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TITLE OF THESIS.....Samuel Johnson on the Writer in Society.....

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UNIVERSITY.....Alberta.....

DEGREE FOR WHICH THESIS WAS PRESENTED.....Ph.D.....

YEAR THIS DEGREE GRANTED.....1973.....

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DATED.....10 Aug.....19 73

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

SAMUEL JOHNSON ON THE WRITER IN SOCIETY

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

SPRING, 1973

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Samuel Johnson on the Writer in Society" submitted by Felix Benjamin Cherniavsky in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I take this opportunity to express my general thanks to all those persons who have been so generous of their time and knowledge in helping me bring this dissertation to completion.

I bear a singular debt of gratitude to my wife, Eva, whose patience was not the least of the virtues and whose editorial skill was not the least of the abilities she displayed during my writing of this work. Her belief that "Where there is great love, there are always miracles " is surely now vindicated. It is to her and our children Natasha, Benjamin, and Alexander that this work is affectionately dedicated.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine Johnson's central concern with the attitudes he believed all writers should hold towards their readers, society, and their profession. Consequently it falls into three distinct yet sequential parts divided into seven chapters.

The first part, consisting of Chapters I and II, clarifies Johnson's view, upon which his own attitudes and teachings were based, of human nature and of the human condition.

Chapter III defines Johnson's view of the individual's role in society. It opens with a brief description of the principles governing that view, and goes on to analyze Johnson's attitude towards four individuals (each of a distinctly different rank) and their particular roles in society.

Chapter IV discusses Johnson's ground rules for the writing profession and frankly describes its harsh realities.

Chapter V considers Johnson's opinion in regard to the hack writer's usefulness in society. Johnson's defence of the hack is of interest because it reflects his utilitarian attitude that, despite a somewhat

uncreative appearance, a hack's ultimate purpose can be potentially useful and expedient.

Chapter VI, which makes up almost half of the entire dissertation, consists of two sections. The first section deals with Johnson's judgment of writers in the subordinate art of prose. The second, more elaborate, section examines Johnson's view of writers of poetry.

Chapter VII summarizes Johnson's own record in relationship to the criteria outlined throughout this study.

Two leitmotifs permeate the entire dissertation: (i) Johnson's doctrine of moral utility and (ii) the specific use made in this study of his biography of Savage. Each chapter contains selected material from that biography used to illustrate the given exposition. Such a treatment demonstrates the intricacy of Johnson's creative account of Savage and forcefully reveals those elemental convictions upon which Johnson built his moral, psychological, and critical value judgments of the writer's role in society.

CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

OF PRIMARY MATERIAL

1. Ad. - The Adventurer
2. Dictionary - A Dictionary of the English Language
3. Id. - The Idler
4. Letters - The Letters of Samuel Johnson: With Mrs. Thrale's Genuine Letters to Him
5. Lives - Lives of the English Poets
6. Plan - Plan for a Dictionary of the English Language
7. Pref. - Preface to Johnson's Edition of Shakespeare
8. Ram. - The Rambler
9. Ras. - The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia
10. TVHW - The Vanity of Human Wishes
11. Vision - The Vision of Theodore, Hermit of Teneriffe
12. Works - The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D. (1825 edition)
13. Yale Works - The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson

INTRODUCTION

Most of Samuel Johnson's writings, though they were all directed toward helping readers bring order out of the chaos of existence, lack order themselves. Though Johnson ascribed to the writer a crucial role in society as a purveyor of integrated instruction and delight, his vision of this role is scattered throughout that sea of generalities so characteristic of his genius. This dissertation purposes, therefore, to gather those fragments and to compose Johnson's vision of the writer's place in society with the premise that, consciously at least, such a vision did not exist for Johnson. To this end, all of Johnson's major, and a number of his minor, works have been examined. Since, as a result, the discussion is as discursive as Johnson's writings themselves, it is pertinent to devote this introduction to comments upon its underlying structure.

Chapters I and II deal with the attitude towards literate men Johnson believed was prerequisite for every writer to hold, regardless of his abilities or genre of expression. To improve this attitude amongst writers was one of Johnson's fundamental concerns. He was convinced that the greater knowledge a writer has of "the great republick of humanity" (Ram. 77)[1] (the theme of Chapter I)

and the greater his awareness of the conditions under which that "republick" must function (the theme of Chapter II), the more success a writer will have in gaining his readers' attention and, consequently, the more effectively can he fulfil his role as a teacher.

Chapter III, which examines Johnson's view of the individual's role in society, deals with an essential question of concern only to those writers whose attitude Johnson would approve. To offer help to readers in fulfilling their duties and to urge them to accept life on its own terms rather than to seek happiness is certainly a duty Johnson ascribed to all but the drudges of the pen. But if he is to offer helpful advice, Johnson argued, a writer must fully believe in the importance of the individual's particular duties, and be committed to (though not necessarily successful in) practising the general duties Johnson ascribed to all social beings. Above all, he must understand the rationale underlying these duties, for Johnson insisted that no man can teach what he has not learned from his own observation and experience.

Chapter IV, a kind of job prospectus, considers Johnson's exposition of the practical ground rules of the writing profession, none easy to satisfy. It also explains his <u>compte rendu</u>, designed to strip the profession of its false glamour and to warn the virginal writer of the harsh

realities awaiting him should he, as experience might prove, find his hopes of public recognition unrealized.

Chapter V evaluates Johnson's comments upon how and what the hack writer may contribute to readers of his contemporaneous society. Johnson's defense of the hack is interesting chiefly because it illustrates so forcefully his determination to evaluate any individual's worth by his contribution to, rather than by his success in, society. More specifically, it demonstrates Johnson's insistence that, however uncreative and mundane a hack's duties may be, his ultimate purpose is to furnish sources of potentially useful information. Thus, Johnson argued, any hack who fulfils his duties to the best of his abilities contributes to the common welfare, and consequently serves a function which merits recognition from society.

Chapter VI, which constitutes almost half of the entire study, falls into two parts. The first part is concerned with Johnson's judgment of those authors whose works in the subordinate art of prose have survived or, in his opinion, deserve to survive their lifetime. The second and greater part scrutinizes, in the same context, Johnson's view of those writers who attempted to practise the most exacting literary art of all, that of poetry. The order in which the diverse forms of both prose and poetry is discussed is, though arbitrary, based on a personal evaluation as to the relative significance Johnson might have attributed

to each one as appropriate means by which the creative writer may, as a teacher, contribute to the progressive improvement of society. The order in which Johnson's opinion of particular examples of each of these forms is discussed follows the same premise. The criteria of the entire chapter are three: Johnson's view of the relative and potential importance of each form as a means of enduring instruction and delight; his view of the difficulty of satisfying the peculiar demands of each form; and, above all, his opinion of the success of individual authors in satisfying these demands.

Chapter VII attempts to define very briefly Dr. Johnson's own record in the light of the criteria discussed in the course of the entire study.

Two leitmotifs are woven into the entire dissertation, the more apparent of which being Johnson's doctrine of moral utility. This doctrine summarizes Johnson's view of the writer's function in society as that of providing mankind with a truly integrated source of enduringly valuable instruction and pleasure. As this study demonstrates, the theme of moral utility serves Johnson both as a <u>point de départ</u> for his instructions to writers on what they must do for society, and as the ultimate criterion for his evaluations of certain writers concerning what they have actually <u>done</u> for mankind.

The second leitmotif is imposed and results from

the use made in this study of Johnson's account of the life of Richard Savage. Specific themes in Johnson's study of Savage's life provide illustrative material for a major, if not indeed the principal, thesis of each chapter. Because these themes are used for illustrative purposes, no attempt is made to evaluate critically their contents; to discuss, for example, the accuracy of the account or to consider Johnson's prejudices as displayed in his view of Savage.

Apart from providing a certain artistic element (a consideration which, though perhaps irrelevant to this study's practical purpose, would surely meet with Dr. Johnson's approval), this treatment of Savage's life can be justified on several other grounds. For example, it demonstrates very effectively the intricacy of Johnson's study as a creative piece of writing. It forcefully demonstrates, too, Johnson's largesse d'esprit, nakedly revealing the energy of those elemental convictions--in this biography many of them are apparent--upon which he built his moral, psychological, and critical (to mention only three) value judgments. It also becomes evident that this biography is in effect Johnson's disguised apologia pro sua vita written at a time when he himself was just about to emerge from obscurity. But above all, by focusing in the course of the pages following upon several different aspects of Johnson's portrait of one

individual, friend, and writer, this approach makes Savage a living symbol of Johnson's view of mankind in general and of unfulfilled poetic genius in particular.

CHAPTER I

JOHNSON'S VIEW OF MAN AND OF THE "GREAT REPUBLICK OF HUMANITY" (RAM. 77)

In order to examine Dr. Johnson's view of the writer's role in society, we must first study his view of human nature. From such a study will emerge the outline of his own stance as a writer in society as well as the principles upon which he built his doctrine that all writers share the common purpose of helping their readers become better and wiser, both as individuals and as members of society.

Acting as the fixed backdrop to his study of the irrational in human nature are Johnson's observations on man as a creature averse to living in the present. One of Johnson's major concerns as a moralist is to teach how to overcome this aversion as well as possible, since only in the present can one practise virtue. Yet, only in Chapter XXX of Rasselas does Johnson explain the rationale of man's aversion to the present. In that chapter Imlac interrupts his pupils' debate on marriage to remark that Rasselas has as yet to live; to become, that is, involved in life. Rasselas and, indeed, all but the last of the persons he interviews find it

difficult to live in the present, Imlac explains, because there is no passion to motivate them to do so. Imlac's somewhat unusual view[1] is expressed at a later point in the chapter:

> The truth is, that no mind is much employed upon the present: recollection and anticipation fill up almost all our moments. Our passions are joy and grief, love and hatred, hope and fear. Of joy and grief the past is the object, and the future of hope and fear; even love and hatred respect the past, for the cause must have been before the effect.
>
> The present state of things is the consequence of the former, and it is natural to inquire what were the sources of the good that we enjoy, or of the evil that we suffer. (Ras., XXX, 569)[2]

From this thesis Imlac concludes that to allow and to be aware of a moment when each of these elemental passions is dormant is to face a void, which will either become more horrible by the realization of the vacuity of life or more bearable by means of an activity in which reason is in control of the passions.[3]

Only the old man, "whose years have calmed his passions, but not clouded his reason" (Ras., XLV, 598), has come more or less to terms with this aversion. He tells his visitors that, because he has outlived his time, he has no one to love or hate; that because he has "ceased to take much delight in physical truth" (ibid., 599), joy and grief no longer possess him. Because, too, he recognizes his oncoming decrepitude, there is little, at least in this world, to stimulate his hopes or fears. Dispassionately he recollects

happier days, missed opportunities of doing good, wasted time; and hopes "with serene humility . . . to possess in a better state that happiness which here I could not find, and that virtue which here I have not attained" (ibid.).[4] Thus he lives in the present to the extent that he takes stock of his past record as it may affect his ultimate fate. In his solitude (and it is worth noting that he has not withdrawn from the world, but rather that the world has withdrawn from him because he has outlived his time) would lie total misery, did he not devote himself to the pursuit of rational hope. Johnson's essential point is that, though the old man's condition is not enviable, his attitude is commendable. It exemplifies a very high form (whether it is Christian or merely stoical is somewhat uncertain) of resignation.

But the old man is exceptional. Few individuals achieve his state of mind in which calmed passions serve to enrich rather than to dominate reason. Nor, since he makes no complaint of it, is he moved by the imagination. Indeed, he has the imagination so well under control that he makes full use of it, for with it he sees "what I remember to have seen in happier days" (Ras., XLV, 598). Because earthly future does not interest him, the imagination cannot delude him with ideal pictures. His tranquillity is remarkable

when compared with the anguish of old age Johnson portrays in The Vanity of Human Wishes.

As a general rule, man, as Johnson sees him, is obsessed to his dying day with thoughts of the past and dreams of the future. It was Johnson's belief that the greater the obsession, the more man abuses his power of reason. Already corrupt, reason is further weakened as it falls under the sway of the passions which can so easily infiltrate many aspects of his behaviour. Conspiratorially, as if to help man avoid recognizing his failure to integrate the irrational and rational components of his nature, the imagination allies itself with the passions. This alliance makes both, the past and the future, all the more fascinating. Pleasures, whatever their temporal source, become more enticing and pains more terrifying. Unless he puts up some reasoned resistance to this flight from reality, Johnson taught, an individual will ultimately live in the unreal realms of the ideal.

The imagination is, of course, also one of Johnson's major concerns.[5] Indeed, were it possible to express his view of human nature by a mathematical equation, the imagination would appear as a multiplicative factor affecting the sum of all the parts. If it is a component of human nature that can lead

to insanity, he saw it also as an indispensable element of creative genius. When, therefore, Johnson writes of the imagination as a threat to an individual's right conduct of life, he does so as a moralist, and when he discusses it as an essential source of creativity, he does so as a critic. The distinction is significant because in the former capacity Johnson is concerned how better to control the imagination, while in the latter he is interested in giving it due recognition. His discussions may differ in context but they share a common theme: the profitable and deliberate management of the imagination.

Though in Johnson's view the imagination readily allies itself with the passions, it does so primarily as a means to its insatiable need to satisfy its own hunger or appetite for novelty, as Imlac explains during his discourse in the pyramid he and his royal charges visit. The operation of this hunger is manifest in the building of the pyramid. Since "no reason has ever been given adequate to the cost and labour of the work," Imlac explains, the pyramid ". . . seems to have been erected only in compliance with that hunger of imagination which preys incessantly upon life, and must be always appeased by some employment" (Ras., XXXII, 372-73). Having exhausted all the means he

knew of keeping his mind occupied with rational projects, Imlac argues, the pyramid builder, an enormously wealthy and powerful king, ordered its construction that "he may not be soon reduced to form another wish" (ibid., 573). In his vanity he supposed that "command or riches can feed the appetite of novelty with perpetual gratifications" (ibid.).

This "appetite for novelty" is, in Johnson's opinion, a donneé of human nature. He regards it as intricately related to man's aversion to the vacuity of life and hence as the original source of man's need for variety. The essence of this example is that the pyramid builder attempted (or, in all fairness, perhaps his great position paradoxically forced him) to satisfy this irrational appetite for novelty by irrational means, and that therefore the building epitomizes all that is useless, pompous, and foolish. The crux of Dr. Johnson's teachings is that if this craving for novelty is answered by a deliberate exercise of the reason, it becomes a great source of joy. Thus an essential distinction can be made between what Johnson regards as the imagination's unquenchable "appetite for novelty," and the "variety in life," which he insists is a major source of pleasure. To Johnson, the craving for novelty, if appeased only by the passions, is a source of human folly and misery. The variety Johnson values is one upon which the reason, directing (rather than smothered by) the passions, answers this same "appetite for novelty," and in so doing translates the irrational element

of human nature into the useful.

The difference is strikingly illustrated by Imlac's comments upon the motives governing the construction of the great wall of China and that of the pyramid. The reasons for the building of the wall are rational, and therefore pleasurably profitable to study. However, the pyramid, designed for no useful purpose, demonstrates a peculiarly subtle facet of man's nature; his innate craving to answer a need that can never be satisfied, the hunger of the imagination to realize that which is not. Imlac's description of the pyramid as "a momument of the insufficiency of human enjoyments" (ibid.) makes this point clear.

Further evidence to support this distinction lies in Johnson's implication that, unless the hunger of imagination is satisfied with rational employment, man willingly supposes he has overcome his aversion to the vacuity of the present. This means that, if he keeps himself passionately rather than rationally occupied, he creates for himself the delusion that he is living in the present. Regarding the "hunger of imagination" as a passion that makes the present bearable to him, man grows to have no thought but for the present moment and so is in danger of being consumed by this hunger. He can easily answer its demands by indulging in some ideal opiate. This leads to dreaming which, if he has the facilities to do so, he will attempt to realize by building, for example, the pyramid.

Less pernicious in its effects, both upon the individual and his society, is the practice of Sober in Idler No. 31[6] who busies himself with petty concerns. Of these two equally futile attempts to avoid the reality of the present, Sober's is the less harmful. Indeed, perhaps even to resort to such means of filling time is, in Johnson's view, a protection against falling prey to the imagination. Furthermore, any man who behaves in either of these ways will be a victim of pride inasmuch as he supposes he can provide for an innate lack in his nature rather than accept that lack and act accordingly. Certainly Johnson believes that anyone who persists in such folly will know neither rational nor productive pleasure, as both the pyramid builder's and Sober's examples prove.

This point is implied in Imlac's apostrophe before the pyramid, addressed to those men who are unable to take a rational view of the defects of their nature. Johnson's main thesis seems to be that men must realize that they can effectively appease their appetite for novelty only through the proper exercise of the reason, that power which opens up for them the world of the intellect. They must realize that as their longing for novelty ties them to the present, so too can they only satisfy that longing through the world of the intellect--a truth which remains valuable to anyone who contemplates its beauty.

Much the same sort of metaphysical reasoning attends Johnson's comments on the role the passions play in

providing motives for human actions. This account, consisting of the five opening paragraphs of Rambler No. 49, traces the way in which the passions multiply from infancy to adulthood.[7]

From the fact that at birth a baby instinctively turns to his mother's breast to satisfy his primal appetite, Johnson deduces that it is the emotional (not the physical) uneasiness a baby feels after satisfaction of these appetites that causes him to cry. This observation, however challengeable it may be, proves, to Johnson at least, that his appetite satisfied, the baby is disappointed, just as the adult, when he gains an objective he has in view, suffers from disappointment. Furthermore, it leads Johnson to argue that having completed the one motivated action he is capable of, a baby is doomed to face the void of the present, to regret the past, or thirst for the future. Such restlessness alone is cause enough for tears.

Very early in life, Johnson claims, the power of reason together with the six elemental passions begins to operate and to alleviate the discomfort of impotent inactivity. Whereas at first the baby cannot understand the cause of, for example, pain, he now grows to dread it; he turns, that is, his mind to the future. This dread evolves, with the exercise of reason and further experience, either into caution or, if the passions prove stronger than reason, into terror. There then comes a time, Johnson

believes, when, "as the soul advances to a fuller exercise of its powers, the animal appetites, and the [six elemental] passions immediately arising from them, are not sufficient to find it employment" (Ram. 49). Thus, the passions, like the roots of a tree encountering an obstacle that for a time impedes their progress, seek new ground in which to feed. In Johnson's words,

> . . . new desires, and artificial passions are by degrees produced; and, from having wishes only in consequence of our wants, we begin to feel wants in consequence of our wishes; we persuade ourselves to set a value upon things which are of no use, but because we have agreed to value them. (Ibid.)

Therein, Johnson contends, lies the origin of those vices which arise when we anxiously compare our own fate with that of our fellow-man. According to this argument, none but the six basic passions are innate to man; all others are adscititious and lie latent until or unless an individual responds to (or is permitted to satisfy) his natural desire for the society of others. For Johnson, one of the more significant consequences of membership in a society raised above a primitive level is, therefore, the stimulation of the adscititious passions. The more developed the society is, the more active are these passions, and hence the more vital specimens of human nature are its members. Thus, since the adscititious passions flourish principally in, and are indeed a good indication of, a civilized community, the writer should study them carefully if he is to fulfil, as an informed student of human nature,

his designated role of teacher.

If Johnson produces only a sketchy view in his attempt to systematize the origin and structure of the passions, he succeeds brilliantly when he studies the passions of individuals involved in life. He is totally in his element as he deals with two issues central to his role as a moralist: the effect a passion may have upon the "happiness" of a man as an individual and, no less important, upon his conduct as a member of society. So all-encompassing is Johnson's consideration of the passions, both elemental and adscititious, that, to prevent our discussion from being wholly absorbed by a side issue, we consider only two of Johnson's more sustained commentaries on the passions. The first is of grief, an elemental passion, and the second of envy, an adscititious passion. Both commentaries appear in Rasselas, surely his most sustained study of the operations and effects of the passions.

Perhaps because, when he wrote Rasselas, Johnson himself was suffering intensely from his mother's death, the passion of grief is examined twice. The first example is that of a man of reason, crushed by the sudden death of his daughter. Because he bears his grief without dignity, refusing to follow his own teaching and console himself with truth and reason, as Rasselas suggests he might, he is given little sympathy. The sage had earlier celebrated "the conquest of passion, . . . after which man is no longer the

slave of fear, nor the fool of hope, is no more emaciated by envy, inflamed by anger, emasculated by tenderness, or depressed by grief" (Ras., XVIII, 545). Put to the test of actual experience, however, he is unable to regulate his grief and finds himself victim of all those passions to which he had so proudly claimed himself immune. If it would be uncharitable to suggest his fate is well deserved, certainly his behaviour is fit material for Johnson's peculiar brand of irony.

The second example, describing Nekayah's grief over the apparent loss of Pekuah, is a study in depth (see Ras., XXXIII, XXXIV, XXXV). Though both Imlac and Rasselas seek to comfort her as they attempt to recover Pekuah, Nekayah soon falls into deep depression, spending her days in useless but heartfelt self-recrimination. When Imlac eventually tells Nekayah that, since her treatment of Pekuah exemplifies virtuous conduct, her grief is guiltless and hence supportable, the princess goes into a state of reflective meditation, allowing the idealized image of Pekuah to obsess her. Losing her curiosity about life, she withdraws deeper into herself, avoiding her attendants,[8] Rasselas, and even Imlac, but not before declaring to Imlac her intention to retire to a convent. When Imlac questions the worth of this plan, Nekayah explains:

> Since Pekuah was taken from me . . . I have no pleasure to reject or to retain. She that has no one to love or trust has little to hope. She wants the radical principle of happiness. We may, perhaps, allow that what satisfaction this world can afford, must arise from the conjunction of

> wealth, knowledge and goodness; wealth is nothing but as it is bestowed, and knowledge nothing but as it is communicated: they must therefore be imparted to others, and to whom could I now delight to impart them? (Ibid., XXXV, 578)

Up to this point she speaks reasonably enough. But when she adds that "Goodness affords the only comfort which can be enjoyed without a partner, and goodness may be practised in retirement" (ibid.), she fails to realize that her plan to retreat from society makes a mockery of her wisdom, since to retreat is to flee from other human beings only amongst whom, as Imlac politely but firmly points out, she may yet hope to find another person to trust. Imlac, realizing the intensity of Nekayah's grief, elaborates upon his objection to solitude. Solitude, he explains, is contrary to nature:

> Our minds, like our bodies, are in continual flux; something is hourly lost, and something acquired. . . . Do not suffer life to stagnate; it will grow muddy for want of motion: commit yourself again to the current of the world . . . . (Ras., XXXV, 579)

Nekayah heeds Imlac's advice. Delaying her retreat, she gradually and unwittingly conquers her grief. As she becomes less distraught, she sets aside specific periods (rather than, as previously, the whole day) to indulge her fondness for Pekuah. As she becomes increasingly involved in life, so does she become less hysterical, until she frees herself of grief altogether and yet retains, or more precisely rediscovers, "her real [italics mine] love of Pekuah" (ibid., XXXVI, 580).

Such is Johnson's analysis of the progress of and his

prescription for the cure of grief. He provides no such concentrated study of envy, so pervasive an adscititious passion that to trace its progress is impossible, while to suggest means of transcending it is presumptuous.[9] All he does, therefore, is to point out its subtle operation and evil consequences, in the hope that his readers will recognize it better both in themselves and others.

Imlac is the first to refer to envy. In his account of his earlier career he tells how his travelling companions on the trek to Aggra deliberately exposed him to dishonest practices only because, in their envy, the thought of his supposed wealth was a source of grief to them. Imlac adds that, later, these same companions had the insolence to seek from him introductions to the court where he was so warmly welcomed. Their envy had merely given way to their self-interest.[10]

Throughout the course of his interviews, Rasselas sees the nefarious effects of envy. For example, despite the apparently idyllic conditions under which they live, the shepherds envy their superiors; the hermit admits that envy of a fellow officer's advancement was a major motivation for his retreat; it is obvious that envy is at the root of the misery enveloping the Bassa and his court.

Nekayah's study of parental and family relationships emphasizes the same passion. Having compared a family to "a little kingdom, torn with factions and exposed to revolutions" (ibid., XXVI, 558), she explains that, once

they have passed beyond infancy,

> . . . children become rivals to their parents. Benefits are allayed by reproaches, and gratitude debased by envy.
>
> Parents and children seldom act in concert: each child endeavours to appropriate the esteem or fondness of the parents, and the parents, with yet less temptation, betray each other to their children; thus some place their confidence in the father, and some in the mother, and, by degrees, the house is filled with artifices and feuds. (Ibid.)

Her subsequent remarks merely amplify her views. An aged father's resentment against his youthful son's vitality, a mother's discomfort at seeing her daughter's beauty bloom as hers fades, and the behaviour of the celibates whose "constant sense of some known inferiority . . . fills their minds with rancour, and their tongues with censure" (ibid., 560), are all manifestations of envy.

Though grief is a source of great misery and envy of unmitigated evil, Johnson's view of man is not one of unrelieved gloom as might be suggested from the stress he gives to these two passions. Apart from, and above, any other consideration, homo est animal capax rationis.

Unlike Swift, who felt such savage indignation over man's blatant disregard for this dictum (a hallmark of neo-classical humanism), Johnson observes rather than attacks man for the behaviourial consequence of this abuse. Because he observes human behaviour in a deliberately panoramic fashion, the focal point of his attention tends to be overlooked. That point lies in the energy of the human spirit, manifest in the vitality of the passions, the

demands of the imagination in conflict with the wavering light of human reason. His ultimate purpose in studying this energy is to direct it to useful (that is, rational) ends in the light of religious precepts.

Nowhere is the difficulty that lies in the urgency of the task better demonstrated than in The Vanity of Human Wishes.[11] Save for its peroration, this poem is a haunting commentary upon man's rejection of reason as a guide in his struggle to contend with the irrational elements both of his nature and of existence. As from this point of view he successively surveys the hectic pace of life, considers the record of specific individuals of the past, and assesses the prospects of various stages of life, Johnson presents an argument from which only one conclusion can be drawn: because he so totally neglects to heed the voice of reason and hence fails to pursue its support, or perhaps its end, virtue, man is little more than a contemptible creature.

The purpose of the peroration is to provide a viable alternative to so misanthropic a conclusion. Whether this purpose is effectively achieved is, of course, a matter of critical controversy.[12] In the peroration Johnson insists that, through the power of prayer, a power that can be exercised precisely because he is capax rationis, man has the potential means to harness his energy to the purposeful ends of virtue; that the responsibility to do so is his alone; and that the

difficulty of doing so is immense, given that the passions and the imagination, taunting man with the vision of delusive freedom, exert enormous pressure on rational restraint. But the necessity of making the effort is, Johnson insists, absolute. Johnson is convinced that it is only when, by exercising properly his capacity to reason, man strives to acquire "obedient passions and a will resign'd" (TVHW, 360), he can sustain himself with love, patience, and faith and thus direct his energy to virtuous ends.

In The Vanity of Human Wishes Johnson sees man facing an unambiguous and somewhat exaggerated choice. Man either must succumb to the irrational forces of his nature, only to discover ultimately his helplessness and to recognize that he has led a passionate and meaningless existence; or he can attempt through prayer to rationalize and hence make significant use of those same powers, for the purpose of appeasing his fellow-men and even perhaps his Maker.

His attitude towards reason in The Vanity of Human Wishes reveals that Johnson's view is one of orthodox Anglicanism; he regards reason as an indispensable adjunct of religion. If exercised for any purpose other than a moral one, Johnson regards reason as dangerous, contrary to the dictates of religion, and leading ultimately to the mists of atheism. When that is to say, judiciously directed toward the practice of virtue, reason's inestimable

value is, in Johnson's view, proven, since all such efforts bring man closer to religion's end and consequently render him a moral being able and willing to attempt to distinguish between good and evil. Johnson believes that, in accepting this responsibility, man will inevitably discover, though he may not keep to, the path of virtue and hence be granted the happiness of possible salvation. That he should be allowed this possibility is cause enough for Johnson to assert the dignity of human nature and to find in the pursuit and practice of virtue proof of this dignity. Such a conviction deeply colours his view of man when placed in a larger perspective than that of his passions alone.

Evidence of this broader view permeates, as a watermark permeates good paper, Johnson's writings and his statements in Boswell's Life.[13] It is, indeed, one of the key factors that makes Johnson's entire record so fascinating. Yet, partly because the prime context of his study of man was life with all its fleeting impressions and instability, this evidence is, though overwhelming, fragmented. The early and didactic Vision of Theodore, Hermit of Teneriffe[14] is, however, one of the few works in which all the principal fragments unequivocally appear together. This allegory describes the two paths men are free to follow in their efforts to climb the "steeps of virtue" (Ram. 70) and, in doing so, to approach happiness. These two paths are those of reason and religion, respectively. The former is, of course, the more popular, but only the latter leads to the

temples of happiness. On the sides of both paths stand habits and appetites ceaselessly trying, and along the path of reason, at least, succeeding, to lure the climbers into their clutches.

The Vision defines the chief classes of human nature to which an individual may be judged to belong in accordance with his record as a moral being. It demonstrates that classical dictum, a pivot of Johnson's views, that human nature is always the same. It teaches that, no matter which alternative an individual may follow in his desire to climb the path of virtue, the hazards along the way are ever the same and that he alone is responsible for his progress.

It was undoubtedly for these reasons of "usefulness" that Johnson reportedly considered the Vision "the best thing he ever wrote."[15] The didacticism of the work, together with its allegorical form (a form Johnson particularly valued) suffice to explain why it has sunk into a neglect which, had Johnson in his enthusiasm for his work not overlooked its misleading thesis,[16] he would no doubt have accepted as deserved. Nevertheless, it is of considerable significance to the topic of this chapter. This can be demonstrated by correlating the abstract groups described in the Vision with Johnson's portraits of particular individuals, both real and fictional, found elsewhere in his work. Such comparisons, furthermore, make this lifeless allegory into a speaking

picture. Thus, though it cannot be proven, there is little doubt that Johnson would offer members of the Church and eminently devout secular figures (such as his esteemed friend Mrs. Elizabeth Carter) as illustrations of those happy few, the steadfast followers of religion, who turn habit from an adversary into a supporter of their exemplary moral behaviour. The equally steadfast but misguided followers of reason include such men as Pertinax described in Rambler No.95. The former sceptic explains how, in the nick of time, he realized the folly of his ways and, confident that he is responsibly exercising his reason, now hopes that he might ultimately find his way to the path of religion (Ram. 95). Pertinax reports how as a youth he was virtually driven to follow reason: he was born in a "house of discord," his parents being of "unsuitable ages, contrary tempers, and different religions" (ibid.). As a consequence, he was early skilled in argument and, at the university, excelled in logic. By attacking all principles and institutions with the sharp edge of scepticism, Pertinax says he distinguished himself: though, as he came to realize, at a dreadful cost. He recalls:

> . . . having now violated my reason, and accustomed myself to enquire not after proofs, but objections, I had perplexed truth with falsehood till my ideas were confused, my judgment embarrassed, and my intellects distorted. The habit of considering every proposition as alike uncertain, left me no test by which any tenet could be tried; every opinion presented both sides with equal evidence, and my fallacies began to operate upon my own mind in more important enquiries. It was at last the sport of my vanity to weaken the obligations of moral duty, and efface the distinctions of good and evil, till I had deadened the

sense of conviction, and abandoned my heart to the fluctuations of uncertainty, without anchor and without compass, without satisfaction of curiosity or peace of conscience; without principles of reason, or motives of action. (Ibid.)

Suddenly realizing that only the ignorant and wicked sought his aid, Pertinax resolved

> . . . to tolerate though not adopt all which I could not confute. I forbore to heat my imagination with needless controversies, to discuss questions confessedly uncertain, and refrained steadily from gratifying my vanity by the support of falsehood.
>
> By this method I am at length recovered from my argumental delirium, and find myself in the state of one awakened from the confusion and tumult of a feverish dream. I rejoice in the new possession of evidence and reality, and step on from truth to truth with confidence and quiet. (Ibid.)

As for those who disobey rather than, like Pertinax, abuse reason, many examples abound in Johnson's works. A trait common to all, yet sometimes only indicated, is that they are helpless creatures of habit. Suspirius, the human Screech Owl, for example, "has the same habit of uttering lamentations, as others of telling stories" (Ram. 59). No matter what his topic or whom he may address, Suspirius "goes on in his unharmonious strain, displaying present miseries, and foreboding more; . . . every syllable is loaded with misfortune, and death is always brought nearer to the view" (ibid.).

Less reprehensible yet equally pitiable is Sophron, who epitomizes habitual--and hence unreasoned--prudence (Id. 57). Sophron's maxims are in themselves blameless. Yet, because he is chained to them by habit, he renders them, and himself, ineffectual: he "creeps along, neither

loved nor hated, neither favoured nor opposed" (ibid.). Though Johnson does not accuse Sophron of deliberately disobeying reason, he clearly implies that having failed to use her in his battle against habit, he has lost sight of reason altogether. Sophron epitomizes noncommitment.

A totally repugnant example of one who disobeys reason is Squire Bluster, the mischief-maker par excellence (Ram. 142). Squire Bluster is, however, not entirely to blame for the depravity of his mind. As an orphaned heir of ten, he fell into the care of his grandmother,

> . . . who would not suffer him to be controlled, because she could not bear to hear him cry; and never sent him to school, because she was not able to live without his company. She taught him however very early to inspect the steward's accounts, to dog the butler from the cellar, and to catch the servants at a junket; so that he was at the age of eighteen a complete master of all the lower arts of domestick policy, had often on the road detected combinations between the coachman and the ostler, and procured the discharge of nineteen maids for illicit correspondence with cottagers and charwomen. (Ibid.)

Thanks to his grandmother, Squire Bluster became the victim of vicious passions. Denied any knowledge of virtue, in fact clearly taught not to love virtue, and perversely protected from reason, he is like the mouse to the cat, a plaything to his passions and appetites. This state explains, though by no means condones, the fact that he is nothing more than one of "a whole gallery of malevolent folk who are exhibited in order that we may scorn them and their ways."[17]

Each of Johnson's character sketches, being drawn from his study of men, has a place among the various groups

described in the Vision. None, however, represents a man in toto, Johnson's purpose being to emphasize some particular aspect of human behaviour. Nor do many of these sketches portray a member of the most pathetic group of all, men who, inadvertently leaving the road of their choice, find their retreat route blocked by habit. The sight of these men, engaged in a ceaseless but futile battle with the passions and appetites, arouses Theodore's pity. In real life, too, such persons drew Johnson's particular sympathy and attention, as illustrated by his analysis of Richard Savage's peculiar nature. In Johnson's view, Savage's "reigning error . . . was, that he mistook the love for the practice of virtue, and was indeed not so much a good man as the friend of goodness" (Lives, II, 380).[18]

Savage's great appeal, in Johnson's opinion, lay in "the insurmountable obstinacy of his spirit" (ibid., 409). This obstinacy preserved him, Johnson maintains, from ever knowing despair: indeed, it rendered him perpetually blithe and cheerful. It appeared, too, in his "strong sense of the dignity, the beauty, and the necessity of virtue" (ibid., 380) and in the intensity of his natural and principled compassion. Savage directed, Johnson says, his unusually alert mind to the art of conversation and, far more importantly, to the study of "all the different combinations of passions and the innumerable mixtures of vice and virtue, which distinguish one character from

another" (ibid., 358). Of Savage's attitude that grew out of this knowledge of life Johnson remarks:

> . . . it is not without some satisfaction that I can produce the suffrage of Savage in favour of human nature, of which he never appeared to entertain such odious ideas as some, who perhaps had neither his judgement nor experience, have published, either in ostentation of their sagacity, vindication of their crimes, or gratification of their malice. (Ibid., 430)

Johnson stresses, however, how much stronger proved Savage's defects than his good qualities. "Petulant and contemptuous" (ibid., 416), he lacked prudence, that most useful of all intellectual adornments. He became "the slave of every passion that happened to be excited by the presence of its object" (ibid., 431), a slavery which conspired, furthermore, to make his temper so unpredictable. And yet, despite the self-imposed perplexities this temper produced, not to mention the miseries others inflicted upon Savage, Johnson believed that Savage was a man of inner calm, thanks to his powers of rationalization, an art "which every man practises in some degree, and to which too much of the little tranquillity of life is to be ascribed" (ibid., 379). The comments upon Savage's practice of this art are certainly the most thorough to be found in Johnson's writings. He first considers Savage's attitude to the reception afforded his published works. When these were acclaimed, Johnson recalls, Savage "paid due deference to the suffrages of mankind" (ibid.), but when they were censured, he refused to respect the verdict. Sometimes, rather than blaming the public for failing to recognize his

works, he

> . . . imputed the slowness of their sale to other causes; either they were published at a time when the town was empty, or when the attention of the publick was engrossed by some struggle in the parliament, or some other object of general concern; or they were by the neglect of the publisher not diligently dispersed, or by his avarice not advertised with sufficient frequency. Address, or industry, or liberality, was always wanting; and the blame was laid rather on any person than the author. (Ibid.)

If Johnson marvels at the ease with which Savage rationalized his material failures, he condemns Savage's habit of rationalizing matters of moral significance, such as his own behaviour and worth:

> By imputing none of his miseries to himself he continued to act upon the same principles, and to follow the same path; was never made wiser by his sufferings, nor preserved by one misfortune from falling into another. He proceeded throughout his life to tread the same steps on the same circle; always applauding his past conduct, or at least forgetting it, to amuse himself with phantoms of happiness which were dangling before him, and willingly turned his eyes from the light of reason, when it would have discovered the illusion and shewn him, what he never wished to see, his real state. (Lives, II, 380)

Johnson's view of Savage is, of course, far more total than the foregoing abstract suggests. It presents, after all, Johnson's description of an individual he knew intimately. By introducing that view from various angles I hope to show that the basic contours which make up the finished portrait are the same as those Johnson uses in designing his fictional character studies or in sketching the subjects of his many biographies. In the former, the depth of his analysis depends upon the particular aspect of human behaviour he wished to extract for his moral purpose, while in the latter it depends upon the scope of

information at his disposal. Ever present in his mind is mankind's search for happiness.

Johnson's attitude to the pursuit of happiness, at first sight, appears ambiguous. On the one hand he champions it as real and necessary; on the other he deplores it as illusory, a source of moral turpitude and consequent misery. Obviously he has in mind two opposing concepts, one moral to which, in the Vision, for instance, all eyes are directed, and the other amoral, to the extent that it is an impossible pursuit brought about by undisciplined human passions. The latter is vainly sought in the external world; the former is to be sought in peace of mind.

Since everything Johnson ever wrote might be ultimately related to the pursuit of moral happiness, any attempt to examine all the reaches of his concern is bound to fall short of its purpose, as Bate's The Achievement of Samuel Johnson shows.[19] Perhaps, therefore, the study should be chiefly valued for having prompted subsequent critics to scrutinize particular aspects of Johnson's search for truth and knowledge. Furthermore, apart from the basic Christian values, certain other more secular and practical convictions, equally pivotal to Johnson's doctrine of moral utility, govern his view of man: that innately all men love knowledge and that hope is man's chief

blessing. Man, he believes, must convert his love for knowledge into an active acquisition of it; he must divorce hope from the tyranny of the irrational and marry it to reason, in order to attain the serenity of rational hope. Thus, made wiser by knowledge and guided by rational hope, he may make real progress towards the temples of happiness. En route his earthly behaviour pattern will give him a foretaste of that permanent state of celestial happiness promised to those who are worthy of it.

The two foregoing convictions are far too important to a proper grasp of Johnson's beliefs to be passed over without further, though brief, consideration. Not only do they serve as the poles from which Johnson takes his bearings as he surveys the geography of human nature, but they also provide the cornerstone of the bridge joining that survey to his Christian morality.

It was Johnson's conviction that men love knowledge because it lightens the darkness of their ignorance. It alone can satisfy, or at least give direction to, "the two great movers of the human mind, the desire of good, and the fear of evil" (Ram. 1). Johnson held that only by knowledge can truth be distinguished from falsehood, virtue be pursued, and vice avoided. In his opinion, useful knowledge, if not synonymous with, is certainly an integral part of, virtue and truth; all men love virtue and "the mind can only repose on the stability of truth" (Pref. 62).[20] All men, therefore, seek that stability but few enjoy it,

because in their impatience and ignorance few seek it in any disciplined fashion.

