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Theoretical and Practical Biography: Principles, Problems, Processes and the Inscrutable Subject in Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*

by

Markus Joachim Poetzsch

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of English

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Abstract

The following study undertakes an elucidation of the biographic art and career of Samuel Johnson by juxtaposing his theoretical and practical approaches to life writing. In seizing upon the principles by which Johnson, as a literary critic, assessed the value and relevance of biography, and in tracing their influence upon his own biographical endeavours in the *Lives of the English Poets*, the present work explores the author's engagement with the problems inherent not only in the compilation of specific texts, but in the genre of life writing as a whole. Insofar as Johnson's works register the difficulty of their own production, the difficulty, namely, of reconciling and transcribing vastly complex selves, they leave to the individual reader the adjudication of biographical verity. It is precisely through this two-fold revelation of authorial skepticism and human inscrutability that Johnson's 'Lives' derive their modern character.

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommended to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Theoretical and Practical Biography: Principles, Problems, Processes and the Inscrutable Subject in Samuel Johnson's 'Lives of the Poets'* by *Markus Joachim Poetzsch* in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of *Master of Arts*.

Isobel Grundy

Robert Merrett

Marianne Henn

Date MAY 3 0 2000

Acknowledgement

I would heartily like to thank those who reminded me in the midst of my labours to be mindful of a larger world beyond my doors.

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INTRODUCTION

In presenting for analysis the biographical theories and practices of Samuel Johnson, one may have the impression of entering a domain reserved solely for antiquaries or blinkered disciples, a scholarly monastery where reverential labours are pursued largely without notice, a mute space amidst a din of critical antipathy or indifference. The writings, like the man, have, for all their bulk and breadth, been relegated to the dusty shelves and cobwebbed corners of late-twentieth-century literary inquiry, known certainly, but known and studied always in part, influential surely, but not quite modern. Even among the disciples there are some who concede, albeit grudgingly, that "Johnson's most habitual modes of thought and most fundamental philosophical assumptions have surely seemed a denial of the flux, multiplicity, and uniqueness of human experience, of the validity of the highly personal vision, of the possibility of personal (or relative) morality."[1] However one may choose to classify Johnson's 'modes of thought'--an art which appears to require skills far outside the realms of literary or social criticism--there can be few expectations of scholarly merit in succumbing to the genetic fallacy of conflating the writer with his work, particularly when Johnson the writer has been variously caricatured as a blustery, at times tyrannical defender of church and state, a merciless critic treading Lords, Bishops, and female preachers underfoot, and a staunchly conservative moralist lashing out with an admixture of wit and derision at the foibles of humankind. Without commenting on the validity, justness or completeness of such portraits, the critic's "business,"[2] to borrow the language which Johnson applied to his own work as a biographer, must be centered first and foremost on text. And the text, or rather *texts*, in

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[1] William R. Siebenschuh, "Johnson's *Lives* and Modern Students," *Domestick Privacies: Samuel Johnson and the Art of Biography*, ed. David Wheeler (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987) 136-137.

[2] Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the English Poets*, vols. 7 and 8 of *Dr. Johnson's Works* (Oxford English Classics, 1825). 8, 472. (Hereafter *Lives*.)

question here, namely *The Lives of the English Poets*, and, to a lesser extent, Johnson's propadeutic "Lives of Eminent Persons", are such as continue to delight, instruct, and elude the grasp of fleet comprehension.

The enduring character and transhistorical value of Johnson's biographies is, notably, acknowledged even by those who find in their author nothing suggestively modern. T. S. Eliot, for example, despite attributing to Johnson "a positive point of view which is not ours,"[3] places *The Lives of the English Poets* in the foremost ranks of literary criticism:

> Their first value is a value which all study of the past should have for us: that it should make us more conscious of what we are, and of our own limitations, and give us more understanding of the world in which we now live. Their secondary value is, that by studying them, and in so doing attempting to put ourselves at their author's point of view, we may recover some of the criteria of judgment which have been disappearing from the criticism of poetry.[4]

This illumination of the present through a critical engagement with the past, enabling not merely an awakening to, but a transformation of, the moment in which we as readers exist, is a 'value' to which contemporary research on Johnson's life writing has likewise drawn attention. Catherine Parke, for example, educes from the whole of Johnson's literary endeavors, be they generically biographical or not, a prevailing devotion to the practice of 'biographical thinking,' which she defines as an "educat[ion of] oneself over a lifetime in imagining other people's lives and minds."[5] Parke suggests that by imagining others--entailing a twofold recognition of indebtedness and difference--"we empower ourselves to use the present well."[6] In this model, Johnson's *Lives* present

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[3] T. S. Eliot, "Johnson as Critic and Poet," *On Poetry and Poets* (The Noonday Press, 1957) 187.
[4] Eliot 221-2.
[5] Catherine N. Parke, *Samuel Johnson and Biographical Thinking* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991) 2.
[6] Parke 138.

readers with an opportunity not only to attend to the author's "many-voiced conversation with the past,"[7] but to engage that past directly by forming their own dialogical relationship with it.

Though one may suggest that in reading Johnson's *Lives*, or indeed any historical narrative, we do not so much form a dialogue with the past as partake in one which is always already in existence, the indisputable value of Parke's, as well as Eliot's, analysis is its focus on conceptual linkages between past and present, a focus in which the reader's own constructions of meaning are not obscured by notions of authorial eminence. For if it be accepted that Johnson did not write biography in order to reveal himself, then the effect of research which mines these texts exclusively for the author's presence, and pronounces at last that "The pleasure of Johnson's *Lives* is Johnson, not Pope or Addison,"[8] is only to distance the reader from the biographical subject and, consequently, from an awareness of the past within the present. Johnson himself understood the delight of biography as inhering in the reader's capacity to enter into an empathetic relationship, not with the author, but with

> him whose fortune we contemplate; so that we feel, while the deception lasts, whatever motions would be excited by the same good or evil happening to ourselves.[9]

The word 'deception' carries here dual connotations. On one hand, it draws attention to the fictive nature of biography, the idea that because a written life is composed of tropes and figurative language and is selectively arranged, it is necessarily shaped by the author's imagination.[10] The nature of the deception is also, however, dependent on the reader's

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[7] Parke 138.
[8] Ralph Rader, "Literary Form in Factual Narrative: The Example of Boswell's *Johnson*," *Boswell's Life of Johnson: New Questions, New Answers*, ed. John Vance (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985) 33.
[9] Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler* 60, in *Samuel Johnson*, ed. Donald Greene (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 204.
[10] Greg Clingham, "Life and Literature in Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*," *The Cambridge*

imaginative involvement in the text, implying not only an emotive response to what are perceived as common pains or pleasures, but a critical engagement with the very facts of the written life. To borrow Leon Edel's conception, in biography "the reader is made a party to a weighing of evidence."[11] Leaving aside for a moment the important questions of how and to what extent Johnson draws the reader into this 'weighing of evidence'--questions indeed central to the present study in that they elucidate Johnson's biographical methodology *and* modernity--there can be little doubt that without the reader's participation in the biographical narrative, it cannot, despite illumining the past, clarify the present. As Parke notes,

> Johnson believed that knowledge enters the world personally and dramatically, becoming truly ours *only as we think through our own and other people's lives.*[12]

In order to understand how a work like *The Lives of the English Poets* can clarify the present, one must also engage its past, by which I mean not the past of its biographical subjects, but its own historicity, its position in the eighteenth century as a literary text, and a ground-breaking one at that. While Walter Jackson Bate argues that Johnson had already "invented critical biography"[13] with the publication of the *Life of Savage* in 1744, there is little doubt that the appearance of his ten volumes of *Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, to the Works of the English Poets* (1779-81), part of a sixty-volume edition of English poets, reintensified a move away from the long-standing models of hagiographies

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Companion to Samuel Johnson, ed. Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 163; Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse, Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1978) 125; Philip Toynbee, "Novel and Memoir," *Nimbus* 2 (1954): 21; Stephen Spender, *World Within World* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951) 285.

[11] Leon Edel, "The Poetics of Biography," *Contemporary Approaches to English Studies*, ed. Hilda Schiff (London: Heinemann, 1977) 55.

[12] Parke 152 (italics added).

[13] Walter Jackson Bate, *Samuel Johnson* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977) 223.

and seventeenth-century 'pattern' biographies. Produced in the twilight of his life and at the height of his reputation, *The Lives of the English Poets*, to use the title under which the *Prefaces* were later published separately, in many ways defy generic boundaries. Commissioned by established London booksellers who sought mainly to protect their monopoly from the incursion of John Bell's Edinburgh publication of *The Poets of Great Britain Complete from Chaucer to Churchill* (1776-1782),[14] and written, as Johnson himself confessed, "dilatorily and hastily, unwilling to work and working with vigour and haste,"[15] the *Lives* comprise elements of personal, social, and political history, literary and cultural criticism, poetics, aesthetics and didactics. Johnson's tone in the *Lives* has been described as "prudential"[16] and his agenda as politically conservative,[17] yet in his approach to the individual lives and characters he re-embodies there is also evidence of an "astonishing tolerance for [humankind's] dark and unpalatable residues"[18]; it is, in short, a biographical approach governed by what A.O.J. Cockshut termed "salutary humility."[19]

Where Johnson's regard for the innate dignity of any human soul elevates his biographies above the practice of conscious obloquy or careless derision, it neither dulls his critical instincts nor compromises his overarching devotion to veracity. The often cited conclusion to his *Rambler* essay on biography makes this clear:

> If we owe regard to the memory of the dead, there is yet more respect to be paid to knowledge, to virtue, and to truth.[20]

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[14] J.C.D. Clark, *Samuel Johnson: Literature, Religion and English Cultural Politics from the Restoration to Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 24.
[15] Samuel Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, vol. 9 of *Dr. Johnson's Works* (Oxford English Classics, 1825) 271.
[16] Clingham 164.
[17] Clark 233-4.
[18] Gloria Sybil Gross, *This Invisible Riot of the Mind: Samuel Johnson's Psychological Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992) 166.
[19] A.O.J. Cockshut, *Truth to Life: The Art of Biography in the Nineteenth Century* (London: William Collins Sons & Co., 1974) 20. I am indebted to Isobel Grundy for this reference.
[20] *Rambler* 60, Greene 207.

The delineation of truth as a biographical prerequisite does not, however, constitute for Johnson a license to swell a 'life' with whatever data or facts happen to come within the author's reach. In *The Idler* 84, he distinguishes practical from "useless truth," the latter proving little better than falsehood because it conveys "knowledge which [one] cannot apply."[21] For Johnson, applicable knowledge concerns itself not with "vulgar greatness"--that, namely, which is readily discernible to the casual observer--but rather with "domestic privacies [or]...the minute details of daily life."[22]

Although in many ways a departure from earlier biographical models such as that offered by John Toland, who, in his preface to *The Life of John Milton* (1698), disputes the necessity of "relating the ordinary circumstances of [Milton's] life...which are common to him with all other men,"[23] Johnson's emphasis on private life as a revelation of character is not entirely without precedent by the mid-eighteenth century. John Dryden, for example, prefixed his "Life of Plutarch" with a brief commentary on the art of biography in which he suggests that "a descent into minute circumstances, and trivial passages of life...[is] natural to this way of writing."[24] Of still greater relevance is the little-known work of Roger North, whose prefatory remarks to the lives of his brothers, written 1710-30,[25] anticipate much of Johnson's theorizing about the practice and potential value of biography. North, like Johnson, recognized in the perusal of private lives a far greater benefit than that offered by histories of state, because, as he notes, "the latter contain little if any thing, comparate or *applicable* to instruct a private economy, or

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[21] Samuel Johnson, *The Idler* 84, in *Samuel Johnson*, ed. Donald Greene (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 298.
[22] *Rambler* 60, Greene 205.
[23] John Toland, *The Life of John Milton* (1698), excerpted in *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism 1560-1960*, ed. James L. Clifford (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962) 21.
[24] John Dryden, *Plutarch's Lives, Translated from the Greek by Several Hands* (1683-6), vol. 1, excerpted in *Biography as an Art* 17.
[25] Clifford, *Biography as an Art* xii.

tending to make a man either wiser or more cautelous [sic], in his own proper concerns."[26] Should biographical inquiry turn to figures of historical eminence, it must, North urges, seek out the private face of public renown:

> What signifies it to us, how many battles Alexander fought. It were more to the purpose to say how often he was drunk, and then we might from the ill consequences to him incline to be sober.[27]

Embedded here are two assumptions which were to inform Johnson's own biographical endeavors: first, an expectation of a common readership ("us"), meaning uniformity not simply in terms of class, but in the very conditions of life, the fundamentals of human existence; and second, a belief in the transformative power of text. To both notions I shall return in greater detail as they, along with the concern for 'useful truth' and the focus on 'domestic privacies,' form the main theoretical pillars of Johnsonian biography.

The affinity between North's and Johnson's biographical thinking charts in some sense a growing disaffection with both the status and the quality of life writing in the early eighteenth century. Still labouring in a field deemed by Dryden, among others, as "inferior"[28] to annals and state history, and forced to compete with the purported 'life writing' of novels such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Henry Fielding's *History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749), eighteenth-century biographers wrote with little expectation of being widely read. Johnson, interestingly, attributed the public's apathy not to a particular distaste for life writing, but rather to a general aversion to bad writing. In *Rambler* 60, he offers a withering account of biographical practice in his day:

> biography has often been allotted to writers who seem very little acquainted with the nature of their task, or very negligent about the performance. They rarely afford any other account than might be collected from public papers, but imagine themselves writing a life when they exhibit

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[26] Roger North, General Preface to *Life of the Lord Keeper North* (n.d.), excerpted in *Biography as an Art* 27 (italics added).
[27] North, *Biography as an Art* 31.
[28] Dryden, *Biography as an Art* 17.

> a chronological series of actions or preferments; and so little regard the manners or behaviour of their heroes that more knowledge may be gained of a real man's character by a short conversation with one of his servants, than from a formal and studied narrative, begun with his pedigree and ended with his funeral.[29]

It is precisely because Johnson recognized in biographical writing an unparalleled capacity "to diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition,"[30] that he placed upon its practitioners a tremendous weight of responsibility. As Isobel Grundy suggests, Johnson demanded of a biographer qualities no less sublime than those ascribed by Imlac to a true poet:[31]

> [K]nowledge of nature is only half the task...he must be acquainted likewise with all the modes of life. His character requires that he estimate the happiness and misery of every condition; observe the power of all the passions in all their combinations, and trace the changes of the human mind as they are modified by various institutions and accidental influences of climate or custom, from the spriteliness of infancy to the despondence of decrepitude.[32]

In light of these admittedly unattainable expectations, Johnson's own biographical labours are indeed remarkable. Measuring Johnson's written lives against those of his contemporaries, James Boswell concludes that "he excelled...all who have attempted that species of composition;"[33] measuring these texts against others in Johnson's diverse corpus of work, Gloria Gross delineates biography as his "most accomplished genre."[34] Remarkable is not only the quality of Johnson's life writing, but its sheer quantity. Before completing the fifty-two biographies that comprised *The Lives of the English Poets* in 1781, he had already written eight shorter lives for the *Gentleman's Magazine*, beginning

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[29] *Rambler* 60, Greene 206.
[30] *Rambler* 60, Greene 204.
[31] Isobel Grundy, "'Acquainted with all the Modes of Life': The Difficulty of Biography," *Writing the Lives of Writers*, ed. Warwick Gould and Thomas F. Staley (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998) 108.
[32] Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*, in *Samuel Johnson*, ed. Donald Greene (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 352.
[33] James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. R.W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) 181.
[34] Gross 140.

in 1738,[35] the "Life of Cheynel" for *The Student* (1751), the "King of Prussia" for the *Literary Magazine* (1756), as well as a dozen or more sketches of physicians' lives for Robert James' *Medicinal Dictionary*. If one adds to this considerable list Johnson's many unfulfilled biographical projects and proposals,[36] not to mention works like *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, *The Rambler*, *The Idler*, and *Rasselas*, in which 'life writing' functions both implicitly and explicitly as an epistemological framework, a pedagogical methodology, and/or a literary motif, the image that emerges is of a writer profoundly interested in the foundations of his present, meaning not the grand narratives of nation building, but the minute details and dealings of humanity, the tender beginnings of genius, the flowering, misuse or neglect of individual talent, the struggle to inscribe life with meaning or sometimes merely to live, the swelling of hope, the hobbling of joy, the turn from strength to decline to decrepitude, endings swift and slow, the ineradicable legacy of text. It is in the minuteness of their focus that Johnson's biographies reveal a contagious fascination with life and living.

While few critics would attempt to argue that such themes have ceased to operate upon our modern consciousness, the question of Johnson's contemporary relevance is not so easily dismissed. Whatever his spheres of study may have been, Johnson's 'point of view,' to return to Eliot's notion, is that by which his modern sensibility or character is measured. While one should hardly expect scholarly consensus on the question of what constitutes and conveys authorial 'point of view,' a typical discussion might begin by focusing on the style, diction and tone of a given work, then draw upon other texts for evidence and, finally, shift the analysis to the author--that elusive figure behind the text, dead perhaps, but not necessarily divested of all life or significance, existing still in

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[35] This excludes the *Life of Savage* (1744), which is numbered among *The Lives of the English Poets*.

[36] See Robert Folkenflik, *Samuel Johnson, Biographer* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978) 23.

someone's perhaps inherited recollections, in a personal letter, a dusty portrait. If, for example, one wished to ascertain Johnson's 'point of view' on pastoral poetry, a consultation of *Ramblers* 36 and 37, a few snippets from the lives of "Cowley," "A. Philips" and "Shenstone," and a brief glimpse into Boswell's *Life of Johnson* would perhaps yield sufficient proof that though he esteemed the eclogues of Virgil, he found in their imitations little improvement, and considered the genre as a whole to be rather one of pleasure than instruction, given its inherently delimiting subject matter and imagery. To attempt a similar exegesis of Johnson's biographies in order to discover his perspectives on human nature, character, and the struggle of living is quite another matter. There is, particularly in the *Lives*, such a range of topics and profusion of personalities that no single 'point of view' is possible. More significantly, even individual lives are inscribed with such complexity--what Martin Maner terms Johnson's "affective ambiguity"[37]--that delineations of human character or motivation are ultimately left open to the reader's judgment. While Johnson may speak unhesitatingly of the quality and value of his subjects' poetry, he neither educes their character from their work, nor, when revealing private life, stamps their character with certainty. That the shorter 'Lives' are necessarily uncertain or inconclusive in their elucidation of human character is surely no surprise when one considers the dearth of materials available to Johnson; yet even the longer biographies of Milton, Dryden, Addison, Savage, Swift and Pope evince a profound skepticism about the workings of the human mind and the notion of a cohesive and knowable self. Johnson's modernity, I will argue, lies precisely in the complication of his biographical portraits, in his willingness to sustain opposition and contradiction, in the juxtaposition of his appeal to a common humanity and his fracturing of the individual self, in the invitation to readers to seek their own truth in the very lapses of his knowledge.

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[37] Martin Maner, *The Philosophical Biographer: Doubt and Dialectic in Johnson's* Lives of the Poets (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988) 25.

