulf those who mortgage their identity by eroding boundaries, signalling a breakdown in the order of things. In *Rambler 185*, Johnson argues that humankind is enshrouded in a ‘universal uncertainty’ and compares the journey of life to a voyage on

¹⁴⁹ Johnson, *The Rambler*, V, p. 225.

¹⁵⁰ See Aaron Stavisky, ‘Samuel Johnson and the Market Economy’, in *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual, Volume 13*, ed. by Korshin and Lynch, pp. 69–101 (p. 83). Stavisky argues that, in some instances, Johnson accepted the need for specialist trading intermediaries, citing his arguments in favour of the ‘tacksmen’ in *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*.

¹⁵¹ Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson* (1934), IV), p. 102.

a tempestuous sea, in quest of some port, where we expect to find rest [...] we are not only in danger of sinking in the way, but [...] of being driven from the course by the changes of the wind.¹⁵²

Johnson, therefore, used the action of the sea to figure disorder in both the inner and outer worlds. Johnson's use of the metaphor may have had its roots in the 'South Sea Bubble' scandal of 1720. The event functioned for Johnson, like the Interregnum, as a historical pivot point when the stability of society was threatened by unconstrained individualism.¹⁵³ The ministry of Robert Walpole (1721–42), which commenced in the immediate aftermath of the scandal, was characterised as one of commercial greed in Johnson's *London: A Poem* (1738) and 'Marmor Norfolciense' (1739).¹⁵⁴ Walpole was also criticised in Gordon and Trenchard's *Cato's Letters* (1720–23), which as Jacob Soll describes, called for the 'antique republican virtues of transparent, accountable government through the opening of government books and the auditing of government ministers'.¹⁵⁵ Johnson associated Walpole with the commercial interests and believed that he had not been held to account for the scandal, which he subsequently referenced in *Idler 10*, where Jack Sneaker is satirised as believing that 'the scheme of the South Sea was well intended'.¹⁵⁶ Later, in 'Young', Young's wealth is described as having 'been swallowed up by the South-Sea'.¹⁵⁷ In 'Gay',

¹⁵² Johnson, *The Rambler*, V, p. 204.

¹⁵³ A joint-stock company, established as a public-private partnership to reduce the cost of national debt, was granted a monopoly of trade with South America but with little prospect of any real trade. The company collapsed, following a rapid rise and fall of its share price, resulting in many investors being ruined. Robert Walpole persuaded the state to intervene financially to rescue the South Sea Company. Although this action stabilised financial markets, a committee of 1721 found that many of the Cabinet involved in approving the bailout were motivated by corruption. See Jacob Soll, *The Reckoning: Financial Accountability and the Making and Breaking of Nations* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), pp. 106–112.

¹⁵⁴ In 'Marmor Norfolciense' (1739), in *Political Writings*, ed. by Donald J. Greene, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London Yale: University Press, 1958–2019), X (1977), p. 50, Johnson refers to the rumours that Walpole's alleged corruption was serviced by the King's civil list revenues. He further alludes to the Sinking Fund that Walpole established to repay the national debt, which he later used to cover current spending. Adam Smith later criticised the use of sinking funds in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), because they encouraged governments to ignore debt and contract new debt.

¹⁵⁵ Soll, *The Reckoning*, p. 112.

¹⁵⁶ Johnson, *The Idler and The Adventurer*, II, p. 35.

¹⁵⁷ Johnson, *The Lives of the English Poets*, XXIII, p. 1380.

moreover, Johnson notes that Gay held South Sea stock and ‘Gay sunk the calamity so low that his life became in danger’.¹⁵⁸ The scandal engulfed its victims both psychologically and financially, writers being amongst those caught in the cross-fire. The event seemed to haunt Johnson’s writing, crystallising his fears about the floating, unstable forces which threatened both his fragile psyche and civil society.

The surrounding historical context also informed other aspects of Johnson’s exploration of the self in *The Rambler*. *Rambler 6* treats the notion of prodigality in explicitly psychological terms, but also alludes to the changing nature of society, bringing commercial adventurism and domestic entertainment into the same ambit. To attain ‘intellectual dignity’, Johnson argues, it is necessary to avail oneself of ‘resources of pleasure, which may not be wholly at the mercy of accident’.¹⁵⁹ Johnson considered that knowledge and power evolved, in part, arbitrarily, and that ‘the accidental prescriptions of authority’ were often ‘confounded with the laws of nature’.¹⁶⁰ The word ‘accident’ appears throughout *The Rambler*. *The Dictionary* illustrates the term by reference to Swift’s observation that the Reformation owed nothing to Henry VIII’s intentions, ‘He was only an instrument of it’.¹⁶¹ *Rambler 184* argues that ‘many actions must result from arbitrary election’.¹⁶² If a person’s actions are the products of chance, their ability to exercise agency and make rational choices is diminished. This was a profoundly sceptical notion. Johnson proceeds in *Rambler 6* to consider those, ‘who not being chained down by their condition to a regular and stated allotment of their hours [...] are compelled to try all the arts of destroying time’.¹⁶³ Johnson cites the example of a family

¹⁵⁸ Johnson, *The Lives of the English Poets*, XXII, p. 796.

¹⁵⁹ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 31.

¹⁶⁰ Johnson, *The Rambler*, V, p. 66.

¹⁶¹ Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*.

¹⁶² Johnson, *The Rambler*, V, p. 203.

¹⁶³ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 31.

consumed by disappointment at the failure of a card party. The conjoining of chance and trivial activity in the game of cards is a metaphor for a loss of agency. This form of wastefulness is seen as reckless trading: ‘The numberless expedients practiced by this class of mortals to alleviate the burthen of life, is not less shameful, nor, perhaps, much less pitiable, than those to which a trader on the edge of bankruptcy is reduced’.¹⁶⁴

Bankruptcy was also linked to the presentation of self in social interaction, in the form of dissimulation. Dissimulation, or ‘affectation’, is described as an ‘art of counterfeiting’ and ‘he who subsists upon affectation [...] like a desperate adventurer in commerce [...] takes up reputation upon trust, mortgages possessions which he never had, and enjoys, to the fatal hour of bankruptcy [...] the unnecessary splendour of borrowed riches’.¹⁶⁵ In *Rambler 20*, Johnson also criticises those who dissimulate as seeking ‘to wear a mask for life’.¹⁶⁶

Dissimulation, therefore, involved false trading under the ‘mask’ of an assumed identity.

Yet, ironically, this was precisely how Johnson described his own Rambler persona in the final essay of the series, *Rambler 208*, where he claims the privilege of ‘every nameless writer [...] “A Mask, says Castiglione, confers a right of acting and speaking with less restraint, even when the writer happens to be known”’.¹⁶⁷ Although Johnson condemned dissimulation, he himself, hid behind the mask of ‘The Rambler’, subverting any naive equation of the author with the real person. In *Rambler 10*, a lady writes to the Rambler, desirous of knowing ‘by what other name she may direct to him [...] what are his set of friends, his amusements’.¹⁶⁸ Johnson refers his questioner to the philosopher who, when asked what he carried under his cloak, replied, “I carry it there”, says he, “that you may not

¹⁶⁴ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 31.

¹⁶⁵ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 113.

¹⁶⁶ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 112.

¹⁶⁷ Johnson, *The Rambler*, V, p. 317.

¹⁶⁸ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 52.

see it”¹⁶⁹ Johnson’s withholding of his name bespoke the fluidity and elusiveness of authorial identity which contrasted with the stability of self he sought in his self-reflections. *Rambler 14* even compares authors to oriental monarchs who hid in their palaces to avoid human contact; invoking the degenerate Sardanapalus, whom a trespasser might have discovered, ‘not consulting upon laws [...] but employed in feminine amusements’.¹⁷⁰ Comparing the author to Sardanapalus was singular, seemingly hinting at the ambiguous identity of the creative self. Johnson, evidently, deplored role-play in social intercourse but appeared to embrace it in his writing practice.

If Johnson believed that society encouraged people to adopt false identities, he also worried, more fundamentally, that the self might lack substance and could be enslaved by property. Locke, as noted, had argued that property included an individual’s own person, pleasures and liberties, but *The Rambler* appears to question whether their pursuit is worthwhile or even achievable. Keith Thomas in *The Ends of Life* notes that the word ‘fulfilment’ does not feature in Johnson’s *Dictionary* and argues that ideas about the ‘ends of life’ changed radically in the early modern period as people juggled often conflicting aims relating to wealth, work, friendship and religion. The idea that each person had an ‘inner self’ became more prevalent.¹⁷¹ The period also coincided with the rise of a new consumerist ideology which accepted ‘the pursuit of consumer goods as a valid object of human endeavour, and recognising that no limit, could or should, be put to it.’¹⁷² The word ‘commodity’ suggested an object that was inherently desirable.

¹⁶⁹ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 52.

¹⁷⁰ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, pp. 74–75.

¹⁷¹ Keith Thomas, *The Ends of Life: Roads to Fulfilment in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 8.

¹⁷² Thomas, *The Ends of Life*, p. 140.

The new consumerism challenged traditional Christian and Stoic thinking which encouraged detachment from objects and luxuries. But by the mid-eighteenth century, consumerism had made its mark: goods that had been rare before, such as tea, books, clocks, newspapers, wallpaper and curtains had become commonplace. *The Rambler*, however, makes remarkably little reference to such commodities or to the appurtenances of domestic interiors. One of the few essays where Johnson describes a domestic setting in any detail is *Rambler 200*, which is a satire of his friend Garrick's pride in his house and possessions. Garrick is characterised as 'Prospero' in the piece, Johnson as 'Asper'.¹⁷³ For Prospero-Garrick, goods are signifiers of status which raise him above the level of his old friend, Asper-Johnson, but for Johnson they signify only a displacement of self into objects. Johnson despised such consumer fetishism, as we would now term it. In *Rambler 178*, however, Johnson's more fundamental concern was that 'the reigning error of mankind is, that we are not content with the conditions on which the goods of life are granted'.¹⁷⁴ In *Rambler 184*, he further noted that 'nothing which has life for its basis, can boast much stability'.¹⁷⁵ For Johnson, none of the goods on offer, psychological or material, sufficed to efface a sense of emptiness or lack. He believed that property helped define a man's worth. But property, Johnson also argued, is 'nothing in itself [...] its value is only in that which it can purchase'.¹⁷⁶ Property is, accordingly, alienated from its owner by being relegated to a medium of exchange. Johnson also suggests that fulfilment is impossible, and by

¹⁷³ It is not certain why Garrick is represented as 'Prospero'; it may have been due to the character's theatrical association and his role, like Garrick, as actor-director of the play's 'revels'. 'Asper', the acerbic narrator of Ben Jonson's *Every Man out of His Humour* (1599), often seen as a Jonson-surrogate, may represent the role of the satirist, that Johnson himself adopted in *Rambler 200*.

¹⁷⁴ Johnson, *The Rambler*, V, p. 174.

¹⁷⁵ Johnson, *The Rambler*, V, pp. 204–05.

¹⁷⁶ Johnson, *The Rambler*, V, p. 313.

implication, that even the self itself may be displaced in an infinite regression of substitutions like a commercial asset.

The issue of intellectual copyright crystallised the dilemma. Even Johnson's right to regard his literary work as his own property was snared in a web of commercial exchange. Alvin Kernan argues that the identity and rights of the author were established in the eighteenth century by being recognised in law.¹⁷⁷ The Copyright Act of 1709 for the first time protected an author's right to assert ownership of their texts as their property, but such autonomy was bought at a price. Writing *The Rambler* was a contractual obligation, which Johnson occasionally found irksome. Written to order, Johnson composed two essays a week for *The Rambler* between 1750–52 and, in his final *Rambler* 208, confessed that, 'he that condemns himself to compose on a stated date, will often bring to his task an attention dissipated, a memory embarrassed, an imagination overwhelmed'.¹⁷⁸ *Rambler* 134 describes how Johnson sifted potential topics until 'awakened from this dream of study by a summons from the press'.¹⁷⁹ A 'summons' involved a defendant being directed by an order of the court to attend a legal proceedings. Authorship on these terms was less an expression of autonomy than a mandated activity performed to satisfy a legal obligation. While Johnson considered his *Ramblers* his 'wine', he may have felt that, on occasion, he was no different from the grub-street writers that he mocked in *Rambler* 145, as 'drudges of the pen [...] who have no other care than to deliver their tale of wares at the stated time'.¹⁸⁰ Fussell argues that, 'obsessed by

¹⁷⁷ Alvin Kernan, *Samuel Johnson & the Impact of Print* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 98.

¹⁷⁸ Johnson, *The Rambler*, V, p. 318.

¹⁷⁹ Johnson, *The Rambler*, IV, p. 345.

¹⁸⁰ Johnson, *The Rambler*, V, p. 10.

his own contractual obligations, [Johnson] instinctively made obligation-both divine and social-one of the central topics of the *Rambler*'.¹⁸¹

Fussell is right in seeing obligation, both moral and theological, as key to *The Rambler*.

Johnson's treatment of the concept was far from straightforward, but involved a sense of how the self relates to other selves or God. Although Johnson may sometimes have rued the contractual obligations placed on him as a writer, he nonetheless delivered his copy on time. An obligation was, after all, akin to making a promise. Eighteenth-century jurisprudence made this clear, as Warren Swain argues, quoting the contemporary jurist Richard Wooddeson, who argued that contract law 'implies a promise'.¹⁸² Johnson was well versed in law and was a friend of Robert Chambers from the 1750s, who later placed the notion of the 'implied contract' at the centre of his treatment of obligation, arguing that an 'implied contract is violated when either of the parties to the transaction refuses to act according to the known and natural relation of things as acknowledged by the customary commerce of life'.¹⁸³

Obligation, in the contractual sense, also related in part to the functioning of discourse. If one gave one's word, it could be counted on. Language, accordingly, had substance and meaning. Breaking a promise resulted in counterfeit discourse. *Rambler 8* argues, as we have seen, that the mind is only really alive when it is engaged in performance. A promise is, therefore, a performance which unites language and action. In the economic realm, Johnson saw indebtedness as the most basic breach of financial obligation. But in the same way that, in the diaries, Johnson allows charitable instinct to override strict accounting principle; in the

¹⁸¹ Fussell, *Samuel Johnson*, p. 152.

¹⁸² Warren Swain, *The Law of Contract 1670–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 123.

¹⁸³ Robert Chambers, *A Course of Lectures Delivered on English Law Delivered at the University of Oxford 1767–73*, ed. by Thomas Curley, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), II, p. 224.

essays he also argues that limits should be placed on obligation. In particular, he considered that the contemporary treatment of debtors breached society's broader obligations in relation to natural justice. In *Idlers* 22 and 38, Johnson criticised creditors who effectively left debtors to rot in debtors' jails. Jerry White has demonstrated that eighteenth-century debtors were sometimes incarcerated on flimsy grounds.¹⁸⁴ Johnson's criticisms may have been stirred by his own experience of being rescued from a sponging house by Samuel Richardson in 1756. Johnson considered that the punishment should fit the crime, distinguishing between those who breached obligation through indigence and those wealthy speculators who made false representations as a result of careless avarice.

Johnson also linked obligation in a novel way to the charitable instinct. In *Rambler* 81, Johnson distinguishes between 'debts of justice' and 'debts of charity.' A debt of justice is a payment required by the law in accordance with what is 'universally necessary'. It is merely responding to an external requirement.¹⁸⁵ By contrast, a 'debt of charity' involves the giver in an 'elective and voluntary' choice imbued with some sense of 'liberality and kindness'.¹⁸⁶ That charitable giving is defined as a debt appears singular on first consideration. But by contrasting charitable payments with those made pursuant to a legal requirement, Johnson ascribes a different sense to the notion of debt. The debt becomes an obligation that the bestower places upon themselves, motivated by natural instincts — 'our affections' — rather than determined by a contractual requirement.¹⁸⁷ Johnson looked back to older notions of charity which encouraged donors to give, as Donna Andrew argues, 'without discrimination,

¹⁸⁴ Jerry White, *Mansions of Misery: A Biography of the Marshalsea Debtors' Prison* (London: Vintage, 2017).

¹⁸⁵ Johnson, *The Rambler*, IV, p. 63.

¹⁸⁶ Johnson, *The Rambler*, IV, p. 63.

¹⁸⁷ Johnson, *The Rambler*, IV, p. 63.

and without hope of return'.¹⁸⁸ Older theologians had argued that property was held on trust from God, and that charity, as Isaac Barrow, the late seventeenth-century divine, contended, involved lending 'our money to God, who repays with vast usury'.¹⁸⁹

An outpouring of charitable works in the 1740s and 1750s, particularly in London, was partly driven by the more pragmatic attitudes of the 'political arithmeticians' who focused on the impact of the benefits to society of reducing indigence.¹⁹⁰ Whilst Johnson had some involvement with institutional charities, his liberality was, as we have seen, personal and understated. Johnson's emphasis on the 'affections', in particular, internalised the charitable motive. Johnson defined 'affection' in the *Dictionary* as 'Love; kindness; goodwill to some person; often with *to*, or *towards*, before the person'.¹⁹¹ The stirring of the affections involved an empathic movement outwards beyond the limits of the self, epitomised in Johnson's open-handedness which the diaries demonstrated. Johnson elsewhere in *Rambler 60* ascribed a related role to the imagination, 'all joy or sorrow for the happiness or calamities of others is produced by an act of imagination'.¹⁹² Although different in kind, aesthetic receptivity and the actions of the 'affections' both involved an enlargement of the human sympathies. This was best demonstrated by a pamphlet that Johnson wrote in support of the republican Thomas Hollis who argued for the provision of financial assistance to French prisoners during the Seven Years War. Johnson argued that charity should not stop at national boundaries, rather, 'charity is best of which the consequences are most extensive:

¹⁸⁸ Donna T. Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 3.

¹⁸⁹ Isaac Barrow, *The Duty and Reward of Bounty to the Poor in The Theological Works of Isaac Barrow*, ed. by Alexander Napier, 6 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1890), I, p. 81.

¹⁹⁰ See Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police*, pp. 22-28.

¹⁹¹ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*.

¹⁹² Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 318.

the relief of enemies has a tendency to unite mankind in fraternal affection'.¹⁹³ Whilst property underlay subordination, emphasising differences of class and station, the movement of the 'affections' functioned to dissolve such differences.

Finally, Johnson saw obligation pre-eminently in religious terms. *Rambler 8*, one of the early essays, links self-scrutiny to self-reform, 'under the name of self-examination' which is the 'first act previous to repentance'.¹⁹⁴ According to Johnson, reading the past and internalising its lessons, renews the contract with God, resulting in a re-formulation of the self.

Anticipating the Freudian pleasure principle, as scholars such as Jackson Bate have argued, Johnson contends in *Rambler 178* that, 'it is not possible to secure distant or permanent happiness but by the forbearance of some immediate gratification'.¹⁹⁵ However, in the religious context, abstaining from present enjoyment is seen as a down-payment against an eternal reward. The focus on eternity scours the present of meaning. *Rambler 78* notes that religious self-scrutiny involves 'a perpetual meditation upon the last hour', for 'to neglect at any time preparation for death, is to sleep on our post at a siege'.¹⁹⁶ Death is seen as a gathering incursion, evoked in similar terms to the enveloping fears, associated throughout *The Rambler* with the threatening sea. Just as Johnson had difficulty in starting things, he also struggled with completing things. He believed that each individual needs to constantly hold before themselves the image of the 'secret horror of the last', as *Idler 103* would later put it, recognising the future debt, which can be acknowledged, but never fully expunged.¹⁹⁷ *The Rambler's* sceptical expansiveness of thought often seems to undermine any point of

¹⁹³ Samuel Johnson, 'Introduction to Proceedings of the Committee on French Prisoners' (1760), in *Political Writings*, X, p. 288.

¹⁹⁴ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 44.

¹⁹⁵ Johnson, *The Rambler*, V, p. 174.

¹⁹⁶ Johnson, *The Rambler*, IV, p. 47–49.

¹⁹⁷ Johnson, *The Idler and The Adventurer*, II, p. 315.

origin which would centre and constrain signification. When, however, the free-play of thought threatens to exceed certain bounds, Johnson's rhetoric often falters and the 'perpetual superintenden[t]' is moved centre-stage to anchor meaning and foreclose the 'state of universal uncertainty'.¹⁹⁸

In conclusion, this chapter has argued that both the diaries and *The Rambler* explore how the self can be accounted for through a process of rigorous self-reading. They employ, however, very different registers of discourse. The diaries are based around accounting and plain English, whilst *The Rambler* is couched in more formal language, using tropes drawn from the world of commerce. Accordingly, we see the world through the eyes of two very different 'Johnsons': one registering his moral worth and anxieties in stark terms; the other, refracting very similar thoughts through a much more sophisticated and elusive persona. Both, however, struggle to make the world add up, by defining what an authentic existence might like look, or by describing how time might be made to count through active mental performance. In *The Rambler*, in particular, Johnson worries that the new mercantile civilisation has promoted fraudulent trading in both the economic realm and in the social sphere. The growth of dissimulation, in particular, posed a threat to self-possession and to the ability to make genuine connections between individuals. In Chapter 2, I describe how Johnson's concerns about dissimulation played out against Boswell's different understanding of social interaction as a form of role-play. I also argue that the relationship between Boswell and Johnson, as seen through their writings, demonstrated another way in which Johnson read himself and was reciprocally read.

¹⁹⁸ Johnson, *The Rambler*, V, p. 203.

CHAPTER TWO

BOSWELL'S 'LIFE OF JOHNSON': THEATRE, CONVERSATION, VOICE

Introduction

This chapter focuses on Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791). It considers how the biography both theatricalises the representation of Johnson, but also represents his voice and conversation as the physical manifestation of Johnson's wisdom, presence and authority. Other texts are drawn upon to support the argument, including Boswell's essay sequence, *On The Profession Of A Player* (1770) and *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (1785). *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, I argue, stages an on-going debate between Boswell and Johnson about the place of 'players' and dissimulation in the literary and social economy and their significance in relation to different conceptions of the self. The previous chapter examined Johnson's self-accounting. Here, I explore how *The Life of Samuel Johnson* introduced another player into the drama of Johnson's self-reflexivity, namely Boswell, and how the 'double act' of biographer and subject problematised the conception of an autonomous self; a theme later examined by the Argentinian writer, Jorge Luis Borges, in his own interpretation of Johnson's writings, explored in Chapter 5.

Boswell believed that, in real life, people play roles like actors. This notion of widespread theatricality disturbed Johnson. Johnson regarded players as 'no better than creatures set upon tables [...] to make faces', who encouraged the transformation of life into theatre.¹ I

¹ James Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. by George Birkbeck Hill, revised by L. F. Powell, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), II (1934), p. 404.

argue that this is precisely what Boswell set out to do, by consciously staging Johnson as the lead character in the biography, portraying himself as a sort of actor-manager, orchestrating acquaintances and events around him. This rather consigned Johnson, paradoxically, to a subordinate role. The theatrical flavour of *The Life of Samuel Johnson* is also aided by the amount of dialogue that it contains, cast in a form similar to a scripted playlet. Johnson's talk, nonetheless, is represented faithfully, according to Boswell, and he presents Johnson at the centre of the 'conversable world'. Johnson's manly, combative talk is seen both as a sign of cultural mastery and of Johnson's pre-eminence as a conversational performer.

However, Boswell not only considered Johnson's conversation to be a skilled performance, but also an embodiment of heroic wisdom. I argue that Boswell privileged Johnson's speech over his writing, to reinforce his sense of Johnson as a point of origin, but also to subordinate his writing by re-appropriating his wisdom through the representation of his conversation and voice. Boswell's approach reflected an emerging ideology of voice, as expressed by writers such as Blair and Sheridan. Transcribing Johnson's voice enabled Boswell to get closer to Johnson physically and to his essence as an author and person. Johnson's voice inspired a host of imitators and parodists, as Boswell's biography reveals, but Boswell regarded himself as his greatest imitator, arguing that he was 'impregnated with the Johnsonian aether', which enabled him to internalise his subject.² He thereby assumed proprietorial rights over Johnson and in writing the biography, Boswell became the author of himself.

² Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 421.

The Theatre of the Self: Boswell and Johnson's Differing Responses

Before considering Boswell's biography, I explore Boswell and Johnson's differing responses to theatricality to provide a context for the staging of Johnson's life in the biography. Boswell's infatuation with the theatre began as early as the 1750s when he began to immerse himself in the burgeoning Edinburgh theatrical world.³ He even started a play, as an adolescent in 1755, about a hero presciently named Sam.⁴ Boswell's journals document a lifetime of theatre-going. When Boswell first arrived in London in 1762, his enthusiasm for the theatre was at its height. The principal theatrical venues in London, where Boswell obtained much of his theatrical experience, were the Royal Opera House in the Haymarket, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, which were the only two licensed winter theatres. Boswell had catholic tastes. His journals, from November 1762 to January 1763, record him seeing, for example: *Every Man in his Humour* (1598) on 19 November; a pantomime, *The Witches* on 26 November; Terence's *The Eunuch* on 1 December; a comic opera, *Love in a Village* (1762) on 8 December and *King Henry IV Pt. II* (1596–99) on 10 January 1763.⁵ Boswell, also, constantly turned his life into theatre. His journal entries for 11–12 October 1762 describe him at the centre of a number of soireés, singing songs from musical productions and improvising playlet scenes.⁶ *The Beggars Opera* (1728) was a favourite of Boswell's,

³ Peter Martin, *A Life of James Boswell* (London: Phoenix Press, 1999), p. 49.

⁴ Quoted in Martin, *A Life of James Boswell*, p. 49.

⁵ James Boswell, *London Journal 1762–63*, ed. by Gordon Turnbull (London: Penguin, 2014), pp. 8, 12, 23, 32, 89.

⁶ James Boswell, *Private Papers of James Boswell from Malahide Castle, In the Collection of Lt-Colonel Ralph Heyward Isham*, 20 vols, vol. I 'Early Papers', ed. by Geoffrey Scott (Printed in the United States: 1928), p. 93.

and he often passed himself off as Macheath.⁷ Johnson, by contrast, had a more censorious view of theatrical life and did not feel the need to assume another's identity.

In 1770, Boswell wrote three essays, entitled 'On The Profession Of A Player', which were published in *The London Magazine*.⁸ The essays praised the profession of the player and the genius of David Garrick in particular. Garrick had ushered in an era of more realistic and expressive acting. Richard Cumberland recalled how Garrick 'came bounding' on the stage, 'Heavens what a transition! — it seemed as though a whole century had been swept over in the transition of a single scene'.⁹ Garrick helped displace an age 'superstitiously devoted to the illusions of imposing declamation'.¹⁰ Ironically, Boswell's essays were written as the theatrical epoch dominated by Garrick was itself about to be supplanted.

Boswell sees the player as embodying the virtues of the modern age. Acting is considered to be superior to a merely imitative art form like painting. According to Boswell, the player possesses a 'mysterious power', which enables him to 'change himself into a different kind of being from what he really is'.¹¹ By virtue of this 'mysterious power', the good player 'is indeed in a certain sense the character that he represents during the time of his performance'.¹² Boswell qualifies this assertion by arguing that the player 'is the character he represents only in a certain degree'.¹³ It is in the nature of the 'mysterious power' he possesses that:

⁷ See Boswell, *London Journal*, pp. 225–26, where Boswell records on 19 May 1763, 'I surveyed my Seraglio [...] I toyed with them, & drank about & sung 'Youth's the season' and thought myself Captain Macheath.'

⁸ James Boswell, *On The Profession of a Player: Three Essays reprinted from the London Magazine for August, September and October, 1770* (London: Elkin, Matthews & Marriott, 1929), p. 1.

⁹ Richard Cumberland, *Memoirs of Richard Cumberland, Written by Himself* (London: Lackington, Allen, 1806), pp. 59–60.

¹⁰ Cumberland, *Memoirs*, pp. 59–60.

¹¹ Boswell, *On The Profession of a Player*, pp. 12–14.

¹² Boswell, *On The Profession of a Player*, p. 14.

¹³ Boswell, *On The Profession of a Player*, p. 18.

he must have a kind of double feeling. He must assume in a strong degree the character he represents, while he at the same time retains the consciousness of his own character. The feelings and passions of the character he represents must take full possession as it were of the antechamber of his mind, while his own character remains in the innermost recess.¹⁴

The player accordingly effects a creative schism in his consciousness, becoming, in some sense, both himself and not himself. Boswell argues that this psychic splitting is not only characteristic of the theatre, but is also embedded within normal life. For instance, whilst a barrister is pleading a case, ‘the genuine colour of his mind is laid over with a temporary glaring varnish, which flies off instantaneously when he has finished his harangue’.¹⁵

Boswell, an advocate and extrovert, constantly played roles in his social and working life. It was unsurprising that he identified closely with players. Boswell argues that convivial social intercourse would be impossible if people told their companions what they really thought of them. Accordingly, a certain amount of ‘dissimulation’ is necessary.¹⁶ Boswell saw human interaction as essentially performative and situational. Johnson, by contrast, considered dissimulation to be a form of fraudulent trading. Boswell, however, maintained that, ‘we [...] adopt feelings suitable to every occasion, and so like players, are to a certain degree a different character from our own’.¹⁷ ‘Double feeling’ permeated the social fabric as much as it did the stage. In this regard, Boswell provides in ‘Essay II’ what could be seen as a vivid self-portrait:

This double feeling is of various kinds and various degrees; some minds receiving a colour from the objects around them, like the effects of the sunbeams playing through a prism; and others, like the chameleon, having no colours of their own, take just the colours of what chances to be nearest them. And it must be observed, that the greater

¹⁴ Boswell, *On The Profession of a Player*, p. 18.

¹⁵ Boswell, *On The Profession of a Player*, pp. 18–19.

¹⁶ Boswell, *On The Profession of a Player*, p. 19.

¹⁷ Boswell, *On The Profession of a Player*, p. 19.

degree a man is accustomed to assume of artificial feeling, the more probability is there that he has no character of his own [...].¹⁸

Boswell was a consummate social animal, recording in his *London Journal* (1762–63) that he had ‘discovered that we may be in some degree whatever character we chose’.¹⁹ Diderot in *The Paradox of the Actor* (1773–77), also inspired by Garrick, similarly conflated acting and social behaviour. However, whereas ‘anyone in society who wants to please everyone’ is ‘nothing, possesses nothing’; the great actor like Garrick, whilst he is nothing, it is precisely because ‘he’s nothing that he’s everything to perfection, since his particular form never stands in the way of the alien forms he has to assume’.²⁰ This ‘affectively disabling autism’ as Joseph Roach terms it, is linked both to the protean creativity of the player but also to the feelings of hollowness that Boswell evidently experienced in real life.²¹

These issues are touched upon in ‘Essay II’ which includes one of Boswell’s earliest representations of Johnson in conversation. Significantly, it depicts Boswell and Johnson disputing the nature of theatrical illusion and the acting of Garrick in particular.²² The vignette anticipated similar colloquies in *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* and *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, in which Garrick is often the subject of contention. Johnson regarded his friend Garrick as a mere player and was irked by Boswell’s veneration of him. Johnson is introduced in ‘Essay II’ to refute Boswell’s argument:

“If, sir,” said he, “Garrick believes himself to be every character that he represents, he is a madman and ought to be confined. Nay sir, he is a villain, and ought to be hanged. If, for instance, he believes himself to be Macbeth, he has committed

¹⁸ Boswell, *On The Profession of a Player*, p. 20.

¹⁹ Boswell, *London Journal*, p. 9.

²⁰ Denis Diderot, ‘The Paradox of the Actor’, in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. by Geoffrey Bremner (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 106.

²¹ Joseph Roach, *it* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), p. 142.

²² Boswell had, however, included brief vignettes of Johnson at an earlier date in *The Journal of a Tour to Corsica* (1768), ed. by S. C. Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929), pp. 67–68.

murder, he is a vile assassin [...] If, sir, he has really been that person in his own mind, he has in his own mind been as guilty as Macbeth".²³

The concatenation of Macbeth and Garrick is noteworthy. Garrick's performance as Macbeth was one of his most celebrated. Johnson himself had published his edition of Shakespeare only five years earlier in 1765. Macbeth evidently troubled Johnson. Regicide, at the heart of the play, is an act of profound transgression.²⁴ Moreover, in the edition's footnotes to the opening scene, which involves the witches, Johnson argues that 'a poet who should now make the whole action of his tragedy depend upon enchantment, and produce the chief events by the assistance of supernatural agents, would be censured as transgressing the bounds of probability'.²⁵ But Shakespeare was only turning 'the system that was then universally admitted to his advantage, and was far from overburthening the credulity of his audience'.²⁶ Johnson seeks to rationalise the play's disturbing forces by seeing them as merely a product of the times. Throughout Johnson's commentary, however, there is a palpable unease about 'the reality of witchcraft or enchantment'.²⁷ This unease arguably spills over into his condemnation of Garrick's claim that he 'becomes' Macbeth on stage. While Boswell accepts the player's psychic splitting, Johnson rejects such claims. Johnson is disturbed by the destabilising power of performance which threatens to collapse the real and fictive worlds. He suggests, moreover, that the self is dangerously malleable, capable of mutating, like Macbeth, from brave general to inhuman murderer.

²³ Boswell, *On The Profession of a Player*, p. 15.

²⁴ See John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide, 1793–1796* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 62–86, for a discussion of how the treasonable offence of 'imagining' the king's death was mediated, some twenty-five years after the publication of Boswell's three essays, following the execution of Louis XVI.

²⁵ Samuel Johnson, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. by Arthur Sherbo, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), VIII (1968), p. 752.

²⁶ Johnson, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, VIII, p. 752.

²⁷ Johnson, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, VIII, p. 752.

Johnson's discomfort with performance was similar to his disparagement of the contemporary novel. In *Rambler 4*, Johnson worried that the novel's power of illusion may interfere with the mind's capacity to shape reality in accordance with an established moral order.²⁸ John Bender argues that the novel created a virtual reality so overwhelming that it threatened an expansion of thought and experience, which would crowd out the reader's identity and habitual frame of reference.²⁹ Johnson writes:

But if the power of example [in the novel] is so great, as to take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without the intervention of the will, care ought to be taken that, when the choice is unrestrained, the best examples only should be exhibited; and that which is likely to operate so strongly, should not be mischievous or uncertain in its effects.³⁰

Johnson advocates the inscription of a clearly legible morality but also acknowledges the novel's radical force; its ability to bypass the agency of the self by a kind of imaginative violence. Paula Backscheider argues that both plays and novels were addressing the question of the extent to which readers and playgoers should give themselves over to illusion. Writers were increasingly forcing their audiences into the passive role of consumers rather than producers of meaning, distracting them from thinking how things came about, by giving themselves over to identification with characters.³¹ Johnson resisted any such easy capture.

²⁸ Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, ed. by W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), III (1969), p. 19.

²⁹ John Bender, *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 35.

³⁰ Johnson, *The Rambler*, III, p. 22.

³¹ Paula Backscheider, 'Shadowing Theatrical Change', in *Players, Playwrights, Playhouses: Investigating Performance 1660–1800*, ed. by Michael Corder and Peter Holland (Basingstoke: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2007), pp. 78–100 (p. 89).

'The Life' as Theatre: Johnson as 'Character'

Johnson had an ambivalent attitude towards players, as the previous section argued. Boswell quotes Johnson, in his biography, as stating that players are little better than creatures set upon a table like 'dancing dogs'.³² Casting Johnson as a character, with its undertones of subordination, created an inherent tension which occasionally surfaces in the biography. Throughout *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, Johnson and Boswell dispute the nature of theatrical performance, picking up the debate where Boswell's theatrical essays left off. In *The Rambler*, Johnson argued that playing a part serves to erode identity. In the earlier *Life of Mr Richard Savage* (1744), Johnson had also touched upon the dangers of unbridled role-playing.³³ Johnson's only play *Irene* (1749) is also full of references equating role-play and duplicity. In *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, Lord Chesterfield, Johnson's failed patron, exemplifies the performing self in its purest form. Boswell describes Johnson criticising Lord Chesterfield for reducing manners to the arts of the dancing master by prioritising politeness over truthfulness.³⁴ Actors epitomised this tendency. The actor-playwright Samuel Foote, a gifted mimic, is characterised by Johnson in Boswell's biography as a man 'who will entertain you at his house, and then bring you on a publick stage'.³⁵ The theatricalising of everyday experience filled Johnson with unease. It turned people into stage characters who lacked agency because they merely played parts. Boswell's aim was to achieve precisely this object: turning Johnson into a character of Boswell's fashioning. Talk provided the ideal vehicle. Boswell was fascinated by Johnson's conversation, which he constructed

³² Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, II, p. 404.

³³ Johnson notes that Savage, 'had the art of [...] accommodating himself to every new scene', in Samuel Johnson, 'Savage', *The Lives of the Poets*, ed. by John H. Muddendorf, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), II (2010), p. 964.

³⁴ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 266.

³⁵ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, II, p. 98.

with the skill of a dramatist writing stage dialogue. This enabled Boswell to subordinate Johnson's writing by re-appropriating his wisdom through the representation of his speech in dramatic dialogue.

The theatrical framing of the biography is apparent from its beginning. The opening pages set out Boswell's ambitions for his biography:

I cannot conceive a more perfect mode of writing any man's life, than not only relating all the most important events of it in their order, but interweaving what he privately wrote, and said and thought; by which mankind are enabled as it were to see him live, and to 'live o'er each scene' with him, as he actually advanced through the several stages of his life [...] I will venture to say that he will be seen in this work more completely than any man who has ever yet lived.³⁶

The phrase in quotation marks is recycled from 'Essay II', where Boswell wrote that the player 'lives o'er each scene,' and, in a certain sense 'is what we behold'.³⁷ It is a quotation from Pope's 'Prologue' to Addison's tragic play, *Cato* (1713):

To wake the soul by tender strokes of art,
To raise the genius and to mend the heart;
To make mankind in conscious virtue bold,
Live o'er each scene, and be what they behold:
For this the tragic muse first trod the stage.³⁸

The 'Prologue' goes on to state that 'our scene precariously subsists too long, On French translation and Italian song' and such plays, as Addison's *Cato*, 'alone should please a British ear'.³⁹ Italian opera was popular in early eighteenth-century England as the number of theatres in London and the provinces grew significantly.⁴⁰ Alexander Pope's advocacy of

³⁶ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 30.

³⁷ Boswell, *On The Profession of a Player*, p. 12.

³⁸ Alexander Pope, 'Prologue to Mr Addison's *Cato*' (1713), in *Pope: Poetical Works*, ed. by Herbert Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 623.

³⁹ Pope, *Pope: Poetical Works*, p. 624.

⁴⁰ Lisa Freeman, *Character's Theatre: Genre and Identity on the Eighteenth-Century English Stage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), pp. 76–77.

a sturdy theatrical independence reflected fears about the success of foreign entertainments, as Lisa Freeman has argued.⁴¹ Contemporary satires suggested that continental models were effeminate and degenerate, whilst home-grown material was considered masculine and virile. It is possible that Boswell had this context in mind in selecting the citation, which accordingly framed Johnson as being manly, original and, above all, English. Boswell was also, however, undoubtedly attracted to the notion that drama encourages an identification of audience and player, so that the spectator becomes ‘what they behold’.⁴² As the actor inhabits the role, so the audience becomes the actor. Well into the eighteenth century, it was not uncommon for spectators to pay extra to sit on the stage itself, literally closing the distance between actor and audience.⁴³ Identification with the character on stage, however, threatened to subsume the identity of the spectator.

Boswell, therefore, sets out his stall to ‘stage’ Johnson; transforming the events of Johnson’s life into the scenes of a drama. Boswell’s claims for his literary powers are that, much as the theatrical audience becomes ‘what they behold’, so the reader will take on the identity of Johnson. Boswell may be said in this respect to assume the role of impresario, or actor-manager. Eighteenth-century actor-managers included such prominent figures as Colly Cibber, Garrick and Samuel Foote. They were usually the most senior actor in the ensemble, who would take responsibility for choosing the stage repertoire, staging it and overseeing the company. This would also involve paying and supervising a staff of players, musicians, singers, dancers, front-of-house and backstage servants.⁴⁴ David Garrick became a leading

⁴¹ Freeman, *Character’s Theatre*, pp. 7677.

⁴² Boswell, *On The Profession of a Player*, p. 12.

⁴³ David Garrick, however, banned audience members from sitting on the stage at Drury Lane in 1763 and other theatres adopted a similar approach. See ‘A History of a Night at the Theatre’, Victoria and Albert Museum, <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/a/a-history-of-a-night-at-the-theatre/>> [accessed 3 June 2019].

⁴⁴ Peter Thomson, *The Cambridge Introduction to English Theatre, 1660–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 122.

actor-manager, having a half-share in the Drury Lane Theatre with his partner James Lacey. Peter Thomson argues that Garrick's access to the 'corridors of cultural power' was also important in promoting his theatrical interests.⁴⁵ In a similar manner, Boswell was acquainted with the main players in Johnson's circle, which gave him access to conversations at which Johnson was present. Indeed, Boswell gave the impression that he was always in the right place at the right time. Pursuing the analogy, Boswell was present as an actor at many of the episodes that he describes; as actor-manager, he selected the cast of supporting characters, the events from Johnson's life to portray, as well as shaping the lines uttered by Johnson.

Casting Johnson as a character involved looking at Johnson from the outside; rather than from the inside, the vantage-point offered by Johnson's diaries and *The Rambler*. In this context, Freeman argues that the 'subject' emerged in the novel as the dominant 'discursive structure for modelling identities', but 'character' as portrayed in the theatre 'marked a site of resistance to the rise of the subject and to the ideological conformity enforced through that identity formation'.⁴⁶ It is not difficult to point to eighteenth-century dramas and novels which resist such a generalised interpretation, but distinguishing between 'character' and 'subjectivity' is a useful discrimination. 'Subjectivity' is the site of self-writing, while 'character' is a view of the 'subject' by another observer. In the eighteenth century, 'character', as Freeman contends, was increasingly used to describe the sharply individualised personalities created by dramatists and novelists, or the role played by an actor on stage. Boswell's new-style biography, however, promised to view 'character' from both the inside and the outside in such a way as to erase the distinction between subject and

⁴⁵ Thomson, *The Cambridge Introduction to English Theatre*, p. 153.

⁴⁶ Freeman, *Character's Theatre*, p. 1.

reader, player and spectator. It is a deft sleight of hand. Johnson's own self-writing continually fractures any stable sense of identity while Boswell's 'character formation' seeks rather to monumentalise Johnson as an image of stability and integrity. Although Boswell's Johnson is a multi-faceted creation, Boswell could never match the complexity of the person revealed by the diaries and *The Rambler*. In addition, Boswell's selective depiction of Johnson's life, glosses over his early poverty, refers relatively sparingly to Johnson's fits of melancholia, ignores his relationship with Mrs Thrale and betrays only a superficial appreciation of Johnson's writing. Accordingly, it could be argued that Boswell cast Johnson in a particular role, the supreme purveyor of wit and wisdom, in a manner similar to that adopted by an eighteenth-century actor-manager who cast individual players in a particular 'line of business' or typical part played by the actor.⁴⁷

Staging Johnson as a character, and making him the subject of Boswell's writing, however, involved an element of mastery which was more than merely grammatical. Greg Clingham argues that Boswell sought in his journals to create the fiction of 'a continuous and coherent self', but was unable to believe in that fiction.⁴⁸ The vacuum that Boswell felt at the centre of his own being, according to Clingham, was accordingly filled by Johnson's presence. Extending Clingham's argument, it was not only Johnson's company that filled the void, but more importantly, it was writing about him that achieved that end. In 'Essay II', Boswell characterises the English as 'truly a nation of originals', who are 'remarkably honest'; in contrast to the French who play roles and are therefore 'perpetual comedians'.⁴⁹ The English, like Johnson, possessed a solidity, which the French, rather like Boswell himself, lacked.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of how eighteenth-century players were cast in 'lines of business', see Freeman, *Character's Theatre*, p. 31.

⁴⁸ Greg Clingham, *Boswell: The Life of Johnson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 11.

⁴⁹ Boswell, *On The Profession of a Player*, p. 21.

Johnson's robust substance was underlined in Boswell's description of his countenance, which had 'the cast of an ancient statue.'⁵⁰ Johnson, being 'of a very independent spirit', was complete in himself, an original: literally, his own point of origin.⁵¹ Unlike Garrick, who played many very different roles, from Hamlet to Ranger and Abel Drugger, Johnson, in Boswell's representation, was always himself.⁵² Johnson also acted as a father figure who conferred identity on Boswell by approving his writing ambitions, against his biological father's protestations.⁵³ Clingham argues that by depicting Johnson and playing himself off 'against this man invested with all Boswell's ideals', the biographer was trying to 'articulate himself'.⁵⁴ However, articulating himself also meant subordinating Johnson as a character. The relationship between Johnson and Boswell, as described, has a paradoxical quality. Staging Johnson involved a declaration of independence, but in turn Boswell was dependent on Johnson to furnish him with material. Boswell appeared to realise this. In *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, in August 1773, he refers to a sermon of a Mr Tait who preached that:

Some [men] connected themselves with men of distinguished talents, and since they could not equal them, tried to deck themselves with their merit, by being their companions [...] It had an odd coincidence with what might be said of my connecting myself with Dr. Johnson.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, IV, p. 425.

⁵¹ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, IV, p. 426.

⁵² Three of Garrick's theatrical roles referred to in, Boswell, *On The Profession of a Player*, p. 8.

⁵³ Boswell records in the biography, informing Johnson that he would publish an account of his Corsican visit, and that Johnson 'encouraged me', asking that Boswell, 'give us as many anecdotes as you can': Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, II, p. 11. Lord Auchinleck, Boswell's father, instead, wanted his son to focus on his legal career.

⁵⁴ Clingham, *Boswell*, p. 78.

⁵⁵ James Boswell, *Boswell's Journal Of A Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed. by Frederick A. Pottle and Charles H. Bennett, The Yale Edition of the Private Papers of James Boswell (London: Heinemann, 1963), p. 96.

To avert criticism that he was merely basking in Johnson's reflected glory, Boswell may have felt that he needed to emphasise his ability to shape events actively by manoeuvring Johnson into promising situations. Behaving like an actor-manager, Boswell was always keen to manufacture opportunities to enable him to record how his hero performed, particularly in a new environment. In *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, he notes, again in August 1773, how seeing, 'Dr. Johnson in any new situation is always an interesting object to me'.⁵⁶ Boswell also describes how he is able to lead the conversation:

I do not mean leading, as in an orchestra, by playing the first fiddle; but leading as one does in examining a witness- starting topics, and making him pursue them. He appears to me like a great mill, into which a subject is to be thrown to be ground. It requires, indeed, fertile minds to furnish materials for this mill.⁵⁷

The lawyer and the actor-manager converge. Leading his witness, Boswell treats Johnson as a machine for generating quotable material. Boswell's role, in turn, is to provide topics or intelligent company capable of provoking the 'sayings' that he was keen to acquire.

Boswell was indefatigable in his search for quotable material and keen to highlight his role in securing it. The relish with which Boswell describes how he famously inveigled Johnson into attending a soiree, attended by John Wilkes in 1776, illustrates Boswell's eagerness to represent his ability, when required, to lead Johnson by the nose.⁵⁸ Boswell often engineers situations where Johnson is pitched against combative interlocutors to generate lively material. Johnson was aware of this tendency and became angry when Boswell sought, in September 1777, to bring Johnson and Mrs Macaulay together, a potentially combustible combination. Johnson bellowed, 'No, Sir; you would not see us quarrel to make you sport.

⁵⁶ Boswell, *Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, p. 99.

⁵⁷ Boswell, *Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, p. 231.

⁵⁸ See Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, III, pp. 68–78.

Don't you know that it is very uncivil to *pit* two people against one another?'⁵⁹ Johnson occasionally chafed at being cast as a character in Boswell's drama. He also disliked, in particular, being seen as part of a double act, famously thundering at Boswell in April 1776 that he had only two topics of conversation: "yourself and me, I am sick of both".⁶⁰ Writing was also a source of occasional tension. Although Johnson encouraged Boswell's writing, and stated in April 1778 that he 'was pleased to find so much of the fruit of his [Johnson's] mind preserved' in Boswell's journals; he was less content about it being published.⁶¹ When Boswell, in the same month, talked about publishing an account of his European tour, Johnson informed him that he would lessen himself by publishing his travels.⁶² Likewise, both in Boswell's biography and in Johnson's letters, Johnson exhibits some irritation at the attention given to Boswell's proposed account of his Corsican adventures.⁶³ Published writing was encroaching on Johnson's territory. Boswell may have shown his journal to Johnson to tacitly seek approval of his biographical project, but Johnson appears to have possessed an ambivalent attitude. He enjoyed perusing Boswell's journals, but may have been less pleased to be seen merely as a source of material to support Boswell's writing ambitions. Being written, or 'character-ised', moreover, was to be transformed from subject to object, and Johnson was reluctant to be diminished in that way or to concede that anybody could presume to know his mind fully. When Goldsmith, at 'The Club', opined that the members had "travelled over one another's minds", Johnson retorted angrily, "Sir, you have not travelled over my mind, I promise you".⁶⁴ Johnson may also have connected biography

⁵⁹ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, III, p. 185.

⁶⁰ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, III, p. 57.

⁶¹ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, III, p. 260.

⁶² Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, III, p. 300.

⁶³ Johnson's letter to Boswell of 23 March 1768, included in Boswell's biography, warns, 'I wish you would empty your head of Corsica, which I think has filled it rather too long': Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, II, p. 58.

⁶⁴ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, IV, p.183.

with death, always a difficult subject for him, given that such accounts were often published *post mortem*.⁶⁵

The Role of Conversation in 'The Life of Johnson'

I have argued that the biography represents Boswell as a sort of actor manager who directs his leading character Samuel Johnson, which emphasises its theatrical framing. However, the biography's most obvious continuity with the drama is in the amount of talk it contains. Boswell, I contend, presented dialogue as though it were to be performed on the stage, but equally he was concerned to demonstrate the veracity of his representations and Johnson's skills in conversational settings. Good conversation was central to cultivated eighteenth-century life, and while Boswell did not meet Johnson until 1763, he represents himself as always being on hand to record Johnson's celebrated performances. Boswell states in the opening pages of the biography, that 'the conversation of a celebrated man, if his talents have been exerted in conversation, will best display his character'.⁶⁶ As in the theatre, conversation and character are seen as synonymous. Johnson, in the biography, states that "it is when you come close to a man in conversation, that you discover what his real abilities are".⁶⁷ Making a speech "in a publick assembly" is merely "a knack" according to Johnson.⁶⁸ Boswell, however, considered that Johnson may have failed in public speaking as it required a more 'continued and expanded kind of argument'.⁶⁹ Making conversation, by contrast, was

⁶⁵ In his life of 'Addison', Johnson noted that, 'lives can only be written from personal knowledge, which [...] in a short time is lost forever [...] As the process of these narratives is now bringing me among my contemporaries, I begin to feel myself "walking upon ashes under which the fire is not extinguished"', Johnson, *The Lives of the English Poets*, XXII, p. 637.

⁶⁶ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 31.

⁶⁷ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, IV, p. 179.

⁶⁸ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, IV, p. 179.

⁶⁹ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, II, p. 139.

to engage in the amphitheatre of debate without notes or cues, reliant solely upon wit. The spontaneity of talk has a theatrical sparkle, but to make it dazzle on the page required artistic shaping in precisely the manner employed in theatrical dialogue.

Johnson's conversational skills marked him out as a key figure in the emergence of what Jon Mee has called the 'conversable world'.⁷⁰ Mee argues that the new commercial world that emerged in the eighteenth century saw its values as the product of exchanges between citizens. Numerous contemporary handbooks advocated the virtues of conversation. For some, this facilitated the collision of ideas and sentiments. For others, like Addison and Hume, conversation was primarily about exchange conducted through an ease of flow mediated by politeness as a *via media*. The feminisation of culture made women the centres of 'conversable' society, as Hume dubbed it in his *Essays Moral and Political* (1741–42).⁷¹ The softening of cultural exchange was paralleled by the rise of sentimental comedy on the stage, which was associated with good breeding rather than with the bawdiness seen on the stage in previous generations.⁷² As the world of conversation, however, opened up to a multitude of voices, anxieties started to appear about how far things should be allowed to go. Mee describes the emergence of a 'masculine ethos of competition defined the Literary Club set up by Samuel Johnson and friends at the Turk's Head in 1764'.⁷³ There was an emphasis on manly or solid conversation. Johnson's talk was seen as a sign of cultural mastery, illustrating the more general British taste for 'mutual improvement by liberal conversation

⁷⁰ Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention & Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁷¹ See Mee, *Conversable Worlds*, p. 62.

⁷² Richard Steele was a key figure in prefiguring the rise of sentimental comedy, criticising the bawdiness or restoration drama and arguing that a theatrical hero should be a man of 'good Breeding', rather than a man obsessed by physical breeding: Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, ed. by Donald F. Bond, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), I, pp. 219–20.

⁷³ Mee, *Conversable Worlds*, p. 90.

and rational enquiry'.⁷⁴ But genuine conversation or discussion, as opposed to mere 'talk' as Johnson termed it, was not an inclusive activity. Boswell recounts that Garrick's initial blackballing from the Club was due to Johnson's conviction that, 'he will disturb us by his buffoonery'.⁷⁵ Johnson's anti-theatrical animus may have been fed by the double sense of playing as acting, but also as indulging in childish amusement.

Against this background, Boswell clearly positions himself in the biography at the centre of the 'conversable world'. In its opening pages, Boswell establishes his suitability as biographer of Johnson, due, in no small part, to his access to his subject's social circles. Sir John Hawkins had scooped Boswell with his *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D* (1787) some four years before the publication of Boswell's biography. Boswell, however, castigates its 'ponderous labours' and in particular the biography's perceived failure to bring Johnson to life.⁷⁶ By contrast, his own biography's prime virtue was 'the quantity it contains of Johnson's conversation' and the liveliness of its presentation.⁷⁷ Hawkins recorded relatively few examples of Johnsonian talk, which Boswell links to Hawkins's social inadequacies:

A man, whom during my long intimacy with Dr. Johnson, I never saw twice in his company [...] but from the rigid formality of his manners, it is evident that they could never have lived together with companionable ease and familiarity.⁷⁸

By contrast, Boswell, the very essence of 'conversability', exuded 'companionable ease'. Hawkins lacked Boswell's ability to present conversational openings for Johnson. In *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, Boswell refers to himself, when listening to Johnson's

⁷⁴ Quoted in Mee, *Conversable Worlds*, p. 95, from the description of the aims of the Rankenian Society of Edinburgh, given in the *Scots Magazine*, 33 (July 1771), 340. Hume was a member of the Society.

⁷⁵ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 480.

⁷⁶ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 28.

⁷⁷ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 31.

⁷⁸ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 27.

conversation, as being like a ‘dog who has got hold of a large piece of meat and runs away with it to a corner, where he may devour it in peace’.⁷⁹ The image has both obsessional and aggressive overtones.

Boswell also distinguishes himself from Hawkins by the authenticity of his testimony, which he contrasts with Hawkins’ ‘injurious misrepresentations’.⁸⁰ Theatricalising Johnson, Boswell was, nonetheless, keen to stress that he had ‘acquired a facility in recollecting, and was very assiduous in recording his conversation’.⁸¹ Johnson, by contrast, as Annette Wheeler Cafarelli argues, adopted a dismissive attitude to minute biographical accuracy, dismissing it as ‘tedious and troublesome’.⁸² Scholars generally accept that Boswell artistically shaped the raw material that he recorded in his journals, but differ on how much Boswell’s Johnson owed to fiction rather than fact.⁸³ Like Garrick’s vaunted naturalistic style, which was underpinned by an artfulness that sought to disguise itself, Boswell’s Johnson was itself a highly wrought performance, a balance between dramatic brio and faithfulness of representation. The facticity of Boswell’s representation will be discussed later; my focus, here, is on how Boswell sought to represent himself as providing truthful testimony, fusing the dramatic and the real. As a trained lawyer, Boswell was familiar with the exacting standards of truthfulness required of his profession and used to memorising material. Jan-Melissa Schramm argues that, following the Reformation, the role of personal testimony in the transmission and revelation of truth had a special significance in the history

⁷⁹ Boswell, *Boswell’s Journal of a Tour to The Hebrides*, p. 175.

⁸⁰ Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, I, p. 28.

⁸¹ Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, I, p. 26.

⁸² Annette Wheeler Cafarelli, *Prose in the Age of Poets: Romanticism and Biographical Narrative from Johnson to De Quincey* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), p. 11.