Thus, when Johnson asserted to Boswell that ". . . a desire of knowledge is the natural feeling of mankind; and every human being, whose mind is not debauched [an important proviso], will be willing to give all that he has to get knowledge,"[21] he made no sentimental platitude, nor does man's aversion to intellectual labour invalidate the statement. An aversion is not an outright refusal, nor does it mean total indifference. There is always the possibility, Johnson held, that aversion can be overcome. For a writer to achieve that purpose in others, he must have the ability to delight. Besides, "curiosity is the thirst of the soul" (Ram. 103). To direct or, as need be, arouse that curiosity proves one of Johnson's major concerns.

Johnson held that hope is man's chief blessing because, no matter whether it is passionate or rational, it illuminates the temples of happiness and thereby protects man from losing sight of his objective. Passionate hope, however, is in Johnson's view treacherous because it conjures up illusory shortcuts. Rational hope, on the other hand, unambiguously illuminates the pathway to the temples, and for this reason is indeed man's chief blessing.

Beyond these particular considerations, Johnson holds that hope provides man with the nuclear energy of his spirit. When governed by rational hope, Johnson

defended that spirit; where driven by passionate hope, he deplored it. Johnson's empiricism demanded a pessimistic verdict; his Christianity insisted upon hope; while his humanism argued for a positive belief in the potential of man. Since his commitment to all three was equally strong, his basic attitude towards man was one of perpetual conflict. The conflict was all the more intense because, while temperamentally Johnson was drawn to what observation suggested and experience taught him, intellectually he rejected this evidence thanks to his commitment to what can best be described as his Christian humanism. The greatest irony of all, perhaps, is that for all his efforts to reconcile man with his nature, Johnson himself seldom enjoyed that serenity of mind upon which he believed that reconciliation alone could be based.

CHAPTER II

JOHNSON'S VIEW OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

The foregoing chapter described man's need of guidance, if he is to avoid being plunged into error by his passions or being led astray by his imagination. Johnson saw it as his role to fulfil that need by delineating human nature, suggesting how, with the self-knowledge gained, man might direct his life into fruitful paths. With constant reminders of what lay ultimately at stake in the prospect of eternity, Johnson attempted to persuade his readers of the absolute necessity of reaching for that goal. Since he clearly believed that man's very nature makes life difficult, Johnson held out little prospect of achieving happiness. To Johnson's eyes the prospect becomes even dimmer when he appraises the human condition, which envelops those factors that lie beyond man's control and very often beyond his power to explain. The human condition is the mise en scène of the human drama, "this chaos of mingled purposes and casualties" (Pref. 66). Johnson believes that everyone is affected by and reacts to it in a different way. If no one can be held responsible for it, no one can avoid it. Everyone, therefore, must take stock of it, in the attempt to regulate his behaviour

and hold a rein upon his expectations with informed prudence.

The countless aspects of the human condition are woven of an intricate design. Since Johnson does not explicitly distinguish between these various aspects, I shall, for purposes of analysis, group them somewhat arbitrarily into two areas. The first concerns the infirmities of post-lapsarian man, and is inherently related to human nature. This area has implicitly been discussed in the preceding chapter, but will be re-examined here.

The second area of the human condition, and the more conspicuous one, concerns the external forces, such as evil, chance, and uninvited choice, that, as sources of uncertainty, impose themselves upon or threaten man's innate longing for happiness. Since both areas share the element of instability, Johnson's view that, even in terms of his nature, man has little possibility of finding happiness is in effect an integral part of his larger view of the human condition.

The delicate structure of the human condition is illustrated in Rasselas. All of the people encountered have at one time or another been confronted with the external adverse forces of the universe and, while they suffered, those who fled from them experienced even greater misery. None, however, lives in such misery as do the inhabitants of the happy valley. The conditions under which they exist

were designed to strip them of their vitality. Thus, though they have human form, they do not spiritually belong to the catalogue of men; they resemble, rather, those birds that Rasselas notices "sit in seeming happiness on the branches, and waste their lives in tuning one unvaried series of sounds" (Ras., II, 509). Indeed, the happy valley may well be considered an attempt by post-lapsarian man to live under pre-lapsarian conditions--an unnatural and impossible ambition which can only lead, deservedly, to absolute misery. One of Johnson's more subtle purposes is to prove that, however much man yearns for stability, he can only search for it in a world of uncertainty. Ever since the Fall, when man lost his innocence and the world its harmony, both have been irreparably out of balance. Imlac strikes to the heart of the matter when he says, in answer to Rasselas' naive belief in the possibility of happiness, that "Human life is every where a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed" (ibid., XI, 531).[1]

When Rasselas hears this statement, he can only half appreciate it. Still in the happy valley, he is painfully aware that he is living both in a vacuum and in ignorance of the real world. To him, therefore, life in the happy valley is indeed as Imlac defines it for him, but life outside it is unknown, exciting, and hopefully happy, to be experienced before it can be judged. That he should even be this aware is due partly to Imlac's stimulating

conversation, but principally and originally to the fact that the happy valley has failed to smother his spirit--that energy born of the conflicts natural to fallen human nature. The way in which that failure manifests itself in Rasselas, first in what his old instructor diagnoses as mental disease, and ultimately in his successful escape from the happy valley, is highly instructive, for it allows Johnson to demonstrate the fractured design of human nature. It traces, in slow motion as it were, the self-discovery of a particular individual as he evolves from a state of induced somnolence to that of a vital human being entering, out of natural instinct, what the deceitful sages of the happy valley habitually described as "regions of calamity, where discord was always raging, and where man preyed upon man" (ibid., II, 508).

Rasselas' first step on the path to self-discovery, one which at once distinguishes him from his fellow-princes, appears in his "delight in solitary walks and silent meditation" (ibid.). To relieve his malaise, he turns his attention to the animal creation. He recognizes that both he and the animals follow a circular pattern of activity to satisfy their physical needs, but that, whereas the animals' pattern is monotonously regular, his is fractured with restlessness. From this observation he deduces that "Man surely has some latent sense for which this place affords no gratification, or he has some desires distinct from sense, which must be satisfied before he can be happy"

(Ras., I, 509).

Since this is Rasselas' first insight into the structural design of human nature, intuition quite as much as reason must have led him to it. Johnson portrays him, after all, as only on the threshold of discovering himself; he does not as yet know what he is talking about and therefore can only be giving expression to what, with the aid of observation, he is fairly certain about. This feeling is, of course, accurate, and, once he is conscious of it, he meditates upon it as he returns to the moonlit palace, only to conclude that animal nature is far more simple than human nature, despite what conditions in the happy valley might suggest.

Through a strategic blunder on the part of his former teacher, with whom he converses the next day, Rasselas acquires a fixed desire to see the outside world. This desire, precisely because it cannot be satisfied by the happy valley, stimulates the young prince's imagination and excites his hope. Thus, his imagination aroused with the hope of satisfying this desire, Rasselas considers himself "master of a secret stock of happiness" (ibid., IV, 512), though in reality he is, as Johnson carefully remarks, nothing more than the slave of "visionary bustle" (ibid.).

Rasselas remains in this state until he meets Imlac, who willingly prepares him for his later study of human nature. Imlac bases his teaching upon two premises,

one defining what Johnson considered to be a fundamental, and certainly the most observable, flaw of human nature; the other establishing the only psychologically valid means of counteracting the effects of this flaw.

As he relates his early life, Imlac recalls his rich father's declared ambition that his son "should be some time the richest man in Abissinia" (Ras., VIII, 522). When Rasselas incredulously protests the absurd inconsistency of this ambition, Imlac retorts that inconsistency, the antithesis of stability, is the consequence of disobedience, and causes much of man's innate malaise. By far the most interesting part of what Rasselas later learns can be directly related to this premise, delivered in so casual a fashion that it can be easily overlooked. For example, the teacher of morality denies all value of reason and shows himself defenseless and passionate when he suddenly loses his daughter, though before her death, he professed to live by reason. His behaviour demonstrates Johnson's view that inconsistency is a cardinal weakness of human nature.

Significantly, lest he should appear to condone the tranquillity of the happy valley, Imlac amplifies his aforementioned comment. He warns Rasselas not to mistake diversity for inconsistency, explaining that "some desire is necessary to keep life in motion, and he, whose real wants are supplied, must admit those of fancy" (ibid.). Again, Rasselas' later interviews confirm this observation.

When, for example, the hermit retreated from the world, he took along with him equipment requisite to his scientific inquiries. Fifteen years later, having confessed that his inquiries have grown irksome, he reveals his real state of mind. He tells Imlac and his companions:

> I have been for some time unsettled and distracted: my mind is disturbed with a thousand perplexities of doubt, and vanities of imagination, which hourly prevail upon me, because I have no opportunities of relaxation or diversion. . . . My fancy riots in scenes of folly. . . . (Ras., XXI. 551)

Up to the last of the interviews, everything Rasselas hears suggests that neither inconsistency nor imaginary desires can be effectively resisted and that to seek stability or to expect peace in the satisfaction of wants real, though natural, is futile. The example of the old man corrects this dismal impression. He has lived a respected life, Imlac observes, and will obviously continue to do so to his dying day. Johnson's point is that no matter how old age may have altered his relationship with worldly matters, the old man keeps life in motion by focusing his desires upon non-earthly happiness and virtue. Whether, in his peculiar position, his worldly wants are supplied is ambiguous--and for Johnson's purpose essentially irrelevant. It is, however, abundantly clear that he consciously resists the possession of his heart by fanciful wants lest they destroy that consistency born of his rational hope.

The old man could not have acquired this rational

hope, had he not followed the second of the three-part premise Imlac passes on to Rasselas. Like Imlac, the old man surely held that "Truth, such as is necessary to the regulation of life, is always found where it is honestly sought" (ibid., XI, 530), and that "Knowledge is certainly one of the means of pleasure" (ibid., 531); certainly knowledge is the one valid means of seeking truth. By his commitment to these two dicta, the old man's example proves that human beings have the means and potential ability to overcome the innate inconsistency of their nature. If few men use this potential properly, Johnson believes, it is because few have sufficient knowledge to recognize it or are strong enough to exercise it in the correct fashion.

Through examination of Johnson's attitudes towards evil, chance, and uninvited choice, the immense difficulty of proving this potential becomes even more apparent. So, too, does the importance of Johnson's belief that only by observation and experience of life can that potential be exercised with any measure of success. Many of these attitudes are outlined in the Rambler papers. Rambler No. 32, for example, discusses two categories of evil, both attributes of the human condition. The one, a consequence of human nature, consists of the physical evils that fate bestows on men. The other, resulting from accidental events in life, embraces material and moral losses. Johnson opens this essay by asserting that to deny the nature and genuine forces of these evils is vain, giving as an example

that of the Stoics who claimed to have covered "the art of bearing calamities. . . . to the highest perfection" (Ram. 32).[2] To endure such evils with dignity is, Johnson holds, an obligation too often shirked because it requires patience. Johnson realizes that unless he pragmatically demonstrates the necessity of patience, his essay must fail in its expository purpose. He declares therefore:

> The cure for the greatest part of human miseries is not radical, but palliative. Infelicity is involved in corporeal nature, and interwoven with our being; all attempts therefore to decline it wholly are useless and vain: the armies of pain send their arrows against us on every side, the choice is only between those which are more or less sharp, or tinged with poison of greater or less malignity; and the strongest armour which reason can supply, will only blunt their points, but cannot repel them. (Ibid.)

This leads Johnson to insist upon a patient and submissive attitude towards all the inescapable evils of the human condition. It also leads him to warn, with no less emphasis, against mistaking cowardice for patience or indolence for submission:

> We are not to repine, but we may lawfully struggle; for the calamities of life, like the necessities of nature, are calls to labour, and exercises of diligence. When we feel any pressure of distress, we are not to conclude that we can only obey the will of heaven by languishing under it, any more than when we perceive the pain of thirst we are to imagine that water is prohibited. (Ibid.)

The balance of the paragraph, though more conventional, is equally characteristic of Johnson's basic position:

> Of misfortune it never can be certainly known whether, as proceeding from the hand of God, it is an act of favour, or of punishment: but since all the ordinary dispensations of providence are to be interpreted according to the general

> analogy of things, we may conclude, that we have a right to remove one inconvenience as well as another; that we are only to take care lest we purchase ease with guilt; and that our Maker's purpose, whether of reward or severity, will be answered by the labours which he lays us under the necessity of performing. (Ibid.)

Yet in some disturbingly subtle fashion, these lines seem at odds with those preceding them, in much the same way that the peroration of The Vanity of Human Wishes conflicts with the stance earlier established in that far more complex work. Nor is this impression of a malaise Johnson struggled to hide from public view lessened by the sentiments with which he closes this essay--or by the similar design of many others.

Consider, for example, Rambler No. 184. Its opening paragraphs consist of jottings on the periodical essay. Matter for these essays, Johnson remarks, is no problem; the difficulty lies, he explains, with the writer's state of mind, frequently resolved when, as his deadline approaches, he pulls himself together and finds himself writing (as Johnson knew from experience) on whatever happens to come to mind. His topic is not his own; it has been chosen--or dictated--by chance. In fact, Johnson states, a far greater part than is willingly admitted of a man's life is governed by chance, that amorally indiscriminate distributor of good or evil. At one end of the human spectrum, Johnson explains, reckless men "throw themselves by design into the arms of fortune" (Ram. 184); at the other, the most prudent of men cannot escape the

subtle power of chance. As for the young man, whose ignorance of life places him midway between these two extremes, how can he, Johnson asks, "determine his own destiny otherwise than by chance?" (ibid.). Having established his point of life's uncertainty, Johnson draws, in a very effective metaphor, a logical conclusion:

> We set out on a tempestuous sea, in quest of some port, where we expect to find rest, but where we are not sure of admission; we are not only in danger of sinking in the way, but of being misled by meteors mistaken for stars, of being driven from our course by the changes of the wind, and of losing it by unskilful steerage; yet it sometimes happens, that cross winds blow us to a safer coast, that meteors draw us aside from whirlpools, and that negligence or error contributes to our escape from mischiefs to which a direct course would have exposed us. Of those that by precipitate conclusions, involve themselves in calamities without guilt, very few, however they may reproach themselves, can be certain that other measures would have been more successful. (Ibid.)

As if aghast at having sailed too close to the wind, Johnson changes his tack and concludes the essay in a totally conventional fashion:

> In this state of universal uncertainty, where a thousand dangers hover about us, and none can tell whether the good that he persues is not evil in disguise, or whether the next step will lead him to safety or destruction, nothing can afford any rational tranquillity, but the conviction that, however we amuse ourselves with unideal sounds, nothing in reality is governed by chance, but that the universe is under the perpetual superintendence of him who created it; that our being is in the hands of omnipotent goodness, by whom what appears casual to us is directed for ends ultimately kind and merciful; and that nothing can finally hurt him who debars not himself from the divine favour. (Ibid.)

"The certainty of evil" and "the dominion of chance," the themes of Rambler Nos. 32 and 184 respectively, are two of the three basic deductions Johnson drew from his

study of the external forces of the human condition, and they establish the attitudinal contours underlying his conviction expressed in the latter of the two aforementioned essays: "Since life itself is uncertain, nothing which has life for its basis, can boast much stability." This view is apparent throughout Johnson's writings, but nowhere perhaps is it more effectively revealed than in his account of the life of Richard Savage.

To judge from Johnson's account, we may conclude the only significant good that chance afforded Savage in his early years was his godmother's tenderness, but that came to an end with her death, when Savage was ten. The only positive aspect of Savage's debut as a London dramatist was, according to Johnson, the friendship of Mr. Wilks. But just as Savage seemed launched upon a successful career, "both his fame and his life were endangered by an event, of which it is not yet determined whether it ought to be mentioned as a crime or a calamity" (Lives, II, 344).

That this tragic event, Savage's killing of Mr. Sinclair, was, in Johnson's opinion, caused by chance is apparent from his account of the events leading up to it. On the 20th November, 1727, Savage was walking alone in London when he "accidentally" met two acquaintances, whom he joined on their way to a coffee house. Savage was willing to take a bed in the coffee house, but being eminently gregarious, joined his companions in a night ramble, since there was not sufficient accommodation for

all three. As Savage and his two friends wandered the streets, Johnson relates "they happened unluckily" (ibid., 345) to enter a house of ill fame, where shortly thereafter a brawl ensued in which Savage admitted killing Sinclair. As chance would have it, the notorious Sir Francis Page presided over the trial that followed. In his charge to the jury, Johnson says, Page so misrepresented Savage's defence of unpremeditated murder committed in self-defence that the verdict of guilty was a foregone conclusion.

Though released from prison through the intervention of his friends who obtained him the king's pardon, Savage, Johnson relates, continued "as before without any other support than accidental favours and uncertain patronage afforded him; . . . so that he spent his life between want and plenty; . . . [and] whatever he received was the gift of chance . . ." (ibid., 356). The next fifty pages, almost half of the entire work, which provide a detailed account of Savage's subsequent life in London, illustrate the view described above. Just before he relates how Savage was persuaded to leave London, Johnson, as if mesmerized with compassion, recapitulates his friend's peculiar misfortunes, always borne "not only with decency, but with cheerfulness" (ibid., 409). For Johnson the crux of Savage's life journey was that, though he possessed superior abilities, he was always prevented, by the intervention of fate, from applying them usefully, and any promises of good fortune were crushed before they materialized. Thus, Johnson presents two views of Savage: one as an individual

whose choice of life was that of a writer, and the other as a representative of the human species; in both contexts, Savage is portrayed as the plaything of external forces. Because of his blind determination to seek security in a world he did not understand, Savage cuts a pitiable but nonetheless ennobling figure struggling against the flux of the universe.

A third attribute of the human condition and, for Johnson, surely the most perplexing one, is the fact that man is so frequently faced with a choice. In Johnson's view, this fact proves very much a two-edged sword.[3] While it provides Johnson with a requisite context for asserting man's free will, choice is too often uninvited or, what is worse, its implications are unrecognized. These two dangers and the bitter truth to which they give rise are made abundantly obvious at the close of the conversation in Cairo between Imlac and Rasselas. The latter, clearly inebriated with the prospect of exercising his newly acquired freedom of choice after escaping the happy valley, argues that man's wisdom will undoubtedly enable him to choose that alternative which is best suited for his needs. In an effort to alert him to reality, with little apparent success, Imlac points out:

> The causes of good and evil . . . are so various and uncertain, so often entangled with each other, so diversified by various relations, and so much subject to accidents which cannot be foreseen, that he who would fix his condition upon incontestable reasons of preference, must live and die inquiring and deliberating. (Ras., XVI, 542)

Imlac's thesis, which in his naïveté Rasselas refuses to accept, contains two of Johnson's elemental dicta. The first is that it is illusory to expect happiness by reasoning out the best path to follow, because good or evil, though very real, cannot be preferred nor, frequently, can they be easily distinguished. The second dictum maintains that it is equally misleading to suppose that in the relationship between man and choice, man necessarily has the upper hand or the active role. Unpalatable as such a truth may be to human pride, choice often imposes itself on man and in this guise is uncomfortably akin to fate. Thus, of the three attributes of the human condition under discussion that of choice caused Johnson the greatest anguish, precisely because to scrutinize its operations threatened his belief in man's free will. This is not to say that Johnson shunned its study but rather that, when in The Vanity of Human Wishes he asked:

> Must helpless man, in ignorance sedate,
> Roll darkling down the torrent of his fate?
> (TVHW, 345-46)

the question was purely rhetorical, though to many readers of the poem the answer necessarily appears tinged with despair rather than a confident belief in religion. For Johnson, who believed that the comforts of religion can alleviate the pains of evil and chance, was forced to grant that to all but the most religious of men these comforts are less than effective, though all the more essential, in reconciling man with the paradoxical implications of the

supposed freedom of his will.

From a purely secular viewpoint (if we ignore its peroration), The Vanity of Human Wishes summarizes Johnson's appraisal of the tragedy of life. Through his portraits of particular individuals, Johnson shows how man, by reason of his nature and the actions of forces beyond his control, must be prepared to run the gauntlet of disasters. In Voitle's words, "the theme of the poem . . . is the defeat of the spirit of man in 'the clouded mazes of fate,' a theme which is most powerfully expressed in the magnificent lines on Charles the Twelfth."[4]

Even a brief look at those lines is indeed instructive. Fully confident, Charles set out on a military career of conquest. Partly as a result of his triumphs which led him to pre-eminence in the dangerous game of power politics, Charles faced the choice of either continuing along the bloody paths of glory or of accepting the proffered hand of peace. In choosing the former course, he made a truly fatal decision. Deprived of any further choice, he fell into the hands of chance. Chance treated him cruelly, driving him to defeat at Pultowa and hounding him thereafter with miseries and humiliations, not even granting him the comfort of a glorious end:

> His fall was destin'd to a barren strand,
> A petty fortress, and a dubious hand.
> (TVHW, 219-20)

Such is Johnson's account of the fate of Charles the Twelfth, the epitome of a totally active man. More

sedate men fare little better, though Johnson presents their destiny in a somewhat different light. If he presents them as less vulnerable to cruel chance and decision-making, for they do not expose themselves so much to these forces, he makes clear that, in his opinion, they are choice victims of evil. The old man in the poem, for example, has no choice but to suffer the agonies of physical degeneration; he has no chance to divert himself from them. Thus it is his fate that physical infirmities gnaw at his form and uncontrollable accidents tease his spirit

> Till pitying Nature signs the last release,
> And bids afflicted worth retire to peace.
> (Ibid., 309-10)

This chapter has so far concentrated upon Johnson's analysis of the human condition rather than on the instructions he gives for dealing with it. This advice unambiguously appears at the close of the long and important conversation, ostensibly a debate on marriage, between Rasselas and Nekayah. Rasselas, who tries but fails to synthesize much of what he has learnt, acts as a foil to Nekayah. While he raises somewhat naive objections, she sets down general truths. Thus, when Rasselas, shocked by his sister's report on family life, delivers his "Disquisition on Greatness," Nekayah rudely ignores her brother's meanderings to deliver her lecture:

> . . . we do not always find visible happiness in proportion to visible virtue. All natural and almost all political evils, are incident alike to the bad and good: they are confounded in the misery of a famine, and not much distinguished in the fury of a faction; they sink together

in a tempest, and are driven together from their country by invaders. All that virtue can afford is quietness of conscience, a steady prospect of a happier state; this may enable us to endure calamity with patience; but remember that patience must suppose pain. (Ras., XXIX, 562)

Rasselas rejects Nekayah's discourse as irrelevant to his chief concern, which, he tells her, is to find a means of bringing happiness to themselves and others. Marriage, he argues, must be "one of the means of happiness," but Nekayah ruthlessly analyzes for him several states of marital infelicity. When Rasselas protests that for him the most important criterion in choosing a wife will be the woman's willingness to submit to reason, Nekayah warns him:

There are a thousand familiar disputes which reason never can decide; questions that elude investigation, and make logick ridiculous; cases where something must be done, and where little can be said. Consider the state of mankind, and enquire how few can be supposed to act upon any occasions, whether small or great, with all the reasons of action present to their minds. Wretched would be the pair above all names of wretchedness, who should be doomed to adjust by reason every morning all the minute detail of a domestick day. (Ibid., 566-67)

She then reverts to and finishes her analysis of marriage. Rasselas mars her beautifully balanced conclusion with an addendum which, wishful as it is, nevertheless prompts Nekayah to lay her cards on the table:

Every hour, . . . confirms my prejudice in favour of the position so often uttered by the mouth of Imlac, "That nature sets her gifts on the right hand and on the left." Those conditions, which flatter hope, and attract desire, are so constituted, that as we approach one, we recede from another. There are goods so opposed that we cannot seize both, but, by too much prudence, may pass between them at too great a distance to reach either. This is often the fate of long consideration; he does nothing who endeavours to do more than is allowed

> to humanity. Flatter not yourself with contrarieties of pleasure. Of the blessings set before you make your choice, and be content. No man can taste the fruits of autumn while he is delighting his scent with the flowers of the spring: no man can, at the same time, fill his cup from the source and from the mouth of the Nile. (Ibid., 567-68)

Little wonder that at this point Imlac appears and ends the discourse. Nor is it surprising that the balance of this strange conte philoscphique, which bears all the marks of a concentrated vision, should move away from the study of men involved in life to that of man and the past, the imagination, and the soul. The "position" Nekayah subscribes to embraces the basic attitude governing all Johnson's examinations of the topics discussed in this and the preceding chapters. No matter what aspect he considered, Johnson always was finally driven to insist, sometimes only by implication, sometimes even by a reductio ad absurdum process, upon the necessity to be committed, consistent, and content.[5] To Johnson, any man whose record indicates an awareness of these principles proves that he has at least made an effort to make use of his gifts and to master his passions and, by admitting the reigning uncertainty of the human experience, has done his best in the face of that uncertainty. To Johnson, such an individual gains a certain dignity as he struggles to counteract, within his sphere of activity, the instability both within and surrounding him. He deserves to be recognized by his contemporaries and by succeeding generations not necessarily as a happy but at least as an

honest man, endeavouring to fulfil his role as a useful member of society.

CHAPTER III

JOHNSON'S VIEW OF THE INDIVIDUAL'S ROLE IN SOCIETY

There is one fundamental reason why Johnson's portrait of man, presented in the foregoing chapters, is somewhat myopic and might be compared to the late work of El Greco. Any painting originating from more than one perspective is bound to be out of focus. The preceding chapters considered Johnson's view first of man as an individual belonging to the "great republick of humanity," and then as an individual placed alone in the chaos of existence, seemingly crying out for help as, looking around, he exclaims (in the words of A. E. Housman):

> I a stranger and afraid
> In a world I never made.[1]

However, when Johnson focuses on teaching man his duties as a member of "the universal league of social beings" (Ram. 99), he encounters few difficulties. To him, society was as the sized canvas is to the painter. He is more in command of his subject, man, for he feels at ease with his material, society. The change in his entire stance is evident in the confident authority with which he prescribes the principles to be followed for the proper

fulfilment of an individual's role in society.

The most apparent and indeed pivotal of these principles is that of moral utility. Every man, that is, must practise his occupation with a deliberate determination to demonstrate its usefulness to society. To do this he must assess his occupation, considering "the whole extent of its application, and the whole weight of its importance" (Ram. 9) to society. Thereby, Johnson reasons, each man will discover for himself the peculiar relevance of his profession to society and, finding in that relevance a source of pleasure, will perform its duties to the best of his abilities. No man, Johnson warns, should resent the failure of others to appreciate the relevance of his particular occupation other than their own because that failure is usually attributable to ignorance. Thus, Johnson declares, "Every man ought to endeavour at eminence, and enjoy the pleasure of his own superiority, whether imaginary or real, without interrupting others in the same felicity" (ibid.). To prove his thesis Johnson concludes this essay by pointing out that as the "philosopher" depends upon the artificer for the practical demonstration of a theory, so without the help of the philosopher's "theoretical reasoning" the artificer's "dexterity is little more than a brute instinct."

In the Rambler essays Nos. 145 and 181 Johnson considers from this point of view the value to society of labourers and merchants. He grants that though they

"employ only their hands and feet in the service of mankind" (Ram. 145), labourers have an essential function and that, indeed, if they were banished, the immediate effect upon society would be far more damaging than the expulsion of philosophers. But that argument, he believes, is no reason to revere labourers more than intellectuals. "If we estimate dignity by immediate usefulness, agriculture is undoubtedly the first and noblest science" (ibid.), he contends. But, he hastens to add, this is not the way dignity should be or ever has been evaluated: the farmer has never been granted "the same rank with heroes, or with sages" (ibid.). And Johnson continues, this is only reasonable:

> Remuneratory honours are proportioned at once to the usefulness and difficulty of performances, and are properly adjusted by comparison of the mental and corporeal abilities, which they appear to employ. That work, however necessary, which is carried on only by muscular strength and manual dexterity, is not of equal esteem, in the consideration of rational beings, with the tasks that exercise the intellectual powers, and require the active vigour of imagination, or the gradual and laborious investigations of reason. (Ibid.)

Thus labourers, Johnson argues, though they "must be content to fill up the lowest class of the commonwealth, to form the base of the pyramid of subordination" (ibid.), can take pride in the fact that they provide services which, because they are essential, deserve to be recognized, though not celebrated by society. For this reason they must perform them to the best of their ability.

Rambler No. 181 suggests that the shopkeepers'

real worth lies in the vigorous respectability they provide society. Their reputation depends upon such qualities as integrity, initiative, and diligence; much of their success upon the way they apply their judgment to, and exercise their imagination in, their business affairs. Those who display "rational and manly industry" are fit candidates for the post of aldermen, a common ambition of many merchants. Naturally the dignity of those elected aldermen is greatly enhanced, since such persons are entrusted with the smooth functioning of a city. One might therefore suggest that, in Johnson's evaluation of these two classes, the merchant provides the muscle tone of society, while labourers have the duty to answer its physical needs.

In Rambler No. 83 Johnson considers the value to society of the virtuoso. Unlike Swift, who condemned the virtuoso for his pride and regarded him only as a fit target for some fierce satire, Johnson defends the virtuoso.[2] He insists that to prejudge a virtuoso's well-intended concern over remote questions is dangerous. However laughable or pitiable a virtuoso's innocent curiosity may make him, Johnson points out, he is at least occupied and therefore better than those who so idly "spend their time in counteracting happiness, and filling the world with wrong and danger, confusion and remorse" (Ram. 83). Furthermore, no man can validly predict the possible benefits of any new discovery; in fact to do so is blatant

pride. Therefore, Johnson argues, the virtuoso, "who suffers not his faculties to lie torpid, has a chance, whatever be his employment, of doing good to his fellow-creatures" (ibid.) and must be accepted into society.

The same argument is applied to those virtuosi who, with such stubborn perseverance, collect things. For those who specialize in the collection of art objects or mechanical curiosities Johnson has genuine enthusiasm because it is interesting for man to follow the pursuits of the human intellect. He gives less support to collectors of "the utensils, arms or dresses of foreign nations" (ibid.), suggesting, however, that much of the bric-à-brac of these collections might encourage a better knowledge of foreign peoples. As for those virtuosi enamoured with antiques, even Johnson can find little justification, save to agree with what he regards as the commonly held view that memorabilia of famous individuals may urge other men to emulate the virtues by which these individuals achieved fame.

Johnson then focuses in this same essay on the weaknesses of the virtuoso's choice of life. His main objection is the virtuoso's failure to exploit his genius. Once the virtuoso is committed, Johnson remarks, he is unlikely to give up either "a method of gratifying his desire of eminence by expence, [for necessarily he has means] rather than by labour" (ibid.) or his infatuation with "his toys and trinkets for arguments and principles"

(ibid.). In a word, Johnson seems troubled by the lingering suspicion that though the virtuoso does not necessarily abuse his genius (this, of course, was Swift's objection), he may be misusing it.

In Rambler No. 129 Johnson discusses the necessity of acting upon the principle of moral utility with prudence. In this essay he urges that every man must, before undertaking any task, realistically appraise his own abilities in regard to the peculiar difficulties of the project in question. Only by following such a policy, Johnson explains, might a man discover that the path of prudence lies between attempting too much and too little. Though through trial and error everyone quickly learns that to find, let alone to keep, to this path is immensely difficult, Johnson insists that no one must cease searching for it; to do so, Johnson says, is to fail in a universal duty. By way of encouragement, Johnson argues it is better to attempt more than one is capable of than less because whereas the reward of an unsuccessful effort lies in a clear consciousness of having done one's best, the penalty for failing to exercise one's abilities to the utmost is a personal malaise. The entire purpose of the argument becomes apparent in the dictum with which Johnson concludes this Rambler No. 129:

> It is the duty of every man to endeavour that something may be added by his industry to the hereditary aggregate of knowledge and happiness. To add much can indeed be the lot of few, but to add something, however little, every one may hope; and of every honest endeavour it is certain, that, however unsuccessful, it will be at last rewarded. (Ibid.)

Most men, of course, are far better able to pursue these ends by attempting to promote happiness, or at least give pleasure, rather than knowledge. The young boy, for example, who rowed Johnson and Boswell to Greenwich obviously contributed to his passengers' pleasure but little or nothing to their knowledge. As Johnson remarked on that memorable day, learning, natural as his desire for it may be, could not "possibly be of any use"[3] to that boy in the performance of his duties. In Johnson's view the boy (like any other obscure individual who does his job properly), deserved recognition because, by contributing to the conveniences of life, he helped make it more endurable for fellow members of his society to bear. More than that Johnson neither asks nor expects of persons engaged in the lower stations of life.

In certain other of his periodical papers Johnson lays down further guidelines subsidiary to, and prerequisite for, the successful practice of moral utility. In Rambler No. 19 he illustrates, in the example of Polyphilus, the necessity of an early choice of employment in life, while in Rambler No. 63 he illustrates, in the person of Eumenes, the necessity of sticking to that particular choice.

Polyphilus is introduced as a young man who, having shown at the university a facile mastery of both science and letters, was regarded as possessing immense potential. However, though so much was expected of him,

when the time came for his entry into the world, Polyphilus failed, either through ignorance or over-confidence, to fix his eyes upon any particular career. The consequences were disastrously wasteful. He flitted from profession to profession, irresponsibly allowing himself to be influenced in his non-committed choice entirely by chance encounters and the immediate responses of his passions. Finally, he was reduced to pursuing all at the same time a number of absurd projects, none of which he ever completed, all of which bordered on the useless:

> Thus is this powerful genius, which might have extended the sphere of any science, or benefited the world in any profession, dissipated in a boundless variety, without profit to others or himself. He makes sudden irruptions into the regions of knowledge, and sees all obstacles give way before him but he never stays long enough to compleat his conquest, to establish laws, or bring away the spoils. (Ram. 19)

Eumenes, portrayed in the concluding paragraphs of Rambler No. 63, is a good but weak man; his error is inconsistency rather than non-commitment. Rich and honest, he enters public life with the sole intention of remedying injustice. However, gradually "wearied with perpetual struggles to unite policy and virtue" (Ram. 63), he returns to the unspecified occupation (perhaps that of a country-gentleman) which at his father's urging he has accepted as his original choice of life:

> Here he spent some years in tranquillity and beneficence; but finding that corruption increased, and false opinions in government prevailed, he thought

himself again summoned to posts of publick trust, from which new evidence of his own weakness again determined him to retire. (Ibid.)

The respective failings of Polyphilus and Eumenes are so closely inter-related that, if it is not accurate to suggest that each is sequential to the other, it is certainly correct to suggest that they share a common weakness: an inability to make proper use of time.

The proper use of one's allotted time is of crucial concern to Johnson. He devotes three Rambler essays, Nos. 71, 108, and 134, specifically to this topic and, if this is not convincing evidence, one need only recall his private lamentations over his own sloth, the familiar inscription upon his watch,[4] or read the opening sentence of the little noticed preface to The Patriot: "To improve the golden moment of opportunity, and catch the good that is within our reach, is the great art of life" (Works, VI, 214).[5]

In Rambler No. 71 Johnson discusses the platitude "that life is short," to which, he points out, too much lip service has been paid. To illustrate the folly of ignoring this incontestable fact, Mr. Rambler presents the example of the fifty-five-year-old Prospero who, rather than committing himself to the execution of one settled design for his newly bought estate, fritters away his time and indulges his

imagination going over a number of possible alternatives. Prospero's abuse of time has no serious consequences because this particular project affects few others, and everyone is entitled to his own innocent pleasures, foolish as they may sometimes be. The implication nevertheless is clear: Prospero epitomizes an elderly man who rejected the thought "that life was short till he was about to lose it" (Ram. 71). However,

> . . . when many others are interested in an undertaking, when any design is formed, in which the improvement or security of mankind is involved, nothing is more unworthy either of wisdom or benevolence, than to delay it from time to time, or to forget how much every day that passes over us, takes away from our power, and how soon an idle purpose to do an action, sinks into a mournful wish that it had once been done. (Ibid.)

Johnson passes in this number of the Rambler to more serious examples of lost opportunities never brought to completion and concludes by pointing out that it is absurd to postpone reformation and repentance until it is too late.

In Rambler No. 108 Johnson adopts a different tack to the topic. Since incidental distraction preempts so much of our time, he urges that it is essential to take advantage of what remains and what can be effectively called our own. To claim that we lack time for any worthwhile undertaking, Johnson says, is grossly self-defeating, for it is nothing more than

a weak excuse for avoiding diligent effort. Thus, expounding a precept that he accused himself of failing to follow, Johnson declares that he who "hopes to look back hereafter with satisfaction upon past years, must learn to know the present value of single minutes, and endeavour to let no particle of time fall useless to the ground" (Ram. 108).

Johnson goes on to reject the notion that to make one's work one's life, to the exclusion of innocent pleasures and everyday responsibilities, is necessary to the pursuit of a particular objective. Far more profitable, he urges, than the consequent violent efforts so liable to cease in the face of difficulties or the sudden desires which can so easily become irrational obsessions, are "short flights between each of which the mind may lie at rest. For every single act of progression a short time is sufficient: and it is only necessary, that whenever that time is afforded, it be well employed" (ibid.). Thus does Johnson plead for a judiciously balanced disposition of time and persevering exercise of energy to the fulfilment of any particular duty or enterprise.

As an example of those who, by following such a policy, "have risen to eminence in opposition to all the obstacles which external circumstances could place in their

way, amidst the tumult of business, the distresses of poverty, or the dissipations of a wandering and unsettled state" (ibid.), Johnson offers that of Erasmus.

> Compelled by want to attendance and solicitation, and so much versed in common life, that he has transmitted to us the most perfect delineation of the manners of his age, he [Erasmus] joined to his knowledge of the world, such application to books, that he will stand for ever in the first rank of literary heroes. (Ibid.)

With unshaken constancy and prudent use of all the time he could call his own, Erasmus continued to write copiously and usefully.

Rambler No. 134 is the most personal of these three self-revealing essays. It deals with idleness, a condition with which Johnson was all too familiar. The greater part of this essay explores the psychology of "vis inertiae, the mere repugnance to motion" (Ram. 134), which intermittently afflicts all men to some degree. Johnson urges that, rather than submitting to the irrational fear of unknown and unavoidable evils, it is best to meet the evils head-on, "and suffer only their real malignity without the conflicts of doubt and anguish of anticipation" (ibid.) that inevitably result when, allowing ourselves to procrastinate, we let time slip by and irresponsibly invite the imagination to run riot in the consequent vacuum of inactivity.

For this and other forms of procrastination, recognized in a subsequent paragraph of this Rambler, Johnson shows a certain tolerance, regarding them as evidence of failure to practise the art of living. But for

idleness, an irrational refusal to practise that same art, Johnson shows no tolerance, because "to neglect our duties, merely to avoid the labour of performing them, a labour which is always punctually rewarded, is surely to sink under weak temptations" (ibid.).

All the foregoing discussion allows Johnson to conclude this essay with practical advice on how to live significantly. From a philosophical point of view, his advice is directed to one fixed goal, the practice of virtue. As has already been demonstrated, all but the very few morally incorruptible or irresponsible need guidance in seeking a way of climbing, what Johnson terms in Rambler No. 70, the "steeps of virtue." In this essay Johnson comments upon the deplorable inclination, common chiefly amongst men with little knowledge of life, to evaluate the moral worth of any individual merely by his apparent success or failure in the practice of virtue. Johnson insists that even the best of men stumble in the performance of their duties often enough, for human virtue is above all erratic both in performance and in nature. To demand, therefore, a consistent record of moral goodness or to condemn any one for its apparent absence is, in Johnson's opinion, to display sheer ignorance; what counts above all, he insists, is honest effort, which Johnson believes every man capable of making, all appearances to the contrary; "for it often happens, that in the loose, and thoughtless, and dissipated, there is a secret radical worth, which may shoot

out by proper cultivation" (Ram. 70).

Since, Johnson goes on to remark, the minds of most persons are malleable, their records of virtue will always be marred by failures, at the least attributable to the influence of external circumstances, or custom. Thus, Johnson argues, before judging a man, one must know him and the factors with which life has afflicted him.

Particularly prone to the influence of example, Johnson adds, with a complacency that nowadays must be regarded as nothing less than male chauvinism, are women, whose "goodness seldom keeps its ground against laughter, flattery or fashion" (ibid.). Johnson, however, does not mean one should forget that woman, any less than man, has always within her a tincture of moral goodness which "may by the breath of counsel or exhortation be kindled into flame" (ibid.).