CHAPTER 1: JOHNSON'S BIOGRAPHIC PRINCIPLES

In biography, as in all literary genres, Johnson maintained a set of principles which, distinct from the conventions by which any species of writing is necessarily governed, imbue his *Lives* with spirit. Set forth most clearly in *Rambler* 60 and *Idler* 84, and expounded in the individual biographies of Cowley, Dryden, Addison, Congreve, Pope, Thomson, Gray and others, these principles reflect Johnson's theorizing about how a life *should* be written, regardless of the temporal distance between biographer and subject, or the want of knowledge, either personal or otherwise, from which that life is reassembled. Although Johnson evokes notions of an ideal biographer by juxtaposing his principles or theoretical prerequisites--namely, the devotion to 'useful' truth, the emphasis on 'domestic privacies,' the assumption of uniformity in the human condition, and the belief in the transformative power of text--against the inherent difficulties of a mode of composition which depends for its excellence on incidents "volatile and evanescent...such as soon escape the memory, and are rarely transmitted by tradition,"[38] he himself wrote with the conviction that any life could prove delightful and instructive if approached impartially. Testimonies motivated by friendship Johnson distrusted largely, as indicated in *Idler* 84, because "many temptations to falsehood will occur in the disguise of passions too specious to fear much resistance."[39] Although not opposed in principle to narratives of tribute or commendation, he did not include such works under the rubric of life writing:

> If a man is to write *A Panegyrick*, he may keep vices out of sight; but if he professes to write *A Life*, he must represent it really as it was.[40]

The conceptualization of biography as a representation of what 'really' was--a veritable mirror unto the past--necessitates an engagement with Johnson's understanding

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[38] *Rambler* 60, Greene 207.
[39] *Idler* 84, Greene 299.
[40] Boswell 840.

of textual truth. Clearly, he did not believe that a writer of lives could ever have at his/her disposal all the facts and details of another's existence, or hope to evoke merely through words the exact semblance of a human soul. Biographical truth, in Johnson's terms, is at all times grounded in the reality of human indeterminacies, of motives unknown and actions unrecorded, of recollections vague, conflated or false, of knowledge delimited and experience indescribable. These inherent epistemic gaps, Johnson argues, reveal themselves even in our characterizations of the living:

> We know how few can portray a living acquaintance except by his most prominent and observable particularities, and the grosser features of his mind; and it may be easily imagined how much of this little knowledge may be lost in imparting it, and how soon a succession of copies will lose all resemblance of the original.[41]

Biographical truth, then, is not the truth of the 'original' but the truth of the 'copy'. True copies approximate but cannot duplicate; sketched from imperfect knowledge with coarse, at times uneven strokes, they hint at what is lost and irretrievable rather than supplying deficiencies with conjecture or fancy. Commenting, for example, on Dryden's sudden conversion to Catholicism after the accession of King James, Johnson neither condemns nor exculpates his subject, suggesting merely that "inquiries into the heart are not for man."[42] Having numbered Dryden among the "panegyrists of usurpation"[43] early in the 'Life'--a comment indeed justified by his subject's political malleability--Johnson refuses to speculate on his sincerity in matters of faith, that being a 'truth' outside the realm of biographical knowledge. Interestingly, when Johnson *does* speculate, as in the case of Dryden's apparent "want [of] book-learning," he founds his assertions not on a sense of self-evident and indisputable truth, but on "atoms of probability"[44] which the reader is

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[41] *Rambler* 60, Greene 207.
[42] *Lives* 7, 279. A similar comment on the inscrutability of human motives is offered in the "Life of Cowley" (*Lives* 7, 12).
[43] *Lives* 7, 247.
[44] *Lives* 7, 306.

encouraged, by perusing Dryden's works, to discover for him/herself. While Johnson is confident in the strength of his opinions, he self-consciously distinguishes inference from truth, and asks the reader to do likewise.

If biographical truth cannot be written, either through reasoned steps or fanciful leaps, into the gaps of available knowledge, it likewise cannot be reduced to a mere sum of all that *is* known about another's life. To compile a catalogue of dates and facts is not, in Johnson's terms, the equivalent of life writing. Biographical truth, instead, lies in the selection and arrangement of 'useful' knowledge--that namely which is commonly recognized and hence applicable to the reader's own life. Johnson's understanding of 'applicability' may be deduced from the examples offered in *Rambler* 60 of biographically use*less* truth:

> I know not well what advantage posterity can receive from the only circumstance by which Tickell has distinguished Addison from the rest of mankind, 'the irregularity of his pulse': nor can I think myself overpaid for the time spent in reading the life of Malherbe by being enabled to relate, after the learned biographer, that Malherbe had two predominant opinions; one, that the looseness of a single woman might destroy all the boast of ancient descent; the other, that the French beggars made use very improperly and barbarously of the phrase, 'noble gentleman', because either word included the sense of both.[45]

The account of Addison's irregular pulse conveys inapplicable knowledge because, in endeavoring to individualize the biographical subject--what Johnson clearly deems essential to life writing--Tickell has so utterly removed him from 'the rest of mankind' that the reader has no greater sense of Addison than if he were a horse or a houseplant. Given that biography, in Johnson's terms, ought to concern itself primarily with the elucidation of human character, a text which distinguishes its subject by corporal anomalies offers to the reader little more than might be gleaned from a medical report. Though Johnson himself alludes periodically to his subjects' physical characteristics, as when he mentions

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[45] *Rambler* 60, Greene 206.

Swift's "muddy complexion, which, though he washed himself with oriental scrupulosity, did not look clear,"[46] or the "natural deformity"[47] which made Pope's life a 'long disease,' these descriptions are always intrinsically tied to character, the muddiness of Swift's face reflecting the vagaries of his mind, and Pope's twisted body serving only to invigorate his intellectual puissance. What the reader may infer about Addison from the irregularity of his pulse, is, as Johnson suggests, much less clear.

As to the 'predominant opinions' of Malherbe, Johnson deems them of little value to the reader because they reveal nothing more personal or intimate than a mind given to trifles. Much like Addison's pulse, these convictions, though perhaps unique, shed no distinct light on human character. In the first instance, Malherbe appears to deride the vanity of 'ancient descent,' while in the second, mocking the ignorance of the beggarly classes. How such unconnected details "diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition"[48] is unclear. It must of course be added that Johnson evinces in his own biographies a prevailing distrust in the verity and reliability of opinions. Nowhere is this made more plain than in the "Life of Waller":

> Pointed axioms, and acute replies, fly loose about the world, and are assigned, successively, to those whom it may be the fashion to celebrate.[49]

The trivial details of physiognomy or reported opinion are ultimately 'useless' because they do not instruct readers in the art of living--'real life' being for Johnson the true test of all acquired knowledge.[50] Having declared in his celebrated Preface to *The Plays of William Shakespeare* (1765) that "The end of writing is to instruct,"[51] Johnson recognized in life writing an instructive capacity of the highest order. Comprised, as he

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[46] *Lives* 8, 222.
[47] *Lives* 8, 309.
[48] *Rambler* 60, Greene 204.
[49] *Lives* 7, 200.
[50] Boswell 624.
[51] Samuel Johnson, 'Preface' to *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, in *Samuel Johnson*, ed. Donald Greene (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 424.

notes, of "Those parallel circumstances, and kindred images, to which we readily conform our minds," biography offers what general history does not: "lessons applicable to private life."[52] The nature of these lessons is most obviously moral:

> every man has, in the mighty mass of the world, great numbers in the same condition with himself, to whom his mistakes and miscarriages, escapes and expedients, would be of immediate and apparent use.[53]

By providing the reader with everyday examples of 'mistakes' and 'escapes'--that is, the wisdom of experience without its concomitant pain--biography serves as a moral compass by which to direct future actions. There is for Johnson no species of knowledge more valuable or indeed natural than that which potentiates the exercise of virtue. His pedagogical corrective to the theories of learning espoused by Cowley and Milton makes this clear:

> But the truth is, that the knowledge of external nature, and the sciences which that knowledge requires or includes, are not the great or the frequent business of the human mind. Whether we provide for action or conversation, whether we wish to be useful or pleasing, the first requisite is the religious and moral knowledge of right and wrong; the next is an acquaintance with the history of mankind, and with those examples which may be said to embody truth, and prove, by events, the reasonableness of opinions. Prudence and justice are virtues and excellencies of all times and of all places; we are perpetually moralists, but we are geometricians only by chance.[54]

Of significance to Johnson's biographical practice is the instructive value here assigned not only to the eternal virtues of 'Prudence and justice,' but also to a knowledge of 'wrong.' Useful truth inheres as much in examples of human weakness, failure, even depravity, as in reports of noble undertakings and great accomplishments. Johnson's justification for having included in the "Life of Addison" an account of his subject's small-mindedness in

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[52] *Rambler* 60, Greene 204.
[53] *Rambler* 60, Greene 205.
[54] *Lives* 7, 76.

reclaiming by legal means an outstanding debt from Richard Steele, speaks to the benefit of bad examples:

> If nothing but the bright side of characters should be shewn, we should sit down in despondency, and think it utterly impossible to imitate them in *any thing*. The sacred writers...related the vicious as well as the virtuous actions of men; which had this moral effect, that it kept mankind from *despair*, into which otherwise they would naturally fall, were they not supported by the recollection that others had offended like themselves, and by penitence and amendment of life had been restored to the favour of Heaven.[55]

Useful truth, then, is centered on representations of human character which alternately invite and caution against imitation. For Johnson, it is in the admixture of exemplary strength and common weakness that biographical portraits attain their true-to-life complexity, and it is precisely this complexity which instructs without failing to delight.

A final aspect of useful truth, captured in Johnson's own life writing, is what Greg Clingham terms "commemorativeness."[56] In a sense, all biography commemorates simply by bringing into the present a remembrance of the past, but for Johnson this act takes on an almost redemptive significance. Commenting on his methodology in presenting the fifty-two poets that comprise the *Lives*, Bate suggests that "we sense an instinctive desire to rescue them, if only briefly, from extinction in the sludge of time."[57] Of particular significance, however, is Johnson's care in preserving the memory not simply of his biographical subjects, but also of those who, despite existing on the periphery of each 'Life,' helped to shape its course by promoting the fruition of literary genius. The "Life of Addison," for example, begins with mention of two obscure educators, Mr. Naish at Ambrosebury and Mr. Taylor at Salisbury, inserted by Johnson because, as he takes pains to clarify, "Not to name the school or the masters of men illustrious for literature, is a kind

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[55] Boswell 1104-5.
[56] Clingham 188.
[57] Bate 531.

of historical fraud, by which honest fame is injuriously diminished."[58] The 'fraud' of which Johnson speaks is acclaim given to genius alone, an act which strips those instrumental in its development of all meaning and thereby, to borrow Parke's notion, "unpeople[s] the past."[59] Such fraud, ironically, also distorts the truth of genius by disconnecting it from the necessity of instruction and diligence. Although Johnson, in defining genius as "a mind of large general powers," suggests that its direction is "accidentally determined,"[60] he clearly believed its development to be contingent on human endeavor. Biographical inquiry, therefore, which attends exclusively to the fruits of knowledge without acknowledging its seeds and sowers, is for Johnson essentially ahistorical.

The concern with commemorativeness in the *Lives* extends not merely to the facilitators of genius, but even to fellow biographers. While Johnson writes in the main *against* the work of previous historians, offering his texts as correctives to accounts deemed biased, incomplete or otherwise wanting in intellectual weight or instructive value, the "Life of Parnell" affords a poignant example of the author's deference to a fellow life writer and friend:

> What such an author has told, who would tell again? I have made an abstract from his larger narrative; and have this gratification from my attempt, that it gives me an opportunity of paying tribute to the memory of [Oliver] Goldsmith.[61]

The 'tribute' here paid involves a simultaneous process of relocation and reanimation: a dead writer is brought to life in the present moment, redeemed if ever so briefly from the waste of time to speak in his own words. Such commemoration, as Clingham suggests, is political in nature "because it shifts the locus of authority from the material and temporal

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[58] *Lives* 7, 418.
[59] Catherine N. Parke, "Johnson, Imlac, and Biographical Thinking," *Domestick Privacies: Samuel Johnson and the Art of Biography*, ed. David Wheeler (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987) 97.
[60] *Lives* 7, 1-2.
[61] *Lives* 7, 398.

to the eternally embodied, by giving voice to others, empowering them to manifest themselves."[62] The true biographer, then, does not so much recreate the past as enable it to speak itself into being.

The past which for Johnson speaks most clearly of human character and thus instructively to the reader, is, as noted above, centered not on public renown or 'vulgar greatness,' but on the details of everyday life "where exterior appendages are cast aside, and men excel each other only by prudence and by virtue."[63] The notion of 'exterior appendages' elucidates what Johnson saw as a disjunction between public and private self, the truth of the latter, the very object of biographical inquiry, being alternately confused and obscured by manifestations of the former. Where in public life the constraints of obligation and responsibility in a sense facilitate the display, if not the exercise, of virtue, private life brings to light

> The mischievous consequences of vice and folly, of irregular desires and predominant passions...which tell not how any man became great, but how he was made happy; not how he lost the favour of his prince, but how he became discontented with himself.[64]

While Johnson was intimately aware of the biographer's duty to cultural, political, even national history, a duty requiring an earnest engagement with the public life of private individuals, he evinces a yet greater concern for the reader's pleasure and instruction, and thus offers 'Lives' which, regardless of their grandeur, are distinctively human. Johnson's focus on 'domestic privacies' as a source of 'true' character in many ways anticipates what modern biographical theorists delineate as "the personal mythology of the subject"[65]--a belief, namely, in an inner core of truth, which, if it could be unlocked, would reveal motives, mind and character. As Ira Bruce Nadel argues, the myth of the

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[62] Clingham 189.
[63] *Rambler* 60, Greene 205.
[64] *Idler* 84, Greene 298.
[65] Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984) 176.

subject inheres in the disjunction or conflict between public and private self.[66] Insofar as biography is devoted to a reconciliation of this conflict, it may be seen as a form of demythologization.

Johnson's own efforts to demythologize his subjects by illumining the individual behind the mask of public renown were seen by some of his contemporaries as a violation of the dignity of greatness. Robert Potter's attack on the minute focus of the *Lives*, for example, aims to re-entrench the notion that only lofty deeds and unblemished character have instructive value:

> In reading the life of any eminent person we wish to be informed of the qualities which gave him superiority over other men: when we are poorly put off with paltry circumstances, which are common to him with common men, we receive neither instruction nor pleasure. We know that the greatest men are subject to the infirmities of human nature equally with the meanest; why then are these infirmities recorded? Can it be of any importance to us to be told how many pair of stockings the author of the Essay of Man wore?[67]

Had Johnson seen fit to answer his critic, he would perhaps have suggested that a revelation of 'infirmities,' such as Pope's emaciated legs, does not so much diminish the dignity of greatness as contextualize it, and render it thereby comprehensible to the reader. It must also be added that Johnson's emphasis on 'domestic privacies' is not reducible to a voyeuristic fascination with human weakness or failure. Johnson does not attend to the legs in order to hobble the man; rather he seeks in private moments those details of character which common fame has blotted out. Thus he makes mention of Addison's part in the 'barring-out' of his schoolmaster, of Prior's long cohabitation with "a despicable drab of the lowest species,"[68] and of Swift's "tyrannick peevishness"[69] in the treatment of his servants.

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[66] Nadel 176.
[67] Robert Potter, *An Inquiry into some Passages in Dr. Johnson's "Lives of the Poets": Particularly His Observations on Lyric Poetry and the Odes of Gray* (London, 1783) 4.
[68] *Lives* 8, 14.

Of equal significance, however, are the accounts of hidden virtues and secret benevolence in the *Lives*. The reference to Thomson's habitual idleness, for example, is counterbalanced by mention of the poet's extraordinary affection for his sisters, to whom, as Johnson relates, the bulk of the profits from his *Coriolanus* were remitted out of fraternal devotion. The private letter offered as proof of Thomson's tenderness is presented by Johnson "with much pleasure" because it allows him to commemorate not only his subject's good character, but also "the friendly assistance of Mr. Boswell, from whom I received it."[70] A similar tone of effusive delight pervades the portrait of Isaac Watts, one of four poets added to the *Lives* by Johnson's recommendation. In drawing Watts' character, Johnson takes note of his "natural temper," yet only to commend him for having mastered it by "habitual practice."[71] The ensuing description of Watts' clandestine charity discovers a level of authorial esteem perhaps unequalled in the *Lives*:

> His tenderness appeared in his attention to children and to the poor. To the poor, while he lived in the family of his friend, he allowed the third part of his annual revenue, though the whole was not a hundred a year; and for children he condescended to lay aside the scholar, the philosopher, and the wit, to write little poems of devotion, and systems of instruction, adapted to their wants and capacities, from the dawn of reason, through its gradations of advance in the morning of life. Every man acquainted with the common principles of human action, will look with veneration on the writer, who is at one time combating Locke, and at another making a catechism for children in their fourth year. A voluntary descent from the dignity of science is, perhaps, the hardest lesson that humility can teach.[72]

A final example of the capacity of Johnson's 'domestic' revelations to ennoble rather than belittle character is found in the "Life of Collins". The fact that Johnson here draws upon personal knowledge imparts to this 'Life,' much like that of Savage, a greater diversity of those 'volatile and evanescent' incidents which add texture, vigour, and

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[69] *Lives* 8, 222.
[70] *Lives* 8, 374.
[71] *Lives* 8, 384.
[72] *Lives* 8, 384.

certitude to biography. Commenting on the decline of Collins' life, when, debilitated by poverty and depression, the poet was confined to an asylum, Johnson begins by suggesting that these years "cannot be remembered but with pity and sadness."[73] The ensuing account of Johnson's visit to him at Islington, however, reveals a man not to be pitied, but rather emulated:

> he had withdrawn from study, and travelled with no other book than an English testament, such as children carry to school: when his friend took it into his hand, out of curiosity, to see what companion a man of letters had chosen, 'I have but one book,' said Collins, 'but that is the best'.[74]

The apparent regression of a 'man of letters' to a simple schoolboy is drawn with such strength and dignity that Collins' incipient madness is transformed into a kind of spiritual clairvoyance. In choosing to close the description of Collins' character with this image and, more importantly, with the poet's own words, Johnson elevates him above the din of disrepute and ridicule to a position of perseverant and indeed triumphant humanity.

Ultimately, then, the object of Johnson's sharpened focus in the *Lives* is not to denigrate but rather to clarify the notion of greatness. Underlying this process is an assumption--intuitively reasonable but often overwhelmed by the glamour of renown--that literary excellence does not connote excellence of character. In *Rambler* 14, Johnson in fact speaks of a "striking and manifest contrariety between the life of an author and his writings."[75] In order to account for this discord, he points to the fact that we typically live and write under very different circumstances, and in very different states of mind. In the "Life of Savage," for example, Johnson offers the following as an explanation of the gross inconsistencies between man and writer:

> His actions, which were generally precipitate, were often blameable; but his

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[73] *Lives* 8, 402.
[74] *Lives* 8, 403.
[75] *Works* 2, 66.

> writings, being the productions of study, uniformly tended to the exaltation of the mind, and the propagation of morality and piety.[76]

Actions, in other words, being rash either by choice or necessity, are perpetually subject to error; writing, conversely, permits the leisure of correction and refinement because it is grounded in the wisdom of study and involves a state of continual deliberation. Johnson takes this point up again in the "Life of Pope" when he considers the common assumption that "the true characters of men may be found in their letters."[77] In contesting this belief, he again distinguishes the act of writing from the round of daily life and social intercourse:

> In the eagerness of conversation, the first emotions of the mind often burst out before they are considered; in the tumult of business, interest and passion have their genuine effect; but *a friendly letter is a calm and deliberate performance in the cool of leisure*, in the stillness of solitude, and surely no man sits down to depreciate by design his own character.[78]

By assigning even to intimate epistolary discourse a performative quality, Johnson hints at the elusiveness of the writer's true self. For if 'genuine' character imprints itself more discernibly on the 'business' of everyday life than on those acts by which greatness is measured, namely the effusions of the mind, then what is commonly known of an author is to be trusted least in revealing who that author is. Hence Johnson's interest in the domestic sphere as a source of reliable characterization, and his attention to acts which not only contextualize public notions of greatness, but serve to evoke a sense of "private greatness."