⁸³ See for instance, Bruce Redford, *Designing the Life of Johnson, The Lyell Lectures, 2001–2002* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Paul J. Korshin, ‘Johnson’s Conversation’, in *New Light on Boswell: Critical and Historical Essays on the Occasion of the Bicentenary of the Life of Johnson*, ed. by Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 174–93.

of ideas.⁸⁴ Ingrained within Protestant culture was the importance of personal verification in the ascertaining of truth. In English courts of law, the presentation of witness testimony was taken under oath ‘thus ensuring the interrelationship of religious epistemology and legal conceptions of evidential reliability’.⁸⁵ Boswell had some experience of English court procedures, but most of his career was spent in Scottish courts of law. Corroboration was at the heart of Scottish criminal law. Eyewitness testimony was, accordingly, underwritten by both religious and legal protocols. Boswell was also determined to take down all relevant particulars, as a recognition, as David Simpson argues, ‘of the potential interpretability of anything and everything in Johnson’s life.’⁸⁶ Boswell’s access to Johnson’s circles provided ample opportunity to testify on the record in relation to a life he felt confident that he could read and decipher in its totality.

Boswell, therefore, emphasises the truthfulness of his representations as well as his ability to bring Johnson’s conversation to dramatic life. Boswell had a keen ear for dialogue and processed experience in theatrical terms. As early as 1763, Boswell’s journals show that he was starting to develop sequences of dialogue, involving Johnson, which anticipate the mature style.⁸⁷ By 1778, the style was fully developed as this extract from the journals for 7 April 1778 demonstrates:

BOSWELL. “Harris agreed with her.” JOHNSON. “Sir, Harris was laughing at her. Harris is a rough sullen scholar. He does not like interlopers.” BOSWELL. “I think you once said he was a prig.” JOHNSON. “So he is, too, Sir, and a bad prig.”⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Jan-Melissa Schramm, *Testimony & Advocacy in Victorian Law, Literature & Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 28.

⁸⁵ Schramm, *Testimony & Advocacy*, p. 29.

⁸⁶ David Simpson, *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature: A Report on Half Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 50.

⁸⁷ See for instance the entry for 14 July 1763, ‘Sir, said I, it is done. Well Sir, said he [Johnson], are you satisfied? or would you chuse another? Would you, Sir? Said I. Yes, said he, I think I would’: Boswell, *London Journal*, p. 271.

⁸⁸ James Boswell, *Boswell In Extremis 1776–1778*, ed. by Charles McC. Weis and Frederick A. Pottle, The Yale Edition of the Private Papers of James Boswell (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 247.

Although the three theatrical essays feature Johnson in dialogue, Boswell's first published work to feature extensive sequences of Johnson's conversation was *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*. In a typical passage, Boswell describes Johnson and a Mr Mclean talking across each other, stating that 'the scene [...] ought rather to be represented by two good players'.⁸⁹ Boswell's biography is attentive to the chaotic cross-talk and movement of conversation in a room, which theatre excelled at staging, but which was unusual in a biography. In one comic scene, he describes Sir Joshua Reynolds and Mrs Langton carrying on a dialogue when in the midst of it, Johnson 'broke out "Tennant tells of Bears"', prompted by a previous reference to wolves.⁹⁰ Reynolds and Langton continue their conversation, which Johnson:

[...] Being dull of hearing, did not perceive, or, if he did, was not willing to break off his talk; so he continued to vociferate his remarks, and *Bear* ("like a word in a catch" as Beauclerk said) was repeatedly heard at intervals, which coming from him who, by those who did not know him, had been so often assimilated to the ferocious animal, while we who were sitting around could hardly stifle laughter, produced a very ludicrous effect.⁹¹

Boswell stages the cross-talk and ironic shifts of perspective with great skill. Elsewhere, he presents dialogue in a form similar to a play script, as in the exchange where Boswell and Johnson discuss travelling to Ireland:

JOHNSON. "It is the last place where I should wish to travel." BOSWELL "Should you not like to see Dublin Sir?" JOHNSON. "No Sir; Dublin is only a worse capital." BOSWELL. "Is not the Giant's-causeway worth seeing?" JOHNSON. "Worth seeing? yes; but not worth going to see."⁹²

⁸⁹ Boswell, *Boswell's Journal of a Tour to The Hebrides*, p. 256.

⁹⁰ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson* (1934), II, p. 347.

⁹¹ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, II, pp. 347–48.

⁹² Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, III, p. 410.

The format employed is similar to that used in Boswell's journal of 1778. The presentation dispenses with any connecting narrative links, merely listing, instead, the character and his speaking lines. Paul J. Korshin has noted that Boswell made use of captions for each speaker in an exchange, 'as a dramatist would do in writing dialogue'.⁹³ Bruce Redford also notes how Boswell displays Johnson's character 'not only by pictorializing but by dramatizing—by setting his protagonist in motion within a sequence of carefully scripted playlets'.⁹⁴ Although Boswell was familiar with the works of dramatists as varied as Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, John Gay and John Hoadley, as his three theatrical essays demonstrate, he does not appear to have based his approach upon any particular playwright or style. Rather, he adapted theatrical conventions for presenting spoken discourse, and placed them at the centre of his biography.⁹⁵ It was a radical innovation which suspended conventional narrative momentum, by interpolating the real-time drama of speech.

A good example of Boswell's ability to construct a dramatic 'playlet' is the account of the first meeting with Johnson. The famous meeting has been the subject of extensive scholarly discussion, but I want to bring out here its specifically theatrical framing. The construction of Johnson's character echoes Boswell's analysis, in the three theatrical essays, of the 'great labour' involved 'in preparing for the first appearance of any character' in the theatre, including introducing the appropriate 'expressions of voice and gesture'.⁹⁶ The scene is an expanded version of Boswell's journal entry for Monday, 16 May 1763. The original manuscript of the journal is printed on quarto leaves and the entry for 16 May is in a neat hand with few corrections.⁹⁷ A key difference between the journal and the biographical

⁹³ Korshin, 'Johnson's Conversation', p. 177.

⁹⁴ Redford, *Designing the Life of Johnson*, p. 84.

⁹⁵ Boswell, *On The Profession of a Player*, p. 8.

⁹⁶ Boswell, *On The Profession of a Player*, pp. 34–35.

⁹⁷ Boswell, *London Journal*, includes photographs of 2 pages of the manuscript at pp. 221–22.

entries concerns the narrative framing of the episode in Boswell's biography, which serves to amplify the dramatic interest of the encounter and superimpose a view of Johnson derived partly from Boswell's subsequent experience. The journal version, by contrast, is reworked to dilute some of the raw shock of the encounter and heighten its mythic significance. This is a scene about origins: the origins of the friendship and the unveiling of Johnson, the true 'original'. The episode is full of references to literary and pictorial representation. Building on the journal's bare details, Boswell skillfully uses narrative description, as well as dialogue for dramatic purposes. The meeting occurs in Thomas Davies' bookshop in Covent Garden. Davies, a friend of Johnson and an actor, later wrote a biography of Garrick. Boswell describes Davies as 'one of the best of the many imitators' of Johnson's voice.⁹⁸ Accordingly, even before Boswell meets Johnson, he encounters a Johnsonian imitator who is also an actor.

The journal introduces Johnson in fairly un-dramatic terms: 'I drank tea at Davies's in Russell Street, and about seven came in the great Samuel Johnson, whom I have so long wished to see'.⁹⁹ The journal then moves swiftly to the set-piece exchange concerning Boswell's Scottish origins. By contrast, the biography excises the realistic detail ('about seven'), and introduces a lengthy preamble, commencing with Johnson advancing into the shop. Davies announces his approach 'in the manner of an actor in the part of Horatio, when he addresses Hamlet on the appearance of his father's ghost, "Look, my Lord, it comes"'.¹⁰⁰ The simile recalls the episode in *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* when Boswell and Johnson dispute the verisimilitude of Garrick's performance as Hamlet upon seeing the ghost. Johnson self-mockingly casts himself as a grotesque Hamlet, who would have

⁹⁸ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 391.

⁹⁹ Boswell, *London Journal*, p. 220.

¹⁰⁰ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 392.

terrified the ghost; here, Boswell turns the tables by casting Johnson as the ghostly father and himself as the terrified son. The theatrical framing is both comic and proleptic, anticipating the spat concerning Garrick, which is later described. It also marks the moment when the scene has become theatricalised. Johnson is transformed comically into an actor playing, unawares, a Shakespearean role. Boswell omits any physical description of Johnson, stating that he already ‘had a very perfect idea of Johnson’s figure’ from Reynold’s portrait of ‘Dictionary Johnson’.¹⁰¹ Boswell, paradoxically, can only process the ‘originality’ of the experience by reaching for pre-existing representations. Johnson is presented, effectively, at second-hand.

The preamble enables Johnson to make a theatrical entrance but also to defer the description of Boswell’s put-down by Johnson. Seeking to defuse Johnson’s prejudice against ‘the Scotch’, Boswell concedes that, “I do indeed come from Scotland but I cannot help it”, resulting in the famous retort, “That Sir, I find, is what a very great many of your countryman cannot help”.¹⁰² The exchange appears in the journal account in the opening sentences. A deleted manuscript memorandum in a different quill shows that Boswell thought to start the retort with, “You come from Scotland and cannot help it Sir”, but thought better of it.¹⁰³ It undoubtedly had a less theatrically fashioned ring. An account of the episode by Arthur Murphy, a lawyer and playwright, has Murphy at the scene, and is centered around the ‘put-down’.¹⁰⁴ In a footnote to his biography, Boswell, however, denies that Murphy was present, as in ‘my note *taken on the very day*, [...] no mention is made of this gentleman’.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, I, p. 392.

¹⁰² Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, I, p. 392.

¹⁰³ See *James Boswell’s Life of Johnson, An Edition Of The Original Manuscript*, ed. by Marshall Waingrow, 4 vols (Edinburgh, New Haven: Edinburgh and Yale University Press, 1994), I, p. 269.

¹⁰⁴ Arthur Murphy, *An Essay On The Life and Genius of Samuel Johnson, LL. D.* (London: Longman and others, 1793), p. 106.

¹⁰⁵ Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, I, p. 391.

Boswell is keen to assert both the truthfulness of the biography's representation and also his ownership of the episode and its narration.

Following the 'put-down', the journal entry describes Johnson as:

a man of a most dreadful appearance. He is a very big man, is troubled with sore eyes, the palsy, and the king's evil. He is very slovenly in his dress and speaks with a most uncouth voice [...] He has great humour and is a worthy man. But his dogmatical roughness of manners is disagreeable. I shall mark what I remember of his conversation.¹⁰⁶

While recognising Johnson's worthiness, the account mostly focuses on Johnson's negative qualities in comparison to the biography, which omits the description. An oblique reference survives in the final paragraph, Boswell observing that 'I was satisfied that though there was a roughness in his manner, there was no ill-nature in his disposition'.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, while Boswell in the journal merely remarks, without judgement, that he has recorded 'what I remember of his conversation', the biography offers a far more positive estimate of Johnson's powers, noting that, 'I was highly pleased with the extraordinary vigour of his conversation.'¹⁰⁸ Boswell rehabilitates Johnson, based on his later knowledge of him, but also rehabilitates himself, noting that Davies consoled him for his rough treatment, by saying "Don't be uneasy. I can see he likes you very well".¹⁰⁹ The episode establishes a template for similar 'playlets' in the biography, characterised by Boswell's willingness to act as 'feed' to tee up a Johnsonian witticism. Although Boswell the actor loses in such encounters, the actor-manager gains by being able to stage an eyewitness account of Johnson's pungent humour.

¹⁰⁶ Boswell, *London Journal*, p. 220.

¹⁰⁷ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 395.

¹⁰⁸ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 395.

¹⁰⁹ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 395.

The scene demonstrates how Boswell constructs a playlet, but also illustrates the combative nature of Johnson's conversational powers. Johnson frequently argued for victory, and the conversational set-piece itself had a theatrical pedigree, echoing the verbal sparring to be found in the plays of Gay, Goldsmith, Sheridan and others. Unlike Boswell, who as his essays demonstrated, modified his behaviour to promote companionability, Johnson set no such limits on himself, considering conversation 'as a trial of intellectual vigour and skill'.¹¹⁰ Boswell asked Johnson whether there could be good conversation without 'a contest for superiority'; Johnson replied, "no animated conversation, Sir, for it cannot be but one will come off superior".¹¹¹ For Johnson, animated conversation, as opposed to mere talk, was a zero-sum game, in which there were only winner and losers.¹¹² Johnson often behaved in a way that breached civilised social norms. Goldsmith, quoting the words of a Cibber comedy, says, "There is no arguing with Johnson; for when his pistol misses fire, he knocks you down with the butt end of it".¹¹³ Although Johnson advocated subordination, according to Lord Chesterfield, he was a 'respectable Hottentot', who 'disputes with heat, and indiscriminately, mindless of the rank, character and situation of those with whom he disputes'.¹¹⁴ Johnson's whole mode of thinking was profoundly agonistic, and when confronted with an opponent who agreed with him, he would frequently maintain 'the wrong side of an argument', simply to sharpen his debating skills.¹¹⁵ Boswell characterised Johnson's mind in this respect as resembling:

¹¹⁰ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, IV, p. 111.

¹¹¹ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, II, p. 444.

¹¹² The modern philosopher, Michael Oakeshott, discusses the role of conversation in relation to a doctrine of politeness, arguing that good conversation involves differing without disagreeing and where there is no 'hierarchy' and no 'winner'. Johnson's conversational practice, using Oakeshott's terms, would be seen as a species of 'barbarism'. See, Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism and Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1962), pp. 198–201.

¹¹³ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, II, p. 100.

¹¹⁴ Lord Chesterfield, *Letters*, ed. by David Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 220.

¹¹⁵ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, IV, p. 111.

the vast amphitheatre, the Colisaeum at Rome. In the centre stood his judgement, which like a mighty gladiator, combated those apprehensions, that like the wild beasts of the *Arena*, were all around in cells, ready to be let out on him.¹¹⁶

Johnson's external trials of conversation were, therefore, mirrored by equally ferocious internal debates. Both were represented, by Boswell, as forms of performance, whether conducted in the 'amphitheatre' of the mind, or in the external arena of polite society. Significantly, the passage comparing Johnson's judgement to that of a 'gladiator', immediately follows on from a discussion of how one approaches death, which leaves Johnson considerably agitated. Johnson's natural combativeness may have been linked to the stigma that he felt at having to leave Oxford prematurely but may also have had a psychological origin. Psychoanalytic theory sees the formation of the aggressive drive as a defensive reaction to feelings of inferiority or, as Freud later argued, a re-direction of the death instinct to external objects.¹¹⁷ Such accounts are inevitably partial, but it is certainly the case that there was a strong performative element to Johnson's aggression, which he conceded, admitting to Boswell that 'Burke and I should have been of one opinion, if we had no audience'.¹¹⁸ Seeing conversation as a game or contest, the normal concepts of truth or error ceased to pertain, as William Dowling argues, and 'we have instead a notion of conversation as a realm wholly given over to the free play of mind or intelligence.'¹¹⁹

Johnson, accordingly, enjoyed disputation but required an audience to act as a witness to his performance. The set-piece disputation constituted a sort of mini-drama which was governed by the triangular relationship of protagonist, opponent and observer found pre-eminently in

¹¹⁶ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, II, p. 102.

¹¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' in *On Metapsychology* (Middlesex: Pelican, 1987), pp. 316 and 322.

¹¹⁸ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, IV, p. 324.

¹¹⁹ William C. Dowling, *Language and Logos in Boswell's "Life of Johnson"* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 122.

the theatre. As Redford argues, ‘Johnson, for all his strictures against players and play-acting, was himself a consummate performer’.¹²⁰ David Marshall also contends that authors, as diverse as Defoe, Shaftesbury and Adam Smith, were interested in the ‘theatre’ to be found outside the playhouse, specifically in the theatrical relations established when social groups are configured around an actor and spectator.¹²¹ The theatrical staging of behaviour, he argues, was a feature of ordinary social intercourse. Bravura conversation pushed Johnson into the kind of role-playing, which paralleled his adoption of different literary personae in *The Rambler*. Indeed, Johnson’s conversation was attended to as a notable performance. Boswell describes a conversation between Johnson and the Provost of Eton attracting a company ‘four, if not five, deep; those behind standing, and listening over the heads of those that were sitting near him’.¹²² Boswell enjoyed depicting such episodes, not only because they had a dramatic quality, but also because they afforded the vicarious pleasure of witnessing someone more powerful exercising mastery. By manipulating Johnson into such situations, Boswell was attaining his own form of mastery.

Speech and Writing in ‘The Life of Johnson’

In the previous sections, I have contended that Boswell sought to transform Johnson into a dramatic character, treating his conversation like stage dialogue. Here, I argue that Boswell not only presents Johnson’s conversation as a skilled theatrical performance, but also as the embodiment of supreme intellectual powers, reified in the living voice of Johnson, which is

¹²⁰ Redford, *Designing the Life of Johnson*, p. 85.

¹²¹ David Marshall, *The Figure of Theatre, Shaftesbury, Defoe, Adam Smith, and George Eliot* (New York: Columbia Press, 1986), p. 1.

¹²² Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, III, p. 426.

invested with transcendent properties. Boswell considered that Johnson's 'conversation was perhaps, more admirable, than even his writings', containing a form of practical wisdom that his books failed to match; an observation which, significantly, follows a lengthy discussion by Boswell of the *Lives of the English Poets*.¹²³

Johnson's conversation dominates the biography. Korshin argues that the majority of the dialogue recorded in the biography involves an interlocutor posing a question to Johnson to which Johnson presents a 'saying' in reply.¹²⁴ He states that genuine conversational exchanges, involving statements made by each participant, are limited to about fifty examples throughout the biography.¹²⁵ Mrs Thrale, he contends, caught a truer flavour of Johnson's conversation, representing him indulging in ordinary non-competitive chatter rather than in weighty debate. It is difficult, now, to judge whose account was the more accurate, but Mrs Thrale was undoubtedly no hero-worshipper. By contrast, Boswell's desire to represent Johnson's conversation as heroic was necessary to demonstrate his excellence in comparison to others. Although Boswell determined to write the *life* of Johnson, 'not his panegyrick', his biography is firmly cast in the heroic mode.¹²⁶ The opening sentence of the biography has something of the quality of the epic invocation:

To write the Life of him who excelled all mankind in writing the lives of others, and who, whether we consider his extraordinary endowments, or his various works, has been equalled by few in any age, is an arduous, and may be reckoned in me a presumptuous task.¹²⁷

¹²³ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, IV, p. 50.

¹²⁴ Korshin, 'Johnson's Conversation', p. 177.

¹²⁵ Korshin, 'Johnson's Conversation', p. 177

¹²⁶ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 30.

¹²⁷ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 25.

Boswell's task, it may be said, was to justify the ways of Johnson to men. In so doing, Boswell created a new kind of hero: the hero as conversationalist. Boswell, accordingly, depicts Johnson in every conceivable conversational setting to illustrate the epic breadth and nature of his powers. Often combative, Johnson is also presented as delivering monologues or in more conventional conversational settings. Johnson is mostly, however, represented as being centre-stage, the active partner in any colloquy. Often the interlocutor is Boswell himself. Johnson's conversational range varies from pithy putdowns to lengthy perorations. A good example of the latter would be the long 'argument dictated by Dr Johnson', on the evils of the slave trade, a soliloquy which reads rather like an essay.¹²⁸ There are parallels with the contemporary theatrical practice of 'pointing', where a soliloquy or speech was removed from the action and placed centre-stage, directed at the audience as a virtuosic performance.¹²⁹ Johnson's talk embodied his wisdom in its most trenchant form. For Boswell, thinking is synonymous with speech. Johnson's superiority over other men, he believed, consisted in the 'art of thinking'; of displaying in speech a 'certain continual power of seizing the useful substance of all that he knew', enabling him 'to express it in a clear and forcible manner'.¹³⁰ Johnson, Boswell believed, had the unique ability to distil a lifetime's reading and experience, applying it to any topic at hand, so that it emerged as legible wisdom. Such wisdom was the more compelling because it was situational, bodied forth in the crucible of debate, rather than being conceived schematically like a written text. Boswell was able, thereby, to subordinate Johnson's writings by re-appropriating his wisdom through the recording and representation of his spoken words. Boswell not only turned Johnson's sayings into theatre but also put his wisdom on the stage.

¹²⁸ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, III, pp. 200–04.

¹²⁹ See Lisa Freeman, *Character's Theatre*, p. 32–33.

¹³⁰ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, IV, p. 428.

Johnson, by contrast, was attentive to both a writer's literary and conversational gifts. Goldsmith he considered, for instance, a great writer but a poor conversationalist. Johnson, however, always placed the writer above the talker. Boswell took the opposite view. Greg Clingham argues that Boswell's analysis of Johnson's works in his biography fails to demonstrate an understanding of the richness of his writing and the sceptical intelligence which informs it.¹³¹ In this regard, whilst it is clear that Boswell admired Johnson's weighty and 'manly' prose, he did not approach it with the same delight as he did, when reading Addison, who 'writes with the ease of a gentleman.'¹³² Boswell appeared to respect masculine talk more than manly writing. Boswell's patrician reference to Addison's gentlemanly qualities is implicitly contrasted with Johnson's less socially distinguished tone. Clingham argues that Boswell was not able to articulate the connection between Johnson's writing and his character, in particular 'the experiential substantiality that is embodied in his language', which made him a different thinker from Boswell's conception of him.¹³³ Boswell's focus on Johnson's speech may have been illustrative of an inability to process the rhetorical complexity of Johnson's writing. Later, many of the Romantics, and writers such as Macaulay, were to have a similar difficulty. By contrast, Johnson's writings appeared to them, and to Boswell, as orphaned texts, second-order representations of the authentic wisdom revealed in his reported speech.

The privileging of speech over writing has been a dominant theme in post-structuralist thinking, associated with the work of Jacques Derrida, in particular. Derrida criticised the 'myth of presence' which he saw as underpinning all Western thought since Plato's

¹³¹ Clingham, *Boswell*, pp. 91–92.

¹³² Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 224.

¹³³ Clingham, *Boswell*, p. 94.

Phaedrus.¹³⁴ By this he meant that philosophers and writers had traditionally seen language as offering a direct window on experience, an unmediated view of the truth. By contrast, Derrida saw language as vertiginous, and meaning as perpetually deferred. The ‘myth of presence’ was most prominent in the idea of the primacy of speech, which Plato first expounded: the sense that in the act of speech, the self-presence of meaning was manifest in the very breath of the speaker, guaranteeing a direct access to truth and meaning. Writing is seen as a mere ‘supplement’ to speech, to use a key Derridean concept taken from Rousseau, a writer Boswell had met on his European travels. If speech, however, is ultimately articulated through language and, therefore, subject to the same detours and deferral of meaning as written discourse, then meaning, intention and authority will leak from spoken discourse in the same way as they do from any written text. There is no end to the process of ‘supplementarity’, no point of origin which will make meaning coincident with reality. Speech, according to Derrida, can no more provide that point of origin than writing, as both are founded on signs, which are themselves supplements of reality.

Derrida’s detailed argument may now seem dated, but it helps to contextualise Boswell’s privileging of writing over speech within an intellectual tradition that encoded certain ideas about mediation and self-presence.¹³⁵ Boswell considered that Johnson’s speech had a living presence that his writing lacked, issuing from his body and breath. In part this was because he was, himself, a sort of talking book: ‘[Johnson] was always most perfectly clear and perspicuous; and his language was so accurate, and his sentences so neatly constructed, that

¹³⁴ See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp.141–157.

¹³⁵ William C. Dowling explores Derrida’s attack on the metaphysics of *logos*, arguing that conversation in the biography, as it obeys its own rules, functions to disrupt any metaphysical notion of presence, in *Language and Logos*, pp. 98–130.

his conversation might have been all printed without any correction.’¹³⁶ His speaking was, therefore, a form of real-time writing. Boswell emphasises that his talk ‘was easy and natural; the accuracy of it had no appearance of labour, constraint or stiffness’.¹³⁷ Johnson, moreover, had apparently taught himself to speak in a precise clear manner so that it became ingrained:

[Johnson] had early laid it down as a fixed rule to do his best on every occasion, and in every company: to impart whatever he knew in the most forcible language he could put it in; and that by constant practice, and never suffering any careless expressions to escape him, or attempting to deliver his thoughts without arranging them in the clearest manner, it became habitual to him.¹³⁸

Boswell accordingly mythologises Johnson as master of himself and of his speech. As Dowling argues, Johnson’s talk became ‘the embodiment of a mysterious principal of divine rationality [...] completely realized only in the supreme order of speech.’¹³⁹ Boswell never represents Johnson as hesitating, repeating earlier stories or lapsing into ungrammatical utterance. The forceful discipline which Johnson applied to his spoken discourse paralleled his attempts in *The Dictionary* to bring order to the English language itself. However, Johnson’s spoken discourse was ephemeral, leaving no trace, so could not be studied and relished in the same way as his written texts. Boswell was determined that Johnson’s speech should be preserved in writing, establishing himself as the principal curator of Johnson’s wisdom.

¹³⁶ Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, IV, p. 236.

¹³⁷ Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, IV, p. 237.

¹³⁸ Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, I, p. 204.

¹³⁹ Dowling, *Language and Logos*, p. 127.

Voice and Imitation in 'The Life of Johnson'

Boswell, accordingly saw Johnson's sagacity manifested in his conversation. He was, however, also fascinated by Johnson's speech at a more primordial level. The human voice is the unique badge of identity, and a person or actor's most distinctive possession. Boswell, seemingly, needed to believe in the primacy of Johnson's voice and its physical qualities, in order to reinforce his sense of Johnson as a point of origin. Johnson's confident self-presence was mirrored by his perfect translation of meaning into vocal discourse. Boswell was determined to capture its unique timbre through direct imitation. He sought to present his writing, therefore, as the stand-in or 'supplement' for Johnson's voice. In this regard, sensing that Johnson was ambivalent about his writing about their Highland trip, Boswell noted in 1775, that 'Dr Johnson does not seem very desirous that I should publish any supplement'.¹⁴⁰ Johnson evidently did not believe that his voice required any supplementary echo. Boswell took a contrary view.

The human voice is associated with a particular acoustic signature, which emphasises an apparent continuity of identity through time by repetition. The voice is, therefore, conflated with the person, as Donald Wesling and Tadeusz Slawek contend, as a synecdoche for personhood.¹⁴¹ It also links the inside and the outside as Steven Connor argues:

nothing else defines me so intimately as my voice, precisely because there is no other feature of myself from me to the world, and to move me into the world. If my voice is mine because it comes from me, it can only be known as mine because it also goes from me.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in 'Introduction' to Samuel Johnson & James Boswell, *Johnson's A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland and Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed. by R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. xvii.

¹⁴¹ Donald Wesling and Tadeusz Slawek, *Literary Voice: The Calling of Jonah* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 1.

¹⁴² Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 7.

Bennett and Royle, extend this argument by contending that the human voice is at the centre of creative expression:

Literature, in fact, might be defined as being the space in which, more than anywhere else, the power beauty and strangeness of the human voice is both evoked or bodied forth *and* described, talked about, analysed. In this respect, reading literary texts involves attending to extraordinary voices.¹⁴³

Johnson's 'extraordinary' voice finds its own space through Boswell's recreation.

Eighteenth-century writers and thinkers were fascinated by the human voice. The eighteenth-century elocution movement, led by Thomas Sheridan and Hugh Blair, emphasised, according to Connor, the capacity of the voice to embody sincerity and authenticity, promoting, what Jay Fliegelman has called, the ideal of the 'spectacle of sincerity'.¹⁴⁴ These writers conceived of a 'natural language', focused not so much on the written foundations of grammar and syntax, but rather on the performative qualities of living speech. This led to a greater theatricalisation of public speaking and a 'performative understanding of selfhood'.¹⁴⁵ Accordingly, the voices of actors were of particular interest. Peter Holland cites Joshua Steele who wrote in 1755, with some regret, about the voices, which could no longer be heard:

We have heard of Betterton, Booth and Wilks, and some of us have seen Quinn; the portraits of their person are probably better preserved, but no models of their elocution remain [...] Had some of the celebrated speeches from Shakespeare been

¹⁴³ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 4th edn (London & New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 73.

¹⁴⁴ Connor, *Dumbstruck*, p. 331.

¹⁴⁵ Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 2.

noted and accented as they spoke them, we should now be able to judge whether the oratory of our stage is improved or debased.¹⁴⁶

Steele, according to Holland, sought to preserve Garrick's voice for posterity by adapting the techniques of musical notation to capture the rhythm, metre and inflection of his famous 'To be or not to be' speech.¹⁴⁷ He consulted with Garrick over his system of notation, leading Garrick to wonder if '[s]upposing a speech was noted, according to these rules, in the manner he spoke it, whether any other person, by the help of these notes, could pronounce his words in the same tone and manner exactly as he did'.¹⁴⁸

The reproduction of the human voice has an uncanny element; whilst it recreates a person's signature vocal delivery, it also robs them of uniqueness by rendering their speech capable of repetition. Boswell was engaged in preserving Johnson's voice for later generations and was aware of Steele's work on Garrick's speech as the biography makes clear:

I cannot too frequently request of my readers, while they peruse my account of Johnson's conversation, to endeavour to keep in mind his strong and deliberate utterance. His mode of speaking was indeed very impressive; and I wish it could be preserved as musick is written, according to the very ingenious method of Mr Steele, who has shown how the recitation of Mr Garrick, and other eminent speakers, might be transmitted to posterity *in score*.¹⁴⁹

'Scoring' Johnson's voice would preserve its phonic as well its semantic qualities by recording its unique vocal traces. Boswell aimed to place the spectator on the stage with Johnson, so that they could hear Johnson first-hand, as Boswell had heard him. There were other attempts to mechanise the human voice. Erasmus Darwin developed a speaking

¹⁴⁶ Peter Holland, 'Hearing the Dead: The Sound of David Garrick', in *Players, Playwrights, Playhouses*, ed. by Corder and Holland, pp. 248–70 (p. 248).

¹⁴⁷ Charles Dickens later experimented with Steele's notation to capture the absurdities of Parliamentary speech, see Jonathon Ree, *I See A Voice: A Philosophical History* (London: Flamingo, 1999), pp. 255–56.

¹⁴⁸ Holland, 'Hearing the Dead', p. 259.

¹⁴⁹ *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, II, pp. 326–7.

machine which was able to produce simple but recognisable human vocables.¹⁵⁰ Mechanical means of notation alone could not, however, capture the original aura of the voice. Boswell, therefore, sought to reproduce the quality and timbre of Johnson's speech through the re-creative powers of writing. Steele 'scored' Garrick's speech patterns using mechanical means; Boswell, by contrast, notated Johnson's voice by exploiting the metaphoric resources of language. In *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, Boswell notes Johnson's 'excellent English pronunciation', and listens 'to every sentence which he spoke as to a musical composition'.¹⁵¹ Elsewhere in the same volume, he compares Johnson's voice to the compositions of Handel; and whereas '*The Messiah*, played upon the *Canterbury* organ, is more sublime than when played upon an inferior instrument: but very slight musick will seem grand, when conveyed to the ear through that majestick medium.'¹⁵² Johnson's voice is heard as a form of music, whose power is distinct from and exceeds meaning, and whose presence is articulated through the extra-linguistic resources of rhythm and pitch.

For Boswell, the voice had a primordial quality. A small child recognises the sound of its parent's voice rather than its signification. The voice is fashioned by the unique physical configuration of vocal cords, teeth, palate, lips and physical build and is, therefore, intimately linked to the body. Johnson was a physically large man, which was reflected in his 'loud voice and a slow deliberate utterance'.¹⁵³ Mimicking Johnson's voice was a way of getting closer to him physically. Boswell, however, heard not only the music of Johnson's voice but also its aberrant tones. Precise in his speech, he was however also prone to 'talking to himself' in a more obscure fashion.¹⁵⁴ His self-talk would include 'pious ejaculations',

¹⁵⁰ A replica of the machine is maintained at the Erasmus Darwin House in Lichfield.

¹⁵¹ James Boswell, *Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, p. 60.

¹⁵² James Boswell, *Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, p. 8.

¹⁵³ *Boswell's Life of Johnson* (1934), IV, p. 429.

¹⁵⁴ *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 483.

including ‘fragments of the Lord’s Prayer’.¹⁵⁵ But it would also include incoherent elements, as the following passage illustrates:

In the intervals of articulating he made various sounds with his mouth; sometimes as if ruminating, or what is called chewing the cud, sometimes giving a half whistle, sometimes making his tongue play backwards from the roof of his mouth, as if clucking like a hen, and sometimes protruding it against his upper gums in front, as if pronouncing quickly under his breath, *too, too, too*¹⁵⁶

The snatches of the Lord’s Prayer hint at an internal dialogue which has become externalised; as though the anguish expressed in the diaries were breaking through Johnson’s surface eloquence. The inarticulate sounds that Boswell transcribes serve to assimilate Johnson to a non-human reality characterised by clucks, animal noises and nonsense words. In this way, Johnson violated societal norms, much as he did when arguing like a ‘respectable Hottentot’.¹⁵⁷ It is perhaps little wonder that Hogarth on first encountering him thought him an ‘ideot’.¹⁵⁸ Erving Goffman contends that in society ‘a taboo is placed on self-talk’.¹⁵⁹ In particular, it is seen as a ‘threat to inter-subjectivity’.¹⁶⁰ He argues that self-talk can be seen as a form of egocentricity or a form of mimicry of that which has its basis in speech between persons. He explains that a sort of impersonation is occurring, involving a form of self-splitting, ‘to this end we briefly split ourselves in two, projecting the character who talks and the character to whom such words could appropriately be directed’.¹⁶¹ Johnson’s inarticulate theatre restaged, in a bizarre fashion, the self-splitting that occasionally surfaced in the diaries and *The Rambler*. It was the language of the body.

¹⁵⁵ Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, I, p. 483.

¹⁵⁶ Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, I, p. 485.

¹⁵⁷ Lord Chesterfield, *Letters*, p. 220.

¹⁵⁸ Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, I, p. 146.

¹⁵⁹ Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), p. 81.

¹⁶⁰ Goffman, *Forms of Talk*, p. 85.

¹⁶¹ Goffman, *Forms of Talk*, p. 83.

Johnson's body sometimes spoke for him more revealingly than his fluent speech. As Arthur W. Frank writes, 'the body is not mute, but it is inarticulate, it does not use speech, yet begets it.'¹⁶² Johnson's strange utterances were also of a piece with the tics and awkward physical gesticulations that he exhibited. This behaviour flew in the face of ideals of elegant deportment advocated by Chesterfield, amongst others, and notions concerning the correction of physical deformity, put forward by the French surgeon Nicolas Andry, which gained ground in England in the 1740s.¹⁶³ The depiction of Johnson's self-talking and physical quirks, was, however, a good example of how, on occasion, Boswell's compulsion to testify to, and interpret, all that he saw trumped his natural instinct to edit out behaviour which did not fit with his idealised conception of his hero. Indeed, Boswell did not demur from transcribing Johnson's multiple voices, ranging from the sublime to the non-human.

Boswell was also, however, alive to how others heard Johnson's voice. Johnson's voice was notably fortissimo. Lord Pembroke, in *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, is quoted as saying that Johnson's sayings 'would not appear so extraordinary, were it not for his *bow-wow way*'.¹⁶⁴ Although the meaning of the italicised phrase is not wholly clear, Lord Pembroke may have been distinguishing between the substance of Johnson's talk and his manner of speaking: loud, authoritative, brooking no dissent. Johnson's writing was often criticised, in a similar manner, as a triumph of style over substance. But Johnson's voice also carried traces of class and origins. Johnson was wont to argue that Lichfield's inhabitants spoke the purest English, but Boswell demurs from this contention, arguing:

¹⁶² Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.27.

¹⁶³ See Henry Hitchings, *The World in Thirty-Eight Chapters or Dr Johnson's Guide to Life* (London: Macmillan, 2018), p. 14.

¹⁶⁴ Boswell, *Boswell's Journal of a Tour to The Hebrides*, p. 8.

I doubted as to the last article of this eulogy: for they had several provincial sounds; as *there*; pronounced like *fear*, instead of like *fair*; *once* pronounced *woonse*, instead of *wunse* or *wonse*. Johnson himself never got entirely free of those provincial accents. Garrick used to take him off, squeezing a lemon into a punch-bowl, with uncouth gesticulations, looking round the company, and calling out, “Who’s for *poonsh*?”¹⁶⁵

Boswell, as a Scot, was aware of how his own accent was perceived in London. Arthur Herman argues that for most Scots learning to converse and write in English was as difficult as learning a new language.¹⁶⁶ David Hume spoke in broad Scots all of his life. Boswell was therefore acutely attuned to others’ accents, and conscious of his own and others’ apparent defects in accent and pronunciation. Although Johnson spoke in magisterial tones, he remained, to a degree, a provincial and an outsider. Accent marked social class and origins as distinctly as attire. The phonology of London English in Johnson’s time was not markedly different from now, according to Michael MacMahon.¹⁶⁷ The extent to which provincial accents were regarded as contaminating the language of polite society can be gauged by Thomas Sheridan’s criticism of Garrick’s own Staffordshire pronunciation in his *Elements of English* (1786).¹⁶⁸ This was ironic given that Garrick had frequently mocked Johnson’s own provincial tones. Garrick, according to Peter Holland, pronounced words like ‘gird’, with a *u* vowel plus /r/ sound, whereas Sheridan stated the correct pronunciation to be a short *e* plus /r/ sound. Sheridan called this ‘a very improper pronunciation’ which ‘has of late gained ground, owing to a provincial dialect with which Mr Garrick’s speech was infected’.¹⁶⁹ Lynda Mugglestone has also argued that, early on, Boswell came under Sheridan’s sway and

¹⁶⁵ Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, I, pp. 463–64.

¹⁶⁶ Arthur Herman, *The Scottish Enlightenment: The Scots’ Invention of the Modern World* (London: Harper Perennial, 2001), p. 112.

¹⁶⁷ Michael K. C. MacMahon, ‘Phonology’, in *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, ed. by Suzanne Romaine, 6 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), IV, pp. 373–535 (p. 417).

¹⁶⁸ See, Holland, ‘Hearing the Dead’, p. 253.

¹⁶⁹ Holland, ‘Hearing the Dead’, p. 253.

could not comprehend Johnson's commitment to preserving his native accent.¹⁷⁰ Indeed, Boswell, as noted, had been struck on first meeting Johnson by 'his most uncouth voice.'¹⁷¹ Boswell sought to 'improve' his own accent to accord with Sheridan's metro-centric prescriptions, even encouraging Johnson to incorporate clear advice on 'proper' pronunciation in his fourth edition of *The Dictionary*. Johnson was scornful of Sheridan and rebuffed Boswell's suggestions, responding, as Mugglestone argues, 'with marked scepticism to evidence of linguistic self-fashioning'.¹⁷² Boswell later came round to Johnson's way of thinking, conceding that 'a studied and factitious pronunciation [...] is exceedingly disgusting'.¹⁷³ Boswell tended to adapt his behaviour to find favour with others, contrasting markedly with Johnson, whose independence and originality was epitomised by his determination to preserve the traces of his own origins in his speech.

Uncouth in appearance and accent, it is remarkable how Johnson was able to dominate any company. Because Johnson's voice was so striking and singular, it readily lent itself to mockery and imitation as Garrick's party piece illustrates. According to Boswell, Garrick was an excellent mimic of Johnson, and entertained Boswell in spring 1772 by walking with Boswell through St James Park, impersonating the 'Great Cham'.¹⁷⁴ But there were many other fine imitators of Johnson, including Thomas Davies and Samuel Foote. Johnson considered mimicry a 'very mean use of man's powers' and would respond angrily to being taken off.¹⁷⁵ Boswell recounts how Samuel Foote had 'resolved to imitate Johnson on the stage, expecting great profits from his ridicule of so celebrated a man'.¹⁷⁶ Johnson informed

¹⁷⁰ Lynda Mugglestone, "'Speaking Selves': Johnson, Boswell, and the Problem of Spoken English', in *The Johnson Society Transactions 2018* (Rugeley: Benhill Press, 2018), pp. 23–38 (pp. 30–31).

¹⁷¹ Boswell, *London Journal*, p. 220.

¹⁷² Mugglestone, "'Speaking Selves'", p. 28.

¹⁷³ Quoted in Mugglestone, "'Speaking Selves'", p. 33.

¹⁷⁴ Quoted in Ian McIntyre, *Garrick* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 473.

¹⁷⁵ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, II, p. 154.

¹⁷⁶ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, II, p. 299.

Thomas Davies that should Foote attempt such a performance, he would become closely acquainted with his oak stick. Davies passed the message on, and Foote desisted.

Mimicry, however, undermined identity by implying that the unique characteristics of a person were merely mechanical. The philosopher Dugald Smith, writing over forty years after Johnson's death, discussed the well-known theatrical mimics of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, including Samuel Foote, in an article in the *Edinburgh Journal of Science* (1828). According to Connor, Smith saw that the natural mimic has an intensified form of the propensity for all human beings to remake themselves from not only from the inside out, but also from the outside in.¹⁷⁷ Smith argued that:

[T]here is often connected with a turn for mimicry [...] a power of throwing oneself into the habitual train of another person's thinking and feeling, so as to be able, on a supposed or imaginary occasion, to support, in some measure, his *character*, and to utter his language.¹⁷⁸

Getting inside another person's 'thinking and feeling' was a strangely intrusive endeavour, but was precisely the task that Boswell had set himself in his biography. Mimicry of the sort practised by Foote, was, by contrast, intended to provoke ridicule. Because of Johnson's verbal fluency, there was a family resemblance between his authorial and spoken voice. Boswell in the last sections of his biography is engaged with the issues of imitation and parody as they relate to the authorial voice of Johnson. In part, this may have been an attempt to assert the pre-eminence of Boswell's own imitation of Johnson in the biography. Boswell may also have been seeking to demonstrate that the imitators and parodists were on the wrong track. Johnson's real 'voice' was not to be found in imitations or caricatures of Johnson's writing; it was to be found in his speech, to which Boswell asserted proprietorial

¹⁷⁷ Connor, *Dumbstruck*, p. 301.

¹⁷⁸ Dugald Smith, 'Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind', cited in Connor, *Dumbstruck*, p. 301.

rights. Boswell believed that he possessed a unique ability to reproduce Johnson's talk. By contrast, imitators of Johnson's writing, of which he provides 'specimens' in the biography, fell short of capturing Johnson's real voice:

I intend before this work is concluded, to exhibit specimens of my friend's style in various modes; some *caricaturing or mimicking* it, and some formed upon it, whether intentionally, or with a degree of similarity to it, of which perhaps, the writers were not conscious.¹⁷⁹

Johnson's authorial voice was a dominant force in eighteenth-century culture and found echoes in others' writing, sometimes unconsciously, as Boswell notes. The biography includes 'specimens' of seven authors, including novelists and historians. They encompass parodists such as Colman and Blair and imitators such as Hawkesworth and Robertson. Parody and mimicry resemble each other in relying on the existence of a prior text or voice. A poor imitation may also read like a parody which confuses the two literary forms, raising questions about authorial intentionality. Robert Phiddian uses Derrida's ideas of 'writing under erasure' as a metaphor for the activity of parody, pointing to the way that parody operates to disfigure and resituate the original text.¹⁸⁰ An imitation operates, in some respects, in an analogous way. Boswell's biography states that, 'the ludicrous imitators of Johnson's style are innumerable'.¹⁸¹ Boswell notes that 'their general method is to accumulate hard words'.¹⁸² Johnson's parodists sought to demonstrate that his writing style was not original but merely a contrived performance, capable of replication. Boswell's biography cites a Mr Colman, whose squib is a 'sportive sally' which nonetheless captures something of the original without 'being overcharged'.¹⁸³ Boswell also refers to Hugh Blair,

¹⁷⁹ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, III, pp. 172–73.

¹⁸⁰ Robert Phiddian, *Swift's Parody* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 13–14.

¹⁸¹ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, IV, p. 386.

¹⁸² Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, II, p. 386.

¹⁸³ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, IV, p. 387.

the first theorist of written, as opposed to oral discourse, noting that he heard Blair deliver a series of lectures in which he ‘had animadverted on the Johnsonian style as too pompous’, and had imitated the style of Johnson by translating a sentence of Addison into Johnsonese.¹⁸⁴ Amongst the ‘serious imitators of Johnson’s style’, Boswell considered John Hawkesworth the best.¹⁸⁵ Hawkesworth contributed to *The Adventurer* (1752–54) and his ‘imitations of Johnson are sometimes so happy, that it is extremely difficult to distinguish them, with certainty, from the compositions of his great archetype’.¹⁸⁶ Boswell’s admiration cooled when, having risen to some degree of consequence, Hawkesworth ‘had the provoking effrontery to say he was not sensible’ of the Johnsonian influence: borrowing and disavowing his voice in the same gesture.¹⁸⁷

Boswell considered himself to be greatest imitator of Johnson. Imitating Johnson’s speech, Boswell sought to recreate the original force of his utterance, unlike Robertson or Burney who borrowed his authorial voice to illuminate their own concerns. Johnson’s authentic voice, Boswell asserted, was heard only in his talk. How authentic were Boswell’s recorded conversations? Korshin argues that Boswell’s diaries and private papers demonstrate that Boswell took notes of his meetings with Johnson, usually in an abbreviated form, shortly after the conversation’s completion.¹⁸⁸ Boswell, according to Korshin, is inconsistent, however, about when he made these brief notes, in one place stating that he made the notes every evening, elsewhere disclosing that it could be up to four days later. Boswell worked up the longer conversations from the brief notes and transcribed them into his Private Papers, which then substantially formed the basis of the conversations recorded in his biography.

¹⁸⁴ Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, III, p. 172.

¹⁸⁵ Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, IV, p. 388.

¹⁸⁶ Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, I, p. 252.

¹⁸⁷ Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, I, p. 253.

¹⁸⁸ Korshin, ‘Johnson’s Conversation’, pp. 178–79.

Korshin acknowledges a link between historic utterances and the recorded conversations in the biography, but argues that Boswell's powers of memory would have had to have been superlative to have avoided any 'tincture of inaccuracy'.¹⁸⁹ He argues, like Frederick Pottle, a half-century before, that the conversations recorded in Boswell's biography are 'an imaginative reconstruction'.¹⁹⁰ Redford similarly concludes that whilst Johnson's talk is not fabricated, it shows extensive evidence of writerly 'design'.¹⁹¹

Boswell repeatedly attests to the authenticity of the events he describes, by reminding the reader that he witnessed them, but he also argues for one further advantage. Early in the biography, Boswell apologises for the imperfect manner in which he is obliged to exhibit Johnson's conversation in this period:

In the early part of my acquaintance with him, I was so wrapt in admiration of his extraordinary colloquial talents, and so little accustomed to his peculiar mode of expression, that I found it extremely difficult to recollect and record his conversation with its genuine vigour and vivacity. In progress of time, when my mind was, as it were, *strongly impregnated with the Johnsonian aether*, I could with much more facility and exactness, carry in my memory and commit to paper the exuberant variety of his wisdom and wit.¹⁹²

The italicised words are unusual. Johnson is represented as impregnating Boswell's mind with the 'Johnsonian aether'. This process transforms Boswell into a radically changed being: a surrogate Johnson who knows Johnson's mind from the inside and can, therefore, more readily recollect his words. The reference to the aether is noteworthy. By the eighteenth century, physical models known as aether theories, helped to explain the propagation of light, electro-magnetism and gravitational forces. L. Rosenfeld explains that

¹⁸⁹ Korshin, 'Johnson's Conversation', p. 179.

¹⁹⁰ Korshin, 'Johnson's Conversation', p. 185.

¹⁹¹ Redford, *Designing the Life of Johnson*, pp. 4–5.

¹⁹² Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 421.

Newton, in his first published theories of gravitation contained in his *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687), envisaged the interactions between planetary bodies as involving an intervening medium, which he called ‘aether’.¹⁹³ Aether is described as a medium that continually flows downwards to earth and is partially absorbed and partially diffused. Johan Bernoulli, in 1737, used the aether theory to explain the propagation of light. He argued that all space is permeated by small whirlpools of aether, which have an elasticity, transmitting vibrations from packets of light as they pass through.¹⁹⁴

The aether was, therefore, employed as a conceptual model to explain the operation of the invisible forces which formed the fabric of nature. By analogy, the Johnsonian aether represented the arena of consciousness envisaged as a medium, permeated by equally invisible forces: Johnson’s thoughts and emotions. Steele’s attempts to mechanically notate the human voice could only ever be partially successful. Boswell’s bold claim, however, that he could internalise the Johnsonian aether, like a medium channelling a spirit, gave Boswell a distinct competitive edge. He could inhabit Johnson in the same way that Garrick could claim to assume the identity of Macbeth on stage. Casting Johnson in the theatre of his life, Boswell also assumed rights to play Johnson too. If Boswell seemed to be adopting the art of the ventriloquist, it was against a background where many contemporary writers were very much concerned about the dangers presented by ventriloquism and séances. Thomas Reid, in his *Essay on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785), warned that the art of the ventriloquist, or ‘gastriloquists’ as he termed them:

if it could be carried to perfection, a Gastriloquist would be as dangerous a man in society as was the shepherd GIGES, who, by turning a ring on his finger, could make

¹⁹³ L. Rosenfeld, ‘Newton’s views on Aether and Gravitation’, *Archive for History of Exact Sciences*, vol 6, No. 1 (1969), 29–37.

¹⁹⁴ Edmund Taylor Whittaker, *A History of the Theories of Aether and Electricity from the Age of Descartes to the Close of the 19th Century* (London: Longmans, 1910), pp. 101–02.

himself invisible, and by that means, from being the King's shepherd, became King of Lydia.¹⁹⁵

The ventriloquist is, accordingly, seen as a dangerous shape-shifter.

Boswell, therefore, portrayed, himself as a ventriloquist who could 'take off' Johnson like a sort of mimic savant. It seems unlikely that Johnson would have approved, and this underlying tension occasionally came out into the open. One scene in the biography depicts Boswell twitting Johnson by paying him back in his own coin. Johnson is disputing vigorously with Boswell on whether he should have written an account of his French travels, Boswell retorting, "And Sir, to talk to you in your own style (raising my voice, and shaking my head) you *should* have given us your travels in France. I am *sure* I am right, and *there's an end on't*".¹⁹⁶ The only way to cap Johnson was by becoming Johnson. Boswell regarded himself as holding exclusive rights in relation to Johnson and fiercely resisted others' efforts to encroach on his domain. Boswell was particularly exercised that Johnson had allowed some of his *Adventurer* essays to pass for those of Dr. Bathhurst, as 'the actual effect of individual exertion never can be transferred with truth, to any other than its own original cause'.¹⁹⁷ Employing a metaphor based on paternity, Boswell argues 'so in literary children, an author may give the profits and fame of his composition to another man, but cannot make that other the real authour'.¹⁹⁸ Later, the same passage notes that, whilst Esau sold his birth-right, he remained the first-born of his parents. As the son of a Lord, primogeniture was important to Boswell, and it is clear that, spiritually, at least, he considered himself as

¹⁹⁵ Thomas Reid, 'Of the Fallacy of the Senses', *Essay on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (Edinburgh: John Bell & G. G. J. & J. Robinson, 1785), pp. 298–99.

¹⁹⁶ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, III, p. 301.

¹⁹⁷ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 255.

¹⁹⁸ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 255.

Johnson's son and heir, ahead of Hawkins, Thrale and the other rival biographers and imitators. His biography was the testimony to that belief.

This chapter has traced the way that Boswell's biography theatricalises the representation of Johnson, as part of the re-casting of the relationship between Boswell and Johnson themselves, and as a way of exploring different conceptions of self and the function of role-play. Johnson is embodied in his voice, which functions, for Boswell, as a point of origin. The emerging ideology of voice found its perfect locus in Johnson's speech, whose eloquent rationality appeared to be of a supreme order. Boswell sought to re-appropriate Johnson's wisdom by substituting his speech for his writing, thereby achieving a certain mastery over Johnson. Boswell ultimately underwrites the faithfulness of his enterprise, however, by means of the radical assertion that he is able to internalise Johnson. Becoming Johnson, Boswell is the guarantor of Johnson's real legacy, as Boswell saw it, by preserving his speech on the record. In the process, the sometime Scottish lawyer found his own identity. Herman argues that, in the context of the Scottish Enlightenment, Scots like Boswell, became English speakers and culture bearers, but remained Scots. Men such as Boswell, Hume and Robertson 'freely conceded the superiority of English culture so that they could analyse it, absorb it and ultimately master it'.¹⁹⁹ Adam Smith wrote the founding text of modern economics while 'Boswell's Life of Johnson would become the most famous biography in English letters – again in English, not Scottish letters'.²⁰⁰ Boswell in writing *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, accordingly, mastered English and became the author of himself. The next chapter will explore how the Romantics engaged with Johnson, focusing on the very different responses of Hazlitt and Byron. While Johnson's talk, largely due to

¹⁹⁹ Herman, *The Scottish Enlightenment*, p. 115.

²⁰⁰ Herman, *The Scottish Enlightenment*, p. 116.

Boswell, continued to be venerated by his Romantic successors, his writing was less universally regarded, becoming the site of considerable contestability.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ROMANTIC RESPONSE: HAZLITT AND BYRON

Introduction

Samuel Johnson died in 1784. Within five years of his death, Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* had been published; nine years later, in 1798, *Lyrical Ballads* emerged; fourteen years after that, Byron published the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in 1812. In less than thirty years after Johnson's death, the literary world had changed radically, and Johnson had become an unfashionable author. Coleridge was not alone in arguing that Johnson was more powerful 'in conversation than with his pen in his hand'.¹ This chapter will consider the Romantic response to Johnson's writings.

'Romanticism', however, encompasses very diverse and often mutually antagonistic cultures of writing. The term 'Romanticism' is, therefore, used throughout the chapter as a useful marker of literary periodisation, but it is not intended to imply a single homogenous literary ideology. The chapter briefly explores the attitudes of some of the leading Romantic writers to Johnson, specifically Wordsworth, Coleridge and Scott, but will focus principally on the contrasting responses to Johnson of two writers who both had a foothold in the eighteenth century: Byron and, in particular, Hazlitt, who wrote more extensively about Johnson than any contemporary.

I argue, in what follows, that the writers traditionally labelled Romantics saw Johnson's literary practice as rule-driven, lending his writing a rigidity, which was opposed to the spontaneity of the creative imagination. The chapter chiefly explores Hazlitt and Byron's

¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1 November 1883, cited in *Johnson: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by James T. Boulton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 355–56 (p. 356).

contrasting attitudes to Johnson. Hazlitt, I contend, saw Johnson as epitomising the mechanical mindset that he also associated with the emergence of utilitarian philosophy. Johnson was a writer that Hazlitt did not admire but could not evade. Hazlitt could not accommodate a rhetorical discourse such as Johnson's, believing that his style entrapped him. He also criticised Johnson's attachment to the heroic couplet, associated with the re-assertion of political authority in the eighteenth century. Hazlitt favoured loose rhyme schemes, which echoed his 'loose' politics. Hazlitt also disparaged Johnson's critical faculties, in general, as governed by rule and system. However, as I suggest, Hazlitt misreads and evades Johnson, by assimilating him to the philosophers of the industrial age.

Byron, by contrast, I argue, drew upon Johnson's authority to challenge Romantic orthodoxy. The Romantics viewed Johnson's aesthetic as being too rigid, but Byron saw Romanticism's focus on 'sincerity' and the spontaneous as equally constraining as Johnson's purported inflexibility. Byron's rhetorically driven verse and satirical strain were influenced directly by Johnson, Pope and the Augustans. Opposing the Romantic's devotion to 'originality', Byron shared Johnson's sense that 'nothing was new under the sun', which *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749), a favourite poem of Byron's, exemplified. Johnson's poem, I argue, influenced Byron's poem 'Mazeppo' (1819). Johnson was a ghostly presence in Byron's writing, a figure he summoned repeatedly to buttress his sense of poetic worth against rivals whom he saw as seeking to exclude his claim to literary pre-eminence.

The Nature of Romanticism and the General Response to Johnson

Before considering the general response to Johnson, in the early nineteenth century, it is pertinent to describe briefly the nature of Romanticism, and its challenge to the age of Johnson. It is common to refer to the period following the launch of *Lyrical Ballads*, as the ‘Romantic period’ but as critics have argued, not only is it debateable when the Romantic period began or ended, but it is also questionable whether any single definition of Romanticism will do justice to the period’s diverse intellectual currents. René Wellek identified in 1949 the Romantic’s central creed as a struggle to overcome the split between subject and object, self and world, conscious and unconscious.² M. H. Abrams later characterised Romanticism as a movement which self-consciously identified itself in opposition to the norms of classicism, exemplified by Johnson.³ The classicist, according to Abrams, sees art as a mimetic mirror of reality, while the Romantic writer sees it as a lamp, which emits images originating in the poet and not in the world. Geoffrey Hartmann, in an influential account, argued that writers such as Wordsworth sought a point of origin only to find it within themselves.⁴ Paul De Man later challenged the autobiographical basis of Romanticism by focusing on the way that Romantic writers used language.⁵ More recent writers have sought to counter the prevalent view of Romantic writing as anti-rhetorical.⁶

² René Wellek, ‘The Concept of “Romanticism” in Literary History’, *Comparative Literature*, 1(1949), pp. 1-23.

³ M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and The Lamp* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958).