The essay culminates in an important precept: every man "should consider himself entrusted, not only with his own conduct, but with that of others" (ibid.). Consequently, every man must be constantly alert to the potential good or evil effects upon his real or imaginary circle and of his every thought, word or deed. This is a dictum of peculiar importance to the writer as a man and as an intellectual leader; the more distinguished or eminent a man is, the greater must be his alertness since his example will extend far and wide. Any man unwilling to accept this responsibility fails his role in society; he

ignores "the great law of social beings, by which every individual is commanded to consult the happiness of others" (Ram. 148).

Benevolence, indeed, is the sine qua non of beneficence. Without a benevolent attitude, none of the principles Johnson prescribes can be successfully practised. Without "the disposition to do good" no man will or, for that matter, can undertake that most meaningful but exacting of activities, "the practice of doing good."[6]

So obsessed was Johnson with encouraging this activity, for the mutual benefit of the individual and of society, that any man doing or attempting to do good would gain Johnson's approval. Such an individual has had, in Johnson's view, both the courage and the desire to make use of his innate love of virtue, thereby demonstrating at least an attempt to fulfil his prime duty of helping others. Beyond this all-important consideration lies the fact that, as a result of his efforts, he exposes himself to the possibility of that moral happiness he yearns for throughout his lifetime. Such a possibility is surely reason enough, in Johnson's opinion, for the individual to pursue his role in society with the greatest diligence.

While it is true that Johnson never directly taught that only by beneficence might one legitimately hope for a taste of genuine happiness, there is ample evidence to argue that such was his belief or, at least, such was the

drift of his teachings. Beneficence is a hard task-master, for it demands of the individual to pass beyond himself and to recognize that, because of the uncertainty of things and the malice of man, it may be nipped in the bud and may often be unappreciated. Nevertheless, in Adventurer No. 111,[7] Johnson asserts that "to strive with difficulties, and to conquer them, is the highest human felicity; the next, is to strive, and deserve to conquer." Essentially, the nature of the difficulty makes no difference, because in resolving or attempting to resolve it, a man does good. The benefits, to the individual, of doing good in this or in any other way are stated clearly in Rambler No. 41, an essay on "The Advantages of Memory." The greatest advantage, in Johnson's view, is that there is

> . . . certainly no greater happiness than to be able to look back on a life usefully and virtuously employed, to trace our own progress in existence, by such tokens as excite neither shame nor sorrow. (Ram. 41)

That happiness may not always be intense, but its memory is at least irremovable and, as the example of the old man interviewed in Rasselas proves, a source of considerable comfort to the individual for having tried to fulfil his occupational duties.

Finally, such a view is substantiated in the Life of Johnson. When Boswell asked Johnson's opinion of Hume's notion "that all who are happy, are equally happy," Johnson replied: "A peasant and a philosopher may be equally satisfied, but not equally happy. Happiness consists in

the multiplicity of agreeable consciousness."[8] The more means, that is, a man finds of doing good, the greater can be his experience of happiness. Thus, Johnson would argue, the philosopher certainly understands both men and life better than the peasant and, therefore, when he applies this knowledge to life, he can better attempt to do good and in so doing find a measure of satisfaction, if not happiness. Similarly Johnson would reason that the rich man, though his wealth imposes on him the duty of doing good through the proper use of his wealth, also has a greater chance of happiness than a poor man so busy struggling to make ends meet that he has not only fewer means of beneficence, but, quite understandably, less inclination to pursue them.[9] The general problem is, of course, to persuade man to free himself of his self-interest and his other vicious passions that can so easily possess him and help him realize that the attempt to make use of his particular gifts is in itself a potential source of satisfaction.

The preceding commentary can be well documented in the context of such writings as Rasselas, where Johnson describes the happy valley as a fictional society of carefully camouflaged discontent. Yet the four fugitives from the happy valley succeed in living essentially in harmony with each other.

The happy valley, while ostensibly designed to satisfy, in fact conspires to render irrelevant or

superfluous, unfulfilled human desires. It is, after all, impossible to desire anything the lack of which one is forbidden to feel or even retain an awareness of. Thus, the reason why none of the happy valley inhabitants attempts to satisfy any of those desires which, before entering the place they naturally sought to satisfy and which, indeed, drove them to take up residence there, is that the happy valley forbids them doing so. Consequently, since they are denied (for what it is worth) the pursuit of illusory happiness they are condemned, though they may not in their condition recognize it, to unhappiness. If Imlac claims to be less unhappy then the viable reason is that, having "a mind replete with imagery" which he "can vary and combine at pleasure" (Ras., XII, 534) he finds solace in renovating his knowledge and recollecting his experience of the life he led prior to entering the happy valley. Though he recognizes that such an activity is necessarily selfish and hence no source of joy, at least it preserves him from the state of his fellow residents all of whom, despite an obvious semblance of subordination (princes, musicians, servants), are cursed with minds that, he asserts "have no impression but of the present moment [and] are either corroded by malignant passions, or sit stupid in the gloom of perpetual vacancy" (Ras., XII, 534). Imlac, therefore, sees through the illusory nature of the happy valley. He realizes that though it appears to be a place where all evils have been removed and all desires

are fulfilled, and where, therefore, it seems unreasonable to be unhappy, in fact it is a far more unpleasant place than the outside world. The inhabitants of the outside world, at least, can enjoy and learn from variety and can demonstrate, by giving their conduct a moral colouring, the possibility of human dignity. The happy valley residents are not permitted either of these pleasures since they are all smothered by a gnawing indolence.

Such conditions preclude trust and make all residents totally incapable of any sort of co-operation.[10] Suspicion, indeed, poisons the very heart of the society, for the palace in which all the royalty live together stands prominently "on an eminence raised about thirty paces above the surface of the lake" (to serve presumably as a lookout) and "was built as if suspicion herself had dictated the plan" (Ras., I, 507). To live under a cloud of suspicion and to be unable to attempt to dissipate it, is cause of misery indeed.

The four fugitives from this society represent an embryonic ideal society in regard to inter-personal relationships. Imlac, as an older man of learning, commands respect, which he reciprocates with a tolerant understanding of his charges' youthful expectations. Rasselas, fully aware of his

princely position, treats his sister with firm solicitude. She, tinged with the traits of an eighteenth-century blue stocking, accepts her brother's precedence, notwithstanding her own superior intellect. Pekuah is distinctly inferior to the three others, but, as a devoted servant, never questions, at least openly, her position. Thus, all four represent the nucleus of a society structured upon subordination. They are bound by an underlying spirit of mutual trust and by a common purpose, the pursuit and exchange of knowledge. Since none of them knows financial need, interest and envy amongst them are excluded in the world outside the happy valley, and their harmonious relationship is further protected. Nor, because of their wealth, need they fear the frustration of being unable to meet anyone they wish.[11]

The attitudes and behaviour of Imlac's pupils towards members of real society are highly instructive. Even though derided by Cairo's younger set for his pompous and inappropriate lecture, Rasselas soon regains his complacency. He controls himself as he recognizes the inanity of the moral teacher's empty rhetoric. By the last of his interviews the satire of his ever-unchanged naïveté has become apparent. For when the old man has told the bitter truth of his life experience, the prince consoles himself by remarking that

> . . . it was not reasonable to be disappointed by this account; for age had never been considered as the season of felicity, and, if it was possible to be easy in decline and weakness, it was likely that the days of vigour and alacrity might be happy: that the noon of life might be bright, if the evening could be calm. (Ibid., XLV, 599)[12]

In the sense that Rasselas only observes life, this attitude is praiseworthy, but had he ever become truly involved in society, and learnt from experience, he could not possibly have made this somewhat misdirected comment, or retained to the end his naïveté.

His sister's attitude is more human. She reacts vehemently to her encounter with the shepherds, primarily because she feels her own dreams threatened.[13] Her reaction to the loss of Pekuah is a fine study in human grief; she becomes impatient and demanding. But she comes into her own when, before the loss of Pekuah, she reports to Rasselas her study of private life. Her analysis of family relationships is remarkably modern, for she insists that conflict rather than love colours them, just as is the case in society. Her insight into marriage and celibacy is far more incisive than any insights Rasselas ever displays. Rasselas is, precisely because of his benevolent inclinations, too often on the defensive: Nekayah asserts, and in speaking of the single life argues, that marriage is fundamentally a social relationship, and therefore desirable. Single people

> . . . dream away their time without friendship, without fondness, and are driven to rid themselves of the day, for which they have no use, by childish amusements, or vicious delights. . . . They are peevish at home, and malevolent

> abroad; and, as the out-laws of human nature, make it their business and their pleasure to disturb that society which debars them from its privileges. To live without feeling or exciting sympathy, to be fortunate without adding to the felicity of others, or afflicted without tasting the balm of pity, is a state more gloomy than solitude: it is not retreat but exclusion from mankind. Marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasures. (Ibid., XXVI, 560)

Pekuah is the only one to be forcibly separated from the others. Before her abduction she hardly says a word. Following her release she speaks freely. She has gained experience.

This abduction is her great test. She gains the respect of the female society in which she finds herself (although she considers it intellectually so stagnant that she makes no attempt to integrate into it) and pretends respect for her captor. Throughout her captivity she keeps herself busy. At first she thrives upon the novelty of her surroundings, but as this wears off, she expects "to see mermaids and tritons, which, as Imlac has told me, the European travellers have stationed in the Nile" (ibid., XXXIX, 587)[14] until the Arab laughs at her credulity. Gradually, her thoughts fix on Nekayah, because in the loss of her friendship lies her greatest grief. When the two are reunited, all is tenderness, kindness, and gratitude--the prerequisites of friendship between two persons of virtue.

Pekuah's behaviour in relation to others can, however, be considered from a different point of view. Separated from her mistress, she immediately imitates her.

Her reasons are ostensibly political, but the truth is that she enjoys playing a role born out of nostalgic imagination. At the close of her first day of captivity she impresses the women with her air of authority as she orders them to undress her. The nomad chief, thinking, like his women, that she is a princess, treats her with great respect. Though she surely drinks up the flattery, she reveals her real station because the ransom for a commoner is far less than it would be for a princess.

In a sense any example of the happy-valley group is invalid because Rasselas and his friends observe but do not experience life. They can be considered only as existing in a controlled environment. They are not real individuals subject to all those common frustrations and factors of existence which ignite man's passions. Yet their behaviour is significant because it illustrates the difficulty even under controlled conditions for an individual to be of real service to others.

To examine this principle merely in Rasselas is misleading for another reason. Whereas the relationship between Rasselas and his companions is serene, the reports they study of men involved in real life are all extremely unhappy. Between the two extremes--interviewers and their subjects--stand the biographical studies which place the search for, and experience of, moral happiness in the context of real life.

The material from the biographies is vast, but it can be restricted by excluding those studies which discuss individuals primarily as authors rather than as members of society. The principal value of these works lies in their literary criticism. The selection can be further confined by relating it to Adventurer No. 67, in which Johnson admires "the secret concatenation of society, that links together the great and the mean, the illustrious and the obscure."

By analyzing an example from Johnson's writings about one of each of these four categories of men referred to by him, I hope to show his concern in his biographical studies with the contribution his subjects have made to life and society. The four I have chosen are Frederick II of Prussia, Savage, Boerhaave, and Dr. Robert Levet.[15]

It is worth noticing the different relationship Johnson had with each of the four examples. The first, that is to say, is an account of an illustrious contemporary; the second of a friend of his youth; the third of a celebrated individual (deceased in 1738) known to Johnson only by repute; and the fourth of a life-long friend. All four examples are of importance to our concern, for though Johnson's interest in the four varies widely, we can see that his perspective as a biographer does not alter. Johnson

always evaluates his subject by relating his merit to his record as a member of society.

Frederick II of Prussia is the obvious example of a great man's behaviour in society. Johnson wrote this biography in 1756, the year in which the Seven Years' War opened. The practical motivation for writing it is obvious, since England was supporting Frederick. It is an incomplete study because Frederick reigned until 1786, two years after Johnson's death, and it discusses at some length Frederick's political record. Yet Johnson presents Frederick in strictly social terms, and therefore treats him like any other individual whose value and example to society may be fairly assessed.

Although royalty may have a peculiar status in society, in Johnson's opinion its duties differ only slightly from those of other mortals responsible for law and order. The danger of a king not fulfilling his duties is perhaps greater and has potentially graver effects. This is shown in the early part of the study, which describes Frederick's father as "earnestly engaged in little pursuits, or in schemes terminating in some speedy consequence, without any plan of lasting advantage to himself or to his subjects, or any prospect of distant events" (Works,

VI, 436). According to Johnson, Frederick's father was useless and displeasing to his subjects:

> He had learned, though otherwise perhaps no very great politician, that to be rich was to be powerful; but that the riches of a king ought to be seen in the opulence of his subjects, he wanted either ability or benevolence to understand. (Ibid., 437)

By contrast the son of this man, no less tyrannical as a father than as a king, cuts an impressive figure. As a young prince "secluded from publick business, in contention with his father, in alienation from his wife . . . . He diverted his mind from the scenes about him, by studies and liberal amusements" (ibid., 439). That a young prince, exposed to the flattery which goes with his station, should transcend ever-present temptations of "pleasure . . . amusements and festivity" is, in Johnson's view, remarkable; even more is he impressed that a young prince, "in whom moderate acquisitions would be extolled as prodigies, should exact from himself that excellence of which the whole world conspires to spare him the necessity" (ibid.).

The paragraph following points out Frederick's great courage in the face of adversity, one pre-requisite of any individual committed to the welfare of mankind:

> In every great performance, perhaps in every great character, part is the gift of nature, part the

contribution of accident, and part, very often not the greatest part, the effect of voluntary election, and regular design. The king of Prussia was undoubtedly born with more than common abilities; but that he has cultivated them with more than common diligence, was probably the effect of his peculiar condition, of that which he then considered as cruelty and misfortune. (Ibid., 439-40)

The consequences of that cruelty and misfortune were equally happy because they

made him acquainted with the various forms of life, and with the genuine passions, interests, desires, and distresses, of mankind. Kings, without this help from temporal infelicity, see the world in a mist, which magnifies everything near them, and bounds their view to a narrow compass, which few are able to extend by the mere force of curiosity. (Ibid., 440)

Thus, when he became king, Frederick

. . . brought to the throne the knowledge of a private man, without the guilt of usurpation. Of this general acquaintance with the world there may be found some traces in his whole life. His conversation is like that of other men upon common topicks, his letters have an air of familiar elegance, and his whole conduct is that of a man who has to do with men, and who is not ignorant of what motives will prevail over friends or enemies. (Ibid., 440-41)

To Johnson, Frederick is undoubtedly the ideal king, for with his power and concerns he turned to relief of the poor, the advancement of learning, and the reformation of his law courts. Above all, he

. . . declared, that in all contrarieties of interest between him and his subjects, the publick good should have the preference; and in one of the first exertions of regal power, banished the prime minister and favourite of his father, as one that had "betrayed his master, and abused his trust." (Ibid., 443)

As if proclaiming that Frederick had fulfilled the innate ambitions and performed the social duties of an ordinary man (in a kingly fashion),[16] Johnson declares:

> To enlarge dominions has been the boast of many princes; to diffuse happiness and security through wide regions has been granted to few. The king of Prussia has aspired to both these honours, and endeavoured to join the praise of legislator to that of conqueror. (Ibid., 449)

In view of the consistent approval throughout this biography and bearing in mind the political considerations that one can assume invited its composition, it is easy to dismiss it as a mere propaganda tract. But Johnson would never consciously deviate from the truth, and therefore this biography undoubtedly expresses his genuine views of Frederick the Great. Besides, as Boswell's record attests, Johnson retained his admiration for Frederick throughout his life. Boswell records no fewer than five admittedly casual references but all the more significant for that.[17] It is true that Boswell himself adulated as only he could so eminent a public figure of the day, but even he surely recognized that Johnson admired Frederick both as a king and as an individual. On one occasion Boswell reports, Johnson referred to Frederick as follows:

> The true strong and sound mind is the mind that can embrace equally great things and small. Now I am told the King of Prussia will say to a servant, "Bring me a bottle of such a wine, which came in such a year; it lies in such a corner of the cellars." I would have a man great in great things, and elegant in little things.[18]

Any man endowed in this fashion and playing his role in society to the best of his abilities is, in

Johnson's opinion, to be admired. Whether he is a king or not makes little difference to his value as an individual.

No better example can be found of a man whose condition was mean than that of Richard Savage. Johnson's description of Savage's life, in many ways a disguised secular sermon, is the most complex of all Johnson's biographies. It is the only one of an individual intimately known to him. Johnson's main interest is to study the peculiar character of an individual who apparently had the potential and desire to play a meaningful role in society, but whose stubborn contempt for conventional maxims proves "that negligence and irregularity, long continued, will make knowledge useless, wit ridiculous, and genius contemptible" (Lives, II, 434).

Johnson sees Savage as a tragic figure because he possessed, to an imprudent degree, one cardinal trait which his conduct rendered more often than not morally useless. That trait was persistence, which underlies his compassion and courage, his egotism and folly. Johnson records several examples of his compassion. Particularly striking, in Johnson's opinion, is Savage's behaviour upon meeting the woman, since fallen into distress, who as a witness at his trial for murder had given the most damaging (and perjured) evidence against him. With unique effrontery she begged for his help. Savage, after gently reproving her, shared with her the only guinea in his possession. This, Johnson says, was "an act of complicated virtue; by

which he at once relieved the poor, corrected the vicious, and forgave an enemy; by which he at once remitted the strongest provocations, and exercised the most ardent charity" (ibid., 355).[19]

Johnson's assertion that compassion was "indeed the distinguishing quality of Savage" (ibid.) is illustrated by the fact that, in the last months of his life, when confined to prison for debt Savage

> . . . as in every other scene of his life, . . . made use of such opportunities as occurred of benefiting those who were more miserable than himself, and was always ready to perform any office of humanity to his fellow-prisoners. (Ibid., 427)

Savage's extraordinary capacity for friendship, his most unusual social grace, was one which, unhappily, he always seemed to abuse. According to Johnson, Savage's conversation and address were both so pleasing " that he scarcely ever found a stranger whom he did not leave a friend; but," Johnson adds regretfully, "it must likewise be added that he had not often a friend long, without obliging him to become a stranger" (ibid., 369). This perverseness confounds and saddens Johnson, who attributes it to Savage's refusal to recognize any duty towards those on whom he consciously--one might almost say conscientiously--depended. For Savage was oblivious of his duty to provide for himself, and so became a burden to his friends. Despite this ineradicable weakness, Johnson admires the fortitude with which Savage suffered from the neglect and contempt which his self-inflicted poverty

brought upon him, just as he deplored Savage's inclination to betray the confidence of friends. When they, in desperation, persuaded Savage to leave London and arranged to provide him with a basic allowance, Johnson records Savage's well-intentioned resolve which, since his entire record confutes it, acquires a vein of tragic irony. He was

> . . . now determined to commence a rigid oeconomist, and to live according to the exactest rules of frugality; for nothing was in his opinion more contemptible than a man who, when he knew his income, exceeded it; and yet he confessed that instances of such folly were too common, and lamented that some men were not to be trusted with their own money. (Ibid., 413)

Savage's vanity, "the most innocent species of pride" (ibid., 432), was responsible, Johnson explains, for his arrogant attitude towards his subscribers; but, since "his conduct, and this is the worst charge that can be brought against him, did them no real injury" (ibid., 416-17), it is irrelevant to Johnson's larger purpose of portraying an individual whom he presents as always deeply involved in life; accepting the misfortunes, imposed and self-inflicted, that befell him; yet never losing sight of virtue. In this sense, Johnson believes, Savage merits careful study:

> This at least must be allowed him, that he always preserved a strong sense of the dignity, the beauty, and the necessity of virtue, and that he never contributed deliberately to spread corruption amongst mankind. (Ibid., 380)

As a man who, in spite of bitter experience and his own failure, made it his business to study mankind, and always retained a love for it, Savage is, says Johnson, to be admired:

> The knowledge of life was indeed his chief attainment; and it is not without some satisfaction that I can produce the suffrage of Savage in favour of human nature, of which he never appeared to entertain such odious ideas as some, who perhaps had neither his judgment nor experience, have published, either in ostentation of their sagacity, vindication of their crimes, or gratification of their malice. (Ibid., 430)

The value of this biography lies not only in the account of a man who loved virtue not wisely but too well. It is indeed a portrait "of a city on a human scale,"[20] and as such it throws light upon Johnson's attitude to those involved in Savage's pitiable career. The villain of the piece, the Countess of Macclesfield, is condemned in a fashion rarely equalled by any biographer, all the more remarkable because she was still living in 1744, the year in which Savage's biography was published.

Richard Steele, in Johnson's opinion a bad influence at a crucial period in Savage's young manhood, emerges as a telling example of a man of much benevolence but little beneficence, although Johnson spares Steele from severe censure because of Savage's insufferable behaviour towards him. Nevertheless, it is clear from the disproportionate space given to him that his behaviour illustrates for Johnson the dangerous consequences of making promises rather than fulfilling responsible

commitments to an individual in need. Although promises may for a time please, in the end they disappoint all the more if not fulfilled.

By contrast, Johnson does not stint his praise of persons who genuinely helped his friend. They range from Mrs. Lloyd, Savage's godmother, who "always looked upon him with that tenderness, which the barbarity of his mother made peculiarly necessary" (ibid., 325), to Mr. Dagg, his gaoler who paid for his burial. Johnson celebrates such modest people because, in his opinion, they exemplify behaviour worthy of imitation and record. For this reason even the actor Robert Wilks is praised, in spite of Johnson's well-known antipathy to the acting profession, an antipathy he does not hide in the paragraph describing Wilks's qualities.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of this biography is the total honesty of its author. Throughout, as Johnson mentions the persons who contributed to, or detracted from, the well-being of his friend, his purpose is twofold. He treats them both as persons involved in the career of Savage and as individuals whose values to society the reader can assess for himself. The reader learns about more than the strangely moving fate of Savage: he sees how different members of society behaved to a fellow-human-being. Johnson leaves it up to his reader to profit from this description.

Compared to the vast complexity of Savage's

biography, that of the illustrious Boerhaave[21] is starkly simple. Literally the first of Johnson's biographies, it is a straightforward encomium upon an individual no longer alive, who satisfied Johnson's view of the individual in society. Educated for the Church but maliciously barred from pursuing an ecclesiastical career, he studied medicine, a profession which Johnson considers next in importance to the clergy in the service of mankind.

The balance of this brief life portrays Boerhaave as altruistically committed to the society of his times. With the little data available to him, Johnson praises Boerhaave's human and social qualities and in a burst of enthusiasm concludes:

> 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! (Works, VI, 291)

Johnson's affection for the obscure Robert Levet is well known. Their relationship extended over thirty-six years and never ceased to intrigue Johnson's more respectable friends.

Apart from Boswell's judiciously restrained account of Levet's devotion to the sickly poor and a somewhat tardy obituary in the Gentlemen's Magazine, which emphasizes Levet's diligence and curiosity, no extant material defines his social merit except for Johnson's own tribute "On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet" (Yale Works, VI, 314-15). Careful analysis shows that it is the most

telling testimony of all.

Epitomizing the human condition in the first two lines, Johnson then considers the effect of losing one of "Our social comforts" (l. 4) in the death of his trusted friend. This is praise indeed, elaborated upon and justified in the balance of the work. The "merit unrefin'd" (l. 12) of Levet's character is described as

> Officious, innocent, sincere,
> Of ev'ry friendless name the friend.
> (ll. 7-8)

--all the more praiseworthy because Levet was "obscurely wise, and coarsely kind" (l. 10).

Levet's achievement as a physician is then considered:

> His vig'rous remedy display'd
> The power of art without the show.
> (ll. 15-16)

This is an oblique reference to Levet's medical knowledge acquired more through observation and experience (suggesting a genuine love for the ailing individual) than through academic training (such as it was in the eighteenth century, and such as Levet received), which seems always inclined to breed the arrogance of the medical profession. Rough and ready though his medical knowledge might have been,

> In misery's darkest caverns known,
> His useful care was ever nigh,
> Where hopeless anguish pour'd his groan,
> And lonely want retir'd to die.
> (ll. 17-20)

The spirit of Levet's devotion is next considered.

Always ready to answer any summons, he never kept a patient "by chill delay" (l. 21) nor rejected as an insult whatever might be offered him in payment. All he gained, therefore,

> The modest wants of ev'ry day,
> The toil of ev'ry day supplied.
> (ll. 23-24)

In the two lines following Johnson proclaims Levet's greatest worth:

> His virtues walk'd their narrow round,
> Nor made a pause, nor left a void.
> (ll. 25-26)

So devoted was he that "the busy day, the peaceful night" (l. 29) (peaceful because, in the pleasing consciousness of having done his best, Levet slept soundly), "Unfelt, uncounted, glided by" (l. 30). His sudden, painless death at the age of eighty deservedly "free'd his soul the nearest way" (l. 36).

In these thirty-six lines Johnson provides the most concise and persuasive illustration of one who more than fulfilled his role in society. Ironically, of the four individuals discussed in this chapter, the personality and worth of Robert Levet, as Johnson evaluated it, though the least documented, is yet the most convincing. The superiority of poetry as a literary form over that of prose (much as Johnson loved biography) is proven, incidentally, without question.

So, too, is the fact that all four individuals showed great courage in the face of the forces of the human

condition, for none retreated voluntarily from life. Furthermore, Frederick, Boerhaave, and Levet fully recognized and deliberately strove to satisfy the peculiar responsibilities of their stations in life.[22] All three were totally committed to a particular vocation which they pursued in, and for the sake of, society: in their spare time (little as Levet may have had), therefore, intellectual pleasures were theirs to study and enjoy. Because all achieved so nice a balance between performing their duties as individuals in society and satisfying their intellectual needs as creatures capaces rationis, they demonstrated the dignity of human nature and enjoyed whatever happiness in life is attainable.

These conclusions are substantiated by the closing paragraph of Adventurer No. 67 which provides, in as complete a form as is to be found in his writings, Johnson's view of the importance of society and of the need of all to contribute to and share in its conveniences and pleasures:

> To receive and to communicate assistance, constitutes the happiness of human life: man may indeed preserve his existence in solitude, but can enjoy it only in society: the greatest understanding of an individual, doomed to procure food and cloathing for himself, will barely supply him with expedients to keep off death from day to day; but as one of a large community performing only his share of the common business, he gains leisure for intellectual pleasures, and enjoys the happiness of reason and reflection. (Ad. 67)

The question of Savage's exclusion from the foregoing paragraphs is appropriately epitomized in Johnson's remark about free will: ". . . all theory is

against . . . all experience for it."[23] To judge from Johnson's complex attitude towards his friend, Savage's professions were in equal, or even greater accord with the views given in the concluding paragraph of Adventurer No. 67 than those suggested in the persons of Frederick, Boerhaave, or Levet. Savage's record, however (and for Johnson practice is the final criterion), tells another story. Thus, Savage, who "appeared to think himself born to be supported by others, and dispensed of all necessity of providing for himself" (Lives, II. 431), failed in one of his cardinal duties as a private individual. Yet Johnson's account implies Savage recognized and, to the best of his ability, fulfilled his duty as a poet and member of the republic of letters. If, therefore, notwithstanding his compassionate sentiments, Savage as a private individual too rarely helped others, as a poet he made every effort to compensate for this serious flaw. In Johnson's opinion, Savage, the author, ". . . has very little to fear from the strictest moral or religious censure" (ibid., 433), since his instructions were, in Johnson's judgment, unimpeachable. And yet, as even Johnson allows, Savage was an ineffective teacher of men because, owing to certain shortcomings in his technique, he failed to instruct by delighting. He was of course not, as later discussion will show, the only writer who failed to serve society in this fashion, but he was the only quixotic but weak-willed lover of virtue whom Johnson,

through his biography, made into a tragic hero.[24]

CHAPTER IV

JOHNSON'S VIEW OF THE WRITER'S ROLE IN SOCIETY

The foregoing chapter discussed Johnson's conviction that men at all levels have an obligation to contribute to society and to the benefit of others; in so doing, he held, men contribute to their own happiness, or such as is possible to them, and ultimately to their own salvation. Thus, Johnson's purpose in his writing is to lay down guidelines for men to meet their obligations as members of society and to achieve this purpose. He does this by advising them straightforwardly and giving his own judgment of how others have contributed.

While Chapter III attempted to examine the above-mentioned convictions, this purpose can only be gradually pursued. The first half of the chapter explored Johnson's primal insistence that every man must involve himself in life, both as a means of gaining greater knowledge and of keeping himself usefully busy, and that the only valid means of becoming and remaining so involved are commitment, consistency, and contentment.

These three means act as Johnson's points de départ to any consideration of either the individual's role in, or the establishment of, any vital society. The first of these two considerations is illustrated by Johnson's defence of the virtuoso, the second by the paradoxical nature of the society of the happy valley.

Johnson's support of the virtuoso's way of life is firmly based upon the belief that, though many a virtuoso may misdirect his abilities, few fail to satisfy these three prerequisites of living, even though only a few, perhaps, can be said to be involved in life. Because the virtuoso at least and in good faith attempts to add "by his industry to the hereditary aggregate of knowledge and happiness" (Ram. 129), Johnson argues that he deserves to be accepted by society.

The crucial defect of the happy-valley society is that the conditions upon which this society is based preclude commitment. Commitment implies a determination to resist stubbornly any interference encountered in the pursuit of a particular goal. Consistency is, partly because of this, if not impossible certainly discouraged in the happy valley, and the inhabitants pass their time in meaningless forms of revelry and merriment. It is also self-evident and indeed the entire intent of Johnson's account that no one in the happy valley is content, to the extent, at least, that no healthily vital person can be content with monotonous tranquillity.

The second part of the foregoing chapter examined Johnson's analyses of the failure by certain fictional characters to maintain their resolution to be involved in life and of the success by real persons who kept to this same resolution. In the course of this examination it became clear that, according to each individual's particular occupation and station, Johnson stressed specific rules of conduct as particularly relevant to each individual's occupation. Though Johnson emphasized that any occupation that can be useful to society is to be valued, he certainly conceded that some, such as those concerned with the pursuit of truth, are of more importance and require a greater moral awareness than may be reasonably expected of the bulk of mankind. Such occupations are particularly difficult to practise; consequently, for those engaged in them Johnson lays down a far greater number of specific guidelines. Thus, though Johnson held that every occupation has its particular usefulness, each has its peculiar degree of dignity, ranging from that of the manual labourer to that of an archbishop, who is responsible for the effective practice, by word and deed, of virtue. Much the same observation may be made of the innumerable precepts of Johnson's system of morality, each of which represents the practical exercise of a particular religious value. Though all are significant, some are more important than

others to the welfare of society and are more difficult to perform.

In order to establish the general contours of Johnson's view of authorship as a particularly significant occupation, this chapter focuses upon the ground rules Johnson prescribes for any writer, regardless of his ability or his rank in the republic of letters. It also considers Johnson's comments on the attractions and hazards of the profession and his warnings to any individual who, anxious to make his mark upon society as a writer, all too often comes face to face with the harsh realities of poverty and neglect.

The wealth of instruction and delight derived from knowledge alone is enormous and is limited only by two boundaries, adherence to truth and abstinence from vice. Thus, in Johnson's opinion, any writer, even the most obscure, who holds fast to the truth is potentially useful, and any writer, no matter how great his genius, who deviates from it is potentially vicious.

Wide as the spectrum suggested by these two boundaries may be, at its centre lies a problem which in its intricacy is as difficult to resolve as any Gordian Knot. While it is obvious that to be useful a writer must adhere to the truth, he must also present truth in a pleasing manner, else his effort, however commendable, will be of little avail. The opening paragraph of Rambler No. 3 states the problem unambiguously, while the second

paragraph points out the difficulty of effectively resolving the problem:

> The task of an author is, either to teach what is not known, or to recommend known truths, by his manner of adorning them; either to let new light in upon the mind, and open new scenes to the prospect, or to vary the dress and situation of common objects, so as to give them fresh grace and more powerful attractions, to spread such flowers over the regions through which the intellect has already made its progress, as may tempt it to return, and take a second view of things hastily passed over, or negligently regarded.
>
> Either of these labours is very difficult, because that they may not be fruitless, men must not only be persuaded of their errors, but reconciled to their guide; they must not only confess their ignorance, but, what is still less pleasing, must allow that he from whom they are to learn is more knowing than themselves. (Ram. 3)

Before he attempts to overcome his reader's pride, an author must first deal with his own, for otherwise his effort is simply a case of the blind leading the blind. Unfortunately the author, whose task by definition is to teach, is especially vulnerable to pride. This troubles Johnson, who points out that there is little more satisfying for an individual than to see his superiority over others acknowledged. Since authorship implies, of course, that the writer knows more of the topic than his reader, writing attracts many men proudly eager to prove their superiority. Thus, regardless of any innate--or illusory --abilities, Johnson insists that an author can only fulfil his role in society if he realizes and admits that, although he professes to teach, he is yet always a student himself. He must be a student of life, involved, that is to say, in life, but above all "He must first possess himself of the intellectual treasures which the diligence of

former ages has accumulated, and then endeavour to encrease them by his own collections" (Ram.154). Johnson believed that any author who refuses to accept this rule is doomed to failure, for not only do his readers find his pride apparent and offensive, they also see that he is no wiser than they are, and is therefore unqualified to teach them anything. On the other hand, the author who accepts the indispensable instruction he can get from writers of the past, may rest content that, however small his contribution to society may be (and certainly it will be less than he originally imagined), since it is founded in truth, it is useful, and therefore he has met the prime responsibility of his choice of life.

Johnson's obsession with the study of past writers appears very clearly in Rambler No. 154, which discusses and illustrates "The inefficacy of genius without learning."

The first example is the juvenile wit who presumptuously sees himself as an authority. He disdains learning, and relies upon his "unassisted genius and natural sagacity" (ibid.) as a sure means of gaining fame. This he achieves, but only from the narrow circle of fellow-wits. These men never leave their mutual admiration society because, Johnson explains, they know that if they did, their pride could no longer feed upon that acknowledged superiority which they so relish, even though they can enjoy it only for as long as another does not outshine them. Such behaviour, Johnson points out, would be morally

worthless but socially inoffensive were it not that "imagination and desire easily extend it [their acknowledged superiority] over the rest of mankind" (ibid.). In their blind vanity, such men become idle and bitter, all because they refuse to admit that superficial acuteness proves mere tinsel when tested against genuine learning. Thus, Johnson argues, they lead a life of inevitable futility and misery for themselves. Johnson, of course, points out that had they only swallowed their pride and studied the writings of the past, they might well have learned from it and made real use of their abilities. As it is, he concludes, they illustrate all too well Cicero's remark that "not to know what has been transacted in former times is to continue always a child" (ibid.).

The second example Johnson gives in this essay is that of the "philosopher scientist" who, likewise ignoring the work of his predecessors, yet stumbles upon some new discovery. Johnson argues that science makes slow advances and that, though a chance discovery may occur without knowledge of what has been done, one cannot depend upon making such discoveries. Even less, Johnson observes with an eye to moral considerations, can any happiness be expected from such "casual illustrations" since they in no way involve effort, so indispensable to any degree of happiness. Thus, Johnson concludes, such a philosopher scientist would be more meritorious if he would swallow his pride and build on what is known, a far surer way of exercising his genius

effectively and hence of fulfilling his duty to society.

The individual "whose genius qualifies him for great undertakings" (ibid.), but who omits to study the work of his predecessors, does so at his own risk. Without investigation of past records, Johnson warns, he may waste his time pondering over problems which have long been unriddled before him. He has tragically misused his genius, which could have been advantageously employed in the analysis of unsolved problems and an enlargement of mankind's existing knowledge.

Having proven his thesis and, no less importantly, shown how pride can so easily render genius useless, Johnson introduces, somewhat indirectly, his conclusion as he devotes one paragraph to defining the only means by which a writer may achieve meaningful fame:

> But though the study of books is necessary, it is not sufficient to constitute literary eminence. He that wishes to be counted among the benefactors of posterity, must add by his own toil to the acquisitions of his ancestors, and secure his memory from neglect by some valuable improvement. This can only be effected by looking out upon the wastes of the intellectual world, and extending the power of learning over regions yet undisciplined and barbarous; or by surveying more exactly her antient dominions, and driving ignorance from the fortresses and retreats where she skulks undetected and undisturbed. Every science has its difficulties which yet call for solution before we attempt new systems of knowledge; as every country has its forests and marshes, which it would be wise to cultivate and drain, before distant colonies are projected as a necessary discharge of the exuberance of inhabitants. (Ibid.)

If a writer has properly prepared himself and then proceeds to enlighten his readers, what effect may he hope to have on society? Adventurer No. 137 deals with this question in a broad manner. But it reflects one of Johnson's seminal attitudes and is, therefore, very important. Its ostensible purpose is to refute those

> . . . who affirm, that books have no influence upon the public, that no age was ever made better by its authors, and that to call upon mankind to correct their manners, is, like Xerxes, to scourge the wind or shackle the torrent.
>
> This opinion they pretend to support by unfailing experience. The world is full of fraud and corruption, rapine and malignity; interest is the ruling motive of mankind, and every one is endeavouring to increase his own stores of happiness by perpetual accumulation, without reflecting upon the numbers whom his superfluity condemns to want: in this state of things a book of morality is published, in which charity and benevolence are strongly enforced; and it is proved beyond opposition, that men are happy in proportion as they are virtuous, and rich as they are liberal. The book is applauded, and the author is preferred; he imagines his applause deserved, and receives consciousness of merit. Let us look again upon mankind: interest is still the ruling motive, and the world is yet full of fraud and corruption, malevolence and rapine. (Ad. 137)

For two reasons Johnson does not answer this argument directly. First, it originates in an erroneous attitude, since it fails to recognize that "the progress of reformation is gradual and silent" (ibid.). Second, in its generality, it demands too much of man.

Instead, Johnson makes the general assertion that without books "the wickedness that is now frequent would become universal" (ibid.). As without bread,

all mankind, rather than multitudes, would starve, so without books, all mankind would be deprived of knowledge; and in either case society would revert to a stage of savagery. This rationale leads Johnson to declare:

> The power, indeed, of every individual is small, and the consequence of his endeavours imperceptible in a general prospect of the world. Providence has given no man ability to do much, that something might be left for every man to do. The business of life is carried on by a general co-operation; in which the part of any single man can be no more distinguished, than the effect of a particular drop when the meadows are flooded by a summer shower: yet every drop increases the inundation, and every hand adds to the happiness or misery of mankind. (Ibid.)

Having thus proven that the writer is as essential to the moral well-being of society as is the farmer to its physical needs, Johnson considers certain facts related to the success a writer might enjoy, and the attitude he must hold in regard to the significance of any such success. The writer must realize, Johnson warns, that the "book which is read most, is read by few, compared with those that read it not; and of those few, the greater part peruse it with dispositions that very little favour their own improvement" (ibid.). Johnson warns any writer that he must not let success go to his head by supposing that what he proposes to teach is necessarily what his readers learn, if indeed it is their intention to learn anything at all. Johnson also points out that readers have different motivations in taking up a book,[1] motivations originating

often in the passions. Most frequently, however, a book is read for want of anything better to do:

> . . . the most general and prevalent reason of study, is the impossibility of finding another amusement equally cheap or constant, equally independent on the hour or the weather. He that wants money to follow the chace of pleasure through her yearly circuit, and is left at home when the gay world rolls to Bath or Tunbridge; he whose gout compells him to hear from his chamber, the rattle of chariots transporting happier beings to plays and assemblies, will be forced to seek in books a refuge from himself. (Ibid.)

Johnson does not, of course, consider such harmless amusement detrimental to society. Indeed, in his view, any author who provides innocent entertainment may duly qualify as a benefactor to mankind. As for the author who deals with more substantial matters, Johnson urges that he should bear in mind that study rarely

> . . . terminates in mere pastime. Books have always a secret influence on the understanding; we cannot at pleasure obliterate ideas; he that reads books of science, though without any fixed desire of improvement, will grow more knowing; he that entertains himself with moral or religious treatises, will imperceptibly advance in goodness; the ideas which are often offered to the mind, will at last find a lucky moment when it is disposed to receive them. (Ibid.)