On a larger scope, what the divisions between public and private conduct, between writer and actor, between textualized and lived virtue elucidate, is a notion of fragmented or disjunctive selfhood, a notion typically associated with modernism or postmodernism. While the determination of Johnson's biographical modernity necessitates a far more detailed engagement with the individual 'Lives,' one may, from analyzing his theoretical

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[76] *Lives* 8, 144.
[77] *Lives* 8, 314.
[78] *Lives* 8, 314 (italics added).

perspectives on the practice of life writing, educe what Parke terms "family resemblances between his thinking and our own."[79] A prominent 'resemblance' is Johnson's understanding that the biographer's task is not to assemble a cohesive self, which is essentially a process of myth-*making*, eliding the complexities of identity. Johnson, rather, endeavors to present for the reader's consideration the various manifestations of selfhood, each serving to contextualize the other. It is only by weighing the truth of private greatness against that of public renown that a genuine and instructive semblance of the self--a true copy--emerges.

To speak of Johnson's biographical theories as encoding the idea of a disjunctive selfhood is not to suggest that he saw human nature as likewise fractured, divergent, or individualized. On the contrary, the particularities of self-expression are always, in Johnson's terms, grounded in the commonalities of the human condition:

> there is such an uniformity in the state of man, considered apart from adventitious and separable decorations and disguises, that there is scarce any possibility of good or ill, but is common to human kind. A great part of the time of those who are placed at the greatest distance by fortune, or by temper, must unavoidably pass in the same manner....We are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure.[80]

Between the life writer, the subject and the reader, then, there exists a bond of common knowledge and experience which serves to facilitate the collection, communication and comprehension of biographical truth. The inclusive 'We' in a sense pares away the 'decorations' of greatness and the 'disguises' of public renown, and shifts biographical discourse from the remote and particular to the immediate and universal. The *Lives*, clearly, are less a celebration of literary genius than a general inquiry into the minds of men who wrote verse. Johnson's interest in extraordinary gifts and performances is never

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[79] Parke, *Biographical Thinking* 6.
[80] *Rambler* 60, Greene 205.

indulged to the obscuration of what he deems universally relevant, intelligible and instructive. Indeed, his critique of the metaphysical poets in the "Life of Cowley" seizes precisely on their inattentiveness to what is common, natural, fundamentally human:

> As they were wholly employed on something unexpected and surprising, they had no regard to that *uniformity of sentiment which enables us to conceive and excite the pains and pleasures of other minds*: they never inquired what, on any occasion, they should have said or done; but wrote rather as beholders, than partakers of human nature....[81]

Holding to the maxim that "Great thoughts are always general,"[82] Johnson recognizes true genius not in the blaze of novelty, but in the evocation and embrace of common passions.

Perhaps nowhere in Johnson's corpus of work is the value of general knowledge more clearly set forth than in his engagement with the figure of Shakespeare, who, as Clingham notes, is "a real though implicit presence in the *Lives*."[83] Appearing as a midpoint between the publication of *Rambler* 60 and the completion of the *Lives*, Johnson's Preface to *The Plays of William Shakespeare* grounds the poetic goals of delight and instruction in the exploration of human nature and the delineation of common knowledge:

> Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature. Particular manners can be known to few, and therefore few only can judge how nearly they are copied. The irregular combinations of fanciful invention may delight a while...but the pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted, and the mind can only repose on the stability of truth.[84]

Significant here is Johnson's underpinning of 'general nature' with the 'stability of truth,' something which the particularities of existence, if copied by the poet or the biographer, do not so readily afford. Shakespeare's genius, Johnson argues, lies in his capacity to

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[81] *Lives* 7, 16 (italics added).
[82] *Lives* 7, 16.
[83] Clingham 167.
[84] *Shakespeare*, Greene 420.

create characters that are "the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find."[85] Although seemingly individuated and particularized, these characters meld so fluently with the reader's understanding and experience of humanity, that they transcend mere individuals and comprise for Johnson an entire "species."[86] A similar point is made in *Rasselas* when Imlac enlarges upon the ideals of poetic practice:

> 'The business of the poet...is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances....He is to exhibit in his portraits of nature such prominent and striking features as recall the original to every mind; and must neglect the minuter discriminations, which one may have remarked, and another have neglected, for those characteristics which are alike obvious to vigilance and carelessness.'[87]

What Johnson advocates is not a poetry of the lowest common denominator, not a poetry of the banal or painfully obvious, but rather a poetry, rooted in the truth of general nature, which acknowledges, addresses and embraces the reader's humanity.

Biography, by extension, must likewise concern itself with drawing recognizably human portraits if it is to be of 'immediate and apparent use' to the reader. Not only must the vicissitudes of the written life be in some sense familiar to the reader, but the feelings or passions of the biographical subject must be capable of eliciting an empathetic response. As Johnson notes at the outset of *Rambler* 60:

> Our passions are...more strongly moved, in proportion as we can more readily adopt the pains and pleasures proposed to our minds, by recognizing them as once our own, or considering them as naturally incident to our state of life. It is not easy for the most artful writer to give us an interest in happiness or misery which we think ourselves never likely to feel, and with which we have never yet been made acquainted.[88]

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[85] *Shakespeare*, Greene 421.
[86] *Shakespeare*, Greene 421.
[87] *Rasselas*, Greene 352.
[88] *Rambler* 60, Greene, 204.

In order to 'move' the reader's passions, the biographer must first of all represent them in the biographical subject. A failure to do so, as Clingham notes, is for Johnson a failure of imagination and of art.[89] Indeed, the instructive value of biography hinges on the extent to which the written life approximates a lived life. True copies do not simply reinvoke a forgotten past but also serve to edify the present.

Johnson's belief in the power of text to transform the reader's present informs much of his literary criticism in the *Lives*. Works, such as those of the metaphysical poets, which revel in the abstruse and draw their imagery not from common life or nature, lose what Johnson terms "the grandeur of generality" and become "ridiculous"[90] rather than instructive. Even Milton, despite being ranked above Cowley and Donne in regard to poetic design and performance, incurs some of Johnson's severest criticism for running at times after "remote allusions and obscure opinions."[91] *Lycidas*, for example, fails to awaken in the Johnsonian reader a sense of emotional kinship because its effusions are not those of "*real* passion."[92] Devoid, as Johnson argues, of both nature and truth, the poem founders in regions of "inherent improbability"[93]--regions indeed too remote for common understanding. Even *Paradise Lost*, a work whose greatness, Johnson claims, is so supreme that "all other greatness shrinks away [before it],"[94] is not left unscathed by the critic's pen. While it is acknowledged that the poem's original plan "admits no human manners, till the fall,...[and therefore] can give little assistance to human conduct," this seemingly inescapable condition of poetic design becomes for Johnson an "inconvenience"[95] of considerable proportions. The fact that

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[89] Clingham 171.
[90] *Lives* 7, 38.
[91] *Lives* 7, 119.
[92] *Lives* 7, 119 (italics added).
[93] *Lives* 7, 120.
[94] *Lives* 7, 126
[95] *Lives* 7, 130, 134.

> The reader finds no transaction in which he can be engaged; beholds no condition in which he can, by any effort of imagination, place himself; [and] has, therefore, little natural curiosity or sympathy,[96]

diminishes not only the instructive potential of the poem, but also its pleasure. Johnson's suggestion that after perusing *Paradise Lost* we "retire harassed and overburdened, and look elsewhere for recreation,"[97] speaks indeed to a failure of the poetry of the sublime to make immediate and meaningful contributions to the everyday life of its readers.

While Johnson may educe the greatness of Milton's poetry from its capacity to "raise the thoughts above sublunary cares or pleasures,"[98] he likewise recognizes the reader's need for more practical guidance in the inevitable descent to the business of life. Here again Johnson's model seems to be Shakespeare, "the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life."[99] While other dramatists converse in "a language which was never heard, upon topics which will never arise in the commerce of mankind," Shakespeare, Johnson suggests, appears to have gleaned his dialogue "out of common conversation, and common occurrences."[100] Again, it must be noted that Johnson's understanding of the term 'common' is not here laden with connotations of banality; implied rather is an intimate familiarity with, or fluency in, the discourse of human nature. In order to sharpen the distinction between the common and the commonplace, one need only consider Johnson's assessment of the works of Nicholas Rowe, one of the minor poets and tragedians featured in the *Lives*:

> I know not that there can be found in his plays any deep search into nature, any accurate discriminations of kindred qualities, or nice display of passion in its progress; all is general and undefined.[101]

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[96] *Lives* 7, 134.
[97] *Lives* 7, 135.
[98] *Lives* 7, 130.
[99] *Shakespeare*, Greene 421.
[100] *Shakespeare*, Greene 421.
[101] *Lives* 7, 416.

Where the engagement with general nature lacks insight and penetration, it becomes merely insipid. Shakespeare, by contrast, "has not only shown human nature as it acts in real exigencies, but as it would be found in trials to which it cannot be exposed."[102] What Shakespeare's 'mirror of life' reflects, then, is not simply the world as it is, but as it may be, moving from realms of familiarity to conceivability. The instructive value of such writing is thus twofold, rooting the imagination in the truth of general nature, yet also giving it wings to transcend the boundaries of immediate experience and habitual sentiments. As Johnson suggests in summing up the praise of Shakespeare's art:

> he who has mazed his imagination, in following the phantoms which other writers raise up before him, may here be cured of his delirious ecstasies, by reading human sentiments in human language; by scenes from which a hermit may estimate the transactions of the world, and a confessor predict the progress of the passions.[103]

Like Shakespearean characters, biographical subjects, if drawn as true copies, offer the reader imitable models of everyday human conduct, in a sense bringing the personal lessons of the past to bear upon the present moment. Imitation lies indeed at the heart of what Johnson means by the 'immediate and apparent use' of biographical narratives. In the "Life of J. Philips," for example, Johnson quotes Edmund Smith's dictum that "The end of writing Lives is for the imitation of the readers."[104] Commenting on the value of his own *Lives*, he offers the humble moralist's hope that they be written "in such a manner as may tend to the promotion of piety."[105] The mere attainment of knowledge or an acquaintance with the long-forgotten past cannot in itself further the 'promotion of piety' unless readers apply the wisdom of vicarious experience directly to their own lives. For Johnson, the capacity of literature to inform not only the mind but the very life of the reader hinges on the latter's amenability to the influence of exemplary character. As

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[102] *Shakespeare*, Greene 422.
[103] *Shakespeare*, Greene 422.
[104] *Lives* 7, 235.
[105] Boswell, 1090.

Rambler 164 makes clear, the desire for moral improvement is one which Johnson deemed not only common, but indeed ubiquitous:

> As the greater part of human kind speak and act wholly by imitation, most of those who aspire to honour and applause propose to themselves some example which serves as the model of their conduct, and the limit of their hopes. Almost every man, if closely examined, will be found to have enlisted himself under some leader whom he expects to conduct him to renown; to have some hero or other, living or dead, in his view, whose character he endeavours to assume, and whose performances he labours to equal.[106]

Implicit in this framework of growth by example is the notion that we do not simply learn by imitating or reduplicating prized behaviour, but also by avoiding the follies to which even greatness is subject. Hence the biographer's duty to present both the public and private face of renown. As Johnson makes clear, it is a duty owed not only to historical veracity but to the reader's moral enlightenment:

> That writer may be justly condemned as an enemy to goodness, who suffers fondness or interest to confound right with wrong, or to shelter the faults which even the wisest and the best have committed from that ignominy which guilt ought always to suffer, and with which it should be more deeply stigmatized when dignified by its neighbourhood to uncommon worth, since we shall be in danger of beholding it without abhorrence, unless its turpitude be laid open, and the eye secured from the deception of surrounding splendour.[107]

A biographical narrative, then, which presents a single life in such a way that it resonates familiarly with a multitude of readers, which offers not simply any truth but that which is conducive to the furtherance of general knowledge and applicable to the business of everyday life, which moves beyond the glare of public praise to the shadowy spheres of private conduct, which reflects, above all, a continual awareness of "the august presence of another soul,"[108] meaning not only the biographical subject but the reader as well:

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[106] *Works* 3, 275.
[107] *Works* 3, 277.
[108] Cockshut 20.

such a narrative has, in Johnson's view, an unparalleled capacity to evoke meaningful and immediate transformations in the lives and minds of its readers. If an acquaintance with history affords lessons for the governance of nations, the perusal of 'Lives' enables the regulation of private conduct. Although literary biography also allows readers to relate "the figure who has created something...to the work he has created; so that we have a model of his mind,"[109] Johnson consistently presents that 'model,' regardless of its greatness, in such a manner that it is both recognizable and morally edifying. Thus the dissoluteness of Rochester, the madness of Swift, the penury of Collins--all these elucidate common human struggles from which no one is so removed as to be by them unmoved. For Johnson, biography offers ultimately much more than an invitation to the past because the truth of lived experience is not bound by time or place; in its broadest sense, biography empowers any reader, in any age, 'to use the present well.'

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[109] Frederick Karl, "Joseph Conrad," *The Craft of Literary Biography*, ed. Jeffrey Meyers (London: Macmillan, 1985) 72.

CHAPTER 2: THE PROBLEMS OF JOHNSONIAN BIOGRAPHY

One cannot, in delineating Johnson's biographical principles and standards, and evoking notions of the ideal life writer and the text as 'true copy,' lose sight of the inherent generic obstacles which interpose themselves between theory and practice, possibility and performance. Though Johnson dwells more often and emphatically on the value than on the difficulty of biography, seeking rather to silence the chorus of critical detraction and historical trivialization than hobble unduly the efforts of fellow life writers, there can be little doubt of his awareness of the entanglements to which such composition is necessarily subject. In *Rambler* 60 he alludes briefly to some "natural reasons...why most accounts of particular persons are barren and useless,"[110] citing the paucity of personal information and temptations to partiality as the greatest hindrances to biographical verity. Though Johnson had already written the majority of the "Lives of Eminent Persons" before the publication of the *Rambler* essay in 1750, and thus drew his notions of biographical difficulty from firsthand experience, it was not until the completion of the *Lives of the Poets* some thirty years later that he offered for public scrutiny a more comprehensive revelation of the trials and burdens of composing 'Lives'. Nowhere is this issue more clearly engaged than in the "Life of Addison," a biography indeed pivotal in that it brings Johnson into troubling proximity with a writer of his own day. Having related the account of Addison's falling-out with Richard Steele, an account omitted by a previous biographer for its potential volatility, Johnson pauses to assess the discretion of his own endeavours:

> The necessity of complying with times, and of sparing persons, is the great impediment of biography. History may be formed from permanent monuments and records; but lives can only be written from personal knowledge, which is growing every day less, and in a short time is lost for

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[110] *Rambler* 60, Greene 206.

> ever. What is known can seldom be immediately told; and when it might be told, it is no longer known. The delicate features of the mind, the nice discriminations of character, and the minute peculiarities of conduct, are soon obliterated; and it is surely better that caprice, obstinacy, frolick, and folly, however they might delight in the description, should be silently forgotten, than that, by wanton merriment and unseasonable detection, a pang should be given to widow, a daughter, a brother, or a friend. 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,' and coming to the time of which it will be proper rather to say 'nothing that is false, than all that is true'.[111]

Essentially this passage elucidates two biographical impediments, the first having to do with the need for personal knowledge, and the second with the proper application of that knowledge. What Johnson means by 'personal knowledge' is indeed no less than a close acquaintance of biographer and subject, permitting access to the mind's 'delicate features' and 'the minute peculiarities of conduct.' Clearly, such familiarity is tied to the issue of biographical impartiality in that it draws the life writer and subject into a sphere of not disinterested propinquity. The second impediment to which Johnson draws attention has to do with the very core of his biographical methodology: the determination, selection and presentation of truth. For even if the biographer has access to personal or intimate knowledge of the subject, and has sifted useful from useless truth, consideration must still be given to the demands of individual or familial privacy. What Johnson questions here is the life writer's license to disclose all that is known about the subject, regardless of the authenticity thereby conferred upon the biographical portrait, or the instructive value which such a portrait might hold for the reader. Ultimately, then, Johnson's biographical theory and practice discover three central quandaries, the first having to do with the availability of useful knowledge, the second, with the nature of the relationship between writer and subject out of which that knowledge is derived, and the third, with the proper application of said knowledge.

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[111] *Lives* 7, 444-445.

While the most frequent lament registered in the *Lives* is of a scarcity of biographical information, the problem of sources relates not only to their quantity but also to their unreliability, contradictoriness, and, as in the case of the "Lives of Eminent Persons," their occasional capacity to subdue the writer's critical instincts. Excepting the *Life of Savage*, Johnson's earliest biographical efforts are indeed marked by a scrupulous adherence to previous sources. While there is no doubt that he did rely, in his accounts of the English poets, on the *Biographia Britannica* (1747-1766) and the *Lives of the Poets of Great Britain and Ireland* (1753),[112] many of the biographies written for the *Gentleman's Magazine* in the 1730s and 40s drew their materials not from other 'Lives,' but from eulogies.[113] Consequently, the tone of these works is at times unabashedly laudatory. In tracing the life and achievements of Herman Boerhaave, for example, Johnson concludes with a flourish of encomiums:

> So far was this man from being made impious by philosophy, or vain by knowledge, or by virtue, that he ascribed all his abilities to the bounty, and all his goodness to the grace of God. May his example extend its influence to his admirers and followers! May those who study his writings imitate his life! and those who endeavour after his knowledge, aspire likewise to his piety![114]

The "Life of Blake," drawn largely from Clarendon's accounts, is likewise effusive in praise, written, as Johnson confesses in the opening paragraph, "with nothing further in view, than to do justice to his bravery and conduct."[115] Admiral Blake, accordingly, is presented as a man of "insuperable courage, and a steadiness of resolution not to be

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[112] Dustin Griffin, "Regulated Loyalty: Jacobitism and Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*," *ELH* 64.4 (1997): 1010.
[113] Isobel Grundy, "Samuel Johnson: A Writer of Lives Looks at Death," *MLR* 79 (1984): 263.
[114] *Works* 6, 291.
[115] *Works* 6, 293.

shaken."[116] Even his military failures, such as the ill-advised attack in 1652 upon a Dutch fleet thrice greater than his own, are considered in terms glowingly patriotic:

> We must then admit, amidst our eulogies and applauses, that the great, the wise, and the valiant Blake, was once betrayed to an inconsiderate and desperate enterprise, by the resistless ardour of his own spirit, and *a noble jealousy of the honour of his country*.[117]

Johnson's vindicating censure is significant not only for its obscuration of the fact that Blake's impetuosity left "his whole fleet much shattered,"[118] but also for its sharp echoes of Clarendon's assessment of the Admiral's patriotic fervour. In an account which Johnson subjoins to his own narrative, Clarendon describes Blake as a man "jealous of...the glory of his nation."[119]

Not only is Johnson's own voice in these early 'Lives' at times occluded by his sources, but his characteristic skepticism is infrequently brought to bear on the portraits he draws. The "Life of Drake," for example, a life replete with acts of piracy and colonial subjugation, is presented rather like a picaresque narrative, its hero moving from one adventure to the next with seemingly no greater aim than the accruement of wealth. The following is a typical episode, brief, exuberant and divested of all moral implications:

> He had not sailed more than three leagues, before they discovered a large ship, which they attacked with all the intrepidity that necessity inspires, and, happily, found it laden with excellent provisions.[120]

Drake, the 'happy' conqueror, is drawn quite simply as a man of action, wholly unencumbered by self-reflection. As Johnson suggests, "[his] penetration immediately discovered all the circumstances and inconveniences of every scheme, [and he] soon determined upon the only means of success which their condition afforded them."[121] By

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[116] *Works* 6, 295.
[117] *Works*, 6, 302 (italics added).
[118] *Works* 6, 301.
[119] *Works* 6, 308.
[120] *Works* 6, 323.
[121] *Works* 6, 335.

positing this preternatural military sagacity--what appears at times indistinguishable from mercenariness--Johnson propels the narrative swiftly from one episode of plunder to the next, leaving the mind of his hero largely unillumined. Of Drake's "predominant sentiments" Johnson declares only that they were "notions of piety,"[122] citing as evidence his refusal of the adoration and honours offered by the conquered inhabitants of New Albion. Having thus conjoined in Drake the intrepidity of a hero and the piety of a saint, Johnson admits no detractive insinuations. The suggestion of Nathaniel Crouch, Drake's seventeenth-century biographer,[123] that the failure of the Admiral's final mission to the West Indies hastened his demise, Johnson is quick to dispute:

> Upon what [Crouch's] conjecture is grounded does not appear; and we may be allowed to hope, for the honour of so great a man, that it is without foundation; and that he, whom no series of success could ever betray to vanity or negligence, could have supported a change of fortune without impatience or dejection.[124]

While Johnson is certainly consistent in his refusal to ascribe causes or motives where none are readily apparent, his reasons on this occasion have rather more to do with preserving 'the honour of so great a man' than with the pursuance of biographical verity.