⁴ Geoffrey Hartmann, ‘Romanticism and Anti-Self-Consciousness’, in *Romanticism*, ed. by Cynthia Chase (London: Longman, 1993), pp. 43–54.

⁵ Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. ix.

⁶ See, in particular: Jerome J. McGann, *Byron and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); *Rhetorical Traditions and British Romantic Literature*, ed. by D. H. Bialostosky and L. D. Needham (Bloomington, IN.: John Wiley, 1995) and *Spheres of Action: Speech and Performance in Romantic Culture*, ed. by A. Dick and A. Esterhammer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

It is clear, however, that the world had changed after 1789 and that Johnson was seen by many as a relic of the Augustan era. There was a new spirit. Hazlitt, in fact, titled a volume of his essays, *The Spirit of the Age: Or, Contemporary Portraits* (1825). The idea that an age would have a spirit would have been alien to Johnson. But one way in which writers of this period defined themselves was in opposition to their immediate antecedents. The defining event for the writers growing up at the end of the eighteenth century was the French Revolution. Hazlitt argued that the French Revolution ‘was the inevitable result of the invention of the art of printing’ through ‘books which render the knowledge possessed by everyone in the community accessible to all’.⁷ Rules about conduct, society, life, identity, nature and writing were called into question. Johnson and eighteenth-century culture, in general, were associated with rules and inflexible certainties. This was to stereotype the eighteenth century, as Marilyn Butler argues, as a period of hierarchy and stasis rather than as a period of rapid expansion and change.⁸ However, in periods of literary transition, writers often misread each other in order to define themselves, in part, by negation. *The Rambler* or Johnson’s diaries reveal an individual for whom radical irresolution and self-contradiction were as ingrained as any sense of unwavering certainty. But this was not a Johnson who served well as a counterpoint for writers such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, seeking to define their own distinct literary and political agendas.

James Boulton comments on the ‘relatively small [...] attention paid to Johnson by the Romantics and – except for Byron [...] how completely adverse their judgment’.⁹ Blake in ‘An Island in the Moon’ (1784) characterised Johnson as a ‘Bat with Leathern

⁷ William Hazlitt, ‘The French Revolution’ from *Life of Napoleon* (1828–30), in *William Hazlitt: Selected Writings*, ed. by Jon Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 84–98 (p. 84).

⁸ Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels & Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 19.

⁹ *Johnson: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Boulton, p. 34.

Wing/Winking and Blinking'.¹⁰ He is the blinded 'Blinking Sam' of Johnson's most dire imaginings, blinkered and stumbling. Wordsworth and Coleridge saw Johnson as a limited writer who abused language to hide an imaginative deficiency. The only explicit reference to Johnson in the 'Preface' to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) is to the Johnsonian parody of Thomas Percy.¹¹ Wordsworth disapproved of such 'false criticism', which he saw as a 'contemptible' way of attacking a type of poetry, whose deliberate simplicity, sought to align itself with 'life and nature'.¹² Wordsworth's attack on Johnson relates fundamentally to language and logic. He argues that Johnson commits a category error, by focusing on the 'genus' rather than the 'species'.¹³ Johnson tries to prove that 'an Ape is not a Newton' when he is self-evidently 'not a man'.¹⁴ Philip Smallwood argues that Wordsworth sought to historicise Johnson as a figure of the last age, 'to write over him'.¹⁵ Johnson may have been a source of anxiety for Wordsworth, pointing to his unacknowledged roots in eighteenth-century thought and culture. Accordingly, in the 'Appendix' to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth accused Johnson, like Pope, of using 'distorted language' as opposed to 'the language of men' on which he wished to found his own art.¹⁶ In fact, as Smallwood argues, Johnson's Shakespearean *Preface* (1765), praising the Bard's use of language culled from 'the common intercourse of life', anticipated Wordsworth's poetic credo.¹⁷ In any event, the 'turn' to

¹⁰ William Blake, 'An Island in the Moon', in *Johnson: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Boulton, p. 363.

¹¹ William Wordsworth, 'Preface to The Second Edition Of Several Of The Foregoing Poems, Published With An Additional Volume, Under The Title Of "Lyrical Ballads"', in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by E. De Selincourt, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), pp. 384–409 (p. 403).

¹² Wordsworth, 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 403.

¹³ Wordsworth, 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 403.

¹⁴ Wordsworth, 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 403.

¹⁵ Philip Smallwood, *Johnson's Critical Presence: Image, History, Judgment* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 119.

¹⁶ William Wordsworth 'Appendix' to *Lyrical Ballads*, in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, pp.405–09 (p. 405).

¹⁷ Samuel Johnson, 'Preface to Shakespeare' in *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. by Arthur Sherbo, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), VII (1968), p. 70.

‘natural’ language, may be seen as an attempt to erase the past and found writing in speech, itself an ideologically loaded project, equating orality with truth and rhetoric with falsehood.

Like Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge made few observations about Johnson and those that he did make generally characterised him as a narrow literalist. Hazlitt records in ‘My First Acquaintance with Poets’ (1823), how Coleridge ‘was exceedingly angry with Dr Johnson for striking the stone with his foot’ to confute Berkeley’s philosophical idealism.¹⁸ To Coleridge, this was evidence of a ‘shop-boys’ quality’.¹⁹ Hazlitt tartly comments that ‘Coleridge somehow always contrived to prefer the *unknown* to the *known*’.²⁰ References to Johnson in the *Biographia Literaria* (1817) are confined to disapproving comments concerning the *Dictionary*’s definitions and Johnson’s parody of Percy. Elsewhere, he is critical of Johnson’s prose style, observing that he created ‘an impression of cleverness by never saying anything in a common way’.²¹ Coleridge also felt that Johnson did not understand psychology, citing Johnson’s reading of *Hamlet* (1603). Johnson’s horror, when Hamlet forbears from taking his uncle’s life, is not evidence of ‘atrocious’ conduct, according to Coleridge; rather it is illustrative of Johnson’s failure to understand Hamlet’s ‘indecision and irresoluteness’, which Coleridge regards as the Prince’s defining trait.²² Coleridge also opposed Johnson’s characterisation of Shakespeare as a careless writer. Coleridge contended that Shakespeare shaped the distinct elements of his dramas into an organic whole. This was the major dividing line between Johnson and his Romantic critics. According to G. F. Parker, Shakespeare’s general carelessness ‘remarked by Johnson

¹⁸ William Hazlitt, ‘My First Acquaintance with Poets’, in *William Hazlitt: Selected Writings*, pp. 211–29 (p. 219).

¹⁹ Hazlitt, ‘My First Acquaintance with Poets’, p. 219.

²⁰ Hazlitt, ‘My First Acquaintance with Poets’, p. 219.

²¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘Lecture XIV’, in *Coleridge’s Essays & Lectures on Shakespeare and Some Other Old Poets & Dramatists* (London & Toronto: J. M. Dent, 1930) p. 325.

²² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘Lecture XII’, in *Coleridge’s Essays & Lectures on Shakespeare and Some Other Old Poets & Dramatists*, p. 478.

disappear[s] in the unity of the living organism'.²³ Coleridge also disagreed with Johnson's response to dramatic illusion, arguing, like Boswell, that the theatre-goer experiences a sort of 'temporary half faith'; but responds to stage scenery depicting, say a forest, by 'not in the mind's judging it to be a forest, but, in its remission of the judgement that it is not a forest'.²⁴ Johnson, in Coleridge's view, denies the phenomenon of dramatic illusion altogether, lacking, presumably, the literary sophistication to understand the fictive nature of theatre.

Walter Scott, by contrast, was one of the few writers of the period to admire Johnson's writing and ethical stance. Scott, although culturally conservative, was nonetheless an author whose writing mirrored Romantic themes. Johnson also came to represent England as Scott came to embody Scotland, as James Engell argues.²⁵ Boswell and John Gibson Lockhart, Scott's biographer, mythologised their subjects as national exemplars. In particular, Lockhart drew parallels between Johnson's representative role in English literary life and that of Scott, who integrated old Romantic Scotland with modern Scottish life. Scott genuinely admired Johnson's writing, stating of *Rasselas* (1759), that its 'merits have long been long justly appreciated' and describing its style as being in 'Johnson's best manner.'²⁶ Lockhart noted that Scott 'had more pleasure in reading *London and The Vanity of Human Wishes*, than any other poetical composition he could mention; and I think I never saw his countenance more indicative of high admiration than when reciting aloud from those productions'.²⁷ Scott also wrote to J. B. S. Morritt:

²³ G. F. Parker, *Johnson's Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 126–27.

²⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Progress of the Drama', in *Coleridge's Essays & Lectures on Shakespeare and Some Other Old Poets & Dramatists*, p. 28.

²⁵ James Engell, "'Johnson and Scott", England and Scotland' in *Samuel Johnson: New Contexts for a New Century*, ed. by Howard D. Weinbrot (San Marion: Huntington Library, 2014), pp. 313–42 (p. 332).

²⁶ Walter Scott, 'Lives of the Novelists' (1821–4), in *Johnson: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Boulton, pp. 420–22 (p. 422).

²⁷ J. G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Walter Scott*, ed. by Robert Cadell, 7 vols (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, John Murray & Whittaker & Co., 1837), II, p. 308.

The beautiful and feeling verses by Dr. Johnson to the memory of his humble friend Levett [*sic*], and which with me, though a tolerably ardent Scotchman, atone for a thousand of his prejudices, open with a sentiment which every year's acquaintance with this *Vanitas Vanitatum* presses more fully on our conviction.²⁸

Scott produced a number of Johnsonian studies, which remained incomplete at his death, including a sketch of Johnson's life. Scott also looked to Johnson as a moral exemplar. When faced with financial ruin, Scott wrote that 'I will not yield without a fight for it. It is odd, when I set myself to write *doggedly*, as Dr Johnson would say, I am exactly the same man as ever I was, neither low-spirited or *distract*'.²⁹ Scott was recalling Johnson's remark that 'a man may write at any time, if he will set himself doggedly to it'.³⁰ Doggedness was not a conspicuously Romantic virtue, but it was an assertion of the importance of labour in the act of writing. To the Romantics, writing was a product of inspiration, not of workman-like assiduity. Scott admired Johnson's moral resilience, as Carlyle did later, and his sense of the transience of things, which Byron also understood.

William Hazlitt and Johnson

Background

Tom Mason and Adam Rounce identify an ironic congruence between Johnson's detractors and admirers, 'both are specific and immoderate — even passionate'.³¹ One

²⁸ Walter Scott to J. B. S. Morritt, 3 October 1810, *Familiar Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. by David Douglas, 2 vols (Boston, Houghton, Mifflin & co., 1894), I, p. 192.

²⁹ 22 January 1826 journal entry, in Sir Walter Scott, *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott from the Original Manuscript at Abbotsford* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1891), p. 56.

³⁰ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. by George Birkbeck Hill, revised by L. F. Powell, 6 vols (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1934) I, p. 118.

³¹ Tom Mason and Adam Rounce, 'Looking Before and After?', in *Johnson Re-Visioned: Looking Before and After*, ed. by Philip Smallwood (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2001), pp. 134–66 (p. 138).

writer, however, straddled both sides of the debate: William Hazlitt. Like Johnson, he was a periodical essayist and sometime parliamentary reporter. A turning point in his life was meeting Coleridge in 1798. He also greatly admired Wordsworth, whom he saw as ‘the most original poet now living’.³² Wordsworth, in Hazlitt’s view, was a revolutionary, who ‘obliterated and effaced’ all the ‘traditions of learning, all the superstitions of age’.³³ After 1798, Hazlitt became a prolific essayist. Harold Bloom argues that ‘Hazlitt makes a second to Johnson, in a great procession of critical essayists that goes on to Carlyle, Emerson, Ruskin, Pater and Wilde’.³⁴ Hazlitt could be sharp in debate like Johnson and, according to David Bromwich, adopted two Johnsonian assumptions, ‘that truth is not private, but submits naturally to the medium of social exchange; and that whatever fills the mind, by supplying it with an interest, ought not to be scorned’.³⁵ He was more receptive to the immediate past than Wordsworth and Coleridge. Bromwich notes, in particular, a ‘quality of fair mindedness towards his immediate predecessors which sets [Hazlitt] apart from the romantic movement as a whole’.³⁶ While Wordsworth, Coleridge and Scott differed in their views of Johnson, their commentaries on him were similarly sparse. By contrast, Johnson features as a presence throughout Hazlitt’s writings, mostly tilted against, sometimes praised, but always seen as a critic to measure himself against. More revealing than the praise of Scott or the opprobrium of Wordsworth, Hazlitt’s criticisms illuminate in a manner similar to Johnson’s critiques of the metaphysical poets; they reshape our perceptions of Johnson’s writing even if we do not always agree with the judgments reached.

³² William Hazlitt, ‘Mr Wordsworth’ in *The Spirit of The Age* (1825), in *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. by Duncan Wu, 9 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), VII, pp. 161–69 (p. 164).

³³ Hazlitt, ‘Mr Wordsworth’, p. 162.

³⁴ Harold Bloom, Introduction to *Modern Critical Views: William Hazlitt*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), pp. 1–13 (p. 5).

³⁵ David Bromwich, *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 22.

³⁶ Bromwich, *Hazlitt*, p. 21.

This section will consider three areas: first, Hazlitt's consideration of Johnson's prose style; secondly, Hazlitt and Johnson's rival versions of literary history; and thirdly, Hazlitt's criticisms of Johnson's writings on Shakespeare. Broadly, I argue that Hazlitt was unable to process a rhetorical prose style such as Johnson's, given that it was not based on the conversational style favoured by Hazlitt. Hazlitt considered Johnson ill-equipped, as a literary critic, to comprehend 'sublime' poets, such as Milton. His most trenchant criticisms, however, were reserved for Johnson's treatment of Shakespeare. He considered that Johnson's rules-bound thinking inhibited his understanding of Shakespeare's genius, particularly his insights into character and psychology. In this respect, Hazlitt discerned a mechanical quality in Johnson's literary criticism which he also detected in the thinking of Malthus and Bentham.

Johnson and the problem of style

Hazlitt wrestled with Johnson on a number of fronts, but a key battleground was over style. Style for Hazlitt was an aesthetic and moral choice and, in both respects, Johnson's rhetorical style fell short in Hazlitt's view. His criticisms of Johnson in this respect are chiefly encountered in *Lectures on the English Comic Writers* (1818–19), but other texts are also referenced here. Hazlitt was himself a consummate stylist and sought to renew the language of prose much as Wordsworth had aimed to refashion poetic diction. Whereas Wordsworth ostensibly wished to erase the immediate past, Hazlitt admired his eighteenth-century forebears. It was to Burke, however, rather than Johnson, that he looked for a model

of style. In this respect, he was of the same mind as Coleridge.³⁷ Burke was a writer that the radical Hazlitt might have been expected to anathematise rather than laud, but it was an essential part of his credo that 'it has always been with me a test of the sense and candour of any one belonging to the opposite party, whether he allowed Burke to be a great man'.³⁸ He saw, in Burke, a writer in whom 'his style is most suited to the subject [...] he exults in the display of power, in shewing the extent, the force, the intensity of his ideas'.³⁹ Burke was a 'severe' writer whose 'words are the most like things'.⁴⁰ Burke's words became the world and by a performative force 'produced the strongest impression on his reader'.⁴¹ His language was possessed of a unique 'untameable vigour and originality'.⁴² Burke was a great orator and his prose had 'all the familiarity of conversation'.⁴³ Hazlitt's aesthetics of style accordingly privileged writing rooted in speech.

Johnson's essays were decidedly not anchored in speech, his prose was consciously artificial: his sinuous and expansive sentences, with their stately rhythms and balanced antitheses, were intended to provide a vehicle to navigate complex and competing fields of moral discrimination. Romantics, such as Hazlitt, were, however, bent on re-inventing the world and neither Johnson's subject matter nor his mode of expression would any longer serve. As Bromwich argues, 'the Augustan style was worth rebelling against because in Hazlitt's time it still existed as an almost palpable force'.⁴⁴ Bromwich argues that Hazlitt's own prose style deliberately ran counter to Johnson's: 'the deftness of Hazlitt's new cadences, the sinewy

³⁷ Comparing Johnson's style to Burke's in the *Table Talk* for 4 July 1833, Coleridge comments, 'no one, I suppose, will set Johnson before Burke.' Cited in *Johnson: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Boulton, pp. 355–56 (p. 356).

³⁸ William Hazlitt, 'Character of Mr Burke' in *William Hazlitt: Selected Writings*, pp. 54–66, (p. 54).

³⁹ Hazlitt, 'Character of Mr Burke', p. 59.

⁴⁰ Hazlitt, 'Character of Mr Burke', p. 59.

⁴¹ Hazlitt, 'Character of Mr Burke', p. 59.

⁴² Hazlitt, 'Character of Mr Burke', p. 60.

⁴³ Hazlitt, 'Character of Mr Burke', p. 65.

⁴⁴ Bromwich, *Hazlitt*, p. 16.

assurance [...] is figured against [...] a prose which was still a live option even when it was firmly refused'.⁴⁵ Yet, ironically, as Bromwich argues, Hazlitt occasionally sounded like Johnson. For instance, Hazlitt wrote of the hypocrisy of wanting one's friends to be always 'swimming in troubled waters so that they may have the credit of throwing out ropes and sending out life-boats to you, without ever bringing you ashore'.⁴⁶ This clearly echoed Johnson's famous definition of a patron in his letter to Lord Chesterfield.⁴⁷

Many prose writers were, however, still living off Johnson's legacy. Boswell's biography had demonstrated how the Johnsonian style had degenerated in the hands of his imitators. Hazlitt argued, in his *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818–19), that Johnson's 'style of imposing generalisation' was even more baneful in effect and had been adopted by literary and commercial writers, so 'that at present, we cannot see a lottery puff, or a quack advertisement pasted against a wall, that is not perfectly Johnsonian in style'.⁴⁸ Johnson's authoritative style had become a fetishised commodity in its own right. W. K. Wimsatt, moreover, argues that Johnson's sway extended beyond the commercial world to certain classes of minor writers and philological clergymen until well into the nineteenth century. He cites Alexander Chalmers, who wrote in 1817 that, 'the attempt to imitate him [...] has elevated the style of every species of literary composition [...] He not only began a revolution in our language, but lived till it was almost completed'.⁴⁹ Hazlitt, however, saw the fault of his imitators as residing in the original model. In 'Lecture V: Of the Periodical

⁴⁵ Bromwich, *Hazlitt*, p. 16.

⁴⁶ William Hazlitt, *Table Talk* (1821–22), cited in Bromwich, *Hazlitt*, p. 284.

⁴⁷ The Johnson 'definition' is: 'Is not a Patron, my Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a Man struggling for Life in the waters and when he has reached ground encumbers him with help.': 'Letter to Lord Chesterfield', 7 February 1755, *The Letters of Samuel Johnson: 1731–1772*, ed. by Bruce Redford, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), I, pp. 95–97 (p. 96).

⁴⁸ William Hazlitt, 'Lecture VI', *Lectures on the English Poets*, in *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. by WuII, pp. 261–78 (p. 262).

⁴⁹ W. K. Wimsatt Jr, *The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 143.

Essayists', from the *Lectures on the English Comic Writers* (1819), he argues that, 'The herd of his imitators showed what he was by their disproportionate effects [...] Hawkesworth is completely trite and vapid, aping all the faults of Johnson's style, without anything to atone for them'.⁵⁰

'Lecture V' contains Hazlitt's most complete consideration of Johnson's prose, alongside an analysis of other principal eighteenth-century essayists. In a piece notable for its fulsome praise of Richard Steele, Hazlitt devotes only two pages to Steele, but twelve pages to Johnson. Johnson was a writer that Hazlitt disapproved of but evidently could not evade. Hazlitt, Freya Johnston argues, accordingly bore 'all of the hallmarks of the anxiety of influence'.⁵¹ Steele is also preferred to Addison whose 'moral and didactic tone' perhaps reminded Hazlitt of Johnson.⁵² Hazlitt preferred Steele's pieces which read like remarks in a 'sensible conversation [...] less like a lecture' and resembled 'fragments of comedy'.⁵³ The best prose, like Steele's, imitated speech, with the aim of erasing the materiality of writing, replacing it with the figure of a person imparting their thoughts directly to the listener.

Johnson does not fit the model:

the dramatic and conversational turn [of *The Tatler* and *Spectator*] [...] is quite lost in the Rambler by Dr Johnson. There is no reflected light thrown on human life from an assumed character, nor any direct one from a display of the author's own.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ William Hazlitt, 'Lecture V', *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, in *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, II, pp. 84–97 (p. 95).

⁵¹ Freya Johnston, 'Byron's Johnson', in *Samuel Johnson: New Contexts for a New Century*, ed. by Weinbrot, pp. 295–311 (p. 303).

⁵² Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, p. 89.

⁵³ Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, p. 89.

⁵⁴ Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, p. 91.

However, Johnson had deliberately turned against the ‘house style’ of *The Tatler*, being, as he argued, unmoved by ‘temporary curiosity’ or ‘living characters’.⁵⁵ Hazlitt, nonetheless, sees this as resulting in dry academicism:

The Rambler is a collection of moral Essays, or scholastic theses [...] [it] is a splendid and imposing common-place book, of general topics, and rhetorical declamation on the conduct and business of human life [...] there is hardly a reflection to be found in it, which has not already been suggested [...] The mass of intellectual wealth here heaped together is immense, but it is the produce of the general intellect labouring in the mine.⁵⁶

Associated with workmanlike toil, Johnson’s truisms sit mid-way between ‘startling novelty and vapid common-place’.⁵⁷ Johnson, however, like Byron, believed that everything worth saying had already been said. Hazlitt concedes that Dr Johnson was not ‘a man without originality [...] but he was not a man of original thought or genius’.⁵⁸ Wordsworth was an original, Hazlitt believed, precisely because he saw nature anew. Johnson, by contrast, was consumed by a sense of belatedness. Accordingly, he

does not set us thinking for the first time [...] nor is there any passage [...] embodying any known principle or observation, with such force and beauty that justice can only be done to the idea in the author’s own words.⁵⁹

Hazlitt, accordingly, sensed a fundamental lack in Johnson whose clearest marker was a deficiency of style. In a late essay, Hazlitt noted that poets and engravers use ‘a *stylos*, or style’ to execute their works, contrasting the illusion of fluidity created by the Elgin Marbles, which he links with good prose, with the rigidity of other classical sculpture, which he

⁵⁵ Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, ed. by W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), VII (1968), p. 316.

⁵⁶ Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, p. 92.

⁵⁷ Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, p. 92.

⁵⁸ Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, p. 92.

⁵⁹ Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, p. 92.

associates with rhyming verse.⁶⁰ Style properly means the ‘mode of representing nature.’⁶¹ Johnson’s style, by contrast, is unnatural. It is like ‘the rumbling of mimic thunder at one of our theatres; and the light he throws upon a subject is like the dazzling effect of phosphorous, or an ignis fatuus of words’.⁶² The ‘ignis fatuus’ is a light that sometimes appears over marshy ground, often attributed to the combustion of gas from decomposed matter. Johnson’s *Dictionary* describes it as ‘vapours arising from putrified waters’.⁶³ Hazlitt sees Johnson’s style as perverting and decomposing nature by deceiving the senses: presenting ‘mimic’ rather than real sound, false rather than genuine light. Hazlitt’s ideology of style, in this respect, was rooted in the organicist aesthetics of the period. This emphasised a harmonious blending of elements akin to natural processes. Burke, a ‘natural writer’, matches sign, sound and world; Johnson, an ‘un-natural’ writer, by contrast, ruptures sound and sense.

Hazlitt considered that Johnson’s prose was not only unnatural; he believed that it also served to erode difference. Hazlitt objected to:

The pomp and uniformity of his style. All his periods are cast in the same mould. Are of the same size and shape, and consequently, have little fitness to the variety of things he professes to treat of. His subjects are familiar but the author is always upon stilts.⁶⁴

Hazlitt’s view echoed Goldsmith’s criticism that if Johnson wrote a fable of fish, they would all speak like whales.⁶⁵ Hazlitt argued that Johnson’s style had a levelling effect, so that

⁶⁰ Quoted in Tom Paulin, *The Day Star of Liberty* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), p. 99.

⁶¹ Quoted in Paulin, *The Day Star of Liberty*, p. 99.

⁶² Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, p. 92.

⁶³ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London: Time Books, 1979), the text is not paginated.

⁶⁴ Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, pp. 92–93.

⁶⁵ James Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, ed. by G. Birkbeck Hill, 6 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1887), II, p. 231.

‘when we find the same pains and pomp of diction bestowed upon the most trifling as upon the most important parts of a sentence or discourse, we grow tired of distinguishing between pretension and reality’.⁶⁶ The conflation of the sublime and trivial, ‘reduces all things to the same artificial and unmeaning level. It destroys all shades of difference, the association between words and things. It is a perpetual paradox and innovation’.⁶⁷ Johnson’s originality, in other words, consisted in creating an autonomous verbal universe. By applying a sort of uniform verbal coating to all things, Johnson’s style served to obscure the multifarious complexity of the world, reducing the difference between thoughts, sensations and categories of knowledge to the lowest common denominator.

Underlying all of Hazlitt’s objections to Johnson’s style, was the fundamental concern that the rigid rhythms of Johnson’s prose operated like a machine, depriving his ideas of life and flow:

The structure of his sentences, which was his own invention, and which has been generally imitated since his time, is a species of rhyming in prose, where one clause answers to another in measure and quantity, like the tagging of syllables at the end of a verse; the close of the period follows mechanically as the oscillation of a pendulum, the sense is balanced with the sound [...] each sentence [...] is contained within itself like a couplet.⁶⁸

Ironically, Hazlitt’s sentence has its own pendulum structure. But while Walpole and Seward had previously subjected Johnson’s prose to extensive criticism, no writer before Hazlitt had dissected his style with such precision. The grouping of phrases and clauses was a signature element of Johnson’s rhetoric. Hazlitt’s argument paralleled the Romantic objection to the closed form of the heroic couplet: that style drives thought and that both are constrained by

⁶⁶ Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, p. 93.

⁶⁷ Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, p. 93.

⁶⁸ Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, p. 93.

the mechanical conventions of balance within which the discourse moves. Hazlitt's model for prose, the spontaneity of conversation, mirrored his libertarian political views. Johnson's balancing act may have been seen by Hazlitt as both an assertion of linguistic authority, corresponding to his support for hierarchical political structures, but also, paradoxically, as a denial of the agency of the author. The writer surrenders liberty of thought by electing to write like a machine. Style is, accordingly, a moral choice, and Johnson is 'a complete balance-master in the topics of morality.'⁶⁹ Johnson would not commit himself unless 'he should involve himself in the labyrinths of endless error', and will not make a judgement 'for fear of compromising his dignity'.⁷⁰ This hesitation is for a reason:

Out of the pale of established authority [...] all is sceptical, loose, he seems in imagination to strengthen the dominion of prejudice, as he weakens and dissipates that of reason; and round the rock of faith and power, on the edge of which slumbers blindfold and uneasy, the waves and billows of uncertain and dangerous opinion roar and heave for evermore.⁷¹

Hazlitt identifies what Johnson's contemporaries had missed: that scepticism played a role in Johnson's essays as much as faith and that it was built into the rhythm of his prose. Johnson however lacked the courage of his sceptical convictions. Faith always trumps doubt, but as a sort of mechanical afterthought, akin to the echo in the rhyming couplet. Hazlitt did not recognise, as modern critics have argued, that Johnson's writing often involves a movement of thought which circles back on itself in a perpetual refusal of closure.⁷² Hazlitt, rather, contrasts the writer's equivocation with the certainty and naturalness of Johnson's talk: 'the man was superior to the author. When he threw aside his pen [...] he became not only

⁶⁹ Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, p. 93.

⁷⁰ Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, p. 93.

⁷¹ Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, p. 94.

⁷² See, in particular, the 'Introduction', pp. 1–10, and other essays included in *Samuel Johnson: The Arc of the Pendulum*, ed. by Freya Johnston and Lynda Muggleston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

learned and thoughtful, but acute, witty, humorous, natural, honest'.⁷³ Talk possessed the spontaneity central to Hazlitt's Romantic ideology. In privileging speech over writing, moreover, Hazlitt echoed Boswell and Macaulay. Johnson irked Hazlitt because he would not write as he talked. Upright rather than 'loose', his writing was obdurately writerly in its framing.

Hazlitt's final charge is that Johnson further polluted 'natural' language by adopting a form of linguistic miscegenation. In the *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818–19), Hazlitt argues that before Johnson, the learned had 'the privilege of turning their notions into Latin', but Johnson 'naturalised this privilege, by inventing a sort of jargon translated half-way out of one language into another, which raised the Doctor's reputation, and confounded all ranks in literature'.⁷⁴ Hazlitt contends that Johnson's 'long compound Latin phrases required less thought, and took up more room than others'.⁷⁵ The expansion of linguistic space through 'latinisation' was a technique that paralleled Johnson's characteristic accumulation of clauses and balancing phrases, which Hazlitt considered to be a form of literary imperialism. As a literary approach, it sacrificed substance for orotund verbosity. Johnson's style, in other words, was a signifier of authority, designed to stun and to exclude. Ironically, Johnson had similarly charged Hazlitt's master, Milton, of using 'English words with a foreign idiom'.⁷⁶ However, the idea of the natural language of speech, upon which Hazlitt's critique was based, was itself a Romantic self-conceptualisation, like 'spirituality', 'creativity' and 'uniqueness', which Jerome McGann argues, carried their own ideological freight.⁷⁷ The

⁷³ Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, p. 94.

⁷⁴ Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets*, p. 262.

⁷⁵ Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets*, p. 262.

⁷⁶ Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the English Poets*, ed. by John H. Middendorf, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), XXI (2010), p. 202.

⁷⁷ Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983), p. 32.

valorising of the myth of ‘natural language’ inevitably led to Hazlitt regarding Johnson’s prose as unnatural and mechanical, qualities which Hazlitt also saw as characteristic of Johnson’s literary criticism.

Hazlitt, Johnson and literary criticism

Johnson published his edition of *The Plays of William Shakespeare* in 1765 and the *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* between 1779 and 1781.⁷⁸ Hazlitt published his *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays* in 1817–18 and his *Lectures on the English Poets* in 1818–19. It is not fanciful, perhaps, to surmise that Hazlitt was setting his stall on Johnson’s critical territory. In essence, Hazlitt considered that Johnson could not transcend his own rigid literary principles. This section focuses principally on the two writer’s approach to Milton but also covers their respective views of other writers. Johnson’s publication of the *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1779–81) was a conscious effort to put forward a new paradigm of literary history. Widely admired by many, it also had its critics. Edmund Cartwright in *The Monthly Review* (1782), exclaimed, with Candide, ‘What a wonderful genius is this Procurante! Nothing can please him!’.⁷⁹ The sense that Johnson was seeking to cut his literary predecessors down to size was not confined to Cartwright.

Hazlitt’s *Lectures on the English Poets* seems, in part, to have been written *contra* Johnson.

Hazlitt’s work had its origins in a series of lectures delivered at the Surrey Institution in 1817. The Institution, founded in 1808, featured lectures by experts in their fields. Duncan

⁷⁸ Recent scholarship has focused on the commercial significance of the work’s publication as well as the evolution of its publication, particularly, J. D. Fleeman, *A Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000)

⁷⁹ Introduction, *Johnson: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Boulton, p. 270.

Wu comments that the Rotunda ‘was the ideal venue for a series that would revolutionise the way in which people thought about literature’.⁸⁰ Tom Lockwood notes that the lecture room at the Surrey Institution resembled an early modern amphitheatre playhouse which accentuated the performance aspect of the lectures.⁸¹ He cites Gillian Russell’s argument that we see the lecture as occupying a space ‘somewhere between the church and the theatre’, where the lecturer, like an actor, persuades through ‘manipulation of speech and gesture’.⁸² Delivered on Tuesday evenings at 7pm, the lecture series was a resounding success, eclipsing the efforts of Coleridge who delivered a programme of literary talks on the same evening at 8pm at the London Philosophical Society.

Wu argues that Hazlitt’s lectures afforded the first sighting of a powerful new intellect, ‘it was not just that Hazlitt exemplified a new sensibility, but that he was one of the few capable of articulating it’.⁸³ Hazlitt’s non-programmatic stance was reflected in his general critical approach, which was to:

merely read over a set of authors with the audience, as I would do with a friend, to point out a favourite passage, to explain an objection [...] but neither to tire him nor puzzle myself with pedantic rules and pragmatical formulas of criticism that can do no good to anybody [...] In a word, I have endeavoured to feel what was good, and ‘to give reason for the faith that was in me’ when necessary, and when in my power.⁸⁴

Hazlitt’s conversational methodology attested to the origin of the essays as lectures. By contrast, Johnson’s essays, whilst often hurriedly written, were consciously crafted compositions. Grounded in speech, Hazlitt’s mode of thought eschewed overarching grand

⁸⁰ Duncan Wu, *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 221.

⁸¹ Tom Lockwood, “‘He Spoke to Charles Lamb’”, *Reading and Performance in Hazlitt’s “Lectures on The Age of Elizabeth”*, *The Hazlitt Review*, VII (2014), 31–46 (p. 38).

⁸² Lockwood, “‘He Spoke to Charles Lamb’”, p. 38.

⁸³ Wu, *William Hazlitt*, p. 237.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Wu, *William Hazlitt*, p. 235.

narratives in favour of a looser, more instinctive approach. Ian Patel notes that Hazlitt was conscious of the dangers of a discourse 'being seduced by the linear drive of its train of thought, and over-relying solipsistically on its own idiom'.⁸⁵ This lent his delivery an energetic brio which Mary Russell Mitford, a contemporary, identified in the *Lectures on the English Poets*:

He is a very entertaining person, that Mr Hazlitt, the best demolisher of a bloated unwieldy overblown fame that ever existed. He sweeps it away as easily as an east wind brushes the leaves off a faded peony. He is a literary Warwick - 'a puller down of kings'.⁸⁶

The 'overblown fame' was, of course, Johnson's.

The differences in their literary criticism related, therefore, to both style and substance, but were most clearly illustrated by their respective views on Milton who stood at the centre of each account. Johnson's views on Milton were controversial from their inception. Many contemporaries of Johnson were critical of 'Milton' (1779). William Cowper argued that 'his treatment of Milton is unmerciful to the last degree [...] [he] has plucked one or two of the most beautiful feathers out of his Muse's wing, and trampled them under his great foot'.⁸⁷ Cowper was not alone in attributing Johnson's apparent malice to his dislike of Milton's republicanism. The Romantics, later, were also much troubled by Johnson's treatment of Milton. Joseph Wittreich notes that Milton was 'the quintessence of everything the Romantics most admired'.⁸⁸ Steven Lynn argues that in rejecting the Johnsonian Milton,

⁸⁵ Ian Patel, 'Hazlitt's Rhetorical Style', *The Hazlitt Review*, II (2009), 33–38 (p. 34).

⁸⁶ Quoted in Wu, *William Hazlitt*, p. 237.

⁸⁷ Quoted in *Johnson: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Boulton, p. 273.

⁸⁸ *The Romantics on Milton: Formal Essays and Critical Asides*, ed. by Joseph Wittreich (Cleveland: Case University Press Ltd., 1970), p. 11.

they were writing off the previous century by deposing its critical arbiter.⁸⁹ When Coleridge gave a public lecture in 1812 on Milton, he became so incensed, while attacking Johnson, that he used a vulgarity, which earned him a ‘hissing’ from the audience.⁹⁰ Hazlitt’s principal concern was Johnson’s assault on Milton’s versification:

Dr Johnson, who has modelled his ideas of versification on the regular sing-song of Pope condemns the *Paradise Lost* as harsh and unequal. I shall not pretend to say that this is not sometimes the case [...] But I imagine that there are more perfect examples in Milton of musical expression [...] than in all our other writers, whether of rhyme or blank verse prose, put together.⁹¹

Hazlitt further argues that ‘Dr Johnson and Pope would have converted [Milton’s] vaulting Pegasus into a rocking horse’.⁹² In other words, Johnson’s critical judgement was as mechanical as his prose style. Although Hazlitt admired Pope, the most sophisticated practitioner of the heroic couplet, he considered him a lesser figure than Milton. The Romantics, in general, had a marked aversion for the heroic couplet. William Keach argues that in the early modern period, rhyme had become so synonymous with poetry itself, that Milton’s setting of *Paradise Lost* in blank verse was seen as a scandalous challenge to literary and political authority. The heroic couplet represented a reassertion of authority.⁹³ Rhyme, an accidental phonetic correspondence between words, embodies the principal of linguistic arbitrariness and ‘as an organising feature of verse, it projects its arbitrariness into very extensive and fundamental structures of meaning, including political meaning’.⁹⁴ The debate continued in the early nineteenth century. In October 1817, Keats was attacked in

⁸⁹ Steven Lynn, ‘Johnson’s Critical Reception’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, ed. by Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 240–53 (p. 245).

⁹⁰ Quoted in Lynn, ‘Johnson’s Critical Reception’, p. 245.

⁹¹ William Hazlitt, ‘Shakespeare and Milton’, *Lectures on the English Poets*, pp. 206–28 (p. 221).

⁹² Hazlitt, ‘Shakespeare and Milton’, p. 222.

⁹³ William Keach, *Arbitrary Power: Romanticism, Language, Politics* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 46.

⁹⁴ Keach, *Arbitrary Power*, p. 46.

Blackwood's Magazine for his use of 'cockney rhymes' which were seen as an affront to the authority of the rhymed couplet.⁹⁵ The magazine further noted that, 'we had almost forgotten to mention, that Keats belongs to the Cockney School of Politics, as well as the Cockney School of Poetry'.⁹⁶ *Blackwood's Magazine* was a Tory publication, and Keats's looser rhyme schemes were anathema to Tory traditionalists. Hazlitt may have seen Johnson's attachment to the couplet through the lens of this contemporary debate. The couplet, in its very structure, asserted a form of closure every second line, which blank verse opposed with its looser structure based on rhythm rather than rhyme. Johnson, whilst admiring Milton, was almost as confounded by his versification as his politics. In 'Milton', Johnson argued:

The musick of the English heroic line strikes the ear so faintly that it is easily lost, unless all the syllables of every line cooperate together; this co-operation [can only be obtained by] [...] a distinct system of sounds [...] by the artifice of rhyme [...] Poetry may subsist without rhyme, but English poetry will not often please [...] Blank verse [...] [has] neither the easiness of prose, nor the melody of numbers, and therefore tires by long continuance.⁹⁷

The difference relates to tunefulness. Johnson misses the musical return that rhyme creates. It effects a sonic coherence. By contrast, Hazlitt sees the rhymed couplet as a straight-jacket which breaks the verse's flow into discrete dyads like the motion of a child's plaything: the rocking horse. Henri Meschonnic argues that rhythm precedes sense and makes sense possible, representing the orality of discourse which functions to disrupt binary oppositions.⁹⁸ Extending Meschonnic's argument, rhyme, by contrast, could be seen as enforcing structure. Johnson appeared to associate blank verse and the abandonment of rhyme with the Interregnum, 'when subordination was broken'.⁹⁹ It took half a century,

⁹⁵ Keach, *Arbitrary Power*, p. 47.

⁹⁶ Keach, *Arbitrary Power*, p. 47.

⁹⁷ Johnson, *The Lives of the English Poets*, XXI, p. 204.

⁹⁸ Henri Meschonnic, *Critique du rythme: anthropologie historique du langage* (Paris: Verdier, 1982), p. 83.

⁹⁹ Johnson, 'Butler', *The Lives of the English Poets*, XXI, p. 222.

Johnson argued, for Denham and Waller to reassert that ‘long discourses in rhyme grow more pleasing when they are broken into couplets and that verse consisted not only in the number but the arrangement of syllables’.¹⁰⁰ Dryden completed the process by ‘tun[ing] the numbers of English poetry’.¹⁰¹

Johnson’s politics of smoothness informed his view of both poetry and government. Numbers were important to Johnson in both the mathematical and poetic senses. An accomplished poem, in the Johnsonian sense, is one that adds up. A poem that doesn’t add up, lacks melody. In Hazlitt’s view, however, Milton’s copious and irregular flow demonstrated an incomparable ‘ear for music’.¹⁰² Hazlitt’s preference for organic flow was again pitched against Johnson’s apparent rigidity. Ravinthiran, discussing Hazlitt’s lecture, *On Shakespeare and Milton* (1820), notes that Hazlitt repeatedly refers to moments in *Paradise Lost* where solid objects mysteriously melt.¹⁰³ Johnson’s conservative imagination was repulsed by such transitions. By contrast, Ravinthiran argues, that for Hazlitt, the fusion of the ‘stationary’ and the ‘fleeting’ was the very image of sublimity.¹⁰⁴

There were, however, areas where the two writers agreed. Neither Johnson nor Hazlitt were admirers of the metaphysical poets. Johnson thought that they ‘copied neither nature nor life’ and argued that ‘their thoughts are often new but seldom natural’.¹⁰⁵ Hazlitt in his ‘Lecture III’ on the metaphysical poets, from the *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, heartily

¹⁰⁰ Johnson, ‘Dryden’, *The Lives of the English Poets*, XXI, p. 444.

¹⁰¹ Johnson, ‘Dryden’, *The Lives of the English Poets*, XXI, p. 444.

¹⁰² Hazlitt, ‘Shakespeare and Milton’, p. 61.

¹⁰³ Vidyan Ravinthiran, ‘The “Liquid Texture” of the Elgin Marbles’, *The Hazlitt Review*, II (2009), 21–32 (p. 28).

¹⁰⁴ Ravinthiran, ‘The “Liquid Texture” of the Elgin Marbles’, p. 29.

¹⁰⁵ Johnson, ‘Cowley’, *The Lives of the English Poets*, XXI, p. 24

endorses Johnson's contention that, 'the metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavour'.¹⁰⁶ He continues:

the whole of [Johnson's] account is well worth reading; it was a subject for which Dr Johnson's powers of both thought and expression were better fitted than any other man's. If he had the same capacity for following the flights of a truly poetic imagination, or for feeling the finer touches of nature, that he had felicity and force in detecting and exposing the aberrations from the broad and beaten path of propriety and common sense, he would have amply deserved the reputation he has acquired as a philosophical critic.¹⁰⁷

This was rather damning Johnson with faint praise.

Hazlitt also found common ground with Johnson in his admiration for Dryden and Pope.

Unlike his Romantic contemporaries, Hazlitt was never doctrinaire, asking in relation to Pope's *Epistle to Arbuthnot* (1735), 'shall we cut ourselves off from beauties like these with a theory.'¹⁰⁸ Dryden and Pope were 'the great masters of the artificial style' and, though inferior to the great 'natural' writers such as Chaucer and Shakespeare, they 'stand at the head of that class, [and] ought perhaps to rank higher than those who occupy an inferior place in a superior class'.¹⁰⁹ Hazlitt was alive to Pope's radical nature: 'he was in poetry what the sceptic is in religion'.¹¹⁰ This was due to his 'power of indifference', which enabled him to represent things 'as they appeared to the indifferent observer, stripped of prejudice and passion'.¹¹¹ Although Johnson revered Pope, his moral engagement as a writer did not permit the amoral detachment, which Hazlitt argued, Pope cultivated.

¹⁰⁶ Hazlitt, 'Lecture III', *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, pp. 44–64 (p. 44).

¹⁰⁷ Hazlitt, 'Lecture III', *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, p. 44.

¹⁰⁸ Hazlitt, 'Lecture IV: On Dryden and Pope', *Lectures on the English Poets*, II, pp. 228–44 (p. 237).

¹⁰⁹ Hazlitt, 'Lecture IV: On Dryden and Pope', p. 228.

¹¹⁰ Hazlitt, 'Lecture IV: On Dryden and Pope', p. 230.

¹¹¹ Hazlitt, 'Lecture IV: On Dryden and Pope', p. 228.

Whilst Hazlitt often diverged from Johnson's views, Johnson nonetheless provided a reference point throughout his writing. Re-writing Johnson, Hazlitt was able to find his own ground. There is no better example of this than Hazlitt's approach to Shakespeare.

Hazlitt and Johnson: the question of Shakespeare

Both Hazlitt and Johnson judged Shakespeare to be the greatest English writer, but in every other respect their views on the dramatist diverged widely. Johnson's chief failing as a critic, to Hazlitt's mind, was a mechanistic mode of thought which he also detected in contemporary utilitarian philosophy. This critical failing was best illustrated by Johnson's approach to Shakespeare which betrayed, in Hazlitt's view, a limited understanding of the dramatist's imaginative genius and gift for vivid characterisation.

Hazlitt made his name early as a theatre critic. Accordingly, he was able to publish under his own name, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* in 1817. Eric Bentley called Hazlitt 'the father of dramatic criticism in our language' but he was also criticised by M. C. Bradbrook as treating Shakespeare's plays as 'poetic romances' and of forsaking 'action' and 'dramatic context' in studies of character.¹¹² In this he echoed his friend Lamb, who argued 'we do not in general like to see our author's plays acted'.¹¹³ Johnson would have concurred. The *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* was an immediate success. Wu argues that Hazlitt adopted a new approach, responsive to the Romantic fascination with psychology. Therein lay his modernity, according to Wu, 'he saw that Shakespeare's gift lay in his understanding

¹¹² Quoted in John Kinnaird, *William Hazlitt: Critic of Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 166.

¹¹³ Quoted in Kinnaird, *William Hazlitt*, p. 166.

of the mind, and interpreted the plays in that light'.¹¹⁴ Shakespeare's genius lay in the intensity of passion he brought to the creation of character and in the power of his poetry: qualities that Johnson was singularly blind to, according to Hazlitt.¹¹⁵

Hazlitt's 'Preface' to the *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* is cast as a rebuttal of Johnson's more celebrated 'Preface'. Hazlitt commences by admitting 'a high respect for Dr. Johnson's character and understanding' but argues that 'he was neither a poet nor judge of poetry'.¹¹⁶ He explains this by stating that

those whom he has prejudiced against Shakespeare should read his *Irene*. We do not say that a man to be a critic must necessarily be a poet: but to be a good critic he ought not to be a bad poet.¹¹⁷

Least of all, apparently, was he equipped to be 'a judge of Shakespeare'.¹¹⁸ This was an *ad hominem* assault, even by Hazlitt's standards. The merits of Shakespeare are buried under a 'load of cumbrous phraseology'.¹¹⁹ Johnson's failings mirror his stylistic and critical shortcomings because, as Hazlitt argues, 'Dr Johnson's general powers of reasoning overlaid his critical susceptibility'.¹²⁰ In relation to Shakespeare, Johnson's 'ideas were cast in a given mould, in a set form: they were made out by rule and system, by climax, inference, and antithesis: Shakespeare's the reverse'.¹²¹ Hazlitt gave Johnson little credit for dismissing established critical precepts, such as the dramatic unities and for recognising the inevitable transience of critical orthodoxies. Johnson recognised that Shakespeare's plays, over

¹¹⁴ Wu, *William Hazlitt*, p. 212.

¹¹⁵ See also Jonathan Bate, *The English Romantic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), for a discussion of how Shakespeare influenced Romantic theory and practice more generally.

¹¹⁶ William Hazlitt, 'Preface' to *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, in *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. by Wu, I, pp. 85–92 (p. 88).

¹¹⁷ Hazlitt, 'Preface' to *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, p. 89.

¹¹⁸ Hazlitt, 'Preface' to *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, p. 89.

¹¹⁹ Hazlitt, 'Preface' to *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, p. 89.

¹²⁰ Hazlitt, 'Preface' to *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, p. 89.

¹²¹ Hazlitt, 'Preface' to *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, p. 89.

generations, ‘have passed through variations of taste and changes of manners, and [...] have received new honours at every transmission’.¹²² Hazlitt was more concerned with drawing out a fundamental pattern that he discerned within Johnson’s ‘understanding [which] dealt only in round numbers: the fractions were lost upon him’.¹²³ Johnson ‘seized only on the permanent and the tangible. He had no idea of natural objects but such as he could measure with a two-foot rule, or tell upon ten fingers’.¹²⁴

In Chapter 1, I argued that whilst numbers enabled Johnson to get a purchase on the world, mathematics had limitations. Johnson strongly believed that not all experience was susceptible to precise measurement, a thesis which Adam Smith, a writer Johnson did not otherwise approve, echoed in his *Lectures on Rhetoric* (1762). Smith argues that as long as the mind is discomforted by curiosity or experience which cannot be quantified, the philosopher will continue to philosophise and the reader, to read.¹²⁵ Johnson, in reality, was as opposed to mechanistic modes of thought as Hazlitt himself. He argued in *Rambler 121*, that ‘the roads of science are narrow’, but ‘there appears no reason, why imagination should be subject to the same restraint’.¹²⁶ In the ‘Preface’, Johnson, moreover, deprecates writers ‘who form their judgments upon narrower principles’.¹²⁷ However, for Hazlitt, as a Romantic, counting and the realm of the imagination were irreconcilable. Hazlitt was among the earliest writers to recognise that Johnson’s conception of reality was influenced by measurement and computation, but he also misread Johnson, by couching his criticisms in a

¹²² Samuel Johnson, ‘Preface 1765’, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. by Arthur Sherbo, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), VII (1968), p. 61.

¹²³ Hazlitt, ‘Preface’ to *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays*, p. 89.

¹²⁴ Hazlitt, ‘Preface’ to *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays*, p. 89.

¹²⁵ Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. by J. C. Bryce (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), pp. 96–97.

¹²⁶ Johnson, *The Rambler*, IV, p. 282.

¹²⁷ Samuel Johnson, ‘Preface’ in *Johnson on Shakespeare*, VII, p. 65.

language remarkably similar to that he deployed against the rationalists, Malthus, Godwin and Bentham. Hazlitt had stopped reading Johnson and was overwriting his predecessor's Shakespearean criticism with his own animus against what he dubbed 'our Utopian philosophers', who advocate, 'a state of society in which everything will be subject to the absolute control of reason'.¹²⁸ Hazlitt, then, was arguing with the rationalists by proxy.

Where did this animus arise? Some brief historical context is required to answer the question. Mary Poovey argues that Malthus in particular aroused opposition amongst Romantic writers including, Hazlitt, Coleridge and Wordsworth.¹²⁹ Malthus' thesis that population will eventually outstrip food supply stood in opposition to the eighteenth-century belief in perfectibility. Poovey suggests that in 'widening this gulf between one kind of knowledge production (counting) and another (reasoning from a priori principles or beliefs), Malthus helped strip numerical representation of the moral connotations that its eighteenth-century affiliation with Christian Platonism had preserved'.¹³⁰ Hazlitt opposed Malthus' 'moral arithmetic' in *A Reply to Malthus* in the *Political Register* (1807), arguing that self-interest does not preclude an interest in others, which gives rise to the possibility of societal reform. He particularly opposed the idea that 'men will always be governed by the same gross mechanical motives'.¹³¹ Hazlitt, in later essays on Bentham and Godwin in *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), continued to develop a critique of mechanical rules-based systems. *The Spirit of the Age* begins with an essay on 'Jeremy Bentham', because he epitomised how far the modern intellectual had become 'abstracted [...] from himself', as Kinnaird argues.¹³²

¹²⁸ William Hazlitt, 'Malthus' in *William Hazlitt: Selected Writings*, pp. 67–84 (pp. 70–2).

¹²⁹ Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 293.

¹³⁰ Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact*, p. 287.

¹³¹ Hazlitt, 'Malthus', p. 72.

¹³² Kinnaird, *William Hazlitt*, p. 308.

Hazlitt criticises Bentham's notion of the 'felicific calculus' as a driver of social change, arguing that it ignores the role of human passions in inspiring people to either virtue or to vice.¹³³ The doctrine of utility is also seen as naïve and mechanistic. Bentham, Hazlitt argues, has 'methodised, collated, and condensed all the materials prepared to his hand on the subjects of which treats in a masterly scientific manner; but we should find difficulty in adducing from his different works [...] any new element of thought'.¹³⁴ He proceeds:

Mr Bentham's method of reasoning, though comprehensive and exact, labours under the defect of most systems- it is too topical. It includes everything, but everything alike. It is rather like an inventory, than a valuation of different arguments [...] By attending to the minute, we overlook the great [...] his view of the human mind resembles a map rather than a picture: the outline, the disposition is correct, but it wants colouring and relief.¹³⁵

Although written eight years after Hazlitt's 'Preface', the Bentham essay represented the culmination of thinking developed from 'On Malthus' onwards, which was written ten years before the 'Preface'. Hazlitt's critique of Malthus and Bentham deploys similar tropes to those applied to Johnson's Shakespearean criticism. Whilst Johnson's thinking had little in common with nineteenth-century rationalism, in Hazlitt's mind, Malthus, Bentham and Johnson nonetheless shared an approach to the world which was rooted in the mechanistic. Johnson's style erases difference and conflates the sublime and the trivial; Bentham's system similarly makes 'everything alike', and fails to distinguish between the 'minute' and the 'great'. Bentham's mind is seen as a map rather than a picture. Likewise, Hazlitt argues that Johnson lacked a pictorial sense, stating that he 'would no more be able to give the description of Dover cliff in *Lear*, or the description of flowers in *The Winter's Tale*, than to

¹³³ The 'felicific calculus' was an algorithm devised by Bentham for calculating the amount of pleasure that a specific action may cause.

¹³⁴ William Hazlitt, 'Jeremy Bentham', in *The Spirit of the Age*, pp. 77–87 (p. 79).

¹³⁵ Hazlitt, 'Jeremy Bentham', p. 85.

describe the objects of a sixth sense'.¹³⁶ Moreover, Bentham's ability to draw the 'outline' correctly, but inability to recognise 'colouring and relief', resembles Hazlitt's criticism of Johnson as being able to attend only to 'round numbers' not 'fractions.' Johnson and Bentham are, therefore, both characterised as calculating machines. Bentham focuses solely on facts 'in order to put them into his logical machinery and grind them into dust.'¹³⁷ Similarly Johnson is described in the *Characters* as being unable to quit 'his hold of the commonplace and mechanical'.¹³⁸ He, moreover, makes criticism 'a kind of Procrustes' bed of genius, where he might cut down imagination to matter-of-fact, regulate the passions according to reason, and translate the whole into logical diagrams and rhetorical declamation'.¹³⁹

The industrial revolution provoked widespread distrust of mechanisation amongst many early nineteenth-century writers. Carlyle would later complain that 'Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart'.¹⁴⁰ Hazlitt abhorred those who could not apprehend the 'shifting shapes of fancy, the rainbow hues of things'.¹⁴¹ He equally despised philosophers who failed to appreciate that the wellsprings of human action lay in 'the varieties of human nature, and the caprices and irregularities of the human will', rather than in utilitarian calculation.¹⁴² Calculation denied the possibility of agency and divorced motivation from its basis in human passion. There was a continuity in Hazlitt's thinking: character was at the heart of Shakespeare as passion was the basis of political action. Hazlitt appeared to bring Johnson and Bentham within the same ambit at the conclusion of his essay on Bentham. He

¹³⁶ Hazlitt, 'Preface' to *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, p. 90.

¹³⁷ Hazlitt, 'Jeremy Bentham', p. 78.

¹³⁸ Hazlitt, 'Preface' to *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, p. 89.

¹³⁹ Hazlitt, 'Preface' to *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, p. 90.

¹⁴⁰ Thomas Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times', in *Thomas Carlyle: Selected Writings*, ed. by Alan Shelston (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 67.

¹⁴¹ Hazlitt, 'Preface' to *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, p. 89.

¹⁴² Hazlitt, 'Jeremy Bentham', p. 80.

criticised Bentham for ‘turning wooden utensils in a lathe for exercise, and fancies he can turn men in the same manner. He has no great fondness for poetry, and can hardly extract a moral out of Shakespeare’.¹⁴³ This might explain Hazlitt’s uniquely vituperative approach to Johnson in the *Characters*. Both Bentham and Johnson, in Hazlitt’s view, saw Shakespeare as little more than the source of useful homilies.¹⁴⁴ Assimilating Johnson to the ‘utilitarians’ was a way of both evading his presence and asserting his own superior claims to authority in relation to Shakespeare.

Hazlitt, moreover, believed that Johnson’s mechanistic reasoning also limited his understanding of Shakespeare’s great gift for characterisation. The rise of character criticism was associated with the Romantic interest in the subjective. Bersani argues that most pre-Freudian descriptions of character sought to differentiate between characters to provide them with a distinct stable identity.¹⁴⁵ Behaviour is continuously expressive of character as is the revealing incident that makes character intelligible. Hazlitt is critical that Johnson:

[...] says of Shakespeare’s characters, in contradiction to what Pope had observed, and to what everyone else feels, that every character is a species, instead of being an individual. He in fact found the general species or DIDACTIC form in Shakespeare’s characters, which was all he sought or cared for; he did not find the individual traits, or the DRAMATIC distinctions which Shakespeare has engrafted on this general nature, because he felt no interest in them.¹⁴⁶

Johnson’s character criticism, like his prose style, is seen as erasing difference in the service of didacticism. Shakespeare’s characters, Hazlitt argued, displayed the unique traits and habits of distinct individuals with whom the reader or theatre-goer identifies. This notion of

¹⁴³ Hazlitt, ‘Jeremy Bentham’, p. 86.