Johnson next considers the service writers may render not to their readers directly but to mankind in general as disseminators of human knowledge. So confined is human knowledge, he argues, "that almost every understanding may by a diligent application of its powers hope to enlarge it" (ibid.). Johnson then goes on to suggest that, although ambition may urge otherwise, every author should deliberately aim to serve those readers whose "intellects

[are] correspondent to his own, to whom his expressions are familiar, and his thoughts congenial" (ibid.). Knowing the intellectual abilities of his particular reading public, an author can guide his readers along the path, worn as it may be, of truth, on a level appropriate to their understanding.

Johnson applies this argument to all members of the writing fraternity, even to those who, generally through lack of ability, cannot rise above its lowest ranks. Thus he defends these writers on the grounds that in catering to unsophisticated tastes, they provide a source of pleasure and instruction to readers whom other writers ignore. In Rambler No. 145 Johnson deplores the attacks of self-satisfied critics upon these slaves of the pen, protesting that such critics attack merely to satisfy their own intellectual pride; he accuses them of failing to practise "that tenderness and benevolence which by the privilege of their common nature one man may claim from another" (Ram. 145). As for those critics who focus upon the work of any particular writer in the group, Johnson remarks in Rambler No. 93: "I should think it cruelty to crush an insect who had provoked me only by buzzing in my ear." Yet, Johnson concludes in this same essay, he would not, as a matter of principle, suggest that any writer should be exempt from criticism:

> . . . he that writes may be considered as a kind of general challenger, whom everyone has a right to attack; since he quits the common rank of life, steps forward beyond the

lists, and offers his merit to the publick judgment. To commence author is to claim praise, and no man can justly aspire to honour, but at the hazard of disgrace. (Ram. 93)

This warning is significant. It hints at the professional hazards a writer faces, points out the uniqueness of his role, and allows Johnson to limit his argument to those who, willing or not, are committed to authorship as a choice of life. This restriction is all the more necessary for a period "stiled with great propriety The Age of Authors" (Ad.115) and so marked by "the itch of literary praise, that almost every man is an author, either in act or in purpose" (ibid.), and many women, no longer content with domestic duties, have transformed themselves into "Amazons of the pen" (ibid.). This, Johnson declares, is an unhealthy trend, both for the committed writer, who, like every man usefully pursuing a particular role, regards unqualified part-timers as intruders threatening the dignity of his profession, and for the smooth functioning of society, in which every man should devote himself to his particular choice of life for his own peace of mind and for society's benefit.

Johnson's interest lies in a speedy cure rather than in the cause of this intellectual malady. His first point is the most important:

Let it be deeply impressed and frequently recollected, that he who has not obtained the proper qualifications of an author, can have no excuse for the arrogance of writing, but the power of imparting to mankind something necessary to be known. A man uneducated and unlettered may sometimes start a useful thought, or make a lucky discovery, or obtain by chance some secret of nature, or some

intelligence of fact, of which the most enlightened mind may be ignorant, and which it is better to reveal, though by a rude and unskilful communication, than to lose for ever by suppressing it. (Ibid.)

This plea shows that in Johnson's system of moral utility the ends can justify the means. For any fully-fledged member of the writing society the means, however, are indispensable:

The first qualification of a writer is a perfect knowledge of the subject which he undertakes to treat, since we cannot teach what we do not know, nor can properly undertake to instruct others, while we are ourselves in want of instruction. The next requisite is, that he be master of the language in which he delivers his sentiments: if he treats of science and demonstration, that he has attained a stile clear, pure, nervous and expressive; if his topics be probable and persuasory, that he be able to recommend them by the superaddition of elegance and imagery, to display the colours of varied diction, and pour forth the music of modulated periods. (Ibid.)

To satisfy the first of these demands, Johnson goes on to explain, a writer must carefully examine, and extract the truth from, those works which have already been written on the subject. To master the language, he must be a diligent student of eminent authors, paying particular regard to their individual styles and modes of diction.

These requirements cannot, Johnson warns, be met by mere diligence: the individual must have an innate ability to absorb them. Furthermore, Johnson addresses all those who dabble in writing and sets down the qualifications with particular force to deter such dabblers from shocking "the learned ear with barbarism" (ibid.). This is apparent from the concluding paragraph of this Adventurer paper which points out: "No man is a rhetorician or philosopher by

chance" (ibid.). Those who foolishly presume to deny this must realize that their efforts are a waste of time both for themselves and their readers. They are justly condemnable because they are useless. Besides, indifference to style results finally in "the depravation of taste and the corruption of language" (ibid.), whatever hope or flattery may at first suggest.

In Adventurer No. 138, Johnson considers the difficulties a writer faces and the rewards he can expect in return for his efforts to instruct and entertain his fellowman. Johnson concedes that there are a happy few whose pens overflow with an abundance of ideas and sentiments. But he warns:

> Composition is, for the most part, an effort of slow diligence and steady perseverance, to which the mind is dragged by necessity or resolution, and from which the attention is every moment starting to more delightful amusements. (Ad. 138)

If this describes accurately an author's state of mind as he settles down at his desk, consider Johnson's account of an author's tension as he attempts to draw up a master-plan:

> It frequently happens, that a design which, when considered at a distance, gave flattering hopes of facility, mocks us in the execution with unexpected difficulties; the mind which, while it considered it in the gross, imagined itself amply furnished with materials, finds sometimes an unexpected barrenness and vacuity, and wonders whither all those ideas are vanished, which a little before seemed struggling for emission.
>
> Sometimes many thoughts present themselves; but so confused and unconnected, that they are not without difficulty reduced to method, or concatenated in a regular and dependent series: the mind falls at once into a labyrinth, of which neither the beginning nor end can be discovered, and toils and struggles without progress or extrication. (Ibid.)

Johnson goes on to remark that some scholars are

outstanding thinkers but lack an ability to express their thoughts in writing; others, gifted with an elegance of discourse, are void of original thought. And so it is, Johnson remarks, that

> . . . every man, whether he copies or invents, whether he delivers his own thoughts or those of another, has often found himself deficient in the power of expression, big with ideas which he could not utter, obliged to ransack his memory for terms adequate to his conceptions, and at last unable to impress upon his reader the image existing in his own mind. (Ibid.)

These are a writer's tribulations, Johnson says, to be suffered in solitude and endured in silence for the possible benefit of society. One of the most common distresses of these exquisite labours is

> . . . to be within a word of a happy period, to want only a single epithet to give amplification its full force, to require only a correspondent term in order to finish a paragraph with elegance and make one of its members answer to the other: but these deficiencies cannot always be supplied, and after long study and vexation, the passage is turned anew, and the web unwoven that was so nearly finished. (Ibid.)

Very rarely, moreover, does a completed work measure up to an author's expectations before giving birth to it, because

> . . . novelty always captivates the mind; as our thoughts rise fresh upon us, we readily believe them just and original, which, when the pleasure of production is over, we find to be mean and common, or borrowed from the works of others, and supplied by memory rather than invention. (Ibid.)

Johnson's point is that an author's judgment of his own work is unreliable. Only the public's final and inescapable opinion has validity. But the public's judgment is impaired by those few who "commonly constitute

the taste of the time" (ibid.). If mankind were left to respond from the depths of natural reactions, Johnson claims, the real worth of a writer would truthfully be established. Those writers who are able to express accurately human emotions would meet with spontaneous response from the reading public. There would be a "general consent arising from general conviction" (ibid.) But it is through the intervention of the writers who have the "authority to propagate their opinion" (ibid.) that a work becomes acclaimed or falls into obscurity. Johnson insists, therefore, that an author is totally dependent for his happiness upon the propagation of that judgment which, once established, is so seldom challenged. Regrettably for the writer, men are more inclined to believe a critic's censure than his praise.[2] But since

> . . . the world has sometimes passed an unjust sentence, he [the author] readily concludes the sentence unjust by which his performance is condemned; because some have been exalted above their merits by partiality, he is sure to ascribe the success of a rival, not to the merit of his work, but to the zeal of his patrons. (Ibid.)

Thus, Johnson points out, like all men, the author rationalizes human disapproval, whether it is expressed by one, by a group, or by society. But in principle, Johnson concludes, "as the author seems to share all the common miseries of life, he appears to partake likewise of its lenitives and abatements" (ibid.). It is only the peculiar nature of his work, the importance of his function in society, and the intricacy of his relationship

with society that distinguish his choice of life from any other.

This at least is the attitude in the last of Johnson's contributions to the Adventurer essays. Johnson's stance is particularly appropriate in the circumstances, in that it allows him to terminate his contributions to the paper with dignity. The essay is also a very honest statement, containing his essential view of the writer's lot. It is, however, incomplete, since it does not refer to the prospect of poverty which an author disappointed in his hopes has to face. Rambler No. 53 describes this threat as

> . . . nothing but gloom and melancholy; the mind and body suffer together; its miseries bring no alleviations; it is a state in which every virtue is obscured, and in which no conduct can avoid reproach; a state in which chearfulness is insensibility, and dejection sullenness, of which the hardships are without honour, and the labours without reward. (Ram. 53)

Poverty, Johnson knew all too well, makes immense demands upon a writer's integrity. Very rare is the writer who can resist the temptation to relieve his condition at the first opportunity. Poverty cultivates envy and interest and thus can poison honest and benevolent minds. Thus, threatened with the loss of self-regard, and suffering from dire need, the struggling author may sell his talents to the highest (or perhaps the first) bidder, whose views he must present in the most persuasive terms possible. If, Johnson insisted, those views are based upon corrupt

principles, the potential effect upon the writer and his readers will be detrimental. The writer may well become, and certainly deserves to become, an outcast of society once the corruption of his teachings, however unwillingly delivered, is recognized; moreover until this occurs, he will have encouraged vice amongst his readers.

To suffer poverty is also in Johnson's opinion, to experience its adjunct, neglect, "compared with which reproach, hatred, and opposition, are names of happiness; yet this worst, this meanest fate every man who dares to write has reason to fear" (Ram. 2). Neglect is dreadful because it annihilates all hopes of recognition, mocks a man's desire to be useful to others, and undermines the ego. It makes him gravitate towards writers suffering from the same condition. He finds within that circle a spirit which permeates (although for different reasons and in a disguised form) the inhabitants of the happy valley. It consists of men who, having striven to give themselves an identity, realize that their efforts are of no avail. They cannot, amongst themselves, exercise even their latent feelings of envy and rivalry, because they all secretly recognize the equality of their hollow condition. They envy and are denied the followship of more successful writers. Together they suffer in the knowledge that they have failed both their ambitions and their fellow-beings.

By far the most moving account of a writer's

struggles against poverty is that of Savage's life. Savage's background and character are, of course, unusual, so that his career is both an example and an exception. But if for the present purpose the exceptional aspects are disregarded, certain relevant facts to which, Johnson believed, all neglected writers may be subject, emerge.

Except for a brief period of relative prosperity (when, significantly, he wrote most of his best work), Savage suffered various degrees of poverty throughout his writing career. Apart from an unsuccessful theological poem written "in the utmost misery of want" (Lives, II, 330) at the age of eighteen (and of which he grew rapidly ashamed), Savage's earliest work, writes Johnson, consisted of two comedies and a tragedy. The first comedy, Johnson relates, brought no profit to Savage. The second comedy, which appeared two years later, was put on stage only towards the end of the season. It resulted, Johnson reports, in little more than the acquaintance of the questionable Sir Richard Steele and of Robert Wilks, to whom (though he was an actor) Johnson refers as a man of unusual virtues. Savage's tragedy, Johnson claims, was more successful; it brought him, ultimately, one hundred pounds and a measure of recognition. The conditions under which he wrote it were, however, according to Johnson, appalling:

> During a considerable part of the time in which he was employed upon this performance he was without lodging, and often without meat; nor had he any other

> conveniences for study than the fields or the street 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 the pen and ink, and write down what he had composed upon paper which he had picked up by accident.
>
> If the performance of a writer thus distressed is not perfect, its faults ought surely to be imputed to a cause very different from want of genius, and must rather excite pity than provoke censure. (Ibid., 338-39)

So, too, were the humiliations Savage suffered in the production itself. Since he lacked reputation, Johnson explains, Savage had to accede to the players' demands and, perhaps greatest of all professional humiliations, could do nothing to prevent Mr. Cibber from tampering with the text. Though lacking either ability or inclination to do so, Savage was forced to play the title role. At least, Johnson points out, the play helped Savage make the acquaintance of many who subsequently supported him with "accidental favours and uncertain patronage" (ibid., 356)--a fine description of a writer's dependence upon others--until he entered, thanks to Lord Tyrconnell's pension, "the golden part" (ibid., 358) of his life and of his productivity as a writer.

When Lord Tyrconnell withdrew his pension, Savage's decline into penury was inevitable. The pension he received from the Queen, though sufficient for most men, was not enough for Savage. Thus, Johnson reports, having recklessly expended his annual allowance, he lived for many months of the year in total poverty:

> He lodged as much by accident as he dined, and passed the night sometimes in mean houses, which are set open at night to any casual wanderers, sometimes in cellars, among the riot and filth of the meanest and most profligate of the rabble; and sometimes, when he had not money to support even the expenses of these receptacles, walked about the streets till he was weary, and lay down in the summer upon a bulk, or in the winter, with his associates in poverty, among the ashes of a glass-house.
>
> In this manner were passed those days and those nights which nature had enabled him to have employed in elevated speculations, useful studies, or pleasing conversation. On a bulk, in a cellar, or in a glass-house among thieves and beggars, was to be found the Author of The Wanderer, the man of exalted sentiments, extensive views, and curious observations; the man whose remarks on life might have assisted the statesman, whose ideas of virtue might have enlightened the moralist, whose eloquence might have influenced senates, and whose delicacy might have polished courts. (Ibid., 399) [3]

Extravagant as the concluding lines may be, Johnson's leitmotif is painfully clear. However tragic a figure Savage might appear, in Johnson's view, society was the greatest culprit--and sufferer. It prevented Savage from exercising or proving his immense potential as its benefactor. This is the silently pervasive thought underlying Johnson's concern for all struggling writers. He has boundless compassion for the individual of whose efforts and purpose he approves, and great sorrow over the potential loss to mankind represented in the unrecognized writer. In the case of Savage, Johnson believed the loss was apparent.

This chapter has provided, in very broad outline, Johnson's view of the harsh realities of the writing profession. It is not an encouraging view: if there is little in it to suggest that such a choice of life offers

any particular promise of happiness, it is equally apparent that, in Johnson's opinion, it offers an immense range of opportunities to render indispensable, though for the most part unexciting, services to society.

CHAPTER V

JOHNSON'S VIEW OF THE ROLE OF WRITERS FOR THE MOMENT: THE DRUDGES OF THE PEN

This brief chapter examines Johnson's attitude towards those writers, referred to in the concluding paragraph of the preceding chapter, who never leave, generally for lack of ability, sometimes for want of opportunity, the "second ranks" of the writing fraternity. Generally known, in Johnson's time, as hacks and as inhabitants of Grub Street, these writers are commonly anonymous in their lifetime and always forgotten by later generations. The nature of their material, their inability to deal with it other than superficially, or the particular character of the public they address, are three factors which contribute to their status as writers who have no "other claim to notice than that they catch hold on present curiosity, and gratify some accidental desire, or produce some temporary conveniency" (Id. 85). But, although their work may be neither original nor permanent, Johnson insists that their role in society can be useful because "The only end of writing is to enable the readers better to enjoy life, or better to endure it" (Works, VI, 66). Johnson so fervently believes in this dictum that he applies it to all classes of writers.

He grants that some are better able to satisfy it than others, but he dictatorially insists that no writer has any excuse to ignore it. If he does, he is useless. Nor must he abuse it by teaching, and delighting his readers with, the enticements of vice, for then he perverts his entire role and is a corrupter of society.

Johnson, in contrast to the attitudes of Swift and Pope, championed what he terms in Idler No. 85 "secondary writers." At first glance he seems to defend them out of mere benevolence, because they must endure those unpleasant realities which Johnson himself experienced in the early years of his career. A closer study, however, reveals that he defends them rather for the potential beneficence they may bestow upon society. His chief concern, therefore, is to define their duties as a specific group rather than praise the performance of any individual engaged in that group. He deals with them collectively also because secondary writers are anonymous. That he should deal with them at all, or at least with so much relative attention, is best explained by his belief that, if all the lower ranks of literature were filled by men able and willing to make the best use of their particular roles, the lower ranks of society would be happier, fed with innocent pleasures and useful information, and willing to recognize the peculiar dignity that belongs to the great republic of letters.

Throughout his career Johnson campaigned to prove the dignity of the writing profession, chiefly by defining the particular responsibilities that fall upon each of its ranks. The need for such a campaign, whatever its effectiveness may have been, was obvious when Johnson first launched it in the Rambler essays. Within the century, since, that is, the Civil War, both English society and the writer's relationship to it had undergone a radical change. Following the Restoration, the English nation once again displayed a distinctly social awareness, but the classical dictum that the writer's task was "to instruct and delight" stood unchallenged and, therefore, had to be adjusted to the new context.

The press as a social force was not yet born; printing was economically undeveloped. During the Commonwealth, Milton published his Areopagitica, in which he raised questions that were considered untraditional by his contemporaries, though they would hardly be considered avant-garde in Johnson's age. After 1688, however, writers became increasingly relevant not to the king's court (as hitherto) but to his ministers, who now acted more openly as independent politicians, rather than as servants of the king, while the latter, in the view of Alexandre Beljame at least, "no longer held absolute and unquestioned authority by the right of birth; his authority rested on the nation's confidence."[1] Politicians soon courted writers for their support and gave them new importance and prestige. No writer

could ignore the power of politics, although the truly creative ones did, in their greater works, transcend it. Thus, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, a new kind of professional writer was being born. Under the incentive of monetary reward the writer began to find a means of discarding the protective but rigid shell of the court, and integrating into an increasingly prosperous society.

Within a span of some forty-four years (1688-1732) the writer's public spread from the confines of the court to the coffee-houses, where the educated (though not necessarily aristocrats) of London gathered, and to the houses of the rising middle-class. The result appears in the emergence of the periodical press. Where there are buyers, there soon will be a market. This, surely, was the realization of all those, now forgotten, who tried to satisfy, and in doing so merely whetted, the demands of the new public by launching newsletters and distributing pamphlets or miscellanies. These entrepreneurs required copy for which they were willing to pay, even if meagerly. Their requirements were eagerly answered. Thus was born the would-be writer who, seeing the possibility of earning a livelihood in an apparently satisfying way, all too often offered or sold his talents to a Tory politician or, as Johnson might say, to the Whiggish devil himself. Grub Street became the mecca of all those who imagined they could live by the pen,

but who soon discovered, for the most part, that they were doomed instead to be depressed by poverty.

The writer fortunate enough to live by other means and thus able to cater to his readers' tastes, rather than to those of the entrepreneurs, soon found that he was addressing a changed audience. Vitally concerned with problems of the time, yet not necessarily engaged in politically deciding them, the thriving intellectual community was beginning to divert its interests. John Dryden's career illustrates this change dramatically. For more than the first half of his literary career, he depended upon court favour and remained an occasional writer. To cater to his public's tastes, he wrote plays which could be enjoyed by all, even by the barely literate portion of his court audience. Much of his poetry of those years is coloured by a similar intent to please his courtly audience. Absalom and Achitophel, in its treatment of a political situation, is nothing but highly polished propaganda. Many of his occasional poems are mere public relations on behalf of the patron, usually an influential member of the court. While his literary talent was clearly apparent even during that period, the restricted choice of material at court obstructed Dryden's genuis. It was not until the court's fetters gave way that he was able to undertake the crucial and most challenging part of his career, the translation of Virgil, which Pope called "the most noble

and spirited translation . . . in any language" (Lives, I, 449). Thus, it was the post-Restoration writer who, stimulated by the public's desire to improve in taste and elegance and freed from the restrictive patronage of the court, found sufficient opportunity to raise himself into the higher ranks of the republic of letters. But this new freedom did not remain unchallenged.

The period between Dryden's death and the appearance of the Spectator, during which the writing profession gradually found its feet, was clearly transitional. Satire became a widely practised and highly polished form of writing. Its chief virtuoso was Jonathan Swift who, during the early years of his literary career, was deeply suspicious of the rise of the hack writer, and used satire to fight a rear-guard action on behalf of the writer's traditional role. He saw Grub Street as a very real threat to the entire humanist tradition he held so dear. Swift's reactionary attitude to what he considered the potential degeneration of learning, as it evolved from a vocation to a profession, was one of anger and fear. Unlike Johnson, he despised and attacked the writer of Grub Street, whom he saw as nothing more than an upstart.

In his later years Swift did not publicly attack the hack writer, partly because he could hardly elaborate upon his attitude so forcefully expressed in A Tale of a Tub.[2] Another reason is purely historical. During the

transitional years in which A Tale of a Tub was composed and published, the Grub Street fraternity, like a swarm of bees, was still unsettled. By 1711 Steele had successfully launched the Spectator and previously the Tatler. These two periodicals, with their appeal to the middle-class reader, represented a new hope and haven to many ambitious writers. Henceforth the Grub Street writer had the means of serving a definable public. Not, of course, that the periodicals which followed the Tatler and the Spectator sustained those models' standards of grace and good taste, nor that all writers, "bad" either because of their lack of ability[3] or because of their unscrupulous values, found their way into print through periodicals of this nature. But at least the prestige of these leading periodicals gave the more gifted and dedicated writer a goal to strive for.

A generation later in 1728, Pope too attacked the Grub Street race in the first three books of The Dunciad.[4] He returned to the assault twelve years later when he published the fourth and concluding book of this original mock-epic, the underlying purpose of which was to demonstrate "the ultimate consequences for truth, morality, philosophy and religion in a world conquered by Dulness's provident grace."[5]

Pope all too complacently attributed inferior writing to necessity. Neither he nor any of his circle suffered

from want before gaining recognition. All had enjoyed early in their careers some form of patronage, belonged to some established profession or had had private means.[6] Their public was characterized by the same economic factor of affluence. Most of the leading writers in the age of Johnson, however, had served time as members of the Grub Street fraternity. This experience, together with the fact that they had passed their formative years at a time when social attitudes were changing so significantly, had a radical effect upon their view of the writer's role in society. The mystique surrounding the writer as a man outside society was destroyed. A new concept appropriate to the changed conditions had to be evolved, even though the point de départ, that the writer must still instruct and delight, remained. Thus, when the Rambler papers appeared in 1750, authorship was in a depressed, if not disreputable, condition. Without any living writer to dominate the scene, authorship was in danger of falling under the control of the printers, many of whom considered the writer's role merely one to make the trade prosperous.

Nothing daunted, Johnson devoted much thought to defining a useful relationship between each rank of the profession and society. He sought to give purpose and a sense of self-respect to even the lowliest of these ranks, whom he wished to preserve from the scorn Swift and Pope had in their arrogance so effectively encouraged in the

public's attitudes. In place of that tradition of scorn, he wanted the public to reconsider the value of each rank of the profession, which, however uncreative and unappealing it might be, Johnson claimed should be recognized at least as a potential source of useful information.[7] Thus, rigidly applying his argument that a man's worth must be estimated by his contribution to, rather than by his success in, society, Johnson devoted Rambler No. 145 to the cause of the Grub Street, or hack, writer.

He opens his argument by commenting upon society's attitude towards manual labourers who

> . . . must be content to fill up the lowest class of the commonwealth, to form the base of the pyramid of subordination, and lie buried in obscurity themselves, while they support all that is splendid, conspicuous, or exalted. (Ram. 145).

He comments that, though menial workers are not honoured, at least they receive payment for their services which society recognizes are indispensable. This, Johnson goes on to remark, is more than can be said of petty writers:

> . . . another race of beings equally obscure and equally indigent, who because their usefulness is less obvious to vulgar apprehensions, live unrewarded and die unpitied, and who have been long exposed to insult without a defender, and to censure without an apologist. (Ibid.)

Johnson's description of the mentality and drone-like routine of London's "drudges of the pen, the manufacturers of literature" (ibid.), has two principle objectives: to tell the truth of their condition, and to urge that in return for services rendered they deserve to be treated with the same

beneficence afforded manual labourers. In a word, Johnson contends, the most obscure writer can encourage the involvement in life so necessary to the welfare of men as individuals and to their value as participants in "the secret concatenation of society" (Ad. 67). Furthermore, Johnson argues, since "the Ephemerae of learning, have uses more adequate to the purposes of common life than more pompous and durable volumes" (Ram. 145), the public ought to admit its debt to those obscure authors that provide them.

As for

> . . . the abridger, compiler and translator, though their labours cannot be ranked with those of the diurnal historiographer, yet [they] must not be rashly doomed to annihilation. Every size of readers requires a genius of correspondent capacity; some delight in abstracts and epitomes because they want room in their memory for long details, and content themselves with effects, without enquiry after cases; some minds are overpowered by splendor of sentiment, as some eyes are offended by a glaring light; such will gladly contemplate an author in an humble imitation, as we look without pain upon the sun in the water. (Ibid.)

Thus, instead of reassuring authors that their work will always be of use to some segment, however small, of the public, in this essay Johnson urges the public to recognize that every author has his beneficiaries. He argues, too, that save for those who because they violate truth can only be regarded as ignominious, all writers should be regarded with greater kindness than they were hitherto. If they are not the unsung heroes of the day, they are the unsung servants of society.

In Idler No. 85 Johnson discusses the value of compilations, in which many hacks are engaged. He grants

thatthe worth of compilations, just as the effort required to produce them, varies. He remarks:

> When the treasures of ancient knowledge lye unexamined, and original authors are neglected and forgotten, compilers and plagiaries are encouraged, who give us again what we had before, and grow great by setting before us what our own sloth had hidden from our view. (Id. 85)

No compiler, Johnson insists, need be useless, because

> . . . he that recalls the attention of mankind to any part of learning which time has left behind it, may be truly said to advance the literature of his own age. As the manners of nations vary, new topicks of persuasion become necessary, and new combinations of imagery are produced; and he that can accommodate himself to the reigning taste, may always have readers who perhaps would not have looked upon better performances. (Ibid.)

To support his argument further, Johnson adds that to ignore secondary writers altogether would decimate the profession. Their volumes, although of no permanent value, may add variety to a library although he points out that there is a difference between variety and endless repetition of what has been said before. Finally, their influence for good or evil is minor and certainly brief so that, provided they "inform themselves before they attempt to inform others, and exert the little influence which they have for honest purposes" (ibid.), they should be treated decently. In order to eke out a living, after all, each one must first find favour with some segment of society, and can only honestly do so if he serves that segment with innocent pleasure or with interesting knowledge. This is the belief

motivating Johnson's willingness to support, so long as his conscience is unoffended, every guise of hack even, as Idler No. 7 proves, the newswriter.

If Johnson has no doubt that the newswriter's main function is to purvey general knowledge of the day, he has equally little doubt that few newswriters perform this function without error and that, far more disturbing, some abuse it appallingly. Johnson opens this essay by admitting that newswriters provide him, in his capacity as Mr. Idler, with one of his "principal amusements": more generally, he adds with a touch of satire, they are "necessary in a nation where much wealth produces much leisure, and one part of the people has nothing to do but to observe the lives and fortunes of the other" (Id. 7). They provide conversation pieces and help keep the idle from mischief (such as solitude may encourage) by drawing them into groups. The newspapers for which they write are, Johnson claims, the source of that superiority which makes all foreigners admit "that the knowledge of the common people of England is greater than that of any other vulgar" (ibid.). But whether their superiority is as beneficial as it is apparent, is another matter because, Johnson remarks,

> . . . it certainly fills the nation with superficial disputants; enables those to talk who were born to work; and affords information sufficient to elate vanity, and stiffen obstinacy, but too little to enlarge the mind into complete skill for full comprehension. (Ibid.)

The reason for these inconveniences is that most newswriters, in their greed for profit, appease the reader

rather than attempt to enrich him by broadening his knowledge. Moreover, they compete rather than co-operate with each other, and consequently newspapers are dully repetitive. If they collaborated upon reporting an event as it evolved, their work, Johnson suggests, would "vary a whole week with joy, anxiety, and conjecture" (ibid.).

If in Idler No. 7 Johnson shows a constrained acceptance of the newswriter, it is because he refers to their general record as peacetime historians of local events. In times of crisis, many a newswriter, Johnson declares in Idler No. 30, becomes the hireling of politicians. In wartime, when nations are "eager to hear something good of themselves and ill of the enemy" (Id. 30), the newswriter willingly supplies the desired material. He does not refrain from distorting the truth. In fact, he thrives upon and spreads "the falsehood which interest dictates and credulity encourages" (ibid.). Throwing truth to the wind, he becomes corrupt and, consequently, subversive to society. As Johnson concludes this essay:

> A peace will equally leave the warriour and relator of wars destitute of employment; and I know not whether more is to be dreaded from streets filled with soldiers accustomed to plunder, or from garrets filled with scribblers accustomed to lie. (Ibid.)

This is a very telling argument. It proves that, as for all hacks, the newswriter's influence upon society is decidedly temporary; his role, though useful, is

undeniably minor. It reminds the hack that whatever praise may be his due, or what notoriety he may acquire, is short-lived. Hopes of lasting fame prove ineffective against the pains of this obvious truth. All evidence reminds the hack that he writes only for the passing scene, and that only by fulfilling his role, drudgery though his duties may be, might he bear up with a measure of dignity to the harsh realities of his rank in the writing fraternity. Since Johnson knew from personal experience the poverty and neglect which threaten to destroy the drudge's spirit, it is understandable enough that he should contemplate the fate of his less talented confrères, amongst whom no doubt, were many men of worth, with compassion.

CHAPTER VI

JOHNSON'S VIEW OF THE ROLE OF WRITERS FOR POSTERITY

Introduction

For all Johnson's attempts to justify the hack writers' role in society, it is obvious that those efforts were strongly motivated by a genuine desire to lift up their spirits quite as much as to prove the significance of the republic of letters to society. Johnson's support for the drudges of the pen is based as much on human as on literary considerations because, by defining their usefulness, however transitory it may be, Johnson gave them a raison d'être as human beings and, as such, as members of society. Johnson's real concern is that hacks recognize, through the pall of their existence, that they do indeed have a function in society, and that by fulfilling that function to the best of their ability they, as much as those they serve, might perhaps be better able to endure and perhaps even enjoy life.

Unlike the hacks, most of the writers to be discussed in this chapter enjoyed, through the pleasure and instruction their various works afforded, a reputation in their lifetime, and they are remembered, or at least, in

Johnson's opinion, they deserve to be remembered, after their death. Johnson's immediate concern is that their writings should contribute to a reader's moral awareness; his ultimate concern reflects to what degree these writers contribute to the present and future stability of society by advancing the cause of virtue. If Johnson has any doubts on this score in regard to a specific work, he expresses his disapproval as bluntly as he expresses his approval of other writings, even those of the same author. His judgments, which range from outright condemnation to full-blown commendation, are based on such considerations as his estimate of the difficulty of, and his own empathy with, the literary genre in question; the writer's sense of responsibility towards, and success in exploiting, such potential merits of pleasurable usefulness as Johnson ascribes to each genre; and, above all, the enduring value to society of the specific performance in question.

This chapter falls into two parts. The first part deals with Johnson's evaluation of the writers of prose, who have made and in Johnson's view will, for better or worse, continue to make their mark on society, while the second part examines his view of the poet's contribution to society.

Writers in the Subordinate Art of Prose

Of the various genres of prose-writing, which Johnson regarded as a subordinate art (as opposed to the harmless drudgery of the dictionary-maker or the mere diligence required of the hack), that of the novel was the most foreign to his understanding.

The Novelist

The novel was a new genre, without any legitimate tradition (other than that of the heroic romances of the past) to prove its potential significance to the improvement of society. Consequently, with only the diametrically opposed examples of Richardson's and Fielding's works to choose between, Johnson naturally opted for Richardson's usage of this genre. In Johnson's opinion, Richardson taught well what was right, and, to do this with the genre in its infancy was, Johnson believed, sufficient reason to support his friend's work and to deplore Fielding's. Fielding had launched his literary career with what Johnson undoubtedly regarded as a distressingly acclaimed mockery of Pamela and had dealt a body-blow to Richardson's stature with the great success of later books. The source of Johnson's objections to Fielding's school lay in his conviction that Richardson had clearly demonstrated the value of the modern form of romance as a source of moral instruction.

Indeed, Johnson finds in Richardson's novels many commendable features which he specifies in the

opening paragraphs of Rambler No. 4, the famous paper in which he expounds his peculiar attitude towards what later was to take shape as the novel. Since "works of fiction" (such as Richardson's) "exhibit life in its true state," Johnson argues, they require a writer to have engaged in "general converse, and accurate observation of the living world" (Ram. 4) in addition to being a man of learning. Furthermore, Johnson goes on, they have unquestionable use, since they "are written chiefly to the young, the ignorant, and the idle, to whom they serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions into life" (ibid.). In fact, since the novelist is free to place his characters in predicaments familiar to any man, his account of their moral behaviour, as they face these situations, can be so effective as to leave an indelible impression upon the reader. Also, Johnson points out, writers of these "familiar histories" have within their grasp two unique opportunities to fulfil their role as teachers. First, though the material of their plots is life, they can eliminate much of life's chaos since they are free to particularize the context in which they place their characters. Second, since they do not pretend to present pictures of real individuals, they can choose the moral features of their characters. Thus they are at liberty, Johnson reasons, to portray individuals who, though they must be drawn as from the mass of

mankind, may yet stand as moral exempla of humanity. Such, in Johnson's opinion, are the chief advantages of modern fiction-writing.

Despite these advantages, however, the fiction writer, Johnson warns, faces certain problems and assumes grave responsibilities. The first problem is that of sustaining total accuracy. Since, Johnson argues, the novelist is "engaged in portraits of which every one knows the original" (ibid.), the slightest deviation from his original will at once be recognized and, quite rightfully, censured. He will stand accused of having failed as a reliable observer of human behaviour and of having contributed to the spread of falsehood.

The second problem involves a far more serious consideration. It relates to the harmful effect an author may have upon his young readers, whose inexperience of life is sufficient proof that they lack judgment and are extremely vulnerable to misleading instructions. Therefore, the novelist must always bear in mind the morally fragile nature of youth and very deliberately detect and delete from his writings any ambiguity of character such as may mislead "minds unfurnished with ideas, and . . . not fixed by principles" (ibid.). True, Johnson allows, to give an accurate account of life, the author cannot eliminate all evil from his narrative. But this is not to say, Johnson points out,

that he may celebrate promiscuity--even if such trait is indeed common among men:

> If the world be promiscuously described, I cannot see of what use it can be to read the account; or why it may not be as safe to turn the eye immediately upon mankind, as upon a mirror which shows all that presents itself without discrimination. (Ibid.)

If, Johnson argues, good and bad qualities are evenly intermingled in a character, and the villain is made likable through extenuating features of personal charm, then a young reader may become hopelessly confused about vice and virtue. He may identify his own weaknesses with those of the hero, and assume that they are amply atoned by his compensatory merits.

Johnson argues, therefore, that the novelist must give precedence to his role as a teacher over that as an imitator of nature. He must be able to judge what characters are fit for imitation and must construct his narrative with equal care, that it may consist of a chain of events, such as will provide for a context in which virtuous rather than vicious behaviour may unquestionably prevail; a plot, Johnson reasons, based upon an amoral "knowledge of the world will be found much more frequently to make men cunning than good" (ibid.).

As for writers who, believing that every virtue is balanced by a corresponding vice, argue that to divorce virtue from vice makes a mockery of imitation, Johnson says they make a fatal error. They disregard,

in his view, the gift of reason with which every reader can make an honest moral judgment if, that is, he is properly advised. These writers are pernicious because they "confound the colours of right and wrong, and instead of helping to settle their boundaries, mix them with so much art, that no common mind is able to disunite them" (ibid.).

Thus, Johnson sees no reason why the novelist, in the portrait of his hero, cannot depict "the highest and purest [idea of virtue] that humanity can reach" (ibid.). Vice, Johnson insists, should be shown, but it should always evoke feelings of disgust in the reader. That is, vice should be opposed to virtue as black is to white; Johnson permits no clair obscur in the author's attitude towards his characters, lest such subtlety or ambiguity might mislead his reader. Clearly Johnson has in mind the example of Tom Jones, the instant and enduring success of which lay chiefly in the appeal of its young hero, who emerges as a brave and generous, though highly vulnerable, character. Certainly, Johnson refused to admit, if in fact he did not fail to recognize, that Fielding's intent and satiric techniques were deliberately designed for moral instruction. If his objections to Fielding's success say little for the maturity of his readers, it must be remembered that, according to Johnson, those readers consisted chiefly of "the young, the ignorant, and the idle."

If, too, his objections to Fielding's handling of the genre were hotly contested even by Boswell, and for well over a century after Johnson's death contributed to the general misunderstanding of his stature as a critic, it must be remembered that, in considering the novel, Johnson places almost total emphasis on instruction because of the form's very close relationship to life and society. Furthermore, in Johnson's view the novelist must above all other writers always bear in mind the moral effect his work is likely to have upon his readers.

The Historian

Another category of modern prose writer for which Johnson had little understanding is that of the historian, whose purpose and matter are discussed in Rambler No. 122. Although simple narration may appear artless or easy, Johnson warns that it is dangerous for all but the most aware of writers to practise because

> . . . it often happens, that without designing either deceit or concealment, without ignorance of the fact, or unwillingness to disclose it, the relator fills the ear with empty sounds, harasses the attention with fruitless impatience, and disturbs the imagination by a tumult of events, without order of time, or train of consequence. (Ram. 122)

Unlike the philosopher, who must examine "the works

of omniscience" (ibid.), or the poet who, with great risk to his reputation, relies upon his imagination, Johnson goes on to say,

> . . . the happy historian has no other labour than of gathering what tradition pours down before him, or records treasure for his use. He has only the actions and designs of men like himself to conceive and to relate; he is not to form, but copy characters, and therefore is not blamed for the inconsistency of statesmen, the injustice of tyrants, or the cowardice of commanders. The difficulty of making variety consistent, or uniting probability with surprize, needs not to disturb him; the manners and actions of his personages are already fixed; his materials are provided and put into his hands, and he is at leisure to employ all his powers in arranging and displaying them. (Ibid.)

Johnson continues to explain that the public finds in historical accounts "no other use than chronological memorials, which necessity may sometimes require to be consulted, but which fright away curiosity and disgust delicacy" (ibid.).

Johnson then comments upon three British historians whose work he grants has transcended their times.[1] Sir Walter Raleigh's History of the World is laudable for its research and style, but Raleigh "endeavoured to exert his judgment more than his genius, to select facts, rather than adorn them and has produced an historical dissertation, but seldom risen to the majesty of history" (ibid.). Lord Clarendon[2] fares better. Despite Clarendon's unappealing style, Johnson commends "his knowledge of nature and of policy; the wisdom of his maxims, the justness of his reasonings, and the variety, distinctness, and strength of his characters" (ibid.). But Richard Knolles[3] is, in

Johnson's opinion, incontestably the best of England's historians. "His stile, though somewhat obscured by time, and sometimes vitiated by false wit," is, in Johnson's view, pleasing as is the manner with which he handles his material. But Knolles' work is unknown and Johnson adds, a source of grief to those few familiar with it, because his subject is "foreign and uninteresting" (ibid.). Very foolishly, therefore, Knolles "exposed himself to the danger of oblivion, by recounting enterprizes and revolutions, of which none desire to be informed" (ibid.). To Johnson, therefore, it is ridiculous to doubt

> . . . whether an Englishman can stop at that mediocrity of stile, or confine his mind to that even tenour of imagination, which narrative requires.
>
> . . . if we have failed in history, we can have failed only because history has not hitherto been diligently cultivated. (Ibid.)

If in Rambler No. 122 Johnson does not stress "the first qualification of an historian, the knowledge of the truth" (Id. 84), he more than makes up for not doing so in Idler No. 20. In this essay, inspired by the recent fall of Louisbourg into English hands, Johnson deplores that the accounts of that significant event by English and French contemporary historians differ so radically that they have only one factor in common, the vicious sacrifice of truth for falsehood, the immediate consequence of which is to spread distrust. "It is apparent," Johnson writes, "that men be social beings no longer than they believe each other" (Id.20), which is

why this distrust, he points out, threatens to undermine the whole fabric of society. That is indeed a frightening thought, but so is the fact, more relevant to the context of this chapter, of the long-term effects the practice of such propaganda (for that is really the issue Johnson is examining) has upon future historians. As Johnson points out, they necessarily must depend upon contemporaneous accounts to form their view and provide a just representation of any specific event.