This hesitancy to humanize and thereby complicate established notions of greatness distinguishes Johnson's earlier 'Lives' from his accounts of the English poets. There is indeed no sharper contrast to the heroic demise of Admiral Drake than that of the dramatist Thomas Otway. In dealing with this controversial death, Johnson begins by declaring an "unwilling[ness] to mention [it],"[125] yet then brings to light with startling immediacy an unsubstantiated report that Otway, in the desperation of hunger, hastened his own end by choking on a piece of bread supplied by a charitable stranger. Though

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[122] *Works* 6, 364.
[123] Grundy, *MLR*, 263.
[124] *Works* 6, 375.
[125] *Lives* 7, 176.

Johnson ends the account in the hope that "[it] is not true,"[126] its inclusion in the narrative admits at least the possibility of its truth. The "better hope"[127] to which Johnson alludes, namely that Otway died of a fever contracted from chasing a thief, is 'better' only because it is nobler, not because it is necessarily more accurate.

What unites Johnson's efforts in both his earlier and later biographies is the struggle to produce individuated portraits from often no more than one or two sources. This struggle may be seen as compounded by the inevitable fact that available truth is not always the most useful. As James Battersby notes, "Johnson had least of what he most desired, knowledge of 'those minute peculiarities which discriminate every man from all others.'"[128] The inserted quotation is drawn from the "Life of Browne," one of the first biographies to register Johnson's profound skepticism about the nature of the materials available to the life writer. As he observes:

> Of every great and eminent character, part breaks forth into public view, and part lies hid in domestick privacy. Those qualities, which have been exerted in any known and lasting performances, may, at any distance of time, be traced and estimated; but silent excellencies are soon forgotten....[129]

Unlike the "Life of Drake," this biography forwards the notion that 'lasting performances'--those, namely, whereby greatness is estimated--do not in themselves constitute character and therefore cannot be entirely relied upon in its delineation. The difficulty, as Johnson suggests, lies in finding a voice for 'silent excellencies.'

Perhaps nowhere in Johnson's early biographies is this silence more apparent than in the life of Roger Ascham, the sixteenth-century scholar, pedagogue and classicist. The

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[126] *Lives* 7, 176.
[127] *Lives* 7, 176.
[128] James L. Battersby, "Life, Art, and the *Lives of the Poets*," *Domestick Privacies: Samuel Johnson and the Art of Biography*, ed. David Wheeler (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987) 28.
[129] *Works* 6, 495.

fact that Ascham's personal life did not pass in obscurity but was made the subject of a testimonial by his friend Edward Graunt, makes the want of domestic detail all the more troubling for Johnson. Graunt, as he suggests,

> either avoided the labour of minute inquiry, or thought domestick occurrences unworthy of his notice; or, preferring the character of an orator to that of an historian, selected only such particulars as he could best express or most happily embellish.[130]

Having thus only a "scanty" narrative and "know[ing] not by what materials it can now be amplified,"[131] Johnson embarks on a task from which, by his own biographical standards, little more than a recital of public honours can be expected. Of Ascham's achievements as a man of letters and his career as an instructor of Latin and Greek much is related, yet of his private amusements Johnson can only inform the reader that his favourite was archery. The question, moreover, of how Ascham, an avowed Protestant, maintained his position as Latin secretary in the reign of Mary and Philip is left not unconjectured but clearly unsettled. Johnson's conclusion is indeed not an answer: "At that time, if some were punished, many were forborne; and of the many why should not Ascham happen to be one?"[132] Where Ascham's private life and mind prove elusive throughout, the nature of his death is likewise ambiguous. Having only Graunt's unsatisfying account upon which to draw, Johnson refers to Ascham's fatal illness as "a kind of lingering disease."[133] Such blurry terms pervade the closing of the 'Life,' leaving the figure of Ascham in a sense unknown and unknowable. The fact, as Johnson notes, that "He has left little behind him" in terms of literary productions, and that this 'little' has been read "only by those few who delight in obsolete books,"[134] serves only to underscore the insolubility of both author and man, not to mention the frustrations of the life writer.

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[130] *Works* 6, 503-504.
[131] *Works* 6, 504.
[132] *Works* 6, 515-516.
[133] *Works* 6, 518.
[134] *Works* 6, 519, 520.

The dearth of domestic privacies--for Johnson the most useful of useful truths--is also evident in the accounts of the English poets. While the 52 biographies that comprise the *Lives* do offer individuated portraits,[135] they are not, as Johnson himself acknowledges, drawn from sources uniformly rich in detail or reliable. The "Life of Butler," for example, is presented to the reader as a pastiche of two earlier sources of dubious quality:

> Of the great author of *Hudibras* there is a life prefixed to the later editions of his poem, by an unknown writer, and, therefore, of disputable authority; and some account is incidentally given by Wood, who confesses the uncertainty of his own narrative; more, however, than they knew cannot now be learned, and nothing remains but to compare and copy them.[136]

Biography in these terms and under these conditions is at best a salvage operation, leaving Johnson with little more than the wreckage of half-truths and conjectures. Occasionally even these are not available. Commenting, for example, on Butler's relationship to the family of the countess of Kent, Johnson offers merely an authorial shrug of his shoulders:

> In what character Butler was admitted into that lady's service, how long he continued in it, and why he left it, is, like the other incidents of his life, utterly unknown.[137]

Though Johnson endeavours to educe from *Hudibras* what he cannot glean from other sources, his conclusions--namely that the poet "had not suffered life to glide beside him unseen or unobserved"--have ultimately little effect on the "mist of obscurity" around Butler's life.[138] Where domestic details and private life are concerned, there is not simply

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[135] Jeffrey Plank describes Johnson's poets as "variants," subsisting all at once with their variety preserved ("Reading Johnson's *Lives*: The Forms of Late Eighteenth-Century Literary History," *The Age of Johnson* 2 [1989]: 350).
[136] *Lives* 7, 143.
[137] *Lives* 7, 144.
[138] *Lives* 7, 148, 152.

a paucity of information, but indeed only one 'truth,' and that rather ubiquitous: "all that can be told with certainty is, that he was poor."[139]

Other poets in the *Lives* are likewise sunk in obscurity, either by the waste of time, the diminution of personal knowledge, or, as in the case of Elijah Fenton, the degradation of poverty. From the outset, Johnson apologizes for the brevity of Fenton's 'Life,' having, as he notes, "sought intelligence among his relations in his native country, but...not obtained it."[140] This want of information is attributed in large part to Fenton's indigence, a condition owing not to his birth but rather, as Johnson suggests, to a "perverseness of integrity"[141] which prompted him to refuse the oaths necessary for public office. Fenton's early life, consequently, eludes the grasp of biographical certitude. As Johnson observes:

> The life that passes in penury must necessarily pass in obscurity. It is impossible to trace Fenton from year to year, or to discover what means he used for his support.[142]

Where the renown of achievement and public performance cannot be trusted to elucidate the fullness of character, it is yet preferable, Johnson seems to imply, to the absolute erasure by conditions of want. The fact that in the latter part of his life, with the success of his tragedy *Mariamne*, Fenton does emerge from the oblivion of poverty, enables Johnson to offer at least hints of his private character. The inserted report of Fenton's indolence, drawn from the mouth of a servant, the episode of his especial attention to a sister who married against the family's wishes, and the inclusion of Pope's letter to Broome detailing Fenton's death, all contribute to the image of a man perhaps not well known, yet known well enough to be remembered.

It is, interestingly, not only in the shorter 'Lives' where a lack of domestic privacies delimits Johnson's biographic vision. If minor poets such as John Dyer and

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[139] *Lives* 7, 148.
[140] *Lives* 8, 54.
[141] *Lives* 8, 55.
[142] *Lives* 8, 55.

David Mallet are sketched in cursory fashion, the former's 'Life' drawn entirely from his own letters, and the latter's from the "unauthorised loquacity of common fame,"[143] major figures like Dryden, whom Clark designates as "the central figure in Johnson's scenario,"[144] also present considerable challenges to the accrual of personal knowledge and useful truth. As Johnson relates to Boswell:

> 'When I was a young fellow I wanted to write the *Life of Dryden*, and in order to get materials, I applied to the only two persons then alive who had seen him; these were old Swinney, and old Cibber. Swinney's information was no more than this, "That at Will's coffeehouse Dryden had a particular chair for himself, which was set by the fire in winter, and was then called his winter-chair; and that it was carried out for him to the balcony in summer, and was then called his summer-chair." Cibber could tell no more but "That he remembered him a decent old man, arbiter of critical disputes at Will's."'[145]

Despite his obvious skepticism of the value of such intelligence, Johnson includes these episodes in the 'Life' as the only accounts of Dryden's "petty habits or slight amusements,"[146] a fact which speaks resoundingly to the elusiveness of the poet's private self. In drawing Dryden's character, Johnson yields to the authority of Congreve, who, as is suggested, "knew him with great familiarity."[147] This 'familiarity,' as the reader is soon informed, is not however such as permits a wealth of insight or detail:

> [Dryden] was of a very easy, of very pleasing, access; but somewhat slow, and, as it were, diffident in his advances to others: he had that in his nature which abhorred intrusion into any society whatever. He was, therefore, less known, and consequently his character became more liable to misapprehensions and misrepresentations....[148]

In citing Dryden's reclusive tendencies, Congreve in a sense justifies the barrenness of his own account, a fact not lost on Johnson, who concludes that "The disposition of

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[143] *Lives* 8, 463.
[144] Clark 28.
[145] Boswell 770.
[146] *Lives* 7, 300.
[147] *Lives* 7, 290.
[148] *Lives* 7, 290.

Dryden...is shown in this character rather as it exhibited itself in cursory conversation, than as it operated on the more important parts of life."[149] Having thus distanced his analysis from the observations of one familiar with the poet, Johnson proceeds by drawing largely upon "other testimonies"[150] as well as Dryden's own writings in the elucidation of his character. What results is an account full of plausibilities but clearly lacking certitude. In addressing the issue which lies at the heart of Dryden's inscrutability, namely his social awkwardness and conversational reticence, Johnson offers only a handful of safe, speculative notions, certainly nothing by which the knots of private character are untangled. Of the poet's reserve when in company, Johnson concludes merely that "He probably did not offer his conversation, because he expected it to be solicited"; of the imputed "sluggishness" of his conversation, Johnson is still less forthcoming, suggesting that "it is vain to search or to guess the cause."[151] While Johnson has been criticized for backing away from these obvious inconsistencies and refusing to impugn the character of a poet whom he greatly admired,[152] one cannot conflate the rather slippery notions of authorial intention with the very real effects of barren source material. In censuring Dryden's obsequiousness Johnson is indeed not circumspect, having at his disposal a number of 'supporting documents' such as the poet's dedications and encomiums. In judgments, however, where a more personal knowledge of his subject is required, Johnson proceeds without the solidity of proof or the strength of conviction, leaving to the individual reader the unraveling of Dryden's enigmatic personality.

No less problematic than a dearth and vagueness of source material is its frequent unreliability and contradictoriness. It is for this reason that Johnson tends, throughout the *Lives*, to write against previous accounts in constructing his own biographical portraits.

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[149] *Lives* 7, 291
[150] *Lives* 7, 291.
[151] *Lives* 7 291, 292.
[152] Gross 159.

His ability to embed biographical criticism in the lives he chronicles is perhaps best exemplified in the "Life of Cowley," drawn in large part from the earlier works of Thomas Sprat and Anthony Wood. If, as Boswell records, Johnson deemed this his finest biography on account of the inserted commentary on the Metaphysical poets,[153] its delight for the reader, one may suggest, also inheres in the author's capacity to open a space of possible truth outside of previously recorded opinion. The verity and usefulness of Sprat's account, for example, is called almost immediately into question by his "zeal of friendship"[154] for Cowley. As Johnson notes,

> he writes with so little detail, that scarcely any thing is distinctly known, but all is shown confused and enlarged through the mist of panegyrick.[155]

As evidence of the 'enlarging' or generalizing tendencies of friendly accounts, Johnson points to Sprat's unwillingness to reveal that Cowley's father was no more than a grocer by shrouding him under the title of "citizen." This neglect of honest commemoration is amended by Wood, who, as Johnson takes care to emphasize, characterizes Cowley's mother as "struggling earnestly to procure [her son] a literary education."[156] Having here in a sense supplied the deficiency of one account with the detail of another, Johnson at other times sets these narratives against one another only to chart for himself, and for the reader, a more reasonable middle course. Regarding Cowley's retirement to Surrey, for example, following the dramatic failure of his *Cutter of Coleman Street*, Wood and Sprat offer quite divergent explanations, the former alleging disappointment and depression, and the latter, a satiation with public life and a desire to pursue solitary studies. Johnson's reaction is indicative of his fact-based approach to life writing--what Robert Folkenflik terms his "biographical realism":[157]

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[153] Boswell 1092-1093.
[154] *Lives* 7, 1.
[155] *Lives* 7, 1.
[156] *Lives* 7, 1.
[157] Folkenflik 30.

> So differently are things seen! and so differently are they shown! But actions are visible, though motives are secret. Cowley certainly retired; first to Barn-elms, and afterwards to Chertsey, in Surrey....He thought himself now safe enough from intrusion, without the defense of mountains and oceans; and, instead of seeking shelter in America, wisely went only so far from the bustle of life as that he might easily find his way back, when solitude should grow tedious.[158]

Pulling his readers from the swirling eddies of contrary conjecture, Johnson begins by setting them upon the firm ground of what is 'certainly' known. Yet not content to leave Cowley's mind wholly unexplored, he also establishes a medial position between the extreme views of Wood and Sprat. Rather than presenting the poet as one driven by failure to quit urban life or one grown wholly insensible to its manifold delights, Johnson seizes upon the location of his retirement as evidence of a mind balanced enough to separate itself from the 'bustle of life' without being irrevocably separated from life itself.

If Johnson's abilities as a critic are brought to bear on sources notable either for their lack of specificity or their inherent unreliability, his biographical impartiality is tested by accounts built upon his own personal knowledge. Clearly, part of the challenge of a biographical methodology centered on the availability of intimate detail and domestic privacies--procured ideally from the writer's own acquaintance with the subject--is to maintain a sense of critical distance and textual objectivity. As noted in *Idler* 84,

> The zeal of gratitude, the ardour of patriotism, fondness for an opinion, or fidelity to a party may easily overpower the vigilance of a mind habitually well disposed, and prevail over unassisted and unfriended veracity.[159]

The dilemma of chronicling a friend's life with 'unfriended veracity' is brought most poignantly to light in the "Life of Savage." Where an abundance has been written in praise of the detail and psychological insights offered by Johnson, the justness and balance of his authorial perspective have been repeatedly called into question. Joseph Krutch,

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[158] *Lives* 7, 12-13.
[159] *Idler* 84, Greene 299-300.

most notably, alleges a "preposterous partiality"[160] in the rendering of Savage's life. A more temperate analysis is offered by Folkenflik, who likens the author's efforts to those of a defense attorney seeking to exculpate Savage of the more serious of his alleged transgressions.[161] Johnson's initial description of the poet as a man "whose misfortunes claim a degree of compassion, not always due to the unhappy, as they were often the consequences of the crimes of others, rather than his own,"[162] certainly establishes a sympathetic, if not an impartial, tone. His sympathies are not, however, extended uniformly to other figures in the 'Life,' particularly not to those who by their actions compromise Savage's integrity or obstruct his felicity. Lady Macclesfield, for example, is reduced to a fiend of seemingly motiveless malice who disowns her son, declares him dead in order to deprive him of his father's inheritance, and seeks throughout his life to bury him in poverty and obscurity. The fact that Johnson relies largely on Savage's own accounts in fashioning the image of a toxic matriarch--accounts which in recent years have been all but stripped of credibility[163]--is suggestive not only of a lapse in authorial judgment, but of a departure from his own biographical principles, particularly when one recalls from other 'Lives' his prevailing distrust of friendly testimonies.

It is not, moreover, Lady Macclesfield alone who is rashly vilified and deprived of the compassion so willingly bestowed upon Savage. In characterizing the poet's accusers in the death of James Sinclair, Johnson is content to discredit them by reputation, referring to them merely as "a common strumpet, a woman by whom strumpets were entertained, and a man by whom they were supported."[164] Savage, on the other hand, is cast as a

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[160] Joseph Wood Krutch, *Samuel Johnson* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1963) 82.
[161] Folkenflik 206.
[162] *Lives* 8, 97.
[163] Toni O'Shaughnessy, "Fiction as Truth: Personal Identity in Johnson's *Life of Savage*," *Studies in English Literature* 30.30 (1990): 489.
[164] *Lives* 8, 117.

pawn of malevolent forces, drawn innocently into the fray by a petulant acquaintance, and forced, practically, to stab Sinclair in self-defense. In describing the scene, Johnson in fact completely removes Savage from the fatal action:

> This produced a quarrel, swords were drawn on both sides, and one Mr. James Sinclair was killed.[165]

The fact that Savage does not deny his accusers matters little to Johnson in the estimation of culpability. As he suggests, "Had his audience been his judges,"--an oblique reference to the reader, as well as to those present at the trial--"he had undoubtedly been acquitted."[166] Of Savage's fortitude and undauntedly generous spirit both during his confinement and upon his release Johnson is profuse in commendation, ending this bleak chapter in the poet's life with a description of noble, indeed saintly, conduct:

> Some time after he obtained his liberty, he met in the street the woman that had sworn with so much malignity against him. She informed him that she was in distress, and, with a degree of confidence not easily attainable, desired him to relieve her. He, instead of insulting her misery and taking pleasure in the calamities of one who had brought his life into danger, reproved her gently for her perjury, and changing the only guinea that he had, divided it equally between her and himself.[167]

It must be noted that despite Johnson's eagerness to credit Savage's tales of maternal neglect and social victimization, the pattern of authorial defense and vindication does not in the end preclude a more balanced characterization. In assessing Savage as he lived and dealt with others, Johnson's access, as his friend, to minute, personal details allows him to describe a man who, in spite of his compassion and magnanimity, was frequently given to careless indulgence, obstinate pride, jealousy, vanity, bitterness--a man, in short, of gross failings. Savage's tendency, for example, "to enter a tavern with any company that proposed it, drink the most expensive wines with great profusion, and when

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[165] *Lives* 8, 115.
[166] *Lives* 8, 117.
[167] *Lives* 8, 122.

the reckoning was demanded, to be without money,"[168] leads Johnson to conclude that although

> It was his peculiar happiness that he scarcely ever found a stranger whom he did not leave a friend...it must likewise be added that he had not often a friend long without obliging him to become a stranger.[169]

Of Savage's resolution "to spurn that friend who should presume to dictate to him,"[170] Johnson is more direct in censure. Recounting Savage's decision to publish "London and Bristol Delineated", a bitter satire of the citizens of Bristol, chief among them his former friends who had refused after long periods of support to cover his most recent debts, Johnson concludes with a stinging reproof:

> Such was his imprudence, and such his obstinate adherence to his own resolutions, however absurd! A prisoner! supported by charity! and, whatever insults he might have received during the latter part of his stay in Bristol, once caressed, esteemed, and presented with a liberal collection, he could forget, on a sudden his danger and his obligations to gratify the petulance of his wit, or the eagerness of his resentment....[171]

The pettiness of Savage's conduct is not, however, presented as an outgrowth of a small mind, but rather as a consequence of subsisting perpetually on the charity of others. Indeed, the poet's predominant failing, namely his inconstancy, Johnson imputes to "the misery of living at the tables of other men, which was his fate from the beginning to the end of his life."[172] Here, clearly, the author's sympathy for Savage is not the blinkered sympathy of friend, but of one himself familiar with the debilitations of poverty. The portrait of the beggarly man of letters drawn early in the 'Life' seems almost wrung out of Johnson's own experiences:

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[168] *Lives* 8, 133.
[169] *Lives* 8, 133-134.
[170] *Lives* 8, 134.
[171] *Lives* 8, 184-185.
[172] *Lives* 8, 129.