¹⁴⁴ Bentham dismissed Johnson as ‘a misery-propagating ascetic and instrument of despotism’, cited by G. B. Hill in ‘Dr Johnson as a Radical’, *Contemporary Review*, 55 (June 1889), 888–99.

¹⁴⁵ Leo Bersani, *A Future for Asyntax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), p. 20.

¹⁴⁶ Hazlitt, ‘Preface’ to *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays*, p. 90.

character we now associate with a certain ideology of individualism with its counterpart in the Romantic poet's conception of self. Fred Parker argues that Hazlitt misreads Johnson, opposing the notion of the 'individuality' of character to what he perceives to be Johnson's preference for the 'general' type.¹⁴⁷ Johnson, however, intended 'general' nature to denote the aspects common to all people. He did not wish to erase differences in character, and he states in the 'Preface', unequivocally, that 'no poet ever kept his personages more distinct from each other.'¹⁴⁸ For Hazlitt, the 'general species' is however an abstraction; what matters is the irreducible individuality of character. In his 'Essay on the English Novelists', from the *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, Hazlitt articulates this notion of individuality by reference to *Don Quixote* (1615):

The leading characters in 'Don Quixote' are strictly individuals; that is, they do not so much belong to, as form a class by themselves. In other words, the actions and manners of the chief *dramatis personae* do not arise out of the actions and manners of those around them, or the situation of life in which they are placed, but out of the particular dispositions of the persons themselves, operated upon by certain impulses of accident and caprice [...] They are in the best sense *originals*.¹⁴⁹

This is, for a radical writer, a standard description of what we would now term 'bourgeois individualism'. The notion of originality which Boswell applied to Johnson is recast as the self-founding spontaneity of character, which has no origins outside itself, and is unaffected by environment or circumstance. If an individual however is uniquely distinct, then, as Parker argues, it is impossible to relate to them, 'we can only identify our consciousness with his [...] in reading Shakespeare, we escape from this isolation within the personal self only by exchanging our own consciousness for that of another' and, as Lamb argued, "we see not

¹⁴⁷ Parker, *Johnson's Shakespeare*, p. 107.

¹⁴⁸ Johnson, 'Preface' in *Johnson on Shakespeare*, VII, p. 64.

¹⁴⁹ William Hazlitt, 'Lecture VI: On the English Novelists', *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, V, pp. 97–121 (p. 100).

Lear, but we are Lear””.¹⁵⁰ Boswell’s argument that the actor becomes the character, has become internalised; the spectator becomes the character. For Hazlitt, the identification with the stage character enables the mind to escape its own self-referential limits by understanding the unique law of the individual’s nature, not general human nature. For Johnson, however, the spectator is ‘always in his senses’, and creates a relationship to the character rather than a projective self-identification.¹⁵¹ Johnson saw drama as situational: characters act as anyone would do in those particular circumstances. That individuals could empathise with or understand others fully, he saw as illusory. Hazlitt’s notion of ‘disinterestedness’, by contrast, involved transcendence of the self precisely through identification with others, which he considered Johnson incapable of either politically or imaginatively. In Hazlitt’s view, this limited Johnson, ultimately, as both man and critic.

Hazlitt’s criticisms of Johnson’s rigidity of style and thought reflected contemporary intellectual currents. Hazlitt, however, always butts up against Johnson where his deepest sensibilities are engaged. Griffin argues that Wordsworth defined himself as ‘not Pope’; Hazlitt’s negation of Johnson is similarly constitutive of his own self-definition.¹⁵²

Depreciating Johnson in the same language that he applied to the rationalist philosophers was, moreover, a way of overwriting all of the ways in which Johnson was entirely dissimilar to these thinkers. The next section considers Byron’s more positive view of Johnson, which turned many of Hazlitt’s arguments on their heads.

¹⁵⁰ Parker, *Johnson’s Shakespeare*, p. 108.

¹⁵¹ Parker, *Johnson’s Shakespeare*, pp. 107–08.

¹⁵² Robert J. Griffin, *Wordsworth’s Pope* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 5.

Lord Macaulay, writing in 1831 observed:

[Byron] was the man of the last thirteen years of the eighteenth century, and of the first twenty three years of the nineteenth century. He belonged half to the old, half to the new school of poetry [...] His poetry fills and measures the whole of the vast interval through which our literature has moved since the time of Johnson. It touches the *Essay on Man* at one extreme and *The Excursion* on the other.¹⁵³

Macaulay, then, recognised that Byron, like Hazlitt, had roots in both the eighteenth century and nineteenth century. *Don Juan* (1819) is recognisably Romantic in its exploration of love, death and the self, but Byron was equally clear that the poem was ‘an Epic Satire’, owing something to the spirit of Pope and Johnson. I argue that Byron drew upon Johnson’s literary authority and sceptical temper to challenge what Tony Howe has called ‘Romanticism’s more culturally totalitarian voices’, which included Hazlitt’s, no friend of Byron.¹⁵⁴ Byron’s satirical bent, influenced by Pope, Johnson and Augustan verse, distinguished him from his Romantic peers whose work was avowedly rooted in ‘sincerity’ and the spontaneous. While the Romantics regarded Johnson’s aesthetic as rigid and constraining, Byron saw Romantic orthodoxies as equally constricting, and enlisted Johnson’s voice to challenge them. The Romantics prized originality, but Byron shared Johnson’s sense that there was nothing new under the sun, best encapsulated in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, a favourite of Byron’s, which influenced his poem ‘Mazeppo’ (1819).

¹⁵³ Thomas Babington Macaulay in *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Andrew Rutherford (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 308.

¹⁵⁴ Tony Howe, ‘Uncircumscribing Poetry: Byron, Johnson and the Bowles Controversy’, in *Liberty and Poetic Licence: New Essays on Byron*, ed. by Bernard Beatty, Tony Howe and Charles E. Robinson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), pp. 206–18 (p. 207).

Byron admired Johnson from a young age. Freya Johnston notes that Byron possessed editions of the *Dictionary, Lives of the English Poets*, which he thought ‘the type of perfection’, and Boswell’s biography.¹⁵⁵ He also owned a near-complete collection of Johnson’s verse and periodical essays. Byron considered Johnson ‘the noblest critical mind which our Country has produced’ and a ‘great Moralist.’¹⁵⁶ Although they were very different characters, scholars have also noted a number of similarities between the two writers.¹⁵⁷ Both were born with congenital deformities and compensated in part through seeking pre-eminence at school, particularly through voracious reading. They possessed a shared love of anecdote and biography, and a detestation of cant. Both wrote quickly and alternated between bouts of prolonged lethargy and pronounced industry. Neither feared self-contradiction. The Johnsonian personality, a composite as Howe argues of, ‘moral rigour, reflexive curmudgeon, great humour and high style’ was attractive to Byron.¹⁵⁸ Leigh Hunt noted that Byron, ‘liked to imitate Johnson, and say, “Why, Sir,” in a high mouthing way, rising and looking about him’.¹⁵⁹ Byron was also in sympathy with Johnson’s notion that literature should be continuous with, and arise out of, the material of common life.

I argue that Byron was influenced by both Johnson’s literary criticism and his writing, which helped shape his own compositions and provide an alternative perspective to Romantic orthodoxy: opposing satire to the sublime and rhetoric to inspiration. Byron was a controversial figure and differed profoundly from his Romantic contemporaries who objected, in part, to Byron’s indebtedness to Johnson and the Augustans. Byron’s verse,

¹⁵⁵ Johnston, ‘Byron’s Johnson’, p. 298.

¹⁵⁶ George Gordon, Lord Byron, *The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. by Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 125 and p. 138.

¹⁵⁷ See in particular: Johnston, ‘Byron’s Johnson’, Howe, ‘Uncircumscribing Poetry’ and Bernard Blackstone, ‘Byron and Johnson: The Dialectics of Temerity’, *Journal of European Studies*, 10 (1980), 110–25.

¹⁵⁸ Howe, ‘Uncircumscribing Poetry’, p. 206.

¹⁵⁹ Quoted in *His Very Self and Voice: Collected Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. by Ernest J. Lovell, Jr (New York: MacMillan, 1954), p. 328.

which incorporated satire, declamation and digression, was an art form far removed from the Romantic lyric. The sublime, as Jane Stabler notes, was supposed to present a continuous mood of seriousness before God or Nature, but Byron, in *Don Juan* and other works, frequently broke this rule by interpolating satirical and scurrilous asides, a style of discourse drawn from eighteenth-century writing practices.¹⁶⁰

A typical criticism of Byron was Hazlitt's contention that he did not produce 'any regular work or masterly whole'.¹⁶¹ *Don Juan* (1824), moreover, was disfigured by its rapid transitions from 'the sublime to the ridiculous' and 'the utter discontinuity of ideas and feelings'.¹⁶² Hazlitt reflected the characteristic Romantic notion that poetry unified and reconciled discordant elements into an organic whole through the operation of the imagination. *Don Juan*, with its digressions and use of enjambment for humorous effect, was an affront to such ideas. Byron's satirical bent also distinguished him from his peers as did his commitment to a 'rhetorical and premeditated verse', influenced by Pope and Johnson. This, as McGann argues, placed him in opposition to a Romantic poetry which presented itself as 'artless and unpremeditated'.¹⁶³ Romantic poetry was arguably as much a product of a particular use of language as Byron's own more 'rhetorical' verse.¹⁶⁴ Byron's poetry, moreover, spoke directly to the reader. By contrast, as McGann argues, the Romantic poet does not address the audience directly, but is set apart and has to be overheard.¹⁶⁵ Byron's direct appeal to the reader disrupts any illusion of being an unacknowledged spectator of the

¹⁶⁰ Jane Stabler, 'Byron, postmodernism and intertextuality', in *Byron's Poetry and Prose, Authoritative Texts, Criticism*, ed. by Alice Levine (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 864–75 (p. 870).

¹⁶¹ William Hazlitt, 'Lord Byron' from *The Spirit of the Age*, VII, pp. 134–43 (p. 137).

¹⁶² Hazlitt, 'Lord Byron', VII, p. 139.

¹⁶³ Jerome J. McGann, 'Lord Byron's Twin Opposites of Truth [Don Juan]', in *Byron*, ed. by Jane Stabler (London and New York: Longman, 1998), p. 29.

¹⁶⁴ More recent criticism has focused on Romantic writing's unacknowledged debts to the rhetorical tradition. See, particularly, the essays in *Rhetorical Traditions and British Romantic Literature*, ed. by Bialostosky and Needham.

¹⁶⁵ McGann, 'Lord Byron's Twin Opposites of Truth', p. 32.

poet's silent meditations. In this respect, Byron's art recalls that of Johnson and Pope. For instance, in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, the reader is characteristically in Johnson's sights from the start, being instructed to 'remark each anxious toil, each eager strife'.¹⁶⁶ Byron's verse, like Johnson's, incorporates the reader into its mode of address. In this respect, he also differed from Hazlitt, who in his lectures in particular, was not addressing a reader, but an audience.

Byron's critique of Romantic writing, enlisting the support of the Augustans, was a pervasive theme in his verse, letters and journals. Johnson's name was associated with Byron's early in his career when Henry Brougham famously dismissed 'Hours of Idleness' (1807) in the *Edinburgh Review* of 1808 as 'school exercises'.¹⁶⁷ He tartly comments that Byron 'takes care to remember us of Dr Johnson's saying, that when a nobleman appears as an author, his merit should be handsomely acknowledged'.¹⁶⁸ Byron responded to Brougham's criticisms in his poem 'English Bards and Scotch Reviewers' (1809), which included Wordsworth and Coleridge, as well as William Lisle Bowles, amongst its satirical targets. Bowles was censured for his criticism of Byron's revered Pope. Byron's attack on Bowles, according to Johnston, recapitulated Johnson's critical assaults on Joseph Warton, who similarly had disparaged Pope.¹⁶⁹ For Byron, Pope was a peerless poet who was significantly mediated by Johnson. Johnson's 'Pope' was notably 'the finest critical work extant' according to Byron, a work that could 'never be read without delight and instruction'.¹⁷⁰ Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets*, in fact, lay behind much of Byron's

¹⁶⁶ Samuel Johnson, 'The Vanity of Human Wishes', in *Poems*, ed. by E. L. McAdam, Jr, with George Milne, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), VI (1964), p. 92

¹⁶⁷ Henry P. Brougham, *Edinburgh Review* 1808, in *Lord Byron: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Rutherford, p. 30.

¹⁶⁸ Brougham, *Edinburgh Review* 1808, p. 28.

¹⁶⁹ Johnston, 'Byron's Johnson', p. 309.

¹⁷⁰ Lord Byron, *The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, p. 150.

critical thinking. So much so, that perusing Johnson's reading of the poets evidently preoccupied Byron more than reading the poets themselves, as he noted in his journal on 10 January 1821, 'I have been turning over different *Lives* of the Poets. I rarely read their works, unless an occasional flight over the classical ones, Pope, Dryden and Johnson, and those who approach them nearest'.¹⁷¹

Byron's attacks on his contemporaries were rooted both in a devotion to the Augustans and a deep-seated hostility to Romantic theory and practice. Whereas Hazlitt saw Johnson's literary criticism as driven by 'rule and system', Byron argued, by contrast, that it was the Romantics who were trapped in 'a wrong revolutionary poetical system'.¹⁷² Wordsworth is guilty, as *Don Juan* argues, of producing a 'new system to perplex the sages'.¹⁷³ Byron saw Romantic verse as being as much a product of its own rules as the eighteenth-century poetry which Wordsworth and others deprecated. Compared to his master Pope, Byron was astonished at 'the ineffable distance in point of sense—harmony—effect—and even *Imagination* Passion—& *Invention*—between the little Queen Anne's Man and—& us of the lower Empire'.¹⁷⁴ He was particularly contemptuous of 'Cockney couplets' and of the unpolished verse of the early Keats. 'English Bards and Scotch Reviewers', written in rhymed couplets, looks to an Augustan past, 'When Sense and Wit with Poesy allied'.¹⁷⁵ He cited Pope, Dryden and Congreve as exemplary authors, and he contrasted this tradition with the efforts of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey.

¹⁷¹ *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand, 12 vols (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap/Harvard University Press 1973-82), VIII (1976), p. 21.

¹⁷² Letter to John Murray, 15 September 1817, in *Byron's Letters and Journals*, V, p. 265.

¹⁷³ Lord Byron, 'Dedication' to 'Don Juan', in *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), V, p. 4.

¹⁷⁴ Letter to John Murray, 15 September 1817, in *Byron's Letters and Journals*, V, p. 265.

¹⁷⁵ Lord Byron, 'English Bards and Scotch Reviewers' (1808-12), in *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, I, pp. 227-62 (p. 232).

Byron invokes ‘Truth’ to ‘rouse some genuine Bard’ to ‘drive this pestilence from out the land’.¹⁷⁶ The satiric stance offered Byron a way to evade Romanticism by invoking Johnson and the Augustans, who as Frederic Bogel argues, precisely because of ‘their own pastness’ and ‘unavailability to him as simple poetic models’, enabled his advocacy of them to avoid any naive sense of identification, thereby preserving ‘a more nuanced and fractured poetic identity’.¹⁷⁷ By contrast, Wordsworth and Coleridge are repeatedly lampooned. In the earlier satire of 1809, Wordsworth is arraigned for reducing verse to prose and accused of being both simple-minded and unintelligible. In the dedicatory verses to *Don Juan*, Byron declares of *The Excursion* (1814) that ‘he who would understand it would be able/To add a story to the tower of Babel’.¹⁷⁸ The Romantics are, therefore, literally unreadable; associated with a manufactured sublimity, rather than with the ‘pedestrian Muses’ who anchor Byron’s verse in a material reality. ‘The Lakers’, now deemed to have forsaken their early radicalism, developed, according to Byron, their own exclusionary ideology, which meant that ‘poesy has wreaths for you [‘The Lakers’] alone’.¹⁷⁹ Such insularity, as Byron conceived it, invited a robust response and he invoked Johnson’s authority in a letter to John Murray on 11 September 1820 from Ravenna:

Oh! If ever I come amongst you again, I will give you such a Baviad and Maeviad! Not as good as the old but *better merited*. There never was such a set as your *ragamuffins* [...] What with the Cockneys, and the Lakers, and the *followers* of Scott, and Moore, and Byron, you are in the very uttermost decline and degradation of literature. I cannot think of it without all the remorse of a murderer. I wish that Johnson were alive to crush them again.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶ Lord Byron, ‘English Bards and Scotch Reviewers’, p. 250.

¹⁷⁷ Frederic V. Bogel, *The Difference Satire Makes: Rhetoric and Reading from Jonson to Byron* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 213.

¹⁷⁸ Lord Byron, ‘Don Juan’ p. 4.

¹⁷⁹ Lord Byron, ‘Don Juan’ p. 4.

¹⁸⁰ Lord Byron, *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, VII, p. 175.

The Baviad (1792) and *The Maeviad* (1795) were satires written by William Gifford. The former was an attack on a self-admiring coterie of English expatriates living in Florence, including Mrs Piozzi. Byron lived in Ravenna between 1819 and 1821. An expatriate himself, Byron instinctively invoked Johnson's combative authority to help put rival writers in their place. As an exile, Byron felt his sense of exclusion acutely. In literary terms, he set about developing his own 'virtual' community, which comprised himself and the illustrious dead, chiefly Johnson and other favoured Augustans. This served to buttress Byron's sense of his identity and literary values against a two-fold exclusion: from his native land and from his poetic contemporaries. Satire as a literary mode of expression was both a way of expelling 'pestilence', but also of re-drawing the boundaries to counter-exclude 'the Lakers', occupying the high ground at home. Satire, however, involved a significant investment in aggressive impulses, which were the obverse of the elevated feelings associated with the sublime.¹⁸¹ He admired Johnson's honesty in this regard as *Don Juan* records:

Rough Johnson, the great moralist, professed
Right honestly 'he liked an honest hater',
The only truth that has yet been confest
Within these last thousand years or later.¹⁸²

Johnson's satires were modelled, like Byron's early efforts, on the lacerating indignation of Juvenal, rather than the polished urbanity of Horace. Though not as immoderately vituperative as Pope, Johnson did not stint from sometimes savage criticism of rivals and politicians, both dead and alive. In this context, Bogel argues that satire functions as an act of exclusion, or effort of 'boundary-policing' to create an opposition between the satirist and

¹⁸¹ Byron noted in a letter to Shelley, on 26 April 1821, that 'a man should calculate upon his powers of resistance, before he goes into the [literary] arena', citing the lines from 'The Vanity of Human Wishes', 'Expect not life from pain nor danger free/Nor deem the doom of man reversed for thee'. *Byron's Letters and Journals*, VIII, p. 103.

¹⁸² Lord Byron, 'Don Juan', p. 526.

the world satirised.¹⁸³ The Augustan satirical stance is ambivalent, he contends, as the satirist aims to create a sense of stability by differentiating themselves from the object of satire, in order, in part, to repress any recognition of similarities between the writer and those attacked. ‘Honest hating’ taps into these ‘boundary-policing’ energies. While Byron drew upon both Juvenal and Johnson, his satire was more ambivalent, trained on himself as well as those being satirised. For instance, in a letter to Murray in 1817, Byron included himself as well as his Romantic peers among those caught in a ‘revolutionary poetical system’, recognising the competing tensions at play in his own work.

Byron took influences not only from Johnson’s criticism but also his imaginative writing, in particular Johnson’s sense of history as repetition and his critique of notions of originality. Early efforts such as ‘The Elegy on Newstead Abbey’ (1807) bear the imprint of *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, as Johnston argues.¹⁸⁴ Although written in alternate rhyme, rather than rhyming couplets, Byron strikes a Johnsonian note in the opening lines:

Newstead! Fast-falling, once-resplendent dome!
Religions’ shrine! Repentant HENRY’S pride!
Of warriors, monks, dames the cloistered tomb;
Whose pensive shades around thy ruins glide,¹⁸⁵

In his more mature verse, Johnson’s influence is felt less directly, but the poet’s elegiac strain stayed with Byron throughout his poetic career. Johnson was again on Byron’s mind in Ravenna in 1821 as he worked on the early cantos of *Don Juan*. In January 1821, Byron

¹⁸³ Frederic V. Bogel, *The Difference Satire Makes*, p. 12.

¹⁸⁴ Johnston, *Byron’s Johnson*, p. 301.

¹⁸⁵ Lord Byron, ‘Elegy on Newstead Abbey’, in *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, I, pp. 107–12 (p.107).

recorded that he had read *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, ‘all the examples and modes of giving them sublime.’¹⁸⁶ He extols the grandeur of the poem’s theme:

But ‘tis a grand poem—and *so true!*—true as the 10th of Juvenal himself. The lapse of ages changes all things—time—language—the earth—the bounds of the sea, the stars of the sky, and every thing “about, around, and underneath” man, *except man himself*, who has always been, and will be, an unlucky rascal. The infinite variety of lives conduct but to death, and the infinity of wishes lead but to disappointment. All the discoveries which have yet been made have multiplied little but existence. An extirpated disease is succeeded by some new pestilence; and a discovered world has brought little to the old one, except the p[ox]—first and freedom afterwards—the *latter* a fine thing, particularly as they gave it to Europe in exchange for slavery.¹⁸⁷

Byron returned repeatedly to Johnson’s poem. It was the key that unlocked all that meant most to him about Johnson: his hatred of passing fads in thought, leadership and morals, and above all, his sense of the transience of human life. According to Donald Reiman, Byron imbibed a Calvinist sense of guilt from his poverty-stricken boyhood in Aberdeen, and a conviction of the worthlessness of experience.¹⁸⁸ This paralleled Johnson’s own sense that life’s satisfactions were patchy and often illusory. Johnson’s poem drew upon the literature of disenchantment: Ecclesiastes, Jeremy Taylor as well as Juvenal. Byron took from the poem the idea that death mocked the ‘infinite variety of lives’, a theme that reappears throughout *Don Juan*; for instance, Canto XIV notes that, ‘what know you, /Except perhaps that you were born to die’.¹⁸⁹ Johnson’s poem was written, as Lawrence Lipking notes, in the aftermath of the war of the Austrian succession, and its mood ‘is postwar, exhausted by schemes that have vanished like smoke’, among them the military schemes of Charles VII

¹⁸⁶ Lord Byron, *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, VIII, p. 19.

¹⁸⁷ Lord Byron, *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, VIII, pp. 19–20.

¹⁸⁸ Donald H. Reiman, ‘Byron and the “Other”’: Poems 1808–1814’, in *Byron’s Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts, Criticism*, ed. by Alice Levine (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), pp. 876–81 (p. 877).

¹⁸⁹ Lord Byron, ‘Don Juan’, p. 559.

and Charles XII of Sweden.¹⁹⁰ The smoke may have recalled the expensive firework display that celebrated the end of the Austrian wars, which Johnson complained about as a needless expense in a letter to the *Gentleman's Magazine*.¹⁹¹ Byron himself wrote *Don Juan* in the shadow of the Napoleonic wars, which had ravaged Europe in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. The Napoleonic regime had ended only five years before Byron's arrival in Ravenna. Looking back to Johnson from Ravenna, in 1821, Byron clearly experienced the 'nightmare of history' as a source of endless repetition, which Johnson's poem appeared to exemplify. The 'unnumbered maladies' and 'fixed disease' of Johnson's poem reappear in Byron's journal entry in the references to 'pestilence' and 'disease'.¹⁹² But they are linked to the imperial impulse, reflected in Byron's 'discovered world', which is seen very much as Johnson saw it, particularly in his Falklands pamphlet, as driven by aggressive profiteering. Byron's anti-slavery commentary may also recall his reading of Johnson.

Experiencing the world as repetition was a profoundly un-Romantic notion. It is perhaps, therefore, unsurprising that Hazlitt criticised Byron for expressing old ideas 'in a more striking and emphatic manner'.¹⁹³ Byron produced only 'a tissue of superb common-places'.¹⁹⁴ Hazlitt had censured Johnson in similar terms. The sense of repetition permeates Byron's poetry: Ecclesiastes is cited directly in 'English Bards and Scotch Reviewers': 'Thus saith the Preacher: "Nought beneath the sun is new"'.¹⁹⁵ Denoting repetition as a founding principle of the movement of history, thought and experience was a challenge to

¹⁹⁰ Lawrence Lipking: *Samuel Johnson: The Life of An Author* (Cambridge Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 87.

¹⁹¹ Cited by Lipking: *Samuel Johnson*, p. 86.

¹⁹² Johnson, 'The Vanity of Human Wishes', p. 105 and p. 97.

¹⁹³ William Hazlitt, 'Lord Byron', *Lectures on the English Poets*, p. 236; William Hazlitt, 'Lord Byron', *The Spirit of the Age*, VII, p. 135.

¹⁹⁴ Hazlitt, 'Lord Byron', *Lectures on the English Poets*, p. 242; Hazlitt, 'Lord Byron', *The Spirit of the Age*, VII, p. 141.

¹⁹⁵ Lord Byron, 'English Bards and Scotch Reviewers', p. 233.

the visionary optimism and commitment to the uniqueness of experience that characterised Romanticism. Hazlitt's observation that Johnson dealt in round numbers rather than fractions was meant as a criticism of Johnson's perceived inability to savour the particular, the discrete elements of reading and feeling, which imagination transmuted into an artistic whole. Byron by contrast, like Johnson, believed that history and writing were always contaminated by pre-existent forms, thoughts and events. This presented itself as a sense of English ennui, where everything has already been said and seen before. 'One gets tired of everything, my angel', Byron often misquoted from *Les Liasons dangereuses* (1782).¹⁹⁶ In a more contemporary context, Rosalind Kraus argues that the difference between modernism and postmodernism is that the former promotes a cult of originality upholding 'the singularity, authority, uniqueness' of art, while the latter is more accepting of repetition.¹⁹⁷ This could equally be a gloss on the difference between the Romantic and classical tempers. The Romantics believed in originality, whereas Byron borrowed texts and citations, which led to accusations of plagiarism: 'They call me "Plagiary"', Byron noted.¹⁹⁸ One of Byron's early parodies declared that the poem was 'Half stolen, with acknowledgements [...] Stolen parts marked with inverted commas of quotation'.¹⁹⁹ Johnson similarly noted in 'Dryden', that Dryden was also often accused of plagiarism, but notes in his defence: 'whatever can happen to man has happened so often, that little remains of fancy or invention [...] he must be highly favoured by nature, or by fortune, who says anything not said before'.²⁰⁰ He

¹⁹⁶ Lord Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, III, p. 220.

¹⁹⁷ Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), p. 161.

¹⁹⁸ Lord Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, VIII, p. 166.

¹⁹⁹ Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, III, p. 32.

²⁰⁰ Johnson, 'Dryden', p. 448.

encapsulated this view most pointedly in *Rambler 106*, noting that ‘no place affords a more striking conviction of the vanity of human hopes than a publick library’.²⁰¹

‘History-as-repetition’ was also an idea that Byron may have taken from Johnson. The fate of King Charles XII, which forms the centrepiece of *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, is echoed by Byron in ‘Mazeppa’, a narrative poem published in 1819. Although the poem is based principally on the exploits of the Ukrainian, Ivan Mazeppa, the poem begins with a framing device. Mazeppa and King Charles XII are described setting up camp for the night, having retreated with their respective armies from the Russians following the Battle of Poltava in 1709. Mazeppa’s tale occupies most of the poem and is recounted to Charles in the first person. Byron’s sources included Voltaire’s *History of Charles XII, King of Sweden* (1731), which Johnson had also read as his principal reference. Critics have not identified Johnson’s satire as an influence on ‘Mazeppa’, but it does not seem improbable that it left its mark on the tale, given Byron’s regard for the poem. Byron began the poem in Venice in 1817. It received a mixed reception, overshadowed by the publication of the first cantos of *Don Juan*. McGann was the first modern critic to pay the poem much critical attention, discussing its themes of heroism and leadership. McGann argued that Charles XII is ‘set off against Mazeppa and his early mentor John Cassimir’, in order to point up a criticism of Charles’s puritanism and militarism.²⁰² In this, both Byron and Johnson followed their common source, Voltaire. Voltaire’s *History of Charles XII, King of Sweden* (1735) had made the story well-known in England in the 1730s where it was immediately translated and appeared in serial form in *Read’s Weekly Journal*.²⁰³ Johnson had originally intended to write a play about

²⁰¹ Johnson, *The Rambler*, IV, p. 200.

²⁰² Jerome J. McGann, *Fiery Dust: Byron’s Poetic Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 178.

²⁰³ Johnson, ‘The Vanity of Human Wishes’, footnote to lines 191–222, p.101.

Charles XII. He wrote to his friend Taylor in June 1742, ‘I propose to get Charles of Sweden ready for this winter’.²⁰⁴ Voltaire’s *History* describes how Charles XII led an expansionist military policy against Denmark, Russia and Poland. Despite a series of victories, his strategy proved ill-founded and his forces were roundly defeated at Poltava, the aftermath of which Byron’s poem describes. Voltaire compares the respective military careers of Peter the Great and Charles XII to the latter’s disadvantage. Voltaire dryly notes, ‘no king, surely, can be so incorrigible as, when he reads the history of Charles XII, not be cured of the vain ambition of making conquests’.²⁰⁵ Robert DeMaria argues that eighteenth-century historians generally argued, against the antiquarians, that history’s principal task was to draw out the underlying causal links between facts and events and how they contributed to the advancement of human progress.²⁰⁶ This was epitomised in Lord Bolingbroke’s dictum: ‘History is philosophy teaching by example’.²⁰⁷ Voltaire’s *History of Charles XII* exemplified this philosophical approach. Johnson shared this view: *Rambler 122* criticises the practice of ‘clouding the facts’ with too much detail in historical narratives.²⁰⁸ Imlac in *Rasselas* (1759) also proposes that ‘example is always more efficacious than precept’.²⁰⁹ In *Adventurer 99*, Johnson applies these principles by listing ‘projectors’ including Catiline, Caesar, Xerxes and Charles XII, who left behind a trail of ‘horror and desolation’; concluding that ‘I would wish Caesar and Catiline, Xerxes and Alexander, Charles and Peter,

²⁰⁴ Johnson, ‘The Vanity of Human Wishes’, footnote to lines 191–222, p.101.

²⁰⁵ *History of Charles XII by M. De Voltaire with A Life of Voltaire by Lord Brougham and Critical Notices by Lord Macaulay and Thomas Carlyle*, ed. by O. W. Wight, A. M. (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific Honolulu, Hawaii, 2002), p. 185.

²⁰⁶ Robert DeMaria Jr., ‘History’, in *Samuel Johnson in Context*, ed. by Jack Lynch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 208–15 (p. 210).

²⁰⁷ Cited in DeMaria Jr., ‘History’, p. 210.

²⁰⁸ Johnson, *The Rambler*, IV, p. 287.

²⁰⁹ Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas and Other Tales*, ed. by Gwin. J. Kolb, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), XVI (1990), p. 113.

huddled together in obscurity or desolation'.²¹⁰ Johnson's critique of wanton militarism is reflected in *The Vanity of Human Wishes* which also adduces Xerxes, Wolsey and Charles XII as examples of the reckless military adventurer. Johnson's reading of history focuses on failure. These leaders are unable to exercise agency to act on history because they are condemned to perform to type, repeating the errors of their predecessors. The contrast between 'the warrior's pride' and his ignoble fall on a 'barren strand' is therefore starkly pointed.²¹¹

Byron's depiction of Charles XII's end takes some of its hortatory tone from Johnson's final lines depicting the King's fall:

Such was the hazard of the die;
The wounded Charles was taught to fly
By day and night through field and flood
Stained with his own and subject's blood;
For thousands fell that flight to aid:
And not a voice was heard t'upbraid
Ambition in his humbled hour.²¹²

Byron retraces Johnson's connecting lines between imperial 'ambition' and the desolation visited on the 'thousands' conscripted to serve Charles' aspirations. Charles' puritan nature is linked by Byron to his militarist instincts; Mazeppa informing Charles that:

I loved and was beloved again:
They tell me, Sire, you never knew
Those gentle frailties; if 'tis true
I shorten all my joy and pain.²¹³

²¹⁰ Samuel Johnson, 'Adventurer Number 99', in *The Idler and The Adventurer*, ed. by W. J. Bate, J. M. Bullitt and L. F. Powell, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), II (1963), p. 433.

²¹¹ Johnson, 'The Vanity of Human Wishes', p. 102.

²¹² Lord Byron, 'Mazeppa', in *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, IV, pp. 173–200 (p. 174).

²¹³ Lord Byron, 'Mazeppa', p. 182.

Johnson hints at this connection in describing Charles as an ‘Unconquer’d lord of pleasure and of pain’, but Byron suggests a more modern linkage of repression to aggressive impulses.²¹⁴ Byron portrays Mazeppa as representing a less inept model of military leadership than Charles. He is also contrasted with Cassimir:

A learned monarch, faith! was he,
And most unlike your majesty
He made no wars, and did not gain
New realms to lose them back again.²¹⁵

Byron represents Charles as a gambler on a vast stage, demonstrating the reckless impulsiveness that Johnson had identified: ‘War sounds the trump, he rushes to the field’.²¹⁶ Romantic writers, amongst them Hazlitt and Byron, initially greeted Napoleon’s early successes as the actions of a Romantic hero who would carve out a liberating destiny; achieving on the historic stage what the Romantic poets sought to achieve in relation to the fulfilment of the visionary self. Byron had fought for his bust of Napoleon whilst at Harrow.²¹⁷ He came, however, to see Napoleon’s shortcomings and the opening lines of the poem, describing Russia as being saved after the defeat of Charles’ forces, nonetheless note:

And Moscow’s walls were safe again,
Until a day more dark and drear,
And a more memorable year,
Should give to slaughter and to shame
A mightier host and a haughtier name;
A greater wreck, a deeper fall,
A shock to one – a thunderbolt to all.²¹⁸

²¹⁴ Johnson, ‘The Vanity of Human Wishes’, p. 101.

²¹⁵ Lord Byron, ‘Mazeppa’, p. 178.

²¹⁶ Johnson, ‘The Vanity of Human Wishes’, p. 101.

²¹⁷ Quoted in Malcom Kelsall, ‘Byron’s Politics’, in *The Cambridge Companion To Byron*, ed. by Drummond Bone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 44–55 (p. 49).

²¹⁸ Lord Byron, ‘Mazeppa’, p. 174.

The last four lines bear the stamp of Johnson, in particular the repetition of ‘name’ and ‘fall’ (‘His fall was destined [...]’/‘He left the name [...]’) from the final two couplets describing Charles’ ruin. Here, Byron is alluding to the defeat of Napoleon in Russia in 1812 which was the beginning of the emperor’s end. He had like Charles, a Napoleonic prototype, overreached himself. Byron’s mood of disenchantment echoes Johnson’s in the wake of the Wars of the Austrian Succession. ‘Mazeppa’ was written in the shadow of Napoleon’s final exile on St Helena, which led to the restoration of the corrupt regimes he had overturned. In the failure of Romantic and heroic individualism, Byron linked Charles XII and Napoleon as historic types, as Johnson had connected Charles XII to Wolsey and Xerxes. Byron initially saw Napoleon as a revolutionary original who would reset the narrative of history to a new beginning, conquering the cycle of history. Napoleon’s subsequent career merely repeated, in Byron’s eyes, those of other historical adventurers who had become despots. To this insight, he evidently owed something to Johnson’s wisdom.

Ironically, we learn only at the end of ‘Mazeppa’, that Charles has fallen asleep almost as soon as Mazeppa has commenced the tale of his exploits. Romantic egoism, as Jane Stabler argues, comes up against a ‘more recalcitrant physical domain’; accordingly, Charles demonstrates what ‘Byron suspected of his own and all writing—that it was a literature of exhaustion.’²¹⁹ Exhaustion of body and spirit was also reflected in Byron’s interest in the ghostly. Byron’s writing was haunted by ghosts. Byron published ‘Mazeppa’ alongside ‘The Burial: A Fragment’, a tale which arose out of a competition between Byron and Shelley to write a ghost story. Ghosts, representing the return of the dead, are themselves a form of

²¹⁹ Jane Stabler, ‘Byron, postmodernism and intertextuality’, in *Byron’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Levine, pp. 864–75 (p. 265).

repetition. In Canto XVI of *Don Juan*, Johnson himself is evoked in the context of speculation concerning the existence of ghosts. The episode features the ghost of a black friar. Byron wrote Canto XVI in the spring of 1823, a year before his death. Byron, seeking authoritative sources to ground his discussion, misattributes his key argument for the existence of the spectral ('Who bids all men believe the *impossible*, Because 'tis so.') to St Augustine rather than Tertullian.²²⁰ But it is the stubborn sceptic Johnson who is invoked as the ultimate authority:

I merely mean to say what Johnson said,
That in the course of some six thousand years
All nations have believed that from the dead
A visitant at intervals appears.
And what is strangest upon this strange head
Is whatever bar the reason rears
'Gainst such belief, there's something stronger still
In its behalf, let those deny who will.²²¹

Tertullian required total obedience to God, accordingly the more improbable a miracle or spiritual phenomenon, the greater the reason to believe it. Such blind-belief was inconsistent with eighteenth-century rationalism. Johnson, however, had often found himself treading a tightrope between a natural scepticism and his uneasiness in the face of the paranormal. Although Johnson helped uncover the Cock-Lane Ghost imposture, Boswell also quoted him as stating:

It is wonderful that five thousand years have now elapsed since the creation of the world, and still it is undecided whether or not there have ever been an instance of the spirit of any person appearing after death. All argument is against it; but all belief is for it.²²²

²²⁰ Lord Byron, 'Don Juan', p. 523, p. 620.

²²¹ Lord Byron, 'Don Juan', pp. 620–21.

²²² Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, III, p. 230.

Although, like Johnson, Byron had a highly retentive memory, the narrator in *Don Juan* misquotes the time period to the creation of the earth as six thousand, not five thousand years. As Stabler argues, Byron embraced the haphazard elements of authorship; accordingly, chance played a part in his working approach.²²³ This meant that Byron's material was often sourced via the imperfect medium of memory rather than from archival resources. Misquoting was a form of re-writing. The ghosts of past literary texts emerged from the unconscious, carrying their own unique emotional freight. For Johnson, ghostly phenomena and witchcraft were not merely literary tropes but inhabited a liminal region where logic and the uncanny confronted each other. The return of the dead, in Freudian terms, is always associated with the 'unheimlich'. In this state, as Julia Briggs argues, the home is no longer seen as a homely ('heimlich') place, as it is inhabited by strange and primitive tensions; accordingly, 'the concept of uncanniness [...] is clearly connected to disturbing interpretations and the discovery of resisted meanings'.²²⁴ Johnson found the presence of what are referred to in *Rasselas* as the 'apparitions of the dead' unsettling; whereas for Byron ghostliness was in significant part associated with his intertextual relation to his creative forebears, but especially Johnson.²²⁵

Johnson is, therefore, a shadowy presence throughout Byron's poetry and journals, often invoked at times when Byron's sense of exile and isolation caused him to lash out at his rivals. Byron, in fact, used performative constructions, or 'apostrophes' to invoke the bodily resurrection of Johnson, to help rid the landscape of his literary foes.²²⁶ He summoned

²²³ Stabler, 'Byron, Postmodernism and Intertextuality', p. 869.

²²⁴ Julia Briggs, *The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), p. 125.

²²⁵ Johnson, *Rasselas and Other Tales*, p. 116.

²²⁶ The invocations are cast as 'apostrophes', which literally represent a 'turning away'; here from an original addressee (Byron himself in his journal) to another, namely Johnson. They dramatise a dialogue between self and precursor. See J. Douglas Kneale's 'Romantic Aversions: Apostrophe Reconsidered', in *Rhetorical Traditions and British Romantic Literature*, ed. by Bialostosky and Needham, pp. 149–66.

Johnson, ‘Oh! That Juvenal or Johnson could rise from dead!’.²²⁷ Elsewhere, he wrote, ‘I wish that Johnson were alive to crush them again’.²²⁸ Tellingly, whereas the young Wordsworth invoked Milton, the patron saint of the Romantics, to renew the times (‘Milton! Thou shouldst be living in this hour’); Byron, by contrast, called on Johnson as his literary father.²²⁹ Derrida in his analysis of *Hamlet* in *Specters of Marx*, sees the ghost in the play as representing, in Freudian terms, the Law of the Father.²³⁰ Byron was, effectively, summoning Johnson to lay down the law. Byron, like Boswell, admired Johnson’s powerful self-sufficiency. Writing to Scott on 12 January 1822, he asked, ‘you disclaim “jealousies”, but I would ask, as Boswell did of Johnson, “of *whom could you be jealous?*” – of none of the living certainly, and [...] of which of the dead?’.²³¹

Byron’s castigation of his rivals was genuine but may also have masked insecurity. Johnson and Scott, in Byron’s view, ought to have been immune from such doubts. The risen spectre of Johnson was nonetheless a very physical presence in Byron’s imagination. Carlyle by contrast in *Sartor Resartus* (1836) would later mock Johnson for seeking a ghost in external reality when the ghost was actually within, ‘did he never so much as look into Himself? The good Doctor was a Host, as actual and authentic as heart could wish’.²³² In accordance with Carlyle’s ‘natural supernaturalism’, humans were merely ‘spirit [...] shaped into a body’.²³³ Accordingly, Johnson is one in a line of illustrious ghosts:

²²⁷ Lord Byron, *A Self-Portrait: Letters and Diaries, 1798–1824*, ed. by Peter Quennell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 257.

²²⁸ *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, VII, p.175.

²²⁹ William Wordsworth, ‘London 1802’ in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by E. De Selincourt, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 116.

²³⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (London: Routledge, 2006).

²³¹ Lord Byron, *A Self-Portrait*, p. 686.

²³² Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus, The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1888), p. 179.

²³³ Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, p. 179.

Napoleon too, and his Moscow retreats and Austerlitz Campaigns! Was it all other than the veriest Spectre-hunt; which has now, with its howling tumult that made Night hideous flit away?—Ghosts! There are nigh a thousand million walking the Earth openly at noontide; some half-hundred have vanished from it, some half-hundred have arisen in it, ere they watch ticks once.²³⁴

Whereas Johnson and Byron see the repetition of historical ‘types’, Carlyle only sees a procession of ghosts. Despite his robust physicality, something about Johnson compelled two major writers of the early nineteenth century to associate him with the spectral. Harold Bloom also featured Johnson prominently in his *Anxiety of Influence* (1973), particularly in the chapter entitled, ‘Aprophades, or The Return of the Dead.’²³⁵ Perhaps Johnson presented a return of the repressed at a time when Wordsworth, Coleridge and others, sought to ignore his presence. Byron and Carlyle’s ghostly representations sought to put Johnson back at the centre of the literary landscape. Curiously, as the nineteenth century unfolded, both Byron and Johnson emerged at the centre of a cult of celebrity, which focused as much on the body as the ghostly spirit. Helen Deutsch argues that an obsession with Johnson’s body emerged amongst devotees, which concealed a desire for Johnson’s presence; a desire to know him fully and ‘anchor his origins in the flesh’.²³⁶ The figure of the body is seen as a narcissistic projection of cultural phantasies of agency and wholeness. Similarly, Ghislaine McDayter argues that Byron’s body became the subject of obsessional interest due to his limp and sexual magnetism, becoming a screen upon which his devotees projected their desires and phantasies.²³⁷ Such obsessions illustrated an increasing interest in celebrity at the expense of the authors’ writing.

²³⁴ Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, p. 180.

²³⁵ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence, A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edn (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 148–50.

²³⁶ Helen Deutsch, *Loving Dr. Johnson* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 51.

²³⁷ Ghislaine McDayter, ‘Byron and Twentieth Century Popular Culture’, in *Byron Studies*, ed. by Jane Stabler (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 130–54 (p. 132).

This chapter has sought to explore the Romantic reappraisal of Johnson, focusing principally on the work of Hazlitt and Byron. Treating Johnson as a product of the Augustan rulebook enabled the Romantics to discount their roots in the eighteenth century. Hazlitt reflects this view, seemingly aligning Johnson with the philosophers of the machine age. Johnson is depicted as a prisoner of his own style, which constrained the free play of his thought. Hazlitt, however could not process a rhetorical style like Johnson's which was not based on speech. Nonetheless, Johnson is encountered throughout Hazlitt's writing and always where he is most engaged. In order to become the writer that he became, Hazlitt had to overcome Johnson. Byron, by contrast, greatly admired Johnson. Johnson served both as an ally in his war on his Romantic contemporaries but also as an inspiration for the elegiac strain in his verse, which, I argue, influenced 'Mazeppa' in particular. Like Johnson, Byron believed that culture and history were permeated by pre-existing forms, thoughts and events, which represented a challenge to the Romantic commitment to the uniqueness of experience. Byron also saw Johnson as an ally to help rid him of his literary rivals. As the nineteenth century unfolded, writers were increasingly 'lionised' as part of the emergence of a culture of celebrity. Byron and Johnson featured prominently in this process, in a way that might have surprised both. Hazlitt, like Boswell, looked to Johnson's life, more than his writing, and in privileging Johnson's speech over his writing, he established a pattern that the Victorians were to follow, as we will see in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

JOHNSON AND THE VICTORIANS

Introduction

In *The Study of Poetry* (1880), Matthew Arnold observed that Wordsworth and Coleridge did not ‘weigh much’ with the younger generation, but ‘there are many signs to show that the eighteenth century and its judgements are coming into favour again’.¹ The re-evaluation of Johnson may have been linked, as David Fairer argues, to a wider embrace of the eighteenth century and its associated values of classicism, clarity and morality.² By the end of the century, the florid sentimentalism of the earlier Victorian period, which had its roots in Romanticism, needed an antidote. Johnson was, in particular, seen as an impressive individual and served, as Turner contends, to rehabilitate the age in which he lived.³

This chapter will focus on three writers who were instrumental in bringing Johnson back into favour: Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold and George Birkbeck Hill, whose literary careers spanned the commencement and the maturity of Queen Victoria’s reign. Each assimilated Johnson very differently but all saw him as a figure of reassuring substance. Carlyle, I argue, reconceptualised Johnson as a heroic figure and moved the discussion about the author on from the traditional preoccupation with either his talk or writing to a semiotics of action.

This gave rise to a radically different conception of Johnson as an individual whose suffering and whose ‘unspeakable chaos of thoughts’ challenged the status quo.⁴ Carlyle’s re-

¹ Matthew Arnold, *Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. by Miriam Allott (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1978), p. 256.

² David Fairer, ‘Preface’ to *The Victorians and The Eighteenth Century: Reassessing the Tradition*, ed. by Francis O’Gorman and Katherine Turner (London: Taylor & Francis Ltd., 2004), pp.12–16 (pp. 12–13).

³ Katherine Turner, ‘The “Link of Transition”: Samuel Johnson and The Victorians’, in *The Victorians and The Eighteenth Century: Reassessing the Tradition*, ed. by O’Gorman and Turner, pp. 119–43 (p.132).

⁴ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1872), p. 160.

imagining of Johnson focuses on emblematic moments in Johnson's life where an authentic self is created through exemplary performative gestures. Johnson epitomised a style of living and writing which, while seen by Carlyle as valid on its own terms, Carlyle aimed to supplant. By contrast, Arnold saw Johnson as a writer who legitimised Arnold's transition from poetry to criticism. Arnold produced an abridged version of Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets* (1779–81) to help tutor a new reading public. Repackaging Johnson for the Victorian Age, Arnold's selection of six exemplary *Lives*, I argue, echoed Carlyle's distillation of Johnson's life to parabolic episodes and substituted Johnson's view of the canon for his own, effectively overwriting Johnson. Arnold also argued that Johnson helped furnish English literature with a serviceable and lucid prose, which is implicitly contrasted to Carlyle's oracular style. Birkbeck Hill represented both the beginning of modern Johnsonian scholarship but also a turn to the encyclopaedic, focusing particularly on Johnson's life. He sought to restore the intelligibility of Johnson and Boswell's canonical texts for a Victorian readership, through extensive editorial intervention. The level of editorial care applied to these texts signalled the growing status of English literature, coinciding with the rise of a literate public. Birkbeck Hill's edition of Boswell's biography, however, with its apparatus of footnotes and appendices, exposed the paradox of the encyclopaedic project, demonstrating that the task of documenting the world is one which can never be finally completed.

Flux and Permanence: Johnson and the Victorian Context

Before examining the three writers' engagement with Johnson, this section will briefly consider the broader response of Victorian writers to Johnson and the historical and

intellectual environment which shaped that response. What led to the revival of Johnson's reputation? Part of the answer is suggested in a letter published in the *Times* 1 November 1855, which was subscribed by an array of mid-Victorian literary luminaries, including: Henry Hallam, James Stephens, Thomas Carlyle, Thomas Babington Macaulay, William Makepeace Thackeray, Alfred Tennyson, Charles Dickens, Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Benjamin Disraeli (the future prime minister). The letter paid tribute to Samuel Johnson:

Samuel Johnson is such a literary man as probably will not appear again in England for a very great length of time. His works and his life, looked at well, have something in them of heroic, which is of value beyond most literature, and much beyond all money and money's worth to the nation which produced him. That same English Dictionary written on the poor fir desk [...] has an architectonic quality about it; and for massive solidity of plan, manful correctness and fidelity of execution, luminous intelligence, rugged honesty and greatness of mind pervading every part of it, is like no other. This, too, is a Cathedral of St Paul's.⁵

Although celebrating Johnson, the letter's purpose was to appeal for funds from Lord Palmerston, and the wider public, to support two elderly and indigent sisters living in Deptford. The sisters were the offspring of Mauritius Lowe, a painter and acquaintance of Johnson. They became Johnson's godchildren, being provided for in his will.⁶ The letter refers to the 'numerous memorials of Johnson in their possession', which demonstrates the sisters' 'connection with that great man', including 'the fir-desk (capable of being rigorously authenticated as such) upon which Samuel Johnson wrote the *English Dictionary*'.⁷ Johnson, on his death-bed, laid his hand on the elder sister's head to 'give her his blessing'.⁸ The letter

⁵ 'Letter to *The Times* 1 November 1851', *The Times Digital Archive*, 1–12 <<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/archive/article/1855-11-01/6/2/.html#start%3D1855-11-02/1%26next%ED/tto/archive/frame/goto/Times+1>> [accessed 29 October 2018] p. 7. The letter was formally signed off by Carlyle, Dickens and John Forster. The wording has a strong flavour of Carlyle.

⁶ George Birkbeck Hill, in a footnote, refers to the sisters and this public subscription, stating that it was organised by a committee of 'Thackeray, Dickens, Carlyle', in James Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. by George Birkbeck D.C.L., 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1887), IV, p. 203.

⁷ 'Letter to *The Times* 1 November 1851', *The Times Digital Archive*.

⁸ 'Letter to *The Times* 1 November 1851', *The Times Digital Archive*.

encapsulates the mid-Victorian response to Johnson, embracing a sentimental philanthropy which united writers and politicians. It also invokes the body of Johnson, through the hand laid on the elder godchild, and gestures to his ‘saintly’ relics, including the fir desk, with its tangible link to *The Dictionary*. Above all, the sense of Johnson’s ‘solidity’ comes across strongly through the linked references to the fir desk, *The Dictionary* and St. Paul’s Cathedral.⁹

In an era of political, economic and intellectual change, Johnson’s ‘solidity’ had a reassuring air. Amongst the letter’s subscribers, Carlyle, Dickens and Thackeray all wrote warmly about Johnson. Charles Dickens, touring the Midlands in 1840, visited the homes of the two writers he regarded as amongst the greatest of all: Johnson and Shakespeare.¹⁰ Dickens empathised with Johnson’s heroic life-story, ascending from unpromising beginnings to literary pre-eminence. Tony Williams notes that, in 1835, Dickens sent his fiancée a present of the *Lives of the English Poets*, with the leaf turned down to indicate the passage she should read in the ‘Life of Mr Richard Savage’.¹¹ Amongst Johnson’s other Victorian admirers, which included George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Gissing, John Ruskin loved the music of Johnson’s prose and considered him, ‘entirely sincere and infallibly wise.’¹²

The particular writers considered here, Carlyle, Arnold and Birkbeck Hill span a period encompassing the passing of the 1832 Reform Act and the foundation of the National Union

⁹ Christopher Smart was the first to praise *The Dictionary* as a monument comparable to St Pauls, see Allen Reddick, *The Making of Johnson’s Dictionary, 1746–1773* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 177.

¹⁰ Tony Williams, “‘The best of times, the worst of times’”, Dickens and the 18th century’, in *The Johnson Society Transactions 2013* (Lichfield: Benhill Press Ltd., 2013), 28–45 (p. 29).

¹¹ The particular edition of *The Lives of the English Poets* contained the ‘Life of Richard Savage’, according to Williams in “‘The best of times, the worst of times’”, Dickens and the 18th century’, p. 28.

¹² John Ruskin, *Praeterita and Dilecta* (New York, London and Toronto: Everyman’s Library, 2005), p. 199.

of Women's Suffrage Societies in 1897. Their literary careers shadowed an era of agitation and reform, characterised, according to Moran, by a 'contradictory mix of cultural assurance and self-doubt'.¹³ The rise of Empire, which shaped ideas of Englishness, inspired confidence but also self-questioning. National identity, as Young argues, was partly defined in opposition to others. The need for stable or organic 'metaphors of identity or society' implied 'a counter-sense of fragmentation and dispersion.'¹⁴ Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) disturbed intellectual foundations by arguing that species were not fixed, but mutable.¹⁵ Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830–33), an influence on Darwin, inspired Tennyson's troubled reflections on the transience of the world in *In Memoriam* (1850):

The hills are shadows, and they flow
From form to form, and nothing stands;
They melt like mist, the solid lands,
Like clouds they shape themselves and go.¹⁶

Even the landscape suddenly appeared to lack solidity. The state of flux was also reflected in technological change. The *Lancet* in 1862 reported the blurring of perception arising from the speed of train travel, 'The rapidity and variety of the impressions necessarily fatigue both eye and brain'.¹⁷ By the 1860s, Pater developed his own theory of impressionism which saw consciousness operating within a field of shifting sensations and a constantly changing world in which there were no moral absolutes.

Flux was also reflected in the political sphere. Arnold saw the 1866 Hyde Park riots, instigated by the Reform League, as an instance of the 'anarchy' that resulted from 'doing as

¹³ Maureen Moran, *Victorian Literature and Culture* (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 2–3.

¹⁴ Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 4.

¹⁵ K. Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation: England 1846–1886* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 155.

¹⁶ Alfred Tennyson, 'In Memoriam', in *Alfred Tennyson: In Memoriam, Maud and other poems*, ed. by John D. Jump (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1974), p. 146.

¹⁷ Cited in Philip Davies, *The Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 30.

one likes'.¹⁸ Bagehot worried that society was fragmenting. It is unsurprising, therefore, that many Victorians looked for images of enduring permanence. Objects displayed in the 1851 Exhibition, according to Robin Gilmour, were 'grossly material in their heaviness and over-decoration' which echoed the crowded Victorian domestic interior, festooned with bric-a-brac.¹⁹ Devotion to weighty and monumental artefacts helped, according to Davis, 'to give the word "Victorian" that heavy sinking feeling which so often still accompanies it'.²⁰

Johnson, who had famously refuted Berkeley by applying his boot to a large stone, appealed to literary Victorians, precisely as an image of stability, anchored firmly in a world of reassuringly solid objects. Willard Van Orman Quine, the pragmatist philosopher, was later to argue that Johnson's action neatly demonstrated the tangible reality of external objects, conceding that whilst stones are not 'all that is real, [...] they are admirable examples.'²¹ While the Romantics censured Johnson's intellectual inflexibility, the Victorians, by contrast, respected his sense of certainty which Carlyle contrasted with the contemporary retreat into doubt. Against the challenge of the 'Other' represented by the peoples of the Empire, Johnson's manly Englishness projected an assertive self-sufficiency. In fashioning this image of Johnson, the Victorians arguably over-wrote Johnson as much as the Romantics had done earlier.

¹⁸ See, Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2006), pp. 53–73.

¹⁹ Robin Gilmour, *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830–1890* (London: Longman, 1993), p. 223.

²⁰ Davies, *The Victorians*, p. 1.

²¹ Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), p. 3.