To make the implications of both points clear, Johnson invents two opposing, but what he evidently considers typical, accounts of the battle of Louisbourg. One relates the capture of the fortress, as reported for English readers; the other excuses to French readers its fall. The effect of reading these two accounts consecutively is devastating. Truth is nowhere to be found because both accounts deliberately pander to "the inveterate prejudice and prevailing passions" (ibid.) of their respective readers. As for the effect of such accounts upon historians of the future, Johnson's point is, perish the thought, that if they only have propaganda of this sort to rely upon, how can they set the record straight? Little wonder that this essay was reprinted at least six times in other periodicals of the day or that Johnson was suspicious of this kind of historian.

Johnson also devoted Idler No. 65 to the general theme of history-writing, though his main concern in this essay is with a peculiar aspect of the topic. In the opening paragraph he warmly welcomes the posthumous publication of, and sequel to, Lord Clarendon's History of the Grand Rebellion, a recent literary event and obvious inspiration of this essay. Thanks to its elegance and truth, Johnson declares, "many doubtful facts . . . and many questions . . . may be determined by decisive authority" (Id. 65). Clarendon was actively and, Johnson dangerously assumes, impartially involved in the events he records. In Johnson's view, therefore, the merit of this volume, an original manuscript whose editor still remains unknown, lies in its potential usefulness.

Moreover, when Johnson thinks of the problems attending the publication of this long-delayed work, he turns to consider "the common fate of posthumous compositions" (ibid.). He deplores the policy, such as Swift, Pope, and others followed, of relying upon their survivors to publish material which they hesitated, for one reason or another, to publish in their lifetime. Johnson disapproves of this practice, pointing out not only how easily a manuscript may get lost but also that, should their self interest so dictate, those entrusted with the manuscript might either suppress its publication or, even more viciously, might only publish a manuscript

which very deliberately they have distorted so as to suit their own prejudices.

Nor does Johnson accept the practice of deliberately delaying publication of a valuable manuscript which a man may possess for the sake of enjoying the attention he will draw upon himself when or if at last he consents to publish it. To revel in such a feeling of power, Johnson argues, is inexcusable, since in the meantime the value of the manuscript is of no real worth either to the owner or to society. Furthermore, given the uncertainty of life, the manuscript might pass into the hands of some other man who, through negligence or ignorance, may discard it, little realizing that in doing so he performs a disservice to posterity.

Despite his general disapproval of an author delaying publication of any of his work in his own lifeime, Johnson allows in this same essay that the practice is not only permissible but indeed mandatory if the manuscript deals with material which the author records from personal experience: "He that writes the history of his own times, if he adheres steadily to the truth, will write that which his own times will not easily endure" (ibid.). In brief, the truth hurts, and why inflict pain upon living individuals? Once such individuals are deceased, the truth tests only their reputation. If that reputation is well earned, truth will not hurt it, whereas if it is ill deserved, truth will prove it so--and posterity will

be the wiser and healthier. That is why, Johnson declares, the historian of contemporaneous events "must be content to reposite his book till all private passions shall cease, and love and hate give way to curiosity" (ibid.).

As if disturbed lest an author misconstrue this emphasis upon the necessity of keeping to the truth by using it as an excuse not to write, let alone complete, a history of his days, Johnson warns that no one should set himself "such a degree of exactness as human diligence scarcely can attain" (ibid.). He cites, as modes of such excessive scruples, the examples of two learned men. Lloyd "was always hesitating and enquiring, raising objections and removing them, and waiting for clearer light and fuller discovery" (ibid.).[4] Baker "left his manuscripts to be buried in a library, because that was imperfect which could never be perfected" (ibid.).[5] Both set such high standards for themselves that, failing to publish, they short-changed posterity. By all means, Johnson remarks, the diligence of such learned men should be imitated, but he concludes:

> Let it be always remembered that life is short, that knowledge is endless, and that many doubts deserve not to be cleared. Let those whom nature and study have qualified to teach mankind, tell us what they have learned while they are yet able to tell it, and trust their reputation only to themselves. (Ibid.)

Let them, in other words, write the truth as far as their conscience allows them to perceive it. Posterity

will always revere and profit from such work.

The Critic--Editor

Even though it was his own chief literary concern, Johnson ranked criticism "among the subordinate or instrumental arts" (Ram. 208). The reason for his doing so is obvious: the critic examines the work of others rather than life itself. His responsibility is none the less great, since it is his duty "to hold out the light of reason, whatever it may discover; and to promulgate the determinations of truth, whatever she shall dictate" (Ram. 93). The critic who deliberately attempts to exercise his judgment by these criteria meets all that Johnson requires of him, though he recognizes it is well nigh impossible to achieve, let alone maintain, such high demands. In Rambler No. 92 Johnson defines the critic's duties:

> . . . the task of criticism [is] to establish principles, to improve opinion into knowledge, and to distinguish those means of pleasing which depend upon known causes and rational deduction, from the nameless and inexplicable elegancies which appeal wholly to the fancy, from which we feel delight, but know not how they produce it, and which may well be termed the enchantresses of the soul. Criticism reduces those regions of literature under the dominion of sciences, which have hitherto known only the anarchy of ignorance, the caprices of fancy, and the tyranny of prescription.

Thus, Johnson insists, the critic must recommend the works, or the parts thereof, which illustrate the principles of morality, add to the knowledge of life, and are therefore of pleasure and use to readers of the present and future. He must broadcast a writer's meritorious

opinions and praise the innocent pleasures a writer may record or provide in his style so that readers themselves may be informed of and free to pursue them. He must also detect and point out accounts of useless pleasures which, because they originate in the power of the fancy, "may well be termed the enchantresses of the soul."

In executing his responsibilities the critic must follow certain literary criteria which, in Rambler No. 156, Johnson divides into six distinct categories:

> Some are to be considered as fundamental and indispensable, others only as useful and convenient; some as dictated by reason and necessity, others as enacted by despotick antiquity; some as invincibly supported by their conformity to the order of nature and operations of the intellect; others as formed by accident, or instituted by example, and therefore always liable to dispute and alteration.

Just as Johnson recognizes that the critic should have the courage to question the validity of those rules "formed by accident or instituted by example" (Ram. 156), so does he insist that the critic must unquestionably attempt to perceive and pursue those "dictated by reason and necessity" (ibid.). He warns however that dutiful obedience to the afore-mentioned rules is fraught with danger. He argues that just as every political state undergoes a gradual process of deterioration and must be periodically regenerated by the principles of first constitution in order to survive, so are critics inadvertently influenced by "fancy and caprice" and are constantly prey to "error and confusion" (ibid.). This

the committed critic must carefully guard against by separating

> . . . the genuine shoots of consequential reasoning, which grow out of some radical postulate, from the branches which art has engrafted on it. The accidental prescriptions of authority, when time has procured them veneration, are often confounded with the laws of nature, and those rules are supposed coeval with reason, of which the first rise cannot be discovered. (Ibid.)

Thus, the critic should preserve and protect, in all their pristine beauty, those fundamental laws on which critical authority is based.

In Rambler No. 93 Johnson considers another important, though arduous, task. The critic must purge himself of prejudice, which is prone to cloud his power of judgment. While it is difficult, Johnson writes, to convince a man, through reason and argument, that he holds an erroneous opinion, it is impossible to make him accept that which he is determined to reject:

> In trusting therefore to the sentence of a critick, we are in danger not only from that vanity which exalts writers too often to the dignity of teaching what they are yet to learn, from that negligence which sometimes steals upon the most vigilant caution, and that fallibility to which the condition of nature has subjected every human understanding; but from a thousand extrinsick and accidental causes, from every thing which can excite kindness or malevolence, veneration or contempt. (Ram. 93)

Many well-meaning critics, Johnson continues, are not sufficiently informed of the material they pretend to examine. They echo the author, primarily because they lack the profound knowledge required to scrutinize and evaluate his work. Nevertheless, Johnson grants, they

render a service to society inasmuch as they at least preserve literary reputations. This may not be the service they intend, but it is the service they perform.

Johnson goes on to show, that a common frailty of the fraternity is editorial bigotry which is frequently born of self-interest or wounded pride. A critic may produce his work in the hope that his authors--at least those whom he recommends--will reward him with further assignments, or he may withhold his view in retaliation for having had his own original writings rejected.

Johnson then considers prejudices which, he says, are virtually impossible to overcome because they are innate in all of us. Thus, which critic, for example, would not incline to require higher standards from writers of a foreign nation than from those of his own country? Prejudices of this kind, he insists, are no disgrace; as an inescapable trait of human nature, they are unavoidable.

To argue that criticism should be frank but without censure, is, in Johnson's opinion, to emasculate criticism of its entire purpose, making it merely a confession of enforced politeness.

On the other hand, Johnson continues in this Rambler essay, overly severe criticism may needlessly hurt an innocent writer. A critic, therefore, should only probe relentlessly into the principles of those living authors, whose teachings will become guidelines for future generations, and whose errors--whether moral or literary--may otherwise be mistaken for truths.

Johnson requires no moderation of the critic who writes on authors no longer alive for, he says, frank and severe judgment cannot hurt them personally. Of course, it will befit the critic, in general, to retain such values as are already in common usage. If he decides to challenge established reputations--good or bad--he does so entirely at his own risk.

Before we consider "true" criticism, Rambler No. 176 merits brief attention. In the first part of this essay Johnson discusses the relationship between a sensitive, inexperienced author and a critic of recognized authority. The relationship is boldly stated: "The critic's purpose is to conquer, the author only hopes to escape" (Ram. 176), and both parties cut somewhat absurd figures. The author gains little of Johnson's sympathy because, generally speaking, he has made the writing profession his choice of life, and therefore should know and be prepared to withstand its hazards. If an author seeks critical opinion before publication, Johnson argues,

he must not complain if that opinion is brutally frank. He should listen in humble silence to his instructor. But once his work is published, Johnson says that a writer should, like a father defending his child, "overpower arrogance and repel brutality" (ibid.), since at that point humility and moderation will expose him only to further attack. Besides, Johnson points out, many critics fail to realize that there are no absolute standards for their profession:

> The eye of the intellect, like that of the body, is not equally perfect in all, nor equally adapted in any to all objects; the end of criticism is to supply its defects; rules are the instruments of mental vision, which may indeed assist our faculties when properly used, but produce confusion and obscurity by unskilful application. (Ibid.)

Some critics judge with a microscopic--others with a telescopic--eye. The former are the pedants, who cannot see beyond their noses, obsessed as they are with faulty minutiae. Johnson allows that their observations may be correct enough, but he warns that their vision is narrow and hence their critical perspective distorted. They do not teach how to appreciate the value of a work, such as may lie in

> . . . the justness of the design, the general spirit of the performance, the artifice of connection, or the harmony of the parts; they never conceive how small a proportion that which they are busy in contemplating bears to the whole, or how the petty inaccuracies with which they are offended, are absorbed and lost in general excellence. (Ibid.)

Those "furnished by criticism with a telescope"

(ibid.) also labour, according to Johnson, without useful purpose. They focus on details too far removed for the ordinary reader to perceive, but fail to discover the obvious matter closely before them. They

> . . . have no perception of the cogency of arguments, the force of pathetick sentiments, the various colours of diction, or the flowery embellishments of fancy; of all that engages the attention of others, they are totally insensible, while they pry into worlds of conjecture, and amuse themselves with phantoms in the clouds. (Ibid.)

To illustrate that "all can be criticks if they will" (Id. 60)--for everyone has a right to pass judgment--Johnson presents in the Idler essays Nos. 60 and 61 the telling example of Dick Minim.

This deliciously satirical portrait is as effective in its purpose as the Review of Jenyns' Inquiry, although its spirit is as light-hearted as the Review's is serious.

Dick emerges as ridiculous, useless (except as an example to be avoided), and harmless. Like the real Jenyns, he is wealthy, and therefore free to indulge his vanity by means for which he has no qualifications. Like Jenyns, who, according to Johnson, misinterpreted a derivative system of false metaphysics, Dick holds critical opinions in the coffee house garnered from "a few select writers, whose opinions he impressed upon his memory by unwearied diligence" (Id. 60). In Dick's case the result is ludicrous, since he expresses views (for the most part platitudes) which, because he

lacks judgment, or, more charitably, in his vanity does not exercise it, he fails to realize are also derivative. His only commitment is to his own reputation as a scintillating individual rather than as a critic, although this he presumes to be. Since he takes care to frequent only the coffee-houses and theatres where a critic is seen as a man of wit, he achieves his goal. He

> . . . advanced himself to the zenith of critical reputation; when he was in the pit, every eye in the boxes was fixed upon him, when he entered his coffee-house, he was surrounded by circles of candidates, who passed their noviciate of literature under his tuition; his opinion was asked by all who had no opinion of their own; and yet loved to debate and decide; and no composition was supposed to pass in safety to posterity till it had been secured by Minim's approbation. (Id. 61)

Thus did Dick establish a vulgar entourage of would-be critics. Indeed, everything about Dick--his background, opinions, behaviour and disciples--epitomizes vulgarity. This is one reason why, unlike Soames Jenyns', his example is harmless, even more so since he is a vocal critic, never committing his opinions to paper for others outside his circle of sycophants to read. Any intellectually aware man would at once see through Dick. Dick knows this, since he flees all challenge of his opinions.

The moral of this portrait is clear. Dick Minim is a fool, an intellectual coward. If he supposes himself content in his self-importance, it is only because his vanity allows him to forget how useless, and

therefore miserable, he really is.

Johnson's use of the portrait is also clear: it warns all those who may be tempted to emulate Dick Minim of the contempt they invite for themselves from those who recognize the dignity of true criticism. [6]

According to Johnson, Dryden was the first to introduce true criticism to England, a genre which, in Johnson's opinion, only Pope, with a somewhat different approach, practised with at least equal excellence. Significantly, both men in writing as true critics thought, in Johnson's judgment, poetically. In its purest form, Johnson explains in the account of the life of Dryden, criticism is concerned with "general precepts, which depend upon the nature of things and the structure of the human mind" (Lives, I, 413), rather than the qualities of specific literary works. In Johnson's opinion, Dryden's Essay on Dramatick Poetry, was "the first regular and valuable treatise on the art of writing" (ibid., 411) and is praised deliberately lest its seminal contribution to the pursuit of critical knowledge (which Johnson remarks has grown little since then) becomes, with the passage of time, unappreciated. But however much knowledge a work on general criticism may contain, that knowledge is useless, Johnson contends, if the manner of conveying it is not pleasing. For Johnson, Dryden's works of general criticism prove the point, for his

> . . . is the criticism of a poet; not a dull collection of theorems, nor a rude detection of faults, which perhaps the censor was not able to have committed; but a gay and vigorous dissertation, where delight is mingled with instruction, and where the author proves his right of judgement by his power of performance. (Ibid., 412)

Johnson evaluates the ultimate worth of general criticism by the delight of the path it cuts towards truth. This criticism is illustrated by Johnson's somewhat unfair, but useful, comparison between Dryden's prefaces and Thomas Rymer's discourses:

> With Dryden we are wandering in quest of Truth, whom we find, if we find her at all, drest in the graces of elegance; and if we miss her, the labour of the pursuit rewards itself: we are led only through fragrance and flowers. Rymer, without taking a nearer, takes a rougher way; every step is to be made through thorns and brambles, and Truth, if we meet her, appears repulsive by her mien and ungraceful by her habit. Dryden's criticism has the majesty of a queen; Rymer's has the ferocity of a tyrant. (Ibid., 413)

In his lavish praise of Dryden's essays of general criticism Johnson may have been motivated in part by the bitter truth that "Of an art universally practised, the first [modern] teacher is forgotten" (ibid., 411). In his treatment of Addison's criticism, Johnson may have been equally motivated by the fact that by 1780 it was generally condemned, in Johnson's words, "as tentative or experimental, rather than scientifick" (Lives, II, 145). Johnson does not refute this judgment, but he does question its fairness, insofar as, in his view, it distorts Addison's worth as a critic. In this capacity, Johnson points out, Addison deliberately catered to the

taste of his readers all the while attempting to raise their standards. Johnson's point seems to be that Addison's criticism has a far more direct bearing upon society than Pope's contemporaneous Essay on Criticism which, though Johnson regards it as unquestionably a far greater intellectual achievement, he surely recognized as of value chiefly to men of letters. Moreover, though posterity may be understandably blind to the social significance of Addison's criticism, Johnson believes that posterity must admit its enduring debt to Addison for the delight and instruction to be derived from the mastery of his prose style.

Determined, therefore, to champion Addison as a critic, Johnson declares that:

> It is not uncommon for those who have grown wise by the labours of others to add a little of their own, and overlook their masters. Addison is now despised by some who perhaps would never have seen his defects, but by the lights which he afforded them. That he always wrote as he would think it necessary to write now cannot be affirmed; his instructions were such as the character of his readers made proper. That general knowledge which now circulates in common talk was in his time rarely to be found. Men not professing learning were not ashamed of ignorance; and in the female world any acquaintance with books was distinguished only to be censured. His purpose was to infuse literary curiosity by gentle and unsuspected conveyance into the gay, the idle, and the wealthy; he therefore presented knowledge in the most alluring form, not lofty and austere, but accessible and familiar. When he shewed them their defects, he shewed them likewise that they might be easily supplied. His attempt succeeded; enquiry was awakened, and comprehension expanded. An emulation of intellectual elegance was excited, and from his time to our own life has been gradually exalted, and conversation purified and enlarged. (Ibid., 145-46)

Johnson insists that Addison's prose (the main

source of his powerful influence) must be recognized. No other style of writing, in Johnson's view, contributed as much to the improved elegance of the English language as Addison's:

> His prose is the model of the middle style; on grave subjects not formal, on light occasions not groveling; pure without scrupulosity, and exact without apparent elaboration; always equable and always easy, without glowing words or pointed sentences. Addison never deviates from his track to snatch a grace; he seeks no ambitious ornaments, and tries no hazardous innovations. His page is always luminous, but never blazes in unexpected splendour.
>
> . . . Whoever wishes to attain an English style, familiar but not coarse, and elegant but not ostentatious, must give his days and nights to the volumes of Addison. (Ibid., 149-50)

The general and particular principles governing Johnson's attitude to practical criticism are most apparent in the latter part of his Preface to Shakespeare, which discusses the work of those critics who, acting like Johnson himself in the capacity of editors of Shakespeare's plays, preceded him. Clearly, in his opinion, all of them share one shortcoming which, in his Proposals for Printing, by Subscription, the Dramatick Works of William Shakespeare, Johnson had remarked upon nine years earlier. They "have been so much employed on the correction of the text, that they have not sufficiently attended to the elucidation of passages obscured by accident of time" (Yale Works, VII, 56). Apart from this defect, which in the Preface he does not specifically refer to, Johnson insists that none of the editors he discusses "has left

Shakespeare without improvement, nor is there one to whom I have not been indebted for assistance and information" (ibid., 101). Whatever the defects of their individual efforts, Johnson respects them all because--to a greater or lesser degree--he claims they have all been useful.[7] Thus Nicholas Rowe, the first reviser of modern years, is praised by Johnson because "though he seems to have had no thought of corruption beyond the printer's errours, yet he has made many emendations" without "censures of the stupidity by which the faults were committed" (ibid.,93), a frequent and wasteful indulgence of certain of his successors.[8]

Johnson views Pope, the editor of Shakespeare, with both respect and impatience. Pope's revelation that Shakespeare's text was "extremely corrupt" (ibid., 94) and his method of collating hitherto ignored texts were, Johnson says, both indispensable services. The aggressive spirit with which Pope conducted his criticism, not to mention his contempt for his duties as an editor, Johnson finds deplorable and worthy of the following lecture:

> In perusing a corrupted piece, he [the editor] must have before him all possibilities of meaning, with all possibilities of expression. Such must be his comprehension of thought, and such his copiousness of language. Out of many readings possible, he must be able to select that which best suits with the state, opinions, and modes of language prevailing in every age, and with his authour's particular cast of thought, and turn of expression. Such must be his knowledge, and such his taste. Conjectural criticism demands more than humanity possesses,

and he that exercises it with most praise has very frequent need of indulgence. Let us now be told no more of the dull duty of an editor. (Ibid., 95)

For Lewis Theobald, Pope's successor, Johnson has qualified praise. He was "zealous for minute accuracy, and not negligent in pursuing it. He collated the ancient copies, and rectified many errors. A man so anxiously scrupulous might have been expected to do more, but what little he did was commonly right" (ibid., 95-96). Having sifted "the exuberant excrescence of his diction," Johnson retains a number of his notes but occasionally shows him "as he would have shown himself, for the reader's diversion, that the inflated emptiness of some notes may justify or excuse the contraction of the rest" (ibid., 96). Theobald's fate is hardly enviable. [9]

As Arthur Sherbo remarks, Johnson's comments on Sir Thomas Hanmer's work are "cautiously phrased." [10] Johnson grants that Hanmer possessed "the first requisite to emendatory criticism, that intuition by which the poet's intention is immediately discovered, and that dexterity of intellect which despatches its work by the easiest means" (ibid., 97).

Nevertheless, Johnson suggests, Hanmer did not fulfil his potential because he failed to question the work of Pope or Theobald and, what is worse, to acknowledge his debt to them. Such plagiarism, Johnson says, renders his edition of little value. Johnson includes Hanmer's

notes, for they alone are neither copied nor do they suffer from the casualness of the rest of his work.

Warburton's edition receives the briefest attention of all, partly because Johnson regards it as apparently worthless, and partly because he hesitates to attack too openly a contemporary--all the more so a cleric--who, in 1747, had so unwisely undertaken to edit Shakespeare. Yet Johnson includes that small portion of Warburton's work which, he considers, might be helpful to the reader; recognition of this sort speaks for itself.[11]

Johnson's attitude towards the duties of an editor is clear. So long as his prime purpose is to improve the text and thereby to make it more useful to the reader, an editor-critic works to proper ends and merits recognition. To succeed in this, Johnson maintains, the critic must strain his judgment of all personal prejudice, draw on his observation and experience even more than on his study of books, and apply all his imagination to the author's obscurities, expressing his insights in such a way as to convey them effectively to the reader. Above all, he must recognize errors, whether they be moral or literary, for then he helps clear the way to truth. It is not enough, however, to point out a writer's faults at the expense of his merits. Merit can never be justly ignored, for it is all too easily

forgotten.[12]

The Biographer--Autobiographer

Before Johnson championed biography in the Rambler essays, this genre, although belonging to the classical tradition, was scarcely considered an art. Until Johnson presented his theory, biography lacked any theoretical basis that would allow critics to argue over the merits and techniques of the form. The early Church Fathers had been the first to recognize the value of biography, but they used it only for hagiographical purposes. They

> . . . had little curiosity about the nature of their art. They knew what they had to do, and did it. Their purpose was edification. Their justification was the glory of God, through the praise of His Saints. . . . Personal appearance, family relationships . . . inner thoughts or occasional doubts, naturally had no place in the picture.[13]

Much the same attitude prevailed up to the seventeenth century, except that secular figures had replaced saints, and the mist of panegyric had replaced the mystique of hagiography. Churchmen, for the most part, remained the authors. "Let us now praise famous men" may be said to have become the overriding purpose. Enamoured with his subject's record, and determined to impress rather than to instruct his reader, the panegyrist celebrated extravagantly his hero's moral and intellectual strengths, not to mention his material achievements. The entire concept was a rationalization. Since the individual in question was exemplary (for otherwise his life would not be worth celebrating), the recording of his human frailties

could only detract from his fame or offend the reader. If revelation of such frailties had to be recorded, let them be excused or rendered vague. The presentation and technique remained simple: the panegyrist did not study a man, he presented a model.

Even Izaak Walton did not really question this premise; he ignored it. His biographical viewpoint was intensely personal. He treated his subjects as friends of mankind, as individuals who happened to have shown personal merit--not, significantly, vulgar greatness. Walton himself, as The Compleat Angler alone attests, was unpretentiously human. He attempted to provide sympathetic accounts of good, rather than impersonal documentaries of famous, men. The spirit of his biography was refreshing, yet the purpose remained largely unaltered. The Life of Dr. Donne, for example, sketches a real person engaged in the real context of every-day experience, even if it says little of Donne's frailties and failures to conquer his weaknesses. Walton's most appealing trait is his unpretentious admiration, one might even say affection, for his subjects as human beings. He writes as a human and of a human. Such an approach, in Johnson's view, makes for interesting reading.

Johnson championed biography, not merely because it was his favourite literary form, but also because he deplored the inert condition into which it had fallen. He

clearly recognized its potential usefulness. The following paragraph, the first in his study of Cowley, illustrates his attitude:

> The Life of Cowley, notwithstanding the penury of English biography, has been written by Dr. Sprat, an author whose pregnancy of imagination and elegance of language have deservedly set him high in the ranks of literature; but his zeal of friendship, or ambition of eloquence, has produced a funeral oration rather than a history: he has given the character, not the life of Cowley; for he writes with so little detail that scarcely any thing is distinctly known, but all is shewn confused and enlarged through the mist of panegyrick. (Lives, I, 1)

Although Johnson's theory was new to the eighteenth century, it was only in part original. As Boswell expresses it: "To the minute selection of characteristical circumstances, for which the ancients were remarkable, he added a philosophical research, and the most perspicuous and energetick language." [14] The "philosophical research," with which the present discussion is primarily concerned, led to Johnson's conviction that

> . . . no species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography, since none can be more delightful or more useful, none can more certainly enchain the heart by irresistible interest, or more widely diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition. (Ram. 60)

To succeed fully in his task the biographer must have very particular qualities and overcome practical difficulties, both of which Johnson discusses in Rambler No. 60.

The biographer may include in his account, Johnson says, such personal traits as "caprice, and vanity, and accident" may produce, but never at the cost of his basic

task, "to lead the thoughts into domestick privacies, and display the minute details of daily life, where exterior appendages are cast aside, and men excel each other only by prudence and by virtue" (ibid.). He must, that is, present the private and familiar character of one individual whose identity as a member of "the great republick of humanity" (Ram. 136) must not, however, be forgotten. From a moral viewpoint, Johnson argues, this record has enduring interest, because its readers, like its subject, are involved in life. It will be of perpetual use since it helps to "enlarge our science, or increase our virtue" (Ram. 60). It appeals to everybody, as it feeds the human imagination with parallels drawn between the hero's life and that of the reader. For the biographer himself, Johnson clearly believes, it is delightful to practise this art, for what can be more satisfying for him as he gathers his material than judiciously to read, learn, and inwardly digest the "important volume of human life" (Lives, II, 121)?

To do so successfully, however, as Idler No. 84 implies, is far more difficult for the biographer than for the autobiographer, which is why in this Idler essay Johnson explains his preference for the latter form over the former. Whereas, Johnson argues, the biographer "commonly dwells most upon conspicuous events . . . and endeavours to hide the man that he may produce a hero"

(Id. 84), the autobiographer knows that, behind all the power and glory of his elevated position in society, he "feels himself affected by fame or business but as they influence his domestick life" (ibid.). Somewhat naively assuming that the autobiographer will concentrate upon providing his readers with an impeccably honest account of these feelings, Johnson argues, on grounds similar to those given in Rambler No. 60, that such an account will have instructive value:

> The high and the low, as they have the same faculties and the same senses, have no less similitude in their pains and pleasures. The sensations are the same in all, tho' produced by very different occasions. The prince feels the same pain when an invader seizes a province, as the farmer when a thief drives away his cow. Men thus equal in themselves will appear equal in honest and impartial biography; and those whom fortune or nature place at the greatest distance may afford instruction to each other. (Ibid.)

Johnson next points out that the autobiographer has, unlike the biographer, at his disposal a first-hand knowledge of the truth and that

> . . . though it may be plausibly objected that his temptations to disguise it are equal to his opportunities of knowing it, yet I cannot but think that impartiality may be expected with equal confidence from him that relates the passages of his own life, as from him that delivers the transactions of another. (Ibid.)

Moreover, whereas the biographer must base much of his account upon his own conjectures which are so often coloured by his own passions, the autobiographer, precisely because he writes from and of personal experience, can deviate from the truth only "with reluctance of

understanding, and alarm of conscience; of understanding, the lover of truth; of conscience, the sentinel of virtue" (ibid.).

Finally, in this same Idler essay, Johnson contrasts the relationship of the biographer and the autobiographer to their material. The biographer's account, Johnson says, is necessarily coloured by his point of view. Depending, that is, upon the light in which he sees his subject, his account will be tinged with the panegyric born of affection or the censure that is an inevitable consequence of hostility. If personally indebted to his subject, swayed by patriotism, in agreement with any of his subject's particular opinions, or of the same political party, Johnson argues, the biographer will, even with the best of intentions, find difficult that adherence to unalloyed truth which alone cannot mislead his readers or those of posterity.

By contrast, since the autobiographer, Johnson asserts, has no motive other than self-love to deviate from the truth, he is little inclined to indulge in this frailty knowing that he does so at his peril. Thus, Johnson concludes,

> . . . he that sits down calmly and voluntarily to review his life for the admonition of posterity, or to amuse himself, and leaves this account unpublished, may be commonly presumed to tell truth, since falsehood cannot appease his mind, and fame will not be heard beyond the tomb. (Ibid.)

Such is Johnson's theory of autobiography.

In practice, the only author to have attempted it was Johnson himself, as the few pages of his Annales so effectively prove. In burning his private papers prior to his death, however, Johnson deprived posterity of a far greater treasure. True, Johnson cannot be accused of having failed to prove the courage of his convictions, since the deliberate destruction of these papers is sure proof that he wrote them neither for pleasure nor for the eyes of posterity. Yet, since some of them undoubtedly recorded the experiences of a moralist ceaselessly struggling to face the truth, the fact remains that, had they survived, posterity would have been the beneficiary.

The Moralist

General

Much as he credited the record of an individual's life as an effective source of moral instruction, Johnson laid even greater value upon the teachings of the moralist whose peculiar problem he discusses in Rambler No. 14. In this essay, Johnson points out how many of a moralist's admirers want to meet him, or at least learn about him, as a private individual, in the mistaken belief that they will thereby see human perfection. This, Johnson remarks, will be a mistake. Disillusioned to find that their hero does not practise so well what he preaches, his readers lose faith in, and even respect for, his doctrines.

This, of course, is an affront to the moralist's pride but, far worse, it contradicts his very purpose in society. Therefore, Johnson reasons, it is imperative that, like the oriental monarch, the moralist strictly keep himself out of the public eye; because "for many reasons" the moralist, like any man, "writes much better than he lives" (Ram. 14). He writes, instinctively, in solitude; he lives, necessarily, involved in life. Thus, as the moralist writes down his schemes of life, he speculates and "is only in danger of erroneous reasonings" (ibid.); his own passions are latent because of his solitude, while those of others exert no pressure. Once he breaks that solitude and becomes, as at last he must, again involved in life, he must contend with the pressures that men's passions, including his own, exert upon him. His behaviour becomes erratic and, for all the value of his speculative reasoning and observations of life, he proves that he is only another ordinary mortal.

According to Johnson, the moralist must not, however, lower his sights simply to appease the complaints of his doubting followers or to avoid being unjustly accused of hypocrisy by the "corrupt part of mankind" (ibid.)--the part he would particularly help. That is why, Johnson insists, the moralist must present in his writings "the idea of perfection" (ibid.), so as to provide a goal of reformation for himself quite as much as for his readers.

To satisfy this requirement, he can do no better than write down instructions designed to reach a goal based upon the correction of what, from personal observation and experience, he knows best: his own failings.[15]

But this is only half the task of one who, vulnerable as he is to the obvious but unreasonable charge of a conflict of interest between his life and his writings, must

> . . . take care lest he should hinder the efficacy of his own instructions. When he desires to gain the belief of others, he should shew that he believes himself; and when he teaches the fitness of virtue by his reasonings, he should, by his example, prove its possibility: Thus much at least may be required of him, that he shall not act worse than others because he writes better, nor imagine that, by the merit of his genius, he may claim indulgence beyond mortals of the lower classes, and be excused for want of prudence, or neglect of virtue. (Ibid.)

Johnson then offers his own very realistic attitude towards all those engaged in "moral endeavours":

> . . . having first set positive and absolute excellence before us, we may be pardoned though we sink down to humbler virtue, trying, however, to keep our point always in view, and struggling not to lose ground, though we cannot gain it. (Ibid.)

In view of this exacting standard, it is scarcely surprising that Johnson should be wary of writers who set themselves up as moralists. Johnson would clearly prefer that moral teaching be left to the clergy, were it not that few of the clergy know how to write persuasively. Furthermore, Johnson knew that the dignity of the clerical calling frequently precludes (or is taken as an excuse

for escape from) involvement in life and hence intimate knowledge of a purely practical and secular morality. Thus, when an author who knows how to delight undertakes to teach morality, in Johnson's view, he combines the most important of a writer's duties. He provides forceful guidance for issues central to man, while less able writers treat the same topics with tiresome solemnity in the form of axioms and definitions, which, Johnson believes, are ineffective methods of rhetoric. In Johnson's opinion, the great danger for an able writer is to be so confident of his persuasive abilities that pride gets the better of him, and rather than keep to the beaten track of known truths, he is tempted to teach new avenues. Convinced of his power of persuasion, he expounds on these "new" truths, even though he may not be able to explain any underlying principles. Inevitably, he spreads doctrines inimical to his readers' interests; and they, all too often unable to judge for themselves, may swallow his false teachings hook, line, and sinker. Naturally, Johnson, and others of his ilk, regarded it a duty to attack such writing by exposing its falseness and so putting an end to its influence.

An Example of the Irresponsible Moralist

A magnificent example of how Johnson dealt with such cases is his Review of Soame Jenyns' Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil.[16] Ironically, the

Inquiry would be long forgotten were it not for Johnson's Review, written immediately after its publication in 1757.

Two closely related reasons motivated Johnson's essay on the Inquiry. First, it was prompted by Jenyns' bold assumption that he could analyze that most delicate topic, the "Origin of Evil." Second, Jenyns' attitude infuriated Johnson, who judged that the author had displayed too much authority and arrogance in dealing with matters beyond human wisdom and too little consideration of the inherent weakness in man. Jenyns' contemporaneous reputation, together with the contents of the Inquiry, justify this complaint.[17] Furthermore, Jenyns was wealthy and hence unacquainted with many of those very evils of life to which poverty had exposed Johnson. For Jenyns to justify his indifference to such evils was, in Johnson's view, an act of the highest presumption.

Johnson opens his Review by pointing out the intellectual laxity apparent in each of the six letters which make up the Inquiry. The first ("On Evil in General") he dismisses out of hand, because the very point Jenyns sets out to prove he has already recognized in his opening paragraph. In the second ("On Evils of Imperfection") and third ("On Natural Evils") letters, Jenyns discusses the system of subordination which Pope had adopted from "the Arabian metaphysicians" (Works, VI, 49). Johnson complains that Jenyns presents a viciously narrow

definition of poverty. Worse yet, Johnson protests, Jenyns

> . . . has, at last, thought on a way, by which human sufferings may produce good effects. He imagines, that as we have not only animals for food, but choose some for our diversion, the same privilege may be allowed to some beings above us, who may deceive, torment or destroy us, for the ends, only, of their own pleasure or utility. (Ibid., 64)

Such a thesis arouses all the passionate intelligence that underlies Johnson's convictions. Intellectually, Johnson sets out to demolish the "Scale-of-Being" theory. Socially, he protests that Jenyns' view of poverty is inadmissible, and morally, he attacks Jenyns' arguments because, in his view, they are void of compassion and, because of their presumptuous absurdity, they border, in Johnson's opinion, on the profane.

Of the first part of the fourth letter ("On Moral Evil") Johnson exclaims, "Si sic omnia dixisset!" ibid. 71). He finds the subsequent pages of this letter are blameworthy only because they are full of self-deception. Both the fifth letter ("On Political Evils") and the last letter ("On Religious Evils") are dismissed as totally derivative.

Concluding the Review with a summary of complaints, Johnson argues that Jenyns' Inquiry is both useless and dangerous. It is useless, he says, because "instead of rising into the light of knowledge, we are devolved back into dark ignorance" (ibid., 75); it is dangerous because

Jenyns argues "that for the evils of life there is some good reason, and in confession, that the reason cannot be found" (ibid.). Furthermore, Johnson complains, the argument derives from foreign theories invalid to Christianity, even though Jenyns uses them to discuss a question of great relevance to the Christian believer.[18]

A Model of the Conscientious Moralist

Fortunately, not all secular writers fall prey to pride when they teach morality. That orthodox Christian believer, Joseph Addison, was one who, Johnson maintained, did not. To judge from Johnson's admiration for the Spectator papers, Addison was without doubt the most usefully influential figure in English letters. Johnson's admiration for Addison, the moralist, is all-embracing, primarily because so many of the principles Johnson insists all writers must follow and many of the duties they should perform are illustrated in, if not derived from, Addison's work.

Indeed, except that Johnson's stronger intellect and his more somber disposition make his vision deeper and more complex, the similarity between his record and Addison's would clearly be obvious. In a sense, this is not surprising. Addison was England's first prose-master of common life, and his influence was enormous, in great part because his readers instilled in their children the same social manners and moral attitudes Addison had so

gently taught.

From Johnson's account, Addison was uniquely fitted for his self-appointed task of moral reformer: "He had read with critical eyes the important volume of human life, and knew the heart of man from the depths of stratagem to the surface of affectation" (Lives, II, 121). Johnson finds in him, too, an innate wit, which, together with a deeply rooted piety, showed itself best in his humour. Without great intellectual ambitions or pretensions, he was content to be a moralist in the guise of a journalist--a contentment reflected in his political career of secretaryships. Addison's great strength, Johnson remarks, was his ability to think justly; his great weakness was that he thought faintly. But even this liability, Johnson asserts, proved an asset in disguise; since Addison did not attempt to consider matters beyond his depth or that of his readers, he did not lose sight of his moral buoys and, therefore, never led his public into dangerous or murky waters.[19]

In Johnson's view, the collection of characters in the Spectator was a particularly delightful, and therefore effectively instructive, feature. Addison's favourite, Johnson approvingly reports, amongst these characters was Sir Roger de Coverley, whose erratic but nonetheless moral behaviour Johnson finds particularly significant. Equally instructive, in Johnson's view, is

the ultimate beneficence of Sir Roger's foil, Sir Andrew Freeport, a man of the new breed of wealthy Whig merchants. Johnson's social conscience delights in observing how Sir Andrew ultimately proves himself a man of real charity.

In the closing paragraphs of his study Johnson assesses the various aspects of Addison's genius. After cautiously commending his poetry and translations, and after insisting upon his unappreciated significance as an immensely useful critic, Johnson considers the two seminal aspects of Addison's contributions to society:

> As a describer of life and manners he must be allowed to stand perhaps the first of the first rank. His humour, which, as Steele observes, is peculiar to himself, is so happily diffused as to give the grace of novelty to domestick scenes and daily occurrences. He never 'outsteps the modesty of nature,' nor raises merriment or wonder by the violation of truth. His figures neither divert by distortion, nor amaze by aggravation. He copies life with so much fidelity that he can be hardly said to invent; yet his exhibitions have an air so much original that it is difficult to suppose them not merely the product of imagination.
>
> As a teacher of wisdom he may be confidently followed. His religion has nothing in it enthusiastick or superstitious: he appears neither weakly credulous nor wantonly sceptical; his morality is neither dangerously lax, nor impracticably rigid. All the enchantment of fancy and all the cogency of argument are employed to recommend to the reader his real interest, the care of pleasing the Author of his being. Truth is shewn sometimes as the phantom of a vision, sometimes appears half-veiled in an allegory, sometimes attracts regard in the robes of fancy, and sometimes steps forth in the confidence of reason. She wears a thousand dresses, and in all is pleasing. (Ibid., 148)

Though it might be said that Johnson, only as a literary critic be it understood, sometimes behaved as

if he believed he could do no wrong but for just cause, such fulsome praise as he lavished on Addison was, in his view, founded on self-evident truth. Much of the praise, furthermore, remains valid because, though Addison's work may have been anathema to the romantics, yet his influence upon British mores is still acknowledged[20] and his literary style still admired. The pre-eminence Johnson gives to Addison both as England's first and foremost arbiter elegantarium and as a master prose stylist cannot be legitimately challenged. If Addison did not scan all the horizons of the human experience, as Johnson required of the poet, his examination of whatever fell within his view was, in Johnson's opinion, keen and useful. If his knowledge was not equal to that Johnson required of the poet, his understanding of what he knew struck Johnson as profound. If, as a prose writer, his mode of expression was not as intellectually demanding as the poet's, his mastery of that mode was unexcelled. If he did not aspire to be a poet, in Johnson's view, his aspiration to reform the manners and morals of his own and future times was both highly commendable and effective. Thus, though Johnson may have given a poet such as Pope greater stature, he surely considered Addison's imprint upon posterity equally indelible inasmuch as it improved the behaviour of man as a social being rather than as an animal capax rationis.

