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In Full Possession of the Present Moment

**Samuel Johnson, Reading
and the Everyday**

by

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Abstract

'In Full Possession of the Present Moment' *Samuel Johnson, Reading, and the Everyday*

This thesis reclaims Johnson, in both his life and his writings, as a central figure in the ongoing transformations of literate culture. I use as touchstone Michel de Certeau's theory concerning 'everyday life.' From its origins in a lengthy survey of Johnson as a literary projector, the thesis surveys a range of texts and ideas, and presents Johnson as a figure of power and immediacy.

The tension between life and writing, which is fundamental to Johnson's reputation, is not glossed over, but explored so as to tease out the facets of his literary character which both define his vividly central presence, as well as placing him in a largely oppositional stance with regard to what literature has since become. The strengths and limitations of Boswell's depiction of Johnson are carefully examined.

Johnson is historically located at the beginning of mass reading, and is alive to the many anxieties that attend times of such change, such as today. Although the characterisation of Johnson by recent scholars as a late renaissance man is a productive reading which my work reinforces, his sense of the shifts in the shape of literature and discourse shows him looking far ahead. In two chapters, I trace his relationship to the comparable figure of Sir Francis Bacon, in both his *Essays* and *The Advancement of Learning*, in seeking to construct a language in which to speak directly to people, outside of the confines of literary art.

Using the theories of Gérard Genette, I figure the characteristic discourse of Johnson as *diction*: a far more full and positive term than mere prose. It is the language of conversation, and of the everyday, and a sub-theme of the *Lives of the Poets*. The everyday as a distinct location emerges between Bacon's and Johnson's time, and Johnson is anxious that as the everyday is defined it is also increasingly circumscribed by various strategies of control and exploitation. The strategies of which he is most aware are textual and paratextual ones.

Genette's study of paratextuality is suggestive of how devices and practices which seem external to the study of literature are understood and employed by Johnson. His *Dictionary*, in many ways an anomalous work for a major literary figure, is shown as a quintessentially everyday work, one which undermines strategies of control and places textual power into the hands of the reader, but through which Johnson is nevertheless able to pursue his own writerly purposes.

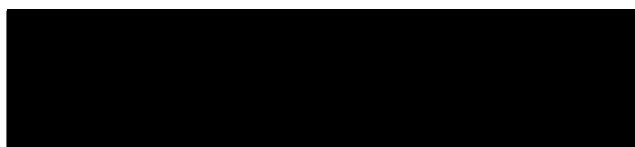
Johnson sees much literary art as threatening to colonise the everyday, especially by what I call 'textual extent.' I draw attention to and survey the minor and non-canonical (indeed, anti-canonical) genres to which Johnson was notably attracted, and described as *minutiae literariae*, and which are essentially implicated with the everyday, and which model a discourse which invites both rational self-awareness and true human relatedness.

Both textual attraction and the everyday intersect in the subject of pleasure. Johnson's affirmation of "harmless pleasure" I contrast with his cynicism about cultural pleasures, which I explore through the *Idler*, and the theme of travel, as well as Boswell's pre-occupation with savagery, and his depiction of Johnson's relationship to Samuel Foote.

The power of the mind to regulate bodily sensation is for Johnson a power by which to retain ownership of the everyday. I consider the place of memory in Johnson's thought, as a necessary ingredient of both individual and social identity. Memory, as transmitted through writing and conversation, enables us to both occupy the everyday and to move forward. The work ends with a brief account of Johnson and resolution.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university and that, to the best of my knowledge, the thesis contains no material previously published by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.



PAUL TANKARD

Preface and Acknowledgements

Through the course of my two Johnsonian theses, I am grateful for having been in the orbit of my supervisor, Professor Kevin Hart. In addition to the usual supervisory discussion and guidance, I have been privileged to read Professor Hart's own work on Johnson as it has proceeded. When his book, *Samuel Johnson and the Culture of Property*, appeared in 1999, it was disturbing for me to find how much of what I had begun to think of as my own Johnsonian preoccupations and insights have been inspired by his conversation.

Professor Clive Probyn, as associate supervisor, has looked over my work during Professor Hart's absence on leave for two extended periods. The Appendix on Johnson as literary projector has been read by Professor Harold Love, and this and other sections of my work carefully examined by the hawk-eyed Dr. Brian McMullin. (Similarly hawk-eyed readers should be able to discern which sections.) This piece has been accepted for publication in *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual*, for vol. 13 (forthcoming, 2002). Dr. Constant Mews supplied me with occasional translations from the Latin.

I would like also to thank the many Johnson scholars worldwide from whose published work I have benefitted, and in particular those with whom I have had direct contact, and who have never failed to reply with courteous interest, and often with generous enthusiasm. Some years ago, the late Dr. David Fleeman sent me two long letters in response to queries about *The Rambler*, when I was writing my Master's thesis, *Reading The Rambler*, the predecessor of this present project. His *magnum opus*, the *Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (2000), appeared too late for me to use it as much as I would have liked, but his work and his example remain inspirational. Other overseas scholars who have responded by letter or email to queries of mine on Johnsonian subjects have been Robert DeMaria, David Fairer, Judith Hawley, Paul Korshin, Jack Lynch, Anne McDermott, James McLaverty, Allen Reddick and Bruce Redford. Whether or not the topics that I was pursuing at the time have made it into the completed thesis, I am very grateful for the contact with the worldwide Johnsonian community. I may say of the world of Johnson scholarship, as Johnson said of the habit of literary quotation, "It is a good thing: there is a *community of mind* in it."

The Johnson Society of Australia was established in 1996, with its headquarters in Melbourne. For the past three years I have been Publications Editor for the JSA, and have been greatly stimulated in my work by the papers and lectures presented to the Society's meetings, and the friendship and refreshingly unprofessional literary enthusiasm of my fellow members.

For other bibliographical help, I thank John W. Byrne, the custodian of the best collection — public or private — in Australia of material related to Johnson. Martin Hoare, formerly of Camberwell Books, put my way at an affordable price the tatty old collection of five of G.B. Hill's Johnsonian editions, in fourteen volumes, formerly owned by the great nineteenth-century editor's son and grand-daughter, which has been fundamental to my research. The Monash University Library Rare Books Department has been a first and often last port of call for help, information and books, and the staff under Richard Overell have supported my work in ways too numerable to mention.

One is ambiguous in one's thanks to I.T. people, feeling that they are as much responsible for the almost daily computer problems and anxieties, as for finding ways to, if not exactly solve the problems, at least temporarily subvert them. If universities are going to insist that every scholar be completely dependent on this congeries of technology, they should at least ensure that it is reliable, that we are properly informed about its use and management, and that expert assistance

is constantly available. Constantly updating perfectly satisfactory systems and tools just to amuse the I.T. people is surely a poor use of scarce resources. Trevor Smith and Jonathan Blythe both helped me recover from temporarily heart-stopping disasters.

I am grateful to Professor Jim Whitelaw, the foundation Director of the Arts Graduate School at Monash University, who — perhaps merely to tidy the place up — invited me to move my books and files into a vacant office in the Postgraduate Centre. Dr. Caroline Spencer, my co-tenant in this space, has been an unfailing source of advice, sympathy and good cheer. Many other students in the PGC, almost all in disciplines far removed from my own, have been good friends, and have provided a serious, stimulating, friendly and collegial environment. I would also acknowledge the assistance and courtesy of the various Centre supervisors over the period of my tenancy, Pam Miller, Grant Johnson, Vesna Nikolovski and Joanne Ligouris, and also Anna Hussar.

It is a pleasure to thank generations of English Department administrative staff, Sheila Wilson, Alik Mahon, Berna Tyndall, Pauline Smith, Gail Ward, Carlin Payne, Judy Keogh and Alison Ling, for constant friendly assistance over a long period.

My most important acknowledgements, for things innumerable and beyond naming, are in the dedication.

This work is for Tanya,
who has upheld me throughout,
and for my parents

Abbreviations

Throughout this work I give full bibliographical details of every text (excluding the page span of quoted articles), when first referred to, in the footnotes. Thereafter, I give a truncated but readily recognisable reference, with page numbers. A full list of the titles, with complete descriptions, may be found gathered in the Bibliography. There are in this thesis (particularly in the Appendix) a considerable number of texts of which I merely note the existence; beyond giving the date of publication to establish their historical contexts, I do not give details of these.

The volume numbers of journals and multi-volume works will be given in Roman or Arabic numerals, as given in the volume.

The following works are referred to by abbreviations throughout, cited by volume and page.

- Johns. Misc.* *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 2 v. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1897). References will be preceded by the name of the text cited.
- Letters* *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford, 5 v. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U.P. "The Hyde Edition," 1992-94).
- Life* James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. L.F. Powell, 6 v. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1934-64).
- Lives* Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the English Poets*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 3 v. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1905). References will be preceded by the name of the poet whose life is cited, if this is not given in the body of the thesis.

For the writings of Johnson, I have mainly used the volumes published to date of *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 1958-), references to which are abbreviated as follows:

- Diaries* I. *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, ed. E.L. McAdam, Jr., with Donald and Mary Hyde (1958).
- Idler, or
Adventurer* II. *'The Idler' and 'The Adventurer'*, ed. W.J. Bate, John M. Bullitt, L.F. Powell (1963).
- Rambler* III, IV, V. *The Rambler*, ed. W.J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (1969).
- Johnson on
Shakespeare* VII, VIII. *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo, intro. Bertrand H. Bronson (1968).
- Sermons* XIV. *Sermons*, ed. Jean H. Hagstrum and James Gray (1978).
- Rasselas* XVI. *'Rasselas' and Other Tales*, ed. Gwin J. Kolb (1990).

When quoting from the *Letters*, the *Life* and the *Diaries*, I have usually given dates as well, in order to facilitate reference checking by readers with other editions. The numbers of individual essays and sermons will be given before the volume and page numbers.

Johnson's *Dictionary* has been quoted from the first edition, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 v. (London: Strahan [et al.], 1755), referred to throughout as *Dictionary*. Most citations are clearly of specific entries, for which the word itself is the best reference. When I have used other — frequently minor — writings of Johnson, I have used other scholarly editions, or in some cases, the original editions. Full details are of course always supplied.

In parts of the thesis where particular texts are referred to frequently and/or in short extracts, I have sometimes put the brief page references to these works in my text, in order to cut down on the number of repetitive footnotes. This is particularly the case with the long Appendix on Johnson's literary projects. I object in principle to in-text references, finding them to be inappropriately intrusive in humane discourse, but the character of this portion of the thesis is different to the prose of the discursive chapters.

The Appendix, which was in fact the starting point of my research, has in the end cut itself loose from the body of the thesis. It has resonances, some noted by me and some not, in every chapter of the thesis. It has been accepted for publication in 2002, in *The Age of Johnson*, v. 13. For this reason, it is bibliographically self-contained.

INTRODUCTION

**On Lists and Literature, the Everyday,
and the Way Paper Crumples**

I. Reading Johnson's Reputation

A standard topic among Johnsonians is the nature of Samuel Johnson's reputation.¹ It is not, I hasten to add, my subject; but it does offer an important point of orientation. One of the sets of parameters for this discussion may be summarised as follows: Johnson is a great writer, on the basis of his literary work, which is almost unread outside of university English departments; but he is also a popular literary figure, although this is mainly due to his being the subject of Boswell's famous and immensely more widely-read biography. Neither of these propositions requires much proving: Johnson is the subject of a vast amount of scholarship annually,² but (like a number of writers of lower-level or more sectional literary reputation, such as C.S. Lewis or G.K. Chesterton) he is also the subject of the sort of amateur literary fan attention about which academe can be somewhat supercilious.³

¹ The pioneer of this topic was Bertrand Bronson, in his essay, "The Double Tradition of Dr. Johnson," *ELH: A Journal of English Literary History* XVIII (June 1951), 90-116.

² Jack Lynch's online "Bibliography of Johnsonian Studies, 1986-98," which has also been published in *The Age of Johnson* 10 (1999), 405-519, lists 1256 items (excluding reviews) for a period of twelve years, an average of 100 items per year. As an alternative measure, I count seventy-three books about Johnson that have been published in twenty years since 1980.

³ This sort of interest may be measured by manifestations which have no equivalent to scholarly gate-keepers: literary societies, websites, and quotations. We will consider his presence in dictionaries of quotations shortly.

As for websites: there is an online index of *British and Irish Authors on the Web*, conducted by Mitsuoka Matsuko of Nagoya University, which (as of its update on 15 November 1999) listed 1205 authors, from *Beowulf* to Janice McGren (b. 1965). There are sites given for 606 of these, although a considerable number of the sites seem to be entries from defunct encyclopedias, literary anthologies, dictionaries of quotations and suchlike, that have been up-loaded *en masse* — the sort of work with which the 'web is cluttered. Some are on-line course materials for American universities. But a good many are sites established by fans of the writers in question. For what it is worth, Johnson is the subject of nine sites (as are Mary Shelley, the Brontës, Wordsworth, William Morris, D.H. Lawrence, Orwell and Beckett), and there are 28 authors who have more sites than this. Of authors earlier than Johnson, only Milton (10), Chaucer (12) and Shakespeare (41) are the subject of more sites. There are 10 given for C.S. Lewis and 11 for G.K. Chesterton. After Shakespeare, the most popular authors by this account are Jane Austen (38), Joyce (32), Lewis Carroll and Conan Doyle (both 26), and Oscar Wilde (19). This fascinating study reveals that Aphra Behn and Isabella Lucy Bishop (both 5) are of greater interest than Pope and Shaw (2 each) or Auden (3). See Online <<http://lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/%7Ematsuoka/UK-authors.html>>.

Before we are tempted to take sides in this dispute, or even to admit its validity, we should recognise that it is at least arguable (and I would argue) that it was part of Boswell's particular genius accurately and persuasively to identify, exploit and transmit what would have been — even without his intervention — many of the major themes of Johnson's life and work. Johnson is, for instance, a far funnier writer than one would believe from a reading of even his sympathetic critics. Therefore, readers who enjoy the style of wit that has lead to passages of Boswell's *Life* taking up so much space in dictionaries of quotations, would I believe also enjoy Johnson's own *Rasselas* or *The Rambler*. I would argue also that both of these works, with the short chapters and heavy use of dialogue of the one, and the short discontinuous texts and (original) periodicity of the other, are designed by Johnson to be (in ways we will discuss) easy to read, and that the gap between his two reputations need not be so very wide.

Also, as we will see in the pages to come, some of the most interesting subjects on which Johnson may be cited were subjects selected for his conversation by Boswell, with a sure instinct for topics which Johnson found difficult or about which his views seem ambiguous. I would, for an important instance, nominate Boswell's emphasis on conversation as being a Johnsonian emphasis, and it seemed appropriate for a number of reasons that a consideration of Johnson and the everyday should open with a chapter on Johnson's views about conversation and Boswell's methods and motives in recording it. It is as well for me to establish my view of the relationship between Johnson's writing and his Boswellian conversations at the outset of using them both in the same study. But other matters that are explored or glanced at in this thesis — the topics of pleasure, memory, savagery, the body, list-making, resolutions, acting and conversation — are also raised in the diegesis of the *Life* by Boswell, and become recurring subjects of Johnsonian anecdotes and conversation; but, I contend, on the basis of Boswell's usually accurate perception of Johnson's interests, strengths, problems and anxieties.

That Johnson's own work, such as *Rasselas* or *The Rambler*, is not much read by "the common reader" today, would not have surprised Johnson, who knew that people will do almost anything rather than read — "People in general," he said, "do not willingly read, if they can have any thing else to amuse them"⁴ — and that even people who like reading will be put off a book by any accidental and superficial circumstance, such as the size of the volume or the length of the text, or its being old-fashioned. What a committed reading

⁴ *Life* IV, 218. 1 May 1783.

of a long discursive or systematic text requires is *attention*, a habit of mind highly valued by Johnson (as we will see in Chapter Eight), indeed, regarded as a duty, but which he knew to be alien to the inclinations of most people, including himself. Johnson himself loved shapeless gossip books such as collections of *ana*, and if he had known Boswell's *Life* (and had someone other than himself been its hero, so as not to offend his modesty), he would have read it, after his fashion, and enjoyed it. It is his lack of faith in highly-wrought over-determined systems, and his love of the daily, the small, the common, the memorable and the immediate that leads to his attraction to anecdotes and quotations, and to books made up of bits and pieces, rather than wholehearted narratives and theses. The latter are not the sorts of things which he liked reading, nor which he wrote.

In this thesis, then, I write about a number of subjects which I identify as being of great and recurring concern to Johnson, and which form substrata to his life and work, but which are seldom the explicit focus of his writing or conversation. The subjects and the texts have, I know, the look of having been chosen arbitrarily, which is what we might expect if they participate in that area of existence which we must call the *everyday*. But I have been at pains to stress the complex network of links and traces between each of my chapters. Rather than representing a sequential argument, they should be seen as a number of sets in a Venn diagram, between which there are various points of intersection, gathered around on the one hand a set labelled "Samuel Johnson," and in another diagram, a set labelled "the everyday." They have in fact only emerged after considerable reading and study, some of the history of which it might be useful to trace, before we rise to the challenge of trying to explain the everyday.

II. Essays, Lists and Other Literature

This project commenced as a development of my Master's thesis, *Reading "The Rambler"* (1994). I initially wanted in my second thesis to explore the context of the periodical essay in the eighteenth century more generally, as a background to Johnson's own writings. I found, as have scholars before me, series of periodical essays (both single-issue periodicals, such as Johnson's *Rambler*, and magazine essays, such as his *Idler*) were both very numerous (I made an extremely long tabulated list of as many as I could locate) — and very uninteresting. That is to say, they were interesting as a phenomenon; they certainly constitute an area of eighteenth-century literature that has been neglected by modern scholars. But the neglect is perfectly understandable and excusable, because the

periodical essay series is a highly determined form, and therefore very conventional, and reading them is — on any other than a casual and adventitious basis — rather tedious. One can make long lists of them, examine and describe their necessarily convoluted bibliographical details, research their authorship, and classify them in any number of ways — by length, contents, style, title, narrator, etc. But as for reading them (other than periodically), well.... They do not reward the effort. Older scholars were right in reading (and canonising) Addison and Steele's, Johnson's and Goldsmith's, and stopping there. They are the best, and as for the *Growlers*, *Loungers*, *Whisperers*, *Loiterers* and the rest, when you've read one, as they say, you've read them all.

They are in particular not susceptible to the *kinds* of reading practices to which scholars are required to subject texts. Literary essays are composed of a material which is seldom, and only with reluctance, regarded as the language of 'literature.' They are literature of the margins. They are couched in diction which is 'companionable' and broadly conversational, is mostly unambiguous and does not require a subtle and trained mind to interpret it. They are addressed to common readers, and they are frequently and openly didactic, for which purpose transparency and clarity are essential. Readers of essays are not challenged with the sort of inquiries that are the stock-in-trade of literary study (even at its least ambitious level), "What is the author saying here?", "What does this passage really mean?" As Brian McCrea has observed,

To thrive, the English department requires ambiguous and difficult works and minds that can exploit that ambiguity, explain (but not make sense of) that difficulty. The department thus always will discriminate against writers (and critics) who have an explicit and simple moral and social agenda.⁵

It is not just that such literary essays are not suitable grist for the mills of professional literary scholarship. It is that in reading them, we do not observe ourselves to be having *aesthetic* experiences, clearly set apart from daily life, such as we do when, say, watching a movie film or reading a novel. We certainly enjoy them, but our enjoyment is of such everyday elements as the diction, the reasoning and the humour, and not of any sense that the act of reading abstracts us from everyday experience. Essays are often periodically published, and are designed to provide useful diversion for an occasional short interval in the business of daily life. Their aims are practical: to entertain and inform, not to elevate

⁵ Brian McCrea, *Addison and Steele are Dead: The English Department, Its Canon, and the Professionalization of Literary Criticism* (Newark: U. of Delaware P., 1990), 146.

the spirits, engage and move the emotions, puzzle or impress. They tend rather to send us back in the direction of everyday life, better informed, more attentive.

This experience forcibly drew me into thinking about that which eludes attention — that which is important but resists being theorised. This is one aspect of what I am investigating as *the everyday*. 'Everydayness,' says Kevin Hart, "straddles the wavy and broken line between art and life."⁶ In this exact way, the marginal and dubiously 'literary' literary genre of the essay is a prime textual location of the everyday. And this explains too the nature of the interest that essays aim to generate, which frequently excludes them from privileged categories, which is an interest in ordinariness.⁷ "The everyday," says Maurice Blanchot, "is platitude ... but this banality is also what is most important, if it brings us back to existence in its very spontaneity and as it is lived...."⁸ Samuel Johnson was not afraid of platitudes, and his writings are not the resort of those seeking the bizarre. An investigation of Johnson and the everyday will take us into an unsystematic variety of unexpected yet ordinary subjects: conversation, prose, anecdotes, pleasure, memory, diaries, and so forth.

Periodical essays are the literary undergrowth in eighteenth-century England, part of its daily — or at least, weekly — life. As a student, one tends to trample over them or kick one's way through them to stand awestruck at the base of the larger outgrowths, *Gulliver*, *Tristram Shandy*, Johnson's *Dictionary*, Pope's works, and eventually through to a dense forest of large novels. But there can be no denying that the essays — and a great many other peculiar things — are there. Such texts must have in their time dominated the literary experience of most writers, and most readers. Johnson in particular (unlike Pope or Swift, Sterne or Frances Burney) worked amongst these texts, and had no desire to do otherwise — except to not have to write altogether. I show this by making visible and elaborating his alternative bibliography, which is located initially in his catalogue of literary projects, called *Designs*.

My account of Johnson as a literary projector was in fact where, after a false start pursuing the periodical essays, this work began. A footnote to a footnote of Boswell's

⁶ Kevin Hart, *Samuel Johnson and the Culture of Property* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1999), 157.

⁷ If there is, as I would contend, at present something of a revival of interest in the essay as a form, it is noticeably coincident with the development of academic interest in the everyday.

⁸ Maurice Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota P., 1993), 239. [Translated from "La parole quotidienne," *L'Entretien infini* (1959).]

eventually grew to a 25,000-word vision of an imagined literary career. (This project eventually cut itself loose from the rest of the thesis, and is included here as a self-contained Appendix.⁹) I was intrigued by texts (of which periodical essays were an example) which seemed to be not so much written through, like a novel or long systematic discourse, according to some independent and pre-determined scheme, but which grew by accretion (somewhat in the way that theses develop in the era of the word-processor!). A collection of essays can be seen as an exercise in elaboration, as successive layers of thought and language are laid down over an accumulation of jottings. Boswell of course includes in the *Life* a transcription of some of Johnson's "hints for essays on different subjects."¹⁰ Johnson occurred to me as a note-taker and list-maker, someone who managed his day-to-day experience in essentially literate ways: his resolutions, his account-keeping, his calculations, his lists of books, his projects. An early outcome of this curiosity, was an article in which I have described and contextualised the reading programme which Johnson suggested for the Rev. Daniel Astle.¹¹ As a list-maker, and by virtue of the kinds of works he projected, Johnson seemed to me to align himself with the fundamental roots of literacy, which begins with the making of lists.

A list is a written or printed series of names, dates, numbers, items, gathered according to some principle or immediate practical need. It may at first glance seem to be an uninteresting and rather minimal function of written language: obvious, written usually in shorthand, using writing only for its capacity for storage; a pre-literary use. A list is a record of a process of collection, and the finished list is a valuable text only insofar as it is imagined to be a means to other practical if unspecified ends. Lists are provisional; they may be added to, or re-sorted: processes which require "working out on paper." Lists are not grammatically finished texts. Whilst a list could be *read* out aloud, or recited from memory, it could not be *said*.

Most of the earliest known human writings are literally unsayable, being lists made for very immediate and practical purposes, and written in non-alphabetic scripts. The most interesting and detailed recent writings about lists as a phenomenon are those of the

⁹ This piece has been accepted for publication, "The Great Literary Projector: Samuel Johnson's Literary Designs," *The Age of Johnson* 13 (2002, forthcoming). However, all further references will be by page to the version appended to this thesis.

¹⁰ *Life* 1, 204. 1750.

¹¹ "A Clergyman's Reading: Books Recommended by Samuel Johnson," *The Age of Johnson* 11 (2000), 125-43.

anthropologist Jack Goody.¹² His interests are in literacy and pre- or early literate societies. He identifies list-making as a very early function of writing. The earliest developed scripts were unable to represent verbal fluency, and so were used for purposes other than transcribing what could, after all, be said. In a small community with a functioning oral culture, there would be no conceivable need to write down stories, poems or cosmogonic discourses. List-making is a far more obvious use of the technology of writing than either the production of written prose or poetry. At the Bronze Age site of Ras Sharma (or Ugarit) in present day Syria, of the 508 documents that have been found, two thirds are lists,¹³ made mainly for economic and administrative purposes. It is a literary commonplace that poetry is also an early cultural manifestation. Neil McEwan writes, "Verse is older than prose, because verse, being easier to memorise, can develop in an oral culture while prose must be written down."¹⁴ Of course, as writing evolved to verbal fluency, poems — already existing as relatively stable oral texts — would be committed to writing. But stable *prose* texts are *products* of the technology of writing. Novels and theses¹⁵ are massive elaborations of the normal conversational functions of language, unimaginable in an oral culture, and it is not surprising that it should have taken so long for such uses to develop. So poetry and lists share, among other things, an antiquity that pre-dates literary prose.

Lists, then, are deeply embedded and implicated in literary history — from Babylon to Harold Bloom¹⁶ — and the making of lists is still probably the most everyday use to which the technology of writing is put. It is difficult to devise an oral means of keeping track of disparate and arbitrary collections of words, names or ideas that have perhaps nothing in common but the needs of the immediate moment. In order to do so, rather than use the prose of conversation, we (still) create verse structures, or mental maps, or mnemonics, or we number things and count them off on our fingers. But it is far more

¹² Jack Goody, "What's in a List?" Ch. 5, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1977).

¹³ Goody, 83.

¹⁴ Neil McEwan, *Style in English Prose* (Harlow, Essex /Beirut: Longman /York Press, 1986), 13.

¹⁵ Here, by *thesis* I mean the thesis-shaped book; what Ian Black has called "one-idea books." It is a striking thing that we have no positive term for such books: 'non-fiction' seems very lame (is poetry 'non-fiction'?), and 'prose' means little more than 'not verse.' If I understand him correctly, Gérard Genette suggests the term 'diction', as discussed in Ch. 2 below, 67 ff. See Genette, *Fiction and Diction*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell U.P., 1993).

¹⁶ I allude to the controversial thirty-six page list of authors and book titles with which he concluded *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (London: Macmillan, 1994).

likely that, whenever we start collecting verbal items (or items verbally) we will reach for pen and paper. What we write will not be conversational prose, but in the form of a list.

III. The Everyday, and Its Locations

Untheorisability, I suggest, is a central consideration in Johnson's attraction to the forms of writing which might be implicated in that category of experience, that category which underlies experience, which we might think of as the everyday. He does not, of course, employ such a term as 'untheorisability'; its equivalent might be the positive term "useful knowledge," which is discussed in Chapter Six. I have alluded to the everydayness of a number of subjects which I have already raised. At the butt-end of the twentieth century, that particular variety of theoretical discourse which rather arrogantly calls itself Theory (often with an essentialising capital 'T'), has become self-referential and self-consuming. Many people are not only exhausted and baffled by Theory, but also blame it for various intellectual, cultural and political woes. In particular, Theory has been interpreted as hosting and legitimising an unholy alliance between notionally left-wing high culture and the free-market capitalist low culture promulgated by the increasingly monolithic mass media, and to be therefore at least complicit with attitudes of cynicism and apathy. We can easily imagine Johnson abominating and excoriating those attitudes, and both 'cultures.' One manifestation of contemporary near-exhaustion with Theory is that the everyday — to which I argue Johnson was devoted — has itself become a topic, and the topic has become intellectually fashionable.

It is appropriate to substantiate this assertion by reference to everyday cultural manifestations, as well as in a more conventional scholarly manner. Of the 526 book titles found (10 December 1999), in the Monash University Library "Voyager" online catalogue, containing the word "everyday," 20 were published in the 1950s, 70 in the '60s, 72 in the '70s, 127 in the '80s, and 215 in the 1990s. Alternatively, I could refer to the nature of the humour of American comedian, Jerry Seinfeld, most of whose monologues concern shopping, domestic activities, 'relationships,' going out, travelling — all quintessentially everyday matters. But the interest seems to be apparent up and down the intellectual and cultural scale. In the world of humane studies, postmodern theorists may have taught us to regard General Knowledge as a construct, but the human need to know things in order to have something to talk and think about has revenged itself with the explosion of 'trivia' quizzes. There is a boom in the publishing of small books, particularly of extracts from

the classics.¹⁷ Other textual evidence might be books of 'factoids' (such as, *How Do Astronauts Scratch?*, or *Milton's Teeth and Ovid's Umbrella*),¹⁸ and a current fashion in book titling — exemplified in titles such as *Flaubert's Parrot*, *Pythagoras's Trousers*, *Poe's Cat* or *Stravinsky's Lunch*¹⁹ — which might be seen to construct and placate a desire among readers to approach the eminent, erudite or arcane through the vulgar and everyday.

In the popular sciences, there is the appeal of what is (rather misleadingly) called Chaos theory, *chaos* (in Physics) being defined as, "[b]ehaviour so unpredictable as to appear random, owing to great sensitivity to small changes in conditions." Whatever the scientific credentials and implications of the theory, it has certainly been well-received in the world of cultural and intellectual commentary. It has assumed mythic status, having been taken to suggest that something like a system is behind the seemingly random aspects of daily life, and that more is to be gained from the examination of minute everyday phenomena and daily lived experience than from the construction and pursuit of totalising intellectual, political or cultural structures. On the one hand such a theory offers a sense of security for a generation which has lost a widespread and determined belief in metaphysics; on the other hand it seems to threaten the realm of free (human) activity. Sociologists at the California State University, Fullerton, alert, in the same way that I and other students of the humanities have been, to these trends in both science and popular culture, have recently established a scholarly (online) journal, *The Journal of Mundane Behavior*, which has briefly attracted a predictable share of non-scholarly amusement.²⁰

I suggest that these phenomena are indicative of an anxiety about the everyday, that we sense its realm being diminished, our scope for everyday activity being increasingly restrained by the infiltration of technology and other systems of control into our lives. I wish to give an account of the everyday, and of Samuel Johnson's own awareness of and anxieties about it. I have used the work of French scholar Michel de Certeau. De Certeau's work is the most recent extended account of the subject, and it is

¹⁷ See my essay on the subject, "Pockets of Wisdom, Samples of Text: Recent Revivals of the Very Small Book," *Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand Bulletin* 21:4 (Fourth Quarter 1997), 226-44.

¹⁸ By David Feldman (1996) and Michael Olmert (1996).

¹⁹ These titles are by, respectively, Julian Barnes (1984), Margaret Wertheim (1995), Brenda Walker (1999), and Drusilla Modjeska (1999). I have surveyed this phenomenon in a light-hearted article, published as "What's Lunch Got to do with it?", *The Sunday Age* (Melbourne), 12 December 1999, "Agenda" 12, in which I give a list of thirty-nine such titles since 1984, fourteen of them published in 1999.

²⁰ Ben Fenton, "Boring, Now that Really is Exciting," *The Age* (Melbourne), 14 March 2000, 8.

one that is growing daily in scholarly influence. Whilst it might have been more straightforward to have used his *Practice of Everyday Life* (1974; English translation, 1984)²¹ as a sort of grid into which to fit appropriate bits of Johnson, I preferred to start with Johnson, and what appeared to me to be the primary locations (I use the term loosely) of the everyday in his work, and see how or if de Certeau could illuminate it. De Certeau's work is not, in fact, grid-like; whilst he gives an extended account of the subject, it cannot be described as comprehensive. He does not purport to offer a *theory* of everyday life, but an account of its *practice*. He calls his book "an essay that does not claim to be a history of theories concerning practices."²² It is an essentially unfinished account. That, for a start, seemed to be an approach that Johnson would have appreciated. "Human experience," he told Boswell, "which is constantly contradicting theory, is the great test of truth."²³ The everyday, then, is the ground (and not one concocted *post hoc*) of all the concerns here, although they are linked in almost innumerable other ways which will emerge in the appropriate places.

An interest in the everyday as an abstract subject is generally recent, Marxist and European. Another substantial account of the everyday is that of Agnes Heller, a Hungarian, who in her *Everyday Life* (1970; English translation, 1984)²⁴ offers a Marxist and Hegelian "theory of everyday life" (ix). Her intellectual roots are more apparent than those of de Certeau, who observes the French tradition of assuming that the reader will recognise and be acquainted with his philosophical context. (It is interesting that Johnson follows the remark about experience being the test of truth, with the observation that "French writers ... proceed upon the mere power of their own minds".) Of course, despite de Certeau's emphasis, foregrounded in his title, on the *practice* rather than 'a (or 'the') theory' of everyday life,²⁵ a long book on such a generalised subject (other than, say, the 'Everyday Life of the Ancient Romans,' and such works) is inevitably theoretical. But it is also inevitably practical to consider the everyday, because the everyday is a realm in which all people are participants: it is, as Blanchot says, "what we are first of all, and most

²¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA.: U. of California P., 1984). Translation of *Arts de Faire* (1976).

²² De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 62.

²³ *Life* i, 454. 28 July 1763.

²⁴ Agnes Heller, *Everyday Life*, trans. G.L. Campbell (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984). Translation of *A Mindennapi Élet* (1970).

²⁵ This is also apparent in the original French title, *Arts de Faire*, which might be rendered, 'the art of doing things.'

often.... The everyday is ourselves, ordinarily."²⁶ It is also, in the broad sense, political. Heller asserts that "[h]ow everyday life can be changed in a humanistic, democratic, socialist direction is the practical issue that the book addresses" (x), and there is without doubt a similar agenda in de Certeau. His project, as summarised by Michèle Lamont, is to survey and analyse the "infinitesimal procedures of resistance against apparatuses of control."²⁷

The everyday is depicted by its expositors as emerging, or at least as becoming identifiable, in early modern, urban settings. Henri Lefebvre, who has also written extensively on and around the subject, asserts that "[b]efore the series of revolutions that ushered in what is called the modern era, housing, modes of dress, eating and drinking — in short, living — presented a prodigious diversity."²⁸ But, he goes on to say, that diversity has been destroyed by modernity. The everyday seems to become visible at the very moment at which people begin to feel anxious about and alienated from it, and we might instance two associated and characteristically eighteenth-century phenomena. It is, firstly, at this time that *boredom* (a word not in Johnson's *Dictionary*) becomes possible;²⁹ and secondly, when it becomes meaningful and necessary for people to pursue *leisure activity* as a distinct element of daily life. Lefebvre says that what we call leisure is both "an integral part in the everyday" and (like boredom) a "critique of the everyday."³⁰ Leisure represents both a private and unoccupied space that we esteem most desirable, and an emptiness that we are anxious to fill. Blanchot's observation, that "the individual of today, of our modern societies ... is at once engulfed within and deprived of the everyday,"³¹ represents exactly the trap that Johnson sees most people (including himself) falling into, effectively diverted by things that do not really have sufficient power or substance to occupy us. Like Lefebvre, Heller observes this development as a feature of early modern Europe,

²⁶ Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," 238.

²⁷ Lamont, review of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, by Michel de Certeau, *American Journal of Sociology* 93:3 (November 1987), 720.

²⁸ Henri Lefebvre, "The Everyday and Everydayness," [trans. Christine Levich], in *Everyday Life*, ed. Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross (*Yale French Studies*, No. 73; New Haven: Yale U.P., 1987), 7. The article is a translation of "Quotidien et Quotidienneté," *Encyclopaedia Universalis*.

²⁹ Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 1995), 32.

³⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, v. 1: *Introduction*, trans. John Moore, pref. Michel Trebitsch (London: Verso, 1991), 29. Translation of *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, I: *Introduction* (1947, 1958).

³¹ Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," 239.

The more dynamic the society, the more fortuitous the relationship between the person and the society into which he is born (and this is particularly true of capitalist society from the eighteenth century onwards), the more sustained is the effort which the person is required to make throughout his life to substantiate his claim to viability.³²

This thesis explores how, at the beginning of this period, Samuel Johnson identified this requirement, thought the effort might be sustained, and himself sustained it.

In some terms or other, the base issues of the everyday must have occurred to every philosophically-minded teenager. At a certain level of calibration, everything we do on a daily basis has been done before. I drive a certain car along a particular road every day, and many other people drive along it also. My driving along this road on any particular day is nothing new; and it could easily be maintained that we are almost never doing anything that is really unlike anything else. But at another level of description, all things we do or experience are new and different, happening as they must at particular unrepeatable moments. I may drive every day on the same roads, but every day I vary my speed differently in response to different traffic conditions, I move from lane to lane at different times and parts of the road to overtake slow or stationary vehicles, or to get out of the way of faster ones, I am stopped by different traffic lights. Today I have coffee with a colleague with whom I've had coffee many times before, but we talk about different topics; today I dress for work as I always do, but perhaps I have never before worn exactly this combination of garments. Boswell and Johnson discussed the subject, as Boswell records:

[A]lthough there is a sameness every where upon the whole, [life] is yet minutely diversified. The minute diversities in every thing are wonderful. Talking of shaving the other night at Dr. Taylor's, Dr. Johnson said, "Sir, of a thousand shavers, two do not shave so much alike as not to be distinguished." I thought this not possible, till he specified so many of the varieties in shaving; — holding the razor more or less perpendicular; — drawing long or short strokes; — beginning at the upper part of the face, or the under; — at the right side or the left side. Indeed, when one considers what variety of sounds can be uttered by the wind-

³² Heller, *Everyday Life*, 5.

pipe, in the compass of a very small aperture, we may be convinced how many degrees of difference there may be in the application of a razor.³³

We ought not to be surprised that in the very first issue of *The Journal of Mundane Behavior*, there is an article devoted to the subject of shaving and "Male' Facial Presentation."³⁴

Perhaps a more pregnant location than that of shaving for Johnson and the everyday is the subject of *moving about*, which for de Certeau comes within the ambit of 'spatial practices.'³⁵ Blanchot asserts that "[t]he everyday is not at home in our dwelling places; it is not in offices or churches anymore than in libraries or museums. If it is anywhere, it is in the street."³⁶ Johnson is readily pictured as on the move, rambling around the Highlands, pacing at night through London's streets and squares with Richard Savage, taking his famous frisk, driving in the country in a post-chaise, heading off to dine at a tavern or someone else's home. Walter Bate depicts Johnson as one who sees himself as a Rambler, an idler, a straggler: all types of the religiously-charged figure of the pilgrim.³⁷ In exploring this theme I would place it in the context of the emergence in the eighteenth century of the figure of the man-in-the-street, and of Johnson's anxieties about fashion. In an early *Rambler*, Johnson quotes a French author (unidentified by editors) remarking that "very few men know how to take a walk."³⁸ It one of his own aims to carve out a discursive space for the knowledge of such everyday matters. Like de Certeau, Johnson's interest in walking, and his ready association with images of walking, is to emphasise how we can with profit and pleasure use the spaces *in between*. The tactics of everyday life, de Certeau says, exploit *time* and its properties — such as speed, surprise, coincidence, opportunity — in order to erode *place*, which is inevitably occupied by institutions of power.³⁹ Such language may not be Johnson's, and may be off-putting for traditional scholars, but seems to me constantly to ring true notes. But the subject of

³³ *Life* III, 163. 19 Septembr 1777.

³⁴ Michael John Pinfold, "I'm sick of shaving every morning': or, The Cultural Implications of 'Male' Facial Presentation," *The Journal of Mundane Behavior* 1:1 (February 2000). Online <www.mundanebehavior.org>.

³⁵ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 91.

³⁶ Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," 242.

³⁷ Walter Jackson Bate, *Samuel Johnson* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1978), 459-60; see also 276.

³⁸ *Rambler* 5; III, 28.

³⁹ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 38-39.

Johnson and Walking I leave for another occasion, wanting in this thesis to follow threads that lead us back to reading.

That most everyday form of reading, the newspaper, serves an agenda set by power: politics, the law and its transgressors, film stars and their seedy yet glamorous pseudo-lives, and not to forget the advertisers. Yet there is also (perhaps only by implication) a ground against which these things are figured. At least as often as newspapers report potential scientific break-throughs with regard to serious disease, or having discovered some new celestial phenomenon, or how to lose weight, there are tales of scientists investigating everyday life: such as the report on the study of mundane behaviour, or of research into the way paper crumples.

Scientists have reluctantly admitted after 18 months of crushing toil that they are still far from understanding crumpling, whether of paper, nylon tights or tin cans. Scientists are broaching another frontier in *everyday life* by turning their attention to the geometry of crumpling, which has implications in fields as diverse as cosmology and biology.... "These seemingly mundane, everyday problems are anything but," said Professor Mahadevan. "Yet their very ubiquity challenges us to explain them."⁴⁰

These are subjects that we can readily imagine would have been of interest to a man who investigated how much weight leaves would lose in drying, and who shaved the hair on his own arm and chest to see how quickly it would regrow.⁴¹ Johnson was concerned about the way in which the hours of life are filled up: he certainly thought that some ways of filling up the hours were better than others, but he thought too that having almost anything at all to occupy one's time is considerably better than having nothing. Hester Thrale noted what a potent theme "the vacuity of life" was for Johnson, and Arieh Sachs has devoted one of the most elegant and searching books on Johnson to exploring the subject.⁴²

⁴⁰ "Study leaves a furrowed brow," *The Age* (Melbourne), 2 October 1999, 18. The article, sourced to the (London) *Telegraph*, cites a report in the journal *Nature* of research conducted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

⁴¹ *Diaries*, 362, 297-98.