> During a considerable part of the time...he was without lodging, and often without meat; nor had he any other conveniencies for study than the fields or the streets allowed him: there he used to walk and form his speeches, and, afterwards, step into a shop, beg for a few moments the use of pen and ink, and write down what he had composed, upon paper which he had picked up by accident.[173]

Where the younger Savage evinces a remarkable aptitude for creative survival beneath the heels of poverty, he is reduced in later life to an object of neglect and undisguised contempt, having exhausted both the charity and patience of his friends. As Johnson relates,

> He complained that, as his affairs grew desperate, he found his reputation for capacity visibly decline; that his opinion in questions of criticism was no longer regarded, when his coat was out of fashion.[174]

A man thus subjected to the rapidly shifting tides of public opinion and discredited for no greater cause than the state of his dress, is, as Johnson suggests, not to be held fully accountable for moments of irresolution, desperation, insolence or bitterness. As is noted in the biography of Collins (another upon whom Johnson bestows the compassion of friendship), there is "a degree of want, by which the freedom of agency is almost destroyed."[175] It is with this idea in mind that Johnson closes the "Life of Savage" with an exhortation to the reader to weigh carefully the conditions of life in the estimation of character:

> Those are no proper judges of his conduct, who have slumbered away their time on the down of plenty; nor will any wise man presume to say, "Had I been in Savage's condition, I should have lived or written better than Savage."[176]

As though anticipating that the reader's commiseration for Savage--not unlike that of his friends--has been finally and thoroughly depleted, Johnson returns to the strategies of a

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[173] *Lives* 8, 110-111.
[174] *Lives* 8, 163.
[175] *Lives* 8, 402.
[176] *Lives* 8, 191.

barrister by shifting the focus of culpability away from individual actions to an entire course of life shaped not by malicious will but by poverty. In a sense, Johnson offers his own assessment of Savage as an imitable model of forgiveness and restraint. Despite having estimated Savage's friendship as having been of "little value" and drawn him as a man whom "it was always dangerous to trust,"[177] Johnson's emphasis, in summing up his life, on the morally crippling effects of penury and suffering serves as a sharp warning to readers eager to cast the first stones of judgment. Where Johnson's outspoken sympathy for Savage appears at first prejudicial, in the end it is offered as a gesture of unwarranted magnanimity from a friend and of 'salutary humility' from a biographer.

Having thus examined Johnson's engagement with the problems of inadequate or unreliable source materials and the often contrary demands of intimacy and impartiality in the rendering of a 'Life,' the issue of authorial discretion remains to be addressed, particularly as it relates to, and at times infringes upon, the overarching concern with biographical verity. Johnson's suggestion in the "Life of Addison," that it may be preferable to reveal 'nothing that is false, than all that is true,' certainly indicates an unwillingness to bestow upon the writer of lives the freedom of full disclosure, even if the information in question should prove trustworthy and potentially edifying for the reader. While it cannot now be known what details Johnson saw fit to withhold in his characterization of Addison, there is little doubt that even his apparently guarded revelations of the poet's private conduct evince a degree of biographical candour uncommon in his day. His mention, for example, of Addison's tendency to drink "too much wine"[178] is noted by Boswell as occasioning more than one dispute over the boundaries of authorial discretion. Clearly the balance between sparing relatives and pleasing readers is at all times a fine one. In taking up the issue of Addison's tavern

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[177] *Lives* 8, 189.
[178] *Lives* 7, 449.

indulgences, Johnson does not present a man weakly or ignobly enslaved, but rather "seduced to excess by the manumission which he obtained from the servile timidity of his sober hours."[179] While obviously not endorsing intemperance, Johnson at least establishes a rationale for its existence, and thereby allows the reader to understand Addison rather than condemn him.

A similar strategy is evident in Johnson's engagement with the figure of Thomas Parnell, another of whom it is confessed that "he was too much a lover of the bottle."[180] Instead of crediting Pope's assertion that Parnell turned to wine in order to assuage the disappointment of dashed career plans, Johnson proposes "a cause more likely to obtain forgiveness from mankind,"[181] namely the death of his son and wife. Clearly, the presentation of potentially damaging information is as important to the subject's *and* the author's integrity as the truth thereby revealed. To borrow Edmund Gosse's notion, the biographer's concern should be "not how to avoid all indiscretion, but how to be as indiscreet as possible within the boundaries of good taste and kind feeling."[182]

Even where a subject's indiscretions are so well-known as to be trumpeted publicly, as in the case of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, Johnson refrains from any gratuitous elucidation of folly or vice. The Earl's lapse into a life of moral turpitude is in fact not imputed to a mind inherently foul or to a will naturally infirm, but instead to his association with "dissolute and vitious company, by which his principles were corrupted and his manners depraved."[183] Of his ribald jokes when inebriated, Johnson says merely that "it is not for his honour that we should remember [them],"[184] indicating an unwillingness to indulge in the heaping of further discredit upon the dead. The fleeting

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[179] *Lives* 7, 449.
[180] *Lives* 7, 399.
[181] *Lives* 7, 399.
[182] Edmund Gosse, "The Ethics of Biography," *The Cosmopolitan* July 1903: 317.
[183] *Lives* 7, 157.
[184] *Lives* 7, 158.

pleasures and inevitable consequences of Rochester's dissipated lifestyle are likewise not belaboured but recounted in a single sentence:

> Thus in a course of drunken gaiety, and gross sensuality, with intervals of study, perhaps, yet more criminal, with an avowed contempt of all decency and order, a total disregard of every moral, and a resolute denial of every religious obligation, he lived worthless and useless, and blazed out his youth and his health in lavish voluptuousness, till, at the age of one-and-thirty, he had exhausted the fund of life, and reduced himself to a state of weakness and decay.[185]

Like the "Unnumbered suppliants [that] crowd Preferment's gate," Rochester does but "mount...shine, evaporate, and fall,"[186] his life a bright but momentary flourish. Notably, Johnson does not end his account here, but in a sense redeems his subject from the blast of ignominy by including the story of his acquaintance with Gilbert Burnet, a man from whom the Earl received "such conviction of the reasonableness of moral duty, and the truth of christianity, as produced a total change both of his manners and opinions."[187] Johnson's eagerness to credit Burnet's account of Rochester's timely reformation is suggestive of his tendency to seek between the extremes of censure and praise a mediating position from which to estimate character. The truth of character lies between a life lived 'worthless and useless' and a death faced nobly and piously. Fittingly, Johnson's tribute to Rochester as a poet and a man--namely that he possessed "a mind, which study might have carried to excellence"[188]--conveys both the esteem for uncommon abilities and the lament for unfulfilled potential.

Where Johnson lingers but briefly on faults too well known to contribute to the memory of the dead or to enlighten the minds of the living, he takes care to expose those blemishes which previous biographers have covered over with the wreath of praise. A

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[185] *Lives* 7, 158.
[186] Samuel Johnson, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, in *Samuel Johnson*, ed. Donald Greene (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 14.
[187] *Lives* 7, 158.
[188] *Lives* 7, 161.

telling example is offered in the "Life of Smith," in which Johnson first transcribes the work of William Oldisworth and then subjoins his own account as a corrective. Written, as Johnson warns, "with all the partiality of friendship,"[189] Oldisworth's characterization of Smith presents a man of truly inestimable quality:

> As his parts were extraordinary, so he well knew how to improve them; and not only to polish the diamond, but enchase [sic] it in the most solid and durable metal.[190]

Having thus, as it were, rendered Smith impervious to the slings and arrows of detraction, Oldisworth passes slightingly over the alleged "defects in his conduct"[191] and invites the reader to do likewise. By juxtaposing the assessment of "the rich, the gay, the noble, and honourable, [who]...easily forgave [Smith] all other differences," with that of "the vulgar [who]...form a character by the morals of a few,"[192] Oldisworth establishes a criterion of proper judgment founded not on sagacity but on social status.

Johnson's response to such biographical maneuvering is immediate and blunt: "I cannot much commend the performance."[193] Though unable, as he notes, to contradict the facts of Oldisworth's account, he offers the reader a sharply divergent interpretation of them. Of Smith's conduct and reputation while at Oxford, for example, Johnson renders no kindly assessment. Where Oldisworth, in typically circuitous fashion, mentions only that "his want of complaisance for some men's overbearing vanity made him enemies,"[194] Johnson arrives at a much less flattering conclusion from the direct perusal of Smith's university records:

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[189] *Lives* 7, 361.
[190] *Lives* 7, 363.
[191] *Lives* 7, 369
[192] *Lives* 7, 370-371.
[193] *Lives* 7, 372.
[194] *Lives* 7, 366.

> the indecency and licentiousness of his behaviour drew upon him, Dec. 24, 1694, while he was yet only bachelor, a publick admonition, entered upon record, in order to his expulsion.[195]

The fact that Smith was again censured six years later for "riotous misbehaviour" allows Johnson to establish a pattern of conduct so ingrained, as he suggests, that the poet could only deviate from it by "assum[ing] an appearance of decency."[196] This, clearly, is not the man whom Oldisworth praises for his "exquisite fineness and distinguishing sagacity."[197]

Nowhere is the difference in Johnson's approach more evident than in his treatment of Smith's death, an event which Oldisworth refrains entirely from mentioning. While the poet's end is undeniably tragic and sudden, it is also, as Johnson seems to imply, to some extent fitting that a man so blindly praised for his discernment should die precisely for want of it. Where Oldisworth asks his readers to place their faith rather in the genius of Smith than in the opinions of his detractors, Johnson's account elucidates the foolishness of such a faith. It is, after all, Smith's stubborn adherence to his own counsel which brings him to an early grave. Compounding the folly of overindulgence with a "boastful[ness] of his own knowledge,"[198] Smith dies as he has lived--arrogantly, recklessly, wastefully. As though to sharpen the distinction between a mind bright in and for itself and one which burns rather for the benefit of others, Johnson closes the account with a tribute to one of his sources, Gilbert Walmsley. Referring to him as "one of the first friends that literature procured me,"[199] Johnson presents Walmsley in terms pointedly antithetical to those in which he drew the character of Smith. Though likewise acquainted with "the gay world," Walmsley is praised because "*his learning preserved his principles*; he grew first regular, and then pious."[200] Where Smith's death, so resonant of the folly of

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[195] *Lives* 7, 373.
[196] *Lives* 7, 374.
[197] *Lives* 7, 363.
[198] *Lives* 7, 377.
[199] *Lives* 7, 380.
[200] *Lives* 7, 380 (italics added).

his life, is presented as something of a moral lesson on divine justice, Walmsley's demise elicits quite simply the dejection of a friend:

> I am disappointed by that stroke of death, which has eclipsed the gaiety of nations, and impoverished the stock of harmless pleasure.[201]

Ultimately, in considering Johnson's engagement with the inherent difficulties of biography--namely, piecing together the scattered and at times inscrutable bits of an individual's life, presenting intimate knowledge without utterly capitulating to the temptation of partiality, and, finally, honouring not only the needs and desires of the reader, but the memory of the dead--it becomes clear that regardless of principles, objectives and ideal visions, the practice of life writing is in the end an art in compromise. Johnson's distinguishing biographical trait is indeed his struggle to maintain a balanced perspective, by which I mean not a temperate or detached analysis of life and character, but rather a continual juxtaposition of opposing and even contradictory viewpoints. Throughout the *Lives*, one account, one anecdote, is pitted against another, praise is undercut by critique and critique offset by praise, the writer is distinguished from the work as truth is from deduction, and the reader, always central to Johnson's plan, is drawn in and made a party to the consideration of plausible conclusions but never trammeled by them.

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[201] *Lives* 7, 380.

CHAPTER 3: THE PROCESSES OF JOHNSONIAN BIOGRAPHY

A detailed consideration of Johnson's notions and constructions of character and selfhood in the *Lives* necessitates first of all an acquaintance with the rudimentary processes by which he presents not only historical personages, but history and literature itself, the individual writers being in a sense filtered through the lenses of their past and their work. One need only remind oneself of the title under which the *Lives* were originally conceived--*Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, to the Works of the English Poets*--in order to appreciate the broader scope of Johnson's endeavour. Just as biography necessarily partakes of and constitutes history, so literary biography must come to terms not simply with the author, but with text. Indeed, Johnson's capacity to pull apart a poem even as he is piecing together a life is what imbues his biographies with such instructive diversity. The "Life of Cowley," appearing first in the collection, in many ways typifies Johnson's protean labours by offering the reader not simply a chronicle of the poet's life (built upon but clearly differentiated from the work of Sprat), but also a disquisition on the metaphysical poets, including brief expositions on wit and sublimity, a general analysis of the style and sentiments of such verse drawn from the works of Cowley and Donne, and, finally, a critical examination of the whole of Cowley's literary endeavours, poetry and prose. Even the much shorter 'Lives' of minor poets are diversified with unexpected detours and tangents, such as Johnson's brief account of the Dispensary in the "Life of Garth," his relation of the diplomatic wrangling behind the Treaty of Utrecht in the "Life of Prior," and his truncated history of pastoral poetry in the biography of Ambrose Philips. Admitting David Wheeler's contention that "as sources of [factual] information about the men whose lives he chronicled, Johnson's biographies have long since been superseded,"[202] the continued interest in the *Lives* must surely be imputed

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[202] David Wheeler, "Introduction: The Uses of Johnson's Biographies," *Domestick*

to their breadth of focus and range of scholarship. This is not of course to suggest that Johnson's treatment of individual character or his exploration of the poetic mind have faded from relevance and that we ought to peruse--to offer an example--a minor 'Life' like that of William Shenstone rather for the author's estimation of blank verse than for his contemplation of the poet's obsession with "rural elegance."[203] To dismiss the *psycho*-biographical value of the *Lives*, even though, as Johnson himself confesses in the prefatory advertisement, they suffer from unforeseeable "omissions"[204] and chronological uncertainties, is to lose sight of their central preoccupation. Explorations of character and mind lie indeed at the heart of the fifty-two biographies, the historical excursions and textual analyses serving to enhance and complicate rather than obscure the self behind the work.

Despite considerable disparities in length, focus, and detail, Johnson's *Lives* do evince broad similarities in structure and approach. Typically, they begin with a chronological reconstruction of the subject's life, with particular emphasis placed upon educational background, scholastic achievements, literary publications, and the incidental clamouring for recognition and fame. Following an account of the subject's death, Johnson often includes a description or summation of character, built upon the reports of friends or acquaintances and sharpened by his own deductions. Finally, he offers an appraisal of the subject's writings, proceeding with critical scrupulosity when dealing with major poets, and moving with rather more cursory strokes and quickened steps where there is not "bulk or dignity sufficient to require elaborate criticism."[205] This tripartite structure of 'life,' 'character' and 'works' represents in many ways a uniquely Johnsonian approach to the art of literary biography. Where previous biographers, building upon the

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Privacies: Samuel Johnson and the Art of Biography, ed. David Wheeler (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987) 5-6.

[203] *Lives* 8, 409.

[204] *Lives* 8, viii.

[205] *Lives* 8, 406.

classical models of Suetonius and Plutarch, dealt almost exclusively with a subject's life and character,[206] Johnson's addition of literary criticism and close readings enable him to bring to light not only a tradition of English letters,[207] but the often incongruous relationship between mind and performance, conduct and text.

The temptation, of course, in delineating Johnson's tripartite biographical structure is to focus rather on the constituent parts of each 'Life' than on their summary impact upon the reader. One indeed cannot gain a sense of the complexities and convolutions of the poetic mind by attending solely to a subject's 'character'. While admitting Folkenflik's contention that Johnson's wariness of providing "easy transitions from life to art"[208] prompted him to establish divisions between life, character and work, each section in a sense builds upon the other by incorporating, contextualizing, and at times challenging foregone assumptions or conclusions. Though occasionally anthologized as entities unto themselves, individual sections do not comprise a 'Life' any more than a 'Life' comprises the truth of self. Holding to the premise that Johnson's main concern in the *Lives of the Poets* is an elucidation of the minds of men who wrote verse--what Bate pinpoints more precisely as the desire "to learn how a man was made happy...[and] how he became discontented with himself"[209]--the three sections may be understood as separate pieces of evidence from which to construct a semblance of the poetic self. Much as biographical truth is established by a variety of sources, whether distant or intimate, objective or partial, whether by anecdote or personal correspondence, by the lips of a servant or the mouth of common fame, so the subject must be rendered not only through the details of

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[206] Folkenflik 115.
[207] Clark designates this "tradition" as Anglo-Latin, by which he means that Johnson appraised the English poets in large part, though not exclusively, on their relation to the classical models of Homer, Virgil, Pindar, Juvenal, Ovid, Lucan, etc., 32.
[208] Folkenflik 117.
[209] Bate 122 (adaptation of *Idler* 84).

characterization, but through the facts and chronology of a life, and the effusions and performances of the mind.

A further difficulty posed by a fragmented reading and analysis of the *Lives* is the fact that divisions between life and character, or life and works, are often blurred. This is evident particularly in the shorter biographies of minor poets. Whether impeded by a dearth of sources or by his own unwillingness to enlarge upon the lives and works of so-called "pygmy writers,"[210] Johnson often pieces together what he can without holding to rigid notions of compositional structure. The immensity of his labours certainly necessitated a degree of authorial licence or looseness, particularly when dealing with writers whose lives, even in Johnson's day, were little-known, and whose works little-read.