The Poets

Introduction

As the foregoing pages suggest, Johnson's overriding consideration in evaluating the work of any writer whom posterity regards (or in his view should regard) as its benefactor was, in terms of its moral usefulness, the importance of that writer's instructions and, in terms of the persuasive delight he affords, his effectiveness as a teacher of men. Since, in his view, no writer was potentially a more effective teacher or dealt with more seminal material than the poet, Johnson placed the poet in a category apart from and above all other writers. In attributing to the poet a special status Johnson was, of course, subscribing to a traditional view but since he was so obsessed with demonstrating the writer's, let alone the poet's, role in society, his purpose was more pragmatic and committed than that of, for example, Sir Philip Sydney. This is apparent in Johnson's only sustained piece of theoretical criticism, the "Dissertation on Poetry," enunciated through his embarrassingly obvious mask, Imlac.

The fact that Imlac is himself a poet gives added interest to the "Dissertation." For example, though Imlac admits his amazement over the undisputed supremacy of the classical poets, he justifies rather than challenges this view. He does so in order to make clear that,

throughout his subsequent commentary, he refers to the labours of only those poets determined to re-present rather than imitate life; to poets, that is, who believe like the Ancients that "the province of poetry is to describe Nature and Passion, which are always the same" and whose poetry shows, as does the Ancients', that they "are in possession of nature . . . excel in strength and invention . . . " (Ras. X, 526).

Thus, if Imlac's focus is so sharply narrow as to be tinctured with that idealism which later leads him to the brink of absurdity, it is in his view nevertheless justified because, he would argue, it is only such poets as these--and the Ancients' enduring reputation is proof enough--whose work will be eminently and enduringly useful to posterity.

As Imlac relates how he determined to add his own name to "this illustrious fraternity" (ibid., 526) and how, as a consequence, he delved into life with "a new purpose" (ibid., 527), he sets down the first of three specific beliefs:

> To a poet nothing can be useless. Whatever is beautiful, and whatever is dreadful, must be familiar to his imagination: he must be conversant with all that is awfully vast or elegantly little. The plants of the garden, the animals of the wood, the minerals of the earth, and meteors of the sky, must all concur to store his mind with inexhaustible variety: for every idea is useful for the inforcement or decoration of moral or religious truth; and he, who knows most, will have most power of diversifying his scenes, and of gratifying his reader with remote allusions and unexpected instruction. (Ibid.)

The "Dissertation" itself is little more than Imlac's commentary, at some points reckless, on the two principles by which a poet must abide if he hopes to provide posterity with a useful re-presentation of life. The first of these principles is that he must, like every other man, involve himself in life. The poet must do so, however, not merely for his own contentment but also because in this involvement lies the material with which he must prove himself an effective teacher of men. For the poet, the material consists first of a knowledge of nature from which he must selectively draw the images which will entrance his readers; and second, of an acquaintance with all aspects of life, from which he must draw the essence of his instruction. In regard to the first of these prerequisites, the problem is, as Imlac with some relish points out, that there is no end to a knowledge of nature. The poet's attention must, therefore, be ever-expanding. That is why Imlac declares:

> The business of a poet . . . is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances: he does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades in the verdure of the forest. He is to exhibit in his portraits of nature such prominent and striking features, as recal the original to every mind; and must neglect the minuter discriminations, which one may have remarked, and another have neglected, for those characteristicks which are alike obvious to vigilance and carelessness. (Ras. X)

In requiring additionally that the poet be

familiar with all aspects of life so that he might consider right and wrong in their abstracted and invariable state and transmit his new insights clearly and persuasively to posterity, Imlac demands of the poet intellectual powers beyond the reach of any man. As he elaborates upon his thesis, it is evident that Imlac forgets, as Johnson never did, that the poet is yet a man, subject to the frailties of his nature, the limitations of time and space and, indeed, of the human mind. It is for this reason and at this point that Johnson, ever the realist, quietly parts company with his mouthpiece, who in his enthusiasm implies that unless the poet meets all that is required of him, he will fail in his task.

Further evidence, if not proof, that Imlac is indeed speaking of an ideal poet lies in the fact that, having already exceeded the bounds of reasonableness, Imlac throws in, as if by way of an afterthought, another labour, that the poet must be as learned as he is knowledgeable, as diligent in cultivating a style worthy of his thoughts as in familiarizing himself with all the techniques of his art. Though, in Johnson's view, this concern is for the poet as essential as that of involvement in life, it is certain that, if Rasselas had not stopped him in his tracks, Imlac would have continued to sketch out demands fit only for the ideal poet.

The Writer of Minor Genres of Poetry

The Pastoral

While it is certainly necessary to recognize that Johnson coated Imlac's commentary with a satiric gloss, it is equally necessary to realize that the basic criteria laid down in the "Dissertation" constitute the touchstone by which Johnson evaluated all poetic performances. That, of course, is why he denounced the modern form of the pastoral. In his view, pastorals are easy because they "require no experience, and, exhibiting only the simple operation of unmingled passions, admit no subtle reasoning or deep enquiry" (Lives, III, 224). They are vulgar because, for all but the beginning poet to write them is, in Johnson's opinion, an inexcusable abuse of talent, while to read them is, for any man familiar with real life, a disgusting thought. A man involved in life, Johnson asserts, "sickens at the mention of the crook, the pipe, the sheep, and the kids" (ibid., 356). Of course, if such an intelligent reader, moved by the Guardian's praise of Ambrose Philips' Pastorals as, in Johnson's words, "one of the four genuine productions of the rustick Muse" (ibid., 324), should peruse these particular poems, Johnson slightly changes his tune. Caught on the horns of a dilemma between his own dislike of the form and his respect for so reliable a guide as the Guardian, he concedes that Philips' Pastorals may have some merit.

That is, of course but faint praise, for Johnson's real opinion is that to write a pastoral is an abuse of genius, while to read one is an abuse of time.

The Georgick

If Johnson is not openly hostile, he certainly shows little enthusiasm for other genres of poetry which, though distinct from the pastoral form, have as their chief theme the observation of mere nature. Somewhat grudgingly, for instance, Johnson recognizes that James Thomson's The Seasons moves its reader, but because it was not the author's purpose to teach or to make his reader think morally, the work is, in Johnson's view, of little use.

The Churchyard Poem

His opinion of Gray's Elegy is similar. Bowing to popular judgment, he concedes that its universal appeal is sufficient proof of its worth as a source of pleasure. Trying to attribute to it more meaningful worth, Johnson finds great merit in four specific stanzas in which, he says, Gray has successfully made new notions familiar, but apart from this passage he finds little real worth in the work.

The Topographical Poem

One might expect Johnson to treat Pope's Windsor Forest in much the same way, allowing for the fact that, by the light of public (and Johnson's) judgment, this

descriptive poem enjoyed no special rank in the Popean canon. However, being as strongly prejudiced in favour of Pope as he was averse to Gray, Johnson's view is irresolute. For example, he praises Windsor Forest for its "variety and elegance, and the art of interchanging description, narrative, and morality" (ibid., 225), but, in the same paragraph, he deplores Pope's use of two unnatural fictions. Some pages further, he praises this same work as a poem of "Imagination, which strongly impresses on the writer's mind and enables him to convey to the reader the various forms of nature, incidents of life, and energies of passion" (ibid., 247), surely evidence of its power to instruct and delight.

Two Contrasting Examples of Unfulfilled Genius in Poetry

The Lives of the English Poets clearly reflect the contours of those moral and social convictions which underlie Johnson's view of poetry such as he considered indispensable for the progress and well-being of society. Included in that collection are two lengthy studies of Richard Savage and Abraham Cowley, neither of whom Johnson proclaims a great poet, though both, he infers, possessed potential greatness. In his view, Cowley dissipated his genius on useless topics, while Savage, because of "negligence and irregularity long continued" (Lives, II, 434), discredited his genius. It is Johnson's

verdict that both failed to benefit society, although for radically different reasons.

No two studies in the entire collection stand in greater contrast, or together provide better examples of what might well be termed unfulfilled genius. Johnson seems to be unintentionally trying to show how little the two poets had in common. Both, in their views of poetry and in their reputations, differed widely. Cowley was eminent in his lifetime, and his mode of versification, if not much of his work, remained influential long after his death. Savage was generally neglected and, despite Johnson's high praise, remained so. Cowley was an actively committed member of society; Savage, who possessed brilliant conversational powers, which Cowley lacked, was an outsider from first to last and was buried in an unmarked grave. Cowley grew up in a society confidently monarchical, lived through the chaos of the Civil War, and died lamented by Charles II. Savage lived in the relative calm of the early eighteenth century, when literature was forming a relationship with the "common reader." Whereas, in Johnson's opinion, the cardinal flaw of Cowley's poetry was the vacuity of its content, the redeeming virtue of Savage's work was its intended moral and social relevance. Cowley's greatest strength lay in technical versatility: he tried his hand at every poetical form; Savage's weakness remained in his

unpolished style and unvarying sentiments.

Johnson's account of the life of Cowley consists of three distinct sections. The first of these, a slender supplement to Dr. Sprat's biography, is particularly significant to this study in that it presents Cowley, despite his lifelong desire for retirement, as an admirable member of society. Johnson's authority was Dr. Sprat, whose high esteem for Cowley had never been seriously challenged either "by envy or by faction" (ibid., I, 18).

The second section, in which Cowley's achievement is evaluated in the context of other "Metaphysical Poets," Johnson himself considered "the best of the whole collection."[21] Boswell, though he clearly misunderstood Johnson's reason for this opinion, subsequently remarked that the dissertation "discovered to us, as it were, a new planet in the poetical hemisphere."[22] Johnson's whole intention was to prove that such a new planet has no place in the poetical, however rightfully and brilliantly it may shine in the intellectual, hemisphere. Except for two paragraphs which acknowledge the accidental merits of "great labour directed by great abilities" (ibid., 21), Johnson evaluated the metaphysicals' criteria and attitudes by his own standards, to demonstrate thereby the uselessness of their poetry and, through such uselessness, the preclusion of genuine delight.[23]

Johnson's task was not difficult because the metaphysicals transgressed or ignored so many of the precepts he considered essential to the attitude of a poet. The entire commentary is remarkably negative, from the start even questioning whether the metaphysicals can be properly treated as "makers of fiction":

> If the father of criticism has rightly denominated poetry . . . an imitative art, these writers will without great wrong lose their right to the name of poets, for they cannot be said to have imitated any thing: they neither copied nature nor life; neither painted the forms of matter nor represented the operations of intellect. (Ibid., 19)

Johnson even questions their reputations as wits, arguing that they "certainly never attained nor ever sought" (ibid.) wit as described (albeit, in Johnson's opinion, erroneously) by Pope; nor does Johnson allow them to have satisfied the "more noble and more adequate conception" (ibid.) that he himself offers. Their wit was "a kind of discordia concors, a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike" (ibid., 20). Johnson's point is that the brilliance of such wit invites admiration but does not bring pleasure; the display of learning that underlies it may be impressive enough, but the tediousness of unravelling its subtlety is rarely worth the effort.

The passage, which considers the attitudes of these writers and demonstrates what results when "heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together" (ibid.).

is particularly significant because, like a photographic negative, it outlines in an inverse form the chief contours of what Johnson always requires of poetry.

In examining Cowley in the third section "as the last of that race [of metaphysical poets] and undoubtedly the best" (ibid., 35), Johnson makes practical application of the objections just referred to. Although he complains that the content of Cowley's poetry is useless, he acknowledges fully Cowley's virtuosity as a mere maker of verses. He deplores, however, Cowley's failure to make proper use of his gifts and the fact that he "whatever was his subject, seems to have been carried by a kind of destiny to the light and the familiar" (ibid., 46). Cowley is therefore faulted because, rather than making the study of life his subject, he preferred to display his learning; rather than seeking to give delight from his matter to all readers, he sought only praise for his performance from a narrow circle of admirers. Thus, because of his indifference, he failed to transcend his times. Yet, as a poet of indisputable genius, in Johnson's opinion, Cowley rendered an indispensable service to English letters and so, indirectly, to society for, without his daringly original verse-making, Dryden would have had no model. Besides, Johnson grants that Cowley himself

> . . . was the first who imparted to English numbers the enthusiasm of the greater ode, and the gaiety of the less;

> that he was equally qualified for spritely sallies and for lofty flights; that he was among those who freed translation from servility, and, instead of following his author at a distance, walked by his side; and that if he left versification yet improvable, he left likewise from time to time such specimens of excellence as enabled succeeding poets to improve it. (Ibid., 64-65)

If in Cowley's works Johnson finds wasted genius, in Savage's he discovers "genius truly poetical" (Lives, II, 433) applied to the propagation of virtue and, most significantly, a thematic content founded upon an immense knowledge of life. Johnson highly commends The Wanderer because it "can provide no other purposes than those of virtue" (ibid., 366). Johnson casts aside as irrelevant its technical defects, although he recognizes that they have been universally, and largely with justice, criticized.

Johnson praises The Bastard as "a poem remarkable for the vivacious sallies of thought in the beginning, . . . and the pathetick sentiments at the end" (ibid., 377). Moreover, it appeals to him because, by exposing the heinous Countess of Macclesfield, it served a strangely useful purpose: at Bath, Johnson reports, she could not enter the assembly rooms or cross the walks without being saluted with some lines from The Bastard. Though Johnson grants that Of Public Spirit with Regard to Public Works met with no success at all, it receives an inordinately lengthy commentary, in which Johnson, except for one long paragraph of unexpected and even over-subtle irony,[24]

continues the pavan-like tone that informs his account of Savage's other poems.

From a purely critical viewpoint, Johnson's entire presentation of Savage's poetic gifts is injudicious. In the present context it would also be irrelevant, were it not that it bears all the trappings of an idealization. Savage emerges, in terms of the intention of his work, as Johnson's idéal manquée of the poet in society.

That intention and performance are two different objectives, Johnson would be the first to insist. Johnson never questions, though he may deplore, the fact that at no time were Savage's performances good enough to attract public attention--ample proof that in reality he contributed nothing to society.

As for Cowley, though he enjoyed success in his lifetime, he had no moral influence, since he sought merely to delight. After his death, Johnson explains, his poems were generally, and deservedly, neglected, except by poets who valued them as technical performances. Johnson concludes, therefore, that Cowley's influence was more literary than social; the most eminent of his youthful admirers was none other than Dryden, the greatest genius, in Johnson's considered opinion, of all the "moderns."

The Writer of Occasional Poems

As the founder of modern poetic techniques, as

the translator of Virgil, and as "the father of English criticism" (Lives, I, 410), Dryden performed immensely significant services. However, each of these services is, in Johnson's opinion, extraneous to the fundamental task of a poet: to create original poetry of perpetually relevant and morally instructive content, which persuades through delight. From this point of view, Johnson believes that Dryden, like Cowley, fell far short because the vast bulk of his original poetry is occasional, celebrating certain public events or some individual of rank and wealth whose favour Dryden hoped to gain. Writing on some public event merely arouses Johnson's impatience, its generic shortcomings being so apparent to him. Composed to order, it is denied that freedom of subject matter so indispensable to any poet. It forbids revision, since it "must be dispatched while conversation is yet busy and admiration yet fresh" (ibid., 424). Finally, in Johnson's opinion, it is of little use, because as a source of pleasing instruction its material depends upon a particular and narrow context which, in time, must become obscure and certainly irrelevant to general nature.

The common abuse of the dedicatory form was of enough concern to Johnson to have discussed it, some thirty years before he considered it specifically as part of Dryden's poetic record, in Rambler No. 136. The

opening paragraphs of this essay point out that in celebrating the virtues of a distinguished individual, a writer sets himself a task which he should execute

> . . . with the most vigilant caution and scrupulous justice; to deliver examples to posterity, and to regulate the opinion of future times, is no slight or trivial undertaking; nor is it easy to commit more atrocious treason against the great republick of humanity than by falsifying its records and misguiding its decrees. (Ram. 136)

To avoid such a charge, Johnson urges, the dedicatory writer must transcend his own interest and envy, and exercise only his moral judgment. His duty is "first to find a man of virtue, then to distinguish the distinct species and degree of his desert, and at last to pay him only the honours which he might justly claim" (ibid.). Johnson concedes that the dedicatory writer able to do this is rare; it is so much easier and potentially more profitable, Johnson remarks, to flatter a hero of the day than to celebrate a man of virtue who, precisely because his value lies in his conduct, lacks the superficial glamour of a successful individual and who, furthermore, may be unable to reward the writer financially.

Having vigorously deplored the degrading effect upon literature of reckless dedications, Johnson discusses the responsibilities of the dedicator and the object of his addresses. The dedicator, of course, must bear responsibility for the moral content of his work, but since the patronage he commonly seeks

in return is often the only means of relieving his miseries or of satisfying his ambitions, he cannot be condemned out of hand, it being society's attitude towards and treatment of him that forces him to resort to seek patronage. This is why Johnson does not entirely condemn the authors for lack of objectivity, but puts the major part of the blame on their patrons. Johnson argues that a patron seldom has any other motive than that of paying for some short-lived flattery. The praise he seeks, Johnson reasons, gives the patron no lasting gratification, for he wants virtues attributed to him that he knows he lacks; in his ignorance, he does not realize that to an intelligent observer praise of this sort is "satire and reproach" (ibid.).

Occasionally, Johnson concedes, an individual is a more-or-less unwitting recipient of a dedication. Sometimes, that is, an author, his book and dedication both completed, must search long and hard to find a person whom he can seduce into accepting and paying for prepared flattery. Johnson readily points out that morally conscientious persons refuse on the principle that to pay for personal praise represents a blatant act of falsehood. But even the wisest may, he grants, under the incessant pressure of a pleading author, succumb to the sweet fragrance of flattery.

Thus, Johnson argues, dedications solicited

meritoriously do have their proper place. Much depends upon the dedicator's motivation. For example an author may praise a patron who actively encouraged a particular undertaking or supported him while engaged in writing it; for the only motivation, then, is gratitude.

Rambler No. 136 elucidates Johnson's dislike of patronage, and clarifies, if clarification is needed, his attitude towards Lord Chesterfield, to whom he had, some four years earlier in 1747, addressed the Plan for a Dictionary of the English Language and to whom, in 1755, he sent his famous letter, commonly regarded as sounding the death-knell of the system of literary patronage. But above all, this Rambler essay throws indirect light upon Johnson's view of Dryden as the author of occasional poetry, because the evils of dedications, as they affected writers, are most apparent in the canon of Dryden's works. Thus, though Rambler No. 136 makes no reference to any specific writer, it may validly be suggested that Johnson had in mind Dryden's example when in this essay he so vigorously inveighed against the indiscriminate writing of dedications.

Dryden's perpetual poverty was a contributing factor to his writing so much occasional poetry. But the chief cause was more complex and concerns Dryden's relationship with, and attitude to, his society, as well as the very nature of his genius. Johnson discusses this relationship and attitude indirectly in the context of

Dryden's character and, in an even more implicit fashion, in reference to the content of his works. Dryden's dull conversation, his willingness to lavish praise, and his eagerness to accept it are for Johnson traits of peculiar significance. His taciturnity suggests to Johnson that Dryden was by nature a-social, except when in the company of the mighty and the great. The inevitable result was that he catered to, rather than tried to reform, the very depraved taste of the town. Thus, after complaining that Dryden's "works afford too many examples of dissolute licentiousness and abject adulation" (Lives, I, 398) Johnson declares:

> Of the mind that can trade in corruption, and can deliberately pollute itself with ideal wickedness for the sake of spreading the contagion in society, I wish not to conceal or excuse the depravity.--Such degradation of the dignity of genius, such abuse of superlative abilities, cannot be contemplated but with grief and indignation. What consolation can be had Dryden has afforded, by living to repent, and to testify his repentance.
>
> Of dramatick immorality he did not want examples among his predecessors, or companions among his contemporaries; but in the meanness and servility of hyperbolical adulation I know not whether, since the days in which the Roman emperors were deified, he has been ever equalled, except by Afra Behn in an address to Eleanor Gwyn. When once he has undertaken the task of praise he no longer retains shame in himself, nor supposes it in his patron. . . . He had all forms of excellence, intellectual and moral, combined in his mind, with endless variation; and when he had scattered on the hero of the day the golden shower of wit and virtue, he had ready for him, whom he wished to court on the morrow, new wit and virtue with another stamp. Of this kind of meanness he never seems to decline the practice, or lament the necessity: he considers the great as entitled to encomiastick homage, and brings praise rather as a tribute than a gift, more delighted with the fertility of his invention than mortified by the prostitution of his judgement. (Ibid., 398-400)

In part, this servility was due to Dryden's indolence. Although Johnson discusses this character trait only as it appears in the unevenness of Dryden's writings, Johnson obviously believed that it affected Dryden's entire attitude to his vocation. If he did not "hang loose upon society" (Lives, III, 180),[25] he made little deliberate effort to improve or correct it through the content of his original writings. He was too lethargic to do so, and only in the last years of his life, when society was on the brink of an obsessive moral awareness, did this intellectual lethargy work on his conscience. Yet lethargy was but one factor, because however alert his mind, Dryden had little insight into the primitive emotions of man's nature. Dryden's attitude, in Johnson's view, led to a distinct moral remoteness, which his love of ratiocination, as an easy means of escape, would further amplify:

> When once he engaged himself in disputation, thoughts flowed in on either side; he was now no longer at a loss: he had always objections and solutions at command: "verbaque provisam rem"--give him matter for his verse, and he finds without difficulty verse for his matter. (Lives, I, 459)

Dryden's lack of concern for, or unawareness of, his failure to help his readers is, according to Johnson, further manifest in his delight

> . . . in wild and daring sallies of sentiment, in the irregular and eccentric violence of wit. He delighted to tread upon the brink of meaning, where light and darkness begin to mingle; to approach the precipices of absurdity, and hover over the abyss of unideal vacancy. (Ibid., 460)

To indulge in such pleasures, which may well be regarded as the privilege of intellectual virtuosity, is, in Johnson's view, essentially selfish and certainly useless, brilliant as the execution may be. It is obvious to Johnson that though obscurity may be tantalizing, the ambiguity that so often is a part of obscurity is dangerous. Besides, such delights ignore the importance of enforcing moral truth.

More specifically, Johnson sees Dryden's attitude to his patrons and to his fellow-writers as another weakness. Dryden advertised his dissatisfaction with the former, and flaunted his hostility towards the latter. He relished discrediting his predecessors; one of his most disreputable relationships was that with Elkanah Settle, whom he was foolish enough, Johnson comments, to treat as a rival.

A principal cause for such lamentable behaviour, according to Johnson, was Dryden's egotism. Johnson recognizes that egotism is a very human trait, but he was convinced that few are content, and none has the right, to allow self-interest to neglect responsibilities as much as Dryden did. Clearly, Johnson believed, a greater awareness of his position in society might have changed the material of Dryden's original works, which then "might perhaps have contributed by pleasing instruction to rectify our opinions and purify our manners" (ibid., 386).

Of the longer poems Johnson says surprisingly little and that without enthusiasm. Though Absalom and Achitophel, a personal satire written in "support of publick principles" (ibid., 373), abounds in vigorous language, witty deprecation, and avid sentiment, it raised for Johnson the question of whether it is appropriate "to join the patriot with the poet" (Lives, III, 181). In its own day it became a bestseller, arousing passionate reactions. This is a dubious service, surely, since the purpose of satire is to correct behaviour rather than to provoke dissension. Technically, Johnson finds fault with inelegant lines, and structurally, he criticizes the length of the allegory (which one might suspect, he considers of questionable taste). The Medal, its companion piece, displays Dryden's genius equally well, but, Johnson remarks, imparts fewer pleasures to the reader. While Johnson concedes that it contains a good portion of skilful satire, he complains that its theme is restricted by the description of a single character. Religio Laici is, though its theme is "rather argumentative than poetical. . . . a composition of great excellence in its kind" (Lives, I, 442), but it is scarcely a rich source of delight and instruction. The Hind and the Panther, "an example of poetical ratiocination" (ibid., 446), similarly fails to make a useful contribution to society, according to Johnson. It presents the dilemma of religious

dissent through the account of a mischosen, irrelevant fable and analogy which must have been distasteful to Johnson.

The Translator in Verse

Sometimes, of course, an author's merits are self-apparent and his influence so pervasive that it cannot be denied. Such are the merits of Dryden as a translator. According to Johnson, Dryden was the first to master this modern art. It was chiefly through his translation of Virgil that Dryden "refined the language, improved the sentiments, and tuned the numbers of English Poetry" (ibid., 419) so fundamentally that he established the school of neoclassical, or modern poetry. This was, in Johnson's view, Dryden's most radical contribution to English letters, as is apparent from Johnson's account of the state of English poetry before his advent. Johnson allows that Waller and Denham paved the way for Dryden's reforms, but compared with the winds of change effected by Dryden, he considers their examples and efforts as but gentle breezes. Dryden, with a "mind very comprehensive by nature, and much enriched with acquired knowledge" (ibid., 457), wrote with unparalleled facility:

> Perhaps no nation ever produced a writer that enriched his language with such variety of models. . . . What was said of Rome, adorned by Augustus, may be applied by an easy metaphor to English poetry embellished by Dryden, 'lateritiam invenit, marmoream reliquit,' he found it

brick and he left it marble." (Ibid., 469)

Disciplining it with a new verse form and giving it a particular diction, Dryden snatched, Johnson maintains, English poetry (despite the rearguard influence of Cowley) from any "tendency to relapse to its former savageness" (ibid., 421). Dryden, in Johnson's perspective, ushered in an era in which poetry was to be written, as it had been in classical times, in accordance with unambiguous principles. He was, in Johnson's opinion, the first to give to English letters a new polish. English society thereafter boasted a school of clear-minded poets, a model of elegance, a virtually new source of instruction and delight, and an enticing means of preserving knowledge and pursuing the truth. Dryden's poetics laid the groundwork of English neoclassicism and cultivated, first in literature and later in society itself, "An establishment of regularity, and the introduction of propriety in word and thought" (ibid., 420).

The backbone of neoclassicism lay in the writings of the ancients, of whose work poetical translations had been first attempted with little success, in Johnson's opinion, by Ben Jonson and his followers. These translations were bound to be unsatisfactory before Dryden. Johnson explains:

> Those happy combinations of words which distinguish poetry from prose had been rarely attempted; we had few elegances of flowers of speech: the roses had not yet been plucked from the bramble or different colours had not been joined to enliven one another. (Ibid., 420)

Chief amongst Dryden's immediate precursors was Cowley. Johnson declares that, recognizing the sorry state of translation, Cowley "asserted his liberty and spread his wings so boldly that he left his authors" (ibid., 223). Johnson points out that in his youth, Dryden admired Cowley, and in his translation of Virgil he learned much from Denham.[26] But it was left, Johnson observes, to Dryden to set the rules of translation and to recognize and resolve its essential problems:

> When languages are formed upon different principles, it is impossible that the same modes of expression should always be elegant in both. While they run on together the closest translation may be considered as the best; but when they divaricate each must take its natural course. Where correspondence cannot be obtained it is necessary to be content with something equivalent. 'Translation therefore,' says Dryden, 'is not so loose as paraphrase, nor so close as metaphrase.'
>
> All polished languages have different styles: the concise, the diffuse, the lofty, and the humble. In the proper choice of style consists the resemblance which Dryden principally exacts from the translator. He is to exhibit his author's thoughts in such a dress of diction as the author would have given them, had his language been English: rugged magnificence is not to be softened; hyperbolical ostentation is not to be repressed, nor sententious affectation to have its points blunted. A translator is to be like his author: it is not his business to excel him. (Ibid., 422-23)[27]

Yet, Dryden's own performances as a translator did not, Johnson regretfully reports, at all times fulfil expectations, partly because of his peculiar disposition, and partly because he frequently worked out of necessity or in collaboration with others. However, his translation of Virgil, an author of peculiar difficulty, was, Johnson points out, a superb achievement, which

gained immediate and enduring recognition. Johnson acknowledges that the work is not without blemishes, but notwithstanding later versions by authors of reputation, it stands supreme:

> It is not by comparing line with line that the merit of great works is to be estimated, but by their general effects and ultimate result. It is easy to note a weak line, and write one more vigorous in its place; to find a happiness of expression in the original, and transplant it by force into the version: but what is given to the parts may be subducted from the whole, and the reader may be weary though the critick may commend. Works of imagination excel by their allurement and delight; by their power of attracting and detaining the attention. That book is good in vain which the reader throws away. He only is the master who keeps the mind in pleasing captivity; whose pages are perused with eagerness, and in hope of new pleasure are perused again; and whose conclusion is perceived with an eye of sorrow, such as the traveller casts upon departing day. (Ibid., 454)

A translator, of course, does not deal directly with the morals and manners of men. He may improve society to the extent that he exposes it to otherwise inaccessible knowledge, but personally, or at least directly, he is not concerned with the reform of human behaviour.

The Satirist

A far more morally directed genre is satirical poetry. Johnson looked upon and, indeed, practised satire with great caution. He was as familiar with its classical heritage as he was with its modern usage. Satire is a tool not unlike a scalpel. An irresponsible, unauthorized person may cause irreparable harm by using

it as a weapon to slash at whatever or whoever provokes him; while a responsible individual, properly skilled in the use of the instrument, may perform incomparable services by exposing human maladies which can then be remedied. Unfortunately, few writers succeed in this art, for it requires great knowledge of human nature, coupled with a high degree of self-control. The prerequisite is total commitment to avoid self-righteousness in passing judgment on human error. The need to obey these rules, wherein lies much of the satirist's art, is as great as the surgeon's need to exercise all his skill lest he should damage some vital nerve.

Such a modern analogy as the above is well sustained in the Dictionary, in which Johnson defines satire as "a poem in which wickedness or folly is censured," with the revealing caution that "Proper satire is distinguished, by the generality of its reflections, from a lampoon, which is aimed at a particular person; but they are too frequently confounded."

The entire section in the Dictionary referring to satire and its cognates confirms Johnson's aversion to "general satire"--that is to say, satire lacking the necessary discrimination. To that aversion of Johnson Mrs. Thrale alludes in a familiar observation.[28] In Johnson's view, even Pope, the greatest modern master of the genre, sometimes let his anger get

the better of his judgment, and in his zeal to amuse his reader, with a high-spirited censure of an individual's folly or wickedness, meanly attacked his victim. Although Johnson does not use the term, perhaps he considered a major problem for the satirist was to avoid bad taste.

One of the earliest, if minor, satires referred to in the Lives is Cowley's The Puritan and the Papist. From a strictly literary point of view Johnson apparently regards this work as without merit--to judge by the fact that he ignores the piece in his critique of Cowley's works. But from a morally instructive viewpoint, Johnson evidently values it because it clearly censures two deviating species of Christianity and deliberately directs the reader to general orthodoxy.

A more celebrated work, dealing with the same general topic of religious deviation, and a product of the same chaotic times, is Hudibras, which Johnson discusses at some length in his report on the life of Butler.

At its publication, Johnson reports, Hudibras had an immediate effect: " . . . the king quoted, the courtiers studied, and the whole party of royalists applauded it" (Lives, I, 204). Johnson admits that Butler's readers undoubtedly delighted in the poet's humorous treatment of "the sour solemnity, the sullen

superstition, the gloomy moroseness, and the stubborn scruples of the ancient Puritans" (ibid., 214). However, Johnson argues that to laugh at the Presbyterians' belief in astrology was unfair and, to readers of future generations, misleading, because this pseudo-science was very popular in those distressful times and was not, as Butler's work suggests, the particular folly of the Presbyterians. For Johnson, the crucial test, therefore, lies in the answers to two questions: how well does Hudibras serve society; and does it stand the test of time? It is in this context that Johnson next discusses Butler's treatment of his butt.

To ridicule Hudibras was, Johnson points out, acceptable to Butler's immediate readers because such a portrayal satisfied prejudices of the times. But, Johnson argues, to later readers, free of these particular prejudices, such an attitude on the author's part is meaningless if not discomforting. Johnson compares Cervantes' presentation of Don Quixote (Butler's model) with Butler's treatment of Hudibras:

> Cervantes had so much kindness for Don Quixote that, however he embarrasses him with absurd distresses, he gives him so much sense and virtue as may preserve our esteem: wherever he is or whatever he does he is made by matchless dexterity commonly ridiculous, but never contemptible.
>
> But for poor Hudibras, his poet had no tenderness: he chuses not that any pity should be shown or respect paid him. (Ibid., 210)

Thus, essentially, it is Butler's uncharitable

attitude towards his victim that disturbs Johnson.

With the perspective of time to aid him, Johnson elaborates upon this objection. To have portrayed the Presbyterian Hudibras as an incompetent soldier may have appealed to the prejudices of the time but, Johnson argues, such a portrayal was false, being inconsistent with that sect's military record. Butler, therefore, gave delight at the expense of truth. Johnson regards this as a very serious error, although he does not suggest that Butler committed it consciously. Perhaps Johnson considered Butler's inability to view objectively the events of the day sufficient reason for not placing him in the first rank of poets.

Another defect, according to Johnson, lies in monotony:

> . . . in the poem of Hudibras, as in the history of Thucidydes, there is more said than done. The scenes are too seldom changed, and the attention is tired with long conversation. . . . Some power of engaging the attention might have been added to it, by quicker reciprocation, by seasonable interruptions, by sudden questions, and by a nearer approach to dramatick spriteliness; without which fictitious speeches will always tire, however sparkling with sentences and however variegated with allusions. (Ibid., 211-12)

Despite these defects, however, Johnson sees in Hudibras such qualities as to make it more than a temporary poem. In fact, it "is one of those compositions of which a nation may justly boast, as the images which it exhibits are domestick, the sentiments unborrowed and unexpected, and the strain of diction original and

peculiar" (ibid., 209). As a source of practical knowledge, furthermore, it has, as Johnson remarked to Boswell, "a great deal of bullion in it which will always last"[29]-- an opinion which Johnson repeated in his study on Butler:

> He that merely makes a book from books may be useful, but can scarcely be great. Butler had not suffered life to glide beside him unseen or unobserved. He had watched with great diligence the operations of human nature and traced the effects of opinion, humour, interest, and passion. From such remarks proceeded that great number of sententious distichs which have passed into conversation, and are added as proverbial axioms to the general stock of practical knowledge. (Ibid., 213)

In the concluding paragraph of his study, Johnson views Hudibras as an example of the burlesque form, which

> consists in a disproportion between the style and the sentiments, or between the adventitious sentiments and the fundamental subject. It therefore, like all bodies compounded of heterogeneous parts, contains in it a principle of corruption. (Ibid., 218)

On these grounds he is unable to recommend the work:

> All disproportion is unnatural; and from what is unnatural we can derive only the pleasure which novelty produces. We admire it awhile as a strange thing; but, when it is no longer strange, we perceive its deformity. It is a kind of artifice, which by frequent repetition detects itself; and the reader, learning in time what he is to expect, lays down his book, as the spectator turns away from a second exhibition of those tricks, of which the only use is to shew that they can be played. (Ibid., 218)

Like a responsible censor judging, in the public interest, the social value of a controversial motion picture, Johnson is uncertain how to classify Hudibras. Despite its indisputably useful qualities, Johnson held that to condone deformity of any sort is to commend

deviation from nature. That, Johnson always refused to do. Perhaps in no other of his longer critiques is Johnson's driving determination to be just to the author and honest to his reader so apparent as in the discussion of Hudibras.

Johnson is clearly more at ease in his account of The Dispensary of Samuel Garth.[30] Like Hudibras, the poem dealt with contemporaneous passions and prejudices and, Johnson remarks, was received with widespread enthusiasm, notwithstanding its obvious technical weaknesses. Garth's moral awareness as a satirist receives Johnson's particular approval. The Dispensary

> was on the side of charity against the intrigues of interest, and of regular learning against licentious usurpation of medical authority: and was therefore naturally favoured by those who read and can judge of poetry. (Lives, II, 60)

One shortcoming of satirical poetry, as Johnson sees it, is that its subject matter is either of particular or of minor interest, and therefore its value as a source of moral instruction is somewhat limited. Most satirical poets, that is, seem to Johnson more intent upon delighting than upon instructing. Johnson was disturbed by the fact that satirists were inclined to disregard the moral effect on, and the unfairness of the treatment to, the object of their scorn. This bias might be taken as inherent to Johnson's view of the art of satiric poetry were it not that The Vanity of Human

Wishes, his own greatest example of the form, written admittedly in imitation of Juvenal's Tenth Satire, suggests otherwise. Johnson's stance in this work is far from merry, his purpose being to expose the folly that lies in human wishes and draw the necessary, or conventional, conclusions depending on each reader's point of view. Johnson is not willing, as Samuel Butler was, to entertain at the expense of accuracy, within the narrow context of temporality, or to focus upon one individual. Nor is there the slightest trace of arrogance, such as he deplored in Pope's character and discovered in much of Pope's satirical poetry. Johnson's essential purpose is to provide wholly instructive commentary, which his art and his peculiar brand of grim humour make persuasive. Of no other major satirical poet, in English literature at least, can this be said, which is one reason why, much as Johnson may commend satirical poetry for the delight it provides, he is essentially suspicious of the form.

Much of Johnson's confidence in evaluating the material examined in the foregoing discussions is attributable to two factors. First, he himself had written in all the forms, and, secondly, he measures each form by its potential, and every performance by its apparent effects upon the reader. Observation and experience, together with the principle of moral utility,

are the pivots of his critical opinions. By consequence, he gives relatively little attention to the aesthetic value of literary achievement. Yet in his discussion of The Dunciad, not to mention The Rape of the Lock or the great translations of Pope and Dryden, he clearly recognizes an experience which has very little to do directly with structured delight. The reader is overwhelmed (or he may be overwhelmed, if his sensibility is developed enough) by something that transcends any delight designed to influence him morally. Such works can transport the reader beyond the experience of common life into the realm of the sublime. But this experience is rare and, in relation to Johnson's usual criteria, irrelevant.

The Epic Writer

However, when Johnson examines Paradise Lost, he admits that its "end is to raise the thoughts above sublunary cares or pleasures" (Lives, I, 176). In Johnson's view, its beauties far outweigh its faults, but these beauties are not wholly literary, for many of them lie in the unique experience such a display of intellectual power provides.[31] The poem's faults, on the other hand, are, in Johnson's opinion, specific and ultimately attributable to Milton's pride rather than to any shortcoming in his genius.[32]

Unfortunately, for Johnson, the very aesthetic

beauty of the work is also its moral shortcoming, inasmuch as "it comprises neither human actions nor human manners" (ibid., 181). Although Johnson respectfully terms it an "inconvenience," this flaw, because it precludes any immediate response, infects, in his opinion, the entire worth of Paradise Lost as a source of delight and instruction. The concepts of Heaven and Hell, with which the narrative deals

> . . . are too important to be new: they have been taught to our infancy; they have mingled with our solitary thoughts and familiar conversation, and are habitually interwoven with the whole texture of life. Being therefore not new they raise no unaccustomed emotion in the mind: what we knew before we cannot learn; what is not unexpected, cannot surprise. (Ibid., 182)

Thus, even had Milton possessed the power to make such familiar truths new (and Johnson seems to think Milton erred in even attempting to renovate such sacred material), Johnson feels that Milton's subject matter made the work of little value as a source of effective instruction and, of course, Johnson uses the "agents" in the poem to prove his point. The weakest "of his agents are the highest and noblest of human beings, the original parents of mankind" (ibid., 176), he complains, while all the others are angels, whose concerns and attributes are totally divorced from man's. Insofar as this account does not help resolve man's problems of living well or better, Johnson concludes that it is useless.

Furthermore, Johnson complains, the passions of the angels, however judiciously presented, bear no relationship to human passions, and therefore can be no help in man's efforts to master his weaknesses. As for Adam and Eve before the Fall, Johnson comments:

> Their love is pure benevolence and mutual veneration; their repasts are without luxury and their diligence without toil. Their addresses to their Maker have little more than the voice of admiration and gratitude. Fruition left them nothing to ask, and innocence left them nothing to fear. (Ibid., 174)

Such an example, Johnson argues, is of no use to man, who finds it dull because, being ideal rather than realistic in terms of human conditions, it can arouse neither his imagination nor his interest.