Carlyle and Johnson

Background

It is difficult now to appreciate the impact that Thomas Carlyle made on other writers but George Eliot, no admirer, gave a flavour of his intellectual dominance in 1855:

there is hardly a superior or active mind of this generation that has not been modified by Carlyle's; there has hardly been an English book written for the last ten or twelve years that would not have been different if Carlyle had not lived.²²

Carlyle was born into a family of strong Calvinist beliefs in Dumfriesshire and became a periodical essayist like Johnson. His writing covered a wide range, from satire to history and polemic. Birkbeck Hill detected a kinship between the two authors, writing of Carlyle in 1892, 'We must go back to Samuel Johnson before we can find his fellow in the strangeness and rugged strength of his character'.²³

Carlyle saw Johnson's heroic originality as being his defining characteristic, a thesis advanced in two principal texts: an essay on *Boswell's Life of Johnson* (1832) and *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* (1841). The former, published in *Fraser's Magazine*, is, ostensibly, a review of Croker's 1831 edition of Boswell's biography, which Carlyle dismisses in short order, as Macaulay had done a year earlier in his essay 'Samuel Johnson' (1831). Carlyle also takes issue with Macaulay's negative views of both Boswell and Johnson. His principal purpose in the essay, however, is to re-narrate at some length, Johnson's life and career, effectively re-writing Boswell. Carlyle highlights a number of key

²² Quoted in John Clubbe, *Carlyle and his Contemporaries: Essays in Honor of Charles Richard Saunders*, ed. by John Clubbe (North Carolina: Durham, 1976), p. 182.

²³ George Birkbeck Hill, *Writers and Readers* (Victoria, Australia: Trieste Publishing, 2017), p. 34.

episodes from the biography which exemplify Johnson's genius. *On Heroes and Hero Worship*, by contrast, arose from a series of lectures given every Tuesday and Friday between 5 May to 22 May 1840. His lectures according to Carlyle, 'vomited [...] forth' on his audience 'like wild Annandale grapeshot.'²⁴ Delivered two hundred years after the outbreak of the Civil War, Carlyle hoped the lectures, would set the scene for his planned biography of Cromwell. Johnson cut an odd figure amongst Carlyle's pantheon of great men which included Mohammed, Luther and Napoleon, but Carlyle admired Johnson as a hero-writer, possessed of unique qualities.

The writer as protean hero

Carlyle's was arguably the first profoundly different view of Johnson. Hazlitt had seen Johnson as un-original, a master of the commonplace. Carlyle, by contrast, saw Johnson, as wholly original. While Johnson's contemporary Adam Smith included writers amongst his classes of unproductive workers in his *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Carlyle, by contrast, argued that in the modern print-era, heroism was now to be found in the garret rather than on the battlefield.²⁵ Johnson's heroic originality, Carlyle argued, derived from his being entirely a product of his own imagining. His originality, however, was not to be found in his books, which are referred to only glancingly, but in his life. Carlyle's Johnson is a weirdly radical being, whose heroism is grounded in failure.

²⁴ Quoted in Fred Kaplan, *Thomas Carlyle, A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 265.

²⁵ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into The Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 295.

Odd though Carlyle's paradoxical pronouncements undoubtedly were, they rapidly became common currency. Dickens echoed Carlyle's view of Johnson as did Leslie Stephen in the 1870s, who noted 'the heroic ring of Johnson's wrestling with adverse fortune'.²⁶ Carlyle's conception of heroism was *sui generis*. Carlyle built upon notions of self-authoring, derived in part from Romantic ideology but also from his Calvinist upbringing. Religion influenced his ideas about charismatic authority, which Weber was later to develop as a key element of his thinking. Carlyle opposed heroism to determinism. He believed that individuals possessed agency and could influence events, whereas thinkers such as Bentham argued that history was driven by economic forces, contending that, 'of all that is pernicious in admiration, the admiration of heroes is the most pernicious'.²⁷ Carlyle also distinguished heroism from the contemporary cult of celebrity. Paradoxically, Johnson himself was a key figure in this culture which arose between 1750 and 1850, latterly becoming associated with the phenomenon of 'literary lionism'. Carlyle saw lionism as emasculating, amounting to 'a corrosive voyeurism', as Richard Salmon describes the trend.²⁸ Although Johnson used the term 'celebrity', himself, recalling a time when 'he did not find [him]self yet enriched in proportion to [his] celebrity', he was, Carlyle argued, untainted by the gaze of others and transcended the culture of celebrity.²⁹

Boswell was part of the problem from Carlyle's perspective. His biography of Johnson had embraced celebrity and established a distinctively English style of manhood for male writers. Zionkowski, in particular, argues that Boswell's celebration of Johnson's verbal and physical

²⁶ Leslie Stephen, 'Dr Johnson's Writings', in *Hours in a Library*, 3 vols (London: The Folio Society, 1991, first published 1874–79), II, p. 7.

²⁷ Jeremy Bentham, *Deontology: or The Science of Morality*, ed. by John Bowring, 2 vols (London: Rees, Orme, Browne and Longman; Edinburgh: Tait, 1834), II, p. 254.

²⁸ Richard Salmon, 'The physiognomy of the lion: encountering literary celebrity in the nineteenth century', in *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture 1750–1850*, ed. by Tom Mole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 60–78 (p. 65).

²⁹ Quoted by Tom Mole, 'Introduction', in *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture*, pp. 1–18 (p. 2).

violence underwrote his integrity of character.³⁰ Whilst Carlyle recognised, and sometimes praised Johnson's aggressive qualities, he was determined to present a picture of Johnson which was more nuanced than the simplistic image of the roaring Englishman. Carlyle associated Johnson's genius with originality rather than virility. His genius was linked to Johnson's 'culture', which 'is wholly English [...] he sees and knows nothing but England'.³¹ This might suggest an insular outlook, but Carlyle, like his fellow Scot Boswell, saw Johnson's Englishness, paradoxically, as a sign of his originality. Like Boswell, Carlyle viewed the English as true originals because they did not ape others. Johnson, moreover, exemplified a style of radical individualism because he both reflected and transcended the age in which he lived. Carlyle's task, therefore, was to demonstrate how individuals like Johnson shaped history.

In a further paradox, Carlyle, as a 'natural supernaturalist', also believed that history was, to some degree, illusory. In the early essay on *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, Carlyle writes of Johnson's life as through it were a theatrical mirage: 'Rough Samuel and sleek wheedling James *were* and *are not*. Their Life and whole personal environment has melted into air [...] All, all, has vanished; in very deed and truth, like that baseless fabric of Prospero's air-vision'.³² Chris Vanden Bossche argues that the figure of the hero enabled Carlyle to overcome this paradox by resolving 'the tension between transcendence and history'.³³ Carlyle was, therefore, less interested in 'the Court Calendars and Parliamentary Registers' of conventional history, than in 'the LIFE OF MAN in England: what men did, thought,

³⁰ Linda Zionkowski, 'Celebrity violence: Savage, Pope and Johnson', in *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture*, ed. by Mole, pp. 168–85 (p. 179).

³¹ Thomas Carlyle, 'Boswell's Life of Johnson', in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays: Collected and Republished*, 3 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1894), II, pp. 261–322 (p. 320).

³² Carlyle, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, p. 277.

³³ Chris R. Vanden Bossche, *Carlyle and the Search for Authority* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), p. 98.

suffered, enjoyed; the form, especially the spirit, of their terrestrial existence; its outward environment, its inward principle; *how* and *what* it was; whence it proceeded, whither it was tending'.³⁴ This led to a very singular notion of history as an account of man's 'vital relations to this mysterious Universe'.³⁵ Accordingly, in his essay on Boswell's biography, Carlyle argues 'that this book of Boswell's will give us more real insight into the History of England during those days than twenty other Books, falsely entitled "Histories," which take themselves that special aim'.³⁶ Unlike Boswell, however, Carlyle's focus was not on Johnson's conversation, but on his 'spirit.' This echoed, as Carol Christ argues, a trend in nineteenth-century historiography epitomised by Ranke, which emphasised an understanding of the past through 'existential recreation' of individual personalities typical of the developing human consciousness.³⁷

Later, Carlyle charted, in *On Heroes and Hero Worship*, the changing nature of heroism, from hero-priests and hero-kings to the emergence of the modern Hero as Man of Letters. The lectures upon which the book was based, might have influenced the book's prose style, which Carlyle reflected, was 'somewhat in the style of *speech*'.³⁸ Carlyle's approach also reflected the preaching culture in which he had grown up. In fact, Carlyle argues, with the advent of print culture, the writer had acquired the means to supersede previous forms of authority, because, 'now with the art of Printing [...] the writer of a book is a Preacher, not preaching to this parish or that [...] but to all men in all places and times'.³⁹ Carlyle goes on to argue that if one 'invent[s] Writing. Democracy is inevitable'.⁴⁰ Writing, therefore, gave

³⁴ Carlyle, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, p. 278.

³⁵ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 3.

³⁶ Carlyle, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, p. 278.

³⁷ Carol T. Christ, *Victorian & Modern Poetics* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 111.

³⁸ Cited in Kaplan, *Thomas Carlyle*, p. 265.

³⁹ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 148.

⁴⁰ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 152.

Johnson a powerful platform. But Carlyle saw Johnson as much more than a writer and was influenced, in this respect, by Fichte's *The Nature of the Scholar* (1806), which argued that while Genius 'will always appear as a *specific* Genius for philosophy, poetry, natural science', universal Genius is aligned with 'a particular province only by the accident of culture'.⁴¹ Carlyle drew upon Fichte to argue that Johnson was a protean figure who reshaped reality. The 'province' in which Johnson worked, as writer, was arbitrary because Carlyle had 'no notion of a truly great man that could not be all sorts of men'.⁴² Carlyle considered that there 'was so much left undeveloped' in Johnson and that he could 'have been priest, prophet, sovereign ruler'.⁴³ The hero is, accordingly, infinitely malleable. Few writers before Carlyle had estimated Johnson's abilities so extravagantly. However, Carlyle's Johnson is both solid and strangely incomplete. While the form that heroism assumed was less important than the capacity of the actor to impact others and the world around them, a man who, however, might be anything, might also, fundamentally, lack self-identity.

Johnson: the tragic iconoclast

Carlyle's description of the protean nature of heroism results in a stark essentialism that erodes difference: hero poets, hero kings or prophets, are all fundamentally made of the same stuff. This resulted from Carlyle's inability to resolve the contradictions between the operations of spiritual and secular power and between literature and history. Carlyle saw heroism everywhere as a disruptive force. While much of Johnson's thinking was outmoded,

⁴¹ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Popular Works: The Nature of the Scholar, The Vocation of Man, The Doctrine of Religion* (USA: Kessinger Publishing, 2009), p. 160.

⁴² Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 73.

⁴³ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 165.

according to Carlyle, his uncompromising ‘sincerity’ compelled him to become an iconoclast, in spite of himself. Carlyle, therefore, largely dismisses most of Johnson’s books and talk, focusing instead on Johnson the actor: the tragic hero whose suffering enacted a radical break with eighteenth-century rationalism.

Carlyle followed Fichte in believing that history progressed dialectically by creative destruction. Carlyle seemed to crave tumultuous change without being clear to what end. Nietzsche perceptively argued that ‘Carlyle drugs something in himself with the fortissimo of his veneration of men of strong faith [...]: he *requires* noise [...] At bottom, Carlyle is an English atheist who makes it a point of honour not to be one’.⁴⁴ The role of Johnson as Hero, therefore, was to introduce ‘noise’ into the system:

Figure him there, with his scrofulous diseases, with his great greedy heart, and unspeakable chaos of thoughts; stalking as mournful as a stranger in this Earth; eagerly devouring what spiritual thing he could come at: school languages and other merely grammatical stuff [...] The largest soul that was in all England.⁴⁵

To characterise Johnson, a stranger and outsider, by the ‘chaos of [his] thoughts’ is to encounter a profoundly revisionist description of the writer and a radically different way of writing about him. The description could almost be applied to Carlyle himself. Famed for his ‘talk’, Carlyle saw Johnson’s tumultuous wisdom as literally ‘unspeakable.’ Some, however, also saw Carlyle’s prose style as ‘unspeakable’. John Stuart Mill winced at Carlyle’s ‘abrupt, exclamatory manner’.⁴⁶ He, moreover, concluded that Carlyle had an artist’s temperament rather than a historian’s.⁴⁷ Carlyle’s imagination was indeed metaphoric rather than

⁴⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, quoted in *Modern Critical Views: Thomas Carlyle*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), p. 8.

⁴⁵ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 165.

⁴⁶ Quoted in John D. Rosenberg, *Carlyle and The Burden of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 30.

⁴⁷ See John Gross: *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters: English Literary Life since 1800* (London: Penguin Books, re-published 1991), p. 39.

metonymic. For Carlyle, all words started as metaphors, as Goss argues, poetic expressions that were intimately connected to the speaking body that created them.⁴⁸ In seeking to transform the reader's understanding of Johnson, Carlyle, accordingly, uses the power of figurative language, linked to the senses, so that Johnson's body, rather than his talk, speaks for him. Carlyle, accordingly, invokes the tropes of taste and sight, in describing Johnson's 'great greedy heart' and in characterising him as 'a man with his soul seeing, and struggling to see'.⁴⁹ He also recasts Johnson's 'seeing' as a form of heroic intellection and, therefore, the supreme truth, 'the great fact of this universe glared in'.⁵⁰ Michel Foucault argued that seeing was at the heart of the Enlightenment project, 'the eye [...] has the power to bring a truth to light'.⁵¹ This was epitomised, for Foucault, by eighteenth-century medical practice. The increasing use of autopsy procedures enabled doctors to open up the outer body to see its invisible interior. If such 'seeing' conformed to materialist Enlightenment principles, by contrast, Johnson's 'visioning', according to Carlyle, permitted to him to penetrate to the spiritual heart of things. Bentham's rationalism, by contrast, was 'an *eyeless* heroism.'⁵² Johnson's originality was rooted, therefore, not in his celebrated powers of reasoning, but rather in extra-rational processes of intuition which enabled an unmediated access to the 'facts' of the world. Johnson was a transcendentalist, in other words, before his time.

Johnson's visionary intuition was also grounded, according to Carlyle, in a capacity for suffering. Carlyle believed that self-actualisation involved struggle, which reflected Carlyle's religious upbringing and the 'inner worldly asceticism' which Weber later identified with

⁴⁸ Erin M. Goss, 'The Production of Meaning in Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present*', in *Journal Prose Studies, History, Theory, Criticism*, vol. 30, 2008, Issue 3, 266–85 (pp. 266–68).

⁴⁹ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 165 and p. 200.

⁵⁰ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 181.

⁵¹ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage Books, [1963], revised edn, 1994), p. xiii.

⁵² Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 160.

Calvinism.⁵³ Carlyle was the first writer, before Samuel Beckett, to celebrate Johnson's misery as constitutive of his being. But unlike Beckett, Carlyle conceived despair to be the only possible response to what he regarded as a faithless, secular world. Carlyle detects the signs of Johnson's oppositional anguish, not in his writing, but inscribed on the text of his body. Accordingly, Johnson 'must look through bodily windows that were dim, half-blinded'.⁵⁴ His 'poetic soul', moreover, is imprisoned in an 'unsightly body'.⁵⁵ Johnson's birthplace is reconstructed as a scene of 'Disfigurement, Disease', which echoes his raddled physique.⁵⁶ Overcoming the disfigurement of his physical and external environment, Johnson sought to figure reality in its wholeness. Suffering is, therefore, seen by Carlyle as a sort of performance. Johnson is described as 'Like a Hercules with the burning Nessus'-shirt on him'.⁵⁷ Unlike Goethe, Johnson, like Burns and Rousseau, did not 'conquer' but 'fought bravely and fell', being, implicitly, a mere precursor of Carlyle himself, who was to proclaim the new covenant of the 'Divine Idea' in a new and prophetic language.⁵⁸

Johnson's suffering originated, according to Carlyle, in the disjunction between his conventional beliefs and the profounder 'truths' that his nature compelled him to recognise. This constituted the essence of Johnson's originality or 'sincerity'. Carlyle argued:

The essence of *originality* is not that it be *new*: Johnson believed altogether in the old; he found the old opinions credible for him [...] Johnson was far more other than a mere man of words and formulas; he was a man of truth and facts. He stood by the

⁵³ See especially 'Asceticism, Mysticism and Salvation Religion', in Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building: Selected Papers*, ed. by S. N. Eisenstadt (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 279–93.

⁵⁴ Carlyle, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, p. 286.

⁵⁵ Carlyle, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, p. 286.

⁵⁶ Carlyle, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, p. 287.

⁵⁷ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 165.

⁵⁸ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 147.

old formulas [...] but in all formulas that *he* could stand by, there needed to be a most genuine substance.⁵⁹

‘Sincerity’ was an important concept for Carlyle. Kaplan argues that Victorian sentimentality defended the ‘vision of the ideal’ against the claim that the universe is governed by mechanical or deterministic forces.⁶⁰ Carlyle’s notion of ‘sincerity’ had similar roots but involved the more fundamental sense of taking the world on one’s own terms. The original person like Johnson was possessed of a ‘substance’ or unconscious substrate which could not be shaped by external ideological narratives. Despite being hemmed in by the ideas of an age ‘thick-quilted with Pedantries, Hearsays’, Johnson retained a reverence for ‘this mysterious Universe’.⁶¹ Carlyle excuses Johnson’s Anglicanism and Toryism (mere ‘Formulas’) by a sleight of hand. They are seen as the tools that Johnson had to hand. This enables Carlyle to re-write Johnson and tell the reader what Johnson really meant. ‘Formulas’, he opines, are the ‘indispensablest furniture of our habitation in this world’, but merely constitute intellectual scaffolding to be dispensed with, following mature reflection.⁶² This allowed Carlyle, unlike Hazlitt, to see Johnson as both original and old-fashioned at the same time. Carlyle simply discarded the things that he disliked or considered supernumerary. Stripped of his false trappings, the Ur-Johnson stood revealed.

Carlyle treated Johnson’s writing in the same way and was, characteristically, less interested in the content of his books than their style and spirit. Although Johnson’s ‘opinions are fast becoming obsolete’, nonetheless ‘his style of thinking and living will never become obsolete’.⁶³ Johnson had a ‘wondrous buckram style, -the best he could then get to’, which

⁵⁹ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 166.

⁶⁰ Fred Kaplan, *Sacred Tears: Sentimentality in Victorian Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 6.

⁶¹ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 166 and p. 3.

⁶² Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 167.

⁶³ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 169

had now ‘grown obsolete’ but ‘always has something in it’.⁶⁴ ‘Buckram’ in this context refers to the coarse linen or cloth stiffened with gum or paste typically used to cover and protect books. It is telling that Johnson’s writing is characterised, not by any apposite quotation, but rather by reference to the coarse materiality of the textual integument. One of the few works Carlyle cites is *The Dictionary*, which is praised for its ‘its clearness of definition, its general solidity’.⁶⁵ The work is ‘a great solid-built square edifice’, created by ‘a true Builder’.⁶⁶ The ideas or sense are suspended. What comes across instead is the performative force and solidity of the writing. Writing in this sense is seen as a form of action. As Gillian Beer argues, ‘Carlyle’s writing, is in itself, activity’ which solicits ‘further forms for itself in the future acts of the reader’.⁶⁷

Johnson and the semiotics of action

Not only was Carlyle’s writing a form of action, but Carlyle also saw Johnson, above all, as embodied in action. For Carlyle, action represented a disruption of settled circumstance, seemingly an end in itself. This may explain why Johnson’s heroism is imagined as a mode of being rather than as a specific object of endeavour. Speech or writing, Johnson’s signature skills, were regarded as mere shadows or precursors of action. Carlyle wrote in *Past and Present* (1843) that ‘Action hangs, as it were dissolved in Speech’.⁶⁸ This may be why Carlyle switched from fiction to history. In his early essay *On History* (1830),

⁶⁴ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 169.

⁶⁵ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 169.

⁶⁶ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 169.

⁶⁷ Gillian Beer, *Arguing with The Past: Essays in Narrative from Woolf to Sidney* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 83.

⁶⁸ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, ed. by Richard Altick (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 153.

Carlyle wrote that ‘Narrative is *linear*, Action is *solid*’.⁶⁹ History and time acquired a solidity through action, that writing or speech lacked. Joel Fineman argues that history in the Hegelian era operated within a teleological framework.⁷⁰ Carlyle, however, appeared to believe that historical eras merely supplanted each other in an endlessly destructive cycle. Curiously, what had meaning for Carlyle stood at two extremes: eternity and the moment. Whilst eternity, like ‘Prospero’s air-vision’, consigned history to oblivion; the moment punctured time, re-framing what had gone before and after, achieving a transitory solidity like a photograph. The new art of photography, in fact, as Sir Frederick Pollock argued in 1855, had ‘the power of rendering permanent that which appears to be fleeting’.⁷¹ This conception has some similarities with Fineman’s notion of the anecdote:

The anecdote is the literary form that uniquely *lets history happen* by virtue of the way it operates an opening into the teleological, and therefore timeless narrative of beginning, middle and end. The anecdote produces the effect of the real, the occurrence of contingency, by establishing an event as an event within and yet without the framing context of historical successivity, i.e., it does so only in so far as its narration both comprises and refracts the narration it reports.⁷²

The action and the anecdote both function by fracturing the enframing temporal context, revealing the presence of the ‘real’ in the ‘contingent’. Carlyle, however, was not concerned to disrupt narrative, in the sense, perhaps, intended by Fineman, but rather to edit it down to the originating incidents which served to manifest history or being. He was, accordingly, not drawn to accumulating facts like Boswell, or J. G. Lockhart, whose biography of Scott he

⁶⁹ Carlyle, ‘On History’, in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays: Collected and Republished*, 3 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1894), I, pp. 493–507 (p. 499).

⁷⁰ Joel Fineman, *The Subjectivity Effect in Western Literary Tradition: Essay Towards the Release of Shakespeare’s Will* (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991), p. 68.

⁷¹ Cited in *The Golden Age of British Photography 1839–1900*, ed. by Mark Haworth-Booth (London and Philadelphia: Aperture, 1984), p. 9.

⁷² Joel Fineman, ‘History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction’, in *The New Historicism*, ed. by H. Aram Veesser (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 266–85, (p. 61).

dismissed as a ‘compilation’ rather than a ‘composition’.⁷³ His approach, rather, hearkened back to Romantic biographers, such as De Quincey and Hazlitt, who had developed a new style of ‘romantic anecdotal biography’, according to Annette Cafarelli, which replaced chronological fidelity with ‘symbolic patterning’, so that a ‘few synecdochic episodes represents the whole of the character and life of the subject’.⁷⁴ Carlyle went a step further by distilling Johnson’s life down to a mere handful of incidents. Carlyle’s approach curiously echoed Johnson’s own, particularly in *Rambler* 8, where he discounts most of his past, arguing that few moments in his life had fulfilled their potential for action.⁷⁵ Only through ‘performance’, Johnson argued, did an individual become ‘master’ of himself. Johnson, moreover, was reported by Boswell, as loving anecdotes, ‘I fancy mankind may come, in time, to write all aphoristically [...] if a man is to wait till he weaves anecdotes into a system, we may be a long time in getting them’.⁷⁶ Accordingly, Carlyle selected emblematic postures as a sculptor might do. Carlyle did not link these together in any structured narrative, but rather incorporated them as tableaux at the centre of his exploration of Johnson in the essay, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, and also in *On Heroes and Hero Worship*. This can be illustrated by three episodes: the incident of the shoes, recounted in *On Heroes and Hero Worship*; the bearing of Johnson to school by his fellow pupils, and the act of penance at Uttoxeter, both, from *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*. The events illustrate three phases of Johnson’s life: student, school boy and mature man. Two of the episodes feature as side-

⁷³ Thomas Carlyle, ‘Review of John Gibson Lockhart’s *Life of Scott*’, in *London and Westminster Review*, 12, 1838, Walter Scott Digital Archive, University of Edinburgh, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/carlyle-scott.asp> [accessed 28 April 2019]. Text is unpaginated.

⁷⁴ Annette Wheeler Cafarelli, *Prose in the Age of Poets: Romanticism and Biographical Narrative from Johnson to De Quincey* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), p. 17.

⁷⁵ Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, ed. by W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), III (1969), p. 41.

⁷⁶ James Boswell, *Boswell’s Journal of a Tour to The Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D. 1773*, ed. by Frederick A. Pottle and Charles H. Bennett (London: Heinemann, in collaboration with Yale University Press, 1963), p. 23.

panels, set underneath the statue of Johnson sculpted by Richard Cockle Lucas and erected in Lichfield in 1838 (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Side-panel scenes beneath statue of Johnson by Richard Cockle Lucas



Johnson's life had, therefore, already been 'monumentalised', to use Hart's description, in a manner akin to the Gospel narrative.⁷⁷ In *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, Carlyle in fact argued that, 'as the highest Gospel was a Biography, so is the life of a very good man still an indubitable Gospel'.⁷⁸ Reducing Johnson's life to a few exemplary performances was to make them stand out in relief; the part standing for the whole. Each, however, represented a

⁷⁷ See particularly Chapter 1 of Kevin Hart: *Samuel Johnson and the Culture of Property* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁷⁸ Carlyle, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, p. 286.

juncture of intersecting moral, social and intellectual forces. Whilst Boswell celebrated Johnson's powers of speech, the chosen episodes involved actions rather than words, allowing Carlyle to replace Johnson's speech with his own and to over-write Boswell. They were also firmly anchored in the physical world, giving rise to a discourse emanating from Johnson's body rather than his intellect. The first episode, describes Johnson angrily discarding a pair of donated shoes. Carlyle characterises the incident as follows:

It is a type of the man's life, this pitching-away of the shoes. An original man;- not a secondhand, borrowing or begging man. Let us stand on our own basis at any rate! On such shoes as we ourselves can get. On frost and mud, if you will, but honestly on that;- on the reality and substance which Nature gives *us*, not on the semblance, on the thing she has given another than us!.⁷⁹

Carlyle, the author of *Sartor Resartus*, saw clothes as akin to language, to be celebrated and distrusted, as Beer argues.⁸⁰ Johnson's footwear spoke for him as resoundingly as words, as the stone-kicking incident illustrated. Refusing the shoes was a rejection of any mediated identity. The vigour of the gesture also signified self-independence and a certain violence. Johnson's refusal to be defined was, however, ironically counterpointed by Carlyle's determination to define Johnson's essence through the act of writing. Each episode was therefore a mute soliloquy articulating the self as its own point of origin, a life 'without stealing'.⁸¹ It was a quality that Samuel Smiles turned into a Victorian religion in his *Self-Help* (1859). Many Victorian intellectuals were concerned that individualism was being crowded out by public opinion. Mill, who wrote that Carlyle 'saw many things long before me', argued that individuality was beneficial of itself but also to wider society.⁸² In particular, he contended, 'in proportion to the development of his individuality, each person

⁷⁹ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 166.

⁸⁰ Beer, *Arguing With The Past*, p. 91.

⁸¹ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 167.

⁸² John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, ed. by John M. Robson (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 139.

becomes more valuable to himself, and is, therefore, capable of being more valuable to others'.⁸³

The second episode, featuring Johnson's triumphal arrival at school borne by his school friends, also celebrates individuality. It is an act of homage to Johnson's latent powers of leadership, manifested early on. Johnson is literally bodied forth in the image, standing out from his peers. Carlyle states that Johnson's 'calling was rather towards Active than Speculative Life; that as States man (in the higher, now obsolete sense); Lawgiver Ruler; in short as Doer of the Work, he had shone even more than as Speaker of the Word'.⁸⁴ He describes Johnson as like 'the lion of the woods', lions being associated traditionally with both royalty and male aggression.⁸⁵ Carried aloft, Johnson is described as 'dominant, imperial, irresistible'.⁸⁶ Re-situating an author within an arena of power relations was to re-frame Johnson in a different way. Carlyle's representation invoked, however, an earlier, more regressive model of charismatic authority, rather than one attuned to an era of burgeoning democracy. In Carlyle's gestural semiotics, the display of Johnson's mastery appears more important than its object. Johnson's calling to an 'active' life, therefore, involved physical energy or motion as the basis of authentic being or agency. In this respect Carlyle's 'activism' had parallels with biological vitalism, a contemporary trend, which was also opposed to determinism.⁸⁷ Carlyle was dissatisfied, both with secular leaders' lack of spirituality, but also with the failure of writers, like Johnson, to impose themselves on the

⁸³ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. by G. Himmelfarb (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), pp. 127–28.

⁸⁴ Carlyle, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, p. 287.

⁸⁵ Carlyle, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, p. 287.

⁸⁶ Carlyle, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, p. 288.

⁸⁷ Biological vitalism had its origins in the work of the physiologist Johannes Peter Müller who, between 1833 and 1844, argued that organic matter differed from inorganic matter by having a soul. Later philosophers, such as Henri Bergson, contended that the phenomena of life are governed by vital processes that cannot be explained exclusively in merely scientific or physical terms. See Roger Scruton, *Modern Philosophy: An Introduction and Survey* (London: Pimlico, 2004), p.302.

world. This confusion may have arisen because Carlyle saw history and society in aesthetic terms, as John Gross has argued: ‘Carlyle ultimately seems to be judging society as though it were an unsuccessful work of art’.⁸⁸

Carlyle consoled himself that this was the best that Johnson was capable of. Johnson’s rugged individualism, however, had a dignity, which the Uttoxeter Penance, the key episode in Carlyle’s gospel, exemplified. It had particular resonance as it recalled Carlyle’s own feelings of filial impiety. Carlyle’s father was a stonemason of strong religious convictions who wanted Thomas to become a minister, an ambition that his son did not fulfil. This caused Carlyle considerable guilt. Carlyle was in the midst of writing *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, when he learnt that his father had died suddenly in January 1831. Full of remorse, he responded by producing the essay, *The Reminiscence of James Carlyle* (1831), which celebrated James Carlyle’s faith and work as a stonemason, employing tropes associated with solidity, later echoed in Carlyle’s description of Dictionary Johnson as ‘a true builder’.⁸⁹ Carlyle’s father spoke little but was a ‘man of Action, even with Speech subservient thereto’.⁹⁰ The memory of Carlyle’s filial impiety spilled over into his description of the Uttoxeter Penance, as Kaplan has argued.⁹¹ Johnson’s penance in the Uttoxeter marketplace commemorated an occasion when he had refused to help his father, a bookseller. Carlyle describes the incident:

The picture of Samuel Johnson standing bareheaded in the market there, is one of the grandest and saddest we can paint. Repentance! repentance! he proclaims as with passionate sobs: but only to the ear of Heaven, if Heaven will give him an audience:

⁸⁸ Gross: *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*, p. 43.

⁸⁹ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 169.

⁹⁰ Cited in Vanden Bossche, *Carlyle and the Search for Authority*, p. 37.

⁹¹ Kaplan, *Thomas Carlyle*, p. 189.

the earthly ear and heart, that should have heard it, are now closed, unresponsive forever.

That this so keen-loving, soft-trembling Affectionateness, the inmost essence of his being, must have looked forth, in one form or another [...] is not to be doubted [...] in all this we can see the spirit of true Politeness, only shining through a strange medium.⁹²

Johnson's penance is a performance embodied in gesture. Carlyle addresses the reader in the vocative mode, his speech supplanting Johnson's suppressed utterance. The symbology of clothes again comes into play through Johnson's removal of his hat, a deliberate abrogation of dignity and social station. Johnson's self-humbling, moreover, concerns origins: remembering a father, who like Carlyle's own, could not ultimately act as a point of origin. Like Carlyle, Johnson escaped his origins by rejecting the Father figure. Frederic Bogel sees Johnson's guilt as constitutive of his assumption of the authority of the writer, involving self-fathering and self-destroying.⁹³ Similarly, Carlyle had to overcome Johnson, a literary father, to establish his own identity, by developing the swarming prose style which signalled, as Carlyle argued, the 'whole structure of Johnsonian English breaking up from its foundations –revolution there as visible as anywhere else'.⁹⁴ Johnson was heroic but his style would no longer do. For Carlyle, setting aside origins involved violence but also, occasionally, regret. Carlyle recognised the dignity of Johnson's penance, staged, not in a confessional, but in a humdrum marketplace. It was a performative act of illocutionary force.

Carlyle describes the three episodes as 'a type of the man's life'. They can also be seen as forming part of a typology of Johnson's life. Northrop Frye wrote that typology assumes

⁹² Carlyle, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, p. 318.

⁹³ Frederic V. Bogel, *The Dream of My Brother: An Essay on Johnson's Authority* (Victoria, Canada: English Literary Studies published at The University of Victoria, 1990), p. 10.

⁹⁴ Cited in Gross: *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*, p. 40.

‘that there is some meaning and point to history, and that sooner or later some event or events will occur which will indicate what that meaning or point is, and so become an antitype of what has happened previously’.⁹⁵ It is not the repeating of an experience, but the recreating of it, which awakens it to life. The three episodes may, therefore, also function as antitypes of Gospel events. Johnson, borne by the schoolchildren, echoes Christ’s entry into Jerusalem, whilst the Uttoxeter Penance recalls his crucifixion. Carlyle was promulgating a post-Christian gospel and Johnson represented a Christ antitype, doomed like the Messiah, to mortal failure. A Victorian readership would have been alert to this particular textual framing.

Carlyle’s Johnson is a figure unimaginable before the Victorian age. For Carlyle to turn Hazlitt’s image of Johnson, as a purveyor of commonplaces, on its head, by characterising him as a radical individualist, was a singular move. Equally idiosyncratic was Carlyle’s re-imagining of Johnson as a man of action, rather than words, oddly echoing Johnson’s own thinking in *The Rambler*. Carlyle considered that Johnson’s heroism consisted in living in a bad century and making do ‘like a brave man’.⁹⁶ In *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, Johnson is seen as a Canute figure; his ‘aim was in itself an impossible one: this stemming of the eternal flood of Time’.⁹⁷ Carlyle contrasts Johnson with Hume. Johnson is English in outlook; Hume European. Hume has ‘the widest, methodising comprehensive eye’; Johnson ‘the keenest for perspicacity and minute detail’.⁹⁸ Carlyle, however, sees the duo as the ‘two half-men of their time’, and combining the ‘decisive scientific Clearness of Hume with the Reverence,

⁹⁵ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), pp. 80–81.

⁹⁶ Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and The Heroic in History*, p. 170.

⁹⁷ Carlyle, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, p. 311.

⁹⁸ Carlyle, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, p. 321.

the Love, and devout Humility of Johnson' would create 'the whole man of a new time'.⁹⁹

Carlyle, himself, united in one person sceptical and religious strains. Perhaps, like Hazlitt, he sensed a similar dialectic within Johnson. If so, it was further evidence, to Carlyle's mind, of his heroic originality, exemplified in the narrative of Johnson's life.

Arnold and Johnson: The Writer as Pedagogue

Passing from Carlyle to Arnold is to enter a new realm. Matthew Arnold, born in 1822, nonetheless, had commenced his literary career under the influence of Carlyle. Though Arnold was later to diverge from Carlyle, characterising him famously as a 'moral desperado', Honan and others see Carlyle standing behind much of Arnold's thinking on society and religion.¹⁰⁰ In *Past and Present* (1843), in particular, according to Honan, the young Arnold found echoes of both his father's views and those of his hero Newman: 'here was a work which gave the lie to political sophistries by condemning the gross materialism of the age'.¹⁰¹ But Arnold, perhaps, had more in common with Johnson than with Carlyle, both being poet-critics with a shared admiration of classical civilisation. In later life, both also largely abandoned creative writing for literary criticism.

I argue that Johnson facilitated and justified Arnold's transition from poet to literary critic, not least as Arnold's turn to critical prose mirrored that of Johnson, whom Arnold saw as laying the foundations of modern English prose writing. Johnson, moreover, provided a

⁹⁹ Carlyle, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, p. 322.

¹⁰⁰ See Park Honan, *Matthew Arnold: A Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1981), pp. 68–150 and Michael Thorpe, *Matthew Arnold* (London: Evans Brothers Ltd., 1969), pp. 16–18.

¹⁰¹ Honan, *Matthew Arnold*, p. 68.

model of literary authority which Arnold wished to replicate. Arnold, a natural pedagogue, produced an abridged version of Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets* (1779) to help tutor a new reading public. Editing Johnson's work to six exemplary lives, echoed Carlyle's reduction of Johnson's life to emblematic episodes. Both Johnson and Arnold wished to establish an authoritative canon, but each was responding to a different market and public pressures. Establishing his own canon, also involved rewriting Johnson's version of the truth. Collini argues that Arnold, more than any other single writer, 'endowed the role of critic with the cultural centrality it now enjoys'.¹⁰² T. S. Eliot in his essay, 'The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism' (1933), also averred:

From time to time, every hundred years or so, it is desirable that some critic shall appear to review the past of our literature, and set the poets and the poems in a new order [...] Dryden, Johnson and Arnold have each performed the task as well as human frailty will allow.¹⁰³

Canonicity was something that preoccupied Eliot as well as Johnson and Arnold, writers who had all created the critical climate of their times. Each addressed in his own way the question: where does literary value lie and who has authority to judge it? Unsurprisingly, each felt well-qualified to assume the role of critical arbiter. Each, in turn, was inevitably vilified by the succeeding generation. Hazlitt derided Johnson and Arnold was, in turn, criticised by Eliot.

It is perhaps not unexpected that Arnold turned his attention to Johnson. Like Johnson, Arnold largely stopped writing poetry later in his career and concentrated on literary criticism. Early on, Arnold had fallen under the sway of Keats and Wordsworth, but in later

¹⁰² Stefan Collini, *Arnold* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 3.

¹⁰³ T. S. Eliot, 'The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism', in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 79–96 (p. 87).

critical works such as ‘On The Modern Element in Literature’ (1857) and, in particular, ‘The Function of Criticism At The Present Time’ (1864), he became convinced that Romanticism ‘had about it, in fact, something premature; and that from this cause its productions are doomed’.¹⁰⁴ Romantic poets simply ‘did not know enough’, lacking the learning that Goethe so conspicuously possessed.¹⁰⁵ The age in general had not developed ‘a force of learning and criticism, such as were to be found in Germany’.¹⁰⁶ Some of Arnold’s criticisms of the Romantics had been anticipated by Byron. The essay is notable for the promotion of ‘disinterestedness’ in the literary critical approach and the need ‘to know the best that is known, and thought in the world’.¹⁰⁷ The ‘disinterested’ view naturally tended to coincide with whatever Arnold thought to be the case. Arnold was however creating a new critical language. Having turned to criticism, he was sensitive to Wordsworth’s low estimation of the ‘critical power’ and correspondingly keen to emphasise its worth, noting, ‘Is it true that Johnson had better have gone on producing more *Irenes* instead of writing his *Lives of the Poets* [...]?’.¹⁰⁸

Accordingly, Johnson helped buttress Arnold’s sense that criticism was a worthwhile pursuit, at a time when he felt the modern world to be doomed. David Riede argues that Arnold has been recognised as the embodiment of the mid-Victorian *zeitgeist*, but also contends that he epitomised the pathos ‘of the poet’s irremediable loss of linguistic plenitude’.¹⁰⁹ Following Foucault, he contends that in the nineteenth century, the loss of an authoritative primal discourse forced literature to turn in upon itself to reveal, ‘that we are already [...] governed

¹⁰⁴ Matthew Arnold, ‘The Function of Criticism at The Present Time’, in *Selected Poems and Prose*, pp.189–202 (p. 192).

¹⁰⁵ Arnold, ‘The Function of Criticism at The Present Time’, p.192.

¹⁰⁶ Arnold, ‘The Function of Criticism at The Present Time’, p.193.

¹⁰⁷ Arnold, ‘The Function of Criticism at The Present Time’, p.198.

¹⁰⁸ Arnold, ‘The Function of Criticism at The Present Time’, p.190.

¹⁰⁹ David G. Riede, *Matthew Arnold and the Betrayal of Language* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), p.25.

or paralysed by language'.¹¹⁰ Accordingly, Arnold's turn to criticism may have been prompted by doubts about his own poetic powers but also about the potency of language itself. The objectivity and authority of critical prose may have functioned as a way of re-asserting literary and linguistic authority. The desire to instruct came naturally to a man who had been an Inspector of Schools for thirty-five years from 1851. This was a characteristic he shared with Johnson, who, although a failed schoolteacher, also enjoyed lecturing, referring self-mockingly in *Rambler* 208 to his essays' tone of 'dictatorial instruction'.¹¹¹ It is clear, however, that Arnold felt that the native critical tradition lacked the intellectual substance found in continental Europe. In an early essay, 'The Bishop and The Philosopher' (1862), Arnold contrasted the parochialism of the English critical mind with the rigour and intellectual ambition of the French and German schools.¹¹² Voltaire, Lessing and Goethe are seen as the chief sources of intellectual influence in Europe; Addison, Johnson and the first Edinburgh reviewers, their British counterparts, by comparison make a poor showing.

Arnold spent the 1860s trying to find an audience for his literary criticism, but by the 1870s he sought to distance himself from the 'aesthetic' and 'historical' schools of criticism then emerging. In the last decade of his life, Arnold set himself the task of establishing the canon of English classics, completing Johnson's work. He was conscious that he was addressing a different audience from the one which read his critical works in the 1860s, which ostensibly possessed an easy familiarity with the classics and philosophy. By the 1870s, Arnold felt that changes in society required a more pedagogical response. He was also influenced, more prosaically, by the need to make money to retire.¹¹³ Arnold agreed a series of publications

¹¹⁰ Riede, *Matthew Arnold and the Betrayal of Language*, p.25.

¹¹¹ Johnson, *The Rambler*, V, p. 319.

¹¹² Matthew Arnold, 'The Bishop and the Philosopher', in Matthew Arnold, *The Complete Prose Works*, ed. R. H. Super, 11 vols (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1960–77), III (pp. 40–55).

¹¹³ Honan, *Matthew Arnold*, p. 388.

with his publishers, Macmillan and Company, which proved moderately lucrative. Bill Bell argues that, by the 1870s, Arnold was ‘learning to play the market more effectively while capitalising on his reputation for occupying a position above such a vulgar pursuit’.¹¹⁴ Pedagogy and business sense united in a series of publications which ranged from the *Six Chief Lives from Johnson’s “Lives of the Poets”* (1878), to portions of *The English Poets* (1880). Much of this material began its life in periodicals and was aimed squarely at a popular audience, in contrast to his earlier critical work. Johnson would have understood Arnold’s aims. The onset of the new print age in the eighteenth century, heralded an explosion in the publication of books. Canon formation was one way of giving order to the unruly textual landscape. Johnson blamed the poverty of contemporary writing on the surplus of literature, which threatened to crowd out work of real value; he was therefore keen to instruct the public in what they should read. The *Lives of the English Poets* constituted Johnson’s promulgation of the canon, but the choice of authors also reflected commercial pressures. These pressures were of a more particular nature in the 1870s. Literacy rates had doubled during the Victorian era. As a school examiner, Arnold considered that he was best-placed to prescribe the literary curriculum for the new readership.

This may have influenced Arnold’s decision to publish an abridged edition of Johnson’s *Lives of the English Poets* in 1878. With the institutionalisation of English Literature, came a need for student editions, as Turner argues.¹¹⁵ This work fitted the bill admirably. Arnold’s starting-point was to focus on ‘the most important of the lives’, for then, ‘what a text-book

¹¹⁴ Bill Bell, ‘From Parnassus to Grub Street: Matthew Arnold and the House of Macmillan’, in *Macmillan: A Publishing Tradition*, ed. by Elizabeth James (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 52–69, (p. 67).

¹¹⁵ Turner, ‘The “Link of Transition”: Samuel Johnson and The Victorians’, pp. 127–28.

we should have'.¹¹⁶ The choice of Johnson also enabled Arnold to draw upon the potency of his critical forebear. Arnold's volume includes the lives of Milton, Dryden, Swift, Addison, Pope and Gray. It was a reasonable selection of Johnson's most authoritative lives. Arnold also included a life of Johnson, written by Macaulay for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which repeated his earlier criticism that Johnson was a better talker than writer. Macaulay, nonetheless, reserved high praise for the *Lives of the English Poets*, finding that Johnson's 'diction frequently had a colloquial ease which it had formerly wanted'; further that 'the criticisms are often excellent'.¹¹⁷

In the work's 'Preface', Arnold approaches the task like the school inspector that he was, asserting in the opening lines: 'Life is short, and our faculties of attention and of recollection are limited'.¹¹⁸ Discussing education, Arnold is arrested by the question of what 'is to be taught, how much and how?'.¹¹⁹ He argues for 'a severe limitation of the number of matters taught'.¹²⁰ Much of the force of Arnold's later critical work, as LaPorte argues, derived from the great diversity of the Victorian periodical presses, a diversity which Arnold, however, sought to subdue rather than study.¹²¹ Forster's Education Act of 1870 had established a framework for the schooling of all children between the ages of five and thirteen in England and Wales. Arnold wished to take their education in hand. Central to this was the principle of

¹¹⁶ 'Preface' to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's "Lives of the Poets" with Macaulay's "Life of Johnson"*, ed. by Matthew Arnold, 1st edn (London: Macmillan, 1878), digital edition <<http://www.archive-org/details/sixchiefivesfr00macagoog.com>> [accessed 19 November 2018], p. x.

¹¹⁷ 'Life of Johnson, By Lord Macaulay', in Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's "Lives of the Poets" with Macaulay's "Life of Johnson"*, 1st edn, 1878, p. 39.

¹¹⁸ 'Preface' to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's "Lives of the Poets" with Macaulay's "Life of Johnson"*, 1st edn, 1878, p. vii.

¹¹⁹ 'Preface' to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's "Lives of the Poets" with Macaulay's "Life of Johnson"*, 1st edn, 1878, p. viii.

¹²⁰ 'Preface' to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's "Lives of the Poets" with Macaulay's "Life of Johnson"*, 1st edn, 1878, p. viii.

¹²¹ Charles LaPorte, 'Post-Romantic Ideologies and Victorian Poetic Practice, or, the Future of Criticism at the Present Time', *Victorian Poetry* 41.4 (2003), 519–25.

selection. Johnson understood this principle well, observing in *Rambler 106* that ‘No place affords a more striking conviction of the vanity of human hopes than a publick library’.¹²²

Finding anchor-points was a way to orient the reader. Arnold accordingly argues that we need to:

[..] fix a certain series of works to serve as what the French, taking an expression from the Builder’s business, call *points de repère*, - points which stand as so many natural centres, and by returning to which we can always find our way again, if we are embarrassed; finally, to mark out a number of illustrative and representative works, connecting themselves with each of these *points de repère*.¹²³

Points de repère, translates as ‘landmarks’, or ‘points of reference’. The imagery of building figured a desire to stabilise and solidify the canon, echoing the reference to Johnson’s ‘architectonic quality’ in the 1855 Times Letter. In this respect, Arnold was consciously following Johnson. The field of literature is seen as a landscape which can be mapped from a fixed viewpoint and reported upon objectively in the manner of a surveyor. The authority of the critic, in turn, valorises the exercise of choice and discrimination. Arnold argues that Johnson’s critical biographies make an ‘admirable point de repère’ or ‘fixed centre’ for the student of English literature. It is necessary, however, to be selective, to make use of the ‘most important of the lives [...] and leave out all the rest’.¹²⁴ Carlyle had condensed Johnson’s life to a handful of episodes; Arnold similarly distilled Johnson’s text to six lives. In ‘The Study of Poetry’ (1880), Arnold was to apply the same principle of selection, in establishing a writer’s classic status, by reference to ‘touchstone’ lines of verse compiled by Arnold himself.¹²⁵ Recoiling before the vastness of Victorian print culture, Arnold presented

¹²² Johnson, *The Rambler*, IV, p. 200.

¹²³ ‘Preface’ to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson’s “Lives of the Poets” with Macaulay’s “Life of Johnson”*, 1st edn, 1878, p. ix.

¹²⁴ ‘Preface’ to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson’s “Lives of the Poets” with Macaulay’s “Life of Johnson”*, 1st edn, 1878, p. ix.

¹²⁵ Matthew Arnold, ‘The Study of Poetry’, in *Selected Poems and Prose*, pp. 241–64.

his edited highlights as a school primer, treating children and adults alike as pupils requiring instruction. Reducing the numbers of *points de repère*, provided a more manageable reading list. But it also enabled Arnold to assert mastery over Johnson by re-writing his work to eliminate what he conceived to be redundant material. It was an oddly utilitarian approach, which meant that Arnold was effectively doing the job of reading for his pupil public. Repositioning the reading public was important, as Suleri argues, because Arnold presented literature in his later critical writing, ‘as a substitute for religion and philosophy’, which necessitated a new attitude towards reading to enable this to happen.¹²⁶ The reader is required to follow Arnold’s lead, acting as an editor to re-organise the textual universe into new and reshaped versions of the best that it had thought and known. But the secondary nature of reading meant that the critic-reader is always condemned to a subordinate role. This ambivalence stalked Arnold’s later literary career.

When Arnold considers Johnson’s text, he displays little of the condescension displayed by either Hazlitt or Macaulay. Arnold argues that Johnson was a ‘man of letters of the first class, and the greatest power in English letters—during the eighteenth century’.¹²⁷ Johnson’s critical biography provides real ‘insight into the history of English literature and life’.¹²⁸ The statement from ‘Pope’ that good judgment is acquired by wide reading, as the reader ‘must compare one opinion or one style with another; and when he compares, must necessarily, distinguish, reject and prefer’, is given high praise by Arnold: ‘Nothing could be better’.¹²⁹ It is the remark of a headmaster commenting on the work of a particularly promising pupil. It

¹²⁶ Sara Suleri, ‘Entropy on Etna: Arnold and the Poetry of Reading’, in *Matthew Arnold: Modern Critical Views*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), pp. 139–49, (p. 139).

¹²⁷ ‘Preface’ to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson’s “Lives of the Poets” with Macaulay’s “Life of Johnson”*, 1st edn, 1878, p. xiii.

¹²⁸ ‘Preface’ to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson’s “Lives of the Poets” with Macaulay’s “Life of Johnson”*, 1st edn, 1878, p. xiv.

¹²⁹ ‘Preface’ to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson’s “Lives of the Poets” with Macaulay’s “Life of Johnson”*, 1st edn, 1878, p. xv.

was, moreover, the method by which Arnold himself mapped his *points de repère*.

Elsewhere, his comments on Johnson's criticism were more mixed. In 'A French Critic on Milton' (1877), published a year earlier, Arnold praised Johnson's criticism for being free of rhetoric or convention, but noted that he was not sufficiently disinterested, flexible or receptive to be a satisfying critic of Milton.¹³⁰ Johnson's Milton was to continue to prove controversial for generations to come.

In the 'Preface', Arnold was also keen to re-evaluate the importance of prose in English literature and Johnson's role in its development. Given that the volume is ostensibly devoted to poetry, and to Johnson's critical biographies, this might appear something of a digression. Arnold, however, wished to make a wider point. Arnold considered that the eighteenth century's greatest gift to posterity was to furnish future generations with an English prose style which was fit for purpose. The *Lives of the English Poets*, themselves, were a showcase of Johnson's excellence as a prose practitioner. Nations such as France and England, which were 'called to a great historic life', were sure 'to feel the need of a sound prose of their own'.¹³¹ Equating nationhood and writing was singular but may have reflected a wider sense that the nineteenth century was an age of prose. Macaulay, in his essay 'Milton' (1825), argued that 'We think that, as civilisation advances, poetry almost necessarily declines'.¹³²

Arnold detects a shift in sensibility at the start of the eighteenth century, quoting Johnson's comments on a book written by an English chaplain in 1702, 'It is sad stuff sir [...] miserably written as books in general then were. There is now an elegance of style now

¹³⁰ Matthew Arnold, 'A French Critic on Milton', online edition, <<http://www.chronicleofancientsunlight.wordpress.com/2014/01/10/a-french-critic-on-milton>> [accessed 19 November 2018].

¹³¹ 'Preface' to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's "Lives of the Poets" with Macaulay's "Life of Johnson"*, 1st edn, 1878, p. xix.

¹³² Quoted in Philip Davis, *The Victorians*, p.222.

diffused'.¹³³ Arnold argues that aspiring nations needed a 'good prose [...] plain, direct, intelligible, serviceable'.¹³⁴ Johnson and his peers met this need, thereby establishing the basis for modern prose. Arnold admired the Enlightenment virtues of clarity and simplicity of expression and saw that tradition as still alive and usable. The English language was an enduring cultural resource in an era of change. Arnold, in contrast to Hazlitt and Carlyle, argued that 'Johnson himself wrote a prose decidedly modern'.¹³⁵ Although Johnson used pompous and long words, 'the structure is always plain and modern'.¹³⁶ Arnold appeared to be distinguishing between surface and deep structure. The prose of Milton and Taylor is characterised by Arnold as 'cumbersome, unavailable, impossible'.¹³⁷ Ruskin also valued Johnson's sentences, not because 'they were symmetrical, but because they were just and clear'.¹³⁸ Strikingly both Arnold and Ruskin read Johnson as a model of intelligibility. Arnold may however have had the Germanophile, Carlyle, in his sights, arguing that 'the example of Germany may show us what a nation loses from having no prose style'.¹³⁹ A style of 'regularity, uniformity, precision', the Apollonian virtues, is implicitly contrasted with Carlyle's convoluted, Dionysian style, influenced by German idealism.¹⁴⁰ Precision and objectivity were also the tools of the modern critic, deployed to reify a critical approach which, nonetheless, was in reality, as much driven by ideological choices as any other.

¹³³ 'Preface' to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's "Lives of the Poets" with Macaulay's "Life of Johnson"*, 1st edn, 1878, p. xviii.

¹³⁴ 'Preface' to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's "Lives of the Poets" with Macaulay's "Life of Johnson"*, 1st edn, 1878, p. xix.

¹³⁵ 'Preface' to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's "Lives of the Poets" with Macaulay's "Life of Johnson"*, 1st edn, 1878, p. xviii.

¹³⁶ 'Preface' to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's "Lives of the Poets" with Macaulay's "Life of Johnson"*, 1st edn, 1878, p. xviii.

¹³⁷ 'Preface' to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's "Lives of the Poets" with Macaulay's "Life of Johnson"*, 1st edn, 1878, p. xxi.

¹³⁸ John Ruskin, *Praeterita And Dilecta*, p. 199.

¹³⁹ 'Preface' to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's "Lives of the Poets" with Macaulay's "Life of Johnson"*, 1st edn, 1878, p. xx.

¹⁴⁰ 'Preface' to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's "Lives of the Poets" with Macaulay's "Life of Johnson"*, 1st edn, 1878, p. xxi.

Such a view was not wholly novel. Arthur Hugh Clough, a friend of Arnold, had written in a lecture on Dryden in 1869:

Our language before the Restoration certainly was for the most part bookish, academical, and stiff [...] Dryden then has the merit of converting this corruption and dissolution of our old language into a new birth and renovation [...] You may call it, if you please, a democratic movement in the language [...] For the first time, you may say, people found themselves reading words at once easy and graceful; fluent yet dignified; familiar yet full of meaning.¹⁴¹

Tillotson argues that Arnold's call for smoothness in writing, which paralleled Johnson's own, had a contemporary significance, presenting a forceful challenge to 'Carlyle's explosiveness, and a noticeable contemporary cult of an oracular prose'.¹⁴² Johnson's contemporary critics considered his style orotund, but it had a clarity which Carlyle rarely matched. Johnson's prose gifts were, however, a double-edged sword according to Arnold. Johnson's 'overpraise of artificial poets like Pope' is rationalised as 'the utterances of a man who worked for an age of prose, who was ruled by its influences'.¹⁴³ This made Johnson a less reliable critic of a writer like Milton whose poetry was at the furthest remove from prose. But Arnold nonetheless believed that Johnson's poetic commentaries were 'the utterances of a great and original man'.¹⁴⁴ It is a statement that many of his Romantic predecessors would not have felt capable of making.

Arnold's edition of Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets*, proved a great success, so much so that it went into several editions and was still in use in schools until the mid-twentieth century. Seeking a larger audience, Arnold produced a fourth school edition of 1886 which

¹⁴¹ Quoted in Geoffrey Tillotson, 'Matthew Arnold's Prose: Theory and Practice', in *Matthew Arnold: Modern Critical Views*, ed. by Bloom, pp. 37–61 (pp. 45–46).

¹⁴² Quoted in Geoffrey Tillotson, 'Matthew Arnold's Prose: Theory and Practice', p. 48.

¹⁴³ 'Preface' to *Samuel Johnson, The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's "Lives of the Poets" with Macaulay's "Life of Johnson"*, 1st edn, 1878, p. xxiv.