⁴² Sachs, *Passionate Intelligence: Imagination and Reason in the Work of Samuel Johnson* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1967), see esp. 4 ff. Mrs. Thrale's identification of the theme may be found in the *Anecdotes*, see *Johns. Misc.* 1, 251. Early version, may be found in the *Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale (later Mrs. Piozzi), 1776-1809*, 2nd edn., ed. K.C. Balderston, 2 v. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951), 179-80, 601-2, and other remarks concerning the subject, 198, 254.

Johnson was aware that in creating literature one is (among other things) filling up time, but one is also filling up paper. Paper has both a limited life and a variety of uses: Hawkesworth's three-volume account of Cook's voyages would, he said, be eaten by rats before it was read (*Life* IV, 308). But literature, importantly, also makes a claim on the time of others: it is open to being interpreted as a strategy of control. Being read is for Johnson the great aim of literature, and readability is the virtue on which all other literary virtue is dependent and subordinate. That which is (on the face of it) most readable is that which is least like that which can only be presented in a book, and most like conversation. It is therefore not surprising that the genres in which Johnson customarily worked are so hard to specify. We think of Shakespeare's plays, Auden's poems, Austen's novels, even Addison's essays; but for Johnson...? Of the twenty-three volumes of text eventually to comprise the Yale Edition of his Works (which will not include the *Dictionary*), only two contain what most "common readers" would think of as Literature: novels, poems and plays. For the bulk of his writing, 'non-fiction' is a rather uninformative term, and prose means only 'not verse.' But non-fictional prose (what I call, after Gérard Genette, *diction*) is writing at the zero degree, writing at its most practical, approachable and everyday, and is and has to be a major focus of an attempt to look at Johnson in relation to the everyday. I devote Chapters Two and Three to the subject, considering the relationship of Johnson's prose to that of Francis Bacon, and what Johnson has to say about prose in the *Lives of the Poets*.

I have, therefore, been drawn to two different textual, paratextual or generic foci for this project, that of non-fictional prose, and the dictionary method of organising literary materials. Taken together, they represent aspects of his work which are so obvious and everyday as to be overlooked — and indeed, almost nameless. Yet they encompass most of what Johnson wrote, and account for much of his appeal, and his awareness of them as literary strategies weaves its way throughout his writing.

IV. Some Textual Circumstances

I am not proposing to write about Johnson's reputation, its ebbs, flows or locations, but an important theme of my work is the nature of the attention that Johnson has attracted and continues to attract. It is not, I believe, fortuitous or accidental that, as we identify distinctive manifestations of this attention, we find that they have significant common

characteristics that are grounded, in the end, in the kind of writer and written character he was.

"*Johnson and...*" In an essay of which this phrase is the title, Paul Korshin has noticed the attention given by scholars to Johnson's personal relationships, and has subsequently pursued some of Johnson's literary relationships.⁴³ The same title could just as well be applied to a consideration of the topics with which Johnson's name is linked, in the titles or sub-titles of books and articles. These vary from the portentous and specialised to the commonplace and trivial. Here is a sampling: Johnson and English Law, Johnson and Women, Johnson and Cookery, Johnson and Portsmouth, Johnson and Cats; Johnson (to be brief) and: Time, the Royal Society, the Classics, the Imagination, the English Language, India, Music, the Life of Reading, the Dissenters, Nature, the Theatre, the Rhetorics of Consolation, Jacobitism, the Act of Reflection, the Uses of Enchantment, Generality, Neo-Hippocratic Medicine, Imperialism, the Literature of Common Life, Political Correctness, the Essay, the Printed Word, Hell, Gender, the Crowd, the Falkland Islands, the English Eccentrics, the Augustinian Doctrine of Salvation, the Art of Social Comfort, the Cucumber, Stories of Childhood, the Ocean of Life, the Auxiliary 'Do,' the Industrial Revolution, and the Past Tense.⁴⁴ And so on. Some of these are extremely subtle works of professional scholarship, some are light-hearted exercises in index-searching by amateur enthusiasts. Some of them draw attention to and attempt to systematise themes, such as imperialism or the life of reading, which are not made explicit in his work; others aim to do almost the opposite, to highlight occasional and localised references, such as to India or cats, that may be (it is hoped, usefully, or at least entertainingly) elaborated.

All these may be characterised as efforts to write texts in which Johnson's views or attitudes are described, on subjects which he did not address other than implicitly or by-the-way. That they are of interest to readers, at least, to the readers of Johnson and Boswell who write them, is testimony to the susceptibility of Johnson's (and Johnsonian) texts to analysis by means other than just reading.

⁴³ Paul J. Korshin, "'Johnson and ...': Conceptions of Literary Relationship", *Greene Centennial Studies: Essays Presented to Donald Greene in the Centennial Year of the University of Southern California*, ed. Paul J. Korshin and Robert R. Allen (Charlottesville: U.P. of Virginia, 1984), 288-306.

⁴⁴ Most of these may be found in Jack Lynch's (online) *A Bibliography of Johnsonian Studies, 1986-1998*, or its two predecessors, Clifford and Greene, and Greene and Vance. See my Bibliography.

Encyclopedic approaches. No one could have been surprised when Pat Rogers brought out his *Samuel Johnson Encyclopedia* (1996),⁴⁵ except perhaps to be surprised that it had not been done before. I expected it to be a detailed work of reference, at least with double-column pages, and therefore found it rather disappointing. It is a highly-selective work, giving an alphabetical but far from encyclopedic coverage to aspects of Johnson's behaviour, opinions, characteristics, acquaintances, works, sayings, travels, residences and reading. There are entries for Dogs, but not Cats (despite Johnson's being known to have owned two of the latter, and none of the former) nor Bulls (although they are mentioned frequently in his letters from Ashbourne); Biography, but not Bibliography; Gardening and Gambling, but not Gout nor Godchildren; Philology, but not Philosophy (nor Theology, the largest separate category of writing in Johnson's library); Francis Bacon, but not Robert Burton. There are Checkers, Mugging, and Kangaroo; but why these and not every incident in the *Life*, or every subject about which Johnson wrote or talked? It seems a bit arbitrary. Certainly, to encyclopedise Johnson would require a consortium of writers.⁴⁶ But done well or not, this is *not* the sort of treatment to which every prolific (and well-documented) writer could be subjected, or of which the result would be so potentially interesting to a wide enough readership as to justify the expense and effort.

Boswell's *Life of Johnson* is itself a kind of encyclopedia, even without the astonishing layers of apparatus with which it has become surrounded. Boswell's long title (which is not often enough reproduced with the text⁴⁷) makes clear that he intends the book to be more than a comprehensive life of one great man; he describes the work as "exhibiting a view of literature and literary men in Great-Britain for near a half-century, during which he flourished." Boswell's editors, in the way they have dealt with his text, have certainly responded to something in the

⁴⁵ Pat Rogers, *The Samuel Johnson Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood, 1996).

⁴⁶ See my "Beginner's Guide to the Great Cham," review of *The Samuel Johnson Encyclopedia*, by Pat Rogers (1996), *The Southern Johnsonian* 6:1 (November 1998), 6. A book which constitutes a more thorough encyclopedisation of an author is *The C.S. Lewis Readers' Encyclopedia*, ed. Jeffrey D. Schultz and John D. West, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1998). It is an extremely comprehensive volume, by a team of writers (and for less than half the price of Rogers' work on Johnson).

⁴⁷ I have eight modern editions of the *Life* to hand, in which the original title is present in five. In four of these — ed. Christopher Hibbert (Penguin, 1979); ed. Frank Brady (Signet, 1968); Selections, ed. R.W. Chapman (Clarendon, 1929); and the Hill-Powell — it is reproduced as an illustration. In only one is it given as the title, on the title page (Routledge, n.d.). It is omitted in the Oxford Standard Authors editions (ed. R.W. Chapman [1953], rev. J.D. Fleeman [1970]), and in the otherwise admirable Dent "Everyman" edition (ed. S.C. Roberts [London, 1949]), both of which carefully give the three Advertisements.

character of the work. J.W. Croker's first edition (1831), has interpolated through Boswell's own text as much other material as the editor could find — the text of the *Tour*, more of Johnson's notes and letters, passages from other memoirs of Johnson — to fill out Boswell's scheme. Despite Croker's having removed much of this material in his second edition (1835), in response to Macaulay's savage review, the multiple layers of footnotes and Appendices, from Boswell, Malone, Croker, Hill and Powell, that find their way into the now-standard scholarly edition, bolster its encyclopedic qualities.⁴⁸

Indexes. Johnson comes to us mediated by indexes and index-like paratexts. As we will see in detail in Chapter Five, this means of managing text seems to have Johnson's authority. His own essays were indexed when collected, and he proposed the indexing of other literary works. An edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* is next to useless unless there is an index, and it must be a good one. The index to the G.B. Hill edition (1887), and its successor, the now-standard Hill-Powell edition (1934-50), occupies most of the sixth volume of those works. L.F. Powell continued to revise the index, and it was published in a second edition (1964).⁴⁹ The two-volume Everyman edition of the *Life* (1949) boasts on its front flap "an Index compiled by Mr. Alan Dent on a scale of thoroughness unprecedented in cheap editions, running to thirty pages of double-column type." In the one-volume Oxford "Standard Authors" edition⁵⁰, most of the short front flap note is devoted to celebrating the index: "Dr. Powell's great index ... has been used as the basis of the index in the present volume.... It may be claimed that the new index will not fail any reader." Even the dramatically shortened Penguin Classic edition has an index. All this attention is indicative of the publishers' perceptions of how contemporary editions of the *Life* are used; that they may or may not be read *through*, but they are certainly consulted, browsed in, checked for verification, used as research tools.

The Dictionary of the English Language. We will see when we examine his *Designs*, Johnson's own abiding interest in encyclopedic methods of analysis. The

⁴⁸ On Croker, Hill, and the other editors of Boswell, see Hart, *Samuel Johnson and the Culture of Property*, 81 ff.

⁴⁹ It was a genuine 'New Edition,' with corrections and new material.

⁵⁰ The 1953 'New Edition' of the 1904 'Oxford Standard Authors,' in a 1965 reprint. (This was edited and revised by R.W. Chapman, although the reprint I am using does not make this clear anywhere in the book.)

Dictionary is, among other things, an alphabetically-organised commonplace book, containing Johnson's favourite quotations or opinions from his reading, on every topic under the sun. It is well-known that he chose, as his examples of English usage, extracts that represented a right way of thinking about each subject, and only from writers whom he believed to be generally of a good moral tendency.⁵¹ It may thus be regarded as what I call a 'rhetorical dictionary': that is, a work which uses the dictionary structure for extra-linguistic purposes. Unlike the most notable examples of this genre, which are ironic dictionaries of how *not* to think about particular subjects, Johnson's is virtually a moral encyclopedia; not a systematic ethics, but an alphabetical and hence practical ethics. The alphabet as a system of information management looks highly organised, but it yields a narrative that is arbitrary and chaotic. It is the quintessential user's manual. We will examine the *Dictionary* in its generic contexts in Chapter Four.

Quotations. Johnson is amongst the most represented writers in dictionaries of quotations. He is the eighth most quoted writer in the *Everyman's Dictionary of Quotations and Proverbs* (1951), the ninth in *The Penguin Dictionary of Quotations* (1960).⁵² In *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (3rd edn., 1979), he is the fourth most quoted individual writer (after Shakespeare, Tennyson and Milton).⁵³

Unlike Milton and Tennyson, at least, Johnson is also the subject of a great many individual volumes of his wit, sayings, quotations, opinions, and so forth. This attention began in his lifetime, with *The Beauties of Johnson* (1781),⁵⁴ and has been continued by scholars and publishers into our own day. Johnson's great Victorian editor, George Birkbeck Hill, made one such collection, *Wit and Wisdom of Samuel Johnson* (1888). There is hardly a reader of Johnson, particularly who is involved in the world of writing themselves, who is not tempted to gather their own anthology. Some of them attempt to represent the range or quality of his

⁵¹ "[H]e has quoted no authour whose writings had a tendency to hurt sound religion and morality." *Life* 1, 189 (1748).

⁵² *Everyman's Dictionary of Quotations and Proverbs*, ed. D.C. Browning (London: Dent, 1951); some notes on "allotment of space" in the Introduction. *The Penguin Dictionary of Quotations*, ed. J.M. and M.J. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960); my own calculations.

⁵³ *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1979), vi.

⁵⁴ *The Beauties of Johnson: Consisting of Maxims and Observations ...Accurately extracted from the Works of Dr. Samuel Johnson*, published by George Kearsley, with a second volume in 1782. The editor is unknown; Allen Hazen has argued that it was compiled by William Cooke; see "The Beauties of Johnson," *Modern Philology* 35 (1938), 289-95.

literary work with bite-sized extracts; one such is the *Selections from Samuel Johnson, 1709-1784*, ed. R.W. Chapman (1955). More common are collections of pieces of no longer than a few sentences, selected for pungency or amusement value and arranged by topic, frequently alphabetically; these tend to emphasise Boswell over (or at least on a par with) Johnson's own works. A recent one is *The Sayings of Doctor Johnson*, ed. Brenda O'Casey (1990).⁵⁵ There are also various envelope-sized booklets, such as *The Sayings of Chairman Johnson*, ed. Edmund Kirby,⁵⁶ and the series of *Doctor Johnson on...*, including *Love and Marriage*; *Politics*; *Religion*, and so on, assembled by Graham Nicholls of the Johnson Birthplace Museum (these are apparently even beneath the dignity of the Johnsonian bibliographers).⁵⁷ There have also been Johnson samplers and calendars. We are, to my knowledge, yet to see bumper stickers or bubble gum cards. Again, this is not accidental, nor incidental, as we will see when we consider Johnson and the tactic of literary quotation in Chapter Six.

CD-ROM. Johnson was one of the first writers to be flattered with the attention of an authoritative edition of his works on searchable electronic computer disk. In fact, there are two such editions. A team at the University of Birmingham has produced an edition of the *Dictionary of the English Language: on CD-ROM*.⁵⁸ And there is a remarkable *Major Authors* disk containing almost the complete works of Johnson in the Yale Edition, plus the *Dictionary*, with the Hill-Powell edition of Boswell's *Life*, Hill's edition of *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, the *Thraliana*, and other material.⁵⁹ I cannot believe that anyone would employ these CDs-ROM for actual reading, although they do provide access to some otherwise obscure minor Johnsonian texts. They must be valued mainly for the tantalizing potential of enabling the texts to be immediately, automatically and comprehensively searched,

⁵⁵ Full details of these and others like them will be found in the three bibliographies, Clifford and Greene, Greene and Vance, and Lynch.

⁵⁶ (Kettering, Engl.: J.L. Carr, 1976). (The title is modelled on that of the famous 'little red book' of Mao Tse-Tung, *The Sayings of Chairman Mao*, which was much circulated in the west in the late 1960s.)

⁵⁷ (Lichfield, Engl.: James Renshaw, 1977). I have those named; according to a note in two of them, there were supposed to be eleven in the series.

⁵⁸ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language: on CD-ROM*, ed. Anne McDermott (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1996).

⁵⁹ *Major Authors on CD-ROM: Samuel Johnson and James Boswell*, ed. Leopold Damrosch, Jr. (Woodbridge, Conn.: Primary Source Media, 1997). This disk and one of Virginia Woolf were the first releases in the series; the only disks published since are The Brontës, Cervantes and Walt Whitman.

at the flick of a switch. The *Dictionary* disk, for instance, enables the quotations in Johnson's great anthology to be searched by author (although, since it contains no more text than the original, searchers must know what or for whom they are looking, and then have the task of finding and wading through the authors' works for precise references). The *Major Authors* disk can be searched for any half-remembered Johnsonian remark, or speculatively, to see how particular phrases are used or if anything is said on particular topics. As will be observed later, as we discuss Memory in Chapter Eight, such devices make a certain kind of scholarship — and not a pointless kind — almost completely irrelevant.

There are a considerable number of things that could be concluded from the particular nature of all this attention, to which Johnson is oddly susceptible. None of them is central to Johnson criticism; we might see them as textually circumstantial, and to talk much about them to be a sort of sub-critical gossip. But I am alerted by Gérard Genette to the phenomenon of paratextuality, which I have already mentioned in passing, but it might be best to explain. Paratexts (according to Genette, who invented the term and more-or-less comprehensively examined the subject) are the devices within and without a text which exist to make it public. They are "verbal and other productions," which do not exactly *belong* to the text, but nevertheless "they surround it and extend it, ... to ensure the text's presence in the world."⁶⁰ If the everyday is a zone mediating between art and life, paratexts exist in the everyday. They are the first things we perceive about a text. Johnson is frequently occupied with such issues, being always concerned at how best to negotiate the dangerous (notion of a) barrier between the imagination and experience. All texts have paratexts, but Johnson in his literary work gives them more conscious attention than almost any other writer. We should attend to them because it is too often assumed by writers and writers about writers that text exists in a kind of vacuum, irrespective of the material conditions not only of its generation but of its reception.

What can be concluded from the five phenomena I have identified above? We can imagine them all combined, in a huge collection of text, both alphabetically and electronically searchable, that would include every potential subject for a "Johnson and..."-style of essay (with learned commentary), every quotation, every imaginable encyclopedia entry, every indexable topic from his writings, every word in the *Dictionary*, and ultimately, every word in every work by and about him. That is the sort of vaguely

⁶⁰ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, foreword by Richard Macksey (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1997), 1. Translation of *Seuils* (1987).

lunatic end to which index-making tends, and which Johnson seemed to detect as the end to which modernism already tended. Such attention in some ways disembodies, unravels, deconstructs, Johnson. Yet he not only attracts this treatment, but survives it. I argue in Chapters Five and Six that these are both so, because his texts are structured around aphorisms, anecdotes, quotations, and so on.

Johnson, as I have pictured him, is a writer who is implicated in the history of literature, without being associated with any particular recognisable literary genre. The modes of writing with which he is most readily associated are not canonical, despite his own unmistakeable place in (what is called) the canon. Lists may be said to be the organising principle of the minor genres with which Johnson's reputation is intermeshed. But as I found with the periodical essays, there is not a great deal to be done with them.⁶¹ They resist theory, and resist it essentially.⁶² We may characterise theoretical English discourse — always a species of prose — as language with a horizontal dynamic. Lists are not a discourse (that is, not discursive) at all; they are vertical and discontinuous. They are essentialising, with clear internal limits, and they do not argue. Yet they are also frequently provisional, unwieldy and unfinished. A series of essays, particularly periodical essays, could continue for ever — or at least for the length of the life of some one reader. A dictionary can include more and more words, and never all of them, as new words evolve; a dictionary like Johnson's with historical citations could in principle include the entire literature of a language.

Lists may or may not be literature, but they are a quintessentially literate use of language. Lists are not oral; and that is something that could not be said of almost any literary genre, other than concrete poems (which are often lists anyway). Poetry and prose read as if to be heard, the one more like music and the other more like talk. The novel is the last major literary genre to develop because, presumably, people had until the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries been able to tell long stories. Johnson was a constant maker of lists in the more conventional sense. They represent to him short cuts to

⁶¹ I presented a paper, "Reading Lists" at a conference in 1997. It has not so far been accepted for publication, editors tending to complain that it is "insufficiently theorised."

⁶² I do not mean that they are untheorisable; theory, as an evolving suite of questions and practices, can be exercised on anything. But lists, unlike other linguistic constructions, do not invite questions: in this, they are not discursive artefacts but mere collections of things. Paul de Man argues that "Resistance may be a built-in constituent of its [literary theory's] discourse," although it is a mode of 'resistance' nothing like as radical as what a list represents. See the title essay in De Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota P., 1986), 12.

knowledge and aids to memory. But they represent to us models of the purposes to which writing may be put. He uses lists to plan, to manage, to resolve.

V. Filling Up Life

The most everyday purpose to which lists are put would have to be the shopping list. We do not appear to have any shopping lists of Johnson's, which is perhaps odd, considering what a range of scraps of his everyday life that we *do* have. Such lists we might consider as functioning to displace the memory, as it is argued frequently (from Plato onwards) that all literature does. But this will not do: as a purely literate artefact (unelaborated language, without grammar or syntax, with no equivalent in oral culture) such a list is a simple prompt to or repository of memory. It does not constrain or limit our everyday decisions or activities. Rather, it should be seen as what de Certeau would call a tactic, a means (in this case) of restraining the sensual impulses which the market economy strategically exploits, to wrest from us the management of the everyday. Of course, what is lost by way of the rather conceptual pleasure of resource management is for most people more than compensated for by the sensual pleasure of material acquisition. As we see in Chapter Seven, Johnson ruefully observes the common folly of buying unnecessary and useless objects, and sees such pleasures as typical of the problem of pleasure for the Christian moralist.

Consumer pleasure is perhaps essentially an exploitative concept, strategically engineered by the commercial media. That the consumer can, by figuring shopping as a pleasure, recover a path for the everyday through a system of power, does not alter the moral character of the transaction. De Certeau is charmed and heartened by the persistence of the everyday, but the moralist has other concerns. A compassionate moralist will concede, as Johnson insists, that indeed *life must be filled up*; but some means are better than others. In any case, although shopping lists may be employed tactically by the consumer, the technology has recently developed for shopping lists of a different kind to be strategically used by the commercial world. A recent news story opens with the following,

Your taste in food, how many condoms you use, the size of your underpants and whether you are likely to be vegetarian or a health food faddist.[sic] /If you use an Eftpos card in a supermarket, someone somewhere could have access to this

information through the supermarket's database and the banking system. /If electronic commerce is the tidal wave of our digital future, then the data warehouse is the vault from which the billions will flow. /This is the information age in which data, especially about individuals, has become critical to the success of electronic enterprises such as the Packer organisation's ecorp.... Potentially there is *hardly an aspect of your daily life* that could not be scooped up, filed away in an electronic warehouse and made available to whoever might be prepared to pay the price.⁶³

The advent of the electronic *post-shopping* list is a focus of anxieties about identity, privacy, memory: all locations of the everyday. If we have become merely consumers, then what we consume represents what we are, and the random and uncontrolled choices we make are (rather like our DNA, which is being analysed in another database) unique to us, and yet unknown to us, like memories we have forgotten.

Johnson's psychology of forgetting is explored by Ariele Sachs, but Johnson is more concerned about forgetting on a communal and cultural level. There are implications for our response to the seemingly inevitable process called globalisation, and other tendencies in the contemporary economic order. There is an unforeseeable potential for society in such trends as technological convergence and concentration of the ownership of the media of mass communication; unforeseeable because the changes in these areas are so rapid (and often minute) that there is no time for public or governmental scrutiny — hardly even awareness — between our society being on the verge of new developments, and being overtaken by them: between the unforeseen emergence of a potential and its deliberate development and exploitation. As this article tells us, it has all of a sudden become possible — through a combination of bank amalgamations and branch closures, electronic funds transfer, barcode technology, data collection and sale, outdated privacy laws, privatisation and commercialisation of the instruments of mass media — for large corporations, often (so far as Australians are concerned) foreign-owned, to monitor the daily financial transactions of individuals, where they take place and what products or services they involve. These innumerable and disparate items of otherwise insignificant data, a seeming chaos of detail of little or no concern originally to the individual whose negotiations it represents, can be technologically assembled into a portrait of intimate habits and preferences enabling people to be commercially targeted and exploited. The

⁶³ Garry Barker, "Electronic treasure troves for the online sales pitch," *The Age* (Melbourne), 1 December 1999, 2. My emphasis. (Kerry Packer, whose "ecorp" is mentioned, is Australia's wealthiest media baron.)

anxiety that the news story taps is exactly that vast tracts of what we have been accustomed to regarding as part of our everyday are being colonised.

In the account I have just quoted, the journalist commences his story by highlighting the potential intrusion of this technological practice into areas of life that are vivid and private, highlighting food, intimate relations, the body, and life-choices. These are all areas which connect with what de Certeau identifies as locations of the everyday. The locations of the everyday (like the Gifts of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament) are not to be definitively listed or otherwise limited to these locations; but de Certeau mentions as typical everyday practices *reading, talking, dwelling, moving about, shopping, cooking*.⁶⁴ Of these, only reading and talking remain somewhat outside the economy of contemporary data collection technology, and as we will see, Johnson is anxious about them too. According to de Certeau, it is a characteristic of "everyday practices that [they] produce without capitalizing" (xx); these accidentally developed databases extend the empire of capitalism, by appropriating traces of everyday practices that formerly participate in "the tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong" (xvii).

De Certeau himself is not as anxious about what seems to be a sense of decreasing space in which people can practice everyday life, as he reads the everyday as practices rather than locations. The "marginalised majority," whom we are accustomed to referring to as "consumers," de Certeau calls "users," stressing what he believes to be the irrepressible power of human agency. He was, however, writing twenty-five years ago, and developments since then may have weakened his faith that users are always able to, as he puts it, *make something* of the representations imposed upon them by a dominant economic order (xii-xiii). (Sociologists, however, seem to have a vested interest in not appearing too negative about such developments as this, by asserting, for instance, that 'the private' is only ever 'an imagined space.' One would think that there was at least an ethical issue in re-arranging 'data' to come up with conclusions unimaginable to the subjects and suppliers of the data. It's a kind of theft. But the word "theft" is representative of a vocabulary not employed by sociologists.)

This particular development in contemporary commerce — however ominous it may appear right now, and however much a mere fact of life it may be in the very near

⁶⁴ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xix, xx.

future — might seem to have little relevance to a discussion of an eighteenth-century man of letters. But I have mentioned it as a means of introducing the theme of the everyday, as well as a sense of the atmosphere of threat in which everyday practices are conducted. De Certeau's important distinction between the *strategies* of producers and the *tactics* of consumers is based on this apprehension, and will be discussed in Chapter Five. It is my contention that Samuel Johnson was vividly aware of the role of the everyday in the moral life, and sensitive to anything which might contain or exploit it. The private ownership of large and fortuitously-assembled databases, concerning the private affairs of millions of people (what we have purchased, where we have been and when) represents an attempted co-option of the everyday, about which we might imagine there to be perhaps perennial anxiety. But 'perennial' is an exaggeration. I will contend that such anxiety is a defining feature of modernism. As a figure of the 'early modern' period, but who identified strongly with the previous century, Johnson can be regarded as something of a pioneer in detecting seeming threats to the everyday.

VI. Johnson, Tradition, and the Millennium

All of Johnson's impulses and reasoned political commitments implied an adherence to tradition, to time-honoured practices in statecraft, religion, and manners. His definition of a *Tory* is "One who adheres to the antient constitution of the state, and the apostolical Hierarchy of the church of England": a clearer statement of traditional policy could hardly be imagined. Johnson's main sense of *tradition* is "The act or practise of delivering accounts from mouth to mouth without written memorials," and secondly, that which is so delivered "from age to age." We are inclined now to emphasise less the aspect of oral transmission, than the simple passing of notions and practices from age to age, whatever the means, and Johnson recognises a drift towards this in the definitions of the cognate terms. *Traditional* he defines as "Delivered by tradition; descending by oral communication; transmitted by the foregoing to the following age"; there is no sense that the last of these three needs to be qualified by the second. Of *Traditionally*, he says simply, "By transmission from age to age."

G.K. Chesterton observed that tradition in this broader sense is "the democracy of the dead," that tradition gives, as it were, a vote about cultural practice to those — no less

worthy than ourselves — who merely happen to be no longer alive.⁶⁵ It is a sentiment frequently re-iterated through the ages. Almost two millennia ago, Petronius (*Satyricon*, 42.5) wrote, of one dead, "*Abiit ad plures* — He's gone to join the majority." In Johnson's day, the thought was echoed by Edward Young,

Life is the desert, life the solitude;
Death joins us to the great majority.⁶⁶

This is a thought which, as Chesterton perceived, provides a grounding for a certain conservatism with regard to cultural practice. If we and our contemporaries are but a point along the march of human history, always about to recede into an ever-expanding past, what obligation or right have we to change or destroy anything — the language, environment, institutions, manners — that we have inherited? Our obligation is rather to pass on as much as we can unaltered to successive generations. For this thesis to have any impact, it is required that people have a living and humble awareness of the reality of the past.

History was, for Johnson, an important study — second only in importance to divinity — and it is easy to see why. A knowledge of history is likely to help people see their own lives and times in context, to feel more relaxed about fashion, recognising that any time in which one is alive is soon enough going, like all times, to be a *period*, and in the past. Chronology, which in the eighteenth century was a study separate from and prior to that of history, was also important to Johnson. It is a means of situating oneself morally, in relation to other people and times, giving a sense of mortality and the transience of fashion. In his Preface to the educational manual, *The Preceptor*, Johnson attempts to imagine the mental landscape of someone with a degree of learning but without a distinct and accurate impression of broad chronological relationships:

he will consume his Life in useless reading, and darken his Mind with a Croud of unconnected Events, his Memory will be perplexed with distant Transactions resembling one another, and his Reflections be like a Dream in a Fever, busy and turbulent, but confused and indistinct.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1909), 83 (Ch. 4 "The Ethics of Elfland").

⁶⁶ *The Revenge* (1721), Act IV.

⁶⁷ Johnson, Preface to *The Preceptor*, *Prefaces and Dedications*, ed. Allen T. Hazen (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1937), 183.

Now in the year 2000, with a total world population that has passed six billion, which is said to be *more than the total number of people who have ever been alive before*, we can see that Johnson was right to be anxious about memory. His works have survived to a time in which he is thought of (by those who think of such things) as a major writer, and English has become, for better or worse, a "world language." And yet fewer people with a claim to be educated have heard of him, and a major university in the richest nation on earth has ongoing difficulty in completing the publication of a collected edition of his works. The increasingly large proportion of young people in western countries at universities, seem to learn less and less about the past, even the immediate past. They undertake courses in managing data, and in understanding the phenomena that pass before their eyes, keen to catch it before it disappears into that unimaginable and irrelevant realm, the past. And this is understandable. Apparently, in bluntly statistical terms, we who are alive today *are* the great majority. Humanity has reached some sort of critical mass, with the present demanding and absorbing more and more of our attention, and the past seems to have been a momentary blip; history was a phase we went through.

Johnson was a great believer in "the present moment," but he believed in grasping it and utilising it, not being in thrall to it. If as individuals or as a community we can remember the past, believe in its reality, and know that it was different, the present will not enthrall us. Such a memory will empower us to act for the future, to see that history has not — *pace*, Francis Fukuyama — yet ended. Memory leads, as in my final two chapters, to resolution.

Although it is often offensive to the interests of global capital, the past is valuable because it is different. Knowing, and in particular knowing by reading, about the past is useful because it is about as close as we can get to the thought processes of other people, challenging us with the reality of their minds and experience, and challenging us also to similarly use our own minds, powered by something more than the immediate sensations which the global economy wants to sell us, and with which the postmodern view seems to completely identify human personality. Reading is in fact suggestive of the past in ways that television or, more, the Internet, is not. It invites us to engage with self-contained and completed discourses that were thought once in the minds of specific others, whereas the electronic media compel us to attend to multi-voiced yet impersonal ongoing discourse which is happening now, and appears frequently to embody nothing that could be called thought on the part of anyone.

In reading and writing about a writer two hundred years dead, I have attempted to locate the everyday in order, certainly, to engage with a topic with some theoretical currency, but mainly to engage with Johnson's own deep sense of dailiness, as a location at which his discourse must intersect with the lived experience of others, both non-historically-oriented scholars and non-readers, who might otherwise see Johnson (and every other dead writer, including Boswell) as of little relevance. The 'locations' — being textual, generic and thematic, being now in the life and now in the writing — perhaps seem without a clear logic. But this is one account, and as Maurice Blanchot says, the everyday is of the moment, and when it is lived (as it can only be), "it escapes every speculative formulation, perhaps all coherence and all regularity."⁶⁸ My account is far from escaping all coherence, which is above all in the humane and permanently relevant figure of Johnson, and his texts. I have inevitably come up against what Johnson himself identifies as barriers — some of them logical, regular and strategic — to the connection of mind with mind, and the mind with experience, and the means by which he tries to negotiate or subvert them.

⁶⁸ Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," 239.

CHAPTER ONE

Uttering a *Rambler*: Johnson's Conversation

I. The Writer and the Talker

Samuel Johnson's conversation made a great impact upon its hearers, but it could be said to have made an even greater impact, through Boswell's account of it, upon subsequent generations of readers. Part of the reason for its impact in both contexts may be that it upset a conventional expectation that a man of letters will be in person retiring and inarticulate; but, for the vast audience of Boswell's record, we can add to this that his representation of Johnson's conversation also upsets an expectation that writing in books — however fine — will not generally have the same ease or other pleasing characteristics of listening to fine talk: characteristics such as discursiveness, lack of caution, verbal force. To such expectations as these, Johnson's conversation is a welcome disappointment. The tensions between writing and talk, as well as the different tension between Johnson's own writing and Boswell's account of his talk, are fundamental to his subsequent reputation. Macaulay praised the representation of Johnson's conversation in Boswell's *Life* for being unlike his writing, "When he talked, he clothed his wit and his sense in forcible and natural expressions. As soon as he took his pen in his hand to write for the public, his style became systematically vicious."¹ But his original audience was pleased to find that his conversation *was* like his writing. One acquaintance reported, "Johnson spoke as he wrote. He would take up a topic, and utter upon it a number of the *Rambler*."²

In this chapter, I want to consider the status of Johnson's conversation as recorded in Boswell's *Life*, and explore the tensions between it and his writings. These tensions between Johnson's writings and conversations are not simply a matter of 'reliability': the question of whether in quoting the reported conversations in the *Life*, we are quoting Johnson or Boswell; although that is not a question that can be ignored. Conversation is, according to Michel de Certeau, a primary location of the everyday. He calls conversation, "an oral fabric without individual owners, ... a provisional and collective effect of

¹ T.B. Macaulay, Review of Croker's Edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (*Edinburgh Review*, September 1831); see *Johnson: The Critical Heritage*, ed. James T. Boulton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 429.

² Sir Brooke Boothby, Anecdotes in *Johns. Misc.* II, 391.

competence in the art of manipulating 'commonplaces' and the inevitability of events in such a way as to make them 'habitable.'³ But when conversation becomes a written text, it is certainly no longer conversation. That Johnson's conversation is any sort of a text much less a topic for scholarly discussion is an odd, possibly unique example of an everyday event (or at least the trace of an everyday event) that has been transformed into a literary artefact, to some extent displacing as literature the writings which it purports to serve and supplement. This is not to say that something, however, of its everydayness does not linger in the text and constitute much or most of its character and appeal. But Johnson's conversation is not now "an oral fabric," nor is it without owners, or at least claimants. Perhaps if I begin with a couple of paragraphs of truisms, by way of orientation, I can also rehearse the recent scholarly debate on the subject of the ownership of Johnson's conversation.

From the first line of his *Life*, Boswell's Johnson is not a talker but a writer, described by his biographer as "him who excelled all mankind in writing the lives of others."⁴ Johnson certainly wrote (despite poverty, indolence, melancholy, the attractions of London and society) a great deal, perhaps too much. And amongst the ephemeral dedications, journalism, translations and petitions there is much that will be read as long as anything is. However, Johnson — like all of us — talked more than he wrote, and the Johnson who is imaged in Boswell's *Life*, is Johnson the talker. Boswell's collection of Johnson's talk, when framed, put into prose, into print and between two boards (or ten, in the Hill-Powell edition, minus the index), is such that it constantly threatens to swamp Johnson's reputation as a writer. During Johnson's life the dangers of such a swamping had already become evident. His writing made him known, and talked about, and his conversation and company sought after and talked about. Boswell reports the publication, and good sale, of a volume of *Johnsoniana; or a Collection of Bon Mots*, "By Dr Johnson and Others,"⁵ (which Johnson deemed "a mighty impudent thing") as well as both *The Beauties* (and the *Deformities*) of Johnson.⁶ He was in the modern sense a celebrity,

³ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xxii. Heller also says that conversation is a "basic component in everyday life" (*Everyday Life*, 226).

⁴ *Life* I, 25 (introductory).

⁵ *Life* II, 432 and n.1 (16 March 1776); III, 325 (28 April 1778). The *Johnsoniana* will be discussed in Chapter Seven, under *Ana*, 197 ff.

⁶ *Life* IV, 149 (28 March 1782). The books were *The Beauties of Johnson*, and [James Callender,] *Deformities of Dr. Samuel Johnson. Selected from his works* (Edinburgh, 1782), 2nd edn. (London, 1782).

someone who (in Malcolm Muggeridge's words) is "famous for being famous."⁷ Johnson remarks to Boswell that "there is hardly a day in which there is not something about me in the newspapers."⁸ It serves Boswell's interests to produce such remarks, which attest not so much to Johnson, as to Johnson's fame, of which Boswell's *Johnson* is the testimony, the embodiment and, for subsequent generations, the chief cause.

So Samuel Johnson exists for posterity as a writer and a talker; but while his writings are his own work, his talk is the work — the masterwork — of James Boswell. Johnson the talker is Boswell's reconstruction of what he truly recalls of the parts of the 425 days⁹ that he was in Johnson's company. These truisms — familiar to every Johnsonian — serve I hope to focus the problematic issue of using Johnson's writings, and his conversation in Boswell's *Life* and the *Tour*, in the same discourse. "Johnson wrote" and "Johnson said" sound as if they refer us to the same source, but they do not: usually, the phrase "as Dr Johnson said" ought merely for reasons of precision to be translated "as James Boswell wrote." I am not suggesting that Boswell should necessarily be regarded as unreliable (in the past it was felt that he was too naïve to be unreliable¹⁰); the questions which his work provokes are far more subtle and interesting.

The question of the reliability of Boswell's account of Johnson's conversation ought to confront us with at least two other questions: reliable as what? and reliable for what purpose? However, in the recent discussion of the subject, these issues hardly seem to arise. Donald Greene's case against Boswell is, firstly, that the *Life* is hardly a biography of the best sort in modern terms,¹¹ and secondly, that many of the most-quoted lines of supposed Johnsonian conversation from the *Life* are unreliable and that scholars

⁷ I recall hearing Muggeridge use this expression on television many years ago, although it is likely that he was adapting (and improving) Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: or, What Happened to the American Dream?* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), Ch. 4: "The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness."

⁸ *Life* IV, 127. 3 June 1781. (This passage is not in the Journals; see Boswell, *Laird of Auchinleck, 1778-1782*, ed. Joseph W. Reed and Frederick A. Pottle [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977], 375-76.)

⁹ This is, according to the foremost contemporary Boswellian sceptic, Donald Greene, "a generous estimate." Greene lists 327 days on which Johnson and Boswell spent some time in each other's company, but notes there is some evidence for further unrecorded meetings. Donald Greene, "'Tis a Pretty Book, Mr. Boswell, But —," *Boswell's Life of Johnson: New Questions, New Answers*, ed. John A. Vance (Athens, GA.: U. of Georgia P., 1985), 134.

¹⁰ After Horace Walpole had written to Gray complaining of Boswell's having forced his way into his house and acquaintance, Gray replied (*apropos* of Boswell's *Account of Corsica*), "any fool may write a most valuable book by chance, if he will only tell us what he heard and saw with veracity." Quoted in *Life* II, 46 n.1.

¹¹ Donald Greene, "'Tis a Pretty Book, Mr. Boswell, But —," 110-46.

ought to examine their provenance before treating them as authoritative.¹² One feels that these conclusions ought not to be controversial, although a number of scholars have wanted to dispute with Greene over matters of detail and emphasis.¹³ Thomas Kinsella seems to accept much of Greene's case, but demonstrates through his examination of Boswell's revision of the dialogue in the *Life*, that Boswell aimed at something less like word-for-word accuracy (an aim clearly beyond anyone at the time) and more like fictional realism. Boswell, he says, is "striving to recreate conversation that allowed readers to picture Johnson, 'to see him live,' but out of necessity he followed conventions of written dialogue."¹⁴ It is an important part of Boswell's intention that the dialogue be lively and dramatic. But in this conclusion there is, I suggest, no need for the sceptics to rejoice. For how better to achieve lively and realistic dialogue than by using so far as possible the actual words and sentiments of the original conversation? Especially if, like Boswell, one has a detailed and usually contemporaneous journal record, supplemented by a particularly good verbal memory? I will, in all the chapters that follow, be using the recorded conversation of Johnson with confidence, but aware that any particular remark of Johnson's is not simply in the *Life* because he made such a remark. Boswell is essentially present, both within the diegesis and as the narrator, and has his own reasons for his own choices.¹⁵ I wish to consider the dynamics between writing and conversation, as reflected in Johnson's writing and conversation, as well as the dynamics between Boswell and Johnson, with which such questions are inescapably implicated.

II. The *Life* and the *Works*

The reliability of the narrator could be said to be one of the themes of *The Life of Johnson* and *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*. Particularly in the *Tour*, which was a sort of taster for the *Life*, Boswell is at great pains to show that Johnson (from 18 August to 26

¹² Donald Greene, "The *Logia* of Samuel Johnson and the Quest For the Historical Johnson," *The Age of Johnson* 3 (1990), 1-33.

¹³ See Philip Edward Baruth, "Recognising the Author-Function: Alternatives to Greene's Black-and-Red Book of Johnson's *Logia*," *The Age of Johnson* 5 (1992), 35-59; and John J. Burke, Jr., "Boswell and the Text of Johnson's *Logia*," *The Age of Johnson* 9 (1998), 25-46.

¹⁴ Thomas E. Kinsella, "The Conventions of Authenticity: Boswell's Revision of Dialogue in the *Life of Johnson*," *The Age of Johnson* 6 (1994), 256. He quotes Boswell from the opening of the *Life* 1, 30.

¹⁵ In line with Greene's counsel, all passages quoted from the *Life* in this thesis have been compared with the version in Boswell's journals, and variations of substance will be noted.

October) read the journal he was keeping, and commented favourably upon it from time to time.