At one specific point in his disjointed but highly acute discussion (the longest of any specific work in The Lives of the English Poets), Johnson qualifies his objection that Paradise Lost is void of human interest. Nothing is more typical of him than to remark:

> The short digressions at the beginning of the third, seventh, and ninth books might doubtless be spared; but superfluities so beautiful who would take away? Or who does not wish that the author of the Iliad had gratified succeeding ages with a little knowledge of himself? Perhaps no passages are more frequently or more attentively read than those extrinsick paragraphs; and, since the end

> of poetry is pleasure, that cannot be unpoetical with which all are pleased. (Ibid., 175)

In Johnson's opinion Milton wrote these passages, as nowhere else in the work, with "the freshness, raciness and energy of immediate observation" (ibid., 178). In Johnson's view, because they reflect the experience of a human being, they are of immediate interest; because that human being was the author of the only successful epic in English literature, they please. Finally, Johnson clearly considers these three passages are effectively instructive--as indeed is everything that is interesting--although not in the ambitious sense Milton supposed was to be found throughout Paradise Lost.

In presenting his major objection to Paradise Lost, Johnson's real target is not the shortcomings--so apparently outweighed by its merits--of the work itself but Milton's attitude towards his reader, a consideration that is totally removed from any appreciation of Milton's almost superhuman intellect. This argument is further substantiated by Johnson's feelings expressed in the biographical portions of his study.

Underlying the entire account of the life of Milton is Johnson's reverence for Milton's intellectual capacity coupled with his barely hidden dislike of Milton's pride in it, which his life of study did nothing to temper or educate. Johnson mentions, for example, how in emulation of the Roman writer Politian, Milton so pre-

tentiously dated his first composition. Such pride provokes Johnson to point out that the juvenalia of others, those of Cowley in particular, were indeed superior to Milton's, and that great promise in youth far from assures useful performance in maturity.

Johnson criticizes Milton's attitude as a schoolmaster because he failed to urge that his pupils follow Socrates' precept of "how to do good and avoid evil" (ibid., 100). Milton's "wonder-working academy" (ibid., 101), Johnson remarks, operated to little benefit. The men it produced were neither, in Johnson's opinion, intellectually distinguished nor, he clearly suspects, much suited for membership in "the great community of mankind"--so austere was Milton's curriculum of "hard study and spare diet" (ibid., 101). For all his diligence, Johnson argues, Milton misdirected his zeal. Johnson complains that just as Milton aroused terror in his description of Hell for its own sake and as a means of displaying his powers, so did Milton as a schoolmaster urge his scholars to study learning for the proud but useless purpose of conquering intellectual difficulties.

Johnson's account of the genesis of Paradise Lost throws further light upon his attitude towards the intellectual poet-author of Paradise Lost. Only after he had retired from public life, aged and blind, Milton resumed work on his objectives: "an epick poem, the

history of his country, and a dictionary of the Latin tongue" (ibid., 720). The dictionary, never completed, Johnson remarks, was undertaken with some vanity since Milton was so early blind. His history, ultimately published in 1670, was, in Johnson's opinion, eminently useless, for it stopped in 1066 at the conquest of Britain by the Normans, whereas, for Johnson at least, the core of British history, and recordings thereof, evolved following that event. As for the subject matter of the epic, Johnson reports that Milton finally chose Paradise Lost, but not before considering King Arthur as a topic.

Johnson records, at some length, the evolution of Paradise Lost because "it is pleasant to see great works in their seminal state pregnant with latent possibilities of excellence" (ibid., 124). Yet this pleasure scarcely hides Johnson's suspicion that pride was Milton's real motivation in undertaking this gigantic epic, and that he was more concerned with displaying his stupendous genius, than with pursuing the most useful of purposes, "the reasonableness of religion, and the necessity of obedience to the Divine Law" (ibid., 171).

Johnson viewed Milton, as a public official, with great suspicion for having actively supported those who had attempted to destroy the monarchy and alter the structure of the Church. How, Johnson seems to wonder,

could an individual whose "political notions were those of an acrimonious and surly republican" (ibid., 156), have society's real needs at heart? How could one who "had mingled little in the world, and was deficient in the knowledge which experience must confer" (ibid., 189), effectively delight and instruct? To attribute such questions to Johnson is mere speculation, of course, but they support his underlying uneasiness with Milton's intellectual pride.

Milton's failure to render Paradise Lost an effective vehicle of moral instruction surely was the bitterest disappointment to Johnson because, as he states at the start of his discussion, the poem when "considered with respect to design, may claim the first place, and with respect to performance the second, among the productions of the human mind" (ibid., 170). When he makes this generous assertion, Johnson treats Paradise Lost as an aesthetic experience, and an example of sublime poetry. From this point of view he recognizes many supremely artistic, though socially useless, qualities and acknowledges Milton's powers of intellect as sans pareil. Thus Johnson evaluates the work from two distinct perspectives: when he discusses its social values, he relates them to the common reader; whereas its aesthetic merits concern the intellectual elite. Nowhere else in the Lives of the English Poets or, for

that matter, in any of his writings, does Johnson so divide his critical attention. This twin vision makes for a somewhat confusing and, at times, seemingly inconsistent discussion, primarily because Johnson does not make clear that he is using it, if indeed he himself was aware of his differentiation.[33]

The Dramatist--Shakespeare

If Johnson's view of Milton is astigmatic, his view of Shakespeare is panoramic, as befits work that, he concedes, transcends time or place. His view is panoramic and refreshing even to the extent of illustrating the dangerous example of an author who, though the source of so much pleasure and instruction, nevertheless seemed unaware that "it is always a writer's duty to make the world better" (Preface, 71). Johnson's discussion covers the praiseworthy, blameworthy, and unusually useful aspects of Shakespeare's works.

Much of the discussion, especially the fault-finding, moves along traditional lines. Thus only the most striking features need be examined in the context of this enquiry. The Preface first considers the supremacy of Shakespeare's plays as a source of pleasure. The highly concentrated discussion centers around the opening statement: "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature" (ibid., 61). This challenge faces the writer who aspires to

please permanently, and who, when he succeeds in doing so, must be counted amongst those of the first rank of writers. Nothing at once introduces an authoritative tone, and serves to emphasize the importance of please, the repetition of which merely adds force to the strength of the two convictions. Equally telling are many and long, for one irrefutable proof of greatness is that a writer pleases all his readers--for all time. The last phrase meets all expectations. Just has the sense of both "exact" and "honest," and carries with it, therefore, the moral overtones which colour any of Johnson's considered statements. Representation must be taken in all its original force of re-presentation as distinct, that is, from imitation of general nature, a term which Johnson uses to encompass the human experience. Shakespeare pleases, therefore, because he provides an honest and exact "mirrour of manners and life" (ibid., 62). That mirror, Johnson explains, reflects species of humanity rather than individuals, men rather than heroes, characters who "act upon principles arising from genuine passion" (ibid., 69), whose dialogue is always realistic and with whom, therefore, all readers can empathize. As for his plots, Johnson points out, Shakespeare took his ideas from every-day life. Thus "by reading human sentiments in human language, by scenes from which a hermit may estimate the transactions of the world" (ibid., 65), any individual derives useful pleasure from Shakespeare's plays.

To Johnson, pleasure is useful because it provides so much practical instruction. However, so copious is this instruction, so casually is it offered, that the "system of social duty" (ibid., 71) contained in it must be selected from the mass of material. It is from this very important view, in Johnson's opinion, that Shakespeare poses a real danger. Few readers, Johnson believed, are able to select judiciously. It is for this precise reason that, according to Johnson, a writer must present a distinct moral thesis, must show virtue triumphant, and teach--delightfully to be fully effective--the abyss between good and evil. It was because Fielding failed to abide by this principle that Johnson unhesitantly proscribed his works, and because Richardson made this purpose the raison d'être of his novels that Johnson championed him. Why then is not Shakespeare, who is guilty of the same fault as Fielding, proscribed by Johnson with equal severity? The answer must be sought in Johnson's view of the different attitudes of the two writers towards their contemporary readers.

One of the most significant charges Johnson makes against the contemporary novel in Rambler No. 4 (and there is little doubt that he refers chiefly to Fielding) is that the modern novelist presumes to please and teach by promiscuously describing the world. Furthermore, he quite deliberately refuses to take up a

moral stance such, at least, as Johnson could accept (promiscuity and morality being always at odds with each other). Shakespeare, on the other hand, pleases by providing a true "re-presentation of general nature" and fails, through carelessness, indifference, perhaps even ignorance, but certainly not through a refusal of performing his duty, to improve the lot of man.

Unlike Fielding, whom Johnson in effect accuses of the sin of complicity, Johnson could charge Shakespeare only with the sin of connivance. That is to say, Shakespeare clearly meant no evil (nor of course was he committed to the "good"). Johnson believes that Shakespeare's fault must, however, be clearly stated, since by his unquestionable facility of captivating his reader he exerts so enormous an influence:

> His first defect is that to which may be imputed most of the evil in books or in men. He sacrifices virtue to convenience and is so much more careful to please than to instruct that he seems to write without any moral purpose. (Ibid., 71)

This celebrated judgment can best be explained on the grounds of inevitability. It is inconceivable to suppose that Johnson would not apply so important a leitmotif as that of moral utility to an author in whom he finds all his other essential criteria so wonderfully satisfied. The result, however, is strange, for it would seem that Johnson demands the best of two possible accounts of life, that which Shakespeare so accurately re-presented,

and that which Johnson required a writer to provide by adherence to truth. For the sake of preserving or respecting his doctrine of moral utility, Johnson ignored the fact that, precisely because Shakespeare re-presented life rather than imitated it, it is quite illogical to require of him a moral stance.

The essential contradiction is illustrated by Johnson's reference, in an earlier paragraph, to the origins of the drama. " . . . The ancient poets," he explains, " . . . selected some the crimes of men, and some their absurdities. . . . Thus rose the two modes of imitation, known by the names of tragedy and comedy" (ibid., 66). Johnson's inconsistency is apparent, for in selecting a theme a writer inevitably takes up a moral attitude (for selection requires judgment), while a re-presentation of life as it exists leaves the author no freedom to develop that stance. Shakespeare's greatest strength, as Johnson is the first to insist, is that he neither selects nor imitates. His genius is so natural that he absorbs life, and his writings are nothing more than a skilful or instructive record of that absorption. To require a moral purpose or judgment of such a writer is to spoil his naturalness, that feature which makes "Shakespeare the sovereign of the drama" (Lives, I, 454); yet not to require it, is to go counter to that most seminal of Johnson's, and neo-classical, dogmas, that the end of

writing is to instruct, the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing. Faced with relinquishing the principle of moral utility or with asserting it once again, Johnson took the latter course.

Simply because Shakespeare has so many excellencies is for Johnson no reason to omit discussion of his faults. As Johnson wrote to Charles Burney:

> We must confess the faults of our favourite, to gain credit to our praise of his excellencies. He that claims for himself or for another the honours of perfection will surely injure the reputation which he designs to assist. (Letters, I, 177)[34]

Thus in the name of deeply held conviction and for the sake of maintaining a critical equilibrium, Johnson points out Shakespeare's gravest defect, namely, that he "sacrifices virtue to convenience" and writes "without any moral purpose" (Preface, 71). In this way, Johnson fulfilled his duty even if, in doing so, he damaged his own reputation as a Shakespearean critic for well over a century. That disrepute was clearly without just cause if the paragraph chiefly responsible for it is read in proper context.

Johnson's description of Shakespeare as "our favourite" suggests that in a private letter to the educated Charles Burney, Johnson feels free to acknowledge that, from a purely aesthetic point of view, Shakespeare stands supreme. In his published work Johnson did not express such a view, because, much as he admired Shakespeare he could not, as a critic writing

for the benefit of all, wholeheartedly endorse the work of one who "makes no just distribution of good or evil, nor is always careful to shew in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked" (Preface, 71). Johnson believed that though the morally aware individual might recognize this flaw, the public at large would not. That is why, in his view, Shakespeare poses a certain danger, and why Johnson insists upon noticing this danger.

The Ideal Poet of the Common Reader--Pope

In order to give a certain perspective to Johnson's view of Pope as the ideal poet of the common reader, it is pertinent to note, very briefly, Johnson's casual remarks upon the changes that had occurred in the nature and size of the writer's public since the time of Shakespeare. In Johnson's opinion these changes were sufficient proof that society had indeed advanced to a point where, regarded as a teacher by all literate members of society, the writer was at last able to fulfil his role in society effectively.

According to Johnson, Shakespeare wrote for a nation "yet struggling to emerge from barbarity. . . . [and where] literature was yet confined to professed scholars, or to men or women of high rank" (ibid., 81-82). To satisfy his unsophisticated public, Johnson explains, he provided those "strange events and fabulous transactions" (ibid., 82) so offensive to the mature

intellect.

In Dryden's day, little had changed: theatre audiences "applauded by instinct, and poets perhaps often pleased by chance" (Lives, I, 411). Thus, when Dryden published his translation of the Aeneid, though Johnson says that "the nation considered its honour as interested in the event" (ibid., 448), he obviously means that only the truly literate, whether they belonged to the Court or to the Church, were really concerned. To his mind, that is, a poet's influence upon such a society, though undoubtedly important, was limited to a very narrow circle.

At the time Pope had started his career, the entire structure of society (reflected in literature by the culmination of the Ancients-and-Moderns controversy) had changed, thanks to economic, social, and political factors.[35] So had, in Johnson's opinion, the writer's public. "The gay, the idle, and the wealthy" (Lives, II, 146), predominantly members of the middle class, emerged. This class, neither erudite enough to join the ranks of the learned, nor inclined to do so, yet eager to protest the ignorance of its forbears, had leisure enough to cultivate wit and judgment in its drive for self-improvement, and found in Joseph Addison the best of

guides.[36] It is, however, only in his account of the conditions surrounding Pope's publication of the Iliad translation, that Johnson stresses the immense significance of this change as it affected the writer's relationship with contemporary society.

Johnson opens his account by placing Pope in situ as he projected this "poetical wonder" (Lives, III, 236). "Addison," Johnson reports, "recommended caution and moderation, and advised him [Pope] not to be content with the praise of half the nation, when he might be universally favoured" (ibid., 110). But, from Johnson's account at least, such advice proved unnecessary, thanks to the force of Pope's genius. More significantly, it was irrelevant, because Pope's public was no longer definable in Addison's terms. As volume after volume of the Iliad translation appeared, Johnson reports, it became the "popular topick" of "every man who had connected his name with criticism, or poetry" (ibid., 126). The melody of Pope's lines, Johnson explains in his critique of the work, "took possession of the publick ear; the vulgar was enamoured of the poem, and the learned wondered at the translation" (ibid., 238).

At last a writer was appreciated by the vulgar, and hence was able to instruct them at the same time as he was able

to delight the learned. The time was ripe for the writer to play a leading role in the improvement of society as a whole. Much of the credit for establishing this new role Johnson ascribes to Addison who, in 1711, had begun to whet his readers' hitherto latent appetite for knowledge and desire for elegance. In Johnson's view, Pope's significance lay in the fact that as a poet he satisfied that appetite, as, in his account of the ethos of that decade, Johnson explains:

> There is a time when nations emerging from barbarity, and falling into regular subordination, gain leisure to grow wise, and feel the shame of ignorance and the craving pain of unsatisfied curiosity. To this hunger of the mind plain sense is grateful; that which fills the void removes uneasiness, and to be free from pain for a while is pleasure; but repletion generates fastidiousness, a saturated intellect soon becomes luxurious, and knowledge finds no willing reception till it is recommended by artificial diction. Thus it will be found in the progress of learning that in all nations the first writers are simple, and that every age improves in elegance. One refinement always makes way for another, and what was expedient to Virgil was necessary to Pope. (Ibid.)

The Iliad translation therefore may be said to open, in Johnson's view, the "Age of Elegance" and, for the writer serving that society, the age of the common reader, whose judgment Johnson was prepared to trust, since he had proved his eagerness for knowledge and appreciation of elegance by his response to Addison. Besides, since politically and socially the common reader played, as a member of the middle-class,

an increasingly important role in society, it was, in Johnson's view, the writer's obvious duty to continue to educate him, thereby refining the taste of the times and making the class to which he belonged the backbone of a progressive society. Johnson's own stance in his periodical essays illustrates this belief well enough: his comments upon the value of two particular literary works written after the publication of the Iliad prove it. Of Pope's Imitations of Horace, which Pope wrote with genial ease, Johnson's main reason for rejection is simply that "they cannot give pleasure to common readers" (Lives, III, 247) unfamiliar with the original text. Far more revealing is his confession that he contemplates Thomas Gray's poetry "with less pleasure than his life" (ibid., 433). Yet he goes on to say:

> In the character of his Elegy I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours. The Church-yard abounds with images which find a mirrour in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo. (Ibid., 441)

Simple calculation shows that the common sense to which all literary criticism must give way as the final arbiter of the Elegy (and, of course, of any other publicly acclaimed work) for the first time gained force enough in a generation of youthful readers in the closing years of Pope's life. Since youth is the most impressionable of ages, it follows that Pope's influence upon this

generation was all pervasive, and that Pope's attitude to his vocation as a poet, and, indeed, to his public, accounts for much of this influence. That this was Johnson's belief is apparent from his view of Pope's major works as a critic, translator, and satirist; his admiring account of the consistency with which Pope so contentedly committed himself to his choice of life, and his searching analysis of Pope's intellectual character. By examining in turn each one of these three major facets of Johnson's assessment of Pope, we may perhaps appreciate the force of that rhetorical question Johnson poses in the closing paragraphs of his account of Pope: "If Pope be not a poet, where is poetry to be found?" (ibid., 251).

The only work of general criticism Johnson commends as highly as Dryden's discourses is Pope's Essay on Criticism. Significantly, while he does not elaborate at length on Dryden's essays, Johnson conscientiously examines the Essay. The reason is that he is in total sympathy with Pope's instructions to the critic. He is also sympathetic towards the Essay's account of the critic's difficulties and responsibilities regarding both moral values and literary attitudes, and towards its recommendations to study ancient and modern predecessors.

Johnson's admiration for the work is easy to explain: it mirrors his own views. It integrates critical principles with moral truths and relates both

themes to the social duties of a critic. Were it not for its particular style and spirit, the Essay could easily be attributed to Johnson himself. No other treatment of the subject could, in Johnson's opinion, be more useful, and how can a reader but learn from so delightful and magnificent a work, which excels in "such extent of comprehension, such nicety of distinction, such acquaintance with mankind, and such knowledge both of ancient and modern learning" (ibid., 94)?

One might well suppose that, for Johnson while it is all too true that The Essay on Criticism does not attempt to make new views familiar; is it not equally true that it makes familiar views new? And since these views mirror so well Johnson's own, what in his opinion could be more useful to the maintenance of critical taste and judgment?

According to Johnson's account, the Essay's early reception indicates that it improved rather than maintained critical taste and judgment. Pope doubted its success because he feared that it would be too provocative and difficult to be understood by his contemporaries--even those of education. These apprehensions prompt Johnson to remark: "The gentlemen, and the education of that time seem to have been of a lower character than they are of this" (ibid., 98).[37]

When confronted with the Essay on Man, upon

which he reports Pope laid his claim to "the honour of a moral poet" (ibid., 163), Johnson's attitude suffers a temporary but very real sea change. The main reasons for this sudden volte-face would seem to be two. The first is that Johnson seems to have felt it his duty to protect posterity from a work in which "a religious eye may easily discover expressions not very favourable to morals or liberty" (ibid., 165). The second is his apparent anxiety to prevent posterity from casting any serious doubts upon what he considered the otherwise remarkable record of Pope's contribution to society. The most striking aspect of Johnson's volte-face is the way he distorts, to the point of ignoring, the success and indisputable influence of the Essay on Man upon mid-eighteenth-century society, both English and continental. Though Johnson concedes that, following its publication, the Essay on Man "for a time flourished in the sunshine of universal approbation" (ibid., 164), he artfully attributes this success chiefly to the technical brilliance of the work. Furthermore, in his account of the dispute over the morality of the poem between Pierre de Crousaz and Bishop Warburton, Pope's éminence grise, Johnson strongly implies that, following the former's efforts to demonstrate that the work's ultimate purpose was the doctrine of "indissoluble fatality" (ibid., 165), the poem fell into an oblivion which Johnson so devoutly wished upon it

but which he surely knew in his heart it did not deserve. Since such blatant misrepresentation of the facts can in no way be attributed to ignorance, it can only be explained by the rationale suggested above. Further evidence to support this view is Johnson's obvious concern to explain how Pope, dedicated to refining the pleasures and to educating the awareness of his public so entranced by the elegance, imagery, and decoration of his fiction-making, could lend these powers to a doctrine which Johnson asserts is so full of "obscurity, dogmatism and falsehood" (ibid., 164). Johnson's answer is that Pope, for all the veneration he deserves as a poet, was yet an ordinary mortal. According to Johnson, Pope fell under the sway of his ill-chosen aristocratic friend, the devilish (though Tory) Lord Bolingbroke, who provided the philosophical stamina of the Essay on Man using the unsuspecting Pope for his own evil purposes. Thus it would seem to be Johnson's view that, in a moment of pride, Pope grossly abused his vocation.

If Johnson portrays Bolingbroke as the villain of the sorry affair, he depicts Crousaz as the well intentioned if overzealous defender of society's welfare, and Warburton as the patron in regard to Pope's. Crousaz was the first to expose the work and thereby, Johnson informs his reader, put an effective end to the corruption its doctrine might otherwise have continued to spread through society.

Warburton so effectively refuted, according to Johnson, Crousaz' imputations that Pope finally recognized his indebtedness and wrote him a letter of thanks. Johnson, seeing in it an ideal means of absolving Pope from further censure, writes of this letter:

> By this fond and eager acceptance of an exculpatory comment Pope testified that, whatever might be the seeming or real import of the principles which he had received from Bolingbroke, he had not intentionally attacked religion; and Bolingbroke, if he meant to make him without his own consent an instrument of mischief, found him now engaged with his eyes open on the side of truth. (Ibid., 168-69)

As for the moral doctrine of the poem, Johnson treats it with thinly disguised contempt, both in the biographical and critical section of his study. When in the former section Johnson explains that Crousaz launched his crusade against the success of the Essay because "His incessant vigilance for the promotion of piety disposed him to look with distrust upon all metaphysical systems of Theology, and all schemes of virtue and happiness purely rational" (Lives, II, 165), Johnson might as well have been speaking for himself. This is evident from the opening lines of Johnson's critique of the Essay on Man in which he asserts that the Essay on Man

> . . . was a work of great labour and long consideration, but certainly not the happiest of Pope's performances. The subject is perhaps not very proper for poetry, and the poet was not sufficiently master of his subject; metaphysical morality was to him a new study, he was proud of his acquisitions, and, supposing himself master of great secrets, was in haste to teach what

he had not learned. (Ibid., 242-43)

Thereupon Johnson sets out to persuade his reader that the Essay on Man never really was and certainly no longer is significant, save as it forms part of the Popean canon. Johnson first attacks Pope for presenting an argument which, by the light of his own interpretation at least, Johnson proves is both incoherent and trite. Then he tackles "the dazzling splendour of imagery, and the seductive power of eloquence" (ibid., 243) he recognizes the poem possesses and which, he knows, provide so much pleasure to any reader:

> Never were penury of knowledge and vulgarity of sentiment so happily disguised. The reader feels his mind full, though he learns nothing; and when he meets it in its new array no longer knows the talk of his mother and his nurse. When these wonder-working sounds sink into sense and the doctrine of the Essay, disrobed of its ornaments, is left to the powers of its naked excellence, what shall we discover? That we are, in comparison with our Creator, very weak and ignorant. . . . (Ibid., 243)

The paragraph continues in this vein to its conclusion. The result is that any reader, bowing to Johnson's authority, is easily persuaded to ignore the Essay on Man and would conclude, as Johnson intended he should, that since the teachings of the Essay on Man are either platitudinously dull or dangerously radical, it is best to forego the pleasure to be found in relishing the work purely as a performance of poetic virtuosity.

As if determined to make doubly sure that such

would be his reader's conclusion, Johnson adds two more paragraphs to his commentary. In the first he warns and then, in his own peculiar literary terms, briefly explains his view that "never till now" had such familiar moral instruction as Pope gave in the Essay on Man been "recommended by such a blaze of embellishment or such sweetness of melody" (ibid., 244). In the second and concluding paragraph he says:

> . . . if I had undertaken to exemplify Pope's felicity of composition before a rigid critick I should not select the Essay on Man, for it contains more lines unsuccessfully laboured, more harshness of diction, more thoughts imperfectly expressed, more levity without elegance, and more heaviness without strength, than will easily be found in all his other works. (Ibid., 244-45)

Johnson's analysis of the Essay on Man is ingenious. By attacking the work as a moral treatise and yet not, until the last paragraph above, challenging Pope's success in providing delight in his treatment of this topic, Johnson appears to give a certain equilibrium to his total view of the work. By so doing he camouflages his prejudices and his gross misrepresentation of the work's significance, suggesting in effect that the Essay on Man is an unfortunate but indelible blot upon the record of Pope's otherwise remarkable contribution to society. On these grounds, Johnson implies, it is best left unread.

If Johnson views the Essay on Man with ill-disguised contempt, he views Pope's translation of Homer

with undisguised awe. And well he might, given that Pope was under twenty-five when the first volumes appeared and that his knowledge of Greek was questionable; yet, in Johnson's opinion, "the English Iliad. . . . is certainly the noblest version of poetry which the world has ever seen; and its publication must therefore be considered as one of the great events in the annals of learning" (ibid., 119). In his critique of these translations, Johnson elaborates on Pope's debt to Dryden. Indeed, he seems to compare Pope's position in regard to Dryden to that of a dutiful son who follows in his father's footsteps and improves upon his father's work, thanks, in part, to a greater commitment and, in part, to a peculiar improvement of circumstances. No matter what the son accomplishes he willingly recognizes that, without his elder's example, he might have achieved little, but that with it he performs miracles. Such, in Johnson's view, was Pope's debt to his literary father-figure. The record speaks for itself. In working on the translation of the Iliad,

> Pope searched the pages of Dryden for happy combinations of heroick diction, but it will not be denied that he added much to what he found. He cultivated our language with so much diligence and art that he has left in his Homer a treasure of poetical elegances to posterity. His version may be said to have tuned the English tongue, for since its appearance no writer, however deficient in other powers, has wanted melody. (Ibid., 238)

Johnson refutes the long-standing complaint that Pope's translation does not preserve Homer's "awful simplicity, his artless grandeur, his unaffected

majesty" (ibid.). He argues that in the two-thousand years since Homer the life styles and thoughts of man have acquired so much more polish that the common reader could not respond to the "open display of unadulterated nature" (Lives, III, 114) that was the hallmark of Homer's epics. Clearly, he considers that so much as to attempt to preserve this feature would be presumptuous and foolish. Like Virgil, who was so much closer to Homer in time, heart, and mind, Pope deliberately recognized this difference:

> To a thousand cavils one answer is sufficient; the purpose of a writer is to be read, and the criticism which would destroy the power of pleasing must be blown aside. Pope wrote for his own age and his own nation: he knew that it was necessary to colour the images and point the sentiments of his author; he therefore made him graceful, but lost him some of his sublimity. (Ibid., 240)

Johnson's comments on Pope's several satirical poems are, for the most part, merely corrective. He finds no serious fault in these performances and little to complain of in their matter, for Pope seldom wasted his genius on temporary subjects. If he did, his genius was such that by his treatment he amplified his matter to the level of general nature, and thus made it perpetually relevant. A distinctive exception is the second Dialogue of Seventeen Hundred and Thirty-eight. This poem attacking one of the Foxes, among others, spurred Charles Fox to reproach Pope and to remind him, by the arrest of a nondescript poet, Paul Whitehead, and his publisher Dodsley, of the reprisal

a politician could inflict upon any satirical insolence. Pope took the hint and

> . . . never afterwards attempted to join the patriot with the poet, nor drew his pen upon statesmen. That he desisted from his attempts of reformation is imputed, by his commentator [Warburton], to his despair of prevailing over the corruption of the time. He was not likely to have been ever of opinion that the dread of his satire would countervail the love of power or of money. (Ibid., 181)

Johnson merely glances at The Memoirs of Scriblerus part of an unfinished project which Pope undertook in collaboration with Swift and Arbuthnot. In Johnson's opinion this work which, he says, was designed to "censure the abuses of learning by a fictitious life of an infatuated scholar" (ibid., 182), was of both questionable taste and unquestionable futility:

> . . . for the follies which the writer ridicules are so little practised that they are not known; nor can the satire be understood but by the learned: he raises phantoms of absurdity, and then drives them away. He cures diseases that were never felt.
>
> For this reason this joint production of three great writers has never obtained any notice from mankind; it has been little read, or when read has been forgotten, as no man could be wiser, better, or merrier, by remembering it. (Ibid.)

Whether The Dunciad, perhaps "the best specimen that has yet appeared of personal satire ludicrously pompous" (ibid., 241), could make any reader wiser, better, or merrier, is the crucial problem, as it is indeed of any satirical composition.

In a narrow sense it is doubtful whether any man could become wiser by reading The Dunciad, except possibly

some of those bad writers, the victims of Pope's contempt, who might have learnt thereafter to cease protesting Pope's treatment of them. Thus, from one point of view, Johnson argues, the poem contained little of general interest to the average reader, for who cared if "one or another scribbler was a dunce" (ibid., 146). But, from a broader perspective, The Dunciad exposes the pettiness and raises the public's awareness of unsuccessful wit. And "satirical criticism may be considered as useful when it rectifies error and improves judgement: he that refines the publick taste is a publick benefactor " (ibid., 242). Hopefully, Johnson believes, this better judgment might infiltrate into other aspects of the public's awareness.

Whether reading The Dunciad might make for a better man is, in Johnson's opinion, doubtful:

> That the design was moral, whatever the author might tell either his readers or himself, I am not convinced. The first motive was the desire of revenging the contempt with which Theobald had treated his Shakespeare, and regaining the honour which he had lost, by crushing his opponent. Theobald was not of bulk enough to fill a poem, and therefore it was necessary to find other enemies with other names, at whose expence he might divert the publick. (Ibid., 241)

Johnson is fearful lest the poem might, in fact, have an adverse effect upon a man's morals, should he share with Swift and Pope an "unnatural delight in ideas physically impure, such as every other tongue utters with unwillingness, and of which every ear shrinks from the mention" (ibid., 242). Johnson assumes that most readers,

shocked like himself, recognize and guard against such an unnatural delight, but for those few who do not, the pitfalls are considerable. In Johnson's opinion, such persons lack the deliberation required to divorce repulsive images from the artistic excellence of the work. Johnson concedes, however, that the vast majority of readers might gain some moral benefit so long as they are determined to eschew the examples so excellently presented in accounts of the Traveller, the Florist, and James Moore. Study of the dramatic images might, he suggests, even help to lighten the fullness of ignorance.

In Johnson's opinion, it is certain that The Dunciad makes every man merrier, albeit at the expense of Lewis Theobald and others more deserving of Pope's irascibility. Admittedly, in writing The Dunciad, Pope displayed an attitude truculent enough to arouse Johnson's aversion, though not total condemnation.

Johnson considers The Dunciad a fine example of proper satire, for although a personal element intrudes, its general effect of merriment is dominant. And since "a merry heart doeth good like medicine," it is surely a commendable contribution to society.

As a display of Pope's satirical powers, The Dunciad is, in Johnson's opinion, only excelled by The Rape of the Lock, "the most exquisite example of ludicrous poetry" (ibid., 104). The original end of the work, that of reconciliating two families, was, of course,

irrelevant to Pope's ultimate purpose as a poet writing for posterity--and to Johnson's concern as a judge of poetic art. Yet, though Johnson doubted whether this goal was fully attained, it surely appealed to him as useful because, to whatever degree it was achieved, the two families were wiser and hence better. As for John Dennis' charge that the work lacks a moral, and therefore is inferior to The Lutrin, Johnson points out that "The purpose of the Poet is, as he tells us, to laugh at 'the little unguarded follies of the female sex'" (ibid., 234). Johnson clearly considers this a useful purpose:

> The freaks, and humours, and spleen, and vanity of women, as they embroil families in discord and fill houses with disquiet, do more to obstruct the happiness of life in a year than the ambition of the clergy in many centuries. It has been well observed that the misery of man proceeds not from any single crush of overwhelming evil, but from small vexations continually repeated. (Ibid.)

However much merriment The Rape of the Lock gives to readers of every background, Johnson's real interest lies in investigating the sources of the poem's pleasing power. That is to say, he examines the work from an aesthetic point of view.

That brilliant inquiry has, of course, nothing to do with the worth of the work as a satire, and little to do with its value as a source of instructive merriment. Neither of these aspects is Johnson's major concern, because he surely considered that the greatness of The Rape of the Lock lies, as George Berkeley wrote in a

letter to Pope, in "the magic of your invention, with all those images, illusions and inexplicable beauties which you raise so surprisingly, and at the same time so naturally out of a trifle." [38]

Pope, Johnson reports, himself regarded the work as "his most successful execution of poetical art" (Lives, III, 104) and with this judgment Johnson is in complete accord. Johnson admits that Dennis, in his vain attack upon the work, may find minor defects in the design, "but," he rhetorically asks, "what are such faults to so much excellence!" (ibid., 235). This work gave immediate delight to all levels of its contemporaneous public, and Johnson sees no reason why it should not continue to delight posterity, which is, in his eyes, reason enough to commend it without reservation. The nature of his enquiry into its power of pleasing suggests that he regarded it as a work whose real worth is aesthetic rather than useful.

In writing Pope's biography, Johnson clearly felt that he recorded the life of a consecrated poet. Johnson reports how Pope immersed himself in the classics, learned to read French and Italian, wrote poetry of all styles and on many subjects, enjoyed the regard of a retired ambassador and, for a time, the mutual admiration of the Restoration playwright William Wycherley--all by the age of seventeen, when he made his debut as a poet:

During this period of his life he was indefatigably diligent, and insatiably curious; wanting health for violent, and money for expensive pleasures, and having certainly excited in himself very strong desires of intellectual eminence, he spent much of his time over his books: but he read only to store his mind with facts and images, seizing all that his authors presented with undistinguishing voracity, and with an appetite for knowledge too eager to be nice. In a mind like his, however, all the faculties were at once involuntarily improving. Judgement is forced upon us by experience. He that reads many books must compare one opinion or one style with another; and when he compares, must necessarily distinguish, reject, and prefer. But the account given by himself of his studies was that from fourteen to twenty he read only for amusement, from twenty to twenty-seven for improvement and instruction; that in the first part of this time he desired only to know, and in the second he endeavoured to judge. (Ibid., 94)

Thereafter, his works flowed forth, ranging from his Pastorals and his Imitations of Horace to a mass of satirical poetry, not to mention his translations and didactic compositions.

Like Dryden, Pope enjoyed the company of the great; but unlike Dryden, he treasured his independence and demonstrated his disdain of patronage. When Lord Halifax, after hearing portions of the unpublished Iliad, attempted to patronize Pope, he was rewarded, Johnson delightfully reports, with "sullen coldness." With considerable relish and some inaccuracy Johnson elaborates upon the incident:

The patron was not accustomed to such frigid gratitude, and the poet fed his own pride with the dignity of independence. They probably were suspicious of each other. Pope would not dedicate till he saw at what rate his praise was valued; he would be 'troublesome out of gratitude, not expectation.' Halifax thought himself entitled to confidence; and would give nothing, unless

he knew what he should receive. Their commerce had its beginning in hope of praise on one side, and of money on the other, and ended because Pope was less eager of money than Halifax of praise. It is not likely that Halifax had any personal benevolence to Pope; it is evident that Pope looked on Halifax with scorn and hatred. (Ibid., 127-28)

Johnson felt that Pope treated critics with contempt, except for Joseph Spence and Bishop Warburton, both of whom became intimate friends. His attitude towards Grub Street, the source of so many ill-informed judgments and malicious pamphlets, was extremely severe. Cruel as this attitude was, Johnson on the whole accepts it, arguing that in the design of The Dunciad

. . . there was petulance and malignity enough; but I cannot think it very criminal. An author places himself uncalled before the tribunal of criticism, and solicits fame at the hazard of disgrace. Dulness or deformity are not culpable in themselves, but may be very justly reproached when they pretend to the honour of wit or the influence of beauty. If bad writers were to pass without reprehension what should restrain them? 'impune diem consumpserit ingens Telephus'; and upon bad writers only will censure have much effect. The satire which brought Theobald and Moore into contempt, dropped impotent from Bentley, like the javelin of Priam. (Ibid., 241-42)

Pope's stance vis-à-vis the political parties was also unusual, particularly since his career was exactly contemporaneous with Walpole's tenure as Prime Minister (1715-42). The Walpole years were exceedingly political, requiring most writers to declare, pretend, or alter allegiance to whichever one of the parties seemed the more influential at any given time. Johnson sees Pope as the first eminent writer to rise above such a fracas: he "never disturbed the publick with his political

opinions" (ibid., 109). Indeed, Johnson says, Pope so entranced political foes as to unite them in mutual admiration of his work.[39]

The spirit of consecration which underlay these exemplary attitudes appeared also in the parental attention Pope gave to the making and mending of his verses. With his responsibility--and reputation--as a poet in society always in mind and with his youthful desire for excellence ever possessing him, Pope's method, Johnson reports, was to "write his first thoughts in his first words, and gradually to amplify, decorate, rectify, and refine them" (ibid., 219). Thereby he gave to his finished verse clarity of thought, elegance and vigour of expression--cardinal qualities Johnson sought not only in poetry but also in the very fabric of a vital society.

Such a purpose is, of course, only significant if the subject matter of the poetry is relevant to the seminal interests of the common reader. No poet, in Johnson's view, knew better how to fulfil this requirement than Pope. Johnson recognizes, of course, that Pope's financial security, abetted by his independent spirit, allowed him to write when and on whatever subject he wished; yet only once (in the Essay on Man) did he, in Johnson's opinion, seriously abuse this privilege. Johnson believed that Pope did not write, as Dryden professed to

have written all but one of his dramas "for the people" (Lives, I, 361) but, committed to the pursuit of virtue and to satisfying the enduring needs and interests of society, he chose perpetually relevant subjects for the matter of his poetry:

> . . . he studied in the academy of Paracelsus, and made the universe his favourite volume. He gathered his notions fresh from reality, not from the copies of authors, but the originals of Nature. Yet there is no reason to believe that literature ever lost his esteem . . . . His frequent references to history, his allusions to various kinds of knowledge, and his images selected from art and nature, with his observations on the operations of the mind and the modes of life, shew an intelligence perpetually on the wing, excursive, vigorous, and diligent, eager to pursue knowledge, and attentive to retain it. (Lives, III, 216)

The underlying principle of that intelligence, Johnson goes on, was "Good Sense, a prompt and intuitive perception of consonance and propriety" (ibid.). Coupled with this commendable quality was genius, "that quality without which judgement is cold and knowledge is inert; that energy which collects, combines, amplifies and animates" (ibid., 222). Such a synthesis, Johnson maintains, allowed Pope to excel in, and exemplify, that very quality of prudence which Johnson considered essential to a contented and stable society. Indeed, all the qualities attributed to Pope's work are those Johnson sought in the structure of an ideal society, delighted and instructed by the poet. Thus Pope illustrated, in an almost mystical fashion, Johnson's concept of the poet's role in society. Ironically, his account

of the life of Pope, with which Johnson closed his literary career, is tinged with an enthusiasm which is gently satirized in Imlac's "Dissertation upon Poetry." In Johnson's eyes, the difference is, of course, that in Pope's work lies a living proof of what is both humanly possible and permanently enduring; for poets, it stands as an incandescent beacon which illuminates their way to poetical excellence and by which they should be guided and directed; for common readers, it serves as a source of delight and instruction such as may enable them to contribute to the establishment of a society based upon the principles Johnson so ardently taught.

CHAPTER VII

JOHNSON'S ROLE AS A WRITER IN SOCIETY: CONCLUSION

By far the most effective means of summarily evaluating Johnson's own record as a writer in society is to assess it by the light of the tenets, elemental to his entire stance, of commitment, consistency, and contentment.