¹⁴⁴ 'Preface' to *Samuel Johnson, The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's "Lives of the Poets" with Macaulay's "Life of Johnson"*, 1st edn, 1878, p. xxiv.

condensed the work even further ‘by striking out a few things in them that might be thought objectionable reading for girls and young people’.¹⁴⁵ This was not an attempt to ‘bowdlerise’ the text, but rather to ‘relieve the young reader’ by ‘omitting here and there a Latin extract, and still further by abridging certain details which [...] have now almost entirely lost their interest’.¹⁴⁶ Arnold also confined the use of footnotes to, ‘what seemed required for making the Lives intelligible and interesting to the class of readers which I have here in view’.¹⁴⁷ The redactions made by Arnold reflected both a pedagogical intent but also a broader change in society’s response to classical culture and to the work’s more detailed preoccupations, which Arnold saw as no longer engaging a Victorian audience. As an editor, George Birkbeck Hill resorted to lengthy footnotes to explicate obscure eighteenth-century arcana. By contrast, Arnold studiously avoided such footnotes and applied the editorial knife dispassionately. This reflected, in part, a difference in the audience anticipated by each. Two examples will suffice to illustrate Arnold’s approach. For instance, in the abridged version, Arnold excises a passage from the original text of ‘Milton’, relating to Milton’s rustication from Cambridge, including a ten-line poem by Milton in Latin (commencing ‘Me tenet [...]’), expressing Milton’s reluctance to return from ‘exile’ to the university.¹⁴⁸ Also cut is a passage where Johnson explicates the Latin poem’s meaning. Johnson’s scholarly elucidation does not survive contact with Arnold’s editorial scrutiny, informed as it was by a rather different instructional intent. By comparison, it is precisely the sort of esoterica that Birkbeck Hill would have hunted down and parsed at length. Later, in the abbreviated version of ‘Dryden’,

¹⁴⁵ ‘Advertisement’ to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson’s “Lives of the Poets” with Macaulay’s “Life of Johnson”*, ed. by Matthew Arnold (London: Macmillan, 1908, reprint of 4th edn of 1886) [‘Advertisement’ is not paginated].

¹⁴⁶ ‘Advertisement’ to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson’s “Lives of the Poets” with Macaulay’s “Life of Johnson”* (1908, reprint of 4th edn of 1886).

¹⁴⁷ ‘Advertisement’ to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson’s “Lives of the Poets” with Macaulay’s “Life of Johnson”* (1908, reprint of 4th edn of 1886).

¹⁴⁸ Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson’s “Lives of the Poets” with Macaulay’s “Life of Johnson”* (1908, reprint of 4th edn of 1886), p. 48.

Arnold removes three pages of text relating to a lengthy critique, by Dryden, of the writer, Elkanah Settle, whose play, *The Empress of Morocco* (1673), had been successfully received in a way that clearly irked Dryden.¹⁴⁹ The language used by Dryden, (for instance, ‘I am mistaken if nonsense is not here pretty thick sown.’) is salty and abusive.¹⁵⁰ A scholarly editor might well have relished the period flavour that Johnson’s cameo provided. In the era of Victorian self-improvement, however, such detail may have appeared to Arnold to be archaic, aggressive and of little moral value. Arnold’s determination, however, to provide a model ‘text-book’ through selection, may itself have masked an aggressive intent. Arnold’s pedagogical approach involved the blunt instrument of selection, applied, in a relatively utilitarian manner. This may appear ironic, given that Arnold, elsewhere, was keen to castigate ‘philistinism’ in all its guises.

Arnold’s engagement with Johnson, in conclusion, was enthusiastic, and largely sympathetic. Ultimately, like Carlyle, Arnold saw Johnson as an original:

[Johnson] was a great man, and great men are always instructive. The more we study him, the higher will be our esteem for the power of his mind, the width of his interests, the largeness of his knowledge, the freshness, fearlessness, and strength of his judgments [...] His well-known lines on Levett’s [sic] death, beautiful and touching lines, are still more beautiful and touching because they recall a whole history of Johnson’s goodness, tenderness and charity[...] His faults and strangenesses are on the surface, and catch every eye. But on the whole we have in him a fine and admirable type, worthy to be kept in view for ever¹⁵¹

Arnold combines an appreciation of Johnson as man, writer and critic. The passage also shows that Queen Victoria was not alone in adopting the ‘plural pronoun’. Arnold’s usage,

¹⁴⁹ Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson’s “Lives of the Poets” with Macaulay’s “Life of Johnson* (1908, reprint of 4th edn of 1886), p. 48.

¹⁵⁰ Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets*, ed. by John H. Middelndorf, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), XXI (2010), p. 375.

¹⁵¹ ‘Preface’ to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson’s “Lives of the Poets” with Macaulay’s “Life of Johnson”*, 1st edn, 1878, p. xxvi.

however, implies an *ex cathedra* authority. Arnold's analysis bears comparison with that of Carlyle. Both saw Johnson as a model 'type' of man, epitomising fearlessness and goodness. But whilst Carlyle celebrated Johnson's 'strangeness' as signifying his originality, Arnold, a more conventional Victorian, overlooked Johnson's aberrant qualities, focusing instead on the pedagogical potential of Johnson's literary authority and his contribution to the development of English prose. As a new nation and literary culture closed in on Arnold in the last decade of his life, Johnson may have appeared to be throwing him a lifeline, to help Arnold assume the cultural authority that Johnson achieved in his own age.

Birkbeck Hill: The Encyclopaedist Approach

Background

George Birkbeck Hill, born in 1835, was, like Matthew Arnold, the son of a headmaster and followed his father in becoming a teacher and headmaster himself. He was steeped in Liberal values, being the nephew of the postal reformer, Rowland Hill. From the late 1870s onwards, Birkbeck Hill devoted his life to the study of Johnson. Birkbeck Hill represents, I argue, both the beginning of modern Johnsonian scholarship but also a turn to the encyclopaedic. His work left its mark on scholars and writers alike and, whilst not a creative writer like other authors examined here, he nonetheless blurred the lines between creativity and scholarship by establishing the role of editor, almost as a rival creator. Birkbeck Hill saw Johnson and Boswell's canonical texts as somehow incomplete; requiring extensive annotation to render them intelligible to a Victorian readership. Birkbeck Hill edited and

admired Johnson's writing, but the principal text examined here is Birkbeck Hill's *magnum opus*, the 1887 edition of Boswell's biography.

Like Carlyle, Birkbeck Hill's main focus was on Johnson's life. Whereas Carlyle had reduced Boswell's biography to a handful of episodes; Birkbeck Hill, by contrast, added a substantial scholarly superstructure to the work. The 1887 edition is swollen with footnotes which threaten to swamp the host text. That Johnson occasioned such detailed editorial attention indicated an increasing confidence in English culture but may also have reflected a cultural anxiety to document the past in the face of a present reality too complex to grasp. Birkbeck Hill's encyclopaedism, and his later commodification of Johnson's life and sayings, established a precedent for some later writers. But like Birkbeck Hill, their endeavours only demonstrated the paradoxical nature of the encyclopaedic project itself as the gaps in history could never be fully addressed by footnotes and copious indices.

Not much has been written about Birkbeck Hill. Most of the available information about him can be gleaned from his letters, published by his daughter, Lucy Crump. He began his writing career, like Johnson, at Pembroke College Oxford, contributing articles to university publications. He continued for the rest of his life to provide literary reviews for periodicals. At Oxford, he met Swinburne and became friends with Burne-Jones and William Morris. Later in retirement, Crump notes, Birkbeck Hill's life became centred on Johnson, the 'man who from the first, became his hero'.¹⁵² She describes him reviewing, in the 1870s, a new edition of Boswell's biography 'and in the minute care which he bestowed on this task he found a fresh incentive to Johnsonian studies'.¹⁵³ This resulted in a small volume entitled *Dr*

¹⁵² *Letters of George Birkbeck Hill, D.C.L., LL.D.*, ed. by Lucy Crump (Cornell: Cornell University Library, 2008, reproduction of 1906 edition), p. 126.

¹⁵³ *Letters of George Birkbeck Hill*, p. 126.

Johnson, his Friends and his Critics in 1878.¹⁵⁴ It was the first of a series of publications which led Birkbeck Hill to be regarded as the most learned commentator on Johnson.

Catherine Dille argues that Birkbeck Hill was the founder of modern Johnsonian scholarship and also one of the first scholars to argue for a ‘liberal’ Johnson.¹⁵⁵ His principal Johnsonian publications focused on Johnson’s life and sayings, included the 1887 edition of Boswell’s *Life*, the *Wit and Wisdom of Samuel Johnson* (1888) and *Johnsonian Miscellanies* (1897). He also produced an edition of Johnson’s *Lives of the English Poets* (1905). The edition of Boswell’s biography, however, was his most esteemed work in his lifetime.

The context: editing ‘The Life’, Johnson and Englishness

This section is principally concerned with the 1887 edition of Boswell’s biography. The edition was quickly established as a classic, so much so that Samuel Beckett was delighted to purchase it in 1961 after ‘looking for [it] in vain for years’.¹⁵⁶ Its publication heralded the development of an encyclopaedist approach to Johnson and the emergence of the ‘super-editor’. The editorial role had evolved and expanded during the previous two centuries. Boswell’s biography was caught up in debates about the nature of that role. Marcus Walsh identifies the emergence of a concerted project of intelligent annotating and textual editing in the eighteenth century, centred on Shakespeare and Milton. He argues that its origins lie in the history of a ‘process by which English culture required and developed a sense of its own

¹⁵⁴ The volume included pieces previously published in ‘The Cornhill Magazine’, ‘The Pall Mall Gazette’, ‘The Saturday Review’ and ‘The Times’, as Birkbeck Hill’s ‘Preface’ to the volume confirms. See ‘Preface’ to George Birkbeck Hill, D.C.L., *Dr Johnson: His Friends and His Critics* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1878), p. xii.

¹⁵⁵ Catherine Dille, ‘Johnson, Hill and The “Good Old Cause”: Liberal Interpretation in the Editions of George Birkbeck Hill’, in *The Age of Johnson, Vol. 14*, ed. by Paul J. Korshin and Jack Lynch (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 2003), pp. 193–219.

¹⁵⁶ See James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1996), p. 482.

identity and its own history, and began to seek literary classics of its own history, comparable with, if not yet replacing, those of antiquity'.¹⁵⁷

The notion of 'authorial intention' develops in editorial practice. As the authorial text requires to be interpreted, it becomes subject to glossary and commentary. A division also emerged between editors who adopted considerable interpretative freedom in their work and those who took a more objective approach. Some editors sought increasingly to position works within their linguistic, cultural and intellectual contexts. Others began to paraphrase texts and locate parallel examples and verbal contexts. This was to lay the foundation for nineteenth-century editing, as did another eighteenth-century innovation, the emergence of the footnote as the prime means of annotation. H. J. Jackson argues that the footnote 'made a visual statement about the relative importance of the author and the editor or interpreter by firmly demoting commentary to the bottom of the page and a smaller typeface'.¹⁵⁸ Boswell provided ample footnotes in his biography and in the second and third editions added yet more. The footnote developed a life of its own in Croker's infamous 1831 edition of Boswell's biography. Croker's edition included a large quantity of footnotes but was also notorious for interpolating accounts of Johnson's life, including those of Mrs Thrale and Hawkins, directly into the main text. Matthew Arnold wrote witheringly:

Mr. Croker's edition [...] is a good example of the labour and ingenuity which may be spent upon a masterpiece, with the result after all, really of rather encumbering than illustrating it [...] this kind of editing seems to proceed upon the notion that we have only one book to read in the course of our life, or else that we have an eternity to read in.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Marcus Walsh, *Shakespeare, Milton & Eighteenth-Century Literary Editing: The Beginnings of Interpretative Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 1.

¹⁵⁸ H. J. Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001) p. 56.

¹⁵⁹ 'Preface' to Samuel Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's "Lives of the Poets" with Macaulay's "Life of Johnson"*, ed. by Matthew Arnold, 1st edn (London: Macmillan, 1878), digital edition <<http://www.archive-org/details/sixchiefivesfr00macagoog.com>> [accessed 19 November 2018], p. xvii.

This was an emerging trend which Birkbeck Hill was later to magnify rather than check. Editorial commentary may sometimes conceal a hostile intent, as Ralph Hanna argues, existing ‘to deliberately obscure the aggressive act of controlling audience consumption of text’.¹⁶⁰ In this respect, the proportion of editorial to authorial text appeared to be growing out of balance. Carlyle was incensed by Croker’s editorial interventions:

You begin a sentence under Boswell’s guidance, thinking to be happily carried through it by the same: but no; in the middle, [...] starts up one of these Bracket-ligatures, and stitches you in from half a page to twenty or thirty pages of a Hawkins, Tyers, Murphy, Piozzi.¹⁶¹

Responding to such criticisms, a new edition was published in 1839 with the textual interpolations safely consigned to footnotes or appendices. Unconsciously adopting the language of Johnson, Birkbeck Hill acknowledged Croker’s contribution but concluded that ‘No one surely but a blockhead [...] could with scissors and paste pot have mangled the biography which of all others is the delight and the boast of the English-speaking world’.¹⁶²

Editing Boswell’s biography clearly had a fractious history. It, therefore, invites the question, why, of all of Birkbeck Hill’s publications, he was to invest most energy in his edition of the biography, spending more than a decade, on-and-off, on the project.¹⁶³ It was, above all, because it was Johnson’s life that consumed his attention, and Boswell’s biography was, he wrote, like ‘a stately mansion in which’ he hoped ‘to find for himself a

¹⁶⁰ Ralph Hanna, ‘Annotation as social practice’, in *Annotation and its Texts*, ed. by Stephen A. Barney (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 178–84 (p. 181).

¹⁶¹ Carlyle, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, p. 72.

¹⁶² ‘Preface’ to Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, ed. by George Birkbeck Hill, D.C.L., 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1887), I, p. xxii.

¹⁶³ In the ‘Preface’ to *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, Birkbeck Hill notes that he ‘was rash enough more than twelve years ago to offer myself as editor of a new edition of Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*.’

home'.¹⁶⁴ While this demonstrated that Carlyle was not the only author to associate Johnson with architecture, it also indicated an element of regressive nostalgia, or homesickness (being nostalgia's etymological derivation). Birkbeck Hill's 'Johnson' is associated with an idealised eighteenth century and is grounded in a late Victorian notion of Englishness. Central to this thinking was the emerging importance of English language, literature and biography. Froude's biography of Carlyle appeared in 1882 and the *Dictionary of National Biography* was published between 1886 and 1900.¹⁶⁵ In Johnson, biography, life and the English language converge. Birkbeck Hill records in his edition's 'Preface', that he had been irked, as an Oxford student, by being required to translate passages from *The Spectator* into 'bad Latin instead of reading good English'.¹⁶⁶ At the public schools and Oxford and Cambridge, the classics still held sway. English Literature as a discipline was not widely taught in universities until after the First World War.

While two chairs in English Literature had been established in 1828 and 1838, the subject's status remained low.¹⁶⁷ English, however, as Palmer argues, 'was fast becoming the primary language of trade and international politics', particularly as the lingua franca of Empire.¹⁶⁸ Reviving Johnson's reputation, therefore, served to reify certain notions of Englishness, based around a robust sense of national and cultural self-identity. Johnson's England garnered a new respect as the age which, as Arnold argued, had overseen the 'passage of our nation to prose and reason' and established the stable, humane and predominantly middle-class culture which had shaped the Victorian age, following the turbulent years of revolution

¹⁶⁴ 'Preface' to Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, pp. xii–xiii.

¹⁶⁵ For more detailed background on the late nineteenth-century biographical boom, see Laurel Brake, *Subjugated Knowledges: Journalism, Gender & Literature in The Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 169–84.

¹⁶⁶ 'Preface' to Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. xi.

¹⁶⁷ See Brake, *Subjugated Knowledges*, p. 49.

¹⁶⁸ Beth Palmer, *Victorian Literature* (London: York Press, 2010), p. 220.

and Romanticism.¹⁶⁹ Birkbeck Hill, a patriotic Liberal reformist, fully embraced this view of the eighteenth century, writing that the ‘troublesome doubts’ which have harassed mankind ‘since the great upheaval of the French Revolution’, had ‘scarcely begun to ruffle the water of their life. Even Johnson’s troubled mind enjoyed vast levels of repose’.¹⁷⁰ The 1880s saw the passing of the Third Reform Act (1884), the establishment of the Fabian Society (1884), the splitting of the Liberal Party over Irish Home Rule and, in 1887, the year that Birkbeck Hill’s edition was published, the Trafalgar Square riots against unemployment. Johnson was a signifier for a state of English civilisation associated with the middling values of calm and order, at a time when such virtues seemed in short order.

Recreating The ‘Life’: the editor as encyclopaedic creator

On publication, Birkbeck Hill’s edition was an overnight success. *The Athenaeum* reported that it had ‘little to say but praise.’¹⁷¹ L. F. Powell’s updated version of 1934 has subsequently become the standard scholarly edition. Although Birkbeck Hill’s edition contained numerous textual errors, being based on Boswell’s third edition of 1799, Powell’s corrected edition preserves much of Birkbeck Hill’s original work. Its merits are therefore not in question. This section explores, rather, how Birkbeck Hill’s exhaustive approach sheds light on the assimilation of Johnson in the late nineteenth century. To put this into context, the first edition of Boswell’s biography ran to some 1,104 pages in two volumes. Birkbeck Hill’s six-volume edition, complete with Index and other material ran to some 2,694 pages. The edition included a host of appendices, Boswell’s *Hebridean Journal* and Johnson’s

¹⁶⁹ Arnold, ‘Preface’ to *Six Lives*, in *Complete Prose Works*, VIII, p. 311.

¹⁷⁰ ‘Preface’ to Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, I, p. xii.

¹⁷¹ ‘Review’ of George Birkbeck Hill edition of *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, *The Athenaeum*, 3113 (25 June 1887), 825–26 (p. 825).

Diaries. Birkbeck Hill appeared to be engaged in an enterprise of rival creation. His turn to the encyclopaedic hinted at elements of, what modern psychologists term, the ‘collector psychology’. Collecting is seen as akin to a quest which can never be finally completed, which provides security by filling a part of the self which is missing or devoid of meaning.¹⁷² Collectors also catalogue and re-arrange the world to provide a safe haven where fears can be neutralised. Birkbeck Hill’s labours were not merely symptoms of an anal-regressive psychology. They did, however, suggest a related sense of cultural anxiety. Stockpiling information about Johnson’s life and times exhibited what Roland Barthes, has termed the nineteenth century’s ‘passion for the real’.¹⁷³ This was manifested, as Hayden White argues, in the obsessive need to document and discover the laws behind all phenomena, in the face of a reality which seemed to be retreating from grasp.¹⁷⁴ The need to amass facts, in the face of possible cataclysm, led the nineteenth-century writer Bourget to assemble his six-volume history of Paris, which Walter Benjamin referred to in his own similarly ambitious *Passagenwerk*.¹⁷⁵ Such instincts might, however, be self-defeating, as Brown argues, encyclopaedias being inevitably ‘monuments to transience’.¹⁷⁶

Birkbeck Hill, however, undeniably applied his best efforts. His detailed research involved visits to the British Library and other institutions, and he developed an extensive personal

¹⁷² See for instance J. Rykwert, ‘Why Collect?’, *History Today*, 51 (12), 32 (EBSCO Host: 2001), <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/why-collect> [accessed 19 August 2019] and Mark McKinley, ‘The psychology of collecting’, *The Washington Post Online*, 2007, <https://www.thewashingtonpost.com/newspapersdirect.com> [accessed 19 August 2019] and R. O. Frost and V. Hristova, ‘Assessment of Hoarding’, in *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 67 (5), (2011), 456–66.

¹⁷³ Quoted in Hayden White, *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957–2007*, ed. by Robert Doran (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010), p. 188.

¹⁷⁴ White, *The Fiction of Narrative*, p. 188.

¹⁷⁵ Quoted in Andrew Brown, *A Brief History of Encyclopaedias: From Pliny to Wikipedia* (London: Hesperus Press Limited, 2011), p. 92.

¹⁷⁶ Brown, *A Brief History of Encyclopaedias*, p. 55.

library which was inspected for this doctoral project.¹⁷⁷ Birkbeck Hill's library is effectively an encyclopaedia of the eighteenth century. It contains up to a thousand volumes, mostly eighteenth-century first editions, including: complete runs of *The Gentleman's Magazine* (1731–1819), *The Annual Register* (1758–98), *London and Its Environs* (1761) in six volumes, the letters of Anna Seward and Gibbon's *Memoirs*. The library ranges from historical and philosophical works, to poetry, fiction and archival texts. *London and its Environs* (1761), for instance, includes a contemporary map of London, detailed drawings of buildings and locations and comprehensive information describing London life in the mid-eighteenth century. Many of the volumes are annotated in Birkbeck Hill's hand with cross references to footnote information in his edition of Boswell's biography. This footnote information was, however, not always judiciously chosen. For instance, one footnote teeters on the edge of bathos by detailing the history of building work at Pembroke College during Johnson's residency, drawing upon Birkbeck Hill's copy of Hearne's *Remains*.¹⁷⁸ Elsewhere, he sourced material of greater moment, for instance expanding upon Boswell's bare statement, that a Mr Warren published some of Johnson's earliest literary efforts, by tracking these 'efforts' to the Birmingham Journal, noting that 'the number (No. 28) for May 21, 1733', was preserved in the office of the *Birmingham Daily Post*.¹⁷⁹ The note expands the reader's understanding of an important phase of Johnson's writing career and identifies its source. It also marks the transition from an edition aimed at the general reader to one directed at a more scholarly audience, designed to support the needs of research.

¹⁷⁷ Birkbeck Hill's personal library was gifted to Pembroke College, the University of Oxford, where it was inspected for this thesis.

¹⁷⁸ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 59.

¹⁷⁹ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 85.

Birkbeck Hill's task was to map this source material to, and anchor it in, Boswell's biography. In the 'Preface', he argues that in reviewing an old edition of Boswell's biography, he 'began to note the parallel passages and allusions not only in their pages, but in the various authors whom I studied'.¹⁸⁰ Reconnecting the Victorian reader to the past involved re-animating the text with appropriate historical context; in particular as:

Books which were once in the hands of almost every reader of the *Life* when it first appeared are now read only by the curious. Allusions and quotations which once fell upon a familiar and friendly ear now fall dead. Men whose names were known to everyone, now often have not even a line in a Dictionary of Biography.¹⁸¹

Birkbeck Hill sought to recover a past rapidly disappearing from view. The elderly Lowe sisters, referenced in The Times letter of 1855, may, in fact, have provided the last physical connection to Johnson and his age.¹⁸² Birkbeck Hill was also keen to emphasise his scholarly rigour: 'I have sought to follow him [Johnson] wherever a remark of his required illustration, and have read through many a book that I might trace to its source a reference or allusion'.¹⁸³ He saw each utterance or description within the text as concealing a lost origin to be hunted down, in order to restore the work to its full plenitude. This involved vast research. Birkbeck Hill quotes, with approval, Boswell's assertion that he ran over half of London in order to fix a date correctly.¹⁸⁴ The need to position editorial effort within a discourse of truthfulness was echoed in other disciplines and cultural activity. Novelistic realism, a field linked to biography, was constructed in part on a juridical model of reality, and the evolving field of historical studies, influenced by German scholars such as Ranke, emphasised the importance

¹⁸⁰ 'Preface' to Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. xii.

¹⁸¹ 'Preface' to Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, pp. xv–xvi.

¹⁸² Robert Graves famously opens *Goodbye to All That* with a vision of the antebellum world which links him, via a series of famous authors who had physical contact with each other, in a chain back to Dr. Johnson. See Robert Graves, *Goodbye To All That: An Autobiography*, ed. by Richard Perceval Graves (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1995), pp. 6–7.

¹⁸³ 'Preface' to Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. xvi.

¹⁸⁴ 'Preface' to Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. xv.

of records and documents as key markers of historical reality. Accordingly, Birkbeck Hill enlisted contemporary letters, essays and periodical magazine reports to re-textualise Johnson's world, placing his own editorial signature firmly on the work. The edition shares the episodic bagginess of the nineteenth-century novel. Leo Bersani notes that the nineteenth-century realist novelist:

[...] desperately tries to hold together what he recognises quite well is falling apart. The looseness or elasticity of novelistic form is a sign of that recognition. The ordering myth of nineteenth century society can obviously not be given within the narrow formal discipline of classical tragedy [...] The novel welcomes the disparate, it generously gives space to great variety of experience; but it is essentially an exercise in *containing* the looseness to which it often appears to be casually abandoning itself.¹⁸⁵

Birkbeck Hill also struggled to contain the 'looseness' of his material. Everywhere in Boswell's biography, he saw opportunities to re-populate the work with a bewildering variety of textual sources and information. Birkbeck Hill abhorred loose ends. Boswell, out of tact, often withholds the names of those shown in a poor light, but Birkbeck Hill displayed few such qualms. Pinning down an individual's name served to fill the hole in the text. This also reflected changing attitudes to the disclosure of personal information in biographies. For instance, Edmund Purcell, the biographer of Cardinal Manning, argued strongly against the 'advocates of the art of suppression.'¹⁸⁶

Re-siting Boswell's biography within an eighteenth-century textual world may have implied a subordinate role for the editor, but Birkbeck Hill's work wholly belies such a notion. The footnote provides the textual arena through which Birkbeck Hill imposes meaning on the work. The volume of footnotes immediately strikes any reader of the work. They effect a

¹⁸⁵ Leo Bersani, *A Future for Asyntax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), p. 61.

¹⁸⁶ Edmund Purcell, 'On the Ethics of Suppression in Biography', *Nineteenth Century* 40, 5, (1896), 534–35.

punctuation in the text; as Anthony Grafton notes, ‘footnotes interrupt a narrative. References detract from the illusion of veracity and immediacy [...] since they continually interrupt the single story told by an omniscient narrator’.¹⁸⁷ The reader is moreover confronted not by one narrator but two: Boswell, and Birkbeck Hill, the latter addressing the biographer from the text’s margins, as well as directing commentary at Croker, Johnson and others. There is often a sense of *infinite regressus*. Birkbeck Hill finds in one case, that ‘my long search was rewarded by the discovery that Boswell was quoting himself’.¹⁸⁸ Elsewhere, he provides as an appendix, ‘Notes on Boswell’s Note’ and, even, ‘Notes on his own Notes’.¹⁸⁹ Ironically, in the editor’s annotated copy, inspected in Birkbeck Hill’s personal library, he scrawls the comment: ‘I write this in Switzerland. I find in looking at this copy that I did not make so many notes in it as I had thought’.¹⁹⁰ Birkbeck Hill is, however, clear that the notes provide the text’s master meta-narrative. He even asserts that he has cleared up ‘statements in the text which were not fully understood even by the author’.¹⁹¹ The editor, not the author, is accordingly the ultimate arbiter of meaning.

The extent to which the footnotes represent an obtrusive intervention in the text can be illustrated by Figure 3 overpage. Of the two pages, page 191 is entirely devoted to two lengthy footnotes, whilst page 190 comprises about one-third text, and two-thirds footnotes.

¹⁸⁷ Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), p. 69.

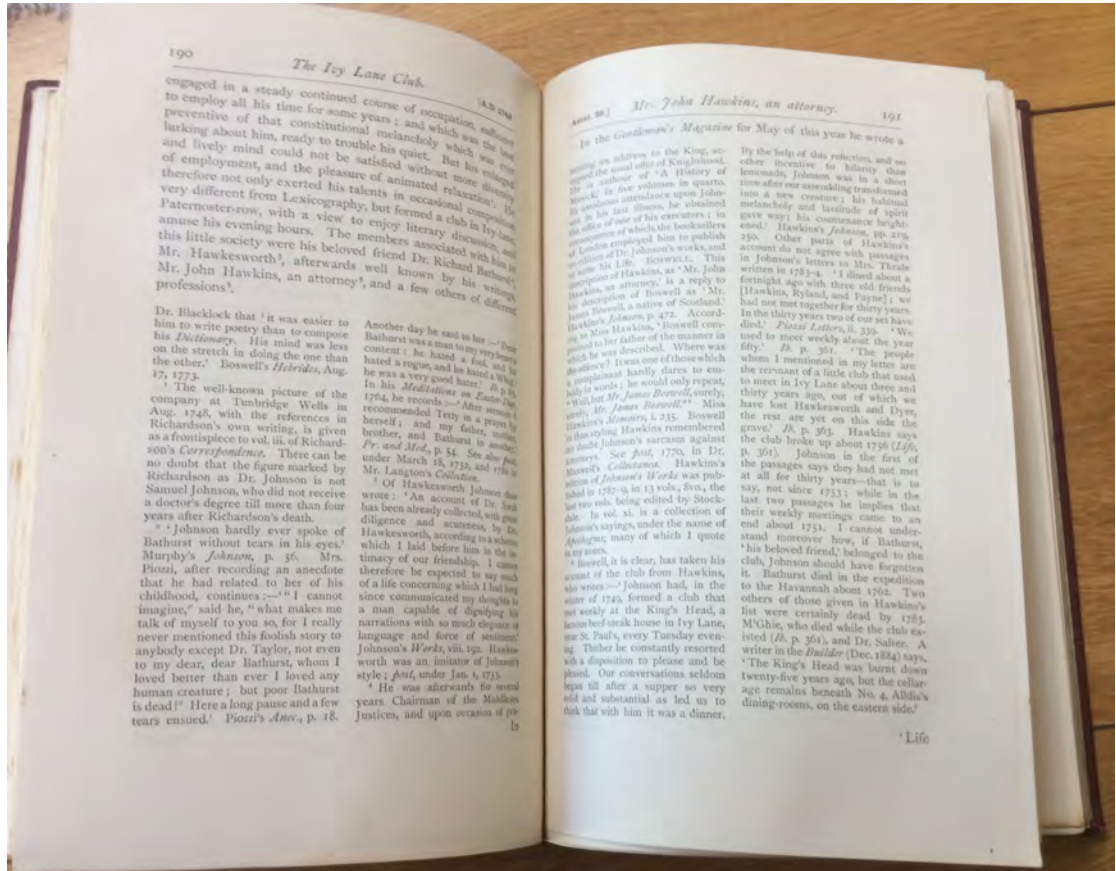
¹⁸⁸ ‘Preface’ to Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, I, p. xvii.

¹⁸⁹ See ‘Appendices’, Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, V, VI.

¹⁹⁰ *Life of Johnson*, ed. by George Birkbeck Hill, Editor’s Annotated Copy, held by Pembroke College, Oxford.

¹⁹¹ ‘Preface’ to Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, I, p. xviii.

Figure 3: Pages 190–91 of Volume I of the Birkbeck Hill edition of Boswell's Life



Whilst this illustration is an extreme case, it is not an isolated example. Percy Fitzgerald, a barrister and writer, who had produced his own version of Boswell's biography, wrote an excoriating critique of Birkbeck Hill's edition in 1898:

Dr B. Hill's numerous notes are unsigned, and, at first sight appear to be the legitimate notes of the text: while we find every one of Boswell's notes marked 'Boswell,' as though he were some intruder or outsider [...] Surely all who read these notes will be struck by the determined way in which the editor criticises or confutes opinions of Johnson by introducing passages from his writing which are opposed to these opinions.¹⁹²

¹⁹² Percy Fitzgerald, *A Critical Examination of G. Birkbeck Hill's Johnsonian Editions*, (London: Forgotten Books, 2015, reproduction of original work of 1898), pp. 2–5.

Fitzgerald, a rival Johnsonian scholar, did not bring a wholly objective eye but nonetheless makes a number of interesting points. According to Fitzgerald, the principal subject of the edition was Birkbeck Hill himself. His ‘profuse notes, [...] literally overwhelm and submerge poor Boswell’.¹⁹³ Fitzgerald is particularly hard on Birkbeck Hill’s use of ‘parallel passages’, whereby:

Johnson utters an opinion, and something he said elsewhere to the same, or contrary effect- or something that someone else has said-is noted, and all these things are ‘shot’ in heaps, and shovelled upon the unlucky author, who is himself elbowed quite out of the way.¹⁹⁴

If the author was in danger at times of being buried, it was because Birkbeck Hill, nonetheless, was seeking, as Dille argues, to ‘reintegrate Johnson the author with Johnson the conversationalist’.¹⁹⁵ For instance, Boswell explains how Johnson’s fits of teenage lassitude, became increasingly ‘violent’ and that he ‘strove to overcome it by forcible exertions’.¹⁹⁶ Birkbeck Hill links this observation to *Rambler 85*, where Johnson writes, ‘how much happiness is gained, and how much misery escaped by frequent and violent agitation of the body’.¹⁹⁷ The directional flow of the editorial intervention is from life to writing. Speech and action thereby become textualised events, embedded in Johnson’s writing.

Birkbeck Hill is, however, prone to lapses in judgement, applying Victorian standards of morality to eighteenth-century conduct. Referring to Dr James, a physician and acquaintance of Johnson’s, Boswell cites Johnson’s observation, ‘that no man brings more mind to his

¹⁹³ Fitzgerald, *A Critical Examination of G. Birkbeck Hill’s Johnsonian Editions*, p. 12.

¹⁹⁴ Fitzgerald, *A Critical Examination of G. Birkbeck Hill’s Johnsonian Editions*, p. 6.

¹⁹⁵ Dille, ‘Johnson, Hill and The “Good Old Cause”’, p. 207.

¹⁹⁶ Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, I, p. 64.

¹⁹⁷ Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, I, p. 64.

profession'.¹⁹⁸ Birkbeck Hill cannot resist commenting in the associated footnote, 'Johnson did not speak equally well of his morals'.¹⁹⁹ Fitzgerald notes that the editor is 'particularly severe where "morals" or questions of morals arise, and is often shocked at, or reprobates, sentiments or conduct that seem to deviate from his high standard'.²⁰⁰ In addition, Birkbeck Hill does not show himself well-disposed to women writers. He is, for instance, 'often wilfully prejudiced', as Clifford has argued, against Mrs Thrale's representation of Johnson.²⁰¹ Birkbeck Hill's personal library at Pembroke College includes his own copy of the letters of Anna Seward. On the flysheet of the first volume, he has hand-written: 'A most worthless book. The woman was a pretentious liar – utterly commonplace.'²⁰² Elsewhere, Seward writes about Johnson's 'gloomy and servile superstition', commenting, that it had not 'subdued that malevolent and envious pride, and literary jealousy, which were ever the vices of his heart'.²⁰³ In the margin Birkbeck Hill hand-writes: 'Bitch'.²⁰⁴ Further on, he adds in the margin: 'Why comment bitch, why comment?'.²⁰⁵ Birkbeck Hill's edition does not include comments as venomous as these, but, Boswell's own similarly dismissive attitude to Seward, may have made this unnecessary. Birkbeck Hill associated authority with masculinity and adopted an aggressive posture in relation to any criticism of Johnson, particularly if advanced by a woman writer. In this, he followed Boswell.

Birkbeck Hill's 'encylopaedism' is most clearly exemplified in the apparatus of Indices, Appendices and Concordances provided as annexes. He notes that:

¹⁹⁸ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 159.

¹⁹⁹ Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. 159.

²⁰⁰ Fitzgerald, *A Critical Examination of G. Birkbeck Hill's Johnsonian Editions*, p. 17.

²⁰¹ James L. Clifford and Donald J. Green, *Samuel Johnson: A Survey and Bibliography of Critical Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1970), p. 12.

²⁰² *Letters of Anna Seward*, Vol. 1, Flysheet Verso, Ref BH/SEW 14376, Personal Library of George Birkbeck Hill, held by Pembroke College Oxford.

²⁰³ *Letters of Anna Seward*, Vol. 1, Letter to Reverend Whalley, November 7 1784, Ref BH/SEW 14376, p. 10.

²⁰⁴ *Letters of Anna Seward*, Vol. 1, Letter to Reverend Whalley, November 7 1784, p. 10.

²⁰⁵ *Letters of Anna Seward*, Vol. 1, Letter to Reverend Whalley, November 7 1784, p. 11.

The plan on which my Index is made will, I trust, be found convenient. By the alphabetical arrangement in the separate entries of each article the reader, I venture to think, will be greatly facilitated in his researches. Certain subjects I have thought it best to form into groups. Under America, France, Ireland, London, Oxford, Paris, and Scotland, are gathered together almost all the references to these subjects. The provincial towns of France, however by some mistake, I did not include in the general article.²⁰⁶

There is a faintly risible quality to the taxonomy, as it descends from nations to the provincial towns of France. Foucault was famously provoked to laughter by the classificatory categories described in Borges' fictional Chinese encyclopaedia, which are mutually exclusive and therefore impossible to conceptualise.²⁰⁷ Birkbeck Hill's categorisations are not impossible to conceive, but they indicate a way of thinking based around the application of 'rule and square', to use Fitzgerald's withering description.²⁰⁸ Fitzgerald was particularly critical of the 'gigantic general index, which consists of no less than 288 pages, or nearly 600 columns. It has indexes within indexes'.²⁰⁹ It suggested a mindset struggling to tabulate and tame a multitudinous reality by using an ordering system akin to the objective laws of science. Birkbeck Hill even provides a table mapping the relationship between the writers and key individuals encountered in *The Life*. (see Figure 4 below).

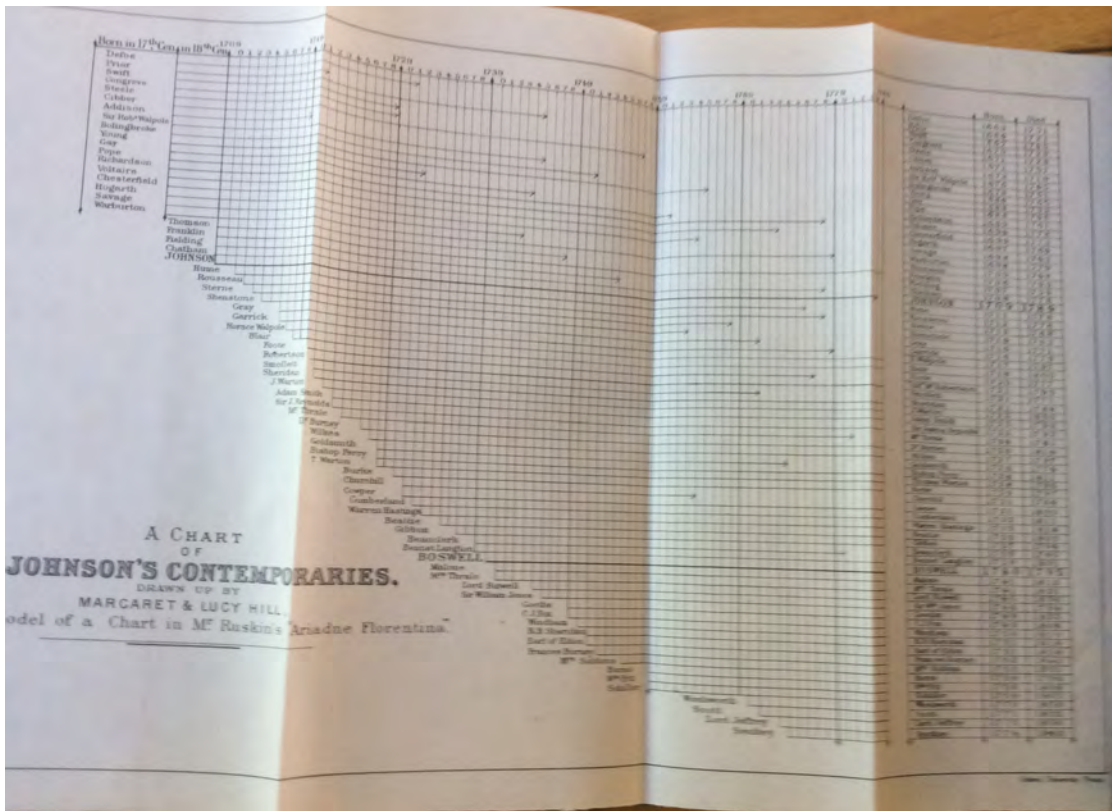
²⁰⁶ 'Preface' to Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. xix.

²⁰⁷ Michel Foucault: 'Preface' to *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 1989), p. xvi.

²⁰⁸ Fitzgerald, *A Critical Examination of G. Birkbeck Hill's Johnsonian Editions*, pp. 4-7.

²⁰⁹ Fitzgerald, *A Critical Examination of G. Birkbeck Hill's Johnsonian Editions*, pp. 4-7.

Figure 4: A Chart of Johnson's Contemporaries from Volume VI of the Birkbeck Hill edition



Applying a map or grid to human relations was a classificatory approach which had similarities to the emergence of statistical and graphical tools to illustrate the conditions of life, increasingly used by the Victorian reformers such as Chadwick, Nightingale and Booth. Chadwick argued in 1862 that ‘close scrutiny of particulars, by the exhaustive collection of them, and wider inductions from them’ could help advance social progress.²¹⁰ The appropriation of techniques associated with the natural and social sciences was not unique to Birkbeck Hill; indeed, as acknowledged, his chart draws upon Ruskin’s practice in *Ariadne*

²¹⁰ Edwin Chadwick, ‘Opening Address of the President of Section F (Economic Science and Statistics) of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, at the Thirty-Second Meeting, at Cambridge, in October, 1862’, *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 25 (December 1862), 502–03.

Florentina (1873). Ruskin and Birkbeck Hill were both reformists. Conceptual grids created an illusion of objectivity, whereas they were, to an extent, arbitrary.

Birkbeck Hill also applied his 'rule and square' to Johnson's sayings. His edition includes a 'Concordance of Johnson's sayings' which 'will be found convenient by the literary man who desires to make use of his strong and pointed utterances'.²¹¹ This analyses Johnson's sayings into a range of categories from 'laced waistcoats' to 'lexicographers.' It is the perfect primer for the middle-class man in need of an apposite quotation for an after-dinner speech. His desire to commodify Johnson is explicitly articulated in the pronouncement that 'Johnson's trade was wit and wisdom, and some of his best wares are set out here in a small space'.²¹² In the *Wit and Wisdom of Samuel Johnson*, he provided longer extracts from Johnson's sayings and writings, neatly categorised by topic, as though they were items in a saleroom inventory. Other writers were to produce their own editions of Johnson's 'spoken wisdom', including J. F. Waller and Robina Napier.²¹³ While Birkbeck Hill rekindled interest in Johnson's writing, his legacy at the end of the nineteenth century was to reinstate the pre-eminence of Johnson the talker.

Birkbeck Hill influenced modern Johnsonian scholarship but his encyclopaedism also inspired amateur scholars. Most conspicuously, Aley Lyell Reade was one of the few authors who could match Birkbeck Hill for attention to detail. His first effort was a large volume entitled *The Reades of Blackwood Hill and Dr Johnson's Ancestry* (1906). Reade admits that there 'seems little connexion' between the Reade family and Dr Johnson's, but

²¹¹ 'Preface' to Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. xx.

²¹² 'Preface' to Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, I, p. xx.

²¹³ See Turner, 'The "Link of Transition": Samuel Johnson and The Victorians', pp. 119–43.

nonetheless turns up obscure links.²¹⁴ He provides extensive details regarding both families dating back to the sixteenth century, including detailed genealogical charts. Family trees, as Francois Weil argues, are as much about the genealogists as the ancestors, questing to discover ‘who thought they were, or who they wanted to be’.²¹⁵ Reade subsequently produced the eleven-volume *Johnsonian Gleanings* (1909–52), which expanded upon the 1906 work in even more exhausting detail. Reade illustrated the cul-de-sac to which encyclopaedism leads. The desire to connect things up and close the gap between reader and author has a fetishistic quality.

Johnson’s celebrity was also processed in other ways. Jackson’s book *Marginalia* approaches Boswell’s biography through the history of marginal annotations made to the text. In one example of infinite regress, Jackson uncovers a marginal note to a Birkbeck Hill footnote in the biography, concerning Goldsmith’s approach to proof-sheets: ‘This was Walter Pater’s method’.²¹⁶ Jackson also concludes that Boswell’s readers, seeking help with their lives, focused on passages ‘in which there was something at stake for them personally’.²¹⁷ This led Lord Rosebery in 1909 to declare that Boswell’s biography was now as ‘annotated and commentated as if it were Holy Writ’.²¹⁸ This was due in no small part to Birkbeck Hill.

In conclusion, although Johnson was represented by Carlyle, Arnold and Birkbeck Hill in very different ways, the writers were united in taking a far more positive view of him than

²¹⁴ Aleyn Lyell Reade, ‘Preface’ to *The Reades of Blackwood Hill In The Parish of Horton Staffordshire: A Record of Their Descendants with a Full Account of Dr. Johnson’s Ancestry, His Kinsfolk and Family Connexions*, (London: Spottiswoode & Co. Ltd. [Privately Printed for the Author], 1906), p. vii.

²¹⁵ Francois Weil, *Family Trees: A History of Genealogy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 215.

²¹⁶ Jackson, *Marginalia*, p. 175.

²¹⁷ Jackson, *Marginalia*, p. 178.

²¹⁸ Lord Rosebery, *Dr Johnson: An Address delivered at the Johnson Bicentenary Celebration*, at Lichfield, September 15, 1909 (London: Humphreys, 1909), 12.

many of their Romantic forebears. Like the Romantics, however, they were no less assiduous in overwriting Johnson in accordance with their own mid- and late Victorian views on life and literature. The change in the viewpoint can, perhaps, be best gauged by the master tropes used to delineate Johnson in each era. Johnson's orderly rationality is associated by Hazlitt, in particular, with rigidity and the age of the machine; by contrast, Johnson's decisiveness and clarity are identified by the Victorians as signifiers of his heroic solidity in an age beset by doubt. Arnold linked this solidity to Johnson's critical authority, which had helped usher in an age of prose and reason. Birkbeck Hill saw Johnson's life, words and works as epitomising a state of English civilisation, calmer and more intelligible than the turbulence of late Victorian society. He went on to stockpile information about Johnson's life and times in the face of a contemporary reality increasingly difficult to comprehend. Carlyle, by contrast, however, focused on the creative chaos that he saw as underpinning Johnson's originality. In this one respect, Carlyle looked forward to the 'moderns.' Although modern writers, particularly Eliot, Borges and Beckett, were to take a different approach to Johnson from their Victorian predecessors, Johnson's chaotic strangeness was to resonate strongly with Beckett, in particular, and a number of scholars who were to follow him.

CHAPTER FIVE

JOHNSON AND THE MODERNS

Introduction

The Victorians did much to restore Johnson's stock following the Romantic age. But the way we read Johnson today, as Greg Clingham argues, has its origins in the work of early twentieth-century writers and critics, particularly T. S. Eliot.¹ Clingham observes that readers of 1900 inherited a view of Johnson which was 'rooted in the moral rectitude of his arguments, and the power and eccentricity of his personality'.² Eliot's critical revolution, however, beginning with 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), helped re-focus attention on Johnson's writing and literary criticism. The three writers considered in this chapter, Eliot, Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges, were at the centre of Modernist and Post-Modernist developments. Respectively American, Irish and Argentinian, they also approached the English language and Englishness with the critical distance of the outsider, yet all were united in their admiration for a writer who epitomised a certain style of unapologetic Englishness. They also saw Johnson as strangely modern. Nonetheless, while 'Dictionary Johnson' wielded his native tongue with a confident authority, all three were pessimistic about the ability of language adequately to represent the complexity of modern life. The crisis of representation to which they responded by fracturing language and form was at the core of the Modernist enterprise.

¹ Greg Clingham, 'Critical Reception since 1900', in *Samuel Johnson in Context*, ed. by Jack Lynch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 54–61 (p. 55).

² Clingham, 'Critical Reception since 1900', p. 55.

This chapter will explore why these writers were drawn to an author who was, in many respects, their polar opposite. This may be best explained by considering the complex influences which informed the Modernist project. Borges and Eliot, although both avant-garde writers, were also radical conservatives, while Beckett and Eliot both looked to the eighteenth century as a counterpoint to Romantic afflatus. More importantly, all three writers discerned the modern and disturbing elements in Johnson that previous generations of authors had, to large extent, over-written. In that light, as Anthony W. Lee argues, 'Johnson emerges as a compellingly modern figure'.³ Eliot, I argue, valorised impersonality and technical accomplishment over Romantic expressiveness and created a literary context which was more sympathetic to the virtues of an Augustan writer such as Johnson. He admired Johnson's deft criticism, enlisting him at various points when vigorously advancing his new poetic, not least in confronting Milton. Johnson's sense of the hollowness of experience, evident in the elegiac undertone of his verse, also appealed, later, to Eliot's religious sensibilities. Beckett looked to a darker, stranger Johnson which reflected his interest in psychoanalytic literature. In the 1930s, Beckett filled notebooks with detail about Johnson and his circle which resulted in him attempting to write a play about Johnson, a project which he eventually abandoned. Beckett's notebooks recorded his fascination with Johnson's aberrant psychology and idiosyncrasies, themes which surfaced, I argue, in the later fiction and drama. Finally, Borges found in Johnson a precursor whose novella *Rasselas* (1759) possessed the meditative and weightless qualities to be found in his own fiction, and who shared Borges' classical temper. Johnson's influence, however, left fewer traces on Borges' creative work than it did on Eliot and Beckett. Unlike them, he argued for the centrality of Boswell in mediating our understanding of Johnson. Borges' 'Boswell' is a playwright who

³ Anthony W. Lee, 'Introduction: Modernity Johnson?', in *Samuel Johnson Among The Modernists*, ed. by Anthony W. Lee (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2019), p. 3.

creates the ‘character’ of Johnson, a theme explored in Chapter 2. Borges also saw Boswell as Johnson’s *alter ego*, a relationship strangely recapitulated in his own friendship with Adolfo Bioy Casares, Borges’ ‘own Boswell’.

All three writers began their literary careers in the first decades of the twentieth century, a period when, as Yeats argued in ‘The Second Coming’ (1919), things seemed to be falling apart. Key events, such as the First World War, the Russian Revolution, the splitting of the atom and the dethroning of the ego in psychoanalysis, were evidence of the further fragmentation and complexification of the cultural landscape which the Victorian period had set in train. Ernest Rutherford, who was the first to tentatively describe the structure of the atom in 1910, was later awarded the Nobel Prize for ‘investigations into the disintegration of elements’.⁴ Later, Heisenberg, when asked how an atom could be visualised, replied ‘Don’t try’.⁵ The world became increasingly difficult for any one individual to comprehend, Eliot noting that ‘when everyone knows a little about a great many things, it becomes increasingly difficult for anyone to know whether he knows what he is talking about or not’.⁶ In philosophy, practitioners of ‘the phenomenological reduction’ bracketed out, or refused to consider, whether perceived phenomena correspond to actually existing reality.⁷ Beckett in his essay on ‘Recent Irish Poetry’ (1934), referred to the ‘new thing that has happened, [...] namely the breakdown of the object’.⁸ The artist, who was attuned to this new reality, perceived ‘the space that intervenes between him and the world of objects [...] as [a] no-

⁴ Cited in Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Everything* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2003), p. 124.

⁵ Cited in Bryson, *A Short History*, p. 129.

⁶ T. S. Eliot, ‘The Perfect Critic’ (1920) in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), pp. 50–58 (p. 55).

⁷ The ‘phenomenological reduction’, as posited by Edmund Husserl in particular, involved ‘bracketing’ out all that is not given to consciousness to reveal the pure subject itself. See Roger Scruton, *Modern Philosophy: An Introduction and Survey* (London: Pimlico, 2004), pp. 39–41.

⁸ Samuel Beckett, ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (London: John Calder, reprinted 2003), pp. 70–76 (p. 70).

man's-land'.⁹ Beckett cites Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) as a product of this viewpoint.¹⁰ Both Beckett and Eliot shared a sense of the disconnection between subject and world in a way which would have meant little to Johnson. All three rejected any sense of the self as unitary: Eliot attacked the myth of the 'substantial unity of the soul'.¹¹ Beckett shrunk identity to an echo-chamber of diminishing voices and Borges, in one of his early essays, rejected the ego as illusory.¹² Unlike the Victorians, these writers, therefore, did not look to Johnson as an emblem of solidity in changing times, rather they sensed an unsettling strangeness in Johnson which seemed to anticipate their own concerns.

T. S. Eliot: Johnson, Critic and Writer

Background

Eliot, I argue, enlisted Johnson as an ally in the critical revolution that he embarked upon from 1919 onwards. Eliot used Johnson to support his anti-Romantic animus and to buttress his argument with Milton that poetry should be grounded in speech. Like Johnson, Eliot linked Milton to the Civil War, which Eliot later argued, caused the 'dissociation of sensibility' identified in an earlier essay. Johnson also proved useful in the 1940s in Eliot's assault on modernist 'incoherence', and his influence may have left traces in Eliot's later work. Early and later essays are considered here, including the mature consideration, 'Johnson as Critic and Poet' (1944).

⁹ Beckett, 'Recent Irish Poetry', p. 70.

¹⁰ Beckett, 'Recent Irish Poetry', p. 70.

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919) in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Kermode, pp. 37–44 (p. 42).

¹² Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Nothingness of Personality', in *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922–1986*, ed. by Eliot Weinberger (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 3–9.

Herbert Read wrote that Eliot ‘honoured [Johnson] above all other English writers - Samuel Johnson, with whom he shared a faith in God and the fear of death. Johnson, both as a poet and a critic, was constantly in his mind’.¹³ Eliot referenced Johnson across four decades from the early seminal essay, ‘The Metaphysical Poets’ (1921) to the late piece, ‘The Frontiers of Criticism’ (1956). Eliot admired Johnson’s poetry, but it was Johnson’s criticism which principally preoccupied him. In ‘The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism’ (1933), Eliot included Dryden, Coleridge and Arnold amongst the poet-critics who appear ‘every hundred years or so’ to ‘set the poets and poems in a new order’.¹⁴ The critic, ‘armed with a powerful glass’, surveys the literary terrain to ‘gauge nicely the position and proportion of the objects surrounding us, in the whole of the vast panorama’.¹⁵ Eliot’s critic recalls Arnold’s surveyor scanning for *points de repère*, while his earlier formulation of the function of criticism as ‘the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste’, by contrast, has a distinctly Johnsonian ring.¹⁶ Eliot was clear that only the poet-critic could perform the generational role of re-setting the literary dial. Edmund Wilson, writing in 1931, argued that Eliot, himself, had affected literary opinion, ‘more profoundly than any other critic writing in English’.¹⁷

¹³ Herbert Read, ‘T. S. E. A Memoir’, in *T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work, A Critical Evaluation by 26 Distinguished Writers*, ed. by Allen Tate (New York: Dell Publishing, 1966), pp. 11–37 (pp. 28–29).

¹⁴ T. S. Eliot, ‘The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism’ (1933) in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Kermode, pp. 79–96 (p. 86).

¹⁵ Eliot, ‘The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism’, pp. 86–87.

¹⁶ T. S. Eliot, ‘The Function of Criticism’ (1923), in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Kermode, pp. 68–76 (p. 69).

¹⁷ Edmund Wilson, *T. S. Eliot: Axel’s Castle, A Study of The Imaginative Literature of 1870–1930* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2004), p. 92.

Terry Eagleton describes Eliot's critical revolution as a 'wholesale demolition and salvage job which it was Eliot's historical task to carry out'.¹⁸ The revolution, inaugurated in the essays assembled in *The Sacred Wood* (1919), renewed and extended Arnold's critique of the Romantics. Johnson was to prove useful in this battle. Eliot's Romantic animus went further than Arnold's. Eliot argued for a doctrine of 'impersonality' against the Romantic deification of self. The establishment of the poetic work as self-sufficient, organic and impersonal was a rejection of the Romantic idea of poetry as the expression of spontaneous feelings. Eliot's aesthetic drew in part upon classicism and Johnson, steeped in classical culture, was to prove helpful to Eliot in this respect.¹⁹

Eliot drew upon Johnson at stages when he was advancing his poetic most vigorously. The earliest reference to Johnson's criticism is in 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921) which introduced the notion of the 'dissociation of sensibility' and argued both for a reevaluation of the metaphysical poets and for the necessity, in modern times, of a more allusive, 'difficult' poetry.²⁰ Johnson is at the core of the essay, both as the putative originator of the term, 'metaphysical poets', but also as one of that movement's fiercest critics. Eliot, unlike Hazlitt, enlists and redirects Johnson's critical energies rather than confronting them. Eliot generally respected Johnson's judgements, but here he subtly trains Johnson's fire back on himself. Johnson's distaste for the metaphysical poets' practice of yoking 'the most heterogeneous ideas [...] by violence together' is cited as a technique used by Johnson himself in the lines from *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749): 'His fate was destined to a barren strand/A petty

¹⁸ Terry Eagleton, 'Ideology and Literary Form: T. S. Eliot', in *T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Harriet Davidson (London and New York: Longman, 1999), pp. 111–116 (p. 112).

¹⁹ Steve Ellis argues in *The English Eliot: Design, language and landscape in Four Quartets* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 141, that 'Augustanism' had even more influence on Auden and MacNiece, than Eliot.

²⁰ T. S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921), in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Kermode, pp. 59–67 (pp. 64–65).

fortress and a dubious hand'.²¹ Eliot regards this 'telescoping of images' as one of the sources of vitality of poetic language. The peculiarities of the metaphysical poets were 'something permanently valuable, which subsequently disappeared, but ought not to have disappeared'.²² Johnson, Eliot opines, hits, perhaps 'by accident', on what was of value in these poets, precisely that 'their attempts were always analytic'.²³ This resulted in a 'direct sensuous apprehension of thought', a quality, according to Eliot, which was then lost, in different ways, in the Augustan and Romantic eras.²⁴ The modern poet is however 'constantly amalgamating disparate experience [...] forming new wholes'.²⁵ Hazlitt used Johnson's views as a stick with which to beat him. Eliot, however, distinguishes between Johnson's judgement and his critical instincts. Eliot considered that Johnson's identification of the metaphysical poets' 'analytic' qualities was a radical discovery. Eliot differed from Hazlitt, believing that the creative mind operates as a filter to bring together varied and unconscious feelings, opening up a separation between judgement and instinct.²⁶ Johnson's insight may, therefore, have been no 'accident' but, rather, may have been prompted by instincts located in 'the cerebral cortex, the nervous system'.²⁷ Eliot considered Johnson's judgement wrong, but his diagnosis of what was distinctive about the metaphysical poets, right. That Johnson used 'telescoped' imagery in his own verse proved to Eliot that Johnson's creative instincts were capable of trumping his judgement.