He came to my room this morning before breakfast, to read my Journal, which he has done all along. He often before said, "I take great delight in reading it." To-day he said, "You improve: it grows better and better." — I observed, there was a danger of my getting a habit of writing in a slovenly manner. — "Sir, said he, it is not written in a slovenly manner. It might be printed, were the subject fit for printing."¹⁶

Despite many efforts such as this on the narrator's part, it remains an inescapably circular argument for Boswell to cite Johnson and others within his text as testimony to that text's authority. (He did not have access to Johnson's testimony in his letters to Hester Thrale, "Boswell writes a regular journal of our travels, which I think, contains as much of what I say and do, as of all other occurrences together — 'For such a faithful Chronicler as Griffith.'"¹⁷) But Boswell's aim is narrower than that: the testimony he presents is to the authority of the text within his text — the record of Johnson's conversation.

Johnson throughout his life spoke for the priority of reputation to belong to a writer's works rather than his character. "[F]or many reasons," he asserts in *Rambler* 14, "a man writes much better than he lives."¹⁸ He means, of course, morally better, rather than stylistically. He offers various explanations why this is the case, and certainly believes it to be so with regard to himself. He told Hester Thrale,

I have through the whole progress of authorship honestly endeavoured to teach the right, though I have not been sufficiently diligent to practice it, and have offered Mankind my opinion as a rule, but never proposed my behavior as an example.¹⁹

¹⁶ *Life* v, 226-27. *Tour*, 19 September. Boswell also placed a footnote at this point, to ask pardon for quoting such flattery.

¹⁷ *Letters* II, 95. 30 September 1773 (The allusion is to Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*). In any case, Greene emphasises that the *Tour*, which was read in manuscript by Johnson and Hester Thrale, and the *Life* are different cases. Greene, "'Beyond Probability': A Boswellian Act of Faith," *The Age of Johnson* 9 (1998), 72.

¹⁸ *Rambler* 14; III, 75.

¹⁹ *Letters* III, 371. 12 November 1781.

I used the words 'works' and 'character' five sentences back, but Johnson's words are teaching or 'rule' and 'example.' His belief is that any life ought to be judged, and lived, from the perspective of the effect it has on others: what I write is my teaching to others, and what I do has the potential to be an example to others. Johnson is aware of this as an especial burden on writers. Whilst at Westminster Abbey with Oliver Goldsmith, Johnson remarked, with humility and awe, on the prospect of being remembered by his writings with the great teachers of mankind.²⁰ But whereas a man's writings — which by their nature claim the public's attention — may be judged in this way, his behaviour, being private, is between him and his conscience. It is chiefly for this reason that Johnson is able, in the *Life of Savage*, to be generous to Richard Savage: a minor writer, whose character defects eventually cost him most of his friends and patrons. The only interest that the public should now have in Savage is as an author. Johnson remarks of Savage, that "[h]is actions, which were generally precipitate, were often blameable; but his writings, being the productions of study, uniformly tended to the exaltation of the mind, and the propagation of morality and piety."²¹

Paul Fussell insists that there is a profound inconsistency in, for instance, Johnson's "unremitting condemnation of moral backsliding on principle ("Never accustom your mind to mingle virtue and vice") which accompanies ... a genuine fellow-feeling with actual backsliders like Richard Savage."²² There are two points that might be made in response: that to "hate the sin, love the sinner" is a basic Christian imperative;²³ and that we can and should clearly distinguish back-sliders from the genuinely vicious, on the basis of a consciousness of having back-slidden, and the presence or otherwise of an intention — however half-hearted or unsupported by habitual practice — to repent, to reform, to do better in future. As his prayers testify, throughout his life Johnson himself was constantly forming such intentions, and doing so, by his own severe estimate, mostly unsuccessfully. Self-examination and resolution were for Johnson everyday activities, and we will consider his resolutions in the final chapter.

²⁰ *Life* II, 238. 30 April 1773.

²¹ "Savage," *Lives* II, 380.

²² Paul Fussell, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 43.

²³ Found as "I hate the sin, but I love the sinner," in a poem of nineteenth-century American popular poet, Thomas Buchanan Read, "What A Word May Do"; although this sentiment is unlikely to be unprecedented. (In *Measure for Measure* II vii, Angelo asks Isabella if she does not wish him, in pardoning her brother Claudio, to "Condemn the fault and not the actor of it?")

If we return to the distinction between life and works — upon a strong maintenance of which, Johnson realised, the future reputation of Richard Savage depended — where does a man's talk enter into this scheme? Is Johnson's own talk another of (or a supplement to) his works; or is it something that he *does*, an aspect of his behaviour? For Johnson himself, the answer is the latter: he confesses that "nobody, at times, talks more laxly than I do."²⁴ He writes, in other words, much better than he talks. His feelings, therefore, about having his every word hung on and recorded were doubtless ambivalent. He was flattered of course, by Boswell's attention: he enjoys the gaiety of the younger man's company, he dutifully offers moral guidance to a pupil who claims to be in need of it, and he admires the skill with which Boswell portrays him. But the question is: can the 'private life' of the great moral teacher stand this sort of scrutiny?

Johnson seems to have doubted it. After a session of "being teased with questions," he became angry with Boswell, telling him,

"I will not be put to the *question*. Don't you consider, Sir, that these are not the manners of a gentleman? I will not be baited with *what*, and *why*; what is this? what is that? why is a cow's tail long? why is a fox's tail bushy?" The gentleman [as Boswell calls himself], who was a good deal out of countenance, said, "Why, Sir, you are so good, that I venture to trouble you." JOHNSON. "Sir, my being so *good* is no reason why you should be so *ill*."²⁵

Johnson sees that Boswell is not, with such questions as these, engaging in the civil and social pleasure of conversation, nor is he seeking edification. On another occasion Johnson told him, "Questioning is not the mode of conversation among gentleman. It is assuming a superiority, and it is particularly wrong to question a man concerning himself."²⁶ Boswell is exploiting the conversational context and his intimacy with Johnson, for the anti-social and mercenary purpose of gathering data; data from which he and not Johnson might profit, for a biography that Johnson knows must one day replace him. For this reason, the answers that Johnson gives to Boswell's sometimes silly questions are moved out of the

²⁴ *Tour*, 24 October. *Life* v, 352.

²⁵ *Life* III, 268. 1778. See the note in App. F, p. 519 of this volume, for Mrs. Thrale's version of Johnson's account of this incident, which identifies Boswell as the "gentleman", and gives as the topic the shapes of apples and pears. She has Johnson conclude his complaint to her, "Would not such Talk make a Man hang himself?" The account in Boswell's Journals (10 April) does not include Johnson saying "I will not be put to the *question*." See *Boswell in Extremes, 1776-1778*, ed. Charles McC. Weis and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), 264.

²⁶ *Life* II, 472. 25 March 1776

realm of casual, private and everyday discourse. Writing matters more than speech, and requires more careful management, because it is by nature more promiscuous. The writer cannot be present to his readers, spatially or temporally, and must rely on his writings to represent him. He cannot qualify or elaborate his words; he cannot offer authoritative interpretations by his tone or expression; and he cannot provide by his presence a personal relationship with the reader, which would place his words in a context in which literal or literary truth is irrelevant.

By becoming a public figure, and particularly with Boswell on his trail, Johnson saw his private conversations develop an alarming potential for public promiscuity. Boswell labours to produce innumerable simulacra of Johnson, little new Sams — he wanted to exhibit, he told Frances Burney, "gay Sam, agreeable Sam, pleasant Sam"²⁷ — Sams which have the potential to go abroad in the world, meet with whom they will and with whatever understanding and sympathy (or misunderstanding and antipathy) they might. The implications of this are not lost on Johnson: there will someday be a new text of Johnson, over which he will ultimately exercise no control, but which nevertheless will remain morally his responsibility; who knows how many generations will prefix what random remarks with an authoritative "as Dr Johnson says..."? Being "put to the *question*," as Johnson says he is by Boswell, is being interrogated or put on trial. The *Dictionary* has it (under *question* [7]) as "Examination by torture," and gives the following illustration,

Such a presumption is only sufficient to put the person to the rack or *question*, according to the civil law, and not bring him to condemnation. *Ayliffe's Parergon*.

Johnson's answers must be right, for they will influence others, and he himself will therefore be judged by them. The obligation which Boswell puts him under, to speak permanent truth on matters of complete inconsequence, was no doubt very burdensome to Johnson. No wonder he is keen to discourage Boswell from spending more of the year in London: when asked he tells him, "were I in your father's place [which, of course, he is], I should not consent to your settling there."²⁸

²⁷ [Frances Burney,] *Dr. Johnson and Fanny Burney*, ed. Nigel Wood (Eristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1989), 104 (entry for October 1790).

²⁸ *Life* III, 176-77. 20 September 1777.

III. Private and Public Life

Apart from the moral problems of having one's proper name appropriated for unforeseeable purposes, Boswell poses an existential problem for Johnson; he is a *memento mori*, a reminder for Johnson — for the last twenty years of his life — of his impending death. He is already famous, he has achieved his reputation, and his biographer and embalmer dogs his heels already.

I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.

Here in his young, gay, agreeable friend, his devoted admirer, is "the dangerous supplement," that inevitably supplants the text. As Jacques Derrida says,

there is a fatal necessity, inscribed in the very functioning of the sign, that the substitute [in this case, Boswell's record of Johnson's talk] make one forget the vicariousness of its own function and make itself pass for the plenitude of a speech whose deficiency and infirmity it nevertheless only *supplements*.²⁹

Embalming the remains of Johnson, or something very like it, is clearly Boswell's intention: "Had his other friends been as diligent and ardent as I was [in collecting what Johnson "privately wrote, and said, and thought"], he might have been *almost entirely preserved*."³⁰ This curious and slightly ghoulish expression contrasts forcibly with the language and imagery used of the *Life*, and of its writer and subject, by some of Boswell's contemporaries, to the effect that Boswell's literary and subsequent social success on the basis of his book may be likened to him living off (as we would say, 'dining out on'), in fact cannibalising his friend. Their contemporary, the satirical poet John Wolcot, in the *persona* of Peter Pindar, writes of Boswell's expressed intention to write the life of Sir Joshua Reynolds. He has Johnson from beyond the grave calling, "O Bozzy, Bozzy, spare the dead!", and addressing him as "*Anthropophagus*." Peter Pindar comments on his own verse, as follows:

²⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G.C. Spivak (London: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1976), 144.

³⁰ *Life* I, 30 (introductory). My insertion (from same source) and emphasis.

The word *anthropophagus* is a derivative from the Greek, signifying *man-eater*, and Mister James Boswell having regaled most plentifully on the Carcase of Doctor Johnson [means] to make as hearty a meal on the Body of Sir Joshua Reynolds....³¹

(It occurs to me that pickles and pickling are mentioned at least three times in the *Life*.)
The preserver is also the destroyer.

Aside from the possibility of his 'Life' being preserved, Johnson believes that an author's works and life may be inconsistent, in terms of the principles enunciated in the one and exemplified in the other, without the taint of hypocrisy. In the *Rambler* cited earlier, Johnson says it is unjust

to charge with hypocrisy him that expresses zeal for those virtues, which he neglects to practise; since he may be sincerely convinced of the advantages of conquering his passions, without having yet obtained the victory.³²

When Rasselas tells the "assembly of learned men" of the hermit who, having supposedly renounced the world, "gazed with rapture" at Cairo, "[o]ne of the youngest among them, with great vehemence, pronounced him an hypocrite."³³ Only a very young man, we are to understand, would be so presumptuous. However, we are not here talking about neglected virtues, but two contrary virtues. There is a real and important distinction between private and public utterances. When Boswell complained to Johnson about the lack of intellectual conversation at a dinner he had attended, Johnson insisted that the point of 'meeting at table' is "to eat and drink together, and to promote kindness; and, Sir, this is better done when there is no solid conversation."³⁴ In his private capacity, among his friends, Johnson's conversation becomes such that Boswell, reporting it, finds it necessary to explain to his readers that the great man is sometimes off duty; or, to be more precise, that one's duties to the public and to one's friends are of a different character. Boswell says, in the Dedication of the *Life* to Sir Joshua Reynolds, that it is inadvisable to be

³¹ [John Wolcot,] "Sir Joshua Reynolds," *Peter Pindar's Poems*, selected by P.M. Zall (Bath: Adair and Dart, 1972), 29.

³² *Rambler* 14; III, 76.

³³ *Rasselas*, Ch. XXII, 84 (my emphasis).

³⁴ *Life* III, 57. May 1776.

"playful and frolicsome"³⁵ in the presence of fools; and with his friends, to be "playful and frolicsome" is precisely what Johnson often desires.

One of Johnson's ways of being playful Boswell describes (twice) as "talking for victory."³⁶ He notes later that Johnson

would sometimes in conversation maintain opinions which he was sensible were wrong, but in supporting which, his reasoning and wit would be most conspicuous.... [T]here was hardly any topic, if not one of the great truths of Religion and Morality, that he might not have been incited to argue, either for or against it.³⁷

This may perhaps have disappointed those who expected on the basis of his writings that "the *Rambler's* conversation"³⁸ would be undiluted moral advice, wisdom and good sense. There are innumerable opinions which one might maintain in argument with friends, but would not put into writing, much less print; not for fear of censure, but of misunderstanding. Ungenerous, humourless, or friendless people, people who are not 'liberal-minded,' as well as naïve folk, inclined to literalism, would not appreciate that a serious-minded man, a public upholder of strict morality, could also be playful and frolicsome.³⁹ Furthermore, Johnson's playfulness is characterised by its dangerous edges, by its being very close to morally reprehensible social conduct. He pokes fun at others, exposes their foibles, contradicts them, and expects the same in return: "I dogmatise and am contradicted," he says, "and in this conflict of opinions and sentiments I find delight."⁴⁰ Whatever he may do in public conversation, his private friends will not require him (or allow him) to "utter a ... *Rambler*" at them, nor does he want them to. He expects that no one will mistake the nature of such intercourse, and treat anything said too

³⁵ *Life* I, 4. Dedication.

³⁶ *Life* II, 100 (26 October 1769); II, 238 (30 April 1773).

³⁷ *Life* III, 23-24. 5 April 1776.

³⁸ *Life* V, 128. *Tour*, 28 August. That Boswell should use such expressions as this to dignify his material only encourages the confusion; although is he perhaps here being ironical at his own expense?

³⁹ A man of letters who bears some comparison with Johnson on a number of grounds, is Hilaire Belloc. In his "Chinese Litany of Odd Numbers", Belloc lists 'The Nine Jollities' as follows, "To laugh / To fight / To fulfil the body / To forget / To sing / To take vengeance / To discuss / To boast / To repose". With the exception of the fifth of these, I can imagine Johnson's endorsement. See *Short Talks with the Dead, and Others* (London: Cayme Press, 1926), 187.

⁴⁰ *Life* II, 452 n.1. 21 March 1776. (Quoted from Sir John Hawkins's *Life of Johnson*.)

seriously, such as by taking (or giving) offence; and he is impatient with those who do, such as Sir John Hawkins, whom he described as "very *unclubable*" for this very reason.⁴¹ But that there should be always a potential for offence is part of the game. More is put at risk by serious argument with close friends, but likewise more is achieved: the implication is that 'not even such a disagreement as this can divide us.'

Another aspect of the risk of private conversation is that friends scorn to tell each other when they are 'only joking'; indeed, if my own experience is relevant, it is usually impossible to say. The dynamic of playfulness and seriousness in such intercourse is constantly shifting, in a manner which baffles the prosaic and literal-minded. Conversation also exposes such people to the intellectual risk of being shaken in a cherished prejudice. Conversation, even between thoughtful people on serious matters, is seldom an exchange of perfectly developed views, but rather of preliminary and tentative opinions which may be sharpened or modified by debate. As Johnson told Boswell, "General principles must be had from books, which, however, must be brought to the test of real life. In conversation you never get a system."⁴²

Many instances of these behaviours in Johnson might be cited, or even explored, as each seems to show the matter in a different light. However, I am pursuing an argument; from which I will, however, digress for a moment, to observe that it is not only with intimate friends, but also total strangers (people who don't know that one is Dr. Johnson), that one is free to be playfully frank and jovially offensive. When Johnson accompanies Boswell to Harwich, at the end of the first season of their friendship, he makes fun of Boswell's (and his own) 'idleness' to the "fat elderly gentlewoman" with whom they are travelling.

At the inn where we dined, the gentlewoman said that she had done her best to educate her children; and, particularly, that she had never suffered them to be a moment idle. JOHNSON. "I wish, Madam, you would educate me too; for I have been an idle fellow all my life." "I am sure, Sir, (said she) you have not been idle." JOHNSON. "Nay, Madam, it is very true; and that gentleman there (pointing to me,) has been idle. He was idle at Edinburgh. His father sent him to Glasgow, where he continued to be idle. He then came to London, where he has been very

⁴¹ *Life* I, 480 n.1 (Burney's note). 1764.

⁴² *Life* II, 361. 16 April 1775.

idle; and now he is going to Utrecht, where he will be as idle as ever." I asked him privately how he could expose me so. JOHNSON. "Poh, poh! (said he) they knew nothing about you, and will think of it no more."⁴³

Strangers, we might say, do not care at all about the reputation of private people whom they do not know, and a man's friends by contrast will care about him despite almost anything. Problems only arise with a class of persons with which most of us — who are not celebrities, but private citizens — have no contact: that is, the General Public.

The second occasion on which Boswell mentions Johnson as having "talked for victory," he says that he "rather urged *plausible objections* to Dr. Robertson's excellent historical works, in the ardour of contest, than expressed his *real and decided opinion*."⁴⁴ It is more than likely that Johnson had no "real and decided opinion" of Robertson's works; he reserved such opinions for more important matters. I think that we can see the various discourses in which Johnson participates as forming a complex hierarchy:

- teasing, bawdy and nonsense; small-talk;
- topics for argument: books, human behaviour;
- principles of life and conduct: as in his essays; and
- great (and mysterious) truths.

In this classification, two essentially private discourses frame the central and more public discourses. The content of the public discourses are matters of secondary importance, common sense and matters of revealed and public truth. They are openly debated in society, at dinner-parties, and in the editorial pages. They are important questions, sometimes; but no one of any sense is going to lose sleep over them ("publick affairs vex no man.... I have never slept an hour less, nor eat an ounce less meat. I would have knocked the factious dogs on the head, to be sure; but I was not vexed"⁴⁵). But the content of the private discourses are imponderable, beyond the reach of civil debate: the nothings through which our personal relationships are negotiated and sustained, and the momentous questions to which no man of himself has the answers.

The primary insight into Johnson offered by Paul Fussell is in his discussion of how literary genres appeared and were observed in the eighteenth century. The writer, he

⁴³ *Life* I, 465. 5 August 1763.

⁴⁴ *Life* II, 238. 30 April 1773 (my emphasis).

⁴⁵ *Life* IV, 220-21. 15 May 1783.

says, had responsibilities to observe various conventional forms which were validated by their social functions. Johnson wrote many things which strike modern readers as sub-literary, because they do not proceed from impulses within himself. (This begs many questions, of course.) "A strong consciousness of genre," says Fussell, has as its "corollary, the assumption that a writer is very seldom 'upon oath'."⁴⁶ Johnson wrote not just "lapidary inscriptions" (to his remark about which Fussell alludes), but many other functional forms, such as Prefaces, Dedications, his Parliamentary Debates, and innumerable letters for others. Fussell says that in such writings "the line separating the literary 'honest' from the literary 'fraudulent' is very easily crossed over." He then proceeds in his thesis to contrast this attitude to literature with Johnson's 'contradictory' attitude that literature and the literary life are "very like a Christian sacrament." He does not seem to see that such tasks as these call upon the writer to perform an explicitly moral function, that is, to exercise a sense of what ought to be said.

Johnson found that people had a great need for the sort of principles for the conduct of social and personal life which his mind was constantly rehearsing. Such principles are neither profound nor original; they are public, and the public "more frequently require to be reminded than informed."⁴⁷ To exalt the mind and to propagate morality, were the terms (quoted earlier) Johnson used for the writer's task, with reference to Savage. In *Rambler* No. 2 he describes the same task (rather ironically) as "to enlarge or embellish knowledge, ... [and] to regulate the conduct of the rest of mankind."⁴⁸ He is willing to cheerfully mock himself for presuming to do such a thing, but at bottom he believes that most people are not in a position to do so for themselves. The same essay continues, to characterise the writer's audience as "fluctuating in pleasures, or immersed in business, without time for intellectual amusements; ... prepossessed by passions, or corrupted by prejudices, ... too indolent ... too envious ... unwilling to be taught." There are sufficient barriers to communication, apart from any deficiency of skill on the writer's part, without putting up the barriers of unconventional opinion.

For instance, Johnson would, in conversation, often shock any of his hearers who expected that a High Church Anglican would denounce the vanities of Roman Catholicism.

⁴⁶ Fussell, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing*, 72.

⁴⁷ *Rambler* 2; III, 14.

⁴⁸ *Rambler* 2; III, 13.

At every opportunity he would put Catholic belief and practice in the best possible light,⁴⁹ so much so that Bennet Langton Snr. believed him to be of that faith⁵⁰ (and indeed he was not beyond considering the idea). He had had a cordial relationship with the English Benedictines in Paris, and was happy to help one of them who was seeking a publisher for his book. But when he was asked by Boswell whether he would write a preface for the book, he said, "No, Sir. The Benedictines were very kind to me, and I'll do what I undertook to do; but I will not mingle *my name* with them."⁵¹ He has come to his own generous opinion of Catholicism through personal experience, including reading and reasoning. But to those readers who would regard his name as authoritative, he has a responsibility not to mislead into anything beyond what revealed religion guarantees. Discussing the subject of toleration, he said,

People confound liberty of thinking with liberty of talking; nay, with liberty of preaching. Every man has a physical right to think as he pleases; for it cannot be discovered how he thinks. He has not a moral right; for he ought to inform himself, and think justly. But, Sir, no member of a society has a right to *teach* any doctrine contrary to what that society holds to be true.⁵²

When Mrs Thrale actually converted to Catholicism in order to marry Piozzi, Johnson became very angry — aside from his purely personal disappointment — on account of its *public* consequences.

There are "plausible objections" to most things and equally plausible reasons in their favour. Johnson's favourite conversational method is to articulate these as clearly as possible, to give them such argumentative force as he can, and to see where he and his friends can be taken by the argument. When he is shown as "varying from himself in talk"⁵³ he is exploring an idea or, more frequently, challenging a facile expectation or an ill thought-out or prejudiced position held by someone else. He very seldom says what he thinks, having a mind that is so fertile that he thinks many things. The natural habit of his mind is to formulate thoughts in paragraphs so that, as in his essays, the antecedents and

⁴⁹ See *Life* II, 103-6 (27 October 1769) and IV, 289 (10 June 1784).

⁵⁰ *Life* I, 476. January 1764.

⁵¹ *Life* III, 286 (my emphasis). 15 April 1778.

⁵² *Life* II, 249. 7 May 1773.

⁵³ *Life* III, 155. 17 September 1777.

consequences of any position are apparent to him as well as possible qualifications, exceptions and plausible objections. His conversation does not consist of 'what he thinks,' if we mean by this some single sentiment that sums up what he has concluded about a particular topic, but *the sort of thing that he might think*, in the same way as much of his writing consists of not what he thought, but *what ought to be said*. His conversation emphasises not the conclusions of thought, but the process. And it is this precisely that Boswell is able to reproduce so exactly.

IV. Boswell and Imitation

Boswell does not go into as much detail as we would like about his methods of collecting Johnson's conversation, but there are many notes as to his practices, as well as some hints as to the origins of his skills in his own nature. In examining this, we must accept at the outset that he does not claim to reproduce conversations verbatim. A comparison of Boswellian reports with transcripts of informal conversation, or more formal conversation such as Hansard, shows something of the difference.⁵⁴ For a start, they are greatly compressed. The dinner at Dilly's with John Wilkes, which is one of the longest single episodes in the *Life*, takes about twenty-five minutes to read aloud, at a conversational pace. But the whole evening which it represents must have taken six to eight times as long in real time. Boswell himself says in an essay "On Diaries," in his series called *The Hypochondriack*,

I do not think it possible to do it [i.e., "to keep a journal of life"] unless one has a peculiar talent for abridging. I have tried it in that way, when it has been my good fortune to live in a multiplicity of instructive and entertaining scenes, and I have thought my notes like *portable soup*, of which a little bit by being dissolved in water will make a good large dish; for their substance being expanded in words would fill a volume.⁵⁵

Because Boswell's Johnsonian conversations make such a bulky book, such "a good large dish," we forget that we have here extremely compressed versions of a few hundred evenings in a long life. What Boswell is prepared to guarantee the readers of the

⁵⁴ See Lennard J. Davis, "Conversation and Dialogue," *The Age of Johnson* 1 (1987), 347-75.

⁵⁵ [James Boswell,] *The Hypochondriack: Being the Seventy Essays ... Appearing in the London Magazine, from November 1777 to August 1783*, ed. Margery Bailey, 2 v. (Stanford, CA: Stanford U.P., 1928) II, 259.

Life is that, having become himself "strongly impregnated with the Johnsonian æther," he is able to give us the "genuine vigour and vivacity"⁵⁶ of Johnson's conversation. In order to convey the *quality* of conversation (which he obviously does) Boswell creates completely new texts.

I must, again and again, intreat of my readers not to suppose that my imperfect record of conversation contains the whole of what was said by Johnson, or other eminent persons who lived with him. What I have preserved, however, has the value of the most perfect authenticity.⁵⁷

It is not completely clear what Boswell means here, but it is clear what he doesn't mean. Boswell and Johnson knew of the art of short-hand or stenography; Boswell owns that he could not take shorthand.⁵⁸ The passage above warrants a close look. As a "record of conversation," Boswell declares his account to be "imperfect"; that is, it does not contain "the whole of what was said." His account is however a "preservation" rather than a reconstruction, and he tries to claim a species of perfection for it. Greg Clingham and Thomas Kinsella both note that the eighteenth-century (and in particular the Boswellian) understanding of 'authenticity' is not our own; "'authenticity' is not truth," says Clingham.⁵⁹ Kinsella examines a range of relevant definitions, and concludes that "Boswell preserves Johnson's conversation with more 'authority' than 'accuracy.'"⁶⁰ In any case, Boswell does not claim that his account of Johnson's conversation is 'authentic,' but that it "has the value of" — that is, may be valued as highly as — "the most perfect authenticity": which could mean 'that which is better than mere authenticity.' At another place, Boswell mentions (outside the diegesis) his role as recorder of Johnson's sayings, which is "to collect my friend's conversation so as to exhibit it with any degree of its original flavour."⁶¹ (He follows this, interestingly, with one of those mentions of

⁵⁶ *Life* I, 421. 1 July 1763 (Boswell's emphasis).

⁵⁷ *Life* II, 350. 10 April 1775.

⁵⁸ *Life* III, 270. 10 April 1778.

⁵⁹ Greg Clingham, "Truth and Artifice in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*," *New Light on Boswell: Critical and Historical Essays on the Occasion of the Bicentenary of 'The Life of Johnson'*, ed. Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1991), 210.

⁶⁰ Kinsella, "The Conventions of Authenticity," 238.

⁶¹ *Life* III, 183. 21 September 1777. Understandably, most such extra-diegetical reflections in the *Life* are not found in the Journals; however, at this point he notes, "I am not sure if I have given his very words. But I am sure I have given their import." See *Boswell in Extremes*, 174.

pickling, which he uses here as an analogy.) Boswell does not say that his "record" exactly reproduces the original, but that it has the "flavour" of the original. It seems to me that Boswell is anxious to claim for his account of Johnson as much credibility as possible, but is also anxious not to claim what could be shown to be impossible.

This latter passage occurs in the *Life* as part of a continuous sequence in which Johnson and Boswell are together for a number of days, in 1777, on a visit to Taylor at Ashbourne. Boswell the narrator follows these remarks about his methods, by giving us Johnson's comments on the public reputation of the Earl of Cork, and the various graces of conversation, which includes generous remarks about Wilkes, Garrick and Foote. Given this lead, Boswell the character pursues the general topic of "players." It is a topic which he frequently introduces, as he and Johnson disagree about the virtues of the profession of acting, and he hopes for some fireworks. He tells Johnson, "There, Sir, you are always heretical: you will never allow merit to a player."⁶² Having been told what he "always" and "never" does, Johnson obligingly launches into a colourful diatribe against actors, maintaining that the popular mimick Samuel Foote⁶³ has superior powers to the tragedian Betterton. (I presume this is, on Johnson's part, on the principle that if one dislikes a particular form, one will least dislike the instances of that form which do not demand to be taken seriously.) Boswell contradicts him, although partly outside the diegesis.⁶⁴ He then continues with an account of how, over breakfast the following day, he expressed his desire to see Johnson and Mrs. Macaulay together, to which Johnson bursts out, memorably, "No, Sir; you would not see us quarrel, to make you sport. Don't you know that it is very uncivil to *pit* two people against one another?"⁶⁵ I have related this sequence because it seems to represent a revealing co-location of ideas, or train of thought, on the narrator's part: from the difficulty of reporting Johnson, to conversation in general, to the merits of acting, and finally to the conflict in Boswell himself between the mere reporter and the actual engineer of challenging situations for his hero.

Boswell greatly admired actors; he envied their lifestyle and enjoyed their company. 'Mimicks' were at the time a very popular sub-species of actor, and Boswell

⁶² *Life* III, 184. 21 September 1777.

⁶³ Johnson's complex and revealing responses to Foote will be examined in Ch. 7, 232 ff.

⁶⁴ Boswell frequently allows himself the last word in a disagreement with Johnson, by commenting as narrator on a reported conversation. The effect of this seems to be to soften Johnson's harsher sayings, perhaps so that Boswell does not alienate himself from anyone influential by reporting them. They would make an interesting study.

⁶⁵ *Life* III, 185. 22 September 1777.

introduces the topic of mimickry to Johnson on a number of occasions. When he describes to him the powers of mimickry of a Scottish friend, Johnson agrees that mimicks have great powers, but says that they put them to a very mean use.

JOHNSON. "Why, Sir, it is making a very mean use of a man's powers. But to be a good mimick, requires great powers, great acuteness of observation, great retention of what is observed, and great pliancy of organs, to represent what is observed. I remember a lady of quality in this town, Lady _____,"⁶⁶ who was a wonderful mimick, and used to make me laugh immoderately. I have heard she is now gone mad." BOSWELL. "It is amazing how a mimick can not only give you the gestures and voice of a person whom he represents; but even what a person would say on any particular subject." JOHNSON. "Why, Sir, you are to consider that the manner and some particular phrases of a person do much to impress you with an idea of him, and you are not sure that he would say what the mimick says in his character."⁶⁷

Johnson himself was much subject to imitation, if not by mimicks, then by literary parodists. His style, or at least, what was imagined to be his 'Rambler' style, fascinated his contemporaries, and was much imitated by wags for satirical purposes, and by his admirers, with atrocious consequences. Boswell raised the topic on the visit to Ashbourne, and Johnson commented thus on the supposedly 'Johnsonian' sentence he exhibits: "No, Sir, the imitators of my style have not hit it. Miss Aikin has done it the best; for she has *imitated the sentiment* as well as the diction."⁶⁸ All this may be taken to give us an idea of what might be required of someone who wished to give a representation of Johnson's conversation. A mimick of Johnson would need to observe, retain and represent his manner, and employ some of his particular phrases; however, to decide what Johnson would *actually say* on a particular issue — the 'sentiment,' his "real and decided opinion" — is not an issue for the mimick. The best mimick is not limited to the actual words and sentiments he has heard from his subject, because he can identify *the sort of thing* he would say, his plausible sentiments, or what on a given topic under particular circumstances *ought to be said*.

⁶⁶ In the journal version, identified as Lady Amelia Hervey. *Boswell for the Defense, 1769-1774*, ed. William K. Wimsatt and Frederick A. Pottle (London: Heinemann, 1960), 51.

⁶⁷ *Life* II, 154. 21 March 1772.

⁶⁸ *Life* III, 172. 19 September 1777 (my emphasis).

It should be no surprise to learn that the person who could best do this in respect of Johnson was James Boswell. He tells of mimicking Johnson to his face: "Sir, to talk to you in your own style (raising my voice, and shaking my head,) you *should* have given us your Travels in France. I am *sure* I am right, and *there's an end on't*."⁶⁹ If this sounds rather weak, Boswell's powers of physical mimicry of Johnson are more convincingly attested to by both Frances Burney and Hannah More. Burney describes him reading to her a letter from Johnson to himself: "He read it in strong imitation of the Doctor's manner, very well, and not caricature."⁷⁰ Hannah More relates that in a "very mirthful conversation at dear Mrs. Garrick's" she was

made by Sir William Forbes the umpire in a trial of skill between Garrick ["the greatest actor of his age"] and Boswell, which could most nearly imitate Dr. Johnson's manner. I remember I gave it for Boswell in familiar conversation, and for Garrick in reciting poetry.⁷¹

The distinction between *familiar conversation* and *reciting poetry* is important, because the ideal of at least some species of formal recitation would be to diminish personal speaking characteristics. In recitation, Johnson would himself sound more like a professional declaimer — that is, more like David Garrick. But in *familiar conversation* he would sound more like himself: and it was this that Boswell could imitate. In 1764, Boswell told Rousseau, "In the old days I was a great mimic. I could imitate every one I saw. But I have left it off."⁷² But it is a skill that, if he ever really 'left it off' at all, represents such a basic part of his nature that it emerges in other ways. It is reasonable to suppose that Boswell, in presenting a written account of Johnson's conversation, is not so much recalling Johnson word for word, as imitating him and the sort of thing he would say. With his close to contemporaneous journal notes as a prompt, he would recall particular *bon-mots*, probably very accurately (that being the nature of *bon-mots*), as well as the flow of topics and argument, and then start 'thinking Johnson.' Paul Korshin argues, no doubt correctly, that G.B. Hill's notes to the *Life* demonstrate that the plausibility of the

⁶⁹ *Life* III, 301. 17 April 1778.

⁷⁰ *Dr. Johnson and Fanny Burney*, 105. October 1790. In 1792, Fanny Burney recorded another testimony to Boswell's skill, in comparison with Langton, which is quoted at *Life* IV, 1 n.2.

⁷¹ "Anecdotes by Hannah More" [from her *Memoirs*, by William Roberts (1834)], in *Johns. Misc.* II, 195. (My interpolation.)

⁷² *Boswell on the Grand Tour: Germany and Switzerland, 1764*, ed. F.A. Pottle (London: Heinemann, 1953), 257 (15 Dec. 1764).

Boswellian account of Johnson's conversation owes much to Boswell's familiarity with Johnson's writings.⁷³ Johnson's admiration for Boswell's powers, and regard for the journals he saw, need not suggest that he thought "This is exactly what I said," but (what is equally astonishing) "This is just the sort of thing I could have said."

V. Playing at Johnson

There are many contrasts between Johnson and Boswell, but I believe the most important for a consideration of the status of "Boswell's Johnson," is marked by their differing attitudes to acting. Johnson is suspicious of it (which suspicion is but a subset of his suspicion of himself); Boswell believes that acting is not only to be admired as a profession, but that it is the business of life.

Boswell devoted an entire short work to a consideration of acting, which emphasises his preoccupation with the subject, and sheds some light upon it. In his three-part essay of 1770, "On the Profession of a Player," he speculates about what enables a good actor to portray feelingly and convincingly a variety of characters and emotions. He argues that "a good player is indeed in a certain sense the character that he represents, during the time of his performance." He quotes Johnson's emphatic but rather unsubtle objections to a literal understanding of this proposition, which, he admits, "render it exceedingly ridiculous." He then stresses the importance of his qualification, "only in a certain degree," but says that "I am really at a loss" to define what he means by it.⁷⁴ His own conjecture, which really only substitutes for one vague expression a number of others, equally vague, is that a player, as he puts it,

must have a kind of *double feeling*. He must assume in a strong degree the character which he represents, while he at the same time he retains the consciousness of his own character. The feelings and passions of the character

⁷³ Paul J. Korshin, "Johnson's Conversation in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*", *New Light on Boswell: Critical and Historical Essays on the Occasion of the Bicentenary of 'The Life of Johnson'*, ed. Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1991), 189.

⁷⁴ James Boswell, *On the Profession of a Player: Three Essays* (1770; London: Elkin Mathews & Marrot, 1929), 14, 15, 16.

which he represents must take full possession as it were of the antichamber [sic] of his mind, while his own character remains in the innermost recess.⁷⁵

He goes on to give an analogy from his own experience as a barrister, affirming that "during the time of his pleading, the genuine colour of his mind is laid over with a temporary glaring varnish." However, he also argues that "The double feeling which I have mentioned is experienced by many men in the common intercourse of life"; indeed, he soon says that "every man ... can hardly recollect a scene of social life, where he has not been conscious more or less of having been obliged to work himself into a state of feeling, which he would not naturally have had."⁷⁶ The habit of artificial feeling is apt to make a man have "no character of his own on which we can depend, unless indeed he be born of an uncommon degree of firmness," and such men, he seems to suggest, are the majority.⁷⁷

Boswell's theory of the "double feeling" is, perhaps, not so much a result of his reflection on the "profession of a player," as of his own experience. There is hardly a figure in literature in whom seemingly contradictory characteristics — greatness and weakness, gaiety and melancholy, toryism and romanticism, piety and dissipation — are more openly present. His journals are replete with observations on the characters he is at such great pains to create for himself in society: the sincerely passionate lover, the man of pleasure, the man of genius, the very strict Christian, the feudal lord, the earnest patriot. He is constantly assuming rôles — and they are always 'sincere' rôles — which are displayed for the appreciation of his later self. He is pre-occupied with matters of conduct and behaviour, anxious to always appear civil, agreeable, dignified, honest, easy, and so forth. On his first visit to London he recorded,

Since I came up, I have begun to acquire a composed genteel character very different from the rattling uncultivated one which for some time past I have been fond of. I have discovered that we may be in some degree whatever character we

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 18. My emphasis.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 18, 19, 19-20.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 20-21. This sentiment he may have learnt from Johnson. In the 'Dissertation on the Epitaphs written by Pope,' published in 1756 in the *Universal Visiter*, and later appended to his 'Life of Pope,' he says, "the greater part of mankind 'have no character at all,' have little that distinguishes them from others equally good or bad...." *Lives* III, 263-64. (The quoted allusion is to Pope's *Moral Essays*.)

choose. Besides, practice forms a man to anything. I was now happy to find myself cool, easy, and serene.⁷⁸

All his life he was pre-occupied by such considerations. At the end of his second-last season with Johnson, in 1783, so his own biographer relates,

Boswell, who still believed that his character could be deliberately formed, couldn't decide whether he should be a grave, reserved solid man or "fine, gay, flashy fellow." Johnson's answer, as preserved, is succinct but sufficient: "This is mighty foolish."⁷⁹

Boswell never ceased wanting to discuss the subject, because it was central to his everyday life. Johnson's responses were never anything other than dismissive. His remark, quoted earlier, about the "lady of quality ... who was a wonderful mimick," that "she is now gone mad," seems to be a warning to Boswell to abandon what he saw as a weak, irresponsible, and possibly dangerous pre-occupation with self and self-fashioning. (It seems particularly so in the light of Hester Thrale's marginal note to Boswell's *Life*, in which she identifies Lady Emily Hervey, and comments, "She was never mad as I know of." She describes having met Lady Emily at Bath with Johnson seven years after this conversation, seemingly in her right mind.⁸⁰)

Boswell's own "double feeling" is explored in an artful essay by Karl Miller, *Boswell and Hyde*. Miller uses the psychological description "duality" to describe the phenomenon. (Indeed, he seems not to have seen Boswell's "Profession of a Player.") Boswell's qualifications for having a 'split self', or 'double' or 'multiple personality' seem impeccable. Such disorders, says Miller, "occur wherever a second language is acquired, wherever bilingualism occurs — a bilingualism which includes the simultaneous or successive possession of a regional vernacular and a standard or privileged speech."⁸¹ Boswell was inclined to bouts of drunkenness, which "creates a second self" (12). His

⁷⁸ James Boswell, *Boswell's London Journal, 1762-1763*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (London: Heinemann, 1950), 47 (21 November, 1762).

⁷⁹ Frank Brady, *James Boswell: The Later Years, 1769-1795* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), 246. (The quotations are from Boswell's journal. See *Boswell: The Applause of the Jury, 1782-1785*, ed. Irma S. Lustig and Frederick A. Pottle [London: Heinemann, 1981], 151.)

⁸⁰ Quoted in *Life II*, App. 2, 492.

⁸¹ Karl Miller, *Boswell and Hyde* (London: Penguin "Syrens," 1995), 7. Parenthetical references follow.

"troubled relationship with his father, Lord Auchinleck, ... must surely have helped to send him oscillating, as he did, between the poles of submission and revolt" (12-13). If it is not quite madness, it is at least an unsteadiness and unreliability, sensed and found repulsive or pathetic by the firm Victorian commentators, but responded to with a bit more compassion and understanding by Johnson. Johnson always felt that, whilst there was a great deal more that should and could be done than many people are prepared to admit, there remains nevertheless a great deal that can't be helped (such as with Boswell, whose assertion that he "couldn't help" coming from Scotland seems to have set the agenda for their relationship). Miller observes that "Boswell's journal is interested in what can't be helped" (13); and we could speculate that perhaps Boswell exaggerates "what can't be helped" in his own life, in an effort to make himself all the more unaccountable and interesting for his own scrutiny.