Johnson's commitment to the responsibilities he ascribed to his vocation infiltrates every one of his writings, but is no more forcefully illustrated than in the Dictionary of the English Language. For seven years of "inconvenience and distraction, in sickness and in sorrow" (Works, V, 51) Johnson concentrated his capacious intellect and focused all of his imaginative powers upon a task which, as he remarks in the Plan, written nine years before the completion of the Dictionary, "is generally considered as drudgery for the blind, as the proper toil of artless industry" (Works, V, 1). He was able to do so because the usefulness of a dictionary, such at least as he conceived, was to him glamorous; the opportunity to sustain his conviction that "the chief glory of every people arises from its authors" (Works, V, 49), was unique. Such total commitment speaks for itself.

So, too, does the consistency with which, no matter in what genre or on what topic he wrote, Johnson pursued his goal of instructing and delighting his reader. Though this consistency is so intense that it covers his work with a thick veneer of moral platitudes which repel rather than delight many readers, it is the chief stay of Johnson's involvement in life. One of the most striking consequences of that involvement is the enormous variety of knowledge, gleaned from his own observation and experience of life, it provides those readers who can penetrate the veneer. Since Johnson held that the essence of all pleasure lay in variety, his work in fact can be regarded as a source of perpetual pleasure. And, precisely because to Johnson pleasure of any sort is necessarily moral (inasmuch as his chief care is to help his readers along the paths of virtue), it follows that all the pleasure of his work is useful. Therein, briefly, lies the significance of his consistent determination to give, as he says, in the concluding sentence of Rambler No. 208, "ardour to virtue, and confidence to truth." He attests to that determination in his Preface to the Lives of the English Poets, in which he so casually explains that he was led beyond his original purpose, no doubt assigned him by the consortium of booksellers who sponsored the project, "by the honest desire of giving useful pleasure." It appears too, in an entirely

different context, in A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland, a travel book as packed with information as it is void of any plaintive references to the strains and stresses any man of the author's age and health might reasonably be expected to record.

In the same terms, but from a strictly practical point of view, Johnson's record is equally impressive in its uniqueness to support any writer whose efforts struck him as even potentially useful to society. That support is manifest in his numerous prefaces, reviews, and dedications--each one designed to improve the lot of long since forgotten writers and to contribute to the knowledge of society. It is also manifest, as has been demonstrated in the course of this study, in his attitude to the hack writer. So obsessed was Johnson by this dual purpose that in his zeal neither the literary merits of any work he championed nor the topics with which it dealt were significant considerations, so long as the author's attitude met with his approval and his topic contributed, in Johnson's opinion, to the improvement of society. Such beneficence is indeed remarkable.

Even more remarkable is Johnson's deliberate effort to impress on and through his writings his belief that man, rather than seeking to be happy as his unregulated nature urges, must strive to enjoy the few blessings and endure the far more numerous sorrows of the

human experience; that he must, in other words, attempt to infuse his entire attitude towards life with the spirit of contentment. Of the trinity of principles upon which Johnson fixed his entire stance, this is primum inter pares and certainly the most difficult to satisfy: it requires a total involvement, the source of both knowledge and judgment, in life and, even more significantly, demands a committed and consistent attempt to practise all the precepts of Christianity.

Despite his enormous effort and for a very paradoxical reason, Johnson failed in this, his ultimate, goal as it surely is of any writer belonging to the tradition of Christian humanism. Since his failure cannot be attributed to lack of effort or ability, it can only have been caused by his melancholic disposition. His heroic struggle against this melancholy was, as his private papers alone attest, the secret drama of his life. Thus, though he so deliberately attempted to imbue his published writings with an attitude of educated contentment, his integrity forbade him to hide the fact that all too often his melancholia threw a pall over that intention. When he was unable to penetrate that pall, he viewed life as through a glass darkly. Consequently, the necessity of accepting life that Johnson sought to reflect in his writings is all too often dyed in a gloom that, however close to his particular vision of truth, gives little pleasure to the

common reader.

Such a failure, however, cannot be censured; for the energy, the faith and the devotion with which Johnson endeavoured to instruct by delighting is exemplary, the assiduity with which he attempted to practise what he preached, indisputable. That is why Johnson's radical greatness lies not in his writings but rather in the attitude so indelibly reflected in them.

Such a view transcends consideration of any particular aspect of Johnson's genius. Its validity lies in the fact that any particular writer's attitude towards his vocation and towards society as displayed in his works is the crux of Johnson's appraisal of that writer.[1] For Johnson's consideration of a writer's attitude pre-empts even discussion of his ability (and degree of success) to instruct and delight. Thus, any evidence of a faulty attitude is, for Johnson, cause enough to assume that the work so marked is suspect, whatever its literary merits, insofar as it does not cultivate in its readers an educated acceptance of life. Whereas, for example, Pope's attitude, though flawed by his authorship of the Essay on Man and of some ambiguous worth in his treatment of Grub Street, was otherwise so nicely integrated with his great abilities as to render him, in Johnson's eyes, a model for the modern poet, Johnson obviously deplored much of Dryden's stance--even though he considered Dryden's

genius greater than Pope's. Consequently Dryden's record as a writer in society, though immensely impressive, was, in Johnson's opinion, the less admirable. Similarly, Johnson clearly regarded Milton's attitude, by reason of his pride, reprehensible and Savage's, by reason of its immaturity, imprudent.

From the foregoing argument, two final conclusions can be drawn. The first is that, in Johnson's view, if all writers were able and, even more problematically, willing to accept their obligation to demonstrate in their work a total commitment to, consistency in, and acceptance of, their role as teachers, then the republic of letters would indeed provide the foundations of a stable society. Readers, instructed and delighted by so powerful a group of teachers, would themselves attempt to abide by the tenets expounded to them. And since Johnson held that only by abiding by these tenets may a man reasonably aspire to convert his innate love of virtue into its successful pursuit and, hopefully, practice, it is obvious that therein lies, for Johnson, the nucleus of an ideal society. Though his view of human nature told him this goal was unattainable, Johnson believed it must nonetheless be pursued. It is, after all, the only viable means of proving the dignity of man.

The second conclusion, that the supreme illustration of a writer's pursuit of this goal is found in Johnson's own example, is considerably more apparent.

Johnson's work, though repetitive in its consistency, glows with strength of purpose; his view of life, though coloured with an innate gloom, is that of a Christian humanist. In the final analysis, the most telling tribute to his achievement and the most just record of his contribution to society may lie in the epitaph, erected by his contemporaries for the edification of succeeding generations:

SAMVELI . IOHNSON
GRAMMATICO . ET . CRITICO
SCRIPTORVM . ANGLICORVM . LITTERATE . PERITO
POETAE . LVMINIBVS . SENTENTIARVM
ET . PONDERIBVS . VERBORVM . ADMIRABILI
MAGISTRO . VIRTVTIS . GRAVISSIMO
HOMINI . OPTIMO . ET . SINGVLARIS . EXEMPLI
QVI . VIXIT . ANN . lxxv . MENS . iI. . DIEB . xiiiI
DECESSIT . IDIB . DECEMBR . ANN . CHRIST . cI . I cc . lxxxv
SEPVLT . IN . AED . SANCT . PETR . WESTMONASTERIENS .
xiil . KAL . IANVAR . ANN . CHRIST . cI . I cc . lxxxv
AMICI . ET . SODALES . LITTERARII
PECVNIA . CONLATA
H . M . FACIVND . CVRAVER.

FOOTNOTES

FOOTNOTES

INTRODUCTION

[1]Quotations from, and references to, the Rambler essays in this study are taken from Samuel Johnson, The Rambler, edited by W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, Vols. III-V of the Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969). Arabic numerals given in parentheses following quotations refer to the numbers of the essays.

CHAPTER I

[1]Unusual, because the passions to which Imlac refers are generally taken to be experienced very much in the present. For example, though a man may fear something in the future, to experience fear in the present is a far more real experience.

[2]Quotations from, and references to, Rasselas in this study are taken from Samuel Johnson, Rasselas, Poems and Selected Prose, edited by Bertrand H. Bronson (New York, Chicago, San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), pp. 505-612. As Bronson points out in his introductory Bibliographical Notes, p. xx, he followed Johnson's text "of the second edition of 1759, as edited by R. W. Chapman and as reprinted in 1927 by Oxford University Press." Chapter and page number references appear, in Roman and Arabic numerals respectively, in parentheses following the quotations.

[3]Robert Voitle, Samuel Johnson the Moralist (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), pp. 136-37. As Voitle points out: "The thought of this boredom, this vacuity of life which always must be filled up, often was in itself more appalling to Johnson than some of the vices bred by it" (ibid., p. 137). Arieh Sachs devotes his opening chapter to a metaphysical interpretation of this vacuity of life in Passionate Intelligence (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), pp. 3-19.

[4]The old man has, of course, achieved that harmony which, as Voitle points out in the opening pages of his study, was the "dominating principle" taught by Renaissance moralists, whose concept of reason Voitle terms "Peripatetic" as opposed to "Lockean" (Voitle, The Moralist, pp. 1-12).

[5]Almost every critic of Johnson has discussed his concept of the imagination. Among the more important of these discussions should be mentioned the following: Paul Kent Alkon, Samuel Johnson and Moral Discipline (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1967), passim; Walter Jackson Bate, The Achievement of Samuel Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 63-91 and passim; Sachs, Passionate Intelligence pp. 53-65; Voitle, The Moralist, pp. 39-41.

[6]Quotations from, and references to, the Idler essays in this study are taken from Samuel Johnson, The

Idler and The Adventurer, edited by W. J. Bate, John M. Bullitt, and L. F. Powell, Vol. II of the Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), II, 3-320. Arabic numerals given in parentheses following quotations refer to the numbers of the essays.

[7]Alkon, in Samuel Johnson and Moral Discipline, analyzes at far greater length this essay. See pp. 9-18.

[8]Though the attendants attempted to console Nekayah, they were, Johnson remarks en passant, "not much grieved in their hearts that the favourite was lost" (Ras., XXXIV, 575)--a fine example of the hypocrisy that can come with envy.

[9]Bate, in The Achievement of Samuel Johnson, devotes ten very pertinent pages to Johnson's treatment of envy, pp. 103-13. In the opening paragraph of his discussion, Bate writes that "the theme of envy crawls like a tortoise through the moral essays, giving way at times to other subjects, but always emerging at the end. In the Rambler alone, fifty-seven issues--or well over a fourth--contain either the word itself or the idea" (ibid., p. 103).

[10]Rasselas does not understand Imlac's explanation of his companions' motives at the time. He still believes, as do all the natives of the happy valley, that he lives in a society where envy is quelled by communal felicity--an illusion Imlac at once destroys: "There may be community . . . of material possessions, but there can never be community of love or of esteem. It must happen that one will please more than another; he that knows himself despised will always be envious; and still more envious and malevolent, if he is condemned to live in the presence of those who despise him" (Ras., XII, 534).

Immediately following this conversation Rasselas confesses his desire to escape. It is as if he has recognized the basic dishonesty of the happy valley and the complete integrity of Imlac, who claims to be free of envy himself. When the escapers get to Cairo, and Rasselas complains of his own unhappiness as opposed to the apparent cheerfulness of others, Imlac refers again to envy. He tells Rasselas: ". . . when you feel that your own gayety is counterfeit, it may justly lead you to suspect that of your companions not to be sincere. Envy is commonly reciprocal. We are long before we are convinced that

happiness is never to be found, and each believes it possessed by others, to keep alive the hope of obtaining it for himself" (ibid., XVI, 540).

[11]Quotations from, and references to, The Vanity of Human Wishes in this study are taken from Samuel Johnson, Poems, edited by E. L. McAdam, Jr., with George Milne, Vol. VI of the Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), pp. 91-109. Arabic numerals given in parentheses following quotations refer to the lines of the poem.

[12]Critics regard the peroration from two points of view. For example, David Daiches, in A Critical History of English Literature (2 vols.; London: Secker & Warburg, 1960), I, 688, sees it as a "'coda' . . . the lines round out the poem with a subdued profession of faith in the ability of the individual to come to terms with the world by cultivating the proper frame of mind. In the end it is the proper frame of mind alone that matters." On the other hand, Mary Lascelles, in "Johnson and Juvenal," from New Light on Dr. Johnson, edited by Frederick W. Hilles (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 53, regards the peroration as an "explicitly Christian conclusion . . . . Can this be, as critics have alleged, a merely conventional coda?"

[13]All quotations from, and references to, the Life in this study are taken from James Boswell, Life of Johnson, edited by George Birbeck Norman Hill (6 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964). Roman numerals, following further footnote references to the Life, represent volume numbers, and Arabic numerals indicate page numbers.

[14]Professor Marion Norman has brought to my attention that Tenerife, one of the Canary Islands, was undoubtedly a familiar name to Johnson and his readers, for the Royal Society had, from its earliest days, conducted numerous scientific experiments from the steep cliffs of the island. Furthermore, Tenerife had a strong association with religious miracles, with which Johnson may also have been familiar. See, for example, The Friar Alonso de Espinosa, The Guanches of Tenerife, The Holy Image of our Lady of Candelaria, translated and edited, with notes and an introduction, by Sir Clements Markham, KCB (London: printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1807).

[15]Boswell, Life, I, 192.

[16]Diagramatically, the allegory shows the path of reason as distinctly separate from that of religion, and hence opposes the orthodox Anglican view that reason is the sine qua non of religion. Strictly speaking, therefore, the allegory supports religious enthusiasm. Johnson intends, of course, to teach that those who keep to the true path of reason will find that ultimately it not only leads to, but also joins up with (that is, widens), religion. Those who follow the path of religion find in "rational hope" the mainstay of their progress. The discrepancy is unique to Johnson's otherwise orthodox position. One can only suggest that Johnson assumed that his reader accepted as obvious, though nonetheless essential, the intricate relationship between religion and reason and that, in an unusual fit of enthusiasm both for his topic and for his form, Johnson was blind to the inconsistency of the scheme. This enthusiasm is reflected, moreover, in the undue emphasis, one not normally found in Johnson's writings, on the superiority of religion to reason as a guide in the normal affairs of daily life. Johnson's more characteristic stance is that, while reason by itself cannot lead to happiness (only religion can provide such as is possible), it is nevertheless of more practical and concrete significance than religion for solving secular problems of existence. In Chapter XLIII of Rasselas, for example (on "The Dangerous Prevalence of the Imagination"), Imlac emphasizes the importance of reason. He makes no reference to that of religion, presumably because it bears no immediate relevance to his topic. Perhaps an even more telling illustration is that when Imlac approaches Nekayah, grief-stricken over the apparent loss of her confidant, his approach is reasoned. True, the Man of Reason's grief over his daughter's death cannot be tempered, but this is fundamentally because prior to this tragedy he had championed reason in an extremely rational, rather than reasonable, fashion. His teachings were tainted with enthusiasm for reason; in Johnson's opinion, surely they were distinctly amoral, if not immoral. The Man of Reason failed to realize that in order to exercise it correctly, it was mandatory to give reason a moral colouring, to expose it, that is, to the warm glow emanating from the precepts of religion rather than so proudly to assume that its own feeble and in effect cold rays sufficed to show the way to happiness.

[17]Voitle, The Moralist, p. 57. Voitle points out that "Squire Bluster's vicious temperament is certainly reprehensible, but from a practical point of view it is the effect of Bluster's malevolence on others which is crucial morally" (ibid., p. 60).

[18]Quotations from, and references to, the Lives in this study are taken from Samuel Johnson, Lives of the English Poets, edited by George Birbeck Norman Hill (3 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905). Roman numerals given in parentheses following quotations refer to the volume numbers of the Lives, and Arabic numerals to the pages of the volume.

[19]Bate demonstrates the immense range of Johnson's intellectual powers, but inevitably fails to define Johnson's specific genius.

[20]Quotations from, and references to the Preface in this study are taken from the first of two volumes of Johnson on Shakespeare, edited by Arthur Sherbo, with an Introduction by Bertrand H. Bronson, Vol. VII of the Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 59-113. Arabic numerals given in parentheses following the quotations refer to the numbers of the pages.

[21]Boswell, Life, I, 458.

CHAPTER II

[1]In Voitle's view, Rasselas consists of two main themes: that personal happiness is illusory and that it is unattainable. He argues that Rasselas discovers ultimately that the "'happy' valley mirrors the world" (Voitle, The Moralist, p. 39).

[2]See Chester F. Chapin, The Religious Thought of Samuel Johnson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968), p. 97: "Johnson has no fundamental quarrel with the moral precepts of stoicism. Like the stoics, he admires courage and fortitude, and, generally speaking, what the stoic writers agree to call 'virtue' Johnson is willing to accept as such. His basic criticism of stoicism is simply this--that it doesn't work."

[3]See Voitle, The Moralist, pp. 34-37, for a particularly careful discussion of Johnson's attitude towards "the restraints upon freedom of choice and upon the accomplishment of what is chosen" (ibid, p. 34). The entire chapter on "Reason and Freedom" is of particular relevance to this present discussion.

[4]Voitle, The Moralist, p. 41. S. C. Roberts, in Doctor Johnson and Others (Cambridge: University Press, 1958), p. 48, points out: "The history of Charles XII was modern history in Johnson's day, but Johnson has lifted it into the category of the universal."

[5]This is not to suggest that Johnson means that man should be passively content, but rather that he should attempt to accept life as he experiences it. In Rambler No. 178 Johnson asserts: "The reigning error of mankind is, that we are not content with the conditions on which the goods of life are granted." See also the conclusion of Nekayah's advice to Rasselas in Chapter XXIX cited in the immediately preceding quotation.

CHAPTER III

[1]A. E. Housman, Collected Poems (New York, Chicago, San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1965), p. 111, ll. 17-18.

[2]Richard B. Schwartz, in Samuel Johnson and the New Science (Madison, Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972), discusses Johnson's defence of the virtuoso in some detail; see pp. 112-16.

[3]Boswell, Life, I, 458.

[4]"At this time I observed upon the dial-plate of his watch a short Greek inscription, taken from the New Testament . . . being the first words of our SAVIOUR'S solemn admonition to the improvement of that time which is allowed us to prepare for eternity: 'the night cometh, when no man can work'" (Boswell, Life, II, 57).

[5]Quotations from, and references to, the Works in this study are taken from The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D. (9 vols.; London: W. Pickering, 1825). Roman numerals given in parentheses following the quotations refer to the volume numbers of the Works, and Arabic numerals to the pages of the volume. This edition of Johnson's Works should be distinguished from The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson (referred to in this study, in abbreviated form, as Yale Works), which is as yet incomplete but has been used in this study as a source of reference wherever possible.

[6]Voitle, The Moralist, p. 52. See his chapter "The Nature of Johnson's Altruism," pp. 47-58, in the course of which he writes: "Johnson believes that beneficent actions result from an affection, weak in itself, which is improved by the instructions of reason and the admonition of religion" (ibid., p. 53).

[7]Quotations from, and references to, The Adventurer essays in this study are taken from Samuel Johnson, The Idler and The Adventurer, Vol. II of The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, edited by W. J. Bate, John M. Bullitt, and L. F. Powell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 321-497. Arabic numerals given in parentheses following quotations refer to the numbers of the essays.

[8]Boswell, Life, II, 9.

[9]Voitle, The Moralist, pp. 95-101, discusses Johnson's "diverse attitudes towards riches and the rich" (p. 95). Voitle argues that, in Johnson's view, "There is nothing essentially wrong about acquiring wealth. . . . The trouble is that wealth is seldom desired on virtuous principles and he who does desire it on them is not likely to get it. Johnson's mistrust of the acquisition of wealth arises from the basic contradiction involved; the motive which is most successful in impelling men to accumulate a great fortune is that which is least likely to promote virtuous use of it, avarice" (ibid., p. 96).

[10]Imlac is an exception. His integrity is so total that, as he gains Rasselas' confidence, he teaches him the virtues of trust.

[11]Upon entering Cairo, Imlac tells Rasselas that "it will soon be observed that we are rich; our reputation will procure us access to all whom we shall desire to know" (Ras. XVI, 540). Money, therefore, is no apparent problem; or is it? Perhaps it is because he need not relate his commitment to reward that, in the end, Rasselas makes no choice of life. Necessity, to modify a familiar saw, may be the mother of commitment. The point is essentially academic because the whole intent of Rasselas is to illustrate a conviction to which one's financial condition bears little relationship.

[12]It is interesting to note how the three react to this interview. Rasselas remarks; Nekayah suspects; and Pekuah conjectures. That is, Rasselas reasons; Nekayah employs her emotions; Pekuah uses her imagination. Significantly, Pekuah's conjecture is of the most value: ". . . nothing . . . is more common than to call our own condition, the condition of life" (Ras., XLV, 600). It is a truism perhaps, but worth the notice of all readers.

[13]She hopes "that the time would come, when with a few virtuous and elegant companions, she would gather flowers planted by her own hand" (Ras., XIX, 548). She abandons this vision only after hearing Imlac's discourse on "The Dangerous Prevalence of the Imagination" (ibid., XLV, 595-97).

[14]This is surely a unique instance of Imlac deviating from the truth. He may have done so out of

sheer boredom with Pekuah, or as a jest to teach her, if possible, the pains of credulity. Imlac, at any rate, is not totally humourless.

[15]The material on which the examination of Levet is based does not belong to the genre of biography--certainly not as Johnson defines biography in Rambler No. 60. No mention, for example, is made of Levet's foibles, his vices, or of his domestic habits. However, since not even Johnson attempted to write the biography of an "obscure" individual, I have used this work faute de mieux, because in it Johnson focuses upon Levet's record as an "obscurely wise" individual who, in Johnson's view, devoted himself to the proper fulfilment of his role in society. This fact was reason enough, for Johnson at least, to compose these elegiac stanzas.

[16]As Boswell reports, Johnson remarked on one occasion: "Being a King does not exclude a man from society. Great Kings have always been social. The King of Prussia, the only great King at present, is very social" (Life, I, 442).

[17]See Boswell, Life, I, 434-35; I, 442; II, 475; III, 334-35; IV, 107.

[18]Boswell, Life, III, 334.

[19]This commentary illustrates better than any other the importance Johnson attached to motivation behind performance of an act of virtue. Savage's gesture was amazingly selfless and could only be made spontaneously. In performing it he transcended self-interest. Virtue can, therefore, be performed only in the present; a condition which requires a total involvement in life.

[20]A. R. Humphreys, The Augustan World (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 43.

[21]In Johnson, Boswell and Their Circle: Essays presented to Lawrence Fitzroy Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 86, it is stated that the biographies of Boerhaave and Morin were translated by Samuel Johnson from the eulogies by Fontenelle. On what grounds this statement is made, is unclear. Roberts, in Doctor Johnson and Others, p. 83, says in regard to this same biography that "a memorial oration delivered at Leyden gave him the facts he [Johnson] needed for a series of articles in the

Gentlemen's Magazine." Roberts' statement seems the more reliable, given the very Johnsonian sentiments and style in this short work. Cf. ibid., p. 87, where Roberts states that Morin was translated from an éloge by Fontenelle.

[22]Savage's record in this regard is questionable but, even more so, highly relevant, and will be examined later in this chapter.

[23]Boswell, Life, III, 291.

[24]Johnson's essential view of Savage, the individual, is perhaps best summarized in the remark: "He may be considered as a child exposed to all the temptations of indigence at an age when resolution was not yet strengthened by conviction, nor virtue confirmed by habit . . . " (Lives, II, 381).

CHAPTER IV

[1]In Rambler No. 87, Johnson specifies and discusses these motivations at greater length.

[2]Of course, a book may exploit current fashions and enjoy the recommendation of novelty, this bringing financial returns to its author. As long as the book is honest, Johnson would have no objections to its success. Nor would he have much interest in it: fashion changes, and novelty wears off. Therefore, the book would have no lasting value, but it may be a source of pleasure to the society of its time.

[3]The concluding lines of this paragraph define, of course, Johnson's ultimate vision of the poet as a teacher of the leaders of society.

CHAPTER V

[1]Alexandre Beljame, Men of Letters and the English Public in the Eighteenth Century, edited by Bonamy Dobrée, translated by E. O. Lorimer (London: Kegan Paul, 1948), p. 212.

[2]Among the critical discussions of A Tale of a Tub, one of the most relevant is by Edward Rosenheim, Swift and the Satirist's Art (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

[3]Lacking sufficient judgment, invention, and imagination, they dared treat matters of which they had no real understanding and which they therefore had no right to discuss. According to Johnson (Lives, III, 247), and no doubt in accordance with the eighteenth-century attitude, judgment, invention, and imagination were the three ingredients of genius.

[4]Between the publication of A Tale of a Tub and The Dunciad, there were, of course, many other complaints over the dangers of Grub Street. For example, the clergyman Edward Young, in the first of two "Epistles to Mr. Pope Concerning the Authors of the Age," expressed, in 1730, similar views of the scribblers' activities (ll. 1-20) and of the various categories into which they fall (ll. 35-54). The epistle closes:

> As, when the trumpet sounds, th' o'erloaded state
> Discharges all her poor and profligate;
> Crimes of all kinds dishonour'd weapons wield,
> And prisons pour their filth into the field.
> Thus Nature's refuse, and the dregs of men,
> Compose the black militia of the pen.

See Edward Young, The Complete Works: Poetry and Prose, edited by James Nichols, with a Life of the Author by John Doran (1854) (2 vols.; reprinted Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1968), II, 38.

Surely, this is a matter of the pot calling the kettle black!

[5]Aubrey L. Williams, Pope's Dunciad (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1955), p. 103.

[6]At the age of twenty-one, Swift was forced to "solicit" patronage (See Lives, III, 3); Gay depended upon it; Arbuthnot was a successful doctor; Young was a churchman; and Pope had private means.

[7]See Johnson's comment as reported by Boswell, Life, III, 332-33: "It has been maintained that this superfoetation, this teeming of the press in modern times, is prejudicial to good literature, because it obliges us to read so much of what is of inferior value, in order to be in the fashion; so that better works are neglected for want of time, because a man will have more gratification of his vanity in conversation, from having read modern books, than from having read the best works of antiquity. But it must be considered, that we have now more knowledge generally diffused; all our ladies read now, which is a great extension."

CHAPTER VI

[1]It is important to note that Johnson refers in Rambler No. 122 to English writers of history. Certainly he had considerable respect for the classical historians.

[2]"Clarendon, Edward Hyde, earl of (1609-74) . . . As M.P. . . . he at first sided with the opposition, but, as a strong Anglican, from 1641 onwards he was one of the chief supporters and advisers of the king. [He was] . . . lord chancellor and chief minister to Charles II from 1658, retaining this position at the Restoration. . . . He subsequently became unpopular, partly owing to the ill-success of the Dutch war; and being impeached, he fled to France in 1667 and lived at Montpellier and Rouen, dying at the latter place. . . .

"The 'History'--'The True Historical Narrative of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England'--was first printed from a transcript under the supervision of Clarendon's son in 1702-4, the original manuscript . . . first used in Bandinel's edition (1826). But Bandinel either deciphered it badly or garbled it, and the first true text is that of Dr. Macray (Oxford, 1888). The 'Life of Clarendon,' by himself, appeared in 1759, the 'History of the Irish Rebellion and Civil Wars in Ireland' in 1721 (subsequently incorporated in the 'History'), and selections from his correspondence ('Clarendon State Papers'), edited by Scrope and Monkhouse, in 1767-86.

"Clarendon was chancellor of the University of Oxford from 1660 until his fall. His works were presented to the University by his heirs, and from the profits of the publication of the 'History' a new printing-house, which bore his name, was built for the University Press (q.v.)." See the Oxford Companion to English Literature, compiled and edited by Sir Paul Harvey, 3rd ed., p. 166. The last point is surely significant; he was a benefactor of posterity though not by virtue of his writings.

[3]"Knolles, Richard (1550?-1610); author of a 'General Historie of the Turkes' (1603), not only valuable as a contribution to contemporary knowledge of the East, but interesting for the influence which Byron acknowledges that it had upon himself" (Oxford Companion, p. 436). That Byron and Johnson should have appreciated this work, though presumably on different grounds, links together two men of letters who otherwise shared little in common.

[4]Lloyd, William (1627-1717), bishop of Lichfield from 1692-1700, was a violent anti-papist who wrote numerous works of theology. "Half crazed by an unremitting study of the apocalyptic visions Lloyd came to number himself among the prophets." Quoted from the Dictionary of National Biography, edited by Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1908), XI, 1316.

[5]Baker, Thomas (1656-1740) "was a model of an able, high-minded, and conscientious scholar, his time and energies being mainly devoted to antiquarian historical research" (Dictionary of National Biography, I, 939). In the comment quoted in my text Johnson undoubtedly had in mind the first 23 manuscript volumes of Baker's projected Athenae Cantabrigenses which constitute part of the Harleian collection.

[6]As G. B. Hill points out in the "Appendix" to Boswell's Life, I, 538: "Miss Burney records an interesting piece of criticism by Johnson. 'There are,' he said, 'three distinct kind [sic] of judges upon all new authors or productions; the first are those who know no rules, but pronounce entirely from their natural taste and feelings; the second are those who know and judge by rules; and the third are those who know, but are above the rules.' Mme. D'Arblay's Diary, i. 180." Since Dick Minim belongs to none of these categories, he is clearly a poseur.

[7]But none as useful as Dryden who, presumably because he did not edit Shakespeare, is not mentioned in the Preface. Johnson's account in the life of Dryden makes up for this omission. Referring to one paragraph of Dryden's An Essay of Dramatic Poetry, Johnson writes: "His portraits of the English dramatists are wrought with great spirit and diligence. The account of Shakespeare may stand as a perpetual model of encomiastick criticism; exact without minuteness, and lofty without exaggeration . . . . In a few lines is exhibited a character so extensive in its comprehension and so curious in its limitations, that nothing can be added, diminished, or reformed; nor can the editors and admirers of Shakespeare, in all their emulation of reverence, boast of much more than of having diffused and paraphrased this epitome of excellence, of having changed Dryden's gold for baser metal, of lower value though of greater bulk" (Lives, I, 412). This is extravagant praise for a thirty-five-line description of Shakespeare's soul. Johnson's own Preface, however, is in many ways an elaboration of Dryden's account and includes phrases from it.

[8]As, for example, Lewis Theobald and William Warburton.

[9]And yet, Arthur Sherbo, in an editorial footnote to the Preface, remarks that "Lewis Theobald, one of the best of the eighteenth-century editors of Shakespeare, was much misunderstood and contemned" (Preface, p. 95, n. 7). Such are the winds of critical change.

[10]Yale Works, VII, 43, n. 3.

[11]To judge from Johnson's many derogatory references to Warburton (as a critic, at least) in the Lives and elsewhere, Johnson might have agreed with the Oxford Companion, in which Warburton is described as "a bad scholar, a literary bully, and a man of untrustworthy character" (p. 834).

[12]Besides it is only by recognizing an author's merits and defects that a critic can achieve a balanced judgment--something that Johnson, in his critiques of Lycidas and the Essay on Man, for example, failed to maintain.

[13]Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism 1560-1960, edited by James Lowry Clifford (New York. Oxford University Press, 1962), p. x.

[14]Boswell, Life, I, 256.

[15]He may thereby satisfy an elemental prerequisite of writing--a perfect knowledge of the subject he undertakes to teach. Moreover, since human nature is always the same, his teachings will bear general relevance to all his readers. No moralist better adhered to this dictum than Johnson.

[16]Another example is Johnson's review of Pope's Essay on Man to be discussed later in this chapter.

[17]In Boswell's view, "Jenyns was possessed of lively talents, and a style eminently pure and easy, and could very happily play with a light subject, either in prose or verse; but when he speculated on that most difficult and excruciating question, the Origin of Evil, he 'ventured far beyond his depth'" (Life, I, 315).

[18]See Arthur O. Lovejoy, The Great Chain of Being (New York: Harper & Row, 1960). Lovejoy, in comparing Voltaire's and Johnson's attacks on the Chain-of-Being theory, says that Johnson's "was, somewhat surprisingly, the more profound and more dialectical" (ibid., p. 253). On the page following, Lovejoy says that "Johnson's criticism reached very nearly to the root of the matter. If it had been duly considered by his contemporaries, the late eighteenth century might have been marked by the breakdown of the principle of continuity and of the traditional argument for optimism, which he also vigorously assailed in the same writing. But it does not appear that either his or Voltaire's criticism produced much effect" (ibid., p. 254).

[19]Addison's method of serving as a popular teacher of morals and manners was, in Johnson's opinion, brilliant, even to his "frequent publications of short papers" (Lives, II, 93), a practice which, though he was not the first to introduce, he was the first to make proper use of. So successful were the Tatler and the Spectator, that they had a "perceptible influence upon the conversation of that time, and taught the frolick and the gay to unite merriment with decency--an effect which they can never wholly lose, while they continue to be among the first books by which both sexes are initiated into the elegances of knowledge" (ibid., p. 95).

[20]Donald F. Bond, in his "Introduction," quotes C. S. Lewis' relevant statement: "'That sober code of manners under which we still live to-day, in so far as we have any code at all, and which foreigners call hypocrisy, is in some important degree a legacy from the Tatler and the Spectator.'" See Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, et al., The Spectator, edited, with an introduction and notes, by Donald F. Bond (5 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. cv.

[21]Boswell, Life, IV, 38.

[22]Ibid.

[23]William R. Keast, in "Johnson's Criticism of the Metaphysical Poets," A Journal of English Literary History, 18, (March, 1950), 59-70, argues "for the essential correctness of Johnson's censure of the metaphysical poets. First we must notice that his criticism is by no means unqualified . . . . They have a quality which Johnson prizes beyond most others--originality; and when they err it is

not through lack of ability or pains but through a failure of intention . . . . Nor, again, is Johnson's general criticism of the metaphysical style equivalent to a condemnation of the individual poems of Donne, Cowley and the rest. . . . What Johnson criticizes is the characteristic manner of a school--of 'a race of writers'--which in individual poems may not predominate or may be assimilated to a compelling effect. And who will say that he has not hit off accurately the distinguishing aims and characteristics of this school?" (ibid., p. 68).

[24]See Lives, III, 393, para. 209.

[25]Boswell also reports this remark by Johnson in Life, I, 225.

[26]"He [Denham] appears to have been one of the first that understood the necessity of emancipating translation from the drudgery of counting lines and interpreting single words" (Lives, I, 79). Johnson goes on to say, however, that Denham's performance does not measure up to his perception. He concludes his study by describing Denham as "one of the writers that improved our taste and advanced our language, and whom we ought therefore to read with gratitude, though having done much he left much to do" (ibid., p. 82).

[27]For Johnson's "History of Translation" see Idler Nos. 68 and 69. In the first of these essays Johnson refers to translation "by which the impediments which bar the way to science are, in some measure, removed" as the only kind of writing which "may justly be claimed by the moderns as their own." The Romans, he explains, translated Euripides and Menander but did so more "for exercise or amusement, than for fame." The Arabs translated classical works in medicine and philosophy. "Whether they attempted the poets is not known; their literary zeal was vehement, but it was short, and probably expired before they had time to add the arts of elegance to those of necessity" (ibid.). In Europe, Johnson concludes, when "those arts which had been long obscurely studied in the gloom of monasteries become the general favourites of mankind . . . curiosity and translation [ultimately] found their way to Britain" (ibid.).

Idler No. 69 traces the evolution of the art of translation in English literature, of which the account in Dryden is a resumé. The essay concludes: "Dryden saw very early that closeness best preserved an author's sense, and that freedom best exhibited his spirit; he therefore will

deserve the highest praise who can give a representation at once faithful and pleasing, who can convey the same thoughts with the same graces, and who when he translates changes nothing but the language."

In Johnson's view, the state of the art of translation is clearly an indication of the state of a civilized and elegant society.

[28]" . . . nobody had a more just aversion to general satire." See Hester Lynch Piozzi, Anecdotes of Samuel Johnson, edited, with an introduction, by Sydney Castle Roberts (Cambridge: University Press, 1932), p. 73.

[29]Boswell, Life, II, 369.

[30]Garth's friend, Jonathan Swift, was, in Johnson's view, totally unfit to write satire by the very nature of his disposition and character. Though Johnson grants Swift's claim to be "an original" and recognizes his satirical powers, he condemns Swift's writings, particularly his satire, because though Swift censured wickedness and folly, he did so in a perverse fashion. Johnson's account of Swift's life is, without doubt, the most hostile of the entire collection. It is evident that Johnson realized this. Following a discourse on Swift's character as he saw it, and having given Swift's work attention totally inadequate either for the eighteenth- or the twentieth-century reader, Johnson, as if conscience-stricken, inserts the partial opinion of Dr. Delany, Swift's fond friend. Ironically, this account, for all its extravagance of language, culminates with a far-sighted assertion: "' . . . the character of his life will appear like that of his writings; they will both bear to be re-considered and re-examined with the utmost attention, and always discover new beauties and excellences upon every examination.

"They will bear to be considered as the sun, in which the brightness will hide the blemishes; and whenever petulant ignorance, pride, malice, malignity, or envy interposes to cloud or sully his fame, I will take upon me to pronounce that the eclipse will not last long'" (Lives, III, 62).

[31]One of those faults, perhaps, is found in the astonishing force of Milton's intellect. As Johnson says, admittedly in a somewhat unrelated context, "astonishment is a toilsome pleasure; he [a reader] is soon weary of wondering and longs to be diverted" (Lives, I, 212).

[32]Amongst the several discussions of Johnson's ambiguous attitudes towards Paradise Lost, one of the best and most relevant is by Helen Darbishire, Milton's Paradise Lost (Folcroft, Pa.: Folcroft Press, 1969).

[33]As a means of appreciating Johnson's recognition of the immensity of Milton's undertaking, one need only consider Johnson's comments in the Lives of other attempts to write epics.

Johnson clearly regards the several epics of Sir Richard Blackmore as the somewhat absurd efforts of an amateur poet. Blackmore "was made a poet not by necessity but inclination, and wrote not for livelihood but for fame" (Lives, II, 237).

Of The Davideis, Cowley's unfinished epic, Johnson says that "in this undertaking Cowley is, tacitly at least, confessed to have miscarried" (Lives, I, 49). Johnson then voices with particular clarity his familiar objections to "sacred history" as a subject for the poet.

Johnson expresses great enthusiasm for Dryden's projected but unwritten "epick poem on the actions of Arthur or the Black Prince" primarily because Dryden "had imagined a new kind of contest between the guardian angels of kingdoms . . . without any intended opposition to the purposes of the Supreme Being, of which all created minds must in part be ignorant.

"This is the most reasonable scheme of celestial interposition that ever was formed" (Lives, I, 385).

[34]Quotations from, and references to, the Letters in this study are taken from The Letters of Samuel Johnson: With Mrs. Thrale's Genuine Letters to Him, collected and edited by R. W. Chapman (3 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952). Roman numerals, given in parentheses following the quotations, refer to the volume number and Arabic numerals to the number of the letter.

[35]With these changes came also the beginnings of great prosperity, in which "luxuries" such as poetry were to flourish. See Johnson's citation of the "common remark," as reported by Boswell, "that . . . there is no necessity for our having poetry at all, it being merely a luxury (Life, II, 351).

[36]The "common reader" is defined as "that middle race of students who read for pleasure and accomplishment" (Lives, I, 43).

[37]John Dennis, in a pamphlet written in response to what Johnson reports was a supposed slight upon his (Dennis') reputation contained in the Essay, admits its success "to be secured by the false opinions then prevalent" (Lives, III, 96)--a fact which allows Johnson to argue that, if critical knowledge had not been in need of correction, Pope's work

would have had little impact. It was, Johnson contends, precisely because of the "false opinions then prevalent" that Pope's enlightened precepts gained all the more radiance.

[38]From a letter written by George Berkeley to Alexander Pope, May 1, 1714. See Lives, III, 104, n. 1.

[39]Cf. Maynard Mack, The Garden and the City: Retirement and Politics in the Later Poetry of Pope (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969). Mack effectively challenges Johnson's view by emphasizing the political bias of Pope.

[1]This is also the crux of Johnson's view of the relationship between the value of an author's work, its effect upon society, and his worth as a private individual. In theory, these two considerations are, in Johnson's opinion, related only to the extent that an author's private strengths and weaknesses colour the contents of his writings. In practice, Johnson's own prejudices and value judgments frequently play havoc with the theory, though it is important to bear in mind that whatever and however interesting an author's private record as an individual may be, the attitudes that his writings reflect will be far more enduring.

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