While Johnson consistently traces the lives of his subjects, even if only through a hurried cataloguing of dates from birth to funeral, formal delineations of character are often obscured or omitted entirely. In the "Life of Broome," for example, Johnson proceeds directly from an account of the poet's death to a description of his "smooth and sonorous"[211] lines. Indeed, the only detail which suggests something of the private man is contained in a brief relation of Broome's educational background:

> At his college he lived for some time in the same chamber with the well-known Ford, by whom I have formerly heard him described as a contracted scholar and a mere versifier, *unacquainted with life, and unskilful in conversation.*[212]

The characters of other writers of faded eminence and fleeting renown are likewise omitted or buried in Johnson's treatment of their lives and works. The six-paragraph biography of John Pomfret affords indeed nothing substantive aside from Johnson's reflection that like all others who have planned schemes of life and offered them up for

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[210] *Lives* 8, 128.
[211] *Lives* 8, 231.
[212] *Lives* 8, 229 (italics added).

public consideration, "he had departed from his purpose."[213] Likewise destitute of character is the portrait of George Stepney, his busy life sketched hastily, his epitaph offered in lieu of personal detail, and his poetry dismissed for exuding neither "the grace of wit, [n]or the vigour of nature."[214] The truncated "Life of Walsh," meanwhile, presents a man whose character is essentially eclipsed by his acquaintances. As Johnson suggests, "He is known more for his familiarity with greater men, than by any thing done or written by himself."[215] Walsh, as a result, becomes something of a biographical cipher, his character revealed rather in Pope's "Essay on Criticism," to which the reader is directed, than in Johnson's 'Life'. William King is another whose portrait lacks a formal description of character even though Johnson had at his disposal a detailed life of the poet prefixed to a collection of his works published in 1776. What the reader learns from Johnson's meager account is only that King was far more diligent in the disposal of his wealth than in its accrual, and that he died, notwithstanding a life of moral "irregularity,"[216] with pure principles and uncorrupted piety. A final example of a 'Life' drawn without character is that of James Hammond, a work cobbled together, as its author confesses, from a manuscript of dubious credibility attributed first to Theophilus Cibber and finally to Robert Shiels. Thus operating with the most slender of useful truths, Johnson dispatches the poet's life in two paragraphs and subjoins a cutting assessment of his works, finding in them little more than "frigid pendantry."[217] Of Hammond's character nothing more suggestive is offered than that "He is said to have divided his life between pleasure and

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[213] *Lives* 7, 222.
[214] *Lives* 7, 229.
[215] *Lives* 7, 244.
[216] *Lives* 7, 387.
[217] *Lives* 8, 91.

books"[218]--a report of puzzling vacuity given Johnson's allegation at the beginning of the 'Life' that the poet was "esteemed and caressed by the elegant and great."[219]

Not only is character occasionally elided in the accounts of minor poets, but their works are often summarized or glossed. Johnson's precision as a critic is indeed at times overwhelmed by his impatience to dispense with a poetry that is pleasant but rarely instructive, smooth but not weighty, clever but infrequently wise. In assessing the talents of a public figure like Charles Sackville, for example, Johnson spends more time attending to the "exaggerated praise"[220] of the Earl's beneficiaries than to the object of that praise. Despite finding himself at last obligated, as a disinterested critic, to amend encomiastic errors, he renders only a brief and general appraisal: "[Dorset's] performances are, what they pretend to be, the effusions of a man of wit; gay, vigorous, and airy."[221]

Not unlike the "Life of Dorset," the biography of Charles Montagu, Earl of Halifax, dwells more on poetic reputation than actual merit--a focus somewhat surprising, given Johnson's prefatory justification for Halifax's inclusion in the *Lives*:

> in this collection, poetical merit is the claim to attention; and the account which is here to be expected may properly be proportioned not to his influence in the state, but to his rank among the writers of verse.[222]

Having thus aroused an expectation of veritable talent and set out to commemorate Halifax's deserved 'rank' among poets, Johnson accomplishes the very opposite by his cursory appraisal of the Earl's work. Once the celebratory mist of flatterers like Addison is dispelled, there remains little to persuade the reader that the statesman was indeed a poet of quality:

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[218] *Lives* 8, 91.
[219] *Lives* 8, 90.
[220] *Lives* 7, 225.
[221] *Lives* 7, 225.
[222] *Lives* 7, 393.

> Many a blandishment was practised upon Halifax, which he would never have known, had he no other attractions than those of his poetry, of which a short time has withered the beauties. It would now be esteemed no honour, by a contributor to the monthly bundles of verses, to be told, that, in strains either familiar or solemn, he sings like a Montague.[223]

The fact that Halifax's verse was apparently the lesser or even the least of his 'attractions,' its 'beauties' being but light and ephemeral, is suggestive not of poetical merit but mediocrity. Brought to, or rather below, the level of a common hack, Halifax is drawn by Johnson as a writer not of forgotten but of forgettable talent, his proper place in the *Lives* not justified, but left very much in doubt.

Johnson's haste to dispense with the analysis of minor poetic works leads him at times to rely on the verdicts of earlier critics. In the biography of John Hughes, for example, he leaves the assessment of poetic merit entirely in the hands of Swift and Pope. The reader, in turn, is left with little more than the unavailing conclusion that Hughes, whatever praises may have been lavished upon him throughout his life, is to be numbered "among the *mediocrists*, in prose as well as verse."[224] Johnson's silence is here significant not because he fails to stamp the "Life of Hughes" with his own character, but because he yields to the judgment of critics whose views, on other occasions, he gives reason to distrust:

> In the letters, both of Swift and Pope, there appears such narrowness of mind, as makes them insensible of any excellence that has not some affinity with their own, and confines their esteem and approbation to so small a number, that whoever should form his opinion of the age from their representation, would suppose them to have lived amidst ignorance and barbarity, unable to find, among their contemporaries, either virtue or intelligence, and persecuted by those that could not understand them.[225]

The foregoing, drawn from the "Life of Pope," while it does not necessarily invalidate the appraisal of Hughes' talents as a writer, provides at least a context for understanding both

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[223] *Lives* 7, 397.
[224] *Lives* 7, 478.
[225] *Lives* 8, 317.

the tone and brevity of such criticism. There is indeed no reason to believe that Johnson himself disputed Hughes' alleged mediocrity, yet in his transcription of the dialogue between Swift and Pope, he sheds more light on the excesses of criticism than the deficiencies of the poet, inviting the reader, as it were, to find a better balance through a perusal of the works in question.

Here, above all, is an example of how the reading of one 'Life' informs another. Not only, as I have suggested, do the constituent parts of each biography contribute to an elucidation of the subject at its center, but even other 'Lives' may be used to clarify and enhance emergent notions of character. Of Pope, in particular, much supplementary information is contained in the biographies of Fenton, Gay, Tickell, Broome, Swift, A. Philips and even Dryden, some relating to his private affairs and conduct, some to his criticism, some to his poetry. While the individual biographies clearly do stand on their own, an appreciation of the richness and complexity of Johnson's endeavor, particularly as it relates to the illumination and unraveling of human character, necessitates an engagement with the *Lives* as a whole. Matthew Arnold's contention, therefore, that "in the lives of the six chief personages of the work, the lives of Milton, Dryden, Swift, Addison, Pope, and Gray, we have its very kernel and quintessence"[226]--another example of fragmented reading--fails to consider the numerous and significant dialogical relationships *within* the text.

It is indeed not uncommon for Johnson to supply in one 'Life' what he has neglected to enlarge upon in another. In the biography of John Philips, for example, he subjoins to his own assessment of the poet's works an appraisal by Edmund Smith, which, despite its length, reveals far less about the literary character of Philips than that of Smith himself. Recalling Johnson's portrait of the latter as a man who estimated his own abilities

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[226] Matthew Arnold, ed., 'Preface' to *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's "Lives of the Poets," with Macaulay's "Life of Johnson"* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968 rep.) xii.

far beyond their admittedly considerable scope, a man so assured of his genius as to be by that confidence betrayed into foolishness, the proffered sample of his critical prose evinces both the penetration of his mind and the extent of his hubris. His comments on the frequent 'laziness' or hesitation of poetic genius to submit even its best works for public consideration because "the idea of what they ought to be is far above what they are,"[227] are certainly reflective of Johnson's own deeply self-critical spirit. Yet in Smith's appraisal of "Blenheim", a poem written by Philips in commemoration of the Duke of Marlborough's victory over the French and Bavarians in 1704, there is far more critical presumptuousness than perspicacity:

> But to return to Blenheim, that work so much admired by some, and censured by others. I have often wished he had wrote it in Latin, that he might be out of the reach of the empty criticks, who could have as little understood his meaning in that language as they do his beauties in his own....But I take, generally, the ignorance of his readers to be the occasion of their dislike. People that have formed their taste upon the French writers can have no relish for Philips: they admire points and turns, and, consequently, have no judgment of what is great and majestick; he must look little in their eyes, when he soars so high as to be almost out of their view. I cannot, therefore, allow any admirer of the French to be a judge of Blenheim....I shall allow, therefore, only those to be judges of Philips, who make the ancients, and particularly Virgil, their standard.[228]

While bearing in mind the pitfalls of extrapolating character directly from work, there is here more than a casual resemblance between Smith the writer and the man characterized by Johnson as having "a high opinion of his own merit, and [being] something contemptuous in his treatment of those whom he considered as not qualified to oppose or contradict him."[229]

Given the self-aggrandizing tendencies of Smith's criticism and its propensity to denigrate voices of opposition, it is not unreasonable to inquire why Johnson would

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[227] *Lives* 7, 241.
[228] *Lives* 7, 241-242.
[229] *Lives* 7, 379.

include it in his portrait of Philips. This question is complicated by the fact that Smith's assessment of Philips' work serves in part to *contradict* Johnson's far less commendatory appraisal. In order to sharpen the contrast between their respective analyses, one need only consider Johnson's commentary on the poet's use of blank verse:

> He imitates Milton's numbers indeed, but imitates them very injudiciously. Deformity is easily copied; and whatever there is in Milton which the reader wishes away, all that is obsolete, peculiar, or licentious, is accumulated with great care by Philips. Milton's verse was harmonious...but Philips sits down with a resolution to make no more musick than he found; to want all that his master wanted, though he is very far from having what his master had. Those asperities, therefore, that are venerable in Paradise Lost, are contemptible in the Blenheim.[230]

In seizing not upon 'the ancients' as his standard, nor indeed finding anything but censure for the obsolescence of Philips' diction, Johnson would, in Smith's estimation, be numbered among the 'empty criticks.' Notwithstanding the fact that the "Life of Philips" was composed some seventy years after Smith's death and thus offers the reader the benefit of a broader historical perspective, Johnson's decision to subjoin to his own account one that opposes and even contradicts it, clearly tempers the reader's confidence in his critical stance. Here again, however, is an example of his willingness to entertain contradiction, to leave the adjudication of biographical "truth" ultimately in the reader's hands. Commenting on the dialogical element of Johnson's writing, Beth Carole Rosenberg puts it this way:

> It is most important that we notice in Johnson's writing the desire to sustain opposition, to allow different points of view to exist simultaneously without resolution or synthesis. Johnson is a pioneer, an experimenter...[who] demonstrates...the way rhetoric can be used to present argument in an open-ended and uncircumscribed way.[231]

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[230] *Lives* 7, 233-234.

[231] Beth Carole Rosenberg, *Virginia Woolf and Samuel Johnson: Common Readers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995) xx-xxi.

The *Lives of the Poets* exemplify this strategy because they offer such a diversity of perspectives, some of which are scrutinized, others challenged and debunked, and some merely left to molder on their hollow foundations. Johnson's own perspective predominates throughout, but it does not overwhelm; like others, it is built on evidence, on 'atoms of probability', but its value, its reasonableness, can only be decided by individual readers. It is, moreover, not only through a variety of often competing perspectives by which the reader is drawn into the process of weighing and delineating biographical truth, but also through the pervasive skepticism that Johnson brings to bear on his biographical portraits. The most obvious manifestation of this approach is Johnson's critical mistrust, his unwillingness to accept another's version of 'truth' without questioning authorial motivation, chiseling away at the roots of argument and assumption, or seeking independently established evidence by which to buttress or topple inherited information. At times, however, this skepticism takes on the appearance of an uncontented and unpersuadable curiosity, what Maner terms "a genuinely doubting engagement in questions of interpreting and evaluating individual human lives."[232] This is not a critical strategy or a measured approach, not a means of sifting fact from fable, but rather a consequence of the difficulty of assembling a life--a self--out of mere facts; it is an acknowledgment of what cannot be known or deduced of a subject, of epistemological impossibilities, of the vast disparity between the biographer's best work, the 'true copy', and the elusive original.

At its core, this biographical quandary has little to do with a lack of information, a lack, that is, of useful truth. Regardless of the abundance of reliable domestic detail, or the freshness of memory, or the life writer's skill in weaving into coherence the scattered bits of another's existence, the most that may be accomplished or gained is but a shadowy semblance of the self. As Nadel suggests, the demythologization which the biographer

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[232] Maner 24.

undertakes when reconciling public and private character is inevitably an ironic effort since old myths are replaced by new:

> Myth emerges out of the author's need and the reader's desire for wholeness and order. Irony emerges out of the tension between the impulse to correct in the biography at the same time it generates new myths about the subject. In part this results from the effort to establish coherence in the text from the life and the tendency by readers to understand the life as representative. Biography necessarily universalizes the more it individualizes as it reveals the common experiences of such conditions as triumph, love or failure...It is a movement from metonymy to metaphor in biography, the transfer of an individual life-struggle into a general condition. And in universalizing the narrative, drawing on archetypes and conventions, biography moves from the realm of history to that of myth.[233]

For Nadel, then, the myth of the subject is rooted not only in the coherence of text, but in the reader's desire for coherence; myth, therefore, is as much read *into* text as it inheres in text. From this perspective, the mythologization of the biographical subject is a collaborative effort of author and reader which has seemingly little to do with the subject her/himself.

Although the *Lives of the Poets* certainly evince universalizing tendencies in their presentation of individual personalities, given Johnson's belief in, and emphasis on, the fundamental commonalities of human nature, one cannot disregard the peculiarities of character which serve to distinguish the fifty-two poets and to complicate notions of selfhood. While the focus on domestic privacies brings literary greatness within the reader's everyday realm of conceivable and comprehensible ideas, "genius" is not thereby divested of its unique and extraordinary manifestations. Where Johnson praises the value of a character--be it fictional or historical--which can evoke notions of a 'species,' he also emphasizes the need for individuation. As he says of Shakespeare:

> Characters thus ample and general were not easily discriminated and preserved, yet perhaps no poet ever kept his personages more distinct from

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[233] Nadel 178.

> each other. I will not say with Pope that every speech may be assigned to the proper speaker, because many speeches there are which have nothing characteristical; but perhaps, though some may be equally adapted to every person, it will be difficult to find any that can be properly transferred from the present possessor to another claimant.[234]

In Johnson's view, the life writer, like the poet, must achieve a balance between drawing universally recognizable yet also distinctly individuated portraits. For if a biography is to instruct *and* please, it must seize not only upon those aspects of human character which are familiar, applicable and thus potentially edifying, but also upon the unique, extraordinary and surprising expressions of individuality.

Such expressions pervade the *Lives*, lending even to minor figures and brief narratives a sense of uncommon depth and indelibility. The "Life of J. Philips," for example, is distinguished by an account of the young poet's delight in having his hair combed "hour after hour"--a detail particularly striking when viewed against the backdrop of Johnson's flat characterization of Philips as "a man modest, blameless, and pious."[235] The biography of John Denham likewise affords a brief but vivid glimpse of a deeper, unexplored subjectivity behind the poet's mask. Recounting the unhappiness of Denham's second marriage, Johnson relates that the poet was for a time "disordered [in] his understanding,"[236] a condition which brought upon him ridicule and scandal. As with Philips' boyish indulgences, however, Johnson does not linger long in contemplation of this episode, mentioning merely that Denham "seems to have regained his full force of mind; for he wrote afterwards his excellent poem upon the death of Cowley."[237] Here, as elsewhere in the *Lives*, Johnson leaves to the reader the estimation of psycho-biographical significance. The fact that such moments or events are included in the narrative would appear to suggest their 'usefulness', yet how they contribute to an understanding of the

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[234] *Shakespeare*, Greene 422.
[235] *Lives* 7, 229, 232.
[236] *Lives* 7, 59-60.
[237] *Lives* 7, 60.

poetic self is left unclear. While Johnson persistently evokes notions of a hidden life to which his text is but clue, and of a self which is no longer, and was perhaps never, known and knowable, he refuses to tread into these unillumined regions with only conjecture or speculation as his guide. As a result, the biographical portraits he draws do not inhere in that 'coherence' which, as Nadel argues, contributes to the myth of the subject. On the contrary, the myth of Johnson's subjects is related precisely to their *in*coherence, by which I mean a complexity and contrariness which renders the self--the essential 'I'--ultimately inscrutable. Though there are intimations of a self behind the work, a self behind the public performance, a self even behind the personal anecdote or intimate encounter, Johnson does not undertake to weave these at times disparate entities into a cohesive whole. His characterizations consistently register doubt, opposition, and a tacit acknowledgment that the subject delineated is but a loose and unfinished approximation, an image cobbled together in haste and half-light.

CHAPTER 4: JOHNSON AND THE INSCRUTABLE SUBJECT

Johnson's presentation of the fifty-two men whose minds and manners are traced in the *Lives of the Poets* incorporates the most fundamental yet perhaps least elaborated of biographical truths: the irreducible complexity of human character. As Philip Toynbee notes, we are at every moment "infinite, unseizable, imponderable."[238] This is indeed the most daunting challenge to the writer of lives. Long before committing ideas to paper, s/he must surrender to the fact that no matter how plentiful and reliable the available information, or clear and detailed the account, the written subject will never approximate the real subject. The fullness of individual character, while it may be fleetingly intimated, cannot be captured and held by text; the maelstrom of human thought cannot be distilled into essential truths or translated into comprehensible language. Biography which struggles *against* this notion, which seeks rather to weave the often disparate and contradictory expressions of subjectivity into a cohesive whole, which forges interpretive connections between (and thereby forces them upon) the inherent disjunctions of selfhood, which endeavours to persuade the reader that the recollected, reported and reconstructed subject has incontestable historical validity--such biography, in its very certitude, strays deeply and irretrievably into realms of fiction. Certainty of truth is indeed that which the writer of lives can least depend upon. As Bernard DeVoto suggests:

> Biography is the wrong field for the mystical, and for the wishful, the tender minded, the hopeful, and the passionate. It enforces an unremitting skepticism--towards its material, towards the subject, most of all towards the biographer. He cannot permit himself one guess or one moment of credulity, no matter how brilliantly it may illuminate the darkness he deals with or how it may solace his ignorance. He must doubt everything. He must subject his conclusions and all the steps that lead to them to a corrosive examination, analysis, and verification--a process which he must hope will reveal flaws, for if it does he has added one more item of

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[238] Toynbee 22.

> certainty to his small store. He has, apart from such negatives, very little certainty.[239]

Such, clearly, is Johnson's approach to, and engagement with, biographical information, 'negatives' or debunked assumptions having for him no less value than substantiated conclusions. This is of course not to suggest that the *Lives of the Poets* are centered entirely on a discovery of half-truths and misinformation, or that Johnson devotes his energies rather to a reinterpretation or deconstruction of earlier biographies than to the composition of his own. Biographical criticism and the 'corrosive examination' of inherited truths are not for the life writer ends in themselves; the subject, or semblance thereof, once purged of its grosser illusions, must still be reconstructed and conveyed to the reader. Certainly for Johnson the compilation of useful information is at its core a *creative* process, moving the author (and reader) from 'atoms of probability' to an image of credibility.