Boswell's obsessive interest in what he should be like, and how he should go about being himself, is in no way allayed by Johnson's lack of interest in — indeed, hostility towards — the subject. Boswell seeks these responses, records them, and reports them. ("Sir, you have but two topicks, yourself and me. I am sick of both."⁸²) But Johnson, although he tried to avoid both idleness and solitude and advised Boswell to do the same, was not someone who fled self-knowledge and introspection. As Lawrence Lipking points out in a frankly speculative but intriguing and wide-ranging essay, "What Was It Like To Be Johnson?", Johnson took very seriously the ancient imperative to "know thyself." In *Rambler* 24 he asserts that it is "a dictate, which, in the whole extent of its meaning, may be said to comprise all the speculation requisite to a moral agent."⁸³ It is the theme and title of what Lipking calls "the most personal poem he ever wrote, the superb Latin confession"⁸⁴ that he wrote in 1772, after the labour of revising the *Dictionary* for its fourth edition, "Γνῶθι Σεαυτόν" [*Gnōthi Seauton* = (Gk.) Know Thyself].

Lipking suggests that for Johnson, to know himself does not mean an effort to stand outside of himself in rapt contemplation, but to "situate [the self] in a universe of moral relations.... To know thyself means putting off self-love and approaching a state of utter selflessness." Of course, one may approach such a state without ever getting particularly close. We can sense the effort to do so not so much in Johnson's conversation

⁸² *Life* III, 57. May 1776.

⁸³ *Rambler* 24; III, 130.

⁸⁴ Lawrence Lipking, "What Was It Like To Be Johnson?", *The Age of Johnson* 1 (1987), 40.

as in his anxious, scratchy and half-finished private diaries. How different are these purely practical documents from the remorseless self-celebration of Boswell's journals. They monitor his failures and record his intention to do better. For Johnson, says Lipking, the admonition to "know thyself" "prompts him to reflect on one's duty to others, the need to do what we were placed on earth to do. The self defines itself, and keeps itself in order, by going out into the world."⁸⁵ The past can be known and our part in it subject to reflection; the future can be contemplated and our part in it resolved about. To know what one has done and what one ought to do is all the knowing oneself that is possible, or that one needs. As for the present time, we possess and are possessed by only the present moment, and cannot stand outside of it or ourselves in it, and to attempt to do so — as Boswell so often seems to be attempting — is futile.

But the conversation of Johnson (even as it is represented to us in a text which, as I have said, is no longer conversation) might be seen to manifest this effort to achieve "a state of utter selflessness." Boswell's attraction to Johnson — and the attraction of Boswell's Johnson — is an attraction to a man of distinct and pronounced character, who seems always to be identifiably himself, and to have no difficulty in being so. Speculations such as these can now only rely on how these texts are received, and it therefore seems not inappropriate for us to move away briefly from critical discourse and towards autobiographical discourse. It is Lipking's own literary sensitivity, his immersion in the texts of Johnson — and his own frankness — that gives authority to his reading of Johnson's character. Another such reader is the British critic, the late John Wain, whose contemporary life of Johnson offers such a moving, acute and empathetic portrait. In his own early autobiography, Wain describes his attraction, as a student at Oxford in the 1940s and '50s, to various of his teachers, Donald MacKinnon, Nevill Coghill, Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis. In doing so, he depicts a phenomenon which I believe to be exactly pertinent to where our discussion of conversation and self-fashioning has led us, and which I have seen described with such clarity nowhere else. Twelve years before he became a biographer of Johnson, Wain takes considerable pains, and risks misunderstanding, to depict these men and explain what he found attractive about them. The depiction of his eminent teachers is beyond our purposes, but the explanation is illuminating.

They attracted me because in their different ways they all treated life as if it were art. I do not mean that they posed. They simply recognized, intuitively, that the

⁸⁵ Lipking, "What Was It Like To Be Johnson?", 38, 40.

presence of other people, even the humblest and fewest, constitutes an audience, and towards an audience, one has certain duties....

Some people give the impression of being exactly the same in company as they are when alone. The same raw, untreated personality which serves them for solitary meditation, country walks, cleaning their teeth, casting their accounts, has to do duty in public too. They respond to other people, but they do so artlessly, much as animals might. [By contrast, there are] those for whom the presence of even one other person is a perpetual stimulus to character-creation. They are always giving a performance in the rôle for which they have cast themselves, making up the play as they go along, and tacitly inviting others to collaborate.... It is no mere matter of posing, of permitting oneself to trifle or be insincere. Rather it is the recognition of a duty towards life and towards one's fellow-man: not a duty that is binding on everyone, like the duties of humility or mercy, but one that is instinctively accepted by those who fall into this type.... By the mere fact of our birth, we have been cast for certain parts in the great play that is always going on, and we must act those parts with energy and imagination, making the most of every line.⁸⁶

Can we doubt that Johnson, not only as depicted in Boswell's pages, but as the author of *The Rambler*, would have recognized himself?

[M]en are designed for the succour and comfort of each other; ... though there are hours which may be laudably spent upon knowledge not immediately useful, yet the first attention is due to practical virtue; and ... he may be justly driven out from the commerce of mankind, who has so far abstracted himself from the species, as to partake neither of the joys nor griefs of others....⁸⁷

To know oneself as thus "designed" ought to be, Johnson believes, sufficient knowledge to keep most people fully occupied. In this essay he draws his example (as he does customarily) from the life of writing and study, and scolds anyone who "employs himself upon remote and unnecessary subjects, and wastes his life upon questions, which cannot be resolved, and of which the solution would conduce very little to the advancement of

⁸⁶ John Wain, *Sprightly Running: Part of an Autobiography* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 154-56.

⁸⁷ *Rambler* 24; III, 133.

happiness." He describes "Gelidus," a "great philosopher," who has, through devotion to abstruse science and research, become "useless to common purposes, ... unable to conduct the most trivial affairs, and unqualified to perform those offices by which the concatenation of society is preserved, and mutual tenderness excited and maintained."⁸⁸ The question of whether one ought to be fine and flashy or grave and reserved is hardly philosophical, but is equally "useless to common purposes." But to know who one is, Lipking concludes, is to negotiate a hermeneutic circle, because "you must know the nature of man in general; but your only access to that nature is through understanding deeply what you are." To "Know thyself" is most emphatically not "useless to common purposes," because it brings one face to face with the common purposes of all humankind. The circle of self-knowledge is not an abstract problem to be solved by philosophy, but a practical tension within which to live. As Lipking asserts, "A moral being goes around it every day."⁸⁹

Boswell's need for roles is inevitably implicated in a need for role models. Presumably, his belief — at least, before he began to mix with a wide society — was that every strong and mature character, with a secure place in society, was doing the same as he himself: that is, making a conscious effort to be whatever it was he seemed to be. So he is fascinated by Johnson's remarks to the exact contrary. At the end of his first Johnsonian summer in London, when Johnson accompanied him on the coach to Harwich,

While we were left by ourselves, ... Dr. Johnson talked of that studied behaviour which many have recommended and practised. He disapproved of it; and said, "I never considered whether I should be a grave man, or a merry man, but just let inclination, for the time, have its course."⁹⁰

Bennet Langton reported, in a series of anecdotes that Boswell purports to quote, that Johnson "had an abhorrence of affection," and says that in praising Mr. Langton Senior for his reading and piety, Johnson added "he has no grimace, no gesticulation, no bursts of admiration on trivial occasions; he never embraces you with an overacted cordiality."⁹¹

⁸⁸ *Rambler* 24; III, 131, 133, 132.

⁸⁹ Lipking, "What Was It Like To Be Johnson?", 55. My emphasis.

⁹⁰ *Life* I, 470. 5 August 1763 (these days seem to be unrepresented in the Journals).

⁹¹ *Life* IV, 27. 1780. Hester Thrale also reported, "Fear of what others may think, is the great cause of affectation; and he was not likely to disguise his notions out of cowardice. He hated disguise, and nobody penetrated it so readily." *Anecdotes*, see *Johns. Misc.* I, ?25-26.

That is, he is not play-acting in his private relations. Boswell pursued the topic again some years later: they are discussing the morality of advocacy (they were in Oxford, where Johnson seems to have been helping Chambers with his law lectures):

BOSWELL. "But, Sir, does not affecting a warmth when you have no warmth, and appearing to be clearly of one opinion, when you are in reality of another opinion, does not such dissimulation impair one's honesty? Is there not some danger that a lawyer may put on the same mask in common life, in the intercourse with his friends?" JOHNSON. "Why no, Sir. Every body knows you are paid for affecting warmth for your client; and it is, therefore, properly no dissimulation: the moment you come from the bar you resume your usual behaviour. Sir, a man will no more carry the artifice of the bar into the common intercourse of society, than a man who is paid for tumbling upon his hands will continue to tumble upon his hands when he should walk on his feet."⁹²

Johnson, as a professional writer — and no man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money — is "paid for tumbling upon his hands." Paul Fussell says that one of the eighteenth-century senses of literature that was strongly felt by Johnson is that "literature is a mere rhetorical artifice akin to legal advocacy." By this conception, "the act of literature is necessarily an act of argument, [and] the writer, even when he assumes the role of poet, is most comparable to a barrister arguing a case."⁹³ This underlies Johnson's commitment to the proper demands of genre. Just as everybody knows that lawyers have a job to do, so everyone knows that the epitaph writer, the writer of prefaces, the lexicographer, and even the writer of moral essays has a job to do.

In society — that is, in private, "in the intercourse with his friends," as Boswell put it to Johnson — Johnson wishes to walk upon his feet. (We need to try to ignore the way in which the imagery here becomes confused, that Johnson's walking upon one's feet with one's friends is often to be in Boswell's terms playful and ircklicksome!) Private conversation is a different genre, and different especially to public conversation. Once, having noticed Boswell quizzing Levett about him, "A man, (said he,) should not talk of himself, nor much of any particular person. He should take care not to be made a

⁹² *Life* II, 47-48. Spring [26 March], 1768.

⁹³ Fussell, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing*, 43, 46.

proverb."⁹⁴ Johnson wishes to retain in private that promiscuity of discourse which is appropriate to relations between close friends, and appropriate to the limited human ability to fully comprehend anything. An important aspect of this promiscuity is Johnson's humour, of which so many readers and quoters of his conversation appear to be in need of constant reminding. We might recognise when particular logia are funny, without necessarily recognizing that Johnson was joking. (Boswell himself did not always notice when Johnson was joking.⁹⁵ He notes in his journal, "I could not well defend Mr. Johnson's saying about Sheridan's pension. I told him [Sheridan], as Mr. Johnson told me, that it was said *jocularly*. But I do not see the joke."⁹⁶) By courtesy of Boswell, Johnson finds himself being turned into a text, "made a proverb" and circulated in conversation, while he is still alive, which is a terrible imposition. Rail as he might against it, he eventually has to accept that even such a private scene as his death will very likely be a public occasion.

Boswell reports two conversations with Johnson about death, eight years apart, both of which within the diegesis of the *Life* he himself initiates. And they finish very differently: Johnson ends the first one in "a state of agitation,"⁹⁷ and the second concludes with him gloomy, uncertain, but resolute and hopeful. It is interesting that Johnson should in the second of these conversations appear to calm himself, in the following way: "[h]e added, that it had been observed, that scarce any man dies in publick, but with apparent resolution; from that desire of praise which never quits us."⁹⁸ It must be clear to him that his death, when it comes seven years hence, will be a public death, and that one has a duty to the public. Perhaps even such a little public as Boswell can awaken in Johnson the "desire for praise"; but it more certainly stirs up his sense of responsibility to the genre, to say what ought to be said.

Despite Donald Greene's efforts, and so long as there are general readers, Boswell's conversation of Johnson will be regarded as one of Johnson's works; perhaps his

⁹⁴ *Life* III, 57. May 1776.

⁹⁵ See John A. Vance, "The Laughing Johnson and the Shaping of Boswell's *Life*," *Boswell's 'Life of Johnson': New Questions, New Answers*, ed. John A. Vance (Athens, GA.: U. of Georgia P., 1985), 204-27.

⁹⁶ Boswell, *The Ominous Years, 1774-1776*, ed. Charles Ryskamp and Frederick A. Pottle (London: Heinemann, 1963), 133 (7 April 1775).

⁹⁷ *Life* II, 107. 27 October 1769. The Journals say "a state of tumult"; see *Boswell in Search of a Wife*, ed. Frank Brady and Frederick A. Pottle (London: Heinemann, 1957), 354.

⁹⁸ *Life* III, 153-54. 16 September 1777.

major work. But the facts of its provenance, the motives and character of its recorder, the realities of its genre, and Johnson's own views about the public and private self are decisively relevant to our reading of it. Every time we put Johnson the writer and Johnson the talker into the same discourse, we must keep in mind the special contested character of Boswell's Johnson. It represents a view of Johnson which at any particular point we might wish to resist; but it also represents a tension between two vivid personalities which is productively human. However, so far as being a representation of Johnson's everyday is concerned, Johnson's conversation is not a source which ought to be allowed to displace from our consideration other locations. It is persuasive and strategic, but it must not overwhelm the powerful sense of the everyday that we can gain from Johnson himself, in his writings. The everyday is not only the present or representations of it, but the ways in which in the present one deals with the past and future. Lipking notes that "The relation between memory and hope defines the self for Johnson.... When Johnson tells us about himself, therefore, he journeys into the past, or occasionally the future. More precisely, he records some memories and hopes. It is in these mixed elements that every self lives."⁹⁹ In seeking the manifestations of the everyday in Johnson, we will attend to both of these themes — memory and hope; but leaving his conversation we shall next consider the text and types of text of which Johnson did claim authority and ownership.

⁹⁹ Lipking, "What Was It Like To Be Johnson?", 43-44.

CHAPTER TWO

Prose and the Everyday

I. Reading and Ordinary Language

If, as I have argued, the two Johnsonian discourses, his writing and the accounts of his conversation, must exist in readers' consciousnesses in a productively human tension with each other, it is appropriate to progress from considering Johnson's conversation to his writing. But writing could be regarded as outside the realm of our main focus, the everyday. Although it may be that certain themes in Johnson's writing concern the everyday, *writing itself* does not seem to partake of the everyday, at least not in the same way as does conversation. The *practice* of writing may be an element of the everyday of particular individuals and, of course, by *reading* many people put writing to an everyday use. But they do so, Michel de Certeau would say, on the basis of its being outside of the economy of the everyday. Johnson too registers such conventional doubts, at least in and with regard to writing for publication (and writing in some ways *implies* publication). In his *Journey to the Western Islands*, he notes at Bamff, in some detail, his dissatisfaction with the windows of Scottish houses. Having devoted two paragraphs to describing the windows he writes, "These diminutive observations seem to take away something from the *dignity of writing*, and therefore are never communicated but with hesitation, and a little fear of abasement and contempt."¹ Of course, he immediately proceeds to develop the *seem to*, with the philosophical reflection that life is in fact mostly composed of such small things; and whilst this seems to re-situate writing, it actually reframes the "diminutive observations" as part of something more dignified, more befitting writing. Writing remains a site of dignity, of which the everyday may partake.

Reading is for de Certeau a quintessentially everyday activity; it typifies "everyday practices that produce without capitalizing, that is, without taking control over time" (xx).² Like other everyday activities, it operates freely whilst embedded within systems of control. The system of control in the case of reading is the written text. Reading seems to

¹ Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, ed. J.D. Fleeman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 16 (my emphasis).

² De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*. (Parenthetical references follow in text.)

be a passive activity which serves and is subject to the imposed system (readers are often described as "consumers" of text), whilst de Certeau would insist that in fact the reader makes someone else's text serve his or her own purposes. That reading be figured as a passive occupation was required, de Certeau says, in the past by the Church, and is so now by the media (169). But in fact, by being subject to strategies such as reading, "The ruling order serves as a support for innumerable productive activities" (xxii). Of course, reading can be mere consumption; and some texts and species of text are more prone than others to being merely consumed rather than productively read.³ But most readers experience reading as a prime location of freedom rather than of exploitation. De Certeau depicts it vividly enough: "In fact, to read is to wander through an imposed system (that of the text, analogous to the constructed order of a city or of a supermarket)" (169). Within such a system or constructed order, de Certeau characterises reading as a kind of "poaching" (165). Writing needs to be rendered everyday by reading; writing seeks to take control over time, but reading "makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment" (xxi).

That reading is not merely an undifferentiated passive subjection to text, but is rather a complex suite of strategies, is amply illustrated by Robert DeMaria in the third book of his Johnson trilogy, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading*.⁴ In the styles of reading practised by Samuel Johnson, as DeMaria identifies them, we see a notably activist reader, who is never prepared to take a text on anyone else's terms. He browsed, or skipped, or read rapidly and uncritically, or read with care and attention, taking notes, or re-read. A good many readers probably do all of these things, but Johnson left innumerable traces of his reading in many locations. We may find these in his critical works and other writing, and particularly the *Dictionary*,⁵ in the catalogue of his library and the surviving copies of his many books,⁶ in lists of books he made for other people,⁷

³ We will explore this when we consider narrative in Chapter Five, 161 ff.

⁴ Robert DeMaria, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1997).

⁵ The sources for the *Dictionary* have been studied by Lewis M. Freed and Eugene Thomas. The surviving copies of the books that Johnson used have also been examined and described; a succinct and up-to-date account of this work may be found in Robert DeMaria, "Johnson's *Dictionary*," *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, ed. Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1997), 85-101.

⁶ The sale catalogue of Johnson's library is comprehensively examined and glossed in Donald Greene, *Samuel Johnson's Library: An Annotated Guide* (Victoria, B.C.: U. of Victoria "English Literary Studies," 1975), cited hereafter as *SJL*. For Johnson's surviving books, see J.D. Fleeman, *A Preliminary Handlist of Copies of Books associated with Dr. Samuel Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1984).

⁷ Johnson's most notable writing about book collecting is his letter of advice to the Royal Librarian, Sir Frederick Barnard, on the formation of the collection; see *Letters* I, 307-14 (28 May 1768). He made a list of books for reading for Daniel Astle, to prepare him for studying for the ordained Christian ministry; see *Life* IV, 311-12, and my own new transcription of the MS, with commentary, in "A Clergyman's Reading," 126-27.

in his list of his literary projects and in the accounts given by his biographers of his reading practices. Boswell in particular seems fascinated with the subject. All of these sources have been scrutinised by scholars, who are almost by definition interested in the subject of reading.

In this chapter I will be contending that the type of writing which Johnson most typically employs exhibits his awareness of the tendency of writing to control and systematise, and his desire to so far as possible use a written discourse which goes as far as writing can to meet and to empower the activist, everyday reader. For it seems to me that just as some readers (de Certeau singles out literary critics⁹) are more disposed than others to read strategically, so some writing is more open to such reading, and indeed seems to invite or challenge readers to read strategically. What I am thinking about is non-fictional, non-narrative prose: a discourse which does not narrate, does not quote, does not claim a specialisation or authority, does not manipulate rhythms for effect. It is a genre of language that has no name, and that is usually defined (as I have just done) by the characteristics and functions which it lacks. The term *prose* is not a word with a positive meaning; Johnson defines it in the *Dictionary* as "Language not restrained to harmonick sounds or set number of syllables; discourse not metrical." 'Prose' only means 'not verse.' It is, in other words, ordinary or "zero degree" language. It is the use of language which seems implicated in the everyday by simple analogy; because, like the everyday, as Kevin Hart says, "it is usually defined negatively. The everyday, we tell ourselves, is not touched by the heroic, the marvellous, the monumental or the philosophical; and if we think harder, we might say that it is neither cumulative nor systemic."¹⁰ All those negatives may equally describe essayistic, non-narrative prose. And the analogy works the other way: the everyday or something like it is described by Hegel as "the prose of the world."

When we participate in conversation, we notice if there is any drift towards the perimeters of ordinary language. Ordinary language is suspended when we start telling a story — people sometimes ask at such moments for reassurance about the genre ("Is this a true story? Is this a joke?"). To talk in verse or language with overtly poetic characteristics, or even to break into verse in writing, is in most circles regarded as

⁸ Johnson's own list of forty-eight literary projects, in a notebook labelled *Designs*, are given by Boswell in a footnote to the *Life* IV, 381-82. My new transcription of the text is included in the Appendix, 330-34.

⁹ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 169.

¹⁰ Kevin Hart, *Samuel Johnson and the Culture of Property*, 165.

ostentatious and anti-social.¹¹ To quote or otherwise draw attention to the question of authority in one's discourse, or to talk at such length so as to imply a sense of one's authority, is likewise distracting. (There is the story of Coleridge, in the midst of some hours of uninterrupted discourse, suddenly asking Lamb, "I believe, Charles Lamb, that you have heard me preach?", to which "his fatigued friend ... rapidly retorted, 'I—I—never heard you do anything else.'" Queen Victoria is said to have complained of Gladstone, "He speaks to Me as if I was a public meeting."¹²) We might feel we are having something other than a conversation; perhaps we might call a serious and focussed conversation a 'discussion.' It is not 'just talk.'

But we may ask, after such deductions are made from written language, is there anything left? What is left is the language of conversation, written down — although written down somewhat superfluously, or so it may seem to some readers. The great venue for the art of conversational writing is the essay, a minor genre in English, although undergoing something of a revival at present, mainly as a vehicle for autobiography. The great era for the English essay was the eighteenth century; by the mid-twentieth, the form had suffered many limitations to its range and a tremendous decline in reputation. The popular writers of the 1920s and '30s whose careers were dependent upon work in the genre were seen by later critics as fatally compromised.¹³ No longer able to engage the general reader in conversation on matters of moral seriousness, essayists tended to take refuge for their material in the idiosyncratic or nostalgic. Hilaire Belloc tells in "A Conversation with a Reader" of the disheartening experience of finding a man on a train who is reading a book of his essays. The man is not pleased with the book, dismissing it with "There's no story I can make out. It's all cut up. Might be newspaper articles!"¹⁴ Belloc nods sympathetically; and outside the diegesis of the story he ruefully acknowledges to his actual readers that a collection of newspaper articles is exactly what the book is. Just as articles in newspapers are there mainly to fill up space, so is conversation to fill up

¹¹ I have noticed enthusiastic readers of fiction disconcerted by passages of verse, even when they are framed as such by the narrative (that is, are effectively quoted). In A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, the verse is skipped by many readers.

¹² For the Coleridge story, from the journals of Leigh Hunt, see under Lamb in *The Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes*, ed. James Sutherland (1975). For the Queen Victoria story, see under her name in the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 3rd edn. (1979).

¹³ Graham Good, in a recent survey of the genre, uses as his twentieth-century examples T.S. Eliot and Henry James, whose essays were marginal to their main literary work, rather than committed essayists, such as Beerbohm, Belloc, J.B. Priestley or Gore Vidal. Graham Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (London: Routledge, 1988).

¹⁴ Belloc, "A Conversation with a Reader," *Short Talks with the Dead*, 110.

time. We become suspicious or defensive if we feel that in what looks like conversation people have some other agenda; but like Belloc's reader on the train we expect that books, being separate from the everyday, will have separate and particular agendas beyond the everyday.

II. Johnson, the Writer of Diction

When Boswell asked Johnson what poetry is, Johnson said that he thought that "it is much easier to say what it is not."¹⁵ Johnson was not, of course, much attracted to systematising. The contemporary French theorist Gérard Genette is an exuberant taxonomist, nevertheless he also asserts that "Literature is undoubtedly *several* things at once."¹⁶ In attempting to schematise theories of 'literariness,' Genette contends that there are such theories that may be called *constitutivist* or *essentialist* (he opts for the latter) and those which may be called *conditionalist*. Essentialist poetics, or theories of literature, include two conflicting or overlapping poetics that identify a text as literary on the basis of certain qualities. In practice, these qualities may overlap: we may identify a text as literary on the basis of either fictional content or poetic form. This scheme has the virtue of accounting for the great majority of texts that we might want to regard as literary. Novels, short stories, poems, plays: these are literature.

Johnson employed all of these forms, in *Rasselas*, his various tales, his poems, and *Irene*. But these are not his most characteristic writings, and his commitment to their form is far from unambiguous. *Rasselas* is Johnson's only extended fiction, and it is certainly not a conventional novel. It is rather a moral tract or philosophical *conte*, and like Swift whose *Gulliver's Travels* is in the form of a conventional exploration narrative, Johnson exploits the form of an oriental tale for critical and philosophical purposes. It is couched in a form which effectively satirizes the novel: it is not so much a fiction as a critique of fiction. Johnson's few other tales are to be found within larger contexts — essay series or educational compilations — which headline their didactic purpose. *Irene* was written to make a name by employing a perennial subject and a popular medium; it was an experiment which failed and was never repeated. In many ways, Johnson exploits and critiques rather than practises the genres of literature, as they are traditionally recognised.

¹⁵ *Life* III, 38. 11 April 1776.

¹⁶ Genette, *Fiction & Diction*, 1 (Genette's emphasis). Parenthetical references follow in the text.

Genette goes on to observe that there is "a very considerable domain ... that of nonfictional prose literature" (16) to which an essentialist poetic is unable to assign literary status. It is in this debatable domain that we find most of Johnson's most characteristic work: the three series of moral essays, the criticism and editorial work, biography, political commentary, travel writing, lexicography. It is in this domain that we feel we hear Johnson's own voice, direct, committed, playful, sceptical, authoritative. The literariness of such work is not self-evident, and it seems wise and realistic that Genette also identifies the alternative regime of conditionalist poetics. A conditionalist poetic will assess literariness by a subjective judgment of taste. If a text has within it that which can be aesthetically appreciated, it is a literary text. This regime allows us to make what is a common enough kind of assertion: that a particular poem or fiction can be of insufficient aesthetic interest to be regarded as literary. *Moby Dick* is a novel, and therefore — according to an essentialist poetic — literature. But is the supermarket pulp romance, fictions so trashy and ephemeral that no one — not their readers and perhaps not their writers — recognises their titles, are these literature? In order even to discuss the question we need to recognise the force of the conditionalist poetic.

A conditionalist poetic also allows texts in which we may be able to identify no aesthetic form or intention to be taken as literature on account of what is loosely termed 'style.' Sir Thomas Browne, for instance, wrote nothing that fits into the traditional literary genres as we presently recognise them, and his speculations are either scientifically outdated or (for most of the reading public) ideologically irrelevant. But he is still enjoyed and studied for — ostensibly — his style. Donald Greene testifies to this, "Johnson's 'Rambler style' ... is essentially poetic. One reads it ... for the rich involvement of skillfully controlled sound (both rhythm and the handling of vowel and consonant sounds), imagery and syntax."¹⁷ Genette says, "a text is literary ... for someone who is more concerned with its form than with its content" (17). This is arguably the case with the study of Johnson's work. It is certainly possible, as Genette says, for

any text whose original, or originally dominating, function was not aesthetic but rather, for example, didactic or polemical to transcend or submerge that function by virtue of an individual or collective judgment of taste that foregrounds the text's aesthetic qualities. (18)

¹⁷ Greene, *Samuel Johnson*, Updated edn. (Boston: Twayne, 1989), 162.

Certainly, much of Johnson's work is "didactic or polemical" (and is not it true that the reader mentally glosses this description, "i.e., rather than literary"?). But it is difficult to imagine that the contemporary academic scholars and admirers of Johnson who write, publish and teach about his style and rhetoric (not to mention his texts and bibliography) are not attracted to his attitudes and opinions (that is, his *content*). His works are not, in the main, read in the genres to which they originally belonged: the *Dictionary*, the moral essays, the *Lives*, *Rasselas*, are read, but by students of Samuel Johnson, not by novel readers, people wanting biographical data, or seeking the meanings or origins of words. And is there any audience at all for moral writing *per se*? They have all become, in the specialised, Romantic, and academic sense of the word, Literature.

Another way of framing the questions that this raises is: Is Johnson what would today be called a creative writer? Are his writings literary? These are questions that must be faced whenever students or admirers of Johnson find themselves explaining his work to persons by whom his literary reputation is not taken for granted, or to whom he is unknown. Nothing of Johnson's writing is as readily explicable, summarizable or appreciable as literature as, for instance, Shakespeare's plays, Auden's poems, or Austen's novels. His *Dictionary*, perhaps: but this work's debatable status as Literature serves only to crystallise the problem.¹⁸ As Genette's scheme makes clear, the desire to see the various means by which we explain literature as being all-encompassing, leaves us without even a name for what Johnson mainly wrote, beyond the lame and uninformative *nonfiction*. The name that Genette proposes for this third literary category that is not fiction and not verse is, on the model of 'fiction,' *diction* (21).

If literature is to be classified according to a scheme that simply opposes Diction to Fiction, Diction will include poetry — at least, lyric poetry: all poetry that is not narrative verse. (Narrative verse, it will be noted, qualifies constitutively as literature by being both fiction and poetry.) Diction is not a negative definition: what enables us to thus group together lyric poems and essays is not that they are not fictions, but that they depend for their impact on their formal characteristics, about which, in the case of prose, there is room for aesthetic judgement. Whereas poems are essentially or constitutively literary, prose dictions are conditionally literary. Genette says that Diction is the literature of *exemplification*, as opposed to fiction, which is the literature of denotation (23). It is both too simple and patently inaccurate to say that we read fiction for what is being told (the

¹⁸ See Ch. 4 below, 115 ff.

story), and diction for how it is being told. We read Fiction for the pleasure in what we are being told about, Diction for what we seem to be being told. That is, although there is (by definition) in all fiction a narrator, the narrator is in very many cases undiscernible and unimportant. In diction, there is inescapably a voice from which the text, illustrative of a particular emotion, state of mind or pattern of thought, seems to proceed. For instance, I am reading Genette, and taking (a kind of) pleasure in doing so; I am not noticing the formal characteristics of his prose, save to recognise in retrospect that it requires subtlety and finesse to negotiate a deep and complex subject in a way that is not so convoluted as to be confusing, and is alert to analytical limitations. I take pleasure in believing that I am coming to understand something.

However, I am prepared to allow that this interest is not necessarily aesthetic, but in that case, I do not know how to distinguish the kinds of interest I experience in texts. Genette quotes Mallarmé saying, "Every time there is an effort towards style, there is versification" (18), which is to say that all language has a poetic function, and where this draws attention to itself we have something of literary interest. But it is not necessarily the versification or style that interests the reader. An elegant and agreeable style may do no more than enable the idea-content of a text to be efficiently communicated. Johnson observes that (in Shakespeare), "trivial sentiments and vulgar ideas disappoint the attention to which they are recommended by sonorous epithets and swelling figures."¹⁹ That is, he affirms the possibility of the reader being disappointed (and therefore also, presumably, the possibility of being under other circumstances pleased or gratified) by *ideas* and *sentiments*, irrespective (to some extent) from the writer's language or imagery. Whether this pleasure may be called aesthetic appears not to matter; *vulgar* and *trivial* are not aesthetic judgements. We can find something aesthetic, perhaps *charm*, in the worldview of Sir Thomas Browne, and perhaps *robustness* in the work of Johnson. Whether we always *agree with* (or even understand) them is another matter; it is perhaps sufficient that we would like to.

Genette allows that our interest in diction need not be at the expense of its idea-content. He quotes Mikel Dufrenne, "A church can be beautiful without being deconsecrated"; although this is virtually an aside (18-19). Later he asserts that, "A nonfictional prose text may very well provoke an aesthetic reaction that depends not on its form but on its content" (27). The examples he suggests are events from historians or

¹⁹ Preface, *Johnson on Shakespeare* VII, 73-74.

autobiographers which, he says, "may, like any other element of reality, be received and appreciated as an aesthetic object independently of the way it is recounted." An event or series of events may, Genette implies, possess a configuration which appeals to something within the human psyche, independent of the quality of any particular telling of it.²⁰ If we are dealing with not simply nonfictional prose, but *non-narrative* prose, as we are frequently enough with Johnson, we must ask what it is about an idea that we appreciate in addition to the aesthetics of the language in which it is expressed. Can an idea or a thought, "like any other element of reality," be appreciated for its aptness and integrity? Is an idea like any other object? Is such appreciation aesthetic? Genette talks of "a formula that fascinates us apart from all discernable meaning" (21), giving certain poems as examples, but it is surely something we can see with particular pregnant aphorisms.

I would want, however, to say as well that readers can derive an aesthetic pleasure from diction, despite sometimes knowing *exactly* what it means. It may perhaps be a rather low-level (or low-brow) aesthetic pleasure, but this is surely the case with certain writers who attract not so much scholarly attention, as admirers or even followers. Who are the writers to whom literary societies, fanzines, and websites are devoted? They are not necessarily those who would be highly regarded or much studied in departments of English, or who would feature in canons or alternative constructions. Brian McCrea makes this point forcefully in his study of the reputation of Steele and Addison, when he points out (in a passage already quoted), that "The department thus always will discriminate against writers (and critics) who have an explicit and simple moral and social agenda."²¹ Literary societies are usually made up of amateur students of the authors in question, rather than professional scholars, it seeming not to indicate the appropriate spirit of critical scrutiny and scholarly detachment to admit to actually admiring a writer or enjoying their work. (If this is a rule, Johnson is perhaps the only exception to it.) There are societies and amateur internet home pages devoted to G.K. Chesterton rather than Joseph Conrad, C.S. Lewis rather than Aldous Huxley, Dorothy L. Sayers rather than Virginia Woolf.²²

²⁰ Genette mentions the story of Oedipus as an example of a tale "that moves us whatever its mode of representation" (21). C.S. Lewis makes a very similar point, about the difference between *story* and *myth*, in the chapter, "Myth" in *An Experiment in Criticism*. Cambridge U.P. (Cambridge, 1961).

²¹ McCrea, *Addison and Steele are Dead*, 146.

²² A quick scan of the electronic index, *British and Irish Authors on the Web*, shows this. The page has, however, grown rapidly very recently, and there are now sites of some sort for a considerable number of very minor authors. But many of these seem to have been assembled to fill gaps in the coverage, and are made up of out-of-copyright texts, biographies from encyclopedic sources, and quotations from *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*. Although my point was more graphically illustrated by the state of the 'web a few years ago, we still find (July 1998) that there are no sites for Conrad, and that Virginia Woolf is the subject of seven sites, fewer than half the number devoted to Chesterton, Tolkien or C.S. Lewis. As may be expected (given the age of most web-devotees, and the nature of Joyce's immediate appeal),

In those cases, it is the close identification of the writers with particular extra-literary causes which both attracts admirers and alienates academics.

As we would expect from someone so averse to theories, Johnson does not have a richly elaborated theory of prose. His own prose generates much study among students of rhetoric, and his ideas (often implicit) about poetry are also fertile grounds for scholarship. But prose — non-fictional prose — being the language of conversation and the most everyday form of writing, tends to escape commentary: perhaps because prose *is* commentary. It is not in any obvious way literary language, at least not in the narrow sense of literary. But non-fictional prose is Johnson's main literary language, and the primary location of his commitment to the everyday. It is because Johnson is committed to the everyday that he is suspicious of and eschews the two usual literary (in a more broad sense now) functions of prose: the elaborate and self-contained prose fiction, and the elaborate and self-contained prose thesis. Although novels and theses are written in (more or less) the language of the everyday, they apply prose to distinctly non-everyday uses. Both of these forms could be said "to take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without the intervention of the will," as he says of the novel in *Rambler* 4.²³ And although the subject matter of the modern novel is in a sense the everyday — as Johnson observes, they "exhibit life in its true state, diversified only by accidents that happen daily in the world" — it is a false everyday, or at least, it is not the reader's everyday, and it therefore aims to make something other than the here and now the site of the reader's mental activity. It is the powerful, self-contained and essentially distracting (that is, it draws one's attention away from the everyday) nature of the modern novel that provokes Johnson's suspicion, just as he is concerned about and impatient with elaborate and abstract intellectual systems, which distract the reader from an attentive mental engagement with daily life, and save them from the trouble of thinking for themselves.

In reading any long thesis-like work, a text like Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*, for example, the reader is at least partly engaged in reconstructing the procedures whereby the book has been assembled in the first place. One takes notes, summarises, re-reads and so forth, in an attempt to reveal what is assumed to be the hidden structure of the text. We imagine that such texts are built upon conceptual skeletons, and it often seems that the

James Joyce heads the list with thirty or so sites.

²³ *Rambler* 4; III, 22. The implications of this and similar expressions are central to my thesis, and will be explored further in Chapter Five, 163 ff.

author has been at pains to disguise this, as if to suggest that the work was not actually the product of sustained effort and careful planning, but emerged fully formed from the writer's mind. This sort of readerly effort Johnson cannot be bothered with, and he believes most readers to feel as he does. He will not read a book through. He wants to be able to open a book anywhere at any time and find something that he can put to immediate use. This is not the case with a great many valuable works. Any part of Bacon's *Advancement* must be seen in its relationship to the design of the work as a whole, and detailed schemes are drawn up by students of the book to illustrate its architecture. This is in marked contrast to Johnson's major effort in prose, *The Rambler*. The most important relationship between any two essays of *The Rambler* is simply proximity: that one comes before another. Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* is another long work with a detailed skeleton, but Johnson clearly regards this as an irrelevance.

Both Bacon's *Essays* and his *Advancement of Learning* are instructive for the gaining a sense of Johnson as a prose writer. In the former, Bacon invents in English the genre in which Johnson makes his own most sustained and characteristic contributions to literature, and in the latter, Bacon discusses at length the styles of language by which learning may be accomplished. The *Essays* will be a point of reference for the remainder of this chapter, and in the next we will move on to *The Advancement of Learning*.

III. The Prose of Johnson and Bacon

Johnson told Boswell that he had not read Francis Bacon until he came to compile the *Dictionary*.²⁴ This may not be strictly true, as Bacon is highly praised in the *Harleian Catalogue*,²⁵ which Johnson had helped to compile two years before he began his work on the *Dictionary*. But whatever the precise chronology, Johnson at least felt that Bacon was a discovery not of his youth, when he did most of his serious reading, but of his maturity. All of his references to him date from the mid-1740s. He seems to have fallen for him very powerfully, and from that time he considered Bacon a "favourite authour." He is cited in the *Dictionary* more than any other prose writer, which given his relatively

²⁴ *Life* III, 194. 22 September 1777.

²⁵ *Catalogus Bibliothecae Harleianae*, v. 2 (1743): no. 12532. Cited in Robert DeMaria, *The Life of Samuel Johnson: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 101.

recent acquaintance with him suggests that he read his works thoroughly and carefully.²⁶ In particular, Johnson says that Bacon can be depended upon to supply almost all "the terms of Natural Knowledge."²⁷ But at least as great an indication of how deeply Bacon had penetrated Johnson, and of how readily Johnson had recognised and succumbed to his authority, is the frequency with which he is cited in *The Rambler*. There are seven occasions when he is quoted (mostly from the *Essays*), though not always by name, and Robert DeMaria assures us that "at least as often he silently appears."²⁸ Furthermore, Johnson had at one time thought of making an edition of Bacon's English works, with a life.²⁹

It has often been asserted that Bacon was not simply a powerful authority, offering accurate and pregnant sententiae for quotation, but that his *Essays* was a literary model for the *Rambler* project. Paul Korshin says that Johnson aimed in *The Rambler* to rival Bacon's *Essays*.³⁰ DeMaria says, "most relevant of all [the seventeenth-century Christian humanists] to the voice of the *Rambler* is Bacon. Johnson imitates the approach of Bacon's *Essays*, ... and he discusses many of the same topics."³¹ In *Rambler* 106, Johnson says that of all subjects, those writings which are the fruit of the careful study of human nature are most likely to be long read, and he quotes Bacon's famous remark³² in the Dedication to the third and final edition of his *Essays or Counsels, Civill and Morall* (1625), that of all his works, his essays "have been most current; for that, as it seems, they come home to men's business and bosoms."³³ Johnson's regard for Bacon, and the straight-forward observation that the two writers' essays belong to the same literary genre, needs no further elaboration.

²⁶ I.e., not except Locke, contrary to what is often said. In the first volume alone, Bacon is cited 2,439 times, Locke 1,674. See below, Ch. 4, 130 n.52.

²⁷ Preface, *Dictionary* 1, C1' (para. 62).

²⁸ DeMaria, *Life*, 158.

²⁹ *Life* III, 194. 22 September 1777. See also the Appendix, 384.

³⁰ Paul J. Korshin, "Johnson, the Essay, and *The Rambler*," *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, ed. Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1997), 51.

³¹ DeMaria, *Life*, 144.

³² Pope quotes it in the preface to his *Essay on Man*, and it was used as the motto for the 'Essays and Belles-Lettres' division of *Everyman's Library*.

³³ Bacon's works will be cited from the Oxford Authors volume, *Francis Bacon*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1996), unless otherwise noted. (The Oxford *Bacon* does not give the full text of the Dedication, although it is quoted in the Notes; see p. 712.) For Johnson's use, in which the words are slightly adapted, see *Rambler* 106; IV, 204.

But although Johnson may have the same sort of concerns as Bacon in the *Essays*, uses something like the same literary form, and expects his work to be understood (at least by the learned who are concerned about such things) as belonging to the same tradition, his essays are not made out of the same material. It is a question of what Johnson calls *diction*. This is not, of course, the same use of the term as that of Gérard Genette, which we have just considered, but the two are far from unrelated. Only in the third edition of 1625 do Bacon's *Essays* really become recognisable as essays to modern eyes; in the first version (1597) there are fewer essays and they are not only shorter than they eventually become, but they are considerably shorter than many of the new essays. In the process of expansion, Bacon's notion of what counts as an essay develops from something more like a topical gathering of aphoristical remarks, into the sequence of discursive paragraphs. But even in the final version the *Essays* of course retain a great deal of their aphoristic character. And each *Rambler*, as W.K. Wimsatt suggests, in the spaciousness of the original folio edition, looks to be "not so much a single essay as a collection of paragraphic essays," and speculates, "Perhaps the cut or sectional structure of Bacon's *Essays*, their curt Senecan style, had something to do with the *Ramblers*."³⁴ We could say that Bacon's aphorisms look ahead to the true essay, whereas Johnson's essays look backwards to collections of aphoristic wisdom. But certainly the *Essays* and the *Rambler* resemble each other in the constant pull, back and forth, between the discursive, connected and familiar and the formal, isolated and aphoristic. The balance in Johnson greatly favours the former, in Bacon the latter. But the sense of tension is vital to the life of both works.