Eliot's next major engagement with Johnson was in the 1940s when Eliot was moving into a new critical phase. The two essays, 'Johnson as Critic and Poet' (1944) and 'Milton II'

²¹ Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', pp. 60–61.

²² Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', p. 63.

²³ Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', p. 63.

²⁴ Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', p. 63.

²⁵ Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', p. 64.

²⁶ Eliot, 'Tradition and Individual Talent', p. 41.

²⁷ Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', p. 66.

(1947) are considered here. Taking the latter first, Eliot had grappled with Milton since the 1930s, and Johnson's views usefully chimed with his own. Eliot's first essay on Milton 'Milton I' (1936) does not mention Johnson.²⁸ Subsequently, Eliot compiled two pages of notes on Milton for a lecture in 1944, the second page consisting entirely of quotations from Johnson's 'Milton'.²⁹ The notes stand as an intermediary text between 'Milton I' and 'Milton II' (1947). The later essay maps out new ground by focusing on two themes: the importance of speech in poetry and a re-evaluation of the notion of the 'dissociation of sensibility'. The human voice was at the centre of Eliot's poetic although, early on, his own voice had a decidedly American twang. Eliot's shock at hearing his 'drawl' against the 'standard syllables of an academic language' was 'a paradigmatically modern experience' according to Michael North.³⁰ Eliot did not seem at home initially in any one language, writing much of his early poetry in French. Whereas Johnson wielded the King's English confidently, the babel of voices and languages which emerged in *The Waste Land* (1922) resisted any linguistic centre. Eliot later moved beyond this linguistic rootlessness, particularly following his assumption of British citizenship in 1927. He saw speech as being at the heart of great poetry, as it was rooted in place, an argument pursued most vigorously in Eliot's writing on Milton. Romantics rejected Johnson's criticisms of Milton but Eliot wholeheartedly endorsed his view that Milton's language was too remote from speech. Eliot wrote in 'The Music of Poetry' (1942) that:

²⁸ 'Milton I' and 'Milton II' were the essay titles adopted in T. S. Eliot, 'Johnson as Critic and Poet', in *On Poetry and Poets* [1957] (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2009). The former was previously published separately in 1936 as 'A note on the verse of Milton', in *Essays and Studies of the English Association* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936). The latter was first delivered as a lecture, 'Milton: Annual Lecture on a Master Mind', Henriette Hertz Trust of the British Academy, 1947.

²⁹ T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, ed. by David E. Chinitz, Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2017), pp. 543–46.

³⁰ Michael North, 'The Dialect in/of Modernism: Pound and Eliot's Racial Masquerade', in *T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Davidson, pp. 136–55 (p. 139).

every revolution in poetry is apt to be, and sometimes announce itself to be a return to common speech. That is the revolution that Wordsworth announced in his prefaces [...] the same revolution had been carried out a century before by Oldham, Waller, Denham and Dryden.³¹

The return to speech represented a recuperation of a language embedded in people, place and corporality. Eliot observed that Milton's masters were not English but Latin and, to a lesser degree, Greek: 'this [...] is only saying what Johnson, and in turn Landor said, when they complained of Milton's style not being quite English'.³² Hazlitt charged Johnson with being deaf to Milton's tunefulness but Eliot in 'Milton II' (1947) argues that, rather, he had 'a specialized ear, for verbal music'.³³ Eliot also notes that, 'the essence of the permanent censure of Milton is to be found in Johnson's essay'.³⁴ He quotes three paragraphs from the 'essay' in full, whose essence, in Johnson's words, is that, 'both in prose and verse, [Milton] had formed his style by a perverse and pedantic principle. He was desirous to use English with a foreign idiom [...] what Butler called a *Babylonish* dialect'.³⁵ Remote from speech, Eliot saw the language of *Paradise Lost* (1667) as a dead-end, like *Finnegans Wake* (1939), both being 'inimitable' works which fractured the connection between voice, intellect and feeling.³⁶

Eliot also makes a larger point in 'Milton II', revisiting his argument in 'The Metaphysical Poets', that a 'dissociation of sensibility' had set in from the seventeenth century from 'which we have never recovered', principally due to the influence of Milton and Dryden.³⁷ In

³¹ T. S. Eliot, 'The Music of Poetry' (1942) in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Kermode, pp. 107–11 (p. 111).

³² T. S. Eliot, 'What Is A Classic?' (1944), in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Kermode, pp. 115–31 (p. 120).

³³ T. S. Eliot, 'Milton II' in *On Poetry and Poets*, pp. 165–83 (p. 180).

³⁴ Eliot, 'Milton II', p. 174.

³⁵ Eliot, 'Milton II', p. 175.

³⁶ T. S. Eliot, 'Milton I' in *On Poetry and Poets*, pp. 156–64 (p. 161).

³⁷ Eliot, 'Milton II', p. 173.

‘Milton II’ Eliot argues that its causes are ‘too complex and too profound’ to be explained by changes in literary taste but are, rather, ‘a consequence of the same causes which brought about the Civil War’.³⁸ Following Eliot’s conversion to the Anglican faith in 1927, the ‘dissociation of sensibility’ had acquired a distinctly ideological character. The paragraph immediately following Eliot’s analysis introduces Johnson’s critique of Milton, which appears to be no coincidence. Although acknowledging Milton’s greatness, the embroiling energy which animates Johnson’s essay is a distaste for Milton’s republicanism which Eliot associated with the Civil War. Romantic progressives admired Milton’s radicalism but Johnson, before them, and Eliot after, saw the Civil War as a catastrophe. Eliot considered society had been fractured by it, resulting in a separation of thought and feeling. Civil War was very real for both: Johnson’s father was born during the closing years of the Interregnum; while the American Civil War was recent history for Eliot, born in 1888, which may have informed his judgement on the English Civil War in ‘Milton II’:

The fact is simply that the Civil War of the seventeenth century, in which Milton is a symbolic figure, has never been concluded. The Civil War is not ended: I question whether any serious civil war does end [...] Reading Johnson’s essay one is always aware that Johnson was obstinately and passionately of another party.³⁹

Eliot noted that he ‘shared Johnson’s antipathy towards Milton the Man’.⁴⁰ In particular, both abhorred Milton’s republicanism. Johnson thought that it was founded upon ‘a sullen desire of independence.’⁴¹ Milton, he asserted, ‘hated monarchs in the state, and prelates in the church, for he hated all of whom he was required to obey’.⁴² The puritan emphasis on

³⁸ Eliot, ‘Milton II’, p. 173.

³⁹ Eliot, ‘Milton II’, p. 168.

⁴⁰ Eliot, ‘Milton II’, p.168.

⁴¹ Samuel Johnson, ‘Milton’, in *The Lives of The English Poets*, ed. by John H. Middelndorf, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019) XXI, (2010) p. 171.

⁴² Johnson, ‘Milton’, in *The Lives of The English Poets*, XXI, p. 171.

unmediated autonomy was anathema to both Eliot and Johnson for whom religion and politics involved the acceptance of external authority. Eliot's notes for the 1944 lecture state that Milton is a 'Symbol'; in particular, 'What is important is his egotism'.⁴³ Like Johnson, Eliot opposed what he termed 'whiggery', which he associated with the sceptical liberalism of the Bloomsbury circle.⁴⁴ He believed, as Colin MacCabe has noted, that the Civil War eradicated the *via media*, which had navigated a compromise between a national Church in a national language and a Catholic theology.⁴⁵ For Johnson, the conflict represented a formless anarchy 'when subordination was broken, and awe was hissed away'.⁴⁶ The studied ferocity of Johnson's language was surely not overlooked by Eliot. Eliot's essay was planned in wartime. *Little Gidding* (1942), also written during the war, rehearsed 'Milton II's' concerns, evoking an Anglican monastic community scattered during the Civil War. The desecration of the community, which united Anglicanism and medieval Catholicism, symbolised the Civil War's destructive energies. *Little Gidding* emphasised the fragility of religious and monarchical values at a time when war seemed to threaten those values anew. Milton's language and politics broke the connection with place, shared culture and orality. Johnson seemed to be the catalyst, as he was in 'The Metaphysical Poets', bringing together these floating themes in Eliot's mind. Johnson possessed a stubborn authenticity which Eliot found sympathetic and which helped him define his critical ground.

Johnson accordingly provided a means for Eliot to advance his critical work, but his only dedicated consideration of Johnson's criticism and writing in its own right was his essay

⁴³ T. S. Eliot, 'Notes for a lecture on John Milton', pp. 543–46.

⁴⁴ See John Xiros Cooper, 'Reading the Seduction Fragment', in *T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Davidson, pp. 117–35 (p. 130).

⁴⁵ Colin MacCabe, *T. S. Eliot* (Tavistock: Northcote, British Council, 2006), pp. 46–47.

⁴⁶ Samuel Johnson, 'Butler', in *The Lives of The English Poets*, XXI, p. 222.

‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’ (1944). Examining Johnson’s criticism, Eliot recognises both Johnson’s strangeness and his enduring value. Johnson resists the modern reader, requiring ‘a vigorous effort of imagination to understand’.⁴⁷ Eliot re-positions Johnson’s critical idiom by showing how it was informed by the type of poetry that he wrote. Eliot re-presents the aspects of Johnson’s oeuvre which seem most alien, by contextualising them within an eighteenth-century cultural landscape which, with all its limitations, also offered an astringent challenge to the modern ‘varieties of chaos’.⁴⁸

Eliot argues that Johnson was modern in his own time, for instance, preferring English and French theatre to Greek, but he is frank about Johnson’s limitations.⁴⁹ Eliot adopts a historicist approach suggesting that, unlike the modern age, the eighteenth century was an ‘age of relative unity and of generally accepted assumptions’.⁵⁰ Johnson employed terms such as ‘edification’ and ‘poetic diction’ because they had common acceptance, whereas in the modern era, ‘no two writers need agree about anything’.⁵¹ Johnson’s age lacked ‘the historical sense, which was not yet due to appear’.⁵² Had it shared Eliot’s understanding of Donne, there would have been ‘chaos’ and ‘no eighteenth century as we know it’.⁵³ Eliot recognised that the rules of cultural discourse prescribe the modes of artistic creation, making other types of writing unthinkable. Johnson therefore had a ‘specialised’ sensibility, and his deafness to some poetry was necessary to enable him to appreciate other verse forms: ‘Within his range, within his time, Johnson had as fine an ear as anybody’.⁵⁴ The idea of a

⁴⁷ T. S. Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, in *On Poetry and Poets*, pp. 184–222 (p. 187).

⁴⁸ Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, p. 222.

⁴⁹ Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, p. 201.

⁵⁰ Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, p. 212.

⁵¹ Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, p. 212.

⁵² Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, p. 192. Johnson’s admiration for Shakespeare and Milton may however be seen as a challenge to Eliot’s view.

⁵³ Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, p. 192.

⁵⁴ Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, p. 192.

critical weakness also being a strength was a product of Modernist relativism. But it also provided an illustration of Modernism's repudiation of itself. Modernism was individualist and anti-traditional, as Michael Levenson argues, before it became anti-individualist and traditional.⁵⁵ The rehabilitation of eighteenth-century criteria of 'competence' and 'correctness' is contrasted with Modernism's seduction by 'the music of the exhilaratingly meaningless'.⁵⁶ As David Perkins argues, the Modernist praise of the Augustans, which was usually accompanied by an attack on Romanticism, was 'presented as a possible deliverance from error, yet a deliverance that only the strong-minded can receive.'⁵⁷ Eliot also endorsed Johnson's criticisms of the blank verse form, arguing that in the nineteenth century it produced results as stultifying as the poorest verse in rhyming couplets. Johnson is appropriated to support Eliot's wider attack on nineteenth-century vapidness and loquaciousness.

Other aspects of Johnson's critical arsenal are re-contextualised and re-appropriated to suit Eliot's purposes. The Romantics saw concepts such as 'edification' and 'poetic diction' as the insignia of a rigid moralistic age. Eliot re-sets the terms, illustrating Menand's insight that Eliot's 'best known critical judgements were arrived at by giving a traditional aesthetic vocabulary untraditional jobs to do'.⁵⁸ 'Edification' accordingly implies only that some form of 'benefit' may be derived from poetry. The Arnoldian view of poetry as a criticism of life and Victorian aestheticism are paradoxically seen as variants of the same impulse; the only disagreement being 'the kind of content which we consider edifying'.⁵⁹ Eliot elsewhere

⁵⁵ Michael H. Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 79.

⁵⁶ Eliot, 'Johnson as Critic and Poet', p. 193.

⁵⁷ David Perkins, 'Johnson and Modern Poetry', *Harvard Literary Bulletin* 33.3 (Summer 1985), 303–12 (p. 308).

⁵⁸ Louis Menand, *Discovering Modernism: T. S. Eliot and His Context*, 2nd edn (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 134.

⁵⁹ Eliot, 'Johnson as Critic and Poet', p. 211.

argued that literature ‘affects our moral and religious existence’.⁶⁰ But as James Ley has suggested, Eliot frequently shifted his position and disowned previous judgements.⁶¹ That morality or ‘edification’ might simply be a sort of empty envelope into which ‘content’ is inserted, derived from Eliot’s writerly sophistication, a capability he detected in Johnson who, he argued, did not confuse ‘what an author is saying, with his judgement about the way in which he said it’.⁶² This was a subtlety that Hazlitt did not recognise, enabling Eliot to argue that Johnson wrote a ‘purely literary criticism’.⁶³ Johnson, moreover, according to Eliot, never overpraised a poem ‘of its teaching a pure morality’; it had to yield above all ‘immediate pleasure’.⁶⁴

Eliot similarly translates ‘poetic diction’ as ‘an idiom and a choice of words’.⁶⁵ Redefined in this way, every literary period has its own poetic idiolect. The modern era prized originality above all. Johnson, by contrast, often found originality in the commonplace rather than the novel thought, seeing originality as ‘a mode of thinking and expression’.⁶⁶ Eliot argues that Johnson’s notion of originality was valid but was ‘limited by the other qualities he demands’.⁶⁷ Eliot also notes that the Modern age has no poetic standards akin to Johnson’s, because, unlike the eighteenth century, it lacked a common culture. Johnson practiced a ‘purely literary’ criticism precisely because the intellectual context was taken for granted. Coleridge, by contrast, merges criticism ‘into philosophy and a theory of aesthetics’ and

⁶⁰ T. S. Eliot, ‘Religion and Literature’ (1935), in *T. S. Eliot, Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), pp. 388–401 (p. 396).

⁶¹ James Ley, *The Critic in the Modern World: Public Criticism from Samuel Johnson to James Wood* (New York, London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 100–01.

⁶² Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, p. 215.

⁶³ Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, p. 212.

⁶⁴ Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, p. 210.

⁶⁵ Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, p. 212.

⁶⁶ Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, p. 209.

⁶⁷ Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, p. 209.

Arnold incorporates ‘ethics and propaedeutics’.⁶⁸ Johnson is reframed to show how he is radically different. He is not elevated ‘to a pinnacle’ but re-articulated the better to define ‘what we are’.⁶⁹ Johnson’s otherness is, accordingly, both recognised and re-assimilated as a tool to attack modernist ‘incoherence.’

Johnson: poetry and sensibility

Eliot admired Johnson’s poetry, particularly *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. Its tone of elegiac resignation remained a touchstone for Eliot throughout his career. The four lines, commencing ‘His fall was destin’d to a barren stand [...]’, first cited in ‘The Metaphysical Poets’, were clearly important as they reappeared in the ‘Introductory Essay’ to a 1930 edition of *London: A Poem* (1738) and *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. Rereading the lines, confirmed Eliot in the very positive ‘impression which the four lines had made on me long before’.⁷⁰ The ‘Introductory Essay’ observes that the first two lines, ‘with their just inevitable sequence of *barren*, *petty* and *dubious*, still seem to me to be amongst the finest ever written in that particular idiom’.⁷¹ Romantic readers were generally deaf to such music but Eliot relished the bracing formality of Johnson’s language. Eliot, a satirist himself, enjoyed Johnson’s range of language and feeling, particularly its classical austerity. Goldsmith and Johnson, ‘used the form of Pope beautifully, without ever being mere imitators, [...] to be original with the *minimum* of alteration is sometimes more distinguished than to be original with the *maximum* of alteration’.⁷² Eliot’s comment echoed his critique of

⁶⁸ Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, p. 220.

⁶⁹ Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, p. 221.

⁷⁰ T. S. Eliot, ‘Poetry in the Eighteenth Century’, in *From Dryden to Johnson*, ed. by Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), pp. 271–77 (p. 271).

⁷¹ Eliot, ‘Poetry in the Eighteenth Century’, p. 271.

⁷² Eliot, ‘Poetry in the Eighteenth Century’, p. 272.

Romantic concepts of originality. Johnson himself accepted that literature inevitably echoed the already-written. But Johnson's verse nonetheless had 'a wholly personal stamp'.⁷³ Eliot admires the 'precision' of Johnson's verse and its 'minimal quality'; the way that it 'hits the bull's eye every time.' Johnson is seen as 'the most alien figure' in this 'rural, pastoral meditative age'.⁷⁴ His traditionalist and uncompromisingly urban view of the world was the antithesis of eighteenth-century pastoralism. A 'student of mankind not of natural history', Johnson represented a grown-up reasonableness which Eliot memorably contrasts with both Romantic expressiveness and the modern 'psychological' idiom.⁷⁵

Those who demand of poetry a day dream, or a metamorphosis of their own feeble desires and lusts, or what they believe to be 'intensity' of passion, will not find much in Johnson. He is [...] a poet for those who want poetry and not something else [...] But if lines 189–220 of the *Vanity of Human Wishes* is not poetry, I do not know what is.⁷⁶

Eliot's disavowal of personality now appears overdetermined, as Maud Ellmann suggests, both an ideological response to Romantic individualism but also to the rise of prying forms of popular psychology.⁷⁷ Eliot, however, considered that Johnson wrote with a stoic precision which focused the reader's attention on the art of the writing itself, rather than being seen merely as a vehicle for the exhibitionist expression of self in the Romantic or modern vein.

Eliot revisited Johnson's poetry in his literary criticism of the 1940s. In 'What is Minor Poetry?' (1944), Eliot regards 'Samuel Johnson as a major poet by the single testimony of

⁷³ Eliot, 'Poetry in the Eighteenth Century', p. 275.

⁷⁴ Eliot, 'Poetry in the Eighteenth Century', p. 275.

⁷⁵ Eliot, 'Poetry in the Eighteenth Century', p. 275.

⁷⁶ Eliot, 'Poetry in the Eighteenth Century', p. 276.

⁷⁷ See in particular, Maud Ellmann, *The Poetics of Impersonality: T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1987), pp. 4–5.

The Vanity of Human Wishes'.⁷⁸ Returning to 'Johnson as Critic and Poet', Eliot admires, as he did in the 'Introductory Essay', the 'peculiar force' of Johnson's poetry, the 'way that every word and epithet goes straight to the mark'.⁷⁹ The language of later poetry operated by association and suggestiveness whereas Johnson's poetry possessed a performative directness which compressed world and language in forceful embrace. Johnson at his best had a poetic 'eloquence', which Eliot describes as, 'that which can stir the emotions of the intelligent and judicious'.⁸⁰ Eliot characterises eloquence as a virtue that appeals and is understood by an audience, rather than a single reader; it engages the public space like oratory but seeks to be wisely expressive rather than inciting the 'more inflammable passions'.⁸¹

Eliot focuses principally on *London* (1738) and *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. Johnson is seen as a 'meditative poet' rather than as a genuine satirist: *London*, for instance, displaying only a 'feigned indignation'.⁸² For Dryden and Pope, 'the object satirized' is transformed through virtuosic spleen into 'something beautiful and strange', echoing *The Tempest* (1611).⁸³ *London*, however, is full of vapid generalisations because Johnson's indictment of a whole city lacks satiric conviction. By contrast, Johnson 'found the perfect theme for his abilities' in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*.⁸⁴ Great poetry of this type is rare according to Eliot. It is a 'meditative' poem of 'loose construction', which, in contrast to *London*, does not confine itself to the 'general', but instances vivid examples to support the theme: the finest, according to Eliot, being the description of the demise of Charles of Sweden which is

⁷⁸ T. S. Eliot, 'What is Minor Poetry?', in *On Poetry and Poets*, pp. 34–51 (p.44).

⁷⁹ Eliot, 'Johnson as Critic and Poet', p. 217.

⁸⁰ Eliot, 'Johnson as Critic and Poet', p. 217

⁸¹ Eliot, 'Johnson as Critic and Poet', p. 216

⁸² Eliot, 'Johnson as Critic and Poet', p. 205.

⁸³ Eliot, 'Johnson as Critic and Poet', p. 205.

⁸⁴ Eliot, 'Johnson as Critic and Poet', p. 206.

‘quite perfect in form’.⁸⁵ Whilst Johnson lacked ‘the gift of structure’, the ‘meditative’ form employed achieves a structural coherence by generating linked ‘variations on a theme’.⁸⁶ The poem’s recurring elegiac note provides the piece’s underlying unity.

Johnson was the supreme laureate of disappointed expectations, a strain to which Eliot, like Byron and Scott, responded strongly. The essay also praises Johnson’s elegiac poem on Dr Levet, which ‘does what no one before him could have done and which no successor could emulate’.⁸⁷ It is a poem ‘unique in tenderness, piety and wisdom’.⁸⁸ The *vanitas* theme resonated with Eliot. Peter Ackroyd notes that Eliot recorded a personal anthology of poems for the BBC in November 1948.⁸⁹ The six poems, which included ‘On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet’ (1782), all had an elegiac quality. Eliot, Ackroyd argues, was drawn to such ‘slow mournful music’.⁹⁰ *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, moreover, is cited throughout his essays, because Eliot may have identified with its mood of lofty disenchantment. *The Rock* (1934), Eliot’s pageant play, which satirised the hollowness of modern life, prompted Robert Sencourt, who knew Eliot well, to comment:

The vividness of Eliot’s lines seems like a restatement of Samuel Johnson’s *Vanity of Human Wishes*, with its vigorous satire of London and its insistence on the value of prayer and belief. It was not in Eliot’s nature (any more than in Johnson’s) to lose himself in a sense of glory.⁹¹

Johnson may have provided some tincture in Eliot’s capacious array of influences, as Perkins has also argued.⁹² If so, it is most apparent in the recurrent note of *accidie* evident

⁸⁵ Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, p. 207.

⁸⁶ Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, p. 207.

⁸⁷ Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, p. 204.

⁸⁸ Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, p. 204.

⁸⁹ Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot*, (London: Abacus, 1986), p. 286.

⁹⁰ Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot*, p. 286.

⁹¹ Robert Sencourt, *A Memoir* (London: Garnstone Press, 1971), p. 132.

⁹² David Perkins, ‘Johnson and Modern Poetry’.

throughout his work. Eliot and Johnson both wrote about the wastefulness of lived experience. There are few precise verbal echoes of Johnson, but traces of Johnson's sensibility may be visible in the complaint about 'twenty years largely wasted'.⁹³ His influence may also be present in the lament in 'Burnt Norton' (1936), 'Ridiculous the waste sad time/Stretching before and after'.⁹⁴ Ricks and McCue, moreover, detect several echoes of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* in *Little Gidding* (1942): for instance, 'fools' approval stings', they argue, echoes Johnson's 'Grief aids disease, remember'd folly stings'.⁹⁵ *The Four Quartets* (1943), which shares some of Johnson's regret for time wasted, was written mostly in the early forties as Eliot was starting to turn his attention again to Johnson. The confluence of feeling, if it is such, is rooted in a shared religious sensibility. Both held a bleak view of the satisfactions to be gained from ordinary life. *The Rambler* represents Johnson's life as one 'of wide and continued vacuity'.⁹⁶ *The Waste Land* (1922) exhibits wasted lives and a disgust with ordinary experience.

Later, post-conversion, Eliot saw life as a 'void that I find in the middle of human happiness [...] I am one whom this sense of void tends to drive towards asceticism or sensuality, and only Christianity helps to reconcile me to life, which is otherwise disgusting'.⁹⁷ The post-coital typist in *The Waste Land* who, 'smooths her hair with automatic hand/And puts a record on the gramophone' is evoked with frigid disapprobation.⁹⁸ She is emblematic of what Eliot, in an essay on *Baudelaire* (1930), called the 'cheery automatism of the modern

⁹³ T. S. Eliot, 'East Coker', in *The Annotated Text: The Poems of T. S. Eliot, Volume 1, Collected and Uncollected Poems*, ed. by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), pp. 185–92 (p. 191).

⁹⁴ T. S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', in *The Annotated Text*, ed. by Ricks and McCue, pp. 179–84 (p. 184).

⁹⁵ *The Annotated Text*, ed. by Ricks and McCue, p. 1026.

⁹⁶ Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, ed., by W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), III (1969), p. 41.

⁹⁷ Cited in Denis Donoghue, *Words Alone, The Poet T. S. Eliot* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 272.

⁹⁸ T. S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land', in *The Annotated Text*, ed. by Ricks and McCue, pp. 55–77 (p. 64).

world'.⁹⁹ By contrast, the essay argues that 'damnation itself is an immediate form of salvation - of salvation from the ennui of modern life, because at least it gives some significance to living'.¹⁰⁰ For Johnson, the possibility of damnation also invested each moment with quasi-existential choice and provided a prospect preferable to eternal annihilation as it preserved continuity of consciousness. Johnson believed in original sin, as Eliot did. Eliot rejected, as Beehler argues, modern representations of subjectivity which presented narcissistic images of self-identity.¹⁰¹ Eliot, like Johnson, understood sin as 'the irreducible immanence of otherness in the self' which was utterly opposed to 'Whig' notions of self-autonomy.¹⁰² Subject to doubts about his own salvation, Johnson invested in performative rituals, which included regular church attendance. Eliot also understood the importance of ritual as sense-making. When asked what he believed, Eliot answered that he gave his intellectual assent to the Creed and the faith's other propositions, but the ritual observations of the faith, pre-eminently Church attendance, were probably of greater importance to him.¹⁰³

Johnson was a touchstone throughout Eliot's literary career. He pre-eminently admired Johnson's forceful clarity and acute discrimination which he contrasted with Romantic flabbiness and Modernist incoherence. Johnson's writing had a precision and bite which demanded attention. Eliot came to believe, like Johnson, that culture and language were deeply embedded in a sense of place. In addition, Johnson's views on Milton and the Civil War, which appear to have been linked in Eliot's mind, chimed with Eliot's own. Both

⁹⁹ T. S. Eliot, 'Baudelaire' (1930), in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Kermode, pp. 231–36 (p. 236).

¹⁰⁰ Eliot, 'Baudelaire', p. 235.

¹⁰¹ Michael Beehler, 'Semiotics/Psychoanalysis/Christianity: Eliot's Logic of Alterity', in *T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Davidson, pp. 75–89 (p. 83).

¹⁰² Beehler, 'Semiotics/Psychoanalysis/Christianity', p. 83.

¹⁰³ Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot*, p. 163.

Johnson and Eliot were horrified by what they saw as the breakdown of religious and monarchical values that the Civil War, in particular, precipitated. This unease also extended to the inner world. Eliot responded sympathetically to Johnson's bleak assessment of the satisfactions to be derived from experience. Eliot's 'sense of the void', like Johnson's, moreover, had a religious dimension. Samuel Beckett also sensed the void in Johnson's life and writing, but in his case, it was one entirely untouched by any divine promptings.¹⁰⁴

Samuel Beckett: Johnson and the Void

Johnson and Samuel Beckett may seem strange bedfellows. Yet Beckett was one of Johnson's greatest admirers, telling his first biographer: 'it's Johnson, always Johnson, who is with me'.¹⁰⁵ The largest number of books in Beckett's library, moreover, were devoted to Johnson's works.¹⁰⁶ But it was a darker, stranger Johnson who fascinated Beckett, informed by his familiarity with psychoanalytic thinking. Beckett's creative engagement with Johnson changed over the years, paralleling the way that Beckett's own broader aesthetic was to develop. An early admirer of the encyclopaedic art of James Joyce, Beckett's approach, as his career progressed, moved in the opposite direction. Beckett told Knowlson, that:

I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, in control of one's material. He was always *adding* to it; you have only to look at his proofs to see that. I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge, subtracting rather than adding.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Beckett's early poetry was influenced by Eliot's; for instance, the notes for 'Whoroscope' (1930) imitate 'The Waste Land'. Beckett later turned against Eliot, the distaste being mutual.

¹⁰⁵ Cited in Francis Michael Doherty, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Hutchinson University Press, 1971), p. 88.

¹⁰⁶ Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 32.

¹⁰⁷ *Beckett Remembering, Remembering Beckett: Uncollected Interviews with Samuel Beckett and Memories of Those Who Knew Him*, ed. by James and Elizabeth Knowlson (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 47.

Beckett's writing progressively pared down plot and characterisation until all that was left were bare reverberating voices. I argue that the process of subtraction and abstraction, which Pascale Casanova has identified as key to Beckett's developing *oeuvre*, was also reflected in Beckett's approach to Johnson.¹⁰⁸ The first phase involved the detailed and encyclopaedic note-taking of the 1930s which spawned an unfinished drama where Johnson is relegated to an off-stage presence. Later, Johnson lived on in Beckett's subsequent works in vestigial references to Johnson's eccentric psychology and habits which first appeared in Beckett's notes. First seen in close-up, Johnson's subsequent presence survives in textual traces.

Beckett's interest in Johnson began early. He read Johnson at college in the late 1920s.¹⁰⁹ In July 1935, the twenty-nine-year-old Beckett toured England, visiting Lichfield, but characteristically elected not to sign the visitor's book in the Johnson Birthplace.¹¹⁰ The visit inspired Beckett to consider writing a play about Johnson.¹¹¹ Subsequently, Beckett travelled through Germany in 1936 and 1937 where he continued his literary tourism and made a detailed diary. On returning to Dublin in April 1937, he began a period of intense research into Johnson and his circle at the National Library of Ireland, which involved detailed notetaking, in preparation for the Johnson play. Recent scholars, including Mark Nixon and John Pilling, have emphasised the intimate relationship between Beckett's notetaking practice and his creative instincts.¹¹² Beckett's notetaking began in earnest when working as an assistant to Joyce and continued throughout the thirties. His early works, influenced by

¹⁰⁸ See Pascale Casanova, *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), p. 12.

¹⁰⁹ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing plc, 1996) p. 755, n. 35.

¹¹⁰ The author of this thesis has personally verified Beckett's failure to sign the visitor's book with the assistance of the Curator of the Birthplace Museum in Lichfield.

¹¹¹ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 203.

¹¹² See Van Hulle and Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library and The Ideal Core of the Onion: Reading Beckett Archives*, ed. by John Pilling and Mary Bryden (Reading: Beckett International Foundation, 1992).

Joyce, were densely allusive. Beckett borrowed heavily from his notebooks, even ticking off quotations used in his works.¹¹³ His writing and reading had a close intertextual relationship. Beckett's notebooks illustrated, as Dirk Van Hulle argues, how authors combine, reorganise and add surplus value to extra-textual material.¹¹⁴ Nixon has characterised Beckett's career in the thirties as a struggle with secondary material, and subsequently he would struggle against any form of knowledge whatsoever.¹¹⁵ When he returned to Dublin from Germany in 1937, Beckett was in low spirits, suffering a creative block. His Johnsonian research instigated a change in Beckett's notetaking, as Nixon notes, from recording short quotations to making longer transcriptions from the works being studied.¹¹⁶ The more his invention flagged, it seems, the more extensive his research became: transcription substituted for creation. The mechanical reproduction of particular passages enabled Beckett to hardwire literary texts and assimilate them for later use in a way that the passive act of reading did not. Beckett also valued the mundane materiality of facts. In Germany, he had recorded, for example, prosaic details about painters' dates and schools:

I am not interested in a 'unification' of the historical chaos than I am in the 'clarification' of the individual chaos, and still less in the anthropomorphisation of the inhuman necessities that provoke the chaos. What I want is the straws, flotsam, etc., names, dates, births and deaths, because that is all I can know [...] the background and the causes are an inhuman and incomprehensible machinery [...] Rationalism is the last form of animism. Whereas the pure incoherence of times and men and places is at least amusing.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 106.

¹¹⁴ Dirk Van Hulle, *Textual Awareness, A Genetic Study of Late Manuscripts by Joyce, Proust and Mann* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2004), p. 7.

¹¹⁵ Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries, 1936–1937* (London: Continuum Books, 2011), p. 101.

¹¹⁶ Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries*, p. 105.

¹¹⁷ Cited in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 244, from the unpublished German diaries, Notebook 4, 15 January 1937.

Unlike Joyce, Beckett mistrusted grand narratives. Dates resisted any form of interpretation or systemisation; existing as bare data, puncturing time in their unassailable facticity.

Ensnared in the National Library, Beckett diligently accumulated facts and dates about Johnson, informing McGreevy in April 1937:

I feel now that I shall meet the most of my days from now on here and in tolerable content, not feeling much guilt at making the most of what ease there is to be had and not bothering much about effort [...] Perhaps it is Dr Johnson's dream of happiness, driving rapidly to and from nowhere in a postchaise with a pretty woman.¹¹⁸

Johnson's famous definition of happiness, drawn from Boswell's biography, figured a pattern of motion and stasis, a theme echoed in *The Rambler*, but which also found a place in Beckett's evolving fiction. The only other writer he read with pleasure at this time was Schopenhauer, whose bleak asperities matched his own mood. The research survives in three notebooks held at Reading University, which were read and inspected as part of this project. The material is drawn from a wide variety of sources including: Johnson's own *Diaries*, *Prayers*, *Annals*; Boswell's biography of Johnson and *Private Papers*; *Mrs Piozzi's Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson* (1786); Hawkin's *Life of Samuel Johnson, LLD* (1787); Leslie Stephen's 1878 biography of Johnson; Birkbeck Hill's *Johnsonian Miscellanies* (1897) as well as more contemporary material such as C. E. Vulliamy's *Mrs Thrale of Streatham* (1936). Beckett tidily supplied a 'Bibliography' listing the works that he consulted, evidencing that his scholarly instincts remained intact.

The first notebook, culled from a variety of sources, includes quotations, mainly drawn from Boswell, covering the developing relationship with Mrs Thrale, but also bearing on the

¹¹⁸ *Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929-40*, ed. by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 490.

behavioural peculiarities of Johnson. The second focuses on material pertaining to the character of Johnson, but particularly his declining years and fear of death. The third includes a melange of quotations depicting the characters of Johnson's Bolt Court menagerie (who were to reappear in his aborted playlet *Human Wishes*), but also following the chronology of his declining years using material from Johnson's *Diaries, Prayers, Annals*. The notebooks reflect the shift in Beckett's developing interests; progressing from 'plot-related' material, relating to the Johnson-Thrale relationship, to information associated with the character of Johnson and his obsessions.

My inspection of the material revealed that the notes appear mainly on the recto page leaving space for occasional additional commentary on the verso. Beckett remained obsessed with 'straws [and] flotsam', particularly the dates and ages of people at key junctures, reflecting the burgeoning dramatist's interest in information useful for the plot. Most of the material is not accompanied by any commentary. The detailed transcription of the source texts has an obsessional quality, reminiscent of Birkbeck Hill. In a letter of July 1937, Beckett referred to his unceasing 'efforts to document my Johnson fantasy'.¹¹⁹ 'Documentation' suggested a historian or lawyer's assiduous efforts to evidence a particular reality. This was precisely the case. Beckett's notes constituted a 'cut-up' of the textual world to support an evolving thesis radically at odds with conventional Johnsonian scholarship. Beckett was not interested in traditional conceptions of Johnson:

There won't be anything snappy or wisecracky about the Johnson play if it is ever written. It isn't Boswell's wit and wisdom machine that means anything to me, *but the miseries he never talked of* [my italics], being unwilling or unable to do so. The horror of annihilation, the horror of madness, the horrified love of Mrs Thrale, the whole mental monster ridden swamp that after hours of silence could only give some ghastly bubble like 'Lord have mercy upon us.' The background of the Prayers and Meditations. The opium-eating, dreading-to-go to bed, praying-for-the-dead, past

¹¹⁹ *Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929-40*, p. 522.

living, terrified of dying, terrified of deadness, panting on to 75 bag of water, with a hydracele [sic] on his right testis. How jolly.¹²⁰

Beckett's Johnson is, in part, a version of himself. Beckett's obsession with death was territory that Johnson had already inhabited. Beckett was less interested in Johnson's talk than the things that he did not talk about: his relationships and the anguish which Johnson had hidden from view in his unpublished diaries. This was a modern Johnson: a tortured figure, who harboured adulterous feelings for Mrs Thrale, skirted madness, took opium and feared death.

The notebooks show Beckett's interest in the Thrale relationship being gradually supplanted by a focus on Johnson's last days and his darker imaginings. A list of dates on the last page of the third notebook sketch out an outline for a four-act play tracing the arc of the relationship from the death of Mr Thrale in 1781, to the appearance of Mr Piozzi and the final years of Johnson in Bolt Court. Beckett's sense of the relationship is summarised in Notebook 1:

Brief Johnson in love (whether he knew it or not) with Hester Thrale./His morality the typical bulwark of neurosis. Could not admit a situation (i.e. love for Mrs T). that would have exiled him from Streatham./ Rationalises his dependence on Mrs T./Mrs T in love with no one.¹²¹

Beckett's fascination with the relationship stemmed from his inability to understand what Johnson saw in Mrs Thrale, or she in him. Beckett explained in a letter of 1936, prior to his Dublin return, 'What interested me especially was the breakdown of Johnson as soon as

¹²⁰ Letter to Mary Manning, 11 July 1937, held in Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas, cited in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 270.

¹²¹ University of Reading, Special Collections (hereafter SC), MS 3461/1, p. 110 (The pages are not numbered in the original manuscript notebook. The pages have, therefore, been counted manually starting with the first page, but excluding notes on front inside cover).

Thrale disappeared.¹²² Beckett speculated that Johnson's abuse of Mr Piozzi was a subterfuge, intended to divert attention from Johnson's impotence.¹²³ A 'Platonic gigolo', Johnson's bluff is called when Mr Thrale dies.¹²⁴ He proceeds in the same letter:

Think of a film opening with Johnson dancing home to his den in Fleet Street after the last visit to Mrs Thrale, forgetting a lamppost and hurrying back. Can't think why there hasn't been a film of Johnson with Laughton. But I think one act, with something like the psychology above, in an outburst to Mrs Thrale, or in his house in confidence to the mysterious servant, would be worth doing. There are 50 plays in his life.¹²⁵

Beckett saw the drama at this early stage in terms of the new cinematic medium. Charles Laughton had played monsters and misfits, and his large clumsy physique resembled Johnson's. Even early on, Beckett's interest evidently wavered between the dramatic potential of the Thrale relationship and the stronger fascination with Johnson's strange but compelling mental landscape, reflected in the obsessive need to revisit the lamppost. As Beckett's notetaking progressed, his interest switched from emotional entanglements to Johnson's inner life. The basis for his proposed drama foundered: without a relationship there was no plot. Beckett had not at this stage found a way of dramatising the motions of consciousness.

Beckett's research, therefore, did not yield much. He managed a scene of around twelve pages, *Human Wishes*, written perhaps as late as 1940. The title referenced Johnson's most famous poem, demonstrating that Eliot was not its only admirer. The drama is a curate's egg. Like 'Godot', the hero Johnson does not feature, nor does Mrs Thrale. Instead, the playlet

¹²² *Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929–40*, p. 396.

¹²³ Thomas M. Curley argues that Beckett got the impotence theory from Colwyn E. Vulliamy's 'over-heated text', *Mrs Thrale of Streatham* (1936), in Thomas M. Curley, 'Samuel Beckett and Samuel Johnson', in *Samuel Johnson Among The Modernists*, ed. by Anthony W. Lee, pp. 133–63, (p. 142).

¹²⁴ *Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929–40*, p. 397.

¹²⁵ *Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929–40*, p. 397.

depicts the meandering conversing of the residents of Bolt Court. Unlike Chesterton's play, *The Judgement of Dr Johnson* (1927), which focused on the coffee-houses and the *beau monde*, Beckett's lens is focused on the margins of society. It is set in Bolt Court on 14 April 1781. Johnson had three years left to live and had surrounded himself with a quarrelsome cast of waifs and strays. The scene features four of the residents. They recycle Johnson's own sayings, accordingly Mrs Demoulins opines that 'Hodge is a very fine cat, a very fine cat indeed'.¹²⁶

The dialogue has some of the scurrilous roughness characteristic of Beckett's later work; Mrs Williams remarks sharply, 'And while I continue to live, or continue to respire, I hope I never shall submit to be insulted by sluts, slovens, upstarts, parasites and intruders'.¹²⁷ The language also includes the erudite and unusual locutions, typical of the mature Beckett. Mrs William intones that 'I may be dying of a pituitous influxion, but my hearing is unimpaired'.¹²⁸ The rough conversational give-and-take prefigures the comic bickerings of Vladimir and Estragon. Miss Carmichael, for instance, accuses her neighbor of being an 'unsupportable hag'.¹²⁹ Their exchanges parody the witty repartee of the elegant grandees recorded in Boswell, by taking them down a register:

Mrs D Of whom you are the relict, Miss Carmichael, or of how many, I prefer not to enquire

Mrs W Were I not loath, Madam, to abase myself to your syntax, I could add: or of whom the daughter, or of how many

Miss C (laughs heartily, sits down and resumes her book)

Mrs W Is the jest yours, Madam, or is it mine?

Mrs D To be called a loose woman would not move me to mirth, for my part, I believe (Sits down).¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Samuel Beckett, 'Human Wishes', in *Disjecta, Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, p. 155.

¹²⁷ Beckett, 'Human Wishes', p. 156.

¹²⁸ Beckett, 'Human Wishes', p. 156.

¹²⁹ Beckett, 'Human Wishes', p. 156.

¹³⁰ Beckett, 'Human Wishes', p. 157.

The dialogue includes the signature Beckett practice of nagging away at a phrase and the slapstick elements which feature so prominently in 'Godot'. The entrance of the drunken Levett results in meta-fictional commentary in sharp exchanges, redolent of the later style:

Mrs W Words fail us
Mrs D Now this is where a writer for the stage would have us speak no doubt
Mrs W He would have us explain Levett
Mrs D To the public
Mrs W The ignorant public
Mrs D To the gallery
Mrs W To the pit.¹³¹

Again, the world of 'Godot' is presciently evoked in the hypnotic staccato exchanges and the defamiliarising of the play form by referencing the dramas's fictionality. The audience is to be provoked rather than entertained and mocked for its insatiable demand for the home comforts of plot, form and simple characterisation.

The scene's last few pages are death-obsessed. Mrs Williams recalls persons that she had known, now dead. Miss Carmichael reads from a favourite text of Johnson's, Jeremy Taylor's *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Dying* (1650):

Miss C 'Death meets us everywhere, and is procured by every instrument and in all chances, and enters in at many doors, by violence-'
Mrs W What twaddle is this Miss Carmichael?.¹³²

Beckett had come across Taylor in his research in the National Library of Ireland. Taylor fed Johnson's focus on final things. Whilst Taylor pointed to the possibility of redemption, here the Taylor citation points to the total permeation of life by death but also itself becomes a subject of mockery. The citation tells how death can enter 'at many doors' and lists the

¹³¹ Beckett, 'Human Wishes', pp. 160–01. (Beckett misspells Robert Levet's surname as 'Levett'.)

¹³² Beckett, 'Human Wishes', p. 165.

various means of entry from ‘heat’ or ‘cold’ through to ‘a hair or raisin’.¹³³ The citation is mocked by Mrs Williams:

Mrs W A hair or a raisin?

Mrs C Yes Madam, a hair or raisin.

Mrs W How do you suppose that death enters in by a hair, Miss Carmichael?

Mrs C Perhaps a horse hair is meant, Madam.

Mrs W Perhaps so indeed. I know if death would be content to enter into me by a horse hair, or by any other manner of hair for that matter, I should be very obliged to him.¹³⁴

The dialogue inverts Taylor’s homiletic conceit by reducing it to bathos, multiplying the origins of mortality to causes of extreme banality; which in turn displaces the place of death in the hierarchy of human values to just another random occurrence, conflating the categories of thought which would otherwise separate off horse hairs and thoughts of final things. The stultifying world of Bolt Court has ossified to such an extent that extinction is represented as a welcome diversion from the relentless circularity of the residents’ dialogue.

The playlet offers a glimpse of what might have been. The notebooks show Beckett trying to accommodate an emerging vision within a dramatic *oeuvre* he had not yet mastered. A play dealing with the Thrale relationship was the stuff of traditional drama. Looking back, in a letter to Ruby Cohn, on 21 November 1972, Beckett recalled that he originally ‘had in mind 4 acts’, the play opening with Johnson on the way home from Mr Thrale’s death bed.¹³⁵ Johnson was to appear towards the end of Act 1. That Beckett ended up writing a scene where Johnson does not appear, which he then abandoned, demonstrated that he could not yet bring his subject matter and dramatic approach into focus. Johnson evidently defied

¹³³ Beckett, ‘Human Wishes’, pp. 165–66.

¹³⁴ Beckett, ‘Human Wishes’, p. 165.

¹³⁵ *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1966–1989*, ed. by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 490.

representation. Beckett, however, had hit upon a style of dramatic writing, deliberately anti-theatrical in approach, which he was to work with for the rest of his career. Beckett's vision of the declining Johnson never found dramatic form but if it had, it might have depicted a solitary figure in the vein of *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), as Thomas M. Curley also argues.¹³⁶ Indeed, Frederik Smith contends that this vision inspired the brooding characters of Beckett's later writings.¹³⁷

However, Johnson's influence survived in other ways. The notebooks, in particular, spawned a further creative afterlife, which is explored here thematically rather than in the order that Beckett composed his works. Beckett made extensive use of his reading from the 1930s, in general, in his later fiction, although less explicitly so than in his early novels. The very act of writing is inscribed at the heart of Beckett's notebooks. The physical transcription of texts by and about Johnson, engaged with Beckett's interest in how the act of writing itself figured and deformed reality. Lifting material from Johnson's diaries, in particular, was a repetition in a double sense, firstly in a purely mechanical way, and secondly as a way of re-inscribing Johnson, compiling fragments of Johnsonian discourse to create a new textual world. The physical act of writing involved a mediation between world, notebook and fictive artifact. As Chapter 1 discussed, Johnson's own diaries were recorded on scraps of paper sewn together or on old almanacs. The leakage of self into these private textual scraps fascinated Beckett, symbolising the act of writing itself. *Molloy* (1955), the first of Beckett's Trilogy, enacts this process at book length, conflating existence and writing, 'Oh, it's only a diary, it'll soon be over', Molloy fatefully reflects.¹³⁸ The link between fiction and notebook is made explicit in *Malone Dies* (1956), 'of all I ever had in this world all has been taken from me, except the

¹³⁶ See Curley, 'Samuel Beckett and Samuel Johnson', p. 162.

¹³⁷ Frederik N. Smith, *Beckett's Eighteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 100–31.

¹³⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, in *The Beckett Trilogy* (London: Picador, 1979), p. 58.

exercise book, so I cherish it, it's human.'¹³⁹ The act of writing mimics the engagement with the exercise book. Both are figures of a process of unfolding consciousness, which itself is seen as a form of fiction and a lie.

His Johnsonian research took Beckett in a number of directions. Beckett focused increasingly on Johnson's psychology. The research itself represented a working through to this realisation, but it had not yet been assimilated so that Beckett could process the information artistically. This came later as the themes which came to obsess Beckett emerged through a process of distillation in his later fiction. Beckett's preoccupations reflected a knowledge of psychoanalysis. Two years before Beckett began his Johnsonian researches, he had been treated during 1934–35 by the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion at the Tavistock Clinic in London, where an eclectic approach was encouraged, drawing upon Freud, Jung and Adler.¹⁴⁰ Beckett explored his past with Bion and his troubled relationship with his mother. During his treatment, Beckett read widely in psychoanalytic literature and made extensive notes on Freud, Adler and others.¹⁴¹ Of relevance to his interest in Johnson, Beckett typed out the characteristics of neurotic behaviour from 'a commentary of Freud [...] entitled the "Treatment of the Neuroses"'.¹⁴² Beckett learnt that individuals' personalities were influenced by circumstances, in their life and past, not available to the

¹³⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*, in *The Beckett Trilogy*, p. 248.

¹⁴⁰ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 176.

¹⁴¹ The psychoanalytic books studied by Beckett are listed in Reza Habibi, *A Genetic Study of Samuel Beckett's Creative Use of His 'Psychology Notes' in The Unnamable* (unpublished master's thesis, University of Bergen, May 2015), p. 7. These include Karin Stephen's *Psychoanalysis and Medicine: The Wish to Fall Ill* (1933), R. S. Woodworth's *Contemporary Schools of Psychology* (1948), Alfred Adler's *Individual Psychology* (1925) and *The Neurotic Constitution: Outlines of a Comparative Individualistic Psychology and Psychotherapy* (1921), Ernest Jones's *Papers on Psycho-Analysis* (1913) and *Treatment of the Neuroses*, Sigmund Freud's *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1933), Wilhelm Stekel's *Psychoanalysis and Suggestion Therapy* (1923), and Otto Rank's *The Trauma of Birth* (1924).

¹⁴² Cited in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 178.

conscious mind. In particular, neurotic and obsessive-compulsive behaviours resulted in individuals adopting rituals intended to alleviate deep-rooted anxieties.

Beckett, in compiling his notebooks, therefore, focused on Johnson's peculiarities which he understood as psychological symptoms. They were, in effect, case-studies. Beckett was fascinated by a number of themes: Johnson's aberrant psychology, his suffering, his obsession with numbers, his grotesque body and physical peculiarities, and fear of madness and death. Johnson's aberrations are figured by Beckett as the neurotic symptoms of a divided consciousness. It is unclear whether Johnson was aware of the contradiction between his rational nature and his sometimes bizarre behaviour. Beckett, however, clearly was and transcribed extensive passages from Boswell's biography to demonstrate the point.

Johnson's self-accounting often seemed to disclose more than he may himself have been willing to acknowledge. Johnson's rigidity, which the Romantics mocked, is diagnosed by Beckett as neurosis; a letter of 1937 explaining that:

Dr J.'s dogmatism was the façade of consternation. The 18th century was full of ahuris – perhaps that is why it looked like the age of 'reason' – but there can hardly have been so many completely at sea in their solitude as he was or so horrifically aware of it – not even Cowper. Read the Prayers & Meditations if you don't believe me.¹⁴³

Beckett was amongst the first imaginative writers to explore Johnson's diaries. Boswell, Beckett believed, had focused mainly on the 'wit-and-wisdom machine.' Johnson's diaries, however, logged the suffering, 'or necessity of suffering', which Beckett considered central to Johnson.¹⁴⁴ Mrs Thrale had 'none of that need to suffer [...] and never found in him the

¹⁴³ *Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929–40*, p. 529. 'Ahuris' is the first-person singular indicative of the French verb 'ahurir', meaning to 'astound' or 'dumbfound'.

¹⁴⁴ *Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929–40*, p. 529.

peg to hang her pain on that he did in her.’¹⁴⁵ On this basis, ‘his horror at loving her I take it was a mode or paradigm of his horror at ultimate annihilation, to which he declared in the fear of his death that he would prefer an eternity of torment’.¹⁴⁶ Beckett believed that Johnson’s obsession with Mrs Thrale threatened his sense of self-possession. Johnson, because he was ‘spiritually self-conscious’, was a ‘tragic figure’.¹⁴⁷ The analysis oddly echoes Carlyle’s view. Beckett’s emphasis on suffering, however, derived in part from his reading of Schopenhauer and was also informed by his ‘strongly puritanical conscience’, according to Knowlson, which was imbibed from his Irish Protestant forebears.¹⁴⁸

The notebooks quote Johnson’s diaries extensively. Beckett was particularly attentive to the links between mathematical reasoning and Johnson’s emotional life, observing: ‘Arithmetic his cure for depression’.¹⁴⁹ Beckett notes how Johnson sought to weigh and catalogue existence, for instance, ‘weighing (41) vine leaves & laying them out on his bookcase to find out how much weight they lost in desiccation. Measuring and weighing afforded him particular delight’.¹⁵⁰ Inventories, lists, calculations and accounts are at the heart of Johnson’s diaries. This may have filtered into Beckett’s fiction. In *Malone Dies*, the narrator describes the contents of his consciousness as a ‘kind of inventory’.¹⁵¹ A few pages later he notes, ‘When I have completed my inventory [...] I shall write my memoirs’.¹⁵² Later, in *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958), Krapp’s taped spool of memories is kept in an ‘old ledger’ which he brings on stage at the start of the play.¹⁵³ Beckett had copied sections from Johnson’s

¹⁴⁵ *Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929–40*, p. 529.

¹⁴⁶ *Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929–40*, p. 529.

¹⁴⁷ *Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929–40*, p. 529.

¹⁴⁸ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 46

¹⁴⁹ University of Reading, SC, MS 3461/1, p. 159.

¹⁵⁰ University of Reading, SC, MS 3461/1, p. 101.

¹⁵¹ Beckett, *Malone Dies*, p. 167.

¹⁵² Beckett, *Malone Dies*, p. 169.

¹⁵³ Beckett, *Krapp’s Last Tape and Embers* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), p. 10.

diaries which illustrated Johnson's frustration at the failures of his resolutions.¹⁵⁴ These may have been recalled in Krapp's expostulations concerning his wasted life which are enumerated statistically:

And the resolutions! (*Brief laugh in which KRAPP joins*) To drink less, in particular. (*Brief laugh of KRAPP alone*). Seventeen hundred hours out of the preceding eight thousand odd, consumed on licensed premises alone. More than 20 per cent, say 40 per cent of his waking life.¹⁵⁵

Beckett's notebooks demonstrate that he shared Johnson's fascination with the cost of things. Beckett noted the price of eighteenth-century accoutrements such as whalebone hoops, cork rumps and buckram strap. Accounts also make an appearance in Beckett's fiction. Molloy keeps careful account of his expenditure and desires that his son, 'learn double-entry book-keeping and [he] had instructed him in its rudiments'.¹⁵⁶ Beckett's characters attempt their own form of self-accounting. Molloy notes that 'I always had a mania for symmetry'.¹⁵⁷ In *Malone Dies*, a character, 'liked sums [...] what he liked was the manipulation of concrete numbers [...] He made a practice alone and in company, of mental arithmetic. And then the figures marshalling in his mind thronged it with colours and forms'.¹⁵⁸ Johnson's diaries are interspersed with makeshift accounting entries; in *Watt* (1953) book-keeping entries are presented in a sardonic fashion:

¹⁵⁴ Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon note in *Samuel Beckett's Library* (p. 193), that Beckett considered drawing upon Johnson's *Dictionary* in writing *Krapp's Last Tape*.

¹⁵⁵ Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape and Embers*, p. 13.

¹⁵⁶ Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 148.

¹⁵⁷ Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 78.

¹⁵⁸ Beckett, *Malone Dies*, p. 172.

	£	s.	d.
Travelling	1	15	0
Boots	0	15	0
Coloured Beads	5	0	0
Gratifications	0	10	0
Sustenance	42	0	0
Total	50	0	0 ¹⁵⁹

Mathematical series, logical exhaustion and calculations appear throughout Beckett's fiction, parodying the absurdity of framing the chaos of existence in rational terms. While Johnson's diaries recorded how long it took Johnson's shaved body hair to regrow, Molloy counts how many farts he emits in one day, 'three hundred and fifteen farts in nineteen hours, or an average of over sixteen farts an hour [...] it's unbelievable. [...] Extraordinary how mathematics help you know yourself'.¹⁶⁰ The mathematics of the body fascinated Beckett and Johnson, illuminating physicality in a way that language could not. In *Company* (1979), the number of heartbeats completed in a lifetime are ironically enumerated. In *Murphy* (1938), Neary is contemplating his imminent extinction when the narrator sardonically muses that, 'the number of seconds in one dark night is a simple calculation that the curious reader will work out for himself'.¹⁶¹ Beckett's mathematics was 'circus algebra', as he termed it.¹⁶² Like Johnson's accounting, it often did not add up, which for Beckett was often the point.

The notebooks also exhibit Beckett's fascination with Johnson's grotesque body and odd behavioural tics. Beckett recorded Johnson's self-talking, noting the 'too too too' references

¹⁵⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: John Calder, 1955), p. 169.

¹⁶⁰ Beckett, *Molloy*, pp. 29–30.

¹⁶¹ Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (London: Picador, 1973), p. 125.