By making a claim for the credibility of Johnson's biographical portraits, I do not suggest that they exclude or prohibit variant interpretations. On the contrary, the pervasiveness of the author's skepticism invites the reader to engage the text and its conclusions critically, to enter, as it were, into a dialogical relationship with the past. In reading the *Lives*, one has a sense of participating in an open-ended discussion where truth is revealed only in part because it is only partially known. Given Johnson's unwillingness to render rash and uninformed judgments, or to confine his audience to the narrow path of individual opinion, particularly where estimations of human character are concerned, the reader in like manner is compelled to refrain from hasty assessments and to weigh conclusions with care. More importantly, through the dialogical tensions of Johnson's work--by which I mean the juxtaposition of opposing perspectives, the ambiguity of antithetical responses, and the acknowledgment of incertitude and unknowableness--the

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[239] Bernard DeVoto, "The Sceptical Biographer," excerpted in *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism 1560-1960*, ed. James L. Clifford (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962) 149.

reader gains a sense of the complexity and fluctuations, the verisimilitude, of the biographical subject. Indeed, to speak of the credibility of Johnson's portraits is not to suggest a completeness which admits no additional information or an exactness from which nothing may be detracted, but rather a sense of the conceivable, the natural, that which is distinctly and recognizably human. The *Lives* do not resonate with the reader because they carry the weight of incontrovertible truth, but rather because they register the struggle of being *true to life* in the exploration of human character. And for Johnson, trueness-to-life necessarily involves opposition, contradiction, discontinuity and unknowableness. It is indeed an integral part of his salutary humility as a biographer that he refrains from trammeling his subjects--not to mention conceptualizations of selfhood--within the narrow parameters of text. Insofar as the reader can only experience or recreate a semblance of Johnson's subjects through epistemological gaps and textual tensions, s/he also in a sense participates in that spirit of humility and wonder which acknowledges the complexity of human behaviour, the disjunctions of self and character, the folly of blithe judgment and the presumptuousness of certainty.

Notably, the essential inscrutability of Johnson's subjects manifests itself not only in accounts delimited by a want of biographical information, but also--and indeed most strikingly--in the longer and more richly detailed 'Lives' of major poets such as Milton, Swift and Pope.[240] To know more about a subject is not, as Johnson makes clear in these narratives, to know him/her more certainly. Neither in public life nor in the domestic sphere is the poet, the self, indisputably cohesive or comprehensible. What one observer or one anecdote brings to light, another will modify, obscure, or contradict. As noted earlier, Johnson's biographical and critical approach is not to suppress but rather to sustain such intrinsic disjunctions and opposition. Whether commenting on character or works,

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[240] I have excluded Dryden from this group because, as noted earlier, his elusiveness as a biographical subject stems largely from a dearth of domestic information.

therefore, he consistently juxtaposes praise and censure, neither elevating his subjects beyond common view, nor making genius and its labours contemptible. The resultant textual ambiguities are not a product of authorial indecisiveness or prevarication, but rather a reflection of the unseizable vastness and irresolvable knots of human character.

Ambiguous is certainly not a term which critics have tended to associate with Johnson's portrait of Milton. Of all the 'Lives' it is generally deemed the most captious in tone and severe in judgment. As Maner suggests, "Johnson has already made up his mind about Milton; so his skeptical and argumentative stance is abrasive and finally unfair."[241] There is little doubt that as a Tory and a Loyalist Johnson *had* made up his mind about Milton's politics of dissent and his defence of the freedom of the press, yet throughout the 'Life' one senses also a profound admiration for the singular genius and puissance of mind which, despite intense opposition, could rouse itself to such monumental poetical labours. As Johnson notes in summing up Milton's achievements,

> His great works were performed under discountenance, and in blindness; but difficulties vanished at his touch; he was born for whatever is arduous.[242]

Any assessment of Johnson's characterization of Milton as a man and a poet must necessarily begin with an acknowledgment of the author's unwavering respect for his subject's pertinacity, his physical and moral struggle to remain "a thinker for himself."[243] Indeed, of all the manifestations of genius considered by Johnson, Milton's is the most remarkable because it is contingent upon opposition, enabling greatness from a position of isolation and alterity.

The very qualities that make Milton such a formidable poet, namely his staunch individualism and seemingly undaunted self-assurance, infuse his private life and social

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[241] Maner 24.
[242] *Lives* 7, 142.
[243] *Lives* 7, 142.

intercourse with rancour and volatility. From the outset, Johnson presents a man whose genius, untempered by civility, tends toward destruction even as it creates. Commenting on the young poet's years at Cambridge, for example, Johnson juxtaposes the praise of Milton's propadeutic compositions ("they were such as few can perform"[244]) with a veiled reproof of his conduct:

> That he obtained no fellowship is certain; but the unkindness with which he was treated, was not merely negative. I am ashamed to relate what I fear is true, that Milton was one of the last students in either university, that suffered the publick indignity of corporal correction.[245]

Johnson's hesitation in broaching the subject of Milton's refractoriness serves only to make the episode more vivid and damaging. Although Milton is ostensibly made the object of 'unkindness' and 'suffering,' it is clear from Johnson's embarrassed tone that he feels the poet likely deserved his punishment. The author's contention, in summing up Milton's scholastic career, that "thoughts of obedience, whether canonical or civil, raised his indignation,"[246] seems indeed to corroborate this notion.

Where Milton's unassailable self-assurance is concerned, Johnson's commentary is again an admixture of rationalization and censure:

> It appears, in all his writings, that he had the usual concomitant of great abilities, a lofty and steady confidence in himself, perhaps not without some contempt of others; for scarcely any man ever wrote so much, and praised so few. Of his praise he was very frugal; as he set its value high, and considered his mention of a name, as a security against the waste of time, and a certain preservative from oblivion.[247]

This passage in many ways typifies Johnson's critical methodology in that it modifies its own premise through amplification. Where the extent of Milton's 'confidence' is initially described as being common or 'usual' for a man of his aptitude, that idea is called into

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[244] *Lives* 7, 68.
[245] *Lives* 7, 68.
[246] *Lives* 7, 70.
[247] *Lives* 7, 73.

question by Johnson's subsequent contention that '*scarcely any man* ever wrote so much, and praised so few.' Much as Milton's eminence as a poet is unrivaled, so his egoism appears to eclipse that of other greats. Again, however, Johnson does not leave the claim of Milton's lofty sense of self entirely unqualified. In drawing his relationship with Cromwell, Johnson characterizes Milton as a mere peon of usurpation:

> Nothing can be more just than that rebellion should end in slavery; that he, who had justified the murder of his king, for some acts which seemed to him unlawful, should now sell his services, and his flatteries, to a tyrant, of whom it was evident that he could do nothing lawful.[248]

Notwithstanding the rhetoric of conservatism, Johnson's contention that Milton sacrificed both his philosophy and dignity for "the honey of publick employment"[249] points to the limitations of the poet's hubris. A yet clearer example of Milton's capacity to set aside the needs of his genius is furnished by the earlier account of his employment as a schoolmaster. Johnson indeed invites the reader "to look with some degree of merriment on [this]...*small performance*,"[250] because it seems a service so far below Milton's ambitions. One need, of course, only recall Johnson's effusive commendation of Watts' like-minded pedagogical endeavours in order to understand that his 'merriment' is akin rather to pleasant surprise than carping ridicule. In distinguishing his account from those of previous biographers, who "are unwilling that Milton should be degraded to a schoolmaster,"[251] Johnson in fact justifies the poet's descent from the pursuit of loftier goals:

> His father was alive; his allowance was not ample; and he supplied its deficiencies by an honest and useful employment.[252]

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[248] *Lives* 7, 87.
[249] *Lives* 7, 87.
[250] *Lives* 7, 75 (italics added).
[251] *Lives* 7, 75.
[252] *Lives* 7, 75.

For all his rancour, self-righteousness and anti-authoritarian bluster, Johnson's Milton is not above subservience. Commenting on the poet's decision to publish a text of rudimentary logic two years before his death, Johnson goes so far as to ascribe to him "a kind of humble dignity, which did not disdain the meanest services to literature."[253]

In drawing Milton's domestic character and habits, Johnson again attends to his subject's inherent contradictions. Though he begins with the commonly held assumption that Milton lived his life as a "severe student," his hours strictly regimented, his pleasures few, Johnson casts doubt on the attainability of such an "even tenour."[254] The image he presents of the poet at work is itself suggestive of a dreamy, almost indulgent nonchalance:

> He composed much in the morning, and dictated in the day, sitting obliquely in an elbowchair, with his leg thrown over the arm.[255]

Having thus, as it were, skewed the reader's preconceptions of the poet's domestic austerity, Johnson proceeds to present a man of whom it is acknowledged that "Fortune appears not to have had much of his care,"[256] a man whose underpaid labours did not prevent him from leaving his family fifteen hundred pounds from the sale of his library shortly before his death, a man who, for all his patriarchal bullying, still endeavoured to educate his daughters. That Milton was "severe and arbitrary,"[257] Johnson acknowledges, yet these qualities are not ascribed to an uncomplicated malevolence. There is indeed nothing simple about Milton's motivations. Commenting, for example, on the poet's religious affiliations and practices, Johnson confesses that "we know rather what he was not, than what he was."[258] For those who maintain that Milton's manner of worship

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[253] *Lives* 7, 110.
[254] *Lives* 7, 113.
[255] *Lives* 7, 113.
[256] *Lives* 7, 113.
[257] *Lives* 7, 116.
[258] *Lives* 7, 115.

verged on heresy because he appears to have omitted prayer from his private life, Johnson offers a persuasive counterargument:

> Prayer was certainly not thought superfluous by him, who represents our first parents as praying acceptably in the state of innocence, and efficaciously after their fall. That he lived without prayer can hardly be affirmed; his studies and meditations were an habitual prayer.[259]

By reconciling the apostate with the poet of *Paradise Lost*, Johnson in essence characterizes Milton as a model of devoutness, one who made the Pauline dictum of 'praying without ceasing' the very labour of his life.

Notwithstanding these serene, prayerful moments of poetic inspiration and scriptural exegesis, Milton's life, as Johnson makes apparent, consisted in large part of struggle and strife. There is indeed an element of unrestrained ferocity in Johnson's Milton; his character "imparts a menacing threat of disintegration, a troubling fissure in the edifice of culture."[260] The poet's obsessive devotion to polemics is exemplified by his dispute with Salmasius, an episode which escalates to nothing less than mortal combat:

> As Salmasius reproached Milton with losing his eyes in the quarrel, Milton delighted himself with the belief that he had shortened Salmasius's life, and both, perhaps, with more malignity than reason. Salmasius died at the spa, Sept. 3, 1653; and, as controvertists are commonly said to be killed by their last dispute, Milton was flattered with the credit of destroying him.[261]

As Johnson points out, Milton's life-long quarrel was not simply with individuals but with systems of thought, cultural assumptions, the very philosophies of his age. The poet's spirited independence, rather than breeding self-sufficient contentment, breathed its enmity upon the most sacred public institutions:

> He hated monarchs in the state, and prelates in the church; for he hated all whom he was required to obey. *It is to be suspected, that his predominant*

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[259] *Lives* 7, 115.
[260] Gross 148.
[261] *Lives* 7, 86.

> *desire was to destroy, rather than establish, and that he felt not so much the love of liberty, as repugnance to authority.*[262]

Here again, Johnson's hesitancy to impugn Milton's character--his 'suspicion' of a destructive nature--serves only to make his conclusion more devastating. The judgment that is long suspended and distrusted, yet finally brought forth, and even then with considerable unease, seems indeed to carry more weight than ready opinions and hasty summations.

In keeping with his skeptical and dialogical approach, however, Johnson does not consign Milton's character to that of a wantonly destructive tyrant; instead he turns to a consideration of his *productive* labours--his works. The paradox of Johnson's Milton lies indeed in the coexistence of his fractious temperament and sublime poetic spirit. That the rancorous slayer of Salmasius should convey in his works sentiments that are "unexceptionably just," in a language "lusciously elegant" where even superfluities are "beautiful,"[263] speaks to the vast divisions and complexities, the heterogeneity, of selfhood. While Johnson's criticism also seizes upon those qualities of poetic design and performance which bring to mind the political malcontent and domestic bully--Milton's early English poems, for example, are distinguished by their "repulsive harshness" and by rhymes "violently applied"[264]--the general tenor of his appraisal leaves no doubt of poetic preeminence. Johnson's Milton is truly a "mighty poet" whose works encompass and convey such grandeur that "all other greatness shrinks away [before them]."[265] If, in his dealings with others, Milton was sunk to the level of mean-spirited oppressor, as a poet he is upraised by Johnson to unparalleled heights. As one critic notes, "Nowhere else in all Johnson's writings does he throw such stress on to the assertion of greatness."[266]

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[262] *Lives* 7, 116 (italics added).
[263] *Lives* 7, 130, 118, 129.
[264] *Lives* 7, 119.
[265] *Lives* 7, 127, 126.
[266] Isobel Grundy, *Samuel Johnson and the Scale of Greatness* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986) 224.

Milton's greatness, his sublimity as a poet, moreover, seems to inhere in his propensity to transcend or transgress established boundaries and rules--precisely that quality which, in public life, incites divisiveness and conflict. As Johnson makes clear, only the transgressive genius of Milton could produce a work of such staggering imaginative scope as *Paradise Lost*:

> The appearance of nature, and the occurrences of life, did not satiate his appetite of greatness. To paint things as they are requires a minute attention, and employs the memory rather than the fancy. Milton's delight was to sport in the wide regions of possibility; reality was a scene too narrow for his mind. He sent his faculties out upon discovery, into worlds where only imagination can travel, and delighted to form new modes of existence, and furnish sentiment and action to superior beings, to trace the counsels of hell, or accompany the choirs of heaven.[267]

Ultimately, then, it is in the coexistence of destructive and creative inclinations, and in the juxtaposition of the domestic tyrant (encompassing notions of mean or arbitrary greatness) and the poetic giant (encompassing notions of true or deserved greatness), that Johnson's Milton, as a biographical subject, attains his elusiveness. The fact that Johnson does not offer to synthesize these disparate identities or fragments of selfhood serves only to reintensify the reader's perception of a yet unplumbed subjectivity. There is, moreover, in Johnson's account a perpetual vacillation between praise and blame--praise, that is, for Milton's 'humble dignity' and blame for his bullish arrogance; praise for his willingness to teach the young and blame for his seeming inability to be himself subject to authority; praise for his reclusive piety and blame for his domestic tyranny; praise for his power to create new worlds and blame for his eagerness to destroy the old--which, as Folkenflik notes, is for readers and critics alike "irreconconcilable."[268] If anything, the "Life of Milton" is perhaps the *least* 'unfair' of Johnson's biographies because he allows neither detraction nor commendation to remain unmodified or unopposed for long. Thus Milton,

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[267] *Lives* 7, 131.
[268] Folkenflik 166.

the poet, the man, can never be definitively apprehended; he is intimated, postulated, glimpsed perhaps, but never held; if he is one thing, he is also always another.

Not unlike the "Life of Milton," Johnson's biography of Swift has been often stamped by critics as "hopelessly biased."[269] Boswell himself attributes to Johnson "a certain degree of prejudice against that extraordinary man,"[270] offering in support of his conclusion a passage from the 'Life' in which Johnson derides Swift's frugality. There is indeed little doubt that the poet's private character, so replete with petty eccentricities and ritualistic obsessions, evokes in Johnson a profound bafflement:

> Whatever he did, he seemed willing to do in a manner peculiar to himself, without sufficiently considering, that singularity, as it implies a contempt of the general practice, is a kind of defiance which justly provokes the hostilities of ridicule; he, therefore, who indulges peculiar habits, is worse than others, if he be not better.[271]

Of significance here is not Johnson's justification of his own scorn, but rather his inability to subject Swift's behaviour to rational analysis: to suggest, after all, that a man of natural sagacity could fail to consider or mark the consequences--namely the open ridicule--of his actions seems an untenable position. For Johnson, it is simply not conceivable that 'singularity' may encompass not only a full awareness of the repercussions of social defiance, but an utter indifference to them. His image of Swift, consequently, is of a man blinded to the truth of his own actions, a man in error and in need of correction.

Notwithstanding Johnson's inability to reconcile Swift's idiosyncrasies with his own notions of propriety and social order, he recognized in the poet's writings and, indeed, in his modes of thought qualities worthy of emulation. As Maner suggests, "Whatever Johnson's antipathy may have been, it was mixed with admiration; he used Swift extensively in compiling illustrations for the *Dictionary*, he used to quote Swift

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[269] Gross 148.
[270] Boswell 1112.
[271] *Lives* 8, 223.

frequently, and several of his early satires imitated Swift."[272] Like the "Life of Milton," then, Johnson's biography of Swift is an admixture of blame and praise. If, as a private man, Swift is chastised not only for his absurd defiance of social conventions, but for his "severe and punctilious temper"[273] which made even his charity burdensome, as a writer he is allotted every merit to which both his popularity and influence entitled him. As Johnson suggests,

> When Swift is considered as an author, it is just to estimate his powers by their effects. In the reign of queen Anne he turned the stream of popularity against the whigs, and must be confessed to have dictated, for a time, the political opinions of the English nation. In the succeeding reign he delivered Ireland from plunder and oppression; and showed that wit, confederated with truth, had such force as authority was unable to resist. He said truly of himself, that Ireland "was his debtor.'[274]

What Milton aimed to do in other realms, Swift appears to have accomplished in his own. His success, though clearly enhanced by the originality of his compositions, is attributed in large part to the "simplicity" or "purity"[275] of his diction--precisely that aspect which Milton, the overbearing "master,"[276] seems in Johnson's view not to have cultivated. The Swiftian style, as Johnson makes clear, is the appropriate vehicle for popular instruction:

> He pays no court to the passions; he excites neither surprise nor admiration: he always understands himself; and his reader always understands him: the peruser of Swift wants little previous knowledge; it will be sufficient that he is acquainted with common words and common things; he is neither required to mount elevations, nor to explore profundities; his passage is always on a level, along solid ground, without asperities, without obstruction.[277]

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[272] Maner 75. (See Grundy, *Scale of Greatness*, 36-49, for a more complete discussion of Johnson's literary indebtedness to Swift).
[273] *Lives* 8, 216.
[274] *Lives* 8, 219.
[275] *Lives* 8, 220.
[276] *Lives* 7, 135.
[277] *Lives* 8, 220.

While it may be argued that Swift's simplicity is here somewhat overstated, there is little doubt that the 'solid ground' of his prose is precisely that which Johnson himself practiced to attain.

Juxtaposed against this image of lucidity are the "unpalatable inconsistencies"[278] of Swift's private character. One need look no further than the poet's conflicted relationship with the "unfortunate Stella"[279]--at once the object of his dearest affections and most bitter cruelties. Their marriage, as Johnson suggests, mirrored the singularity of Swift's mind:

> they lived in different houses, as before; nor did she ever lodge in the deanery but when Swift was seized with a fit of giddiness. "It would be difficult," says lord Orrery, "to prove that they were ever afterwards together without a third person."[280]

Though Johnson does not seize upon it directly, the irony of these distant lovers coming together only in moments of vertiginous delirium would surely not have been lost upon him. Whatever tenderness may have passed between Swift and Stella, it is made clear that the Dean's unyielding disposition contributed in the main to an extirpation of his wife's joys, her hopes, her very life. Johnson indeed goes so far as to attribute to the poet a "consciousness that [he] himself had hastened [her death]."[281] For Johnson, Swift's "eccentrick tenderness"[282] is ultimately destructive not because it is disinterested or neglectful, but rather because it is too solicitous:

> While she was at her own disposal he did not consider his possession as secure; resentment, ambition, or caprice, might separate them; he was, therefore, resolved to make "assurance doubly sure," and to appropriate her by a private marriage, to which he had annexed the expectation of all

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[278] Gross 150.
[279] *Lives* 8, 196.
[280] *Lives* 8, 208.
[281] *Lives* 8, 214.
[282] *Lives* 8, 215.