How these two works of Diction do *not* resemble each other is at least as interesting as the ways in which they do, and we need to consider the Johnsonian sense of *diction*, particularly as it is used in *The Lives of the Poets*.

IV. Diction, Poetic and Otherwise, in Johnson's *Lives*

Diction, in the Johnsonian sense, is something like vocabulary or word choice. In the *Dictionary*, Johnson gives the word a very modest treatment. It is defined simply as, "Style; language; expression," and he quotes only one authority, Dryden: "There appears in every part of his *diction*, or expression, a kind of noble and bold purity." In this

³⁴ Wimsatt, *The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1941), 116.

quotation, from his Preface to *Sylvæ*, Dryden is referring to Horace. Interestingly, Johnson has emended it slightly; the original reads: "There appears in every part of his diction, or (*to speak English*) in all his expressions, a kind of noble and bold purity."³⁵ It was a term Dryden used in his own criticism; in his 'Life of Dryden,' Johnson quotes his notes on Rymer's criticism, including the following, "Rapin attributes more to the *dictio*, that is, to the words and discourse of a tragedy, than Aristotle has done, who places them in the last rank of beauties" (*Lives* I, 472).³⁶ Dryden obviously regards it as a Latin word, and a technical term of criticism. Johnson wishes to naturalise the word to English, and by the time he came to write *The Lives of the Poets*, the term has developed into one of his own critical touchstones. There are a few recurrent themes in the *Lives*: a suspicion of fiction (and particularly mythology), an impatience with most uses of blank verse, and the troubled relationship between language and thought. It could be said that behind all of these is the problem of diction.

Given that the *Lives* are those of Poets, it is not surprising that "diction" frequently means "poetic diction," the special choice of words suitable for poetry; and it has often been taken to mean only that. Johnson certainly believes that the right diction is what makes poetry, what distinguishes poetry from prose. It is in the 'Life of Dryden' that Johnson makes many of his asides on the subject. He observes:

There was therefore before the time of Dryden no poetical diction: no system of words at once refined from the grossness of domestick use and free from the harshness of terms appropriated to particular arts. Words too familiar or too remote defeat the purpose of a poet.... *Those happy combinations of words which distinguish poetry from prose* had been rarely attempted; we had few elegances or flowers of speech: the roses had not yet been plucked from the bramble.... (*Lives* I, 420; my emphasis.)

The diction of poetry is characterised in most of Johnson's utterances on the subject by elegance; it is a language which is neither "too remote" — technical or scholarly — nor "too familiar," the language of the street. But we should note that it is a matter of *degree*, rather than type of language.

³⁵ Dryden, 'Preface to *Sylvæ*,' *Dramatic Poesy and Other Essays*, ed. William Henry Hudson (London: Dent "Everyman," 1912), 172.

³⁶ Parenthetical references to the *Lives* will follow in the text.

His high estimate of the importance of appropriate diction is the reason that he chastises poets who rely on versification, particularly that most sterile and academic variety of verse, blank verse. His objections to blank verse are well-known. In his 'Life of Cowley' he says, "The great pleasure of verse arises from the known measure of the lines and uniform structure of the stanzas, by which the voice is regulated and the memory relieved" (*Lives* I, 47). A regular verse form creates a pattern of expectation, and the combination of metre and rhyme is particularly satisfying. Metre on its own is not usually (in English) sufficient to be noticed; we may see it on the page, but "The musick of the English heroick line strikes the ear so faintly that it is easily lost...." ('Milton,' I, 192). It may not be prose, but may as well be, for there is no special pleasure for the ear. The only conditions under which he is prepared to allow blank verse are when it is accompanied by specially *poetic* diction. He says of Somerville's *Rural Sports*, "If blank verse be not tumid and gorgeous, it is crippled prose; and familiar images in laboured language have nothing to recommend them but absurd novelty which, wanting the attractions of Nature, cannot please long[.] One excellence of *The Splendid Shilling* is that it is short" (II, 319-20).³⁷ When considering Roscommon's translation of Horace's *Art of Poetry*, he observes,

Blank verse left merely to its numbers has little operation either on the ear or mind: it can hardly support itself without bold figures and striking images. A poem frigidly didactick without rhyme is so near to prose that the reader only scorns it for pretending to be verse. (I, 237)

Here we have examples of the two extremes of unpoetic diction: Roscommon's diction is too academic for true poetry, Somerville's too familiar.

But it is also possible to misunderstand the need for poetic diction. Whilst an absence of verbal elegance makes a poem a rather technical exercise, an over-abundance of elegances, or for the poet to imagine that for diction to be poetic it need merely be unnatural, are faults quite as reprehensible. Of the poet Collins, Johnson says, "he puts his words out of the common order, seeming to think, with some later candidates for fame, that not to write prose is certainly to write poetry" (III, 341). If prose is writing that is clear and conversational, poetry, far too many writers continue to assume, is simply writing

³⁷ Some implications of that final rather gratuitous crack at John Philips' *The Splendid Shilling*, in terms of the length of texts, are explored below, 145 ff.

that is obscure and artificial. Johnson elaborates this theme as he writes of the poetry of Akenside,

The exemption which blank verse affords from the necessity of closing the sense with the couplet, betrays luxuriant and active minds into such self-indulgence that they pile image upon image, ornament upon ornament, and are not easily persuaded to close the sense at all. Blank verse will therefore, I fear, be too often found in description exuberant, in argument loquacious, and in narration tiresome. (III, 417-18)

It is in the matter of diction that one poet differs from another. Of Rowe's *Fair Penitent*, he says, "The story is domestick, and therefore easily received by the imagination, and assimilated to common life; the diction is exquisitely harmonious, and soft or spritely as occasion requires" (II, 67). He says of Edmund Smith's *Phaedra*, "The sentiments thus remote from life are removed yet further by the diction, which is too luxuriant and splendid for dialogue, and envelopes the thoughts rather than displays them" (II, 16). We see in these instances, that diction is not the story (Rowe) or the sentiments (Smith), and that it is to be approved as poetic, if it is such "as occasion requires," or not, if it is in any way out of keeping with the material. He identifies in the longer poems of Milton,

an uniform peculiarity of *Diction*, a mode and cast of expression which bears little resemblance to that of any former writer, and which is so far removed from common use that an unlearned reader when he first opens his book finds himself surprised by a new language. (I, 189-90)

The mention of the "unlearned reader" is a reminder that poetry is not simply to convey ideas and sentiments, for which prose will do just as well if not better, but to give pleasure that arises from the diction, and should be accessible to the learned and unlearned alike. For this reason, Johnson claims that Milton's verse style is formed on "a perverse and pedantick principle" (190). (We will consider pedantry in particular in the next chapter.) Milton's peculiarity of diction is only (just) justified by the inimitable grandeur of his subject. It is only novelty (and the intention of parody) that pardons John Philips, whose achievement in *The Splendid Shilling*, is "To degrade the sounding words and stately construction of Milton, by an application to the lowest and most trivial things" (I, 317).

Johnson also identifies the achievement of an appropriate diction as the key to success in the translation of literature; Johnson says that the task of the translator,

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 ('Dryden,' I, 423; my emphasis).

If ruggedness, hyperbole and affectation are part of an author's design, he (or his translator) should aim to clothe his thoughts in language that does not give them a false dignity. Of Butler's *Hudibras*, Johnson says, "The diction of this poem is grossly familiar, and the numbers purposely neglected" (I, 217). If diction is to be gross, let it be, like all things in the work of a studied writer, deliberate.

What I wish to establish is that 'Diction' is not simply either poetical or prosaick, and it is not only in poetry that words should be chosen with an eye to their suitability. It is not exclusively of poetic language that Johnson writes when he asserts,

Every language of a learned nation necessarily divides itself into diction scholastick and popular, grave and familiar, elegant and gross; and from a nice distinction of these different parts, arises a great part of the beauty of style ('Dryden,' I, 420).

Throughout the *Lives*, and elsewhere, Johnson shows himself concerned not only with poetic diction, but diction more generally. In the Preface to the *Dictionary*, he asserts that from the works of Elizabethan writers alone "a speech might be formed adequate to all the purposes of use and elegance."³⁸ "[A]dequate to all the purposes of ... elegance" sounds exactly like poetic diction, but by "use" he means all practical functions of language, and all specialised ones that impinge on everyday life, learned diction as well as such as the "terms of manufacture and agriculture,"³⁹ and what he calls "the diction of common life."⁴⁰

³⁸ Preface, *Dictionary*, C1^r (para. 62).

³⁹ Preface, *Dictionary* I, B2^v (para. 59).

⁴⁰ Preface, *Dictionary* I, C1^r (para. 62).

Johnson discusses the subject at some length in *Rambler* 168, which is described in its contemporary title as "Poetry debased by mean expressions," but is perhaps more adequately summarised by Donald Greene as "Congruent Diction."⁴¹ Here Johnson is concerned that low or mean expressions — or at least, expressions that are more frequently used for low or mean purposes — can accidentally debase noble writing. "Language is the dress of thought," he says in the 'Life of Cowley,' and "the most heroick sentiments will lose their efficacy, ... if they are conveyed by words used commonly upon low and trivial occasions." In *Rambler* 168 he says that to avoid this, a writer must be aware of the language of "general converse" in "the living world."⁴² Not all writers are subject to such risks — scholars, for instance. And in the 'Life of Addison,' he wryly observes of Addison's Latin poems,

When the matter is low or scanty a dead language, in which *nothing is mean because nothing is familiar*, affords great conveniences; and by the sonorous magnificence of Roman syllables the writer conceals penury of thought and want of novelty, often from the reader, and often from himself. (II, 83; my emphasis.)

Whilst he acknowledges that (in the vernacular) the value of words "depends wholly upon accident and custom," he nonetheless urges that writers who desire "what none can reasonably condemn, the favour of mankind," should be "acquainted with common usages."⁴³ There is an ambivalence that is central to this thesis (that I find myself noticing even as I summarise, by my use of the words 'whilst' and 'nonetheless'). Johnson recognises, and strongly feels himself, the temptation to regard the changing significance of words as something to be regretted. Such drifts in meaning will cause even the words of a master, like Shakespeare, to gather with time unfortunate or ludicrous associations. There is in the essay the sense that it might be regarded as something of a compromise for a grand author to show himself acquainted "with prevailing customs and fashionable elegance." But for Johnson the conditions of the real world always outweigh any other considerations.

Another approach to the hazard of sending the once-written word into a linguistic flux, might be to say, "if it is inevitable that in writing for the fashionable world, my

⁴¹ *Rambler* 168 [editorial title], Donald Greene, ed., *Samuel Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford U.P. "Oxford Authors," 1984), 246.

⁴² *Rambler* 168; v, 129.

⁴³ *Rambler* 168; v, 126, 129, 128.

meaning will be dependant upon factors transitory and beyond my control, I shall write instead for an educated and unworldly elite." This would be the point of, for instance, writing in Latin. (One can imagine Bacon urging such an approach.) But for Johnson, a writer's great project is to be read, to which all other aims must be subservient. He writes in the 'Life of Pope' (and it is a sentiment he often repeats), "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" (III, 240). What makes a work readable is, above all else, appropriate diction. Johnson says of Sprat's *History of the Royal Society*, a book surely on an esoteric enough topic, that "This is one of the few books which selection of sentiment and elegance of diction have been able to preserve, though written upon a subject flux and transitory. [It] is now read, not with the wish to know what they were then doing, but how their transactions are exhibited by Sprat" (II, 33). Is not this exactly what Genette also means by diction?

V. Johnson and Bacon's Diction

Having clarified our sense of what Johnson means by the term diction, and seen its critical importance to his sense of literature, we shall consider the diction of his essays and that of Bacon in his *Essays*.

Bacon's essays, like those of Montaigne, have titles beginning with *Of* (the Latin *De*), which, as Alistair Fowler observes, "at first implied a *tractatus* or discursive treatise,"⁴⁴ like those of Cicero (*De natura deorum*, *De officiis*, *De amicitia*, *De senectute*, and so on). Published, as they were from the start, as a collection in one volume, Bacon's essays appear to be chapters of a text that is both comprehensive and sequential, starting with Truth, and ending in Vicissitude. Johnson's essays, in *The Rambler* and *The Idler*, do not have titles, but occasions — dates; the titles that have been given to those that do not have a clear narrative or character focus are often mere lists of subjects. They are more like excerpts from one side of a conversation, the subject of which drifts and changes, while returning to the same themes. Bacon's essays are more like secular sermons or addresses. They do not attempt to engage or accommodate the listener. The reader is directly addressed, there is no conductor like 'Mr. Rambler' to provide a sense of the work being framed by a fictional narrative, however minimal. It is true that *The Rambler* is

⁴⁴ Alistair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 92.

didactic in intent, but it is not usually didactic in its diction. As I have discussed elsewhere, Johnson is throughout *The Rambler* almost preoccupied with the difficulty of giving advice to the common man, and most of his literary and paratextual strategies are aimed at dealing with the resistance of the common man to the voice of wisdom.⁴⁵

We should notice from the start that there are whole categories of material in *The Rambler* which bear no resemblance to anything in the *Essays*. There are in Bacon no dreams, allegories or fables, no fictitious letters, no literary criticism, no fictitious portraits; these categories include 122 of the 204 *Ramblers*. Of the remainder, something like sixty-seven are in the form of discursive moral essays,⁴⁶ and it will be these that are considered in what follows. There are, as DeMaria says, a number of subjects which are covered in both collections, and which it might be useful to compare. Friendship is the subject of three essays in *The Rambler*, and one of the most important of Bacon's *Essays*.

The first thing that we notice in reading Bacon's Essay XXVII, "Of Friendship," is the density of quotation. In this essay of about 2600 words, there are five historical anecdotes from unacknowledged sources; there are quotations, anonymous or as if proverbial, from two writers (Aristotle, and Strabo by way of Erasmus); two writers (St. James and Comineus) are quoted by name; four ancient philosophers (Pythagoras twice, Themistocles, and Heraclitus) are quoted from unacknowledged biographical sources, and there are at least two other unacknowledged allusions to writers. In other words, Bacon has in this one essay drawn on upwards of twenty literary sources,⁴⁷ although he mentions only three by name (Cicero, St. James, Comineus). Modest though he may be about sourcing, he is not shy of quoting. He quotes by name the three ancient philosophers, and, in the anecdotes, he quotes the (reported) words of Pompey and Maecenas, and letters from Tiberius, Septimius Severus and Antonius (as quoted by Cicero), making a total of eleven uses of attributed words. (It is interesting that although Bacon's quotations clearly derive from his reading, he wishes it to appear that he is using the words of people, not books.)

⁴⁵ See my M.A. thesis, *Reading The Rambler: Johnson's Engagement with the Anxieties of Authorship* (Monash University, 1994), also the revised chapter published as, "A Petty Writer: Johnson and the *Rambler* Pamphlets", *The Age of Johnson* 10 (1999), 67-87.

⁴⁶ For a classification of the papers of *The Rambler*, see the Appendix to my article, "The *Rambler*'s Second Audience: Johnson and the Paratextual 'Part of Literature,'" *Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand Bulletin* 24:4 (Fourth Quarter 2000), 256.

⁴⁷ I am, of course, reliant on Bacon scholars for these identifications. See the notes on this essay in the Oxford *Bacon*, 745-48.

We might compare with this Johnson's *Rambler* 64, which is described in the Contents page of the collected edition as "The Requisites of true friendship." (We should keep in mind that this and any other *Rambler* worth the comparison is more similar to an essay of Bacon's than most of *The Rambler*.) The essay has four literary references: the motto (from Sallust), an anecdote of Socrates from the *Phaedrus*, a vague citation of Horace, and a quotation from Virgil (which Johnson in fact removed after the folio edition). The essays in *The Rambler*, at an average length of 1450 words,⁴⁸ are little more than half the length of Bacon's "On Friendship," so we might look at another essay concerning something like the same subject. *Rambler* No. 99 concerns "The pleasures of private friendship." It has a motto (from Ovid) and in the body of the essay a vague reference to Aristotle. So, in something like the same amount of material, with a similar subject and style, Johnson has six or seven literary references, as against Bacon's twenty. (The Yale editors identify a total of "669 quotations or literary allusions in the *Rambler*" as a whole,⁴⁹ which works out to an average of 3.28 per essay.)

But perhaps "On Friendship" — the second longest essay in Bacon's book — is not a good basis for comparison. Most of the *Essays* (forty-three of the fifty-eight) are far shorter than the more uniform *Ramblers*, and thirty-six are less than a third the length of "On Friendship." The ten of the essays that started life in the first more aphoristic version of the *Essays* in 1597, contain virtually no literary references. In successive revisions, Bacon supplied such references in the new essays added to the collection, and in his embellishments to the old ones. But this means that there are two different styles of essay: shorter and more aphoristical, and longer and more literary. (In fact, the variation in length of the *Essays* and treatment of subject seems another characteristic in which the reader of Bacon feels they are dealing with a less companionable, more unpredictable and dictatorial figure than that of the reliable Mr. Rambler.) A good many of the shorter essays, such as 18 "Of Travel," 28 "Of Expense," 22 "Of Suspensions," contain no literary quotations or allusions at all.

The last of these may be compared with Johnson's *Rambler* 79, summarised on the Contents page of the collected edition as "A suspicious man justly suspected."⁵⁰ Johnson

⁴⁸ W.J. Bate, Introduction, Samuel Johnson, *Essays from the 'Rambler,' 'Adventurer,' and 'Idler'* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1968), xv, fn.4.

⁴⁹ Bate, Introduction, 32.

⁵⁰ *Rambler* 79; IV, 50-55; and Contents page, [v].

has three literary/historical references, two casual quotations from classical sources, and an anecdote from German history. The authors of the quotations are not named, and the second (from Juvenal) is paraphrased, in the conversational fashion. The anecdote (which Johnson says is from Camerarius, but is untraced) is related briefly, but vividly. An essayist does not wish to give the impression of a scholar rushing off in mid-sentence to check his sources. It is told as a story, with its own integrity, rather than being squeezed into the structure of an argumentative sentence. He gives a lightning sketch of an unjustifiably suspicious young man, selecting telling details of behaviour, and records his own reaction to him. He illustrates the means by which suspicion is increased by an imagined but typical incident of military history. These brief but lively bursts of narrative and portraiture contrast with the more studied and formal style of Bacon. His "Of Suspicion" is very brief; there are two paragraphs.⁵¹ He cites an Italian proverb, and uses two artful images. That of "bats among birds" is memorable, but hardly vivid; he does not in fact mean 'among' physically; he means bats as a sub-category of creature among other flying creatures. The image of suspicions that buzz and those that have stings is brief and ornamental. He does not pursue either image in the interests of giving the reader pleasure, but rather to draw attention to his wit. He gives an instance of Henry VII as a man both 'stout' (brave) and suspicious, but puts no flesh on this bald description. Even in the longer essays, Bacon keeps a tight grip on his anecdotes, never letting them gain an independent momentum, and keeping the purely picturesque to a minimum.

When he uses images and conceits, they are firmly in the service of argument. "All rising to great place is by a winding stair; and if there be factions, it is good to side a man's self whilst he is in the rising, and to balance himself when he is placed." "As the births of living creatures at first are ill-shapen, so are all Innovations, which are the births of time." "Costly followers are not to be liked; lest while a man maketh his train longer, he makes his wings shorter." "Superstition, without a veil, is a deformed thing; for as it addeth deformity to an ape to be so like a man, so the similitude of superstition to religion makes it the more deformed." This last is followed immediately by a new image, "And as wholesome meat corrupteth to little worms, so good forms and orders corrupt into a number of petty observances."⁵² We admire his images, but have no time to enjoy them. They are, furthermore, frequently dark — we have already seen worms, bats, winding stairs, apes and deformities — and sometimes obscure. His description of malign persons

⁵¹ *Francis Bacon* (Oxford Authors), 405-06.

⁵² These images are from *The Essays*. See *Francis Bacon* (Oxford Authors), as follows, "Of Great Place," 361; "Of Innovations," 387; "Of Followers and Friends," 436; "Of Superstition," 374.

stretches the reader, who rushes to keep up with the rapidity of transitions, and untangle the allusions, from one half-told tale to another:

Such men ... are ever on the loading part: not so good as the dogs that licked Lazarus' sores; but like flies that are still buzzing upon anything that is raw; *misanthropi*, that make it their business to bring men to the bough, and yet have never a tree for the purpose in their gardens, as Timon had.⁵³

Anthony Quinton draws attention to the "arrestingly memorable first sentences"⁵⁴ of many of *The Essays*; I have quoted two already ('Of Innovations' and 'Of Followers and Friends,' above), and many others could be cited, in addition to those Quinton gives. "Nature is often hidden, sometimes overcome, seldom extinguished." "Virtue is like a rich stone, best plain set." "I cannot call Riches better than the baggage of virtue." These openings are strong, carefully crafted, attention-grabbing, assertive. Throughout the *Essays*, Bacon's opinions are boldly stated, moral identifications are made with a bald and definitive "Virtue is ...," "Nature is ...," "Superstition is." He instructs the reader with take-it-or-leave-it imperatives. In the essay 'Of Great Place,' there are a series of sentences beginning, "Reform, therefore, without bravery or scandal.... Reduce things to the first institution.... Seek to make thy course regular.... Preserve the right of thy place.... Embrace and invite helps."⁵⁵

These characteristics are no part of Johnson's style. The openings of the *Ramblers* are tentative and unemphatic; he is prone to starting modestly at some mutually agreed position, such as by quoting a proverb, or some ancient authority, or a commonplace: "It is observed by those who have written on the constitution of the human body ...," "It is common to distinguish men by the names of animals which they are supposed to resemble," "The younger Pliny has very justly observed ...," "An old Greek epigrammatist ... imprecates upon those"⁵⁶ The Rambler makes his assertions not by a blunt 'is' or 'are,' but with formulae like, it will appear, it is evident, I have always thought, it may reasonably be suspected, it is not sufficiently considered, the general story of mankind will

⁵³ "Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature," *Francis Bacon* (Oxford Authors), 364.

⁵⁴ Anthony Quinton, *Francis Bacon* (Oxford: Oxford U.P. "Past Masters," 1980), 75.

⁵⁵ *Francis Bacon* (Oxford Authors), "Of Nature in Men," 417; "Of Beauty," 425; "Of Riches," 409; "Of Great Place," 360.

⁵⁶ These are the openings of *Ramblers* 43, 59, 68, 69; see III, 231, 314, 358, 363.

evinced, it has been remarked, it may be urged, and so on. He backs away from strong positions, frequently giving opposing viewpoints.

This reluctance actually to give advice is in strong contrast to Bacon; as Brian Vickers points out, the *Essays*, particularly in the first version, "evidently belong to the literature of advice, the conduct-books whose vogue in the Renaissance attracted readers, from courtiers to citizens, bent on self-improvement."⁵⁷ Johnson's unwillingness to be aligned with this tradition extends to the sense of subject in the papers. It does not accord with the normal habits of conversation to decide on a topic beforehand, and to pursue it to the exclusion of all else. Unlike Bacon's *Essays*, the *Ramblers* resist neat titling, as their subjects are often very slippery. There are many numbers in which the focus shifts about halfway through, or in which an example that seems to provide a convenient entrance to a topic takes on a life of its own. Such are No. 184, in which the Rambler gives a dissertation on the essay, on the way to discussing the role of chance in human affairs; and No. 135, which starts with a lengthy digression on the role of fashion, authority and thought in human choice, before discussing annual retreats to the country. Johnson is certainly not anxious to achieve the sort of unity in each *Rambler* that we might assume to be desirable. The most extreme example of this is No. 126,⁵⁸ in which the Rambler gathers together three (supposed) letters on completely different subjects: the first argues that there is a difference between reasonable fears and unreasonable 'antipathies,' and that the latter are simply false opinions which ought to be challenged; the second is a complaint about society women who insist on soliciting praise for their possessions from their guests; and the third is a protest from a lady about a scholar who deflected her serious question by a jest. The essay has no explicit dynamic.

His transitions are casual, and the essays discursive and even digressive, whereas Bacon's are aphoristical, or else woven together by (at least the appearance of) careful grammatical terms of connection. An example of the aphoristical mode is 'Of Studies,' a very short essay, consisting in the main of a succession of branching sub-divisions, which one might imagine would be better represented by a diagram than by prose. Each sentence could be taken to serve as a maxim, and a number have:

- Studies serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability.

⁵⁷ Brian Vickers, Notes, *Francis Bacon* (Oxford Authors), 545.

⁵⁸ *Rambler* 126; IV, 305-11.

- Crafty men condemn studies, simple men admire them, and wise men use them.
- Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be read wholly.
- Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man.⁵⁹

Each branch of these triplets can become a sub-heading, leading to further analysis. For this reason, Bacon's *Essays* are readily analysable, both in terms of their employment of formal classical rhetorical strategies, and in terms of their structure. Johnson's essays are, of course, summarisable, but the summaries are nothing like so neat.

'Of Friendship' is an example of a different mode; here Bacon provides a superstructure of which he gives regular reminders; after an introduction about the problems of solitary life, he asserts, "A principal fruit of Friendship is the ease and discharge of the fullness and swellings of the heart." He then gives the five anecdotes already described, of how this has been shown in the lives of five great men. He proceeds then to the second fruit, making a further distinction between the effect of the two fruits on different human faculties,

The second fruit of Friendship is healthful and sovereign for the understanding, as the first is for the affections; for Friendship maketh indeed a fair day in the affections from storm and tempests, but it maketh daylight in the understanding, out of darkness and confusion of thoughts:

In a mood now to make distinctions, he sub-divides this further,

neither is this to be understood only of faithful counsel, which a man receiveth from his friend; but before you come to that, certain it is, that whosoever hath his mind fraught with many thoughts, his wits and understanding do clarify and break up in the communicating and discoursing with another....

He expands on the clarification of thoughts, before turning to "friendly counsel," which "is of two sorts; the one concerning manner, the other concerning business." After discussing

⁵⁹ *Adventurer* 92 is a gloss on this line. *Adventurer*, 411-16.

these, he turns to "the last fruit, which is like the pomegranate, full of many kernels; I mean aid, and bearing a part in all actions and occasions".

Bacon also at times employs artful disjunctions, equally unlike the smooth and conversational diction (at least, like Johnson's conversation) of the Rambler. But however much more there may be to admire in Bacon's style than Johnson's, it is the sense we have that *The Essays* have been made to be admired that leads to a scholarly reader offering a candid comment like the following,

It is not just their somewhat superficial air of being exemplary exercises that makes Bacon's *Essays* less attractive than other, more earnest-seeming works that he wrote in English. Their aphoristic style of construction, a string of epigrammatic felicities printed as continuous prose, is tiresome.⁶⁰

Johnson would sympathise. In his 'Life of Butler,' he observes, "Uniformity must tire at last, though it be uniformity of excellence ... it is for want of this artful intertexture, and those necessary changes, that *the whole of the book may be tedious, though all the parts are praised*."⁶¹ It is of Butler also that Johnson remarks,

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. (I, 213, my emphasis)

The same could be said of Bacon; Quinton remarks that, "As a quarry for anthologists of memorable sayings Bacon's *Essays* cannot rank far behind *Hamlet*."⁶² We have noted Johnson's insistence on readability, and he is hard on writers for whom readability seems not an important consideration, such as the metaphysical poets, whom he suspects of being "more desirous of being admired than understood" ('Life of Cowley'). In praising Cowley for the "familiarity of language" "by which he is undoubtedly made more amiable to

⁶⁰ Quinton, *Francis Bacon*, 75.

⁶¹ *Lives* I, 212.

⁶² Quinton, *Francis Bacon*, 75. (Just for the record, the 3rd edn. (1979) of *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* contains 104 items from Bacon's *Essays*, and 258 from *Hamlet*.)

common readers," Johnson takes a side swipe at those writers who delight in the employment of techniques such as "inversion" and "innovation," and says that such literary "artifice ... [is] practised, not by those who talk to be understood, but by those who write to be admired" (I, 40).

It is worth our noting, too, that as Johnson (in *Rambler* 106) identifies with Bacon's satisfaction with his *Essays* (that "they come home to men's business and bosoms"), he distances himself from what he says is Bacon's "expectation, that they 'will live as long as books last.'" ⁶³ Johnson figures his own aim in *The Rambler* as something more modest than this: "It may, however, satisfy an honest and benevolent mind to have been useful, though less conspicuous; nor will he that extends his hope to higher rewards, be so much anxious to obtain praise, as to discharge the duty which Providence assigns him." Whilst he ranks his performance as an essayist far lower than Bacon's, Johnson also suggests that Bacon's attention-grabbing diction is more in the interest of gaining fame than of being of help to his readers; and more seriously he implies that Bacon is neither particularly mindful of his duties to God, nor even necessarily "honest and benevolent."

In summary, Bacon's *Essays* are familiar in their form, but Johnson's in both their form and their diction, and given the importance to Johnson of the question of diction, we should not be surprised that Johnson does not consider Bacon as a literary ancestor of his own central work as an essayist.

⁶³ *Rambler* 106; IV, 204. This is, in fact, a slight misconstrual of Bacon (as well as a slight misquotation). In the dedication, Bacon says, "I doe conceive, that the Latine Volume of them [the *Essays*], (being in the Universall Language) may last, as long as Bookes last." See the 'Everyman' edition of *The Essays*, ed. Oliphant Smeaton (London: Dent, 1906), 1. (The full text of the Dedication is not given in the Oxford *Bacon*.) The Latin version was published posthumously in 1638, under the title, *Sermones Fideles, sive Interiora rerum*, and, ironically, "is virtually unknown today" (W.A. Sessions, *Francis Bacon Revisited* [New York: Twayne, 1996], 24. See also Vickers, the Oxford *Bacon*, 712-13.)

CHAPTER THREE

Familiar and Learned Diction

I. The Rise of Familiar Diction

In this chapter, we will continue the concerns of the previous chapter, allowing the contrast between Johnson and Bacon's approaches to prose writing to further clarify our sense of Johnson's project as a prose writer. Although Johnson's own prose is not modelled on Bacon's in *The Essays*, Bacon's influence on Johnson's approach to prose writing may nevertheless be detected, in the contrast between his *Essays* and his other writings, such as *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), and particularly in aspects of his thought in that pioneering work. Bacon is concerned in *The Advancement of Learning* to distinguish false from true learning, and to identify modes of discourse that are inadequate to certain purposes. He attempts to encourage learning, to describe and clear away the barriers to learning, and to configure its contemporary state. Much has happened to literature and learned discourse between Bacon's time and Johnson's own, and Bacon is frequently credited with providing the foundations for this. It is of this intervening period that Johnson offers a partial survey in *The Lives of the Poets*. Some of the categories which Bacon establishes and the distinctions which he makes are reflected in Johnson's thoughts in the *Lives* about prose diction.¹

Another development of the intervening period, which could be read as framing developments in discourse, is that (as we saw in the Introduction) the theorists are agreed that by the beginning of the eighteenth century the everyday emerges. The fundamental conditions of modern western life — privacy, leisure, information, cities and the middle class (for example) — would have been quite foreign to Bacon, and familiar to Johnson. Our own familiarity with these conditions might lead us to assume that the more specialised or exacting forms of written discourse, learned diction and poetic diction, are naturally later developments than familiar diction. This is of course not the case, as a moment's reflection will discover. But it is important that we not lose sight of the logic that the spoken prose of conversation *seems* a more natural and hence older form of

¹ Greg Clingham asserts that "the development of English prose" is one of the major "topics covered" in the *Lives*. Clingham, "Life and Literature in Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*," *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, ed. Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1997), 162.

discourse, and that people accustomed to the idea of literacy will assume that prosiness and familiarity is as natural to literate discourse as to oral.

As Johnson in the *Lives* offers a view of the previous century and a half, he notes two revolutions in diction that have taken place in that period. Inevitably he gives far more emphasis in *The Lives of the Poets* to the development, which he attributes to Dryden, of poetic diction. But he regards as no less important the achievement of Addison in devising an appropriate prose style, as well as the ideal mode of publication (the periodical), by which to "survey the track of daily conversation." Of Addison's two mighty essay-periodicals he says,

Before the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, if the writers for the theatre are excepted, England had no masters of common life. No writers had yet undertaken to reform either the savageness of neglect, or the impertinence of civility; to shew when to speak, or to be silent; how to refuse, or how to comply.²

(He excepts 'writers for the theatre' because he has years before, in the Preface to the *Dictionary*, credited Shakespeare with mastery of "the diction of common life.")³

Bacon, even at his most popular and familiar ("most current"), is not a 'master of common life.' The scenes, for him, of "daily conversation" are courts, colleges, grand houses. Most early works offering directions for behaviour — Castiglione's *Courtier*, Elyot's *Gouverneur*, Machiavelli's *Prince* — are likewise directed at those whose education is to equip them for a life of rule and influence. The early seventeenth-century man-in-the-street is unlikely to have had much opportunity to exercise wisdom in regard to Judicature, Counsel, and Faction, or Great Place, Nobility and Ambition, or Empire, Plantations and Seditions. More importantly so far as the question of diction is concerned, Bacon is inevitably writing for a *learned* readership; for he wrote in a time when there was no other. Johnson, in the 'Life of Milton,' asserts,

The call for books was not in Milton's age [Bacon died when Milton was eighteen] what it is in the present. To read was not then a general amusement; neither traders nor often gentlemen thought themselves disgraced by ignorance.... Those,

² 'Addison,' *Lives* II, 93.

³ Preface, *Dictionary* I, C1' (para. 62).

indeed, who professed learning were not less learned than at any other time; but of *that middle race of students* who read for pleasure or accomplishment and who buy the numerous products of modern typography, the number was then comparatively small.⁴

Bacon can expect that anyone who has learnt to read will approach his *Essays* having already read many of the classical authors whom he quotes (or will at least understand the convention of classical quotation), will be comfortable with the rhetorical strategies which he employs, and will be intrigued and gratified (rather than baffled and irritated) by any novelty or difficulty of thought or diction.

By contrast, Johnson, although he is a massively learned man, and an astute reader of scholarship, asserts that his own work is not intended for the learned — or at least, to make his task more complex, not *only* for the learned. In the 'Life of Pope,' he says, "I am not writing only to poets and philosophers."⁵ The "only" indicates the tight-rope which Johnson attempts to walk. He has just before this given a number of pages of specimens of the variations in Pope's verse between the manuscripts and the printed copy, which he is confident will delight "every man who has cultivated poetry, or who delights to trace the mind from the rudeness of its first conceptions to the elegance of its last." But he is aware that "most other readers are already tired" of this type of material.⁶ Tedium, as always, is to be avoided, and can perhaps be minimised by the elegant flattery of the suggestion that his readers will need to be reminded that some of his *other* readers are, unlike them, not poets or philosophers.

This is frequently the tone which Johnson takes to the learned, and is of a piece with strategies that he uses in, for example, *The Rambler*, to deal with the readers' resistance to his didacticism.⁷ Insofar as he is actually addressing any learned readers, his approach frequently is to crave their indulgence for being obliged to cater for the limitations of more commonplace intelligences. But in purporting to address the learned,

⁴ *Lives* I, 143. My emphasis.

⁵ *Lives* III, 126.

⁶ *Lives* III, 125-26, 126.

⁷ See "The Masks of 'Mr. Rambler': Fiction, Anonymity and Johnson's Narrator," Ch. 4 of my *Reading The Rambler*.

his actual aim is to flatter and conciliate the great majority, his more ordinary readers.⁸ The reader sees by passages in *The Lives of the Poets*, such as the examination of original manuscripts described above, that Johnson is capable of scholarship and providing scholarly amusement to the learned, but is far more ready with implicit defenses of his unwillingness to do so.

Johnson often represents himself as popularising the fruits of learning. This needs doing because the learned are not capable of, and not particularly interested in, doing so themselves. In the 'Life of Dryden' he observes that "Learning once made popular is no longer learning" (I, 411). This chasm we might imagine to be due to the moral and intellectual defects of the populus. But the fault Johnson always attributes to the learned themselves. No doubt he does so at least partly because the learned will understand that this is a literary strategy and will not be offended. If he were to berate the common reader with laziness, imprecision of thought, prejudice, self-interest which will not entertain alternative viewpoints, and hunger for amusement which requires endless feeding with time-wasting trivialities, he would soon have no common readers. But the descriptions of 'the Learned,' their work and their diction which we find in the *Lives* almost uniformly suggest that they are prejudiced and pretentious, and their learning vain or bogus. Cowley is "forbiddingly inelegant" and "pretentious," Dryden is "lofty," and Addison "austere."

For a start, the most common contrast is that of learned with popular works, a contrast Bacon would not have thought to make. On the face of it, why should learning not be popular? In the 'Life of Cowley,' Johnson says that his Latin comedy, *Naufragium Joculare*, that "having neither the facility of a popular nor the accuracy of a learned work, it seems now to be universally neglected" (I, 4). In other words, it pleases no one. It is apparently not possible for something to be both pleasant or easy reading (*facile*) and accurate. The metaphysical poets (the digression about whom in the 'Life of Cowley' is one of Johnson's most considerable treatments of a literary issue) strove for an accuracy of image and sentiment that would avoid the conventional because of the stock responses which it provokes in readers. The trouble is, most readers, so long as readers are ordinary people, actually *like* the conventional because they *enjoy* making stock responses. At the root of Johnson's distaste for metaphysical poetry is the issue of diction. He is highly critical of the attempt of the metaphysical poets to combine poetic diction with learned diction, and seems to believe that the pleasures of poetry are not, in the end, intellectual,

⁸ This sort of strategy is not uncommon, especially in popular media and advertising. It has been said that *Dolly* magazine was designed to appeal to twelve year-old girls by looking as if it were intended for eighteen year-olds.

and poetry should not require its readers to have had special training. "It is a general rule in poetry," he says in the 'Life of Dryden,' "that all appropriated terms of art should be sunk in general expressions, because poetry is to speak an universal language" (I, 433). "[E]very piece," he says of Cowley's poetry, "ought to contain in itself whatever is necessary to make it intelligible" (I, 35-36). This complaint is about a poem that he thinks needs a title for the reader to know what it refers to, but even this would not in his view be satisfactory, because the title is not in fact part of the poem. To modern readers, having long ago surrendered to the apparent necessity in art galleries of reading the name-cards of contemporary works before volunteering any sort of response or interpretation, it seems a very formal and old-fashioned sort of complaint.⁹

His image of the poem here is of an artefact that (still) has the potential to exist in a popular, indeed, an oral, context, with no title or title page to mark a boundary between the text and the social world. Art ought to be self-explanatory. Learned works, on the other hand, necessarily interpenetrate each other. They respond to and refer to each other — and thus need titles — and they are not expected to contain "whatever is necessary to make [them] intelligible." The learned reader is expected to bring his or her own learning to the learned text. The 'common reader' wishes to bring (and is able to bring) to a text only his openness. It is perhaps another variety of impropriety in the diction of metaphysical poets that "they are upon common subjects often unnecessarily and unpoetically subtle." Common subjects are the subjects for poetry, and they call for a common diction, whether in poetry or prose. Johnson rather grudgingly adds, "yet where scholastic speculation can be properly admitted, their *copiousness and acuteness* may justly be admired" (I, 33); but whilst his 'may' gives the reader permission to admire the metaphysicals, Johnson apparently has no intention of doing so himself.

II. The Dangers of False Learning

We see at this point the type of diction that Bacon himself encouraged as most appropriate for the advancement of learning. In Book One of the *Advancement*, he identifies as the first of four "distempers (as I may term them) of learning" what he calls "delicate learning." This disease of learning, he says, results from learned men studying words

⁹ Of course, Johnson's own essays did not have individual titles on first publication, and the titles that were added to the collected editions do not head the essays but are given only on the Contents pages. It is expected that the reader will find out what they are about by reading them.

rather than matter, and becoming more concerned for "the choiceness of the phrase, and the round and clean composition of the sentence, and the sweet falling of the clauses, and the varying and illustration of their work with tropes and figures," than for "the weight of matter, worth of subject, soundness of argument, life of invention, or depth of judgement."¹⁰ Knowledge, he says, should be adorned for use "with sensible and plausible elocution," but a true scholar will disdain any excess of delicacy and affectation. The "copiousness and acuteness" (Cowley, I, 33) which Johnson says are characteristic of learned diction represent a language which has not been purged of its detail and precision, its examples and qualifications, its assertions and uncertainties, merely for the sake of elegance or 'delicacy.'

Bacon is also aware that some learned writers succumb to what we may see as the opposite temptation: to employ more subtlety than their subject warrants, to spin out arguments unintelligently and indiscriminately, to define, distinguish and qualify for the sake of an appearance of learning, rather than for the sake of whatever of knowledge may be achieved. This, which he calls "contentious learning," is a distemper "in nature worse than the former ... [as] vain matter is worse than vain words." It is of far greater a concern also to Johnson. There are, says Bacon, "two marks and badges of suspected and falsified science; the one, the novelty and strangeness of terms; the other, the strictness of positions, which of necessity doth induce oppositions, and so questions and altercations."¹¹ The first of these we have seen censured by Johnson, in his account of Milton's "uniform peculiarity of diction," which surprises the unlearned reader. In the 'Life of Cowley,' he identifies two particular defects of diction, which he call *artifices*, that correspond to Bacon's "novelty and strangeness." "The artifice of inversion, by which the established order of words is changed, or of innovation, by which new words or meanings of words are introduced, is practised, not by those who talk to be understood, but by those who write to be admired" (I, 40). Johnson too seems to regard such practices as marks of contentious learning.

By his second mark of contentious learning, "the strictness of positions," Bacon means the making of precise and dogmatic assertions. He devotes to this tendency two of his most vivid and uninviting images.

¹⁰ Francis Bacon (Oxford Authors), 138, 139.

¹¹ Francis Bacon (Oxford Authors), 140.