¹⁶² Samuel Beckett, letter to J. Putnam, 5 February 1957, Putnam archives, quoted in Bram Van Velde, *Bram Van Velde* (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1989), p. 187.

which were ‘one of his habitual mutterings’.¹⁶³ He records that Johnson’s ‘eccentricity was alarming’, emerging from his house:

without counting every step, rotates his left [...] right foot was in the proper position [...] walking about the town he performed innumerable ‘magical movements’ very embarrassing to his companion. In the intervals of talk he whistled or hooted or chewed or chuckled or blew air into the faces of the company.¹⁶⁴

Johnson’s ‘unconscious self’ spoke loudly through the ‘magical movements’ and involuntary actions of his body which Beckett saw as neurotic rites, truer to his darker self than Boswell’s depiction of him as magnificently in control of his person and speech. In *Watt*, the eponymous hero’s ‘funambulistic stagger’ seems to recall Johnson’s walking style:

Watt’s way of advancing east, for instance, was to turn his bust as far as possible towards the north and at the same time to fling out his right leg as far as possible towards the south, and then to turn his bust as far as possible towards the south, and at the same time to fling out his left leg as far as possible towards the north.¹⁶⁵

Watt’s contrived stagger has an absurd rigour like Johnson’s ‘magical movements’.¹⁶⁶ There may be other echoes: in *Watt*, for instance, ‘Mr Knott talked often to himself, with great variety and vehemence of intonation and gesticulation’.¹⁶⁷ Mr Knott’s disavowal of normal behavioral protocols, while comic, also hints at a private language that Watt, who sees Mr Knott as God-like, cannot read. By contrast, Beckett saw Johnson’s self-talking as an unedited surfacing of unconscious obsessions.

¹⁶³ University of Reading, SC, MS 3461/1, p. 64.

¹⁶⁴ University of Reading, SC, MS 3461/1, p. 94.

¹⁶⁵ Beckett, *Watt*, pp. 28–29.

¹⁶⁶ Ulrika Maude also compares Watt’s walking style to Johnson’s in ‘Chronic Conditions: Beckett, Bergson and Samuel Johnson’, *Journal of Medical Humanities* 37 (2016), DOI 10.1007/s10912-015-9372-2, pp. 193–204, (p. 201).

¹⁶⁷ Beckett, *Watt*, pp. 208.

Although Johnson was bodily awkward, he, nonetheless, had a confidence in the uncomplicated solidity of the world and his physical relationship to it, which fascinated Beckett who, by contrast, saw a huge gulf existing between self and external reality. Johnson's position was exemplified by his stance towards George Berkeley, the philosopher, who denied the existence of matter. Johnson repudiated Berkeley's philosophy by literally applying his body to the world, specifically his large boot.¹⁶⁸ Beckett refers to 'the Lexicographer kicking the stone' in a letter of September 1934.¹⁶⁹ In the letter, Beckett opposes the anthropomorphic landscapes of Claude and Watteau to the objective stance of Cezanne who understood the landscape to be 'by definition unapproachably alien, unintelligible arrangement of atoms'.¹⁷⁰ By contrast, Johnson's stone-kicking illustrated the 'itch to animise'; to master reality, by projecting human consciousness onto it in the manner of seventeenth-century French art.¹⁷¹ Johnson's 'kick' may have been in Beckett's mind, a year later in 1935, when he began work on *Murphy*. Murphy distinguishes between that of which 'he had both mental and physical experience and that which he had mental experience only. Thus the form of kick was actual, that of caress virtual'.¹⁷² Later Murphy muses that he

felt himself split in two, a body and a mind. They had intercourse apparently [...] He neither thought a kick because he felt one nor felt a kick because he thought one. [...] Perhaps there was, outside space and time, a non-mental non-physical Kick from all eternity, dimly revealed to Murphy in its correlated modes of consciousness and extension, the kick *in intellectu* and the kick *in re*.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁸ Other modern writers were also fascinated by this episode including Virginia Woolf, in *To The Lighthouse* (1927), see Anthony W. Lee, 'Introduction: Modernity Johnson?', p. 15.

¹⁶⁹ *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1929–1940*, p. 223.

¹⁷⁰ *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1929–1940*, p. 223.

¹⁷¹ *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1929–1940*, p. 223.

¹⁷² Beckett, *Murphy*, p. 63.

¹⁷³ Beckett, *Murphy*, p. 64.

The terminology refers to the philosophical distinction between reality (*'in re'*) and understanding (*'in intellectu'*).¹⁷⁴ Whereas Johnson's kick asserted that mind, body and world existed in an uncomplicated union, in Beckett's fiction, the mind and body interacted only imperfectly. Later, in *Malone*, Malone's stick provides a 'point of purchase' on reality.¹⁷⁵ By the last page of the novel, Malone navigates the world using 'his pencil or his stick'.¹⁷⁶ Writing and cognition are elided. It may not be too fanciful to imagine Malone's stick as owing a debt to Johnson's solid oak cudgel, which, like his substantial boot, impacted resoundingly on the fabric of the world.

Beckett believed that Johnson's desire to master the physical world, masked deeper anxieties. Johnson's fear of madness, documented extensively in Beckett's notebooks, illustrated his dread of the body hijacking the mind. Beckett quotes at length an episode where the Thrales call on Johnson, only to find him on his knees, 'praying for the continued use of his understanding & he often lamented to us the horrible condition of his mind'.¹⁷⁷ In a letter of 1937, when Beckett was still considering writing his Johnson play, he wrote, 'we will make him younger & madder even than he was'.¹⁷⁸ There is a certain relish in the description, which may have been the result of his recent work on *Murphy* (between 1934 and 1936), a novel with madness at its core. Murphy equates unreason with wisdom and fetters himself to free his mind, whereas Johnson, evidently, saw chains as a means to restrain madness. Earlier writers had often glossed over Johnson's fears for his sanity, but Beckett's researches convinced him not only that Johnson's madness was central to his inner

¹⁷⁴ Beckett would probably have been aware that the distinction between 'in re' and 'in intellectu' was also at the heart of St Anselm's Ontological Proof.

¹⁷⁵ Beckett, *Malone Dies*, p. 233.

¹⁷⁶ Beckett, *Malone Dies*, p. 264.

¹⁷⁷ University of Reading, SC, MS 3461/1, p. 92.

¹⁷⁸ *Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1929–1940*, p. 522.

life, but also that in his more despairing moods, his religious certainties were challenged by a more modern sense of the world as a place that might lose meaning.

Writing *Murphy*, madness and death had been inextricably linked in Beckett's mind. Murphy achieves a state of nothingness with the assistance of gas. Madness and death demonstrated the body's ascendancy over the mind. In the notebooks, Beckett's fascination with the body of Johnson reaches its apotheosis in a passage that Beckett transcribed, some two pages in length, concerning Johnson's autopsy, entitled 'Necropsy conducted by James Wilson F.R.S (pupil of William Cruikshank)'.¹⁷⁹ The account is bald and forensic:

On opening into the cavity of the chest, the lump did not collapse as they usually do when air is admitted, but remained distended, as if this had lost the power of contraction [...] the trachea was somewhat inflamed [...] no water was found in the cavity of the thorax. The heart was exceedingly large & strong, the valves of the aorta were beginning to ossify [...] the liver & spleen were firm & hard [...] nothing remarkable was found in the stomach [...] the pancreas was remarkably enlarged [...].¹⁸⁰

Helen Deutsch comments that the report is transcribed, 'without the "empathy" that would locate its narrative [...] he lets the report speak in all its bodily particularity, while repeating it with a difference. He imagines it in his own space'.¹⁸¹ The imagining of Johnson's body is the end-point to which Beckett's notes inevitably converge. As the focus switches from Johnson's romantic entanglements to his last days as the 'panting on to 75 bag of water', the transition from an overwhelmingly mobile if grotesque presence to a state of stasis is stark. In the autopsy report, Johnson's agitated motion, however, remains, if only mimed through

¹⁷⁹ University of Reading, SC, MS 3461/2, p. 43.

¹⁸⁰ University of Reading, SC, MS 3461/2, pp. 45–7.

¹⁸¹ Helen Deutsch, *Loving Dr Johnson* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 226.

the vigorous verbal constructions attached to his internal organs: ‘distended’, ‘inflamed’ and ‘enlarged’.¹⁸² Even in death Johnson could not stay still.¹⁸³

Beckett was to return to Johnson in the 1960s. In 1961, he bought a copy of Birkbeck Hill’s edition of Boswell’s biography, which he had read during his research in the 1930s.¹⁸⁴ The anecdotal footnotes, in particular, were replete with the type of arcane factual information which Beckett had always been keen to seek out. Later, he started to write one of his strangest texts, *The Lost Ones*, eventually published in English in 1971, which dealt with a colony of two hundred people living in a flattened cylinder riddled with tunnels. Drawing heavily on Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, the story also alluded to the ‘secret passages’ and ‘private galleries’ of *Rasselas*, a ‘grand book’ according to Beckett.¹⁸⁵ Jorge Luis Borges, as will be discussed, shared Beckett’s admiration for the novella. In Beckett’s story, the inhabitants each search for their lost one. Some persist, others have become listless. Although the text may seem to have little connection to *Rasselas*, the central theme of that novel — the vanity of human wishes — is re-enacted in the relentless ladder climbing of the lost ones. For both Beckett and Johnson, the objects of human endeavour, often proved worthless.

¹⁸² The opening scene of Beryl Bainbridge’s novel *According to Queenie* (London: Abacus, 2002) illustrates a later writer’s similar fascination with the autopsy, depicting the removal of Johnson’s body from Bolt Court in a carpet roll to be medically anatomised. Johnson, in the description, is reduced to nothing more than his bodily integuments.

¹⁸³ The autopsy report was headed up as ‘Asthma’ not ‘Samuel Johnson’. The report does not record that several of Johnson’s organs were removed, including his left lung. The organs ended up as exhibits but they have since disappeared. See *The Tyranny of Treatment: Samuel Johnson, His Friends and Georgian Medicine* (Exhibition, Dr Johnson’s House, Gough Square, 2004).

¹⁸⁴ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 482.

¹⁸⁵ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 536. The reference is to the ‘private galleries’ and ‘subterranean passages’ of the palace described in the first chapter of *Rasselas: Rasselas and Other Tales*, ed. by Gwin J. Kolb, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 23 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), XVI (1990) p. 11.

Beckett never completed his play about Johnson. But the image of Johnson *in extremis* provided the germ of an idea which arguably drove the trajectory of his art for the next fifty years. In addition, Beckett's Johnsonian research left legible traces in his later fiction and drama, where he revisited many of the themes that he had first discerned in Johnson's life and writing: the necessity of suffering, the obsession with mathematics, the neurotic basis of bizarre behaviour and a preoccupation with death and madness. Although Johnson did not feature much in Beckett's pronouncements and writing after the 1960s, he was not entirely done with him. In 1994, Beckett was interviewed by Peter Woodthorpe, a young actor.¹⁸⁶ In the taxi afterwards, Beckett told the actor that he would like to see him playing Johnson in a play that he had considered writing. The play would be a monologue with Dr Johnson and his cat Hodge as the only other character. Other cats would enter, but no other human beings. When Woodthorpe later asked about progress on the play, Beckett said that he had abandoned the project. This seemed oddly characteristic of Beckett's life-long engagement with Johnson. Whilst Beckett's vision of Johnson stood in stark counterpoint to Boswell's representation of him, Borges, however, was fascinated by Johnson's relationship to his biographer, re-defining that relationship, in singularly post-modern terms.

Jorge Luis Borges: Rasselas, Romanticism and Johnson's Double Act

That Johnson's appeal to modern writers extended beyond the limits of language and country is attested by the high regard in which the Argentinian writer, Jorge Luis Borges, held the English writer. Borges admired Johnson's writing, especially *Rasselas* (1759), a work, which he assimilated to his own anti-realist agenda. Opposed to the Romantic cult of

¹⁸⁶ James Knowlson interview with Peter Woodthorpe, 18 February 1994, reported in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 785.

originality, Borges also saw Johnson's Ossian diatribes as pre-emptive strikes on Romanticism *avant la lettre*. Borges venerated Johnson the talker, arguing that Boswell had transformed Johnson into a stage character. Borges radically re-framed the Boswell-Johnson relationship, a relationship strangely recapitulated in Borges' friendship with the writer, Adolfo Bioy Casares. This section examines Borges's exploration of Johnson's life and writing, drawing upon Borges's published writings, specifically those translated into English, and in particular, a series of lectures, entitled *A Course in English Literature* (1966) which devoted four chapters to Johnson.

Borges was born in 1899 in Buenos Aires and raised in an Anglophone environment, mainly attributable to English heritage on his father's side. His grandmother was Frances Ann Haslam, an Englishwoman. At home, he spoke both Spanish and English and his family called him by the anglicised name 'Georgie.' The only tuition Borges received before the age of nine was delivered in English. When he started school in Buenos Aires, English was regarded as dangerously exotic, and he was bullied by other pupils. Borges' dual Spanish and English heritage represented a first schism, linguistic and cultural, in his emerging make-up, presaging his later preoccupations with the double. Roberto Gonzalez-Echevarria argues that Borges' relationship to the Spanish language as an Argentinian may have been akin to an Irish writer's, such as Joyce or Beckett, to English.¹⁸⁷ English, by contrast, was the voice of the Father, literally for Borges. His father loved to read English poetry aloud, Borges later observing, 'When I recite poetry in English now, my mother tells me I take on his very voice'.¹⁸⁸ Borges grew up in a Buenos Aires that had absorbed waves of immigrants, mainly

¹⁸⁷ Roberto Gonzales-Echevarria, 'Borges and Derrida', in *Modern Critical Views: Jorge Luis Borges*, ed. by Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1986), pp. 227–234 (p. 231).

¹⁸⁸ Cited in Emir Rodriguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978), p. 87.

Italian and Spanish peasants.¹⁸⁹ Borges, a member of the long-established ‘criollo’ class, looked down upon the immigrant Spanish and Italians according to Monegal.¹⁹⁰ In the Borges household, the language of culture and refinement was English.

The central event of Borges’ early life was the exploration of his father’s substantial library which contained many English books. Borges’ relationship to the literary tradition was different from that of a European. European modernists often sought to distance themselves from a cultural past which might otherwise seem overwhelming. By contrast, Borges in his essay ‘The Argentine Writer and Tradition’ (1951), a title which echoed Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, argued that Argentines, because of their physical separation from Europe, were able to absorb its past on their own terms.¹⁹¹ Argentines, therefore, as Wilson argues, did not feel subject to a monolithic culture.¹⁹² Like Eliot and Beckett, Borges took all of European culture as his heritage. Unlike them, however, Borges’ literary heroes were often drawn from the literary margins, English writers such as Chesterton, Stevenson and De Quincey, as well as Johnson, devoted, like Borges, to the shorter literary work, the essay and the short story.

Borges’ fictional writing was more obviously influenced by writers such as Stevenson, than by Johnson. However, Johnson’s most notable work of fiction *Rasselas* (1759) was a favourite of Borges. Its first chapter, in particular, describing the palace’s private galleries and subterranean passages, which attracted Beckett’s attention, may also have been recalled by Borges in ‘The Immortal’ (1947), which depicts the City of the Immortals as ‘a chaos of

¹⁸⁹ James Woodall, *The Man In the Mirror of The Book: A Life of Jorge Luis Borges* (London: Sceptre, 1996), p. 48.

¹⁹⁰ Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges*, p. 51.

¹⁹¹ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘The Argentine Writer and Tradition’, in *Jorge Luis Borges, The Total Library*, ed. by Weinberger, pp. 420–27.

¹⁹² Jason Wilson, *Jorge Luis Borges* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), p. 13.

squalid galleries’, accessed by ladder.¹⁹³ Moreover, like *Rasselas*, ‘The Immortal’ employs the ‘quest’ form. Where, in *Rasselas*, the Prince journeys abroad to locate the root of human happiness, the narrator in ‘The Immortal’ travels afar to find the source of eternal life. In both stories, the quest, however, only demonstrates the illusory nature of human aspiration. Johnson, himself, is, however, a tangible, and sometimes comic, presence in a number of Borges’ short stories, for instance, appearing as a sheepdog called ‘Samuel Johnson’ in ‘There are More Things’ (1975).¹⁹⁴ Earlier, in ‘A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain’ (1944), the eponymous hero ‘played at being M. Teste or Dr Johnson’.¹⁹⁵ In ‘The Approach To Al-Mu’tasim’ (1944), the narrator avers, ‘as Dr Johnson observed’, that ‘no man likes owing anything to his contemporaries’.¹⁹⁶ Borges repeats the observation in ‘Deutsches Requiem’ (1949), where it is noted that, ‘a certain eighteenth-century author observes that no man wants to owe anything to his contemporaries’.¹⁹⁷ Despite Borges’ post-modernist insistence upon the intertextual basis of writing, most notably articulated in the essay, ‘Kafka and His Precursors’ (1951), Borges’ double reference to Johnson’s observation, may have hinted at an anxiety of influence, that he sensed in Johnson, but may have also felt himself. Like Johnson, Borges may have been more comfortable in consigning his ‘precursors’ to the more remote past.

Like Eliot, Borges’ principal engagement with Johnson was, nonetheless, through his literary criticism. References to Johnson can be found throughout Borges’ non-fictional essays, from the early thirties onwards. Borges’ major consideration of Johnson, however, was provided

¹⁹³ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘The Immortal’, in *Jorge Luis Borges: Collected Fictions*, trans. by Andrew Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. 183–95 (p. 187).

¹⁹⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘There are More Things’, in *Collected Fictions: Jorge Luis Borges*, pp. 437–42 (p. 437).

¹⁹⁵ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘A Survey of the Works of Herbert Quain’, in *Collected Fictions: Jorge Luis Borges*, pp. 107–12 (p. 107).

¹⁹⁶ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘The Approach to Al-Mu-tasim’, in *Collected Fictions: Jorge Luis Borges*, pp. 82–7 (p. 86).

¹⁹⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Deutsches Requiem’, in *Collected Fictions: Jorge Luis Borges*, pp. 229–34 (p. 230).

in a series of lectures, entitled *A Course in English Literature*, delivered to a class of English Literature students in Buenos Aires in 1966, later transcribed from tape-recordings and translated into English by students who had attended the lectures. The tapes are now lost so it is not possible to establish the accuracy of the translation, but the lectures' phrasing and substance bear the unmistakable stamp of Borges, according to the two Argentine scholars, Arias and Hadis, who published them in 2000. According to the editors:

there was no attempt to modify Borges's spoken language, nor edit his sentences, which have reached us intact with their repetitions and their platitudes. This fidelity can be verified by comparing Borges's language here with that of other texts of his oral discourse [...] The transcribers also made certain to note under the transcription of each class the phrase: 'A faithful version'.¹⁹⁸

The course comprised 24 lectures (or 'classes') commencing with the Anglo-Saxons and finishing with Wilde and Stevenson. Borges's survey of the canon was characteristically eccentric, the first seven lectures covering the period up to the Battle of Hastings, before moving immediately on to Johnson in the eighth lecture. Of the twenty-four lectures, four are devoted to Johnson, considerably in excess of the number devoted to any other writer. By 1966, Borges, then 67, had started to acquire international renown. Rather like Johnson himself, he had become, as Wilson argues, a 'Monument'.¹⁹⁹ Perhaps he felt that he had earned the right to re-appropriate the literary past in the manner of his choosing. Johnson was evidently, however, on his mind, echoing Eliot's late preoccupation with the writer.

It is not clear whether Borges was aware that his lectures were being recorded, or would be later transcribed. That Borges' most extensive meditation on Johnson, the great talker, should have been captured in speech, however, has a certain poetic justice. It enabled Borges

¹⁹⁸ From the introduction ('*About this Book*') to *Professor Borges, A Course on English Literature*, ed. by Martin Arias and Martin Hadis (New York: New Directions Books, 2000, re-published 2013), p. xi.

¹⁹⁹ Wilson, *Jorge Luis Borges*, p. 10.

to adopt an exploratory mode of enquiry. Greg Clingham, however, is dismissive of the lectures, arguing that, ‘Alas! Platitudes prevail’.²⁰⁰ While the lectures, as Arias and Hadis concede, contain the ‘repetitions’ and ‘platitudes’ characteristic of spoken discourse, they nonetheless shed important light on Borges’ attitude towards Johnson’s life and writing. The first lecture on Johnson, ‘Class 8’, briefly recapitulates Johnson’s life but begins by taking leave of ‘the eleventh century’ to ‘leap, and land straight into the eighteenth century’.²⁰¹ Borges’ disruption of conventional chronology allows him to position Johnson, as a master of English, within an accelerated history of the language’s evolution. Johnson is seen as the language’s representative. After the Battle of Hastings, the ‘English language goes into crisis’ to resurface two centuries later with Chaucer and Langland.²⁰² Borges, in two paragraphs, then takes in the Hundred Years War and the Civil War, when the ‘Republic arises [...] an event that seriously scandalized the European nations at that time’.²⁰³ Like Eliot, Borges marks the advent of ‘the century of Reason’ as a response to the Civil War. The ‘flamboyant prose of the seventeenth century’ gives way to a language which, ‘aspires to clarity, eloquence, and expression of logical justification’.²⁰⁴ Borges’ style itself was a model of clarity and although Johnson’s ‘paragraphs are long and heavy’, according to Borges, there are nonetheless ‘sensible and original ideas on every page’.²⁰⁵

Borges expands on these ideas in the next lecture (‘Class 9’) which considers *Rasselas*.

Borges notes that the novel’s opening pages may appear ‘slow, the style faltering’, but after a few pages more the ‘slowness feels pleasant to us [...] There is a tranquillity in reading it’.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁰ Greg Clingham, ‘Johnson and Borges: Some Reflections’, in *Samuel Johnson Among The Modernists*, ed. by Lee, , pp. 189–21 (p. 191).

²⁰¹ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 71.

²⁰² Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 71.

²⁰³ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 71.

²⁰⁴ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 72.

²⁰⁵ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 73.

²⁰⁶ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 79.

Johnson's art is to slow down and arrest time. Where Hazlitt only saw a mechanical see-sawing between antithetical clauses, Borges perceives a sonorous music in Johnson's echoing phrases:

The fact that Johnson wrote this book in such a slow, musical style is quite remarkable, this book in which all of the sentences are perfectly balanced. There is not a single sentence that ends abruptly, and we find a monotonous, but very agile, music, and this is what Johnson wrote while he was thinking about the death of his mother, whom he loved so much.²⁰⁷

Borges brought a responsive intelligence to Johnson's work, not least as his own fiction owed something to the eighteenth century. Paul De Man compared Borges's fiction to the 'eighteenth-century conte philosophique', where 'the world is the representation, not of an actual experience, but of an intellectual proposition'.²⁰⁸ *Rasselas*, too, was essentially a novel of ideas. Borges was contemptuous of realism on both philosophic and aesthetic grounds. Borges contrasts the slowness of realism, with its painstaking description of place and laboured attempts at referentiality, with the carefully cultivated slowness of style which he found in Johnson, which had no aspiration to 'repeat' reality. Johnson and Borges both had poor eyesight, Borges later succumbing to blindness, so that neither had a strong interest in the appearance of their surroundings.²⁰⁹ Sarlo makes a broader point, arguing that:

The fabric of Argentine literature is woven with the threads of all cultures; our marginal situation can be the source of our true originality. It is not based on local colour (which binds the imagination to empiricist control) but on the open acceptance of influences.²¹⁰

²⁰⁷ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 82.

²⁰⁸ Paul de Man, 'A Modern Master', in *Modern Critical Views: Jorge Luis Borges*, ed. by Bloom, pp. 21–27 (p. 23).

²⁰⁹ Clingham, in 'Johnson and Borges: Some Reflections', argues that Borges' and Johnson's defects in vision are invisible in representations of them, an invisibility echoed in their shared devotion to translation as a literary endeavour which is necessary and creative (p. 197 and p. 205).

²¹⁰ Beatriz Sarlo, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge* (London: Verso, 1993, re-published 2006), p. 28.

Borges argues that Johnson had a concept of literature that was very different from the contemporary one. While knowledgeable about Abyssinia, having translated Father Lobo, 'he at no point uses his knowledge of Abyssinia'.²¹¹ This is because Johnson thought that:

The poet should not deal with the individual but rather with the generic, for the poet is writing for posterity [...] poetry [is] [...] not about the concerns of his era, but should seek out the eternal, the eternal passions of man, as well as subjects such as the brevity of human life, the vicissitudes of destiny, the hopes we have for immortality, sins, virtues, etcetera. [...] Now people instinctively feel that each poet belongs to his nation, to his class, to his time [...] Johnson thought that a poet should write for all men of his century. That is why with *Rasselas*, besides there being a geographic reference [...] and that everything takes place in Abyssinia, it could take place in any other country.²¹²

Earlier writers had criticised *Rasselas*' weightless lack of particularity, but Borges considered this quality of the narrative to be admirable. His own works eschewed detail, possessing a poetic density, which accounted for their brevity. In 'The Argentine Writer and Tradition', Borges dismisses Gibbon's observation that the lack of camels in the Koran undermined its veracity; he argues instead that as camels were commonplace, Mahomet would have considered that they were common everywhere.²¹³ As John Sturrock notes, 'The use of local colour alienates a writer from the milieu he is writing about and gives him the perspective of a stranger'.²¹⁴ Paradoxically, Johnson's abstract perspective may have helped him to avoid the perils of literary tourism which realism might otherwise have encouraged. In particular, Borges notes that *Rasselas* includes 'very little Oriental colour; that didn't interest Johnson', and that Cairo is merely a kind 'of metaphor, a reflection of London'.²¹⁵

²¹¹ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, pp. 77–8.

²¹² Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 78.

²¹³ Borges, 'The Argentine Writer and Tradition', p. 423.

²¹⁴ John Sturrock, *Paper Tigers: The Ideal Fictions of Jorge Luis Borges* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 19.

²¹⁵ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 82.

Johnson's commitment to 'the generic', however, was linked to his classical temper, according to Borges. A classicist himself, Borges was contemptuous, as Sturrock puts it, of Romanticism's 'cult of originality, its will to particularize, its boastful subjectivism'.²¹⁶ In essays such as 'The Language of The Argentines' (1928), as Thomas R. Hart notes, Borges extended the argument by contending that, because a writer is circumscribed by the language that he uses, he must resign himself to repeating what others have said before him.²¹⁷ That culture is always, already written was part of the post-modernist credo, but it was also a proposition that Johnson, as well as Byron, would have understood, in their different ways, from a classicist perspective.²¹⁸ Like Eliot, Borges found Classicism to be a useful tool to combat Romanticism. Borges argued that, in this regard, Johnson was curiously ahead of his time, stating in 'Class 11' that Johnson had effectively mounted a pre-emptive strike on Romanticism *avant la lettre*, in his criticisms of Macpherson's *The Works of Ossian* (1765). Borges's focus is on the cultural impact of the poems as a precursor of Romanticism with their descriptions of nature and 'romantic phrases'.²¹⁹ According to Borges:

Johnson was a man of classical tastes, and the idea that around the sixth or seventh century, Scotland had produced a long epic poem must have greatly disturbed him. Moreover, surely Johnson felt the threat this new work—so full of the romantic movement—entailed to the classical literature he worshipped.²²⁰

Borges not only outflanks Johnson's Romantic critics by turning his critical fire upon them, but also sees Johnson as having got there before him. In 'The Postulation of Reality' (1931),

²¹⁶ Sturrock, *Paper Tigers*, p. 87.

²¹⁷ Thomas R. Hart Jr, 'Borges' Literary Criticism', in *Modern Critical Views: Jorge Luis Borges*, ed. by Bloom, pp. 5–20 (p. 16.)

²¹⁸ Useful discussions of the post-modernist focus on literature's permeation by the 'already said' are included in: Umberto Eco, *Postscript to The Name of the Rose* (New York: Harcourt, 1984), pp. 67–8 and Charles Jenks, 'What is Post-Modernism?', in *From Modernism to Post-Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Cahoon (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), pp. 457–63.

²¹⁹ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 105.

²²⁰ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 106.

Borges argued that the classic writer is committed to the concept, the Romantic writer to the particular.²²¹ The classic writer:

is not really expressive; he does no more than record a reality, he does not represent one. The sumptuous events [...] dense experiences, perceptions, reactions; these may be inferred from his narrative but are not present in it [...] he does not write reality's initial contacts, but its final elaboration in concepts.²²²

The Romantic position was epitomised by Hazlitt, who had criticised Johnson's writing as a product of 'the general intellect labouring in the mine'.²²³ Borges, as a post-modernist, savoured *Rasselas* as a fictional form devoted to the play of ideas, where reality is inferred rather than mechanically enumerated.

According to Borges, *Rasselas* played on one particular idea, as 'Johnson was not writing an adventure novel, but rather rewriting his poem about the vanity of human wishes'.²²⁴ The seductive monotone Borges heard in Johnson's tale was due to its singular focus on *vanitas* to the exclusion of other aspects of experience. In contrast to the pessimism of Voltaire's *Candide*, which Borges argues is undermined by the text's bravura inventiveness, *Rasselas* convinces because 'we feel for [Johnson] that life is essentially horrible. And the very scantiness of invention in *Rasselas* makes it that much more convincing'.²²⁵ While this makes the novella a little airless, it provides a unity of tone.²²⁶ This also explains Johnson's extensive use of monologue:

²²¹ Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Postulation of Reality', in *The Total Library*, ed. by Weinberger, pp. 59–64.

²²² Borges, 'The Postulation of Reality', p. 60.

²²³ William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, in *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. by Duncan Wu, 9 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), II, pp. 84–97 (p. 95).

²²⁴ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 82.

²²⁵ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 86.

²²⁶ Clingham, in 'Johnson and Borges: Some Reflections', disagrees with Borges' judgement that *Rasselas* 'is really a rejection of man's happiness', arguing that the novella embraces the possibilities, 'if not the easy possession' of human happiness (p. 207). Borges, however, like Beckett, advances a darker reading of Johnson

His characters abundantly indulge in soliloquies. Johnson did not do this because he thought that people were given to monologue, but because it was a convenient way of expressing what he felt, and at the same time, expressing his own eloquence.²²⁷

Language itself is accordingly foregrounded in *Rasselas* as much as the world depicted.

Johnson's imagination was not dialogic, in the Bakhtinian sense, rather all voices were variations of his own voice. Borges himself noted that, 'I've never created a character. It's always me, subtly disguised'.²²⁸

The novel provides a bridge to enable Borges to consider Johnson's life and melancholy.

Johnson's misery is not dwelt on, in the manner of Beckett, but is alluded to, in order to highlight Johnson's stoicism. Johnson's 'private life', indeed, is revealed, 'not by him—he tried to hide it and never complained about it', but 'by an extraordinary character, James Boswell'.²²⁹ Borges devotes an entire lecture ('Class 10') to Johnson's life and Boswell's account of it, which treats the principals, at times, like fictional characters in a drama. Talk is at its core, Johnson preferring 'to talk rather than write'.²³⁰ According to Borges, Johnson devoted his later years to conversation and almost stopped writing, 'because Johnson knew he liked to converse, and he knew that his gems of conversation would be recorded by Boswell'.²³¹ His talk raised Johnson to the status of a latter-day performance artist, a wit, like Oscar Wilde, whom Borges argued, elsewhere, that he resembled and who 'was also right'.²³² Conversation was important to Borges throughout his life, commencing with his active participation in the male culture of literary conversation in Buenos Aires in the 1920s.

and his works, as a challenge to pre-modernist conceptions of Johnson, and as a bridge to his speculations on Johnson's private life and Boswell's depiction of it.

²²⁷ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 78.

²²⁸ Quoted in Wilson, *Borges*, p. 144.

²²⁹ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 87.

²³⁰ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 88.

²³¹ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 98.

²³² Borges, 'On Oscar Wilde', in *The Total Library*, ed. by Weinberger, p. 315.

In later life, like Johnson, Borges' talk often appeared in print, he being one of the most interviewed of modern writers.²³³ The interview form gave access to Borges' spontaneous presence and voice, but it also solidified his talk in print-form for posterity.²³⁴ Like Johnson, Borges' talk began to displace his writing.

Contra Macaulay, however, Borges sees Boswell as a skilful artist. According to Borges, on first meeting Boswell, 'Johnson left, without knowing that something very important had happened, something that would determine his fame more than *Rasselas* [...] more than his *journals*'.²³⁵ Borges, like Bernard Shaw, considered Boswell a playwright *manqué*, who 'created the character Johnson'.²³⁶ Borges also concluded that Boswell sought:

to make Johnson's biography a drama, with several characters. There is [Sir Joshua] Reynolds, there is [Oliver] Goldsmith [...] And they appear and behave like characters in a play [...] above all, Dr. Johnson, who is sometimes presented as ridiculous but always as loveable.²³⁷

Borges' stories often blurred the dividing line between fact and fiction, but as Chapter 2 argued, Boswell's biography is framed in a decidedly theatrical manner. Borges contrasts the dramatic vivacity of Boswell's biography with Johann Peter Eckermann's *Conversations of Goethe* (1836–48), where Goethe is depicted speaking *ex cathedra*, resulting in a book which had 'something of the catechism about it'.²³⁸ Boswell's role, as supporting player, is 'to bring out the hero's personality'.²³⁹

²³³ See Wilson, *Jorge Luis Borges*, pp. 80–1.

²³⁴ See Rebecca Roach, *Literature and the Rise of the Interview* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), for a book-length discussion of the impact of the modern interview on literature, publicity, subjectivity and democracy.

²³⁵ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 91.

²³⁶ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 92.

²³⁷ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 95.

²³⁸ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 95.

²³⁹ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 94.

Further conflating life and fiction, Johnson is compared to Don Quixote, who ‘is more real to us than Cervantes himself’ and Boswell is cast as Sancho Panza.²⁴⁰ They are seen as a double act. Johnson would have found the comparison invidious. Unlike Quixote, he believed that he could clearly distinguish appearance and reality and had no need, moreover, of a Boswellian sidekick. Borges was, however, fascinated by Johnson’s relationship with Boswell, particularly in light of Johnson’s hatred for Scots. Karl Miller in his *Doubles*, a meditation on duality in literature, notes that, ‘the Englishman and the Scot have long served as one another’s alter ego’.²⁴¹ Borges picks up on this theme, noting that, ‘the Scots tend to be [...] much more intellectual, much more rational. Englishmen are impulsive; they don’t need theories for their behaviour’.²⁴² Johnson, indeed, had little use for speculative theory, whereas Boswell was an intellectual *flâneur*. Polar opposites, they made a good stage duo. Miller argues that the double is a destabilising force, undermining the idea of, ‘a stable, impervious, monolithic, human identity’.²⁴³ Boswell, as Johnson’s double, similarly challenged Johnson’s sense of autonomy because the relationship implied a mutual dependency. Freud linked the double more broadly to a fear of death and to the ‘incapacities of the modern neurotic’; a theory Beckett might have found intriguing in relation to Johnson.²⁴⁴ Borges himself confessed to ‘being afraid of being repeated’ in mirrors as a child; in particular, the dizzying experience of self-multiplication.²⁴⁵ This repetition

²⁴⁰ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 95.

²⁴¹ Karl Miller, *Doubles* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985), p. 435.

²⁴² Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 96.

²⁴³ Miller, *Doubles*, p. 24.

²⁴⁴ Cited in Miller, *Doubles*, p. 26.

²⁴⁵ Richard Burgin, *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (London: Souvenir Press (Educational & Academic) Ltd., 1969), p. 34.

threatened Borges' sense of self-possession, as sex also did. Both echoed Johnson's aversion to being 'taken off', and his putative fear, according to Beckett, of sexual intimacy.²⁴⁶

Borges points to other fictional double acts including Holmes and Watson, which also feature a brilliant hero and a straight man who diligently records his life. Holmes refers to being 'lost without his Boswell', meaning Watson.²⁴⁷ Johnson and Boswell's friendship is presented as an archetypal relationship, where the duo is more important than either individual, and whose antecedents are fictional rather than real. With the discovery of Boswell's source manuscripts, Boswell was no longer seen as the passive partner of Macaulay's imagination. Borges refers to Joseph Krutch's work, concluding, like Krutch, that it was Boswell's artistry which enabled him to produce 'the effect of Johnson's conversation'.²⁴⁸ If Boswell had shown Johnson what he was writing, Borges contends, 'the work would have lost a lot'.²⁴⁹ The two writers were accordingly engaged in a game of mutual bluff to sustain the equilibrium of the relationship and to sponsor an enterprise of artistic co-production. Borges relates the external drama of this relationship to an inner schism. He notes 'that there is a Hindu school of philosophy that says we are not the actors in our lives but rather the spectators'.²⁵⁰ By the same token, he argues, that:

I, for example, was born the same day as Jorge Luis Borges [...] I have seen him be ridiculous in some situations, pathetic in others. And as I have always had him in front of me, I have ended up identifying with him. According to this theory, in other words, the I would be double [...] It is all as if this is happening to somebody else.²⁵¹

²⁴⁶ Chapter 2 noted Johnson's violent reaction to the prospect of being 'taken off' on stage by the playwright and actor, Samuel Foote. Beckett, as this chapter earlier explained, speculated that Johnson feared intimacy with Mrs Thrale, as it may have exposed his alleged impotency.

²⁴⁷ Arthur Conan Doyle, 'A Scandal in Bohemia', *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing, 2007), p. 8.

²⁴⁸ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 98.

²⁴⁹ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 98.

²⁵⁰ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 97.

²⁵¹ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 97.

Boswell, accordingly, acted, in a very modern way, as both actor and spectator in the drama of Johnson's life. However, few writers, before Borges, had speculated that Johnson was such an active partner in Boswell's games, in order to ensure that his talk was preserved as literature. Borges further implies that Johnson connived with Boswell in creating his celebrity persona, which Johnson himself understood to be unreal, in the same way that Borges comprehended his own public personality to be an alien 'double'. Borges compares Boswell's knowingness to that of *Miles Gloriosus* of the Latin comedy, a cowardly soldier who lies about his bravery and is promoted to captain. His deceit is subsequently revealed, and he is stripped of his captaincy²⁵². Rather than mourn his loss, he celebrates that "the thing I am shall make me live"²⁵³. Borges considers this, 'a kind of strength we all have within us, what Spinoza called "God," what Schopenhauer called "will," what Bernard Shaw called "life force," and Bergson called "vital impulse." I think this is also what was going on with Boswell'.²⁵⁴ Like the cowardly soldier, Borges argues, Boswell was able to split himself in two, regarding the faintly ridiculous individual depicted in his biography as though he were another person. It suited Boswell's purposes, ensuring, that through the operation of some impersonal evolutionary will, the 'other' Boswell, the artist, would live on.

That Borges attended so closely to the relationship between Johnson and Boswell may have been influenced by his own friendship with the young Argentinian writer, Adolfo Bioy Casares. Doubling seemed to proliferate in Borges's life and writing. Borges met the young Casares in the early 1930s, and the two rapidly became friends, meeting regularly at Bioy's apartment for long evenings of conversation. Casares was younger than Borges, sophisticated and more successful with women. The relationship had parallels with that of

²⁵² Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 97.

²⁵³ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 97.

²⁵⁴ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 97.

Johnson and Boswell as Clingham and others have noted.²⁵⁵ Casares was strongly interested in the work of Boswell and Johnson. Borges told Richard Burgin in 1967 that ‘I sent him [Casares] to Stevenson and he sent me to Doctor Johnson’.²⁵⁶ Like Boswell, Casares maintained a very detailed journal, 1,600 pages of which were extracted to form the volume *Borges* (2006), which depicted a relationship conducted over fifty years, focusing on Borges’ conversation. Borges was a brilliant conversationalist. There are numerous references to Boswell’s biography throughout the journal. At one point, Borges tells Casares that Maria Esther Vazquez had said, ‘Soy tu Boswell’, indicating that Casares was Borges’ Boswell.²⁵⁷ The richest period in the journals were the years 1956–63 when Borges’ international fame started to grow. Borges’ eyesight was failing, and Casares, like Boswell, made detailed records of their conversations, which he did not divulge to Borges, even when Borges said, ‘It’s important to act like Boswell, noting things down so they don’t get lost’.²⁵⁸ Casares recalled:

I asked myself all the while whether he suspects the existence of this book; if he would be curious to read it; if he would correct it; if the fact that lately he has written so little might be due not only to his vision problems and his laziness but also to the existence of this book.²⁵⁹

Casares’ speculation curiously parallels the theory that Borges later developed in the Lectures, that Johnson abandoned writing for talk which he knew that Boswell would preserve for posterity. Casares records Borges as already thinking along these lines:

Something that nobody has proposed is the possibility, which seems very likely to me, of Johnson’s collaboration in Boswell’s book. There’s even a point where it is

²⁵⁵ Clingham, ‘Johnson and Borges: Some Reflections’, pp. 197–98.

²⁵⁶ Burgin, *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges*, p. 129.

²⁵⁷ Quoted in Karl Posso, *Adolfo Bioy Casares: Borges, Fiction and Art* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), p. 65. ‘Soy tu Boswell’ literally means ‘I’m your Boswell’, where the ‘I’ is referring to Casares, not to Esther Vazquez, the speaker quoted by Borges.

²⁵⁸ Quoted in Posso, *Adolfo Bioy Casares*, p. 64.

²⁵⁹ Quoted in Posso, *Adolfo Bioy Casares*, p. 64.

said that Johnson didn't write anything more after a certain date. Of course, he didn't need to write, because he knew the book was being written where he could have put down whatever he wanted.²⁶⁰

Whilst the idea of an actual collaboration appealed to Borges' literary sensibilities, and mirrored his own writing partnership with Casares, he did not repeat this speculation in the Lectures. Casares also records Borges trying out other ideas in relation to Johnson which were, however, to appear in the Lectures.

Casares also records others attending his soirees, Karl Posso noting that, 'as in James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), Bioy sometimes sets up a conversation with *dramatis personae*, and records what he himself says to get Borges started, or in rejoinder, but the focus is always on Borges'.²⁶¹ The journals appear to have been closely modelled on Boswell's approach. Casares, like Boswell, withdraws into the shadows, the better to spotlight his subject. Casares expresses concern that journalists 'present me as Borges's appendix'.²⁶² The comment echoes Boswell's description of himself as Johnson's 'supplement'. The two relationships mirror each other almost vertiginously: Borges, like Johnson, forsakes writing for speech, which Casares captures in writing, basing his approach upon Boswell's biography. Borges later lectures on the relationship between Boswell and Johnson, developing ideas previously rehearsed with Casares. The lectures, in Spanish, are recorded and translated back into English, the language of Boswell's biography. Delivering the lectures, it is possible that Borges may have felt that he was not only describing the relationship of clandestine artistic co-production between Johnson and Boswell, but also that between Casares and himself. In recognising and covertly articulating the repetition of the

²⁶⁰ Quoted in Posso, *Adolfo Bioy Casares*, p. 65.

²⁶¹ Posso, *Adolfo Bioy Casares*, p. 60.

²⁶² Quoted in Posso, *Adolfo Bioy Casares*, p. 69.

doubled relationship, Borges may have felt able to transcend it, through the further repetition of language.

That Johnson was so important to Borges may seem initially surprising. Johnson's classicism, however, chimed with his own anti-Romantic instincts. Moreover, fascinated by duality, Johnson's relationship with Boswell intrigued Borges. He also relished the sonorous music of Johnson's prose. Indeed, it was Johnson's Englishness and mastery of the English language, which appeared, above all, to resonate with Borges. Through Johnson, Borges was able to access his English roots, one part of his double identity. Borges visited Britain in 1963. His recent studies in Anglo-Saxon occupied his mind, and he fulfilled a lifelong ambition to recite the Lord's Prayer in Old English in a Saxon church in Deerhurst.²⁶³ For Borges, Anglo-Saxon represented a search for origins. Although Johnson provided examples of Old English in the *Dictionary's* prefatory material, it was the later acquisition of Latin which he saw as enabling the transition from Anglo-Saxon 'barbarity' to a civilised Christian society. Borges, by contrast, prayed to the Father he did not believe in, invoking the Old English of his father's forbears. Borges noted in the Lectures that Johnson's books abounded in 'hard words' which were easy for him as they were 'Latin words, that is Spanish', whereas all the common words were Anglo-Saxon.²⁶⁴ Johnson was a master of the English language but his writing, paradoxically, was characterised by words derived from Latin, and he 'knew very little Old English', unlike Borges.²⁶⁵ In Johnson, Borges' dual heritage found its curious locus.

²⁶³ James Woodall, *The Man In the Mirror of The Book: A Life of Jorge Luis Borges* (London: Sceptre, 1996), p. 201.

²⁶⁴ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 99.

²⁶⁵ Borges, *A Course on English Literature*, p. 75.

In this chapter, I have shown how Johnson was assimilated by three great Modern writers. Placing themselves at a tangent to the literary tradition enabled them to conjure a Johnson who appeared radically strange and oddly modern. The three writers responded to Johnson very differently, but all recognised the darker aspects of his life and writing, which previous writers, Carlyle aside, had generally overlooked. While Eliot valued Johnson's judgement and the sureness of his poetic instincts, Beckett saw Johnson as a tragic being, whose behavioural oddities and suffering constituted an authentic response, in Beckett's view, to the bleakness of existence. Borges by contrast, saw Johnson, through his own uniquely Post-Modernist perspective, as a knowing writer who, in *Rasselas* in particular, produced an anti-realist fiction which looked forward to his own writing, and who connived with Boswell in turning his life into literature. That all three writers were born into cultures outside the English literary mainstream, enabled them to de-familiarise Johnson and represent his life and work from a very different standpoint. They proved, again, that imaginative writers had always been at the forefront of the re-interpretation of Johnson; liberating Johnson's difference and resistance to categorisation through creative mis-reading.

CONCLUSION: READING JOHNSON, AN ON-GOING OCCUPATION

Reading Johnson has been a preoccupation of a number of imaginative writers in successive generations. This thesis has not considered all of the writers who have written about or been influenced by Johnson, and whilst it ventures as far as the 1960s, Johnson has continued to be read by imaginative writers.¹ For instance, Johnson features in Julian Barnes' *England, England* (1988), whilst the poem, 'That Evening at Dinner' (1999), by the American poet David Ferry includes a lengthy quotation from Johnson.² John Buchan, Beryl Bainbridge and Lillian De la Torre, moreover, all went one stage further than Boswell by turning Johnson into a fictional character.³ Reading Johnson, therefore, remains an ongoing and unfinished task.

I have argued, in this thesis, that imaginative writers have taken a distinctly literary approach to reading Johnson. They have recreated Johnson using techniques borrowed from the theatre or vignette, or re-imagined him through the use of the epistolary or essay form. By so doing, writers have not only illuminated Johnson, but also their own concerns and the literary culture which informed their writing. Imaginative writing, necessarily, involves a freer approach to the use of language, form and material than scholarly endeavour. In turn, this has also resulted in writers adopting a more heterodox approach to their subject, Johnson himself. The vehemence of Hazlitt's critique of Johnson was singular. By contrast, Carlyle's

¹ A recent volume of essays, *Samuel Johnson Among The Modernists*, ed. by Anthony Lee (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2019), explores Johnson's relationships to modern writers, including: Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Vladimir Nabokov, Ernest Borneman, as well as T. S. Eliot, Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges.

² Julian Barnes, *England, England* (London: Trafalgar Square, 1988); David Ferry, 'That Evening at Dinner', from *Of No Country I Know: New and Selected Poems and Translations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). The long quotation included in Ferry's poem is from Johnson's 'Review of Soame Jenyns, *A Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil*' (1757).

³ See John Buchan, *Midwinter: Certain Travellers in Old England* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd., 1923); Lillian De la Torre, *Dr Sam: Johnson, Detector* (London: Macmillan, 1946); Beryl Bainbridge, *According to Queeney* (London: Little, Brown & Company, 2001).

representation of Johnson as a religious seer involved a casual dismissal of Johnson's Anglican beliefs with an audacious sleight-of-hand. Beckett's Freudian reading of Johnson, presented his psychological torments, in part, as a form of *grand guignol*. While the work of these writers often lacked the scholarly rigour of academic writing, they, nonetheless, in successive generations, tapped into the contemporary pulse of feeling, exposing new fault lines in Johnson's life and work, re-imagining him anew.

My thesis seeks to explain why Johnson was so important to such a disparate group of writers. Boswell encapsulated one view of Johnson in his own age: a figure of authority, a heroic talker and literary sage. Johnson, however, was also a liminal figure, looking back to Milton, Shakespeare and the classics, but also living on to the cusp of the Romantic era. Byron excepted, the Romantics, generally, found Johnson's literary approach to be too rigid. He was subsequently embraced by the later writers considered here, who found Johnson's classicism useful in their battle to disavow their late Victorian and Modernist roots in Romanticism. Johnson was often conceived in morphological terms. For instance, later writers detected a solidity in Johnson's presence which contrasted with the perceived airiness of the Romantics and, later, the chaotic nature of the Modernists. Johnson, himself, in *The Rambler*, associated self-possession with the solidity of land and property, a trope later resurrected by the Victorians who used architectural metaphors to describe what they saw as his heroic substantiality. Johnson was, to many of the writers considered here, an authoritative figure, possessed of a hard-edged and hard-won integrity. At the same time, he was re-presented in many, very different guises. Johnson's authenticity, however, was recognised by most of these writers, particularly his preference for personal judgement over abstract principle and his ruthless self-accounting. Later writers did not all share Johnson's religious and moral outlook, but they admired his dogged stoicism which provided a singular

contrast to the cult of self, promoted by both the Romantics and the Modernists in their different ways. It was a quality encapsulated by Beckett's words from *The Unnamable*, 'You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on'.⁴

Reading Johnson involved each writer bringing their own creative instincts, concerns and cultural framework of reference to the reading experience. Writers, accordingly, found their creative identity, in part, by defining themselves in comparison to Johnson. The way in which Johnson was 'received' by each literary generation, however, was also mediated by a history of previous readings of the writer. Borges' reading of Johnson, for instance, was inevitably shadowed by Boswell's representation of the author. These writers also over-wrote Johnson and his own self-reading. For instance, the diaries revealed a man who made compulsive use of accounts and lists to create a semblance of order, to help quell a perpetual sense of unease. However, the anguished figure of the diaries was ignored by most of the writers considered here, excepting Beckett and Carlyle. In addition, the radical self-doubt, which characterises both *The Rambler* and the diaries, was also over-written by the Romantics, in particular, who mostly preferred to represent Johnson as a dogmatist, the better to define their own distinct literary agenda.

Boswell was unique amongst the writers considered here in knowing Johnson personally. In *The Rambler*, Johnson was evidently troubled by the notion of widespread theatricality because it undermined the integrity of self. Nonetheless, Boswell 'theatricalised' Johnson, casting him as the lead character in the drama of his life, and Boswell himself as a sort of actor-manager, reversing their normal roles. Emphasising the centrality of Johnson's speech enabled Boswell to subordinate Johnson's writing by re-appropriating his wisdom through

⁴ Samuel Beckett *The Unnamable* (English version of 1958), in *The Beckett Trilogy* (London: Picador, 1979), pp. 265-382 (p. 382).

representing it in talk. Boswell's artistry, in this respect was later recognised, in particular, by Borges. Subsequently, the Romantics, the first major literary generation to follow on Johnson's age, largely turned against him. Johnson was a writer that William Hazlitt did not admire, but could not evade. The rolling periods of *The Rambler*, which we now see as a vehicle to navigate complex fields of moral discrimination, were seen by Hazlitt as a sort of linguistic prison-house. Hazlitt assimilated Johnson to the philosophers of the industrial age, seeing both as being governed by rule and system. By contrast, Byron summoned Johnson's literary authority to challenge Romanticism's focus on expressiveness and spontaneity, which he saw as being as equally limiting as Johnson's perceived inflexibility.

The rehabilitation of Johnson began under the Victorians. Carlyle radically re-imagined Johnson as a religious seer who had declared war on Enlightenment values. Carlyle may also have taken a literary cue from Johnson's own self-reading. In particular, *The Rambler's* insistence on the need to make time count through 'performance' was re-presented in Carlyle's argument that Johnson's greatness was to be found, not in his writing or talk, but in his actions. Carlyle's condensation of Johnson's life to a series of parabolic performative gestures, was echoed in Matthew Arnold's abridgement of Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets* to six exemplary lives. Where Hazlitt had considered Johnson's prose style antiquated, Arnold praised its lucidity. Like Birkbeck Hill, Arnold associated Johnson with the middling values of calm and order, at a time of tension within Victorian society when such virtues seemed in short order. Birkbeck Hill's edition of Boswell's biography, represented, by contrast, the beginning of modern Johnsonian scholarship and a turn to the encyclopaedic. The edition also focused attention on Johnson's life and away from his works. The Modern age, however, saw a revival in interest in Johnson's writing. In large part, this was due to the contribution of T. S. Eliot. As I have argued, Eliot shared Johnson's religious sensibility,

which may have influenced his own writing, but he also admired Johnson's criticism and the pungent directness of his verse. Beckett attended, perhaps most closely to Johnson's self-reading, particularly the diaries which inspired his vision of the darker, wilder Johnson. Johnson's obsession with numbers, may also have left traces in Beckett's fiction. Borges, like Eliot, saw Johnson as an ally in the war against Romantic afflatus, but he was also interested in his fiction, which Borges linked to his own anti-realist agenda, and in Johnson's relationship with Boswell.

For these writers, reading Johnson was a profoundly creative process. As they read Johnson, they re-wrote him, re-orientating Johnson's concerns to reflect their own. Beckett's obsession with end-games echoed Johnson's preoccupations with death. Numbers reappeared not only in Beckett's fiction but also in Hazlitt's writings on Johnson, which he associated with the limitations of the rationalist outlook. Johnson's life, as represented in Boswell's biography, also interested later writers, in part, because the work interrogated notions of the authentic and performing self, of doubling in human relationships, themes that engaged their own imaginative writing. Suspicious of role-play, Johnson's writing persona and conversational virtuosity reflected, ironically, a more plastic and elusive identity. This tension in Johnson between self and other, being and performing, resonated with Borges, in particular, who argued that Boswell had transformed Johnson into a stage character for his own artistic purposes; a tension, moreover, that Borges may have felt in the relationship with his own 'Boswell', Casares.

Johnson's appeal to a number of these writers also lay in a distinct mood or tone associated with his writing: the idea of *vanitas*, represented most strongly in 'The Vanity of Human Wishes' (1749). Byron, Eliot, Beckett and Borges shared, in their different ways, Johnson's

sense of the hollowness of experience. It was related to Johnson's sense, encapsulated in *Ecclesiastes* (1:9) that 'there is nothing new under the sun', which Johnson glossed by arguing that 'he must be highly favoured by nature, or by fortune, who says anything not said before'.⁵ This simple idea has been re-interpreted variously in different literary epochs, but, in particular, to highlight the opposition between, what Kraus has termed, 'the singularity, authority, uniqueness' of art, associated with Romanticism and Modernism, and Classicism's contrary emphasis on the importance of tradition and of literary models.⁶ Johnson, seen as exemplifying classical values, was looked to as an ally, firstly, by Byron. Byron attacked Romanticism's emphasis on subjective experience and its claims to have re-invented the world anew, ideas which the Modernists later built upon. Eliot, like Byron, drew upon Johnson's Augustan virtues in arguing against Modernism's focus on originality, which Eliot believed often led to aesthetic incoherence. Borges, like Johnson, believed that history and culture repeated themselves endlessly and was opposed to the Romantic devotion to the particularity of experience. Johnson, Byron, Eliot and Beckett, in this context, all wrote, at times, during periods of warfare, which brought a sense of both repetition and of *vanitas*. Johnson's most famous poem, accordingly, was part of a literature of exhaustion which saw humankind as ineluctably condemned to constantly repeat the destructive errors of the past.

A sense of exhaustion however did not lead to the withering of literary inspiration. In particular, this thesis has argued that reading Johnson was a form of writing. Each writer deployed their own distinct aesthetic register to achieve this. This also enabled them to use

⁵ 'Dryden' in *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958–2019), XXI (2010), p. 448.

⁶ Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), p. 161.

Johnson to help re-orient the literary map, by re-writing Johnson as a contemporary in sympathy with their own artistic agendas. Whilst Johnson sometimes lamented that there was nothing new left to say, his words left a distinct and potent trace. His singular voice also found echoes in the writing of many of these writers. Birkbeck Hill, Arnold and Eliot, even sounded like Johnson in isolated phrases and passages. Responding to Johnson, accordingly, involved a swerve into creative utterance, repeating his words and life differently. As I noted earlier, John Wain, Beryl Bainbridge and David Ferry, amongst others, have continued that reading journey, creating new versions of Johnson which de-familiarise our sense of the man and his work. Eliot, indeed, saw him as ‘the most alien figure’ in his time.⁷ Whether one agrees with that assessment or not, all of the writers considered in this thesis sought to liberate Johnson’s difference and enduring value, a process which is on-going.

⁷ T. S. Eliot, ‘Poetry in the Eighteenth Century’, in *From Dryden to Johnson*, ed. by Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), pp. 271–77 (p. 275).

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