> the pleasures of perfect friendship, without the uneasiness of conjugal restraint.[283]

The image that emerges here is not of a man arbitrarily cruel, but rather of one driven to cruelty by profound insecurities. Swift's punctiliousness, his obsessive attention to detail, his desire for control, his domineering exertion of power--all these suggest a man inherently fearful of, and unadaptable to, life's natural rhythms. "[H]e shuffles," as Johnson suggests, "between cowardice and veracity."[284]

The idea of a shuffling or vacillating subject is indeed central to Johnson's presentation of Swift. Just as the poet's mind passes from lucidity to 'giddiness,' so his character is marked by transitions from bold political satirist to uncertain lover, from haughty individualist to needy dotard, from venerated hero to ridiculed madman. If Swift's writings are for Johnson transparent, his mind remains in large part impenetrable. Why, for example, the poet seized upon Stella as the object of his curious affections, Johnson cannot deduce, offering only the unavailing conclusion that "she was great, because her associates were little."[285] Still more troubling for Johnson is Swift's apparent impiety, for which the poet is at once excused and condemned:

> The suspicions of his irreligion proceeded, in a great measure, from his dread of hypocrisy; instead of wishing to seem better, he delighted in seeming worse than he was....He was not only careful to hide the good which he did, but willingly incurred the suspicion of evil which he did not. He forgot what himself had formerly asserted, that hypocrisy is less mischievous than open impiety.[286]

By attending to Swift's feigned behaviour--his 'seeming' impiety--and conflating it with 'open impiety,' Johnson in a sense perpetuates the myth of the subject even as he endeavors to unravel it. What this passage offers is not a vindication of the poet's clandestine charity ('the good which he did'), but rather a condemnation of his efforts to

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[283] *Lives* 8, 214.
[284] *Lives* 8, 213.
[285] *Lives* 8, 215.
[286] *Lives* 8, 222.

eschew the imputation of hypocrisy. Swift's 'true' character, that namely which lies between the extremes of hypocrisy and impiety, is left ultimately unelucidated.

What cannot be deduced from actions alone, given Swift's adoption of contrary poses, Johnson endeavors to glean from his written work. Of the poet's epistolary character, for example, Johnson offers a decidedly unflattering assessment:

> [H]e was not a man to be either loved or envied. He seems to have wasted life in discontent, by the rage of neglected pride, and the languishment of unsatisfied desire. He is querulous and fastidious, arrogant and malignant; he scarcely speaks of himself but with indignant lamentations, or of others but with insolent superiority when he is gay, and with angry contempt when he is gloomy.[287]

It is important to note that this passage, for all its censorious overtones, brings to light not the irrefutable truth, but merely another semblance or mask, of character. Recalling Johnson's description of the personal letter in the "Life of Pope" as 'a calm and deliberate *performance*,' the above assessment of Swift indeed cannot be understood as a crystallization of the poetic self. Johnson himself maintains a measure of skeptical distance by his use of the word 'seems' in introducing his litany of derogatory adjectives. Just as Swift vacillates, so does Johnson's opinion of him, returning in the end always rather to puzzlement than outright denunciation:

> The greatest difficulty that occurs, in analyzing his character, is to discover by what depravity of intellect he took delight in revolving ideas, from which almost every other mind shrinks with disgust. The ideas of pleasure, even when criminal, may solicit the imagination; but what has disease, deformity, and filth, upon which the thoughts can be allured to dwell?[288]

Swift's willingness to entertain notions from which others recoil in fear and disgust, his capacity to seek value in the unvalued and delight in the odious, his resistance, above all, to conventional pleasures--all these serve to make him, in Johnson's terms,

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[287] *Lives* 8, 225.
[288] *Lives* 8, 226.

incomprehensible. If Milton rises too high in his poetic endeavours to be long accompanied, Swift creeps too close to the ground to be long endured.

While it is tempting to conclude that Swift's essential inscrutability stems from his biographer's inability to read him clearly, it must be remembered that Johnson, in closing his characterization, turns to the judgment of Dr. Delany who, though he "knew [the poet] better," presents a portrait likewise wanting in clarity. Delany's opening assessment of the poet's wit as being "always intended rightly, although not always so rightly directed; delightful in many instances, and salutary even where it is most offensive,"[289] brings to light the inescapable contrariness of Swift's character. Even in defending the poet's "fidelity in friendship..and zeal for religion," Delany acknowledges the "blemishes" which, albeit briefly, "cloud or sully his fame."[290] Like Johnson, Delany presents a man who cannot be readily known or understood, but must be "reconsidered and reexamined with the utmost attention."[291] The enigma of Swift, like that of Milton, is that he may be justifiably denounced *and* venerated, that his disdain for the world reflects the experience of considerable hardships, that his arrogance is often a shield against ridicule, and his cynicism an antidote against despair. Perhaps more than any other of Johnson's biographies, the "Life of Swift" entrenches the notion of an utterly unique and original selfhood, one which is in profound ways irresolvable and incommunicable because its perceptions and experiences elude the reader's sympathetic understanding.

A final example of Johnson's biographical verisimilitude, his capacity, that is, to elucidate within his texts the inherent complications, fractures and unknowableness of human character and identity, is captured in the "Life of Pope," which Maner hails as a "masterpiece of dialectical rhetoric."[292] In dealing with the figure of Pope, Johnson

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[289] *Lives* 8, 226.
[290] *Lives* 8, 226, 227.
[291] *Lives* 8, 227.
[292] Maner 121.

attends chiefly to the incongruities or contradictions of poetic genius, continually shifting his focus from symptoms of infirmity to displays of puissance, from sentiments blamable to judgments laudable, from critical insolence to filial meekness, from manifestations of baffling pettiness to revelations of dignity and grandeur. Pope's greatness, as Johnson makes clear, is not simply shaped by, but born of, hardship; to speak of the poet's accomplishments is always to allude to his sacrifices; to praise his fortitude is invariably to intimate the conditions of his weakness.

Thus, in coming to terms with Pope the scholar, critic and poet, one also encounters the the frail child, the delicate prodigy, the needy convalescent. Johnson's presentation of the faltering, fleshly Pope does not, however, serve merely as a bleak backdrop to the brilliant effusions of poetic genius; the body of Pope, particularly in infancy, is drawn not only with compassion but with a sensitivity to its own inherent beauties:

> Pope was, from his birth, of a constitution tender and delicate; but is said to have shown remarkable gentleness and sweetness of disposition. The weakness of his body continued through his life; but the mildness of his mind, perhaps ended with his childhood. His voice, when he was young, was so pleasing, that he was called, in fondness, "the little nightingale."[293]

Of significance here is Johnson's tendency to qualify, counterbalance, and thereby complicate received notions of infirmity and weakness. Rather than seizing upon Pope's congenital deformities as symbols of corruption or employing them as vehicles of the grotesque, Johnson imbues the poet's physical body with a delicacy and preciousness which raise it, even in frailty, above the common, the everyday, the merely alive. If, as Johnson asserts, Pope outgrew the 'mildness' of his mind, there is evidence that he did not entirely shrug off his gentle disposition. Commenting on the poet's relationship with his parents, Johnson offers an endearing portrait of devotion:

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[293] *Lives* 8, 233.

> The filial piety of Pope was in the highest degree amiable and exemplary; his parents had the happiness of living till he was at the summit of poetical reputation, till he was at ease in his fortune, and without rival in his fame, and found no diminution of his respect or tenderness. Whatever was his pride, to them he was obedient; and whatever was his irritability, to them he was gentle. Life has, among its soothing and quiet comforts, few things better to give than such a son.[294]

As Johnson makes apparent, Pope's greatness is not to be equated solely with his ascension to the 'summit of poetical reputation,' but also, and perhaps more so, with his voluntary descent to positions of obedience and meekness. Not unlike the biographer's mindfulness of those that helped to shape a life of genius, Pope's filial devotion is essentially a lifelong act of commemoration, imbuing the present with a sense of the past.

Given Johnson's pervasive skepticism, his elucidation of the childlike Pope does not confine itself exclusively to laudable or endearing manifestations of softness and subservience. In drawing the poet's domestic character, Johnson presents a man made petulant by the indignity of daily dependence on others:

> The indulgence and accommodation which his sickness required, had taught him all the unpleasing and unsocial qualities of a valetudinary man. He expected that every thing should give way to his ease or humour; as a child, whose parents will not hear her cry, has an unresisted dominion in the nursery.[295]

The movement from 'valetudinary man' to 'child' is here accompanied by a commensurate diminution of the poet's sphere of influence: the master of a household is reduced to a petty tyrant of the nursery; the lilting voice of 'the little nightingale' is supplanted by the shrill wailing of a spoiled infant. Pope's neoteny, in short, is an unseemly transformation--his delicacy replaced by peevishness, his exigencies by demands, his tenderness by a hardness to please. If Pope's infirmities made him unwillingly dependent on others, he also, as Johnson points out, courted the attentive and consolatory caresses of any who would indulge him:

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[294] *Lives* 8, 281.
[295] *Lives* 8, 309.

> Wherever he was, he left no room for another, because he exacted the attention, and employed the activity of the whole family. His errands were so frequent and frivolous, that the footmen, in time, avoided and neglected him.[296]

Johnson's Pope is a man who labours paradoxically to remind the world of his eminence and value by drawing attention to his needs and frailties. When the latter are ignored or inadequately provided for, he reacts by drawing upon a childlike repertoire of defenses. As Johnson notes, "He would sometimes leave...silently, no one could tell why, and was to be courted back by more letters and messages than the footmen were willing to carry."[297] If, as is suggested early in the 'Life,' Pope "rate[d] himself at his real value,"[298] he appears by his conduct to have considered himself undervalued by the rest of the world.

The petulance of Pope the child manifests itself as virulence in Pope the critic. Like Swift, he is fearless in his assaults upon fellow writers, while betraying a profound sense of insecurity in the defense of his own works. The poet's quarrel with Addison, for example, begins with the civility of two acknowledged rivals testing one another's strength, yet quickly escalates into a war of recriminatory malevolence when Pope perceives "his reputation and interest [to be] at hazard."[299] By presenting the circumstances and resolution of this dispute partly in Pope's own words, Johnson reveals to the reader the poet's capacity for artful self-exoneration:

> 'I wrote a letter to Mr. Addison, to let him know that I was not unacquainted with [his] behaviour...that if I was to speak severely of him in return for it, it should be not in such a dirty way; that I should rather tell him, himself, fairly of his faults, and allow his good qualities; and, that it should be something in the following manner: I then adjoined the first sketch of what has since been called my satire on Addison. Mr. Addison used me very civilly ever after.'[300]

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296 *Lives* 8, 310.
297 *Lives* 8, 311-312.
298 *Lives* 8, 237.
299 *Lives* 8, 268.
300 *Lives* 8, 269.

By his own account, Pope is a man temperate and fair, not yielding to the 'dirty' tricks of his rival, but instead allowing his 'good qualities' as well as his 'faults'. As proof, he directs the reader to "Atticus" (1715), his 'sketch' of Addison, by which he claims a truce was won, apparently because his rival felt the sting of truth. Notwithstanding Pope's suggestion of fairness, the poem itself clearly belabours Addison's weaknesses and corruptibilities. While acknowledging that he was "born with Talents," Pope portrays his rival as being in the main "scornful," "jealous," "pleas'd to wound," and foolishly "attentive to his own Applause."[301]

Pope's malevolence as a critic is so thoroughgoing as to be provoked not only by direct assaults upon his character, but by any perceived threat to the value and eminence of both his work and ideas. The publication of *The Dunciad* (1728), for example, is attributed by Johnson to the poet's desire "to sink into contempt all the writers by whom he had been attacked, *and some others whom he thought unable to defend themselves.*"[302] Again, Johnson uses Pope's own account of the genesis of the poem--a dedication written to Lord Middlesex in the name of Richard Savage--to elucidate the mechanisms of self-preservation and exoneration:

> 'This gave Mr. Pope the thought, that he had now some opportunity of doing good, by detecting and dragging into the light these common enemies of mankind....This it was that gave birth to the Dunciad; and he thought it an happiness, that, by the late flood of slander on himself, he had acquired such a peculiar right over their names as was necessary to this design.'[303]

Essential to Pope's posturing is his capacity to divest his role as satirist of any intended malice while casting his victims (the dunces) as the 'common enemies of mankind'. Actuated by the desire of 'doing good,' called forth by a 'flood of slander', and entitled by

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[301] Alexander Pope, "Atticus," *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963) 294.
[302] *Lives* 8, 275-276 (italics added).
[303] *Lives* 8, 277.

a 'right over their names,' Pope presents himself as a champion of social justice. Johnson, in prefacing Pope's account, takes a rather less exalted view of the poet's motivation: "This satire had the effect which he intended, by blasting the characters which it touched."[304] Instead of a victim provoked beyond patience, Johnson describes Pope as "the aggressor"--one who took "delight in the tumult which he had raised."[305] Complicating this portrait is the fact that Pope, like Swift, seeks to elude responsibility for aggression even as he delights in the power of its effects. Commenting on the poet's reaction to the expostulations of Aaron Hill, one of the writers lampooned in *The Dunciad*, Johnson suggests that

> Pope was reduced to sneak and shuffle, sometimes to deny, and sometimes to apologize; he first endeavours to wound, and is then afraid to own that he meant a blow.[306]

Returning to the notion of a shuffling subject, Johnson presents Pope in the contrary guise of instigator and coward, of outspoken critic and self-effacing poseur.

Indeed, the central difficulty in unraveling the truth of Pope is his assumption of various and at times conflicting personae. As Johnson notes, "In all his intercourse with mankind, he had great delight in artifice, and endeavoured to attain all his purposes by indirect and unsuspected methods."[307] Pope's identity, in other words, is built on deception, secrecy, and--as is suggested of his epistolary character--performativity. This devotion to artfulness is not merely an aspect of the Popean self, but a "general habit"--one indeed so ingrained that "'He hardly drank tea without a stratagem.'"[308] Johnson's efforts to pare away his subject's several masks, to outwit the conjurer himself, prove largely unavailing. In attempting, for example, to glean from Pope's conversation

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[304] *Lives* 8, 276.
[305] *Lives* 8, 278.
[306] *Lives* 8, 279.
[307] *Lives* 8, 311.
[308] *Lives* 8, 311.

what he could not gather from his writings--a sense, that is, of "the first emotions of the mind"[309]--Johnson concludes with evident disappointment:

> It is remarkable, that so near his time, so much should be known of what he has written, and so little of what he has said: traditional memory retains no sallies of raillery, nor sentences of observation; nothing either pointed or solid, either wise or merry.[310]

Like Dryden, Pope lacks solidity. What is known of him apart from the carefully assembled masks of social intercourse is that which cannot be logically reconciled or distilled into a cohesive whole. His physical infirmities both enhance and detract from the lustre of his intellectual gifts; his childlikeness is at once endearing and repugnant; his domestic frugality is offset by culinary indulgences; his critical virulence is counterbalanced by a dread of confrontation; his worldly contempt gives way to filial meekness; his self-assertions are crafted displays, and his displays, crafted selves. Johnson's Pope, in short, can only be known circumstantially, contextually, partially, but not essentially. Not unlike "the Cynthia of this minute,"[311] he is a man who "invests himself with temporary qualities, and sallies out in the colours of the present moment."[312]

Johnson's capacity as a biographer to inscribe his texts with the inherent flux and inscrutability of human character, to intimate the vastness of which only a part may be fathomed and communicated, to paint, as it were, in the colours of the moment, serves not to obscure but rather to enliven his subjects. The fact that Johnson's Milton, Swift and Pope retain their unseizableness even as their characters are brought to light allows the reader to enter into an open dialogue with the past, to question what is known and imagine what is not.

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[309] *Lives* 8, 314.
[310] *Lives* 8, 311.
[311] Alexander Pope, *Of the Characters of Women, The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963) 560.
[312] *Lives* 8, 317.

CONCLUSION

In considering the *Lives of the Poets* as a work which resists notions of a uniform, cohesive and knowable self, and which opens a space of critical and imaginative dialogue between reader and text, it becomes apparent that Johnson is modern not only in *his* time, as Eliot argues,[313] but in ours. Far from shackling his audience with a positive view of history and human character, he inscribes his biographies with epistemological uncertainty and critical skepticism. The conclusions he offers, though in large part purified of the dross of conjecture and rash assumption, are continually modified, destabilized, juxtaposed and subjected to reinterpretation. The very structure of the *Lives* incorporates what Rosenberg terms "the fluidity of conversation,"[314] shifting between Johnson's voice and those of previous biographers, between recollections and anecdotes and the words of the poets themselves, between the critic's assessment and that of the audience. For Johnson, the determination and communication of biographical truth is necessarily an interactive process, requiring varied perspectives and continual reinterpretation because the nature of such truth--the nature of the biographical subject--is mutable and evanescent. Even when memory is yet undefiled by the passing of time and the biographer is supplied with a relative abundance of information, as in the "Life of Pope," the details of a written life offer only a semblance of a life lived, and merely a shadow of the self that lived it.

Notwithstanding Johnson's belief in the fundamental commonalities of human nature, his biographical portraits are not reducible to a set of standard experiences or comprehensible subjectivities. To know that a writer of verse was once animated by hope or brought low by despair, in want or in plenty, esteemed or reviled, is to know only what s/he was, but not who. A sense of the subject as a credible figure of history can only

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313 Eliot 201.
314 Rosenberg xx.

emerge when the minute circumstances of living are brought to light, when the public face of renown is juxtaposed against manifestations of private character, when anecdotal detail and inherited truth are subjected to the rigours of critical inquiry, when, in the chorus of divergent opinions, even the author's resonates with uncertainty. For if the recreated subject is, in Procrustean fashion, wholly trammeled within the text, if contradictions of character are either unelucidated or tidily resolved by the arts of conjecture and speculation, if the author muzzles, ignores or obscures competing perspectives, then the reader's work is in effect finished. Whatever questions may arise about the credibility of such a polished portrait cannot be answered by referring to the text; instead they must be turned over in the reader's mind like gnawing worries, and in the end either jettisoned or so embraced that the text itself--and with it the subject--loses all meaning and relevance. 'Lives' that endeavour to impose a unilateral vision of history and self are either implicitly trusted or readily forgotten; far from generating knowledge, they circumscribe possibility.

For Johnson, the reader is clearly central to the assessment of biographical verity. In presenting the *Lives of the Poets* he does not so much disseminate his own exegeses of self and character as offer the tools by which these notions may be conceptualized and critically engaged. The first tool--that by which Johnson distinguishes his own approach to the men and lives he chronicles--is a pervasive distrust of inherited truth. In reading the *Lives* and tracing the repositionings, modifications, and corrosiveness of Johnson's skepticism, one acquires a sense not only of the scarcity of reliable testimony but of the need to subject traditional wisdom and common assumption to the rigours of criticism. The dialogical tensions within the *Lives* clearly encourage a resistance to the sway of authority--even if that authority is Johnson's.

The second tool with which the Johnsonian reader is equipped to engage notions of selfhood is an appreciation of the vast complexity and essential inscrutability of human character. Johnson's own inconclusiveness in presenting his subjects speaks most clearly to the knots and convolutions, the riddles of self. By intimating the gaps and

insufficiencies of his sources, as well as the incertitude of his own deductions, he leaves to his audience the adjudication of biographical truth, yielding ultimately, as he suggests in the "Life of Gray," to "the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices."[315] Here, then, is Johnson's proffered invitation to contest knowledge and belief, to bring one's own experiences to bear upon the text, to enter with confidence the debate over history and thereby potentiate its revision.

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[315] *Lives* 8, 487.

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