Surely, like as many substances in nature which are solid do putrefy and corrupt into worms, so it is the property of good and sound knowledge to putrefy and dissolve into a number of subtile, idle, unwholesome, and (as I may term them) vermiculate questions, which have indeed a kind of quickness and life of spirit, but no soundness of matter or goodness of quality.¹²

He gives as examples of this sort of maggotty learning the mediaeval schoolmen, who "did out of no great quantity of matter, and infinite agitation of wit, spin out those laborious webs of learning which are extant in their books." The "wit and mind of man," he says, is properly limited and governed by the scope and rationality of what it contemplates, "but if it work upon itself, as the spider worketh his web, then it is endless, and brings forth indeed cobwebs of learning, admirable for the fineness of thread and work, but of no substance or profit."

Johnson reflects Bacon's disgust for the elaborately nuanced, self-referential text, which does not seem concerned to describe reality, to engage with first order things or the artefacts of everyday life, or specific texts or the products of empirical science. But he develops the argument in three ways, not emphasised by Bacon. Such supposed learning is to be condemned because it is useless, pretentious and arbitrary. In the 'Life of Butler,' Johnson is critical of "the discontinuity of the action" and "the paucity of events" in *Hudibras*, much of the satire of which is in the form of debates. Johnson says,

It is indeed much more easy to form dialogues than to contrive adventures. Every position makes way for an argument, and every objection dictates an answer. When two disputants are engaged upon a complicated and extensive question, the difficulty is not to continue, but to end the controversy. (I, 211)

To pursue arguments endlessly is not only tedious for the reader, but lazy. Inventing new discourses and terminologies, and spinning out arguments, are skills that can be developed, but they cannot be useful to any reader because they have no reference to the world in which all discourse is made, and which all readers inhabit. Johnson says later, this time in commendation of 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" (I, 213). Despite Butler's neglect of narrative, other features of his poem

¹² Francis Bacon (Oxford Authors), 140.

show Johnson that he worked from real life, which is the main issue if his poem is to contain real nourishment for its readers.

As we would expect, Johnson's concern is less for learning in the abstract, than it is for the well-being of the reader, who is the notional beneficiary of writing. Bacon is concerned that by the spectacle of "contentious learning" (which he also calls "vain altercations"), "knowledge must fall under popular contempt."¹³ But Johnson, being concerned more about moral consequences than intellectual reputation, penetrates further into the psychology of the learned mind turned in upon itself. Knowledge becomes for scholars of this type a mere exhibition of intellectual machismo and virtuosity, with the implicit claim, 'my text is more impenetrable than yours.' Johnson sees much purported learning as a pretentious game, an elaborate and self-contained code of linguistic practices for enhancing reputations and intimidating outsiders. In commending Cowley's *Anacreontiques* for giving "rather a pleasing than a faithful representation" of the Greek originals, he uses the opportunity to give two gratuitous insults to the learned (with whom the metaphysical poets have put him, throughout this 'Life' in particular, in a very bad mood).

The Anacreon of Cowley, like the Homer of Pope, has admitted the decoration of some modern graces, by which he is undoubtedly made more amiable to common readers, and perhaps, *if they would honestly declare their own perceptions*, to far the greater part of those whom courtesy and ignorance are content to style the Learned. (I, 39, my emphasis.)

Most of 'the Learned' are customarily dishonest, in that they pretend to enjoy things that they really do not. They are alienated from their own natural responses.¹⁴ And most of them in any case are not truly learned, but are only called so by those who are too ignorant to detect their impostures, or too polite to expose their pretensions.

To excite admiration is no bad thing, but if one directs all one's endeavours to exciting admiration, the admiration does no good to the admirer (or the admiree). The desire for admiration gives rise to distorted diction (such as Cowley's inversion and innovation), in which *meaning has ceased to matter*. We have already remarked that

¹³ Francis Bacon (Oxford Authors), 141.

¹⁴ This is a theme we will see Johnson further engage with, in Ch. 7, on Pleasure.

Johnson felt that the metaphysical poets were "perhaps more desirous of being admired than understood." "The metaphysical poets," he says, "were men of learning, and to shew their learning was their whole endeavour" ('Cowley,' 1, 19); and wherever he detects such an attitude, Johnson is merciless, because where understanding has become irrelevant, danger lies. Johnson says of Pope, "the Essay [i.e., *on Man*] abounded in splendid amplifications and sparkling sentences, which were read and admired with no great attention to their ultimate purpose" (III, 164). He discourses at length on the controversy about this poem (without mentioning his own contribution, a translation of Crousaz's critical examination of it), and asserts that Pope "perceived himself not to know the full meaning" of his own poem (168). Pope did not intend that his poem would have pernicious implications, he was simply not interested in the question of the truth or otherwise of the scheme he had so artfully constructed.

Even *rational* admiration, of things that might justly be admired, gets in the way of other more substantial responses. The reader's admiration of *Paradise Lost* does not persuade him or her to re-read, or even to finish reading the poem. And no work, however admirable, can do anyone any good unless they can be persuaded to read it. As we noted earlier, Johnson's bottom line, his zero degree, for writing is readability, but it is interesting to notice that for Johnson readability is usually to be contrasted with admirability. "Pitt pleases the criticks," he concedes, but qualifies it immediately with what he supposes to be unanswerable, "Pitt pleases the criticks, and Dryden the people; ... Pitt is quoted, and Dryden read" (III, 279). He says that John Dennis is a "formidable" critic, and that his strictures on Addison's play, *Cato*, are "acute"; he quotes them at length, but concludes, "*Cato* is read, and the critick is neglected" (II, 144). Of the poet Akenside, he asks rhetorically (as the final sentence of this cursory 'Life'), "to what use can the work be criticised that will not be read?" (III, 420) A work which is not read, like a work which is admired rather than read, has effectively ceased to mean anything. For Johnson, as for Bacon, things that are without meaning risk calling all meaning into question.

III. The General vs. the Pedantick

Bacon divides contentious learning into two sub-species, one marked by the subject itself and the other by the method of handling. The subject may be "a fruitless speculation or controversy," such as, one imagines, the supposed controversy of the schoolmen as to

how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. But even a sensible and useful topic for speculation may, he says, be handled in a way,

that rests not so much upon evidence of truth proved by arguments, authorities, similitudes, examples, as upon particular confutations and solutions of every scruple, cavillation, and objection; breeding for the most part one question as fast as it solveth another.¹⁵

The example he gives of this method is, "upon every particular position or assertion to frame objections, and to those objections, solutions; which solutions were for the most part not confutations, but distinctions." He points out that the strength of any science is its harmony, which should be sufficient to suppress "the smaller sort of objections." But the critic who devises plausible objections to "every axiom" is not required to do so from any one consistent position. He weakens a science but without tending to establish any alternative account; he subtracts from rather than adds to knowledge.

Such thoughts as these must underpin Johnson's defense of generality of thought, as against minuteness and pedantry. Again, most of these reflections have been called forth by his dissatisfaction with the metaphysical poets. "Great thoughts," he asserts, "are always general, and consist in positions not limited by exceptions, and in descriptions not descending to minuteness" (1, 21). It is his theme from the opening of the 'Life of Cowley.' His usually condemnatory references to 'the Learned' might be contrasted with his well-known definition of "The true Genius," which, he says "is a mind of large general powers, accidentally determined to some particular direction" (2); quite the opposite to the 'expert' or specialist to whom we defer, not because we are persuaded or can actually apprehend the superiority of their understanding, but merely because we do not understand them. "Their attempts were always analytick: they broke every image into fragments, ... and could no more represent ... the prospects of nature or the scenes of life, than he who dissects a sun-beam with a prism can exhibit the wide effulgence of a summer noon" (21). This glorious outdoor image of the sun at noon, warm and invigorating, giving colour and definition to all the world before us, is a perhaps unexpected illustration of the powers of the mind and imagination. But it is characteristic of what Johnson knows to be the potential of human thought and language, and gives point to his impatience with anyone who purports to be exercising these powers seriously for any other purpose. We can think

¹⁵ *The Advancement of Learning*, see Francis Bacon (Oxford Authors), 141.

readily of a hundred instances: of his telling Boswell to clear his *mind* of cant, of his doubt as to whether James Harris really understood his own *Hermes*, or merely thought that it was elegant and plausible, or his outburst to Dr. Adams who wanted to distract him from a serious spiritual anxiety into having an academic and speculative discussion about damnation.¹⁶ Such dishonest or wasteful uses of intelligence contrast strongly with what he calls "that comprehension and expanse of thought which at once fills the whole mind, and of which the first effect is sudden astonishment, and the second rational admiration" ('Cowley,' I, 20-21).

Pedantry is the besetting sin of (traditional) scholars, and Johnson believes that pedantic learning, which takes the reader ever deeper into ever smaller self-contained systems, is not so much bogus as dangerously disproportionate. It might be true, but we had better not think it important. Cowley errs in this regard, he says, "[i]f by pedantry is meant that minute knowledge which is derived from particular sciences and studies, in opposition to the general notions supplied by a wide survey of life and nature" (I, 55). This explanation is surprisingly neutral. Pedantry is defined less precisely and less neutrally in the *Dictionary* as, "Awkward ostentation of needless learning." It is the opposite to "that comprehension and expanse of thought," and its practitioners are saved from becoming merely silly only so long as they remain modest. Of the poet Blackmore he says, "though he could not boast of much critical knowledge his mind was stored with general principles, and he left minute researches to those whom he considered as little minds" (II, 253). But Cowley, by "pursuing his thoughts to their last ramifications, ... loses the grandeur of generality, for of the greatest things the parts are little; what is little can be but pretty, and by claiming dignity becomes ridiculous" (I, 45). Johnson shortly repeats this insistence that petty learning is made ridiculous by adopting over-stated forms or attitudes, "what might in general expressions be great and forcible he weakens and makes ridiculous by branching it into small parts" (53). We shall return in later chapters to his deep objections to pedantry.

The strongest contrast to the pedantic doubt of a minor step in a complex scheme is the generally applicable assertion. Johnson believes general readers to find knowledge far more useful if it comes in small, self-contained units, rather than as steps in a process of something like arithmetical calculation. Here again we find that Bacon has provided a theoretical foundation that Johnson would seem to respect. In Book Two of the *The*

¹⁶ Cant: *Life* IV, 221 (15 May 1783); Harris: III, 245 (7 April 1778); Dr. Adams: IV, 299 (12 June 1784).

Advancement of Learning, Bacon identifies as a kind (the fourth kind) of Rational Knowledge, the art of "Tradition or Delivery," which is the study of the ways in which knowledge is transmitted to others. He analyses Tradition in terms of its Organs (speech or writing), its Methods, and its Illustration or Rhetoric. Method is, in Bacon's sense, "A branch of Logic or Rhetoric which teaches how to arrange thoughts and topics for investigation, exposition or literary composition" (*OED*). In the *Advancement*, Bacon says "Method hath been placed, and that not amiss, in Logic, as a part of Judgment."¹⁷ He has a number of different schemes whereby to analyse and explain method. The first proposed is the distinction between Methods of two kinds, Magistral and of Probation. Magistral (from *magus*, master) methods are used to convey information which is to be believed, in order to be, as Bacon says, "referred to use," that is, applied. These methods are of greatest value to an everyday audience. Methods of Probation are "referred to progression," that is, they aim to develop and extend knowledge. They are to be used by the learned, those whose business it is to test and evaluate ideas. For the former audience, what is written needs to be true, useful, attractive and memorable, for the latter, precise, subtle, interesting.

Rather confusingly, as he proceeds to offer other 'diversities' of Method, he makes a distinction between "writing in Aphorisms" and "writing in Method." "Method" in this sense refers specifically to systematic exposition, perhaps as if the Methods of Probation are not simply *a* method, but *the* method. Aphorisms certainly seem to be a good example of Magistral methods. Successful aphorisms offer a pared-down knowledge, shorn of cumbersome examples and arguments, handed down over time and confirmed by the experience of generations, and their accuracy is guaranteed by their survival in usually oral cultures. Aphorisms are available for immediate use, whereas Methods (in this sense) "are more fit to win consent or belief, but less fit to point to action."¹⁸ There does not, however, seem to be a precise fit between the distinction between Aphorisms and Methods and that between Methods Magistral and of Probation. Aphorisms, which on all other grounds seem to be a magistral method, "do invite men to inquire farther," whereas "Methods, carrying the shew of a whole," seem to suggest that knowledge is complete, and therefore do not encourage testing.

¹⁷ Francis Bacon (Oxford Authors), 233.

¹⁸ Francis Bacon (Oxford Authors), 235.

Some readers are disposed to be persuaded simply by the appearance of reasoning and thoroughness. Johnson, in such cases is always more disposed to doubt. We have mentioned his cynical but plausible opinion that Pope did not understand his own *Essay on Man*, and that James Harris did not understand his own elaborately reasoned discourse, *Hermes*. An elaborate and carefully worked out text invites his suspicion, as if it is too clever, too artificially constructed, to reflect or be true to lived human experience. To a reader that finds it persuasive, the structure and conclusions of a tightly argued treatise seem to be necessary and inevitable; but writing about Pope's *Essay on Man*, Johnson devotes two paragraphs to thinking about just how watertight such things can be. He subversively questions the means by which we are persuaded.

Almost every poem, consisting of precepts, is so far arbitrary and immethodical, that many of the paragraphs may change places with no apparent inconvenience; for of two or more positions, depending upon some remote and general principle, there is seldom any cogent reason why one should precede the other. But for the order in which they stand, whatever it be, a little ingenuity may easily give a reason. "It is possible," says Hooker, "that by long circumduction, from any one truth all truth may be inferred." Of all homogeneous truths at least, of all truths respecting the same general end, in whatever series they may be produced, a concatenation by intermediate ideas may be formed, such as, when it is once shewn, shall appear natural; but if this order be reversed, another mode of connection equally specious may be found or made.

As the end of method is perspicuity, that series is sufficiently regular that avoids obscurity; and where there is no obscurity it will not be difficult to discover method. (III, 99)¹⁹

It is a question whether the thesis-writer should find such a sentiment disheartening, or encouraging. But it is an opinion that tugs forcefully at the roots of academic discourse, in favour of traditions of learning that are more in touch with the oral everyday world in which for most people usable wisdom must dwell.

¹⁹ Hooker is quoted from the *Ecclesiastical Polity*, Bk. II, i, sec. 2. See *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, intro. Christopher Morris, 2 v. (London: Dent "Everyman," 1954), I, 235. Johnson presumably quotes from memory: this is actually a parenthesis in a long sentence, "out of scripture such duties may be deduced by some kind of consequence, (as by long circuit of deduction it may be that even all truth out of any truth may be concluded)". Johnson uses the same portion in this form in the *Dictionary* under *deduction*.

IV. Common Readers

We can see that for Johnson, the recent rapid growth in the class of readers that has occurred between Bacon and himself is an important historical watershed. When books are only written by the learned and for the learned, the writer has an undoubtedly easier time. He will be able to make assumptions about the culture of his readers with considerable reliability, to know that his text will be read as he intends. Under such a regime, literature does not need to take account of the commonplace, of daily transactions, of shifts in language and fashion. It does not need to coax, cajole, or pander to the dedicated and scholarly reader, or to 'dumb-down.' (Although there remains the temptation to "contentious learning," to express oneself with unnecessary complexity. For where there are more readers, there are more who might be duped by mere appearances.) The serious reader who reads for ideas brings much to a text, and may perhaps regard elegance in prose writing as unnecessary and "delicate": something of a bonus at best, and at worst part of a deliberate effort to mislead.

The large and prosperous new class of non-learned readers is in fact *wanting to be distracted* by their reading, rather than reading for ideas or edification. Johnson is particularly anxious about the major new literary genre which has arisen to take advantage of this readership, and in *Rambler* 4, expresses his concern about the novel, a literary form of which distraction is the purpose.²⁰ He says that in novels the world is "promiscuously described" (he defined *promiscuously* in the *Dictionary* as "With confused mixture; indiscriminately"), and professes himself unable to "see of what use it can be to read the account." Of course, he is challenging the reader to articulate a justification, which will, he believes, inevitably be seen to be based on obviously unwholesome impulses, such as a curiosity about the privacies of imagined persons, and desire to linger upon such things without personal risk, or simply a desire to pass the time in an agreeable but wasteful and pointless manner. He characterises the readers of the contemporary comic prose romances in the following way:

These books are written chiefly to the young, the ignorant, and the idle, to whom they serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions into life. They are the entertainment of minds unfurnished with ideas, and therefore easily susceptible of impressions; not fixed by principles, and therefore easily following the current of

²⁰ Almost his own favorite kind of text is that in which such involvement is not possible, books of *minutiae literariae*, which we will examine in Chapter Six.

fancy; not informed by experience, and consequently open to every false suggestion and partial account.²¹

We sense Johnson's deep feelings of ambiguity about the growth of printing and the spread of reading, when we consider that this cohort of "the young, the ignorant, and the idle" is coterminous with the "middle race of students" to whom he said Addison's essays, and his own, are directed. Such an audience is unlikely to be attracted by the books of serious prose available to readers of the previous generation. Before the time of Dryden, he says,

We had many books to teach us our more important duties, and to settle opinions in philosophy or politicks; but an *Arbiter elegantiarum*, a judge of propriety, was yet wanting, who should survey the track of daily conversation and free it from thorns and prickles, which tease the passer, though they do not wound him.

For this purpose nothing is so proper as the frequent publication of short papers, which we read not as study but amusement. If the subject be slight, the treatise likewise is short. The busy may find time, and the idle may find patience. ('Addison,' II, 93).

It is interesting to observe here how Johnson's mind leaps rapidly, almost automatically, from the subject matter of these writings, to the style (broadly speaking) of text in which they are to be embodied. And his emphasis here is not even on the literary form or type of diction, but the material mode of publication — the periodical.²²

Throughout the *Lives*, these are they to whom Johnson refers as "common readers." It is well known that with regard to Gray's *Elegy* he "rejoice[s] to concur with the common reader;" but it has been less frequently observed that he speaks as if this concurrence were a matter for rejoicing because it is exceptional. It is seldom, one feels he is saying, that he can be so whole-hearted. The tone that he adopts in the very next clause is particularly defensive: "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" (III, 441). As poetry is aimed to give

²¹ *Rambler* 4; III, 21.

²² Johnson was deeply aware of the most fundamental and material conditions of literature, the length of texts and other what we might call paratextual issues, as we will see in Chs. 5 and 6. For periodical publication, see 153 ff.

pleasure, it is to be read and judged by those who read for pleasure, not by those dedicated few who read for edification, information, professional power or other practical purposes.

"Poetry," Johnson asserts in the 'Life of Milton,' "is the art of uniting pleasure with truth, by calling imagination to the help of reason" (I, 170). He says in particular of the digressions in *Paradise Lost*, that "since the end of poetry is pleasure, that *cannot* be unpoetical with which *all* are pleased" (175; my emphasis). The 'Life of Milton' is an odd context for such strong assertions, as he is in fact rather sceptical about the pleasures of Milton. We are right to detect in his "cannot" a certain reluctance, and in his "all" a sense of exclusion. He emphasises this sentiment in the 'Life of Milton' because of the complexity of his reaction to his poetry, his need to compensate for other things he feels about it. *Paradise Lost* demands to be admired, for "The substance of the narrative" (174), the "integrity of the design" (175, Johnson's emphasis), its power "to fill the imagination" (178), the excellence of Milton's "moral sentiments" (179), his "sanctity of thought and purity of manners" (179) and his "copiousness and variety" (191). Yet Milton seems to break or to be the exception to all of Johnson's general statements about poetry. His diction, as we have seen, is "peculiar," his imagery is bookish and his "mythological allusions" are vain (178), *Paradise Lost* excites "little natural curiosity or sympathy" (181), it is based on known truths, from which "we cannot learn" and which "cannot surprise" us (182), and there is a "want of human interest" (183). A great deal of *our* interest in the 'Life of Milton' is in Johnson, in his oscillation from admiration to censure. In his final verdict, the pleasure principle is in the ascendant:

Paradise Lost is one of the books which the reader admires and lays down, and forgets to take up again. None ever wished it longer than it is. Its perusal is a duty rather than a pleasure. We read Milton for instruction, retire harassed and overburdened, and look elsewhere for recreation; we desert our master, and seek for companions. (I, 183-84)

Of the sources of pleasure in writing, Johnson nowhere gives a systematic survey, but in reading the *Lives*, we easily note many features which he again and again approves: metre and rhyme, vivid imagery, fluent narrative, sympathetic characterisation, appropriate diction. Of these things, diction — at least as regards prose — is the most important.

The diction, being the vehicle of the thoughts, first presents itself to the intellectual eye; and if the first appearance offends, a further knowledge is not often sought.

Whatever professes to benefit by pleasing must please at once. The pleasures of the mind imply something sudden and unexpected; that which elevates must always surprise. What is perceived by slow degrees may gratify us with the consciousness of improvement, but will never strike with the sense of pleasure. ('Cowley' 1, 59)

Perhaps the most significant point of identification between Johnson and the common reader is encapsulated in the second sentence in the above passage. The common reader, having been persuaded to read, requires instant gratification. From this point of view, tediousness is the worst of literary crimes. The least sniff of it is to be condemned. A text may have every other virtue, but if it is tedious, they will count for nothing, because tediousness forestalls reading. As Johnson succinctly puts it, in the 'Life of Prior',

Tediousness is the most fatal of all faults; negligences or errors are single and local, but tediousness pervades the whole: other faults are censured and forgotten, but the power of tediousness propagates itself. He that is weary the first hour is more weary the second; as bodies forced into motion, contrary to their tendency, pass more and more slowly through every successive interval of space. (II, 206.)

The taste for instant gratification is a dangerous taste, and our subject divides again at this point, as we postpone a full discussion of the question of pleasure until Chapter Seven. Johnson is in no doubt about the fatal power of tediousness, but he emphasises it (for his generally learned audience) because it is a crime which only the common reader will perceive (or confess to perceiving): someone who is reading for some practical purpose, such as the scholarly reader intent on knowledge, or the Christian engaged in devotional reading, will read through such a text, looking beyond it to what it claims to signify, and perhaps scarcely noticing the style. The act of reading is not, for such a reader, an end in itself. It does not have to be entertaining, or distracting. Johnson, we know, was himself more like this kind of reader, or at least, this was one of his modes of reading, "he gets at the substance of a book directly; he tears out the heart of it";²³ and it must be confessed that there are no descriptions of him taking his ease and reading through a novel, chuckling with amusement or anxious with suspense. Yet these are pleasures which Johnson understood, thought about, and worried about.

²³ *Life* III, 284-85. 15 April 1778.

Like all pleasure, textual pleasure is likewise not easily susceptible to government by principle: James Thomson's play, *Sophonisba*, was, he tells us, mocked around the town on account of one feeble line, and he observes, "Slight accidents will operate upon the taste of pleasure" (III, 288). Those who set out to gratify this taste set themselves a rather low ambition, but are in any case liable to disappointment. He says of Dryden and his rival Elkanah Settle, that they "had both placed their happiness in the claps of multitudes," with the implication that we should not be surprised at the weakness and indignity to which they were reduced (I, 346). Of the poet Pomfret he says, "He pleases many, and he who pleases many must have some species of merit" (I, 302); but the 'must' suggests that whatever 'species of merit' Pomfret has, Johnson finds it difficult to determine or to praise it in any detail. Johnson queries some verbal extravagances of Dryden, and then is amused to quote the poet's justification: "'I knew,' says he, 'that they were bad enough to please, even when I wrote them.' There is surely reason to suspect," Johnson continues, "that he pleased himself as well as his audience; and that these, like the harlots of other men, had his love, though not his approbation" (I, 462). The imagery employed — the chambermaid and the harlot — suggest Johnson feels strongly the attractions of the devices that contribute to the popularity of a text, but also believes that they frequently verge on the reprehensible.²⁴

But of course, we have also seen that Johnson believes that the special diction of the learned is often assumed for the sake of snobbery and mystification. But appropriateness, propriety or congruity is the principle. We have seen that Johnson allows "grossly familiar" diction (in *Hudibras*), and "copiousness and acuteness" ("where scholastic speculation can properly be admitted") in the metaphysicals. But his starting point is always to doubt the need for either. Between the high and low vices of diction, the dishonest remoteness of the learned, and the lazy and morally arbitrary taste for textual pleasure, is the type of prose which Johnson at all times prefers. Of this, he says, Addison is the exemplar:

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

²⁴ We might note similar imagery introduced by Johnson when asked by Goldsmith why, as a former playwright, he no longer frequents the theatre. "Why, Sir, our tastes greatly alter. The lad does not care for the child's rattle, and the old man does not care for the young man's whore." GOLDSMITH. "Nay, Sir; but your muse was not a whore." JOHNSON. "Sir, I do not think she was...." (*Life* II, 14).

ambitious ornaments, and tries no hazardous innovations. His page is always luminous, but never blazes in unexpected splendour. (II, 149)

Like prose itself, the middle style might seem to be best described by what it is not: there are ten negatives in the above passage, and only five positive assertions: pure and exact, equable and easy, luminous. We ought not to be surprised by this: the ordinary and everyday is always between extremes, exists prior to theory, and is thus difficult to describe.

We might compare it with the terms in which he describes the prose of Dryden. Johnson expects us to be surprised that, given his subject, Dryden writes as well in prose as he does. "Criticism, either didactick or defensive, occupies almost all his prose, ... *but* none of his prefaces were ever thought *tedious*" (I, 418, my emphasis). Dryden, he asserts, "may be properly considered as the father of English criticism," because he both "knew the laws of propriety" and endeavoured to teach them (I, 410). As Patricia Spacks acknowledges, didactic writing is more often than not found boring, because most knowledge that is there to be imparted concerns subjects no longer current or immediate; readers do remain interested by self-help or get-rich-quick books.²⁵ To write about such matters might be imagined to be the task of scholars, and to be accomplished with all the remoteness of learned diction. But Dryden apparently wished that the readers of poetry should be able also to be the judges of poetry. Johnson also, when he wrote about Milton in *The Rambler*, was "desirous to be generally understood."²⁶ Of Dryden's prefaces, he says,

They have not the formality of a settled style, in which the first half of the sentence betrays the other. The clauses are never balanced, nor the periods modelled; every word seems to drop by chance, though it falls into its proper place. Nothing is cold or languid; the whole is airy, animated, and vigorous: what is little is gay; what is great is splendid.... Every thing is excused by the play of images and the spriteliness of expression. Though all is easy, nothing is feeble; though all seems careless, there is nothing harsh.... (I, 418)

This seems a more positive description.

²⁵ Spacks, *Boredom*, 129-30.

²⁶ *Rambler* 86; IV, 89.

This sort of effort must be undertaken with prose, because Johnson recognises that conversational diction has already made a quantum leap out of the everyday when it becomes writing. To write, and further, to print, gives an illusion of permanence and a sense of closure to the most informal prose. It is entirely consistent with this that his major literary effort should be a work of such everydayness that it is not only not verse, but is hardly prose, and we shall examine it in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Contexts for the *Dictionary*

I. Priest or Pedant?

As Jonathon Green observes in his recent popular history of dictionary-making, the lexicographer is both a drudge, according to Johnson's self-deprecating definition, and something akin to "a priest, charged by society — whether consciously or not — with the revelation of linguistic verities."¹ And what verities, we might add, are not linguistic? This dual character poses, at least for readers and scholars interested in such questions, a problem about Samuel Johnson, from the point of view of literary reputation. This has been summed up nicely by Lawrence Lipking,² as whether the *Dictionary* is to be considered as "the exemplary text" (and its author "the archetypal author"), or as something completely unoriginal. More than anything else, this problem illustrates — as Lipking means it to — how *limited* is the point of view of literary reputation. It is obvious that the *Dictionary* is, of its kind, a masterwork, and that its kind is the encyclopedic and summative. It is a library, the one book that can replace all others, a *précis* of all (English) language and all literature. However, it is also (literally) a cut-and-paste job, the product of mental labour over a great length of time, and not at all a product of inspiration; its 'author' is not a genius, but a literary hack. It could be assembled by a machine, and machines are perhaps now assembling its successors — which is a development that Johnson seems to foresee.

The *Dictionary of the English Language* does not have a straight-forward place in Johnson's literary work. There are no other canonical writers whose reputation is based on a dictionary — indeed, no other person with a claim to being such a writer has ever written one.³ Johnson's *Dictionary* is unlike any other indisputably major work by an indisputably major writer, and has been treated — or not treated — accordingly. It has

¹ Jonathon Green, *Chasing the Sun: Dictionary-Makers and the Dictionaries They Made* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), 11.

² Lawrence Lipking, *Samuel Johnson: The Life of an Author* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard U.P., 1998), 111.

³ At least, not an ordinary, comprehensive, English-to-English dictionary. This qualification will be explained later in the chapter.

never been included in an otherwise collected edition of Johnson's *Works*. The editors of the ongoing Yale Edition excused themselves from dealing with it, claiming simply that it is "too large."⁴ Despite having been combed through by a number of scholars, it has never been published in a scholarly edition, with a reliable text, citations traced, and appropriate annotative commentary.⁵ (There have, of course, been a number of facsimiles published of eighteenth-century editions, amongst which we should include the two editions on CD-ROM.) Yet it attracts readers and scholarship, not only from lexicographers and historians of lexicography, and is the site of considerable curiosity, antiquarian and anecdotal.⁶

Lexicographers are hardly thought of as a kind of writer at all, although the end result of their labours is certainly written work, and is to a great extent concerned with *written* language. If we must classify, the lexicographer is perhaps to be regarded therefore as a kind of literary critic. Critical writing about literature has itself in recent years tried to resist being classed as a sub- or para-literary pursuit — that is, dependent upon and less important than "primary works" of literature, such as novels, poems, and plays. Under such a regime, the lexicographer's status may alter, although no doubt the work of lexicography itself continues to be both laborious and pedantic. What distinguishes the dictionary from other literary forms is that it is so highly determined. A dictionary seems to be almost all structure, an elaborate template which requires only to be carefully outlined to be complete. It seems to require no actual writing. Another way of expressing this might be to suggest that a dictionary is not so much a text as a collection of paratextual devices. The term 'paratext,' as employed by its inventor, Gérard Genette, refers to "those liminal devices and conventions ... that mediate the book to the reader."⁷ In his book on the subject, Genette aims to make visible these devices and then explore their impact on the way texts are received. Johnson, as we shall see, is alert to paratextual power. A dictionary is almost entirely made of such mediating devices. It is a book which is both its own index and table of contents, a *précis* of and a gloss upon itself, a

⁴ "The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson," rear wrapper note on vol. I, the *Diaries*.

⁵ Anne McDermott reports that The Johnson Dictionary Project of the University of Birmingham, which prepared the CD-ROM edition of the *Dictionary*, "will eventually see the publication of a critical edition of Johnson's *Dictionary*"; see Anne McDermott, "Textual Transformations: *The Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus* in Johnson's *Dictionary*," *Studies in Bibliography* 48 (1994), 133 n.1.

⁶ To take an example close to hand, at every Annual Seminar of the Johnson Society of Australia, Nicholas Hudson has presented popular and entertaining papers based entirely on browsing through the *Dictionary*, in pursuit of particular themes.

⁷ Richard Macksey, Foreword to Genette, *Paratexts*, xviii.

collection of highly abbreviated essays or micro-chapters on the widest possible range of topics.

Although the priest label may seem harder to sustain than that of the drudge, the popular image of the dictionary as a prime cultural locus of authority is reflected in proverbs and catchphrases. The dictionary as a published text is likely to be the only kind of book — certainly the only work of scholarship — in otherwise book-free households, with the *Guinness Book of Records* (and, in the rapidly-receding recent past, a Bible and the *Works* of Shakespeare). The other books have their own particular places in our cultural iconography. The dictionary's place with the others is to represent cultural belonging, and an acknowledgement within that cultural frame of linguistic authority, as Shakespeare represents literary, and the Bible religious, authority. This is so even if — perhaps, particularly if — the books are never opened. Dictionaries, however, *are* opened.

The priestly status of the dictionary-maker is dependent upon the power we attribute to the dictionary. Lexicographers, at least, modern scholarly ones, are willing to provide far less by way of linguistic authority than is looked for by many of their readers. Dictionary users want answers, they want what is correct or proper to be established and set apart from what is wrong or slang. A word is, to many users, somehow validated by being 'in the dictionary.' There is a story of two ladies, Mrs. Digby and Mrs. Brooke, whom Johnson used to visit, and who congratulated him on the publication of his *Dictionary*. They were, they told him, particularly pleased that there were no *naughty* words in it. Johnson said, "What, my dears! then you have been looking for them?"⁸ Since Johnson's day, dictionary-makers themselves have become more coy, not about including 'naughty' words, but about appearing judgmental, tending to say of any question of word usage, "It all depends...." They are determined not to exclude any words at all, for moral or other reasons, and hesitant even about seeming to offer guidance on such matters, by noting that a word is colloquial or 'not polite.'⁹ Johnson had no such inhibitions, confidently asserting that one was 'a cant word' or that another 'ought not to be used.' The lexicographers know that every entry in the dictionary has involved difficult

⁸ H.D. Best, "Minor Anecdotes," *Johns. Misc.* II, 390. The dedicated searcher will, however, find in the *Dictionary*, *arse*, *bum*, *fart* and *piss*, which if not obscene are certainly impolite.

⁹ Much of the controversy about *Webster's Third* was a result of the editorial policy to cut back on usage labels, such as 'slang' or 'colloquial.' See Herbert C. Morton, *The Story of 'Webster's Third': Philip Gove's Controversial Dictionary and Its Critics* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1994), 135 ff., 171 ff. In more recent times, this openness has been challenged for political /ideological reasons — e.g., by those who object to dictionaries including derogatory meanings of racial terms. See Robert Burchfield, "Dictionaries and Ethnic Sensibilities," in Leonard Michaels and Christopher Ricks, ed., *The State of the Language* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 1980), 15-23.

decisions, arbitrary distinctions and guesses, and that more than anything else making a dictionary involves carefully setting policy, and then years of hard and tedious work.

But the end result shows little if any sign of this. A dictionary shows on every line wide reading, comprehensive learning, skill in languages, subtlety of judgement. It seems to the reader to be the fundamental book, the book which contains all others, or at least the book from which all other books and potential books may be assembled. Potential 'creative writers' are always advised to equip themselves with, before all other literary resources, a good dictionary. All verities (and all lies), all fictions and speculations, all human thought and history are in it — all the reader needs to do is search it in the right order. It is the textbook of language and the Ur-text of all literature, and surely its maker must be a figure of special powers.

II. What Kind of a Book is Johnson's *Dictionary*?

That a dictionary is a species of book and therefore, and at least by a very liberal, somewhat eighteenth-century, definition, literature, suggests that dictionaries could be regarded as constituting a literary genre. Our not seeing this may result from the fact that English dictionaries — whether Oxford, Collins, Webster's or the Macquarie — are often regarded as interchangeable, as if they do not or should not differ from one another; so that there are not many dictionaries, but only one: The Dictionary. We think we know what a dictionary is: a book of words? All books are that. A book that gives the *meanings* of words. Not an arbitrary selection of words, but either the words of a particular language (perhaps with certain excluded categories: the technical, obsolete, 'slang,' and so on; and perhaps not). There are also dictionaries of the words within the one language of a particular discourse, such as economics, or geography, which we will consider shortly. As well as meanings, dictionaries frequently attempt to depict the pronunciation of the words, describe their origins (etymology) and, in scholarly dictionaries (such as Johnson's), their history. The history may be illustrated by quotations from texts in the language in which the word is employed. All these elements are, however, subordinate to the question of meaning, of which the definition is a kind of summary, and to which etymology and history are documentary footnotes.

Having no plot or argument, the dictionary (at least in hard copy) must nevertheless be organised, and the alphabetical order that we take for granted today — and

is in many ways a defining feature of the genre — took some time to develop. The earliest dictionary-like works employed principles of organization that were intended to be logical or cosmological, such as proceeding from first principles to minutiae, or grouping words together around themes, or rational, in terms of the place the word occupies in the language, structurally considered. Such methods appear to us if not exactly chaotic, at least, forbiddingly pedantic: it suggests the futility of scholarship, to construct, for the sake of some abstract concept of intellectual coherence, a complex scheme that is in practical terms impossible to manoeuvre around for everyday purposes. With a dictionary this seems particularly inappropriate. Such methods require that one already knows what the word means, or how it is used. Works such as thesauri, which gather words together in thematic groups, need also to be comprehensively indexed, and therefore require at least two moves on the part of the reader. For everyday purposes, dictionaries are mainly used as guides to meaning, and thus begin with the words as artefacts, irrespective of their meanings. They are organized therefore by the arbitrary and structurally illogical means of alphabetical order, and are their own indexes. As Green observes, "In the end it [alphabetical order] had one fundamental appeal: everyone knew it."¹⁰

The alphabetical format is a) usable, practical and everyday, and is (or seems to be), if not rational, certainly b) comprehensive and systematic. But however familiar we may be with them, alphabetical formats are not naturally occurring forms of discourse; they are cultural products, artificial and quintessentially literate. They are used as means of locating particular isolatable items of text, without regard to the structures of the discourses in which they naturally occur. We can ask, What is the natural form / originary text to which any one such alphabetical text refers? A dictionary, *per se*, refers to the entire language, and the task of making one involves considering the entire language — for convenience, by the medium of its literature — re-ordering its component parts, removing superfluities, and describing the core uses of each word.

It has been often enough repeated by scholars, in response to popular misconceptions, that Johnson's was not the first English dictionary. The first English book to call itself a 'dictionary' was *The Dictionarie of Sir Thomas Elyot, knight* (1538), which gives Latin words with English meanings. There had been English-to-English dictionaries of a kind since Robert Cawdrey's *A Table Alphabeticall, conteyning and teaching the true writing, and understanding of hard usuall English words, borrowed from the Hebrew,*

¹⁰ Green, *Chasing the Sun*, 57.

Greeke, Latine, or French. &c. With the interpretation thereof by plaine English words (1604). The early dictionaries were, like Cawdrey's, lists of "hard words" explained, but from the early eighteenth century they had attempted something like a comprehensive coverage of the language. What then constitutes the importance of Johnson's *Dictionary*? It was not in its own time the most comprehensive: with about 40,000 headwords, it is smaller than Nathan Bailey's third dictionary, his *Dictionarium Britannicum* (1730, 1736), which has 48,000 headwords in its first and 60,000 in its second editions. Nor is it a work of original scholarship: like all dictionary-makers (who, as Green points out, plunder each other's word-lists with a lack of shame unknown in any other branch of scholarship), Johnson began his work, at least from one direction, by some sort of reference to Bailey's 1736 edition.¹¹ Neither is the science of etymology his *Dictionary*'s strong point; although, as Robert DeMaria observes, his etymologies are "better than his predecessors,"¹² he relies on the *Etymologicon Anglicanum* (1743) of Francis Junius.

Some of this needs qualification. If Johnson had a smaller word-list than some of his predecessors and competitors, this is at least in part because, as DeMaria puts it, he "is better than most of his predecessors about excluding the mere 'dictionary words' (anglicized Latin words and obscure technical terms) that earlier lexicographers culled from other reference books or simply invented in order to swell their volumes."¹³ On the other hand, this does not make for a smaller book. Johnson's two folio volumes constituted the largest, heaviest and most expensive English dictionary until then produced. As any user of his *Dictionary* would have immediately noticed, the length of the work is a result of the far greater length of each individual entry. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, Johnson takes great care to discriminate and prioritise the different senses of each word, and does so with remarkable success.

Secondly, there was the other direction from which Johnson worked on the *Dictionary*. This was not perhaps an any more intellectually demanding or subtle a task than that of definition — at least of definitions as judicious as Johnson's — but it is what Johnson's *Dictionary* is known for. He read his way through a vast amount of English

¹¹ It seems, to Allen Reddick, doubtful that Johnson's procedure was as Sir John Hawkins described it, viz., to install his own additions and corrections into an interleaved copy of Bailey's book, although he concedes "Johnson probably did train one eye on Bailey's dictionary when he began composing his text." See Allen Reddick, *The Making of Johnson's 'Dictionary,' 1746-1773*, Rev. edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1996), 28-29, 39, 201 n.3, n.8 (source of preceding quote).

¹² DeMaria, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 114.

¹³ DeMaria, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 114.

literature, in order to extend his word-list, diversify his usages, and in particular to provide quotations that would authorise and illustrate his definitions. It is his conducting (and presenting the findings of) actual research that is regarded as Johnson's main contribution to lexicography. The use of "historical principles," which turns a list of words and their meanings into a work of scholarship, has been the model for serious lexicography ever since. Even this practice was based on continental models; as Green notes, "the lexicographers of Greek and Latin were offering them [that is, "proper citations"] two centuries earlier and, more recently, the Academicians of Italy and France had also done it."¹⁴ But Johnson was the first to do it in English.

In confining themselves to hard words, terms to be assimilated from frequently continental sources, and useful to scholars, the early short word-lists were less items for a mass audience than the huge later dictionaries which offer explanations of words which everyone knows. To explain what has only recently been isolated or discovered, and is the particular property of a special and learned class, is in many ways far simpler than to explore the older and more everyday parts of the language which have been hitherto taken for granted. Since the development of language, no one has needed for any practical purpose to explain or investigate words like "get" or "go," whereas entire cottage industries are based around endlessly re-explaining words like "context," "theme" or "perception." In this way, a dictionary like Johnson's bridges the gap between the scholarly and the everyday.

III. Dictionary order

Referring to the *Dictionary's* great ballast of quotations — to which we will return shortly — Lipking observes, "The *Dictionary* does contain a vast amount of learning, scattered arbitrarily throughout. Hence it poses a basic problem of information retrieval."¹⁵ What is the solution? Of course, one means of 'retrieving' information from the *Dictionary* is to read through it, like a novel; yet that is a path which would seem to resist almost everything about it, starting with its size. Of course, it *has* been read through, by

¹⁴ Green, *Chasing the Sun*, 221.

¹⁵ Lipking, *Samuel Johnson*, 126.

linguistic professionals, such as poets (Browning is the example most often given)¹⁶ and by scholars — professional Johnsonians.¹⁷ But the purpose of the scholarly reading through of the *Dictionary* is to wrest from it, by force, meanings which it does not intend to give — frequently meanings not to do with the English language, but to do with the biography of Samuel Johnson. Such meanings are there, certainly on the micro-scale. There are innumerable locations of such meanings. For instance, as John Wain observes, Johnson's dislike expressed in the *Dictionary*, "of (among other words) *belabour*, *cajole*, *dumbfound*, *gambler*, *ignoramus*, *pat*, *simpleton*, *touchy*, and *volunteer*, ... is less reliable as information about the history of the English language than as information about *him*. And this is another area of interest in the *Dictionary*. It brings its author so vividly before us."¹⁸ Indeed, the *Dictionary* is the obvious starting point for a discussion of his views on any subject that has a name. We learn, or seem to learn, something about him from every definition, from every author and passage chosen for citation. On the macro-scale, the value of such a thorough reading — save for a professional reader with a particular goal — may be doubted. In reading through narrative or discursive prose, we follow a given path through a text, the path itself being the most important thing made by the writer. What looks like this path — one word, sentence and paragraph after another — in a text like the *Dictionary*, is an accident of typesetting and alphabetical order. It is not something Johnson wrote, or meant anything by.

If the *Dictionary* is a "problem of information retrieval," other solutions, at the opposite end of a continuum from reading it through, are practices which threaten to make this sort of reading — indeed, perhaps all sorts of reading — irrelevant. The entire text of the *Dictionary* can be — and now, of course, has been — digitally encoded as electronically searchable data, amongst which readers (or their successors) can endlessly sieve, like archaeologists, for the tiniest conceivable literary artefacts. There are two editions of the *Dictionary* on CD-ROM, one containing the text of both the First and (revised) Fourth editions. These tools, which modern scholars have at their command, threaten to make reading superfluous — or at least, superfluous for any purpose other than literary pleasure.

¹⁶ W.K. Wimsatt, *Philosophic Words: A Study of Style and Meaning in the 'Rambler' and 'Dictionary' of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1948), 24. He cites Mrs. Sutherland Orr, *The Life and Letters of Robert Browning* (1891), 53.

¹⁷ DeMaria has done so (*Life of Samuel Johnson*, 127).

¹⁸ John Wain, *Samuel Johnson*, 2nd edn. (London: Macmillan, 1980), 186.

Both of these possible "solutions" are violent and disruptive. Whatever such 'users' of the text read (or 'access'), it is not Johnson's *Dictionary*, but merely the ingredients out of which it is made. It is altogether too subtle to see the *Dictionary* as a "problem of information retrieval," when it is rather itself the *solution* to such problems. It is the natural desire of scholarly readers of Johnson's *Dictionary* (and perhaps it now has no other than scholarly readers) to want to schematise the work: and we know how Johnson felt about *schemes*. The introduction of that term warns all readers of Johnson that we are approaching a point where we will meet the resistance of one of his own fundamental intellectual impulses. This is not to say that the *Dictionary* is impervious to schematisation, nor that to do so is necessarily unprofitable. As we have seen, it is commonplace to use it as a source of data about the opinions of Samuel Johnson, and Robert DeMaria has shown how it can be read as something like an encyclopedic survey of the world of learning.¹⁹ But the *Dictionary* is not, as a whole work, a *scheme* of knowledge or morality — or of anything, other than information about the history and use of English words. Our points of access to the learning which it necessarily (but also coincidentally) contains are not arbitrary, but in accord with the needs of the everyday.

Although alphabetical order appears to be a systematic and scientific method of arrangement, it is only so with regard to words as mere artefacts. It is an intellectually arbitrary device by which to store information, simply because there is no connection between the letter with which any particular word begins and its meaning; likewise, the order of the letters of the alphabet lacks any obvious meaning. For a number of purposes, when we are wishing to subvert meaning, it is agreeably chaotic. When Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes assembled their anthology of poems, *The Rattle Bag*, they "decided to arrange the material in alphabetical order according to titles or first lines rather than thematically or chronologically or according to author." They elaborate the implications of this choice as follows,

To have arranged it according to author would have robbed the order of the poems of an unexpectedness which we think it now possesses.... To have done it thematically would have made it feel too much like a textbook. To have done it chronologically would have left whole centuries unrepresented and made the thing look like a botched historical survey.²⁰

¹⁹ Robert DeMaria, *Johnson's Dictionary and the Language of Learning* (Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina P., 1986).

²⁰ Introduction, *The Rattle Bag*, ed. Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 19.

Of course, Johnson did not realistically have any such choice in organising the *Dictionary*. Nevertheless, the conventions of the genre do have effects on the readers. We all learn the alphabet and it is (still, so far as I know) learned, by everyone literate in a language using the Latin alphabet, in the same conventional, historical order. An alphabetically organised book addresses its readers at the most basic level of literacy.

In fact, the *order* of the alphabet predates all the modern languages that use it. If we examine the history of the various alphabets, we find that over matters of chronological priority there is disagreement among the experts. But there appears to be no disputing the antiquity and the (to me, surprising) ubiquity of alphabetical order. What some claim is the earliest known alphabetic script is the Ugaritic cuneiform, which is recorded on hundreds of tablets excavated since 1929 at the ancient sea-port of Ugarit, modern-day Ras Shamra, in Syria. It was developed in the fourteenth century B.C., to replace the hundreds of non-alphabetic signs of Akkadian cuneiform. Among the documents which record this language are a number of *abecedaries*, formulations which "list the signs in the cuneiform script in a fixed order that resembles the modern order we have inherited nearly 3500 years later."²¹ The script itself, "it is claimed[,] is typologically but not chronologically earlier than the Phoenician-Hebrew alphabet; the Phoenician letters may have appeared by the eighteenth century B.C.E."²² It is from the alphabet of the Phoenicians that our Latin alphabet descends, by way of the Greek. The Phoenician and Ugaritic alphabetic scripts have nothing in common, apart from the striking similarities of order, which Ed Metzler sums up as follows: "The alphabetical order of the Latin ABC, ... has 18 out of 22 letters in common with the sequence of letters in the ancient Hebrew alphabet. The Greek alphabet ... shares 19 out of 22 letters with the ancient Hebrew alphabet. All of its 22 letters occur in the same order in the Ugaritic alphabet."²³

Metzler's project is to show all other alphabets as originating in the ancient Hebrew. But whatever the possibly mystical and certainly remote origins of alphabets may be, alphabets have orders so as to provide a place in oral memory for the sounds of written language, and so that the system of written letters may be learnt and transmitted orally: that is to say, so that children and others learning to write can recite their letters. Whether or not they are traceable to a common alphabetic ancestor, the common order of the

²¹ Andrew Robinson, *The Story of Writing* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 163.

²² Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, 85.

²³ Ed Metzler, *Discovering the Two-Dimensional Structure of the Alphabetical Order* (Herborn, Germany: Baalschem Press, 1987), 7-8.

alphabets can be considered to be the quintessentially written artefact — on which all writing depends — and which exists in order to enter the oral memory. It is the most fundamental of literary quotations. There is no written artefact that is more ancient, or that is known and able to be recited exactly by more people, in a variety of languages, than the traditionally ordered alphabet.

It was not always known as well as it is now, because it is the one quotation that is inextricably implicated in the growth of literacy. Cawdrey, the pioneer author of English-to-English dictionaries, found it necessary to instruct his readers that, "If thou be desirous (gentle Reader) rightly and readily to understand, and to profit by this Table, and such like, then thou must learne the Alphabet, to wit, the order of the Letters as they stand, perfectly without booke, and where every letter standeth."²⁴ Knowing one's letters frees one to sound the letters of any book, but knowing, exactly and by heart, "the order of the letters" frees us to read the dictionary, and thus read for meaning. If we know alphabetical order "without booke," literary knowledge has begun to become for us oral knowledge, something we remember, something — as we now say — we *own*. Johnson said of the practice of literary quotation, "it is a good thing; there is a *community of mind* in it."²⁵

By aligning his major literary work with the oldest and most familiar literary quotation imaginable, he makes a bid for the mind of the largest possible community. In asserting this, I do not wish to pretend that the alphabet is in any way a surprising organisational principle for an eighteenth-century English dictionary. But in writing an *alphabetical book*, Johnson is submitting his literary powers, and his major bid thus far for literary reputation, to a number of deep traditions of knowledge and culture. One of those traditions is two hundred years of writing in English, and the other is the everyday knowledge of anyone who is literate in the meanest possible sense. Of both he exercises mastery, so that when the *Dictionary* seems to be being used, the user himself is immediately in its thrall.

²⁴ Robert Cawdrey, *A Table Alphabeticall* (London, 1604), A4^v.

²⁵ *Life* IV, 102 (my emphasis). 8 May 1781.

IV. Subversions of Dictionary-Form

As well as *the* dictionary, the word-by-word account of a given language, we are accustomed also to more limited dictionaries, in the sense of alphabetically-organised lists of words, such as dictionaries of Economics, or Linguistics, or Contemporary Literary Theory. In Johnson's day (as we will see when we examine Johnson's literary projects),²⁶ there were Geographical and Medical dictionaries, dictionaries of Mythology and of the Bible. As well, there were the *Sea Dictionary*, *Builder's Dictionary* and *Farrier's Dictionary*, which are cited among the authorities in his own *Dictionary*. Alphabetical organisation has indeed come to be seen as characteristic (perhaps the defining characteristic) of the dictionary genre. We may ask what are the original texts or discourses such artefacts purport to define? They relate not to languages, but to the vocabulary of particular specialised conversations. One could make such a book as a dictionary of Economics, or a dictionary of Twentieth-Century History, by deconstituting a comprehensive textbook, dividing it into short passages with distinct headings, and rearranging the passages alphabetically. Or we could picture such a book as being the version of the originary text that is summarised in an index. These sorts of texts offer a convenient paths into specialised fields of study, paths that do not involve the thorough reading of a systematic textbook, but which offer easily accessible information on particular topics as required.

More interesting than this reasonably conventional and unimaginative sort of text is the type of book exemplified by Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764), which, not insignificantly, dates from the age of Johnson's *Dictionary* and, on the Continent, of Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (1751). It is a series of essays, tales and dialogues: it may be called 'philosophical' in the specialised sense in which Voltaire was a *philosophe* or freethinker, and a 'dictionary' in the sense that its contents are given convenient — although sometimes deliberately misleading — headings, by which they are arranged alphabetically. Voltaire's modern editor and translator Theodore Besterman says that this arrangement is "little more than a literary *trompe l'œil*,"²⁷ but it has greater significance. The pieces in the *Dictionnaire philosophique* are propagandistic and controversial, and some of them had been originally published separately as pamphlets. Voltaire had observed of the *Encyclopédie* (to which he had been a contributor) that

²⁶ See the Appendix, 343, 359, 358.

²⁷ Theodore Besterman, "Introduction," Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 5.

"Twenty folio volumes will never make a revolution. It is the little portable volumes of thirty *sous* that are to be feared."²⁸ The first version of his dictionary had been entitled *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif* (1764), and its A to Z arrangement can be regarded, with size, price and portability, as a further effort on Voltaire's part to provide non-scholarly readers with greater ease of access to his critical programme.

We might call works of this type *rhetorical dictionaries*. Geoffrey Hughes notes that "awareness that a dictionary has an authoritative format and status has led to works being put out under the title of 'dictionary' which turn out to be glossaries with a clear ideological or 'consciousness-raising' content."²⁹ However, the history of such works is almost coterminous with that of straight dictionaries. It may be imagined that there could hardly be a sufficient number of such works to constitute a genre, but there are quite a few rhetorical dictionaries, in addition to Voltaire's, that are also very famous works. Gustave Flaubert's *Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues* (1881) began life as a supplement to his last novel, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. The "accepted ideas" which Flaubert mocks are thoughtless clichés and stock responses. His means of mockery is extremely restrained; he simply lists the subjects in order and gives the cliché usually associated with each; for example, "EXCEPTION. Say it proves the rule, but don't venture to explain how."³⁰ The irony is clear enough, one hopes. The form makes its appearance in the twentieth century with *The Devil's Dictionary* (1906, enl. 1967), by American writer, Ambrose Bierce. Like the previous two, Bierce's work did not start life as a book in its own right, but a series of newspaper columns; dictionaries are not written, but collected. Like Voltaire, Bierce often attributes items in his entries to bogus authorities, although the names always makes the bogusness obvious. (Voltaire claimed, for example, that one section was taken from the *Encyclopédie*, and that another had been "Translated into Latin by father Fouquet former ex-Jesuit. The manuscript is in the Vatican library no. 42759."³¹ Bierce added names such as "Aramis Loto Frope" and "Barel Dort," which are meant to sound scholarly and ridiculous, to the verses he purported to quote.³²) All three of these works are works of

²⁸ Voltaire (letter of 5 April 1762), quoted by Besterman, "Introduction," 7.

²⁹ Geoffrey Hughes, *Words in Time: A Social History of the English Vocabulary* (Oxford: Blackwood, 1988), 243-44.

³⁰ Flaubert, *The Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*, trans. Jacques Barzun (New York: New Directions, 1968), 36.

³¹ Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, 78.

³² Ambrose Bierce, *The Enlarged Devil's Dictionary*, ed. Ernest Jerome Hopkins (1967; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 130, 196.

satire or controversy, which is the type of humour that appeals to intellectuals who keep these old books in print.

Examples of the form continue to appear. Recently we have seen Henry Beard and Christopher Cerf, *The Official Politically Correct Dictionary & Handbook* (1992),³³ and Alex Buzo, *A Dictionary of the Almost Obvious* (1998).³⁴ The rhetorical dictionary is a particularly attractive medium for writers who wish to be seen to undermine (supposed) orthodoxies of some kind or other, because a text which is transparently "disguised" as a dictionary automatically appears to be subversive. Voltaire and Bierce both had an animus against the conventional formal religions of their societies; Flaubert was irritated by the thoughtless and habitual parroting of clichés by the bourgeois, as if they were real opinions; Beard and Cerf are offended by the linguistic obfuscation imposed by the fashionable package of predominantly left-wing linguistic and social orthodoxies of recent times, described (ironically, by its enemies) as 'Political Correctness.' Buzo's book has the least focused serious targets, being a dictionary of cant, linguistic gags and gaffes, and of various words as pronounced or mispronounced in different sub-species of Australasian English.

Rhetorical dictionaries employ the A to Z dictionary form as a structure on which to hang a series of short, discontinuous statements — from aphorisms to essays — that offer explanations of a variety of phenomena, usually from a particular point-of-view. The sense of a wide-ranging survey, the alphabetical structure, and the shortness of the items all function to make the work superficially like a traditional dictionary. They are browsable, and argue their larger ideological purposes by the accumulation of telling and amusing reflections and observations. It is helpful to consider Nicholson Baker's offhand distinction between reading, consulting, and "deep browsing" (which he coined in the course of reviewing a dictionary).³⁵ The dictionary form invites such deep browsing, and rhetorical dictionaries aim to give their readers similar reading pleasure to that received by the linguistically curious in reading a real dictionary. But such works also play against the dictionary's order and comprehensiveness, firstly, by being idiosyncratically selective in their coverage. Secondly, rhetorical dictionaries do not aim for objectivity in their mock-definitions or essays, but deliberately set out to critique conventional opinion, and provide

³³ (New York: Villard Books, 1992).

³⁴ (Melbourne: Text Publ., 1998).

³⁵ Nicholson Baker, "Leading with the Grumper" [review of J.E. Lighter (ed.), *Historical Dictionary of American Slang*], *The Size of Thoughts: Essays and Other Lumber* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 97.

an oppositional perspective on the world. Yet the entries are often written *as if* they are objective, and admit no argument or exceptions (e.g., from Bierce, "Gambler, n. A man"³⁶). Voltaire's definitions often begin with sober rational analysis of, for instance, religious names and terms — a critical strategy that functions to diminish their religious aura. Because every such work is implicitly a *parody* of the whole notion of *the* dictionary, rhetorical dictionaries are frequently humorous, even if they are ideologically serious.

And of course the form also can be used for plainly humorous purposes. Douglas Adams and John Lloyd collaborated on *The Meaning [and The Deeper Meaning] of Liff* (1983, 1990), in which odd place-names — words with an under-abundance of meaning — are matched up with everyday phenomena that are hitherto unnamed.

A last sub-category of the rhetorical dictionary is the use of the structure for a serious didactic purpose, similar to the sort of straight 'dictionary of' work I described at the start of this section, but consciously veering toward the more light-hearted use, by a chatty, essayistic tone, and an unconventional selection of subjects. Some examples are:

W.V. Quine, *Quiddities: An Intermittently Philosophical Dictionary* (1987)

Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary* (1988)

Joanne Finkelstein, *Slaves of Chic: An A-Z of Consumer Pleasures* (1994)

John Ralston Saul, *The Doubter's Companion: A Dictionary of Aggressive Common Sense* (1995)

These are, respectively, books of philosophy, Christian spiritual reflection, cultural studies, and economics; or at least, they are mainly about those subjects. But Quine has entries for Euphemism and Gambling, as well as Fermat's Last Theorem and Predicate Logic; Saul, for Dandruff and Big Mac as well as Privatisation and International Money Markets; Buechner, for Jogging as well as Justice. By using the A to Z strategy, these writers intend, presumably, to engage with a less academic or specialist public than would be prepared to read a more conventional and systematic thesis, and to inspire in their readers a sense of the validity of the perspective or discipline from which all the entries are written.

³⁶ Bierce, *The Enlarged Devil's Dictionary*, 140.

We can see from these examples that the dictionary form is an ideal ideological tool. Ordinary dictionaries of the language are of course always battlegrounds for competing visions of language and society, Johnson's as much as any. John Ralston Saul, who admires Johnson and quotes from his *Dictionary*, sees his own dictionary, *The Doubter's Companion*, as a "small guerrilla weapon."³⁷ Anyone who has heard Saul speak in public will perceive that the dictionary format gives him the ability to write about a seemingly random collection of his preoccupations, without the necessity of structuring them into a coherent argument or thesis or system. We might wonder how 'coherent' discursive texts — such as Saul's own *The Unconscious Civilization* — actually are, and whether the sense of logical and systematic pursuit of core arguments is not in fact the reader's response to a particular rhetoric. No doubt a great deal of labour must be expended in order to provide plausible rhetorical linkages between thematically related passages of prose. Furthermore, a similar effort is demanded by such texts of the reader, who feels as if they should be following the argument as they would a narrative, by imaginatively re-creating something like a chronological sequence, and keeping that sequence mentally present whilst continuing to read. The reader is to imagine this sequence as being present in the mind of the author from the beginning, as a tale to be told or a thesis to be expounded, and the discourse being its unfolding and manifestation.

But in fact, writers often speak of their tales and their arguments as only in fact taking shape as their fictions and dictions are articulated.³⁸ It is an unspoken fear, or perhaps a tantalizing suspicion, that our carefully-wrought literary artefacts are not as tight, seamless and logically complete and unassailable as the form or rhetoric of the thesis pretends. The links between one isolatable idea and another are, it is suggested, rather arbitrary and fortuitous, and any connection can be made to appear plausible.

V. Johnson's Subjects

From such a characteristically postmodern perspective we may wish to understand Johnson's profound attraction to discontinuous literary forms, and the small memorable (and hence portable) textual artefacts that compose them. In this light, we will more

³⁷ From an inscription by Saul, 18 March 1997, in my own copy of *The Doubter's Companion*.

³⁸ At a seminar for post-graduates on the current research of academics, Dr. Andrew Milner spoke of his being advised many years before — by a senior colleague, with his tongue only just in his cheek — to negotiate the difficult transition from research to thesis-writing, by throwing his card file in the air, and writing through the subjects in the order in which the cards are gathered up.

closely consider the importance to him of anecdotes and aphorisms in the next chapter. But we would not be going far wrong to regard the *Dictionary of the English Language* as, partly, a rhetorical use of the dictionary form.

Whilst his definitions are as accurate as he could manage, Johnson had for his selection of quotations three aims which are no part of the dictionary-maker's task, as it is now understood. He wanted his quotations to exemplify the best English style, but also to be more broadly informative, and to support sound religion and morality. Two of these aims are made clear in the Preface, although subject to varying degrees of qualification. He is ambiguous about style, noting with a tone of apology that "Some of the examples have been taken from writers who were never mentioned as masters of elegance, or models of stile;" — it is in any case only "some of the examples" — and he continues, "but words must be sought where they are used,"³⁹ which might be the motto of the most determinedly descriptive lexicographer. With regard to the more general utility of his quotations, he says that in planning the *Dictionary*, "I was desirous that every quotation should be useful to some other end than the illustration of a word," but that he had to contract his scheme for fear "that the bulk of my volumes would fright away the student."⁴⁰ The point at which this became apparent, at which "he found that he had marked and gathered ... a wealth of language that could not be accommodated," was, according to Reddick, "probably late 1749 or early 1750."⁴¹ (It can be seen in the *Dictionary*, part-way through the entries under C.) Despite these qualifications — the use of the occasional second-rate writer, and having "the vexation of expunging"⁴² some of his early work — much of the original plan survives in the *Dictionary* as we have it.

And this is partly the case also because, of course, no compromise at all was required for what I have called his third ambition. As Boswell puts it, "he has quoted no authour whose writings had a tendency to hurt sound religion and morality."⁴³ This is not an objective mentioned by Johnson in the Preface to the *Dictionary*, but he occasionally observed in conversation that this had indeed been his practice. Boswell's notice of the

³⁹ Preface, *Dictionary*, B2^v (para. 59).

⁴⁰ Preface, *Dictionary*, B2^v (para. 57).

⁴¹ Reddick, *The Making of Johnson's Dictionary*, 43.

⁴² Preface, *Dictionary*, B2^v (para. 57).

⁴³ *Life* 1, 189. 1748.

practice looks very much as if it were derived from Hester Thrale's *Anecdotes*, in which she writes,

a higher principle ... made him reject every authority for a word in his dictionary that could only be gleaned from writers dangerous to religion or morality — 'I would not (said he) send people to look for words in a book, that by such a casual seizure of the mind might chance to mislead it for ever.'⁴⁴

Certainly, Boswell seems neither very well-informed about the *Dictionary* nor particularly curious about it. As Allen Reddick points out, the account he gives of Johnson's method of composing the *Dictionary* is both vague and derivative.⁴⁵ And he almost never actually quotes from the work in a way that suggests any independent reading of it.⁴⁶ However, he does quote a substantial independent testimony to Johnson's moral scheme, a letter from Dr. Adams, who, in remarking on Johnson's surprisingly tender orthodoxy, says that he excluded Dr. Samuel Clarke (who was otherwise something of a favourite writer with him on religious subjects) from the *Dictionary*, because of his unorthodox views on the Trinity.⁴⁷ And one of Johnson's earliest biographers, Thomas Tyers, reports Johnson saying, "I might have quoted *Hobbes* as an authority on language ... but I scorned, sir, to quote him at all; because I did not like his principles."⁴⁸

This effort is characterised by Reddick as a "negative criterion,"⁴⁹ as if it were a principle purely of exclusion. However, we must also consider with this what material Johnson *includes*, his selection of what writers, and what sorts of material from those writers. The reader (that is, the 'deep browser') of the *Dictionary* quickly becomes aware

⁴⁴ Thrale, *Anecdotes*. *Johns. Misc.* 1, 272.

⁴⁵ Reddick, *The Making of Johnson's Dictionary*, 28.

⁴⁶ By my reckoning, Boswell mentions thirteen particular entries in the *Dictionary* (*alias*, *club*, *excise*, *grubstreet*, *leeward* and *windward*, *lexicographer*, *network*, *oats*, *pastern*, *pension*, *Tory* and *Whig*). It will be seen that, with the sole exception of *alias*, these fall into two categories: examples of amusing or controversial definitions, and those of some biographical interest. (There are, of course, many more definitions mentioned by Hill and Powell in the editorial notes to the *Life* and the *Tour*. They may all be located through the Index, entered under the separate words.)

⁴⁷ *Life* IV, 416 n.2. December 1784.

⁴⁸ For this story, see the version of Tyers's "Biographical Sketch" which he revised and published as a pamphlet (1785); the text is given in O M Brack, Jr. and Robert E. Kelley, eds., *The Early Biographies of Samuel Johnson* (Iowa City: U. of Iowa P., 1974), see p. 82.

⁴⁹ Reddick, *The Making of Johnson's Dictionary*, 34.

that the writers whom Johnson quotes fall easily into a number of obvious categories, which might be summarised as follows:

- 1) Not at all surprising in presence or frequency are Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser, Dryden, Addison, Pope and Swift, the great poetic writers of the English tradition, as then constructed.
- 2) Equally unsurprising are writers on specialist subjects, such as medicine (Arbutnot), the law (Cowel), physicks (Boyle), chymistry ("Ray on the Creation") and innumerable writers on theology, who are used for terms connected with their own subjects.
- 3) There is the kind of writer who writes in order to define, distinguish and explain, and whose work is therefore particularly useful for a dictionary-maker, such as John Locke and Francis Bacon, both of whom appear with great frequency. Overlapping to some extent with these are,
- 4) Writers whose works are large, miscellaneous, or both, such as Bacon (Chambers calls him a "polyhistor"⁵⁰), or Sir Thomas Browne, and in whose writings therefore some interesting remark may be found on almost any topic, but especially some rather obscure ones.

But beyond these categories, the modern reader will particularly note the relative frequency with which Johnson has quoted a clutch of lesser known writers of whom he approves, such as Isaac Watts, Robert South or Richard Hooker. Now, a work like the *Dictionary* is a happy hunting-ground for people inclined to statistical analysis, but even partial surveys can reveal interesting patterns; indeed, certain trends throughout the work would be overlooked in a complete survey. In a survey of one hundred pages of the 1369-page folio *Dictionary*,⁵¹ I found the prose writers cited with the following frequency: Bacon (357), Locke (262), Hooker (142), South (137), Browne (89), Watts (58).⁵² In

⁵⁰ Quoted in DeMaria, *Johnson's Dictionary*, 5.

⁵¹ The one hundred pages were composed of four twenty-five page samples, from throughout the *Dictionary*, i.e., 125-49, 650-74, 976-1000, 1326-50. I used for this exercise Robertson's stereotype from the folio (London, 1828; Fleeman 55.4D/32), which as Fleeman notes is "a reliable version of the text of the 4th folio of 1773."

⁵² My figures, extrapolated to the entire work, appear to conform with those of other investigators: "There are some 3,241 acknowledged citations of Locke in the *Dictionary*" (James McLaverty, "From Definition to Explanation: Locke's Influence on Johnson's Dictionary," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47:3 (July-September, 1986), 384). "Johnson quotes South some two thousand times in the *Dictionary*" (Robert DeMaria, *Johnson's Dictionary*, 155). According to W.K. Wimsatt, using the work of Lewis M. Freed, in the first volume alone, Bacon appears a total of 2,483 times, which far surpasses other prose writers: Locke (1,674), Hooker (1,216), South (1,092), and Browne (1,070). See Wimsatt, *Philosophic Words*, 34 n.17. Some confusion has arisen, perhaps because Wimsatt has listed the writers by categories and has (understandably) included Bacon under both literary prose and philosophical prose. (Pat Rogers seems to have

other words, Hooker and South both appear, on average, almost three times in any two pages, and Watts at least every other page. Hooker we may wish to fit into the third or fourth of the above categories. He is a fine prose stylist, whose *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* is important for Anglican theology, and to some extent for political philosophy. But he is not on any estimate as diffuse or widely influential a writer as Locke or Bacon; and he is a polemicist, writing in defence of Anglican doctrine, orders and practice. Robert South, a prominent High-church Tory preacher, whose six volumes of *Sermons* (1698) continued to be reprinted for the next 150 years, is even more unexpected a choice for such prominence. But both of these writers were for Johnson personally very nourishing reading. Certainly, Hooker — the more magisterial of the two writers — is cited where we might expect him to have something to say on a particular subject — say, *faith*, *polity*, *church*, or *charity* in its theological sense, for all of which he is the first authority given.

But as Johnson says, "words must be sought where they are used," and he could as well find ordinary English words used in Hooker and South as anywhere else. Hooker is cited on the subject of such ordinary words as, for example, *conceit*, *concern*, *confidence*, *conflict*, *direction*, *directly*, *hereby*, *hinderance*, *hold*. South is cited on such words as *annoyance*, *another*, *arrest*, *artifice*, *back*, *bite*, *heretofore*, *high*, *hint*, *hit*, *hoist*. Johnson does not rely on them for definitive passages, in which the writer addresses himself to the subject of the word in question. What we notice in reading the *Dictionary* are the many citations of Hooker and South for instances of typical and more-or-less accurate uses of ordinary words, but for which the passages do not demonstrate the meaning. Johnson has in the Preface explained that some of his quotations "serve no other purpose than that of proving the bare existence of words," and on those grounds no one can object to any quotations at all, from Hooker, South, or anyone else. But when he says that, as a result of having to curtail the exuberance of his original collection, some quotations became "clusters of words, in which scarcely any meaning is retained,"⁵³ he is exaggerating. Meaning is certainly retained.

However, the particular meanings retained in many of these passages will not be anything the reader might have expected. For instance, the reader who consults the *Dictionary* for *both*, finds Richard Hooker, writing about the historical continuity of the Divine revelation, and the importance of the preaching ministry:

read these statistics very carelessly: he asserts that Bacon "was cited more than any other prose writer, with the exception of Locke," and that Locke is cited "well over 1,500 times." *Samuel Johnson Encyclopedia*, 21, 224.)

⁵³ Preface, *Dictionary*, B2^v (para. 57).

Moses and the prophets, Christ and his apostles, were in their times all preachers of God's truth; some by word, some by writing; some by *both*.

Under *bless* [3], less surprisingly, Hooker again, with a serious affirmation:

Unto us there is one only guide of all agents natural, and he both the creator and worker of all in all, alone to be *blessed*, adored, and honoured by all for ever.

At *blind* [4], a rather tart warning to chapel worshippers:

To grievous and scandalous inconveniencies they make themselves subject, with whom any *blind* or secret corner is judged a fit house of common prayer.

Under *but* [7], a concise and emphatic statement of the argument from design:

It cannot be *but* nature hath some director, of infinite power, to guide her in all her ways.

And at *whereunto* [1], an innocent enough word, the unsuspecting reader receives a precise (and very Anglican) summary of the sources of doctrinal authority:

What scripture doth plainly deliver, to that the first place both of credit and obedience is due; the next *whereunto* is whatsoever any man can necessarily conclude by force of reason: after these, the voice of the church succeedeth.

Robert South's contributions are, as we ought to expect, of a different character to Hooker's: not doctrinal, but preacherly. At *debauchee*, we might expect to find a preacher, and we do:

Could we but prevail with the greatest *debauchees* amongst us to change their lives, we should find it no very hard matter to change their judgments.

This might not explain the word, but it gives very Johnsonian advice about how the minds of most people are in subjection to their habits. But it is probably best that moral advice should lurk in unlikely places, and the great majority of South's exhortations crop up in

Dictionary entries where the reader would have no ground for expecting them. Under *big* [6], there is this Ozymandias-like reminder of the limitations of human institutions:

Of governments that once made such a noise, and looked so *big* in the eyes of mankind, as being founded upon the deepest counsels, and the strongest force; nothing remains of them but a name.

At *buy* [3], we receive this heartfelt exclamation about the pull of the things of the world:

What pitiful things are power, rhetorick, or riches, when they would terrify, dissuade, or *buy* off conscience?

At the uncertain conjunction *whether*, we are given this assurance:

Whether by health or sickness, life or death, mercy is still contriving and carrying on the spiritual good of all who love God.

At *whisper*, there is this advice:

Strictly observe the first hints and *whispers* of good and evil that pass in the heart, and this will keep conscience quick and vigilant.

It is easy enough to generalise about the *Dictionary* without actually quoting from it, because it is such an emblematic kind of text, because of the epic story of its making, and because it is such a vivid reality. But having started actually to quote from it, the question is where to stop. Every entry is illuminating in itself, and seems furthermore to reveal something about the workings of Johnson's mind. And as one reads on, patterns seems to emerge on every page. What, for instance, are we to make of the fact that, as well as *whereunto*, Richard Hooker is also quoted under *where*, *whereabout*, *whereas*, *whereat*, *whereby*, *wherefore*, *whereof*, *whereon* and *wherewithal*? It certainly tells us something about the nature of his style of prose. At a different level of significance, what might we conclude from the presence of two quotations from Hooker, which we find in *B*, a column apart? (The "they" in both are the English Puritans.)

Sermons read they abhor in the church; but [that is, except] sermons *without book* [5], sermons which spend their life in their birth, and may have public audience but once.

It shall not *boot* [1] them, who derogate from [ministers] reading [their sermons, that is, rather than preaching *ex tempore*], to excuse it, when they see no other remedy; as if their intent were only to deny, that aliens and strangers from the family of God are won, or that belief doth use to be wrought at the first in them, without sermons.

These sentences are taken from within pages of each other in *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*.⁵⁴ For that reason, they seem to offer us some insight into Johnson's work routine while reading for the *Dictionary*. Both quotations address the same subject; in fact, if they are read in the context of the *Dictionary*, it would be almost necessary to have read the first of them in order to understand the second. Does Johnson expect that the reader will at least sometimes proceed in such a manner? And the issue explored in both of them is the relationship between reading, writing and the message of salvation, which seems in many ways central to the *Dictionary*.

These impressions are considerably strengthened by Allen Reddick's account of Johnson's revision of the *Dictionary* for the Fourth edition of 1773. This major work involved most importantly "the wholesale addition of thousands of new quotations affecting many entries." In particular, Reddick shows that Johnson added to the Fourth edition a great many quotations from the Bible and Milton, as well as from a number of minor Anglican controversialists. In responding, in the Preface to the revised edition of his book, to critics who doubted what this data amounted to, Reddick says, "my claim would be that we can see mapped in the text the fragmentary evidence of an *attempt* which was for the most part diffused and defeated by the nature of the text itself."⁵⁵ I think Reddick concedes too much. Certainly, any user's practical experience of the *Dictionary* would be very different from that of the scholarly reader, to whom historical, textual and statistical analysis will inevitably yield things, significant and insignificant, forever beyond discovering by casual consultation. Any particular polemical intentions that the book might empirically manifest will be dissipated to invisibility by the *Dictionary*'s structure

⁵⁴ Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity*, ed. Morris, II, 77 (Bk. V, XXI.2), and II, 84 (Bk. V, XXII.4).

⁵⁵ Reddick, *The Making of Johnson's Dictionary*, 91, xiv.

and purpose. Johnson surely knows this — hence, my characterisation of this effort as a private game, albeit a serious game. But for it to be otherwise would have entirely defeated his purposes. For the extra-linguistic tendencies of his chosen authorities to become visible would be for the book to no longer be a dictionary. What we should rather understand Johnson as doing through the rhetoric of his *Dictionary* is to naturalise a number of significant and undervalued discourses, to establish certain texts and subjects as centrally important sources and destinations of everyday public language.

The endless unexpectedness or surprisingness of the *Dictionary* is a characteristic that Johnson highly valued in other sorts of text. The *Dictionary* represents a style of text which more than any other is able almost endlessly to excite and gratify curiosity or interest. In *Rambler* 158, Johnson notes that "to raise expectation, and suspend it; something ... must be discovered, and something concealed."⁵⁶ This is an essential characteristic of Johnson's *Dictionary*, and the reason for a certain ambiguity of feeling about its availability on CD-ROM. One must share Reddick's fear that this mode of access could "jeopardise our crucial understanding of the nature of the *Dictionary* as a book."⁵⁷ What is in narrative texts the quality of suspense, the allure of "the progress of the fable," operated powerfully on Johnson, so that, for instance, he was attracted to romances of quite an unsophisticated nature.⁵⁸ In non-narrative and non-discursive texts, this interest (or need) becomes a desire for variety. Johnson's hidden agenda in the *Dictionary*, what I have called his third ambition, is to satisfy and exploit this desire, but to do so by assembling a book that is a sort of unsystematic moral encyclopedia — while still being an entirely serious and conscientious English dictionary.

VI. The *Dictionary* as a Literary Anthology

So Johnson's *Dictionary* is undoubtedly a serious enterprise, although not an enterprise which its author sees as radically undermined by its few but famous jokes and eccentricities. Its seriousness is not, as we have seen, only linguistic seriousness (if indeed such a notion would make any sense to Johnson). *Moral* seriousness is in his view what

⁵⁶ *Rambler* 158; v, 80.

⁵⁷ Reddick, *The Making of Johnson's Dictionary*, xvii.

⁵⁸ We will consider this further in Ch. 5, 166-67. See also the Appendix, in connection with his projected work on the paucity of "REAL FICTION," 381.

matters most, and he invests relatively little value in literature of whatever kind, unless animated by such a purpose. By his choice of quotations, Johnson makes the *Dictionary* something like a moral encyclopedia. Such a purpose is not exactly playful, but is not the purpose for which a dictionary is consulted. That Johnson did not mention this personal agenda in his writing about the *Dictionary*, but would reveal it to his intimates in conversation, suggests that it was something like a private game. In giving seven years of his life to processing a huge mass of text, he rejoices in being able to do so conscientiously, to fulfil his scholarly goal and his contract, and to nevertheless achieve some broader, more solid, and more personal aims. He recognises the rightful demands of genre, and submits to them, but also makes the genre work for him. (Indeed, a strong case might be argued, that whenever Johnson uses *any* literary form, he does so at least partially in order to undermine it: *Rasselas* undermines romances, and his two great poems are both 'imitations.')

Although the quotations may serve their illustrative function, to illuminate the history of words and to authorise Johnson's definitions, each quotation has, in its original context, other functions which are far from eliminated by having been transplanted into Johnson's text. As we have just seen, a considerable proportion of the quotations, from theological and homiletic sources, are selected precisely because of the moral and religious instruction they offer. That they continue in the *Dictionary* to offer such instruction is no accident. I wish to emphasise that, in selecting Hooker and South as authorities in such abundance, and deliberately exploiting this overflow of meaning, Johnson is availing himself of a potential inherent in *all* quotation. The cultural practice of quotation enables a speaker or writer to appropriate the names and words of others, whilst to some undefined extent maintaining an essential distance between himself and their meaning.⁵⁹ When a quotation is made, its meaning is necessarily present, but the ownership of that meaning is attributed to another (usually) by name, and the limits of the quotation — the quotation marks — emphasise that the meaning is inseparable from the owners' language. He who quotes it may seem merely to inform us, without commitment and without emphasis, "This person made this statement."

A quotation comes into a theoretical discourse as something from outside, its meaning and value to be negotiated with between the quoting writer, and the reader. It is offered to the reader, like a piece of currency, to be honoured or perhaps dishonoured.

⁵⁹ The subject of quotation is pursued again at Ch. 6, 202.

Michel de Certeau sees the function of narrative elements within a frame of theoretical writing being the same:

In many works, narrativity insinuates itself into scientific discourse as its general denomination (its title), as one of its parts ("case" studies, "life stories," or stories of groups, etc.) or as its counterpoint (quoted fragments, interviews, "sayings," etc.).

He goes on to say that such elements, rather than representing material and procedures that remain to be eliminated from theoretical discourse, in the interest of scientific accuracy or theoretical purity, must be seen to have "*scientific legitimacy*." "[I]t is," he says, "a variant of the discourse that knows and an *authority* in what concerns theory" (my emphasis). If we understand this, he continues,

One can then understand the alternations and complicities, the procedural homologies and social imbrications that link the "arts of speaking" to the "arts of operating": the same practices appear now in a verbal field, now in a field of non-linguistic actions; they move from one field to the other, being equally tactical and subtle in both; they keep the ball moving between them — from the workday to evening, from cooking to legends and gossip, from the devices of lived history to those of history retold.⁶⁰

In the *Dictionary*, Johnson *speaks* — that is, acts linguistically — when he chooses words, and defines them. This is his own theoretical work. But like so much (all?) science, his theoretical work results from particular procedures — "a discourse composed of stories" (78). When Johnson quotes other writers to illustrate and support his definitions, he *operates* — takes non-linguistic action. In de Certeau's (at this point) broad meaning, narrativity can be stories as we usually understand them — case studies, perhaps, or anecdotes — which he describes as,

a detour by way of a past ("the other day," "in olden days") or by way of a quotation (a "saying," a proverb) made in order to take advantage of an occasion and to modify an equilibrium by taking it by surprise. (79)

⁶⁰ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 78. Parenthetical references follow in text.

A narrative (or a quotation) in the midst of otherwise theoretical discourse "creates a fictional space" (79). It is to be, as de Certeau says, "A dancer disguised as an archivist" (80); or, as Johnson might prefer, a poet disguised as a lexicographer. When Johnson describes himself in the Preface as "a poet doomed to wake a lexicographer,"⁶¹ it is a kind of benign false modesty, inviting contradiction. The poet remains.

To attempt to identify the quotations in the *Dictionary* as constituting, in de Certeau's terms, "a field of non-linguistic actions" seems a bit strained, as they are all composed of language, obviously. But the point is that the quotations are not Johnson's own language: he is not speaking them, but quoting them. (In the same way, a particular teacher of literature who would not himself *use* profane language or blasphemy may need to *quote* such language in the course of teaching.) In *using* them, Johnson brings other voices — however congenial — into his discourse. They are present in his text as other voices telling other stories. His practice of quotation resembles de Certeau's description in another way, how "they keep the ball moving ... from one field to another." In any page from the *Dictionary*, we find ourselves being conducted from King Charles, to Atterbury's *Sermons*, to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, to *Hudibras*, to Locke, to the Bible, to Moxon's *Mechanick Exercises*. Johnson admits that in his original design for the *Dictionary*, he "extracted from philosophers principles of science; from historians remarkable facts; from chemists complete processes; from divines striking exhortations; and from poets beautiful descriptions."⁶² As we have seen, he was wanting by this procedure to have it that "every quotation should be *useful* to some *other* end than the illustration of a word" — that is to say (in the vocabulary of de Certeau), he wanted his quotations to not only be *used* by himself (for lexicographical purposes) but to *speak* for themselves.

One kind of text, somewhere on the boundary between the specialised dictionary, such as the *Sea Dictionary* or dictionary of mythology, and the rhetorical dictionary, is the dictionary of quotations. This is a very popular kind of book. As the pioneer of the use of quotations in an English dictionary, Johnson could be said to have been the inventor of such books himself. It would only take the provision of an 'Index to Authors Cited' and a thematic index to turn the work into a dictionary of quotations as well as a dictionary of the English language.

⁶¹ Preface, *Dictionary*, C1^v (para 72).

⁶² Preface, *Dictionary*, B2^v (para. 57).

Johnson's *Dictionary* remains, as he intended, something much more than a work of lexicography. It is a remarkable anthology, a huge commonplace book, a summary of the world of learning. It is a book that can and has been read for its portrait of eighteenth-century England, its indication of the state of contemporary knowledge. John Wain can hardly be alone in the affirmation that Johnson's *Dictionary* "has made the greatest single contribution to such understanding of eighteenth-century life and literature as I have attained."⁶³ But that is something that might be asserted, of its century, about any dictionary on historical principles. By contrast, Alvin Kernan asserts, that it was "as a great poem, or at least as an anthology of great writing,"⁶⁴ that Robert Browning read through the *Dictionary* at the start of his poetic career. Two centuries later, one feels that a poet would still be better off reading Johnson than, say, Webster's. Kernan goes on to suggest that, having been "supplanted as lexicographically authoritative by ... the *OED*," Johnson's *Dictionary* has become "a minor literary classic."

We have mentioned one of the controversial policies pursued in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (1961) — the minimisation of usage notes; another was that illustrative quotations should simply be clear examples of American word usage. Beyond that, the source of the quotations was not really important. The editor of *Webster's Third*, Philip Gove, asserted that "The hard truth is that literary flavor in a dictionary quotation represents a luxury of a bygone age."⁶⁵ The lexicographer in Johnson would see the justice in this ("words must be sought where they are used"). But his practice would still, one feels, indicate the same ambivalence he felt about modern novels, as expressed in *Rambler* 4,

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.⁶⁶

If one wishes only to find out how language is used, one may go outside into the street and listen to people. But if one wants to discover how words are and have been used, in

⁶³ Wain, *Samuel Johnson*, 184.

⁶⁴ Alvin B. Kernan, *Printing Technology, Letters and Samuel Johnson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 1987), 197.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Morton, *The Story of 'Webster's Third'*, 99, and see 299 n.24.

⁶⁶ *Rambler* 4; III, 22.

the past and outside one's immediate neighbourhood, and thus how they might be used, and for what purposes — in other words, to read about the potential (and in Johnson's view, the highest potential) of language — his *Dictionary* offers a learned and responsible, but also satisfying and challenging, perspective.

CHAPTER FIVE

Johnson and the Size of Texts

I. Texts and Paratexts

From the large, monumental and unmanageable (but quintessentially usable) text of Johnson's *Dictionary*, we proceed very naturally to what we might designate *minutiæ literariæ* — small, self-contained, collectable, listable, movable, memorable texts. Johnson, in his list of literary projects (which it will be clear is a kind of touchstone for me) includes one work described as "Minutiæ Literariæ. Miscellaneous Reflections, Criticisms, Emendations, Notes."¹ In case there is any doubt, the term means, literally, literary minutiæ or trivia — small literary details or particles. They are the sort of texts that as quotations compose the bulk of the *Dictionary*, that as bibliographical annotations are Johnson's original contribution to the *Harleian Catalogue*, that as brief minutes were dramatised by Johnson as the *Parliamentary Debates*, that as mottoes introduce each of the *Ramblers*, that as notes comprise most of Johnson's work on Shakespeare, that as the fragmentary classical text called *The Greek Anthology* were the source of Johnson's last work of poetry and translation. Even his procedures in the *Lives of the Poets*, Lawrence Lipking says, partake of these modes, "From each biographical record, the *Lives* selects a limited number of anecdotes or 'minute details of daily life' and interrogates them for evidence of character."² And of course, small quotable texts, as anecdotes and *ana*, make up the bulk of the various *Lives* of Johnson.

If the *Dictionary* is a book which seems to be paratextually heavy — hardly a text, but all mediating devices — *minutiæ literariæ* have the appearance of being self-mediating. They are not implicated in any particular literary form or bibliographical medium; they seem easily and not inappropriately detachable from the name of any author; they may even be oral rather than literary. They have no titles, dedications, epigraphs, prefaces, chapter divisions — all of which, according to Genette, have an "*illocutionary force*," by which he means that they embody messages. They can communicate information, an

¹ See Appendix, 334, 364.

² Lipking, *Samuel Johnson*, 267 (quoting *Rambler* 60; III, 321).

intention or interpretation, a decision, commitment, advice or command.³ In these terms, the sheer (or mere) size of a text is not to be and cannot be disregarded as a characteristic of no critical importance. It conveys a message prior to any others that the reader or potential reader may perceive. Our experience of a book (or movie film) is affected throughout by an awareness, for instance, that we have read one hundred pages and have another four hundred to go, or that we are thirty minutes into a three-hour film. We inevitably draw all sorts of conclusions from such circumstances (such as, that the hero is not going to be killed just yet); as Genette says of other paratextual information, people who know these facts (and in the case of the extent of a text, who cannot?) will read the work differently, and "anyone who denies the difference is pulling our leg" (8). Yet unlike those other devices, which Genette says "may appear at any time, [and] ... may also disappear" (6), the size of a text is (in some or other terms) an inescapable condition.

Short texts are valued by Johnson, certainly for their ease of both production and access, but also for the more substantial reason that any one such text may be a locus around which commentary circulates. There could hardly be a more critically fashionable group of metaphors at present than margins, edges, boundaries, frontiers and fringes. Short texts are deeply, essentially and literally (not metaphorically) implicated in these notions. The more boundaries or margins, the more space and invitation to make commentary. A gathering of such texts — a book with as much white space as print — has a unique power to stimulate the mind. We have seen, in Chapter Two, Johnson's emphatic dismissal of writers who will not or cannot *be read*. Whether or not a text is readable depends on far more prosaic and everyday considerations than purely literary ones. Before considering specific species of short texts, which might initially seem a rather superficial means of literary classification, we should look more generally at Johnson's lively awareness of the importance of what we will call Textual Extent.

Small texts, when they become literature — written rather than oral artefacts — mostly occur in collections. A collection of short items that are gathered by form is sure to be thematically miscellaneous; this is in itself enough to arouse Johnson's interest, because he has told us in the Preface to Shakespeare, "that, upon the whole, all pleasure consists in variety."⁴ This is repeated in the 'Life of Butler': "The great source of

³ Genette, *Paratexts*, 10-11. Parenthetical references follow in text.

⁴ Preface, *Johnson on Shakespeare* VII, 67.

pleasure is variety."⁵ In complete and extended texts by the one writer (such as the plays of Shakespeare) variety may be achieved by the "interchange of seriousness and merriment."⁶ In a collection of short texts from many sources, the variety may be almost unlimited. If we can consider the quotations in the *Dictionary* as such a collection, and ignore the definitions and dictionary-order, we can see that this material could be re-arranged to emphasise the variety of authors, periods, themes, genres, subjects, tones and attitudes, or diction — and it would still be an interesting book.

We can think of such small texts — things that are especially prone to being gathered, transferred, re-arranged — as tools or, as de Certeau would say, "practices." They are gathered, and so on, in order to emphasise or enhance some useful purpose or other. But for the browser, the collections of them have something of the appeal of shops of *bric-à-brac*. To this effect, de Certeau quotes a writer whom Johnson also knew, Fontenelle:

[A]rtisans' shops sparkle everywhere with an intelligence and a creativity that nevertheless does not attract our attention. Spectators are lacking for these very useful and very ingeniously contrived instruments and practices

These practices, says de Certeau, "remain at a distance from the sciences but in advance of them," and the spectators that he identifies are "collectors, describers, analysts." The activities of collectors of *minutiae literariae*, like other collectors, "acknowledge in these practices a kind of knowledge preceding that of the scientists."⁷ In the same way, literary criticism is preceded by bibliography and, before that, by book collecting. We may go a step further, although this is merely implied by de Certeau. Collection is itself such an "everyday art." He says, "The 'everyday' arts no more 'form' a new product than they have their own language. They 'make do' (*bricolent*)."⁸ Everyday arts, he says, are manoeuvring rather than manufacturing — that is, rather than making things new, they

⁵ 'Butler,' *Lives* I, 212. Similar expressions abound in Johnson: "novelty is the great source of pleasure" ('Prior,' *Lives* II, 206); "'Variety,' said Rasselas, 'is so necessary to content ...'" (*Rasselas*, Ch. XLVII, 164); and "most of our passions are excited by the novelty of objects" (*Rambler* 31; III, 168).

⁶ Preface, *Johnson on Shakespeare* VII, 68.

⁷ Preceding quotes from de Certeau, *Everyday Life*, 67. Fontenelle is quoted from his "Preface" in *Histoire de l'Académie royale pour 1699*.

⁸ De Certeau, *Everyday Life*, 66.

adapt pre-existing materials. This is certainly true of the assembler of a collection, of texts, as of anything else.

I want in the main to examine Johnson, and the discourses he has generated, as an author who has himself become written as anecdotes and aphorisms. In doing so, I will consider his relationship to a literary milieu and a print culture that was still particularly open to the production and consumption of minor — or at least generically unstable — forms of literature. That such forms are both small and hard to classify invites the description 'minor,' but in terms of their penetration and the light they shed on reading practices, they are not to be considered as insignificant so much as everyday, and therefore both pervasive and yet overlooked. They are a cluster of literary genres that are essentially non-canonical, or even anti-canonical, in that they subvert both the economic and cultural systems through which literature is mediated, as well as the practices of reading and interpretation to which literary institutions demand that canonical texts must be subject. Collections of *minutiae literariae* are necessarily various, and demand from the reader constant mental engagement, disengagement and re-engagement. The mind is forced continually back into itself, to assess and discriminate. This kind of text has no tendency to enchain the mind, rather it provokes and stimulates the mind to activity and self-awareness. This is what Johnson perceived such reading to do for him, and what he wished it to do for others.

II. Textual Extent

We have already noticed Johnson, in the serious literary context of his 'Life of Milton,' claim of *Paradise Lost* that "None ever wished it longer than it is."⁹ This is, says Lawrence Lipking, "the kind of truth for which Johnson is famous: refreshing and down to earth."¹⁰ Particularly with Lipking's comment as a prompt, we might recall Johnson's discussion with Boswell and Thomas Erskine, about the comparative virtues of the novelists Fielding and Richardson. Boswell asks if Fielding — whom Johnson had just called a "blockhead" and "a barren rascal" — does not draw "very natural pictures of human life." Johnson is, of course, doubtful about the virtues of "natural pictures of human life," and asserts to the contrary (whilst also changing the subject) that "there is

⁹ *Lives* I, 183.

¹⁰ Lipking, *Samuel Johnson*, 276.

more knowledge of the heart in one letter of Richardson's, than in all 'Tom Jones.'" Erskine tries another tack, only to find that Johnson agrees entirely:

ERSKINE. "Surely, Sir, Richardson is very tedious." JOHNSON. "Why, Sir, if you were to read Richardson for the story, your impatience would be so much fretted that you would hang yourself. But you must read him for the sentiment, and consider the story as only giving occasion to the sentiment."¹¹

Paradise Lost and, more particularly, the multi-volume novels of Richardson, are in this regard, singular works. *Clarissa* is — at a certain level of analysis — more like a telephone book, or a doorstep, or a house-brick, than a novel. It is one of a handful of literary works of which no one is shy to suggest that its length is its most important feature. But *Paradise Lost* and the novels of Richardson are far from being singled out by Johnson for this particular animadversion, of being too long. Johnson is recorded as having exclaimed to Hester Thrale, "Alas, Madam! ... how few books are there of which one ever can possibly arrive at the *last* page! Was there ever yet any thing written by mere man that was wished longer by its readers, excepting Don Quixote, Robinson Crusoe, and the Pilgrim's Progress?"¹²

However, it is important for us to note that it is not reading *per se* that Johnson suggests is a difficult or unpleasant activity, but reading anything that *has* to be read at length. All the texts that are discussed by Johnson in the terms in which we are presently interested are narratives — and not mere tales, but long narratives: epic poems, romances, novels. There is almost no point to reading a *bit* of *Robinson Crusoe*, because the main point of the novel — of any novel — is what happens, page by page, from the start to the end. In novels there is not, and certainly not of necessity, anything in particular that we are reading in order to locate — self-contained anecdotes, pointed expressions, exalted sentiments, exquisite descriptions. Such things may be present, but they are incidental; they are not intended to engage our attention in a way that could hold up the reading process; rather, they contribute to keeping us reading. If 'what happens' is what is most important, it is up to the skill of the writer to make what is most important *matter* to the reader. This is achieved at least in part by the reader's experience of the duration of the text. A book of imaginary events, with vividly depicted characters and scenes, which is

¹¹ *Life* II, 173, 174-75. 6 April 1772.

¹² Thrale, *Anecdotes*. *Johns. Misc.* I, 332.

capable of occupying our imaginations for hours, days, weeks at a time, comes to *feel* like another of the scenes of our life. Like our home, workplace, ongoing duties or amusements, or circle of friends, a lengthy narrative text is a location which we can leave and to which we can return, but which we think about in the meantime, our curiosity maintained by each suspense of the reading experience.

Furthermore, folded within what I identify as the type of book which "*has* to be read at length," there is the larger and more simple category of the book which merely *has* to be read. Textual extent implies compulsion, which for Johnson runs entirely against the grain of reading for pleasure. Μέγα βιβλίον, μέγα κακόν, said Callimachus, "A great book is a great evil," and there is as at least as great a tradition of bibliophobia as of bibliophilia — although it is in the nature of things largely unrecorded. Johnson, we feel, knows all about it, from his own resistance to reading thoroughly, but more from his knowledge of other people. Reading is for many people so disagreeable an activity that the writer, in Johnson's view, should be prepared to go far out of his way to accommodate readers:

People in general do not willingly read, if they can have any thing else to amuse them. There must be an external impulse; emulation, or vanity, or avarice. The progress which the understanding makes through a book, has more pain than pleasure in it. Language is scanty, and inadequate to express the nice gradations and mixtures of our feelings. No man reads a book of science from pure inclination. The books that we do read with pleasure are light compositions, which contain a quick succession of events.¹³

There is a temptation to take such remarks of Johnson's as this not entirely seriously, but it is consistent with his whole approach to literature, as well as many other casual remarks: "A man ought to read just as inclination leads him; for what he reads as a task will do him little good."¹⁴

It is an extremely important aspect of Johnson's well-known suspicion of contemporary fictions, that they insist on a longterm and wholesale surrender of the mind — a forcible appropriation of the important faculty of *attention* (which we shall consider

¹³ *Life* iv, 218. 1 May 1783.

¹⁴ *Life* i, 428. 14 July 1763.

in detail in Chapter Eight). To avail oneself habitually of the pleasures of fiction can only be a bad thing, unless — as in Richardson's novels — the pleasures are rather weak, and are rewarded by wholesome sentiments. We have seen that Johnson writes as if it were the highest species of literary praise to say that a work was readable and could in fact be read to the end, or (even more praiseworthily) that one might actually read it to the end and wish it longer still. What he approves in a long narrative is that it might be read and enjoyed without guilt or self-loathing, at either the company it requires one to keep, the emotions it enables one to experience, or simply the sense of the waste of time. The same may be said of the time spent watching a drama; he asserts of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, "that perhaps it never yet had reader or spectator, who did not think it too soon at an end."¹⁵

Can the *extent* of a text, its scale (a book's length or a play's duration), be said to be a paratextual element? In his comprehensive survey of paratexts, Genette does not mention these factors, or anything like them: this is clearly because without length or duration, text as such is inconceivable. For a text to have being in space or time it must have a certain length; unlike the paratextual devices Genette surveys, extent is a *sine qua non*. Yet the *extent* of a text is a factor which seems irrelevant to critical literary assessment, and we recognise that Johnson is being deliberately vulgar by raising such issues, and trying to scandalise (what he at least rhetorically figures as) his effete learned readership, or at least bring them to an awareness of the everyday realities which govern the responses of that readership to whom he always deferred, the common reader. To talk in this way of a book's size will remind many readers today — not perhaps common readers, but not only eighteenth-centuryists either — of the story of Edward Gibbon presenting the second volume of his *Decline and Fall* to the Duke of Gloucester. The Duke, so we are told, "received him with much good nature and affability, saying to him, as he laid the quarto on the table, 'Another d-mn'd, thick, square book! Always scribble, scribble, scribble! Eh! Mr. Gibbon?'"¹⁶ This anecdote is only ever quoted in order to mock the nobleman's cheerful philistinism, and to rue the scholar's dependence upon the rich and ignorant. Yet it also shows that of which Johnson was very aware, that prosaic everyday considerations can undercut all other criticism, no matter how penetrating and sophisticated. Johnson reminds the professional or learned reader that whilst a poem or book may be an immense labour, a product of erudition or soaring imagination, a thing of

¹⁵ Concluding note on *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Johnson on Shakespeare* VII, 341.

¹⁶ Henry Digby Best, *Personal and Literary Memorials* (1829), 68. Quoted by Hill in *Life* II, 2 n.2.

the mind and spirit, it is also an artefact, grounded in everyday, physical realities, and which requires an often considerable effort on the part of the reader. The attitude to a particular text, of any person for whom reading is not the main and pre-eminent means of engaging with the world, will inevitably be governed by such considerations.

To notice only the size of a text is certainly vulgar, but not to notice is impossible, and to pretend not to notice, intellectual snobbery. It catches our attention. The very word *volume*, as Barry Sanders points out, "came to mean 'intensity of sound' only through analogy — a large volume presumably speaking much more loudly than a slim one."¹⁷ Readers, their attention attracted, may choose to engage with the text and assess its more intrinsic virtues; however, others will be scared or embarrassed. One of the booksellers to whom the natural historian in the *Idler* offered his manuscript, "desired to see the work, and, without opening it, told me, that a book of that size 'would never do.'"¹⁸ Johnson always noticed these matters himself. In a long letter of Autumn 1743, Johnson wrote to Edward Cave of their "Historical Design,"¹⁹ which Boswell believed to be "an historical account of the British Parliament,"²⁰ and briefly of the forthcoming *Life of Savage*. Most of this letter is devoted to the print run, printing program, page layout, use of margins, size of type. Of course, many authors are concerned about the appearance of their work, but all this concerns a work that *had not been written* (and never was). Johnson sees the content of the work and its mode of presentation as being almost inseparable. When Johnson wrote to the printer William Strahan to offer him the tale which became *Rasselas* (and which he had not yet written), he was able to tell him that "It will make about two volumes like little Pompadour that is about one middling volume."²¹ In the hand-written list which he made for Daniel Astle, of books to assist him in his studies for the ordained Christian ministry, even though he is in a hurry and abbreviates the titles, Johnson jots beside five of the titles a note of their format (e.g., "Carte's Hist. of England 3 vols Fol").²² When William Seward claimed that he had seen "three folio volumes" of

¹⁷ Barry Sanders, *A Is for Ox: Violence, Electronic Media, and the Silencing of the Written Word* (New York: Pantheon, 1994), 23.

¹⁸ *Idler* 55; 174.

¹⁹ *Letters* 1, 34. Autumn 1743.

²⁰ *Life* 1, 155. 1742. For more information about this project, see the Appendix, 370.

²¹ *Letters* 1, 178. 20 January 1759.

²² Boswell omits these notes from his transcription in the *Life* IV, 311-12. See the new transcription, from a copy of the MS., in my "A Clergyman's Reading," 126-27.

Johnson's sayings collected by Boswell, the latter objected that his books of notes were in quarto and octavo. Johnson commented, "it is a want of concern about veracity. He does not know that he saw *any* volumes. If he had seen them he could have remembered their size."²³ In the *Journal* account, Boswell comments that "The Doctor did not make sufficient allowance for inaccuracy of memory. But, no doubt, carelessness as to the exactness of circumstances is very dangerous, for one may gradually recede from the fact till all is fiction."²⁴ Johnson's memory for such details was no doubt very strong, but he would have considered that someone who could not be trusted about such obvious matters could hardly be trusted about anything else, and that to have observed that a book was quarto or octavo was better than having nothing to say about it.

And whilst *extent* is a literary characteristic of which the force may be appreciated even by the vulgar and unliterary,²⁵ it also has more subtle and mostly unremarked significance. In pardoning himself for presenting the reading public with short biographical studies of Johnson and Boswell, when there are already so many large works devoted to both of them, F.L. Lucas observes, "There is a need for both long and short biographies, as for large-scale and small-scale maps. And it is not only a question of time. One reads such things not only for the amusement of reading, but also to remember."²⁶ It is a very Johnsonian thought: that, as he says in *Rambler* 2, "men more frequently require to be reminded than informed";²⁷ and a short text may function more effectively than a large one, as a reminder, or (more subtly) by *seeming to be* just a reminder. We all prefer to believe that we are receiving a new piece of insight not with startled surprise, but with mature recognition. To this end, short works are well-adapted. A book throws out a challenge (and perhaps implies a threat) that a short text does not. Johnson's use of the essay form should not be regarded as either accidental or out of keeping with his moral project. The Yale editor of Johnson's essays, Walter Jackson Bate, asserts that "Johnson's universality as a moralist stands in some contrast to the form he took as readiest to hand

²³ *Life* IV, 83-84. 1 April 1781.

²⁴ Boswell, *Laird of Auchinleck*, 307.

²⁵ There must be innumerable scholars with sympathetic but unscholarly relatives who comment on their publications, "Well, it looks like a lot of work to me!", or actors who are asked, "How did you learn all those lines?"

²⁶ F.L. Lucas, *The Search for Good Sense: Four Eighteenth-Century Characters: Johnson, Chesterfield, Boswell, Goldsmith* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), xi.

²⁷ *Rambler* 2; III, 14.

— the eighteenth-century periodical essay."²⁸ In fact, the essay (particularly, the periodical essay) is the ideal form by which to deal with the readers' anticipated resistance to text; it is, as Isobel Grundy points out, "a genre whose name and conventions suggested a modest limitation of aims."²⁹

III. Reading and Managing Text

Johnson, as both a writer and a reader, was often looking for ways to manoeuvre around these most fundamental resistances to text. I will consider his reading practices, and his use of indexes, periodical publication, dictionary form, and abridgement.

His own reading practices, of not "reading through," of "tearing the heart out of a book," could be usefully elaborated in this connection, if they had not already and so recently been comprehensively surveyed by Robert DeMaria. Boswell is fascinated by Johnson's learning, and how he has acquired it, and wherever possible he emphasises how haphazard Johnson's reading practices seem to be. DeMaria, in his *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading* gives a full account of the types of reading to be observed in Johnson, although his taxonomy of reading styles lays less stress than I would on the importance of different types of texts, particularly on the basis of their length and the continuity or otherwise of discourse. DeMaria observes that books that "resemble notebooks already," such as those of Macrobius, were the "kind of farrago [that] suited Johnson's desires in reading, as did Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, which he started reading early, and many collections of ana and bits and pieces of *materia literaria* [that is, literary matter], such as Aulus Gellius's *Attic Nights* and the collected sayings of Gilles Ménage, *Menagiana*."³⁰ All the types of text that fit this description, and what might be their function and appeal, are the subject towards which I am proceeding, in the next chapter; but before bringing them into focus, I wish to look at the other strategies by which Johnson deals with textual extent.

An **index** is a means by which readers may subvert a text's density and discursiveness — the fact that it has a start and a finish which seem to insist on being

²⁸ Bate, "Introduction," *Rambler*, III, xxvi.

²⁹ Grundy, *Samuel Johnson and the Scale of Greatness* (Athens, GA.: U. of Georgia P., 1986), 69.

³⁰ DeMaria, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading*, 90.

observed. We see in the *Designs* Johnson's scheme to index the *Tatlers*, *Guardians* and *Spectators*.³¹ This body of writing, a total of 1081 essays, might have been easy enough fodder for the original readers of the periodical leaflets issued over a period of sixty-seven months, but for someone with limited time its twelve volumes might seem rather impenetrable. Johnson's scheme also involved giving each paper a score, as a further means of helping the readers decide which of the essays are most worthy of their time and attention. In the *Dictionary*, where *index* [3] is defined as "The table of contents to a book," he quotes first Shakespeare, then Isaac Watts:

In such *indexes*, although small [pricks]
To their subsequent volumes, there is seen
The baby figure of the giant mass
Of things to come, at large.³²

If a book has no *index*, or good table of contents, 'tis very useful to make one as you are reading it; and in your *index* to take notice only of parts new to you.

Johnson's *Rambler* essays were first provided with an index in the 'Fourth Edition' of 1756 (i.e., the second [authorised] collected edition),³³ although Johnson — having his own ideas about indexing — expressed to George Steevens his dissatisfaction with the methods of the indexer, Mr. Flexman.³⁴ *The Idler* was indexed, at least in part, even before it was issued in a collected edition.³⁵ It seems to me reasonable to assume that Johnson authorised the indexing of his own essays. He was a believer in indexes, as is demonstrated by his advice to Richardson that the novelist "add an *Index Rerum*" to any future editions of *Clarissa*, so "that when the reader recollects any incident he may easily

³¹ See Appendix, 332-33, 362-63.

³² *Troilus and Cressida*, 1.iii.342-45. The word "pricks" was somehow left out in this citation, although it was included in the citation of the same text under *subsequent*.

³³ J.D. Fleeman, *A Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson: Treating his published Works from the Beginnings to 1984*, prepared for publication by James McLaverty, 2 v. (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 212 (item 50.3R/6a).

³⁴ *Life* IV, 325. 1784 (Anecdotes of George Steevens).

³⁵ "On 10 Feb. 1759, with no. 45 [i.e., of the *Universal Chronicle*], was given away a bifolium of the t. to vol. 1 and two pp. of Index. This was advertised in no. 40 (p. 37a) and again in no. 45 (p. 41c). No further announcements of any similar tt. were made, and it seems that no tt. or Indexes were issued for vols. 2-3." Information from James McLaverty (personal correspondence). See also Fleeman, *Bibliography*, 735 (item 58.4Id/1).

find it."³⁶ Presumably as a response to this suggestion, Richardson appended to volume seven of the fourth edition (1751) of *Clarissa*, "An Ample Collection of Such of the Moral and Instructive Sentiments interspersed throughout the Work, as may be presumed to be of General Use and Service." Johnson then used this collection of quotations in assembling the *Dictionary*.³⁷ Richardson later published separately a 'sentimental index' to his three novels, *A Collection of the Moral and Instructive Sentiments, Maxims, Cautions, and Reflections, contained in the Histories of Pamela, Clarissa, and Sir Charles Grandison* (1755). Such matters were of concern to Johnson throughout his career. With his last major writing project, he was not yet beyond an interest in the index; he wrote to John Nichols, "I am very well contented that the index is settled."³⁸

I have mentioned the essay form, but this must be distinguished from the tactic of **periodical publication**, which Johnson used for the bulk of his essays, and which may itself be characterised as an attempt to subvert textual length and bulk.³⁹ *The Rambler*, as we now have it, consists of 208 un-titled mixed-genre essays in three or four volumes, and is a very long and perhaps intimidating work; but in its original format, as a pamphlet that cost twopence, that might be folded and tucked in the pocket, and read in about twenty minutes, while standing in the street or waiting to meet someone in a coffee house, it was a relatively comfortable — one might say 'user-friendly' — means by which to encounter a writer whose purposes are ultimately serious and philosophical.⁴⁰ He wrote in *The Rambler* itself that, "These papers of the day, the *Ephemerae* of learning, have uses more adequate to the purposes of common life than more pompous and durable volumes," and stresses that it is only proper that there should be reading matter for "[e]very size of readers."⁴¹ Unless one is a scholar, whose business is study, reading is only one activity to be fitted in among a multitude of others. It is unreasonable for a writer to expect more of his readers. Early readers appreciated the extent to which the tactic of periodical publication is implicated in the success of Johnson's essays.

³⁶ *Letters* I, 48. 9 March 1751.

³⁷ See Robert DeMaria, *Johnson's 'Dictionary' and the Language of Learning*, 36, 270 n.29.

³⁸ *Letters* III, 145. 26 November 1778. (His concern in this letter is mainly charitable: that his old friend Alexander Macbean be paid for the work.)

³⁹ Genette mentions *serial publication* as a paratextual practice which he does not investigate, as it "might demand as much work as was required here in treating this subject as a whole." Genette, *Paratexts*, 405.

⁴⁰ See my "A Petty Writer," 67-87.

⁴¹ *Rambler* 145; v, 11 (my emphasis).

When and how Johnson himself read is oddly mysterious. The glimpses we have of him reading are of him snatching up books and throwing them down, reading their backs, and so on. As a student at Oxford, he drew up a chart showing how much Latin verse he could read, if he read so many lines a day, for a week, a month or a year.⁴² He realised that by exercising control over time, what looks physically difficult becomes manageable. Of course, he seldom managed to read much by such plans. He read the *Memoirs of Fontenelle* at the Thrales', "leaning and swinging upon the low gate into the court, without his hat."⁴³ We can surmise that this book was not a folio. Hawkins relates one account Johnson gave of the kind of books he thought best. He does not recommend books by genre (biography, say, or *ana*, both of which he greatly enjoyed) or any literary or intellectual criterion:

He used to say, that no man read long together with a folio on his table:— Books, said he, that you may carry to the fire, and hold readily in your hand, are the most useful after all. He would say, such books form the man of general and easy reading.

He was a great friend to books like the French, *Esprits d'un tel*;⁴⁴ for example, *Beauties of Watts*, &c., &c., at which, said he, a man will often look and be tempted to go on, when he would have been frightened at books of a larger size and of a more erudite appearance.⁴⁵

It may seem odd that he should say that "the man of general and easy reading" is 'formed' — not by what quality or genre of book he reads, nor books in a particular diction — but simply by books of a certain size; but readers are of course 'formed' only by *whatever*

⁴² *Diaries*, 27 (22 October 1729). For another such calculation, concerning Bible reading, see 102 (12 January 1766).

⁴³ *Life* III, 247. 7 April 1778.

⁴⁴ Literally, the 'Spirits or Wit of Such-and-such.' French texts with titles beginning 'Esprit de' were small format collections of quotable selections from well-known writers. A-A. Barbier, *Dictionnaire des Ouvrages Anonymes*, 3rd edn. (1874, rpt. 1963), v. II, lists dozens of such titles, such as *Esprit, Maximes et Principes de M. d'Alembert* (1789), *L'Esprit de Fontenelle* (1744), *Esprit de Leibnitz* (1772), ... *Mme. de Maintenon* (1771), ... *Moliere* (1777), ... *Pape Clement XIV* (1775), ... *Rousseau* (1764), as well as themed collections, ... *de l'Encyclopédie* (5 v., 1768), ... *des nations* (1752), ... *des Philosophes* (1772), ... *des Femmes Célèbres* (1768). All these are "in-12," i.e., 12mo. As Hawkins suggests, the contemporary *Beauties of* ... volumes were English equivalents, as are their modern descendants, such as the Duckworth *Sayings of* ... series.

⁴⁵ Sir John Hawkins, "Apophthegms, Sentiments, Opinions, & Occasional Reflections," *Johns. Misc.* II, 2. Boswell, in planning a book on his travels, considered the size of the work, "Methinks duodecimo volumes or small octavo will be best, as they will go round the world in carriages." Quoted in Frank Brady, *James Boswell: The Later Years*, 476.

they find *readable*. Readability is not, of course, only a matter of the physical size of books, and Johnson's prose has been judged by some as difficult for more intrinsic reasons. George Gleig, who wrote the entry on Johnson in the 1797 edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, challenges this view in a substantial note on Johnson's style, "He who reads *half a volume* of the *Rambler* at a sitting, will feel his ear fatigued by the close of familiar periods so frequently recurring; but he who reads only one paper in the day will experience nothing of this weariness."⁴⁶ Periodical writing is a kind of the tactical behaviour which de Certeau identifies as characteristic of the everyday, which resists the power of place by "a clever *utilization of time*, of the opportunities it presents and also of the play that it introduces into the foundations of power."⁴⁷

So far as the writer is concerned, the periodical form subverts textual bulk by reconfiguring the task of producing a mass of writing. A periodical is, rather like a dictionary, a textual template — though a temporal template rather than a spatial one. Only by writing a succession of small works to a succession of deadlines could many writers produce such a mass of text. Boswell reports that the essays for *The Rambler* "were written in haste as the moment pressed, without even being read over by him before they were printed"; to which Hill adds a note from Croker's edition of the *Life*, "Dr. [Thomas] Birch says:— 'The proprietor of the *Rambler*, Cave, told me that copy was seldom sent to the press till late in the night before the day of publication.'"⁴⁸ And of course there is the more memorable account of Johnson writing an *Idler* in Oxford, with half an hour to spare to catch the mail coach, and folding the paper to send without allowing Langton to read it, saying "you shall not do more than I have done myself."⁴⁹ Boswell depicts Johnson as pleased to have discovered kinds of literary work that the task of writing does not require him to closet himself away from his friends and the pleasures of society. Many other works, written in the margins of daily life, have this character. Harold Nicolson, whose published diaries give an account of over thirty years spent close to the centre of mid-twentieth-century British political and literary life, "found it rather sad

⁴⁶ [Gleig,] "Johnson, Samuel," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 3rd edn. (1797), ix, 299 n.(c). (Gleig is identified as the author in Clifford and Greene's *Samuel Johnson: A Bibliography and Survey*, 56.)

⁴⁷ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 38-39 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁸ *Life* I, 203 and n.6. March 1750. In a later account, III, 42 (12 April 1776), Boswell has Johnson reinforce this in conversation, saying that he had sent the first part of a *Rambler* to the printer whilst he wrote the rest.

⁴⁹ *Life* I, 331. 15 April 1758.

that he who had published forty books should be remembered only for the three that he hadn't realised he'd written."⁵⁰

The *Dictionary*, like the *Rambler*, does not immediately strike us as a work in which textual extent is subverted. It is two huge folios; it could hardly be carried to the fire. In fact, it is so big to modern eyes as to appear to be something other than a book: John Wain gives a characteristically richly-felt description of "the pleasure and interest of browsing through the Dictionary," and lingers on the materiality of "[m]y own cherished copy of the third edition of 1765, which I bought in 1943 and trundled back to my college room on a handcart."⁵¹ This is worth quoting, as a register of the sort of response that a book can call forth from the sort of reader who is acutely sensitive to the intimate relationship between a text and its paratextual frames — and that a large and venerable book such as the *Dictionary* now almost inevitably calls forth from modern readers. Johnson himself is very aware of, proud of, and even amused by its size. Its sheer size is a circumstance sufficient to disable many potential criticisms. In the Preface, he reminds the reader, "Every writer of a long work commits errors, where there appears neither ambiguity to mislead, nor obscurity to confound him."⁵² More generally, he later asserts as a principle, "A large work is difficult because it is large."⁵³ The extent of the *Dictionary* is his main line of defence against criticism. He concludes his masterful preface with the same theme, if in a different key, "In this work, when it shall be found [as it inevitably shall be, he modestly implies] that much is omitted, let it not be forgotten that much likewise is performed."⁵⁴ No one, with the "monumental bulk" of the *Dictionary* before them, could doubt, or even for a moment forget, that here is a huge labour in which much is performed.

In the informal context of private letters, we see that Johnson has (as he says of Richardson with his *Clarissa*) so far "got above all fears of prolixity"⁵⁵ as to see the size of the work as a matter for self-congratulation. Shortly before the *Dictionary* was

⁵⁰ Introduction by Nigel Nicolson, to Harold Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters, 1930-1964*, ed. Stanley Olsen (London: Collins, 1980), 9.

⁵¹ Wain, *Samuel Johnson*, 184.

⁵² Preface, *Dictionary*, B2^v (para. 52).

⁵³ Preface, *Dictionary*, C2^r (para. 83).

⁵⁴ Preface, *Dictionary*, C2^r (para. 94).

⁵⁵ *Letters* 1, 47. 9 March 1751.

published, he wrote in a playful voice to Thomas Warton, "I hope to see my Dictionary bound and lettered next week — *vasta mole superbus* [proud in its vast bulk]."⁵⁶ A few days after this letter, he wrote again to Warton (again using a Latin tag to emphasise the stateliness of the *Dictionary*), "My Book is now coming *in luminis oras* [into the radiant boundaries of light] what will be its fate I know not nor much think because thinking is to no purpose. It must stand the censures of *the great vulgar and the small*, of those that understand it and that understand it not."⁵⁷ He would at least like to believe that its size is an unmistakable mark of its quality and consequence, and that by it the *Dictionary* is lifted above the ruck of literature, giving it a dignity beyond the reach of ordinary criticism.

Kevin Hart has noted how generations of readers and commentators have also been attracted to this image of the *Dictionary* and have continued to circulate metaphors of its monumentality,

Christopher Smart commended it to the world as "a work I look upon with equal pleasure and amazement, as I do upon St. Paul's Cathedral." That image of the monumental persists through generation after generation, from John Walker's praise of the work as "the monument of English philology erected by Johnson" to W.K. Wimsatt's view of the *Dictionary* as a "public monument" and a "monumental English Dictionary."⁵⁸

To this catalogue we might add Lawrence Lipking's comment,

Everything about *A Dictionary of the English Language* is exaggerated. The size of the book, the speed with which one man produced it, the legendary definitions, the praise and blame it has always received, and the reputation as the ultimate

⁵⁶ 20 March 1755. *Letters* 1, 100.

⁵⁷ *Letters* 1, 101 (italics in original). 25 March 1755. The literary allusions are to Lucretius and to Cowley's imitation of Horace; see Redford's notes. Johnson's correspondence over this period traces an increasing sense of confidence in his achievement. On 4 February he is writing to Warton, to thank him for his part in obtaining his honorary Masters degree, of which he has just been informed, and which entitles him to be "Samuel Johnson, A.M." on the title page of the *Dictionary*. Thus fortified, three days later he is writing the famous letter of dismissal to his putative patron, Lord Chesterfield. These two letters to Warton, with their cheerful classical allusions, follow immediately his letter in Latin, of thanks to the Vice-Chancellor of the University.

⁵⁸ Hart, *Samuel Johnson and the Culture of Property*, 20.

authority on English usage that it wielded for more than a century: all seem blown out of proportion.⁵⁹

If its size puts it above criticism, its contents put it beneath criticism — not, of course, as a dictionary, but as a reading experience. As a huge text composed of thousands of very small texts, and which is itself its own index, it might be said to encapsulate Johnson's vision of the ideal literary form. Unlike Richardson's novels, the *Dictionary* is not a book that demands to be read. The man who will not "read long together with a folio on his table" will not be the sort of man who will want to *read* a dictionary; but its discontinuity, stylistic richness and diversity, the utility of its quotations, and its constant surprisingness, might tempt him to browse in it for longer than he might have expected. As a book for browsing and consulting, the *Dictionary* is another text by which time may subvert the dominance of place and materiality. It is a textual trap, set to ensnare any one with the slightest degree of intellectual curiosity.

In connection with the *Dictionary*, we may cite another of his characteristic literary strategies: **abridgement**. Johnson's literary career began with a work of abridgement, the translation of Lobo's *Voyage to Abyssinia* (1735), and the various translations and collections that we see among his *Designs*⁶⁰ would have as likely been, in execution, abridgements too. Abridgement is usually seen as a task requiring very little literary sophistication, perhaps because it is also seen as a practice that cheapens or vulgarises literature. Of course, it does not follow that because ordinary people might read and understand an abridged work, that to have produced it from a more complex original is a task befitting only ordinary abilities. Walter Bate says that the *Voyage to Abyssinia*, "shows a very active intelligence whenever it moves from literal translation to a distilled presentation in a few sentences of a page or so, or is expanded for the sake of clarity."⁶¹ As for the charge that abridgement somehow cheapens or damages literature, Johnson thought quite otherwise. Boswell claimed that abridgement was, at least, relatively harmless. He told Johnson that "printing an abridgement of a work ... was only cutting the horns and tail off the cow.— *Johnson*. 'No, Sir; 'tis making the cow have a calf.'"⁶² Johnson asserts, that is to say, that far from damaging a book, abridgement propagates a

⁵⁹ Lipking, *Samuel Johnson*, 109.

⁶⁰ See the Appendix, 342 ff, 349 ff.

⁶¹ Walter Jackson Bate, *Samuel Johnson*, 140, fn.

⁶² *Life* V, 72. *Tour*, 20 August 1773.

book further, and adds to its reputation. In a quasi-legal document which Johnson prepared for Cave in 1739, to defend the right to abridge books, he wrote:

The design of an abridgement is, to benefit mankind by facilitating the attainment of knowledge, and by contracting arguments, relations, or descriptions, into a narrow compass, to convey instruction in the easiest method, without fatiguing the attention, burdening the memory, or impairing the health of the student.⁶³

He argues that, "as an incorrect book is lawfully criticised ... so a tedious volume may, no less lawfully, be abridged." For an author to be tedious is to do the reader no less of a disservice than to mislead him. It is better, he says, that authors and publishers suffer some small loss than that "the valuable hours of thousands [be] thrown away."

In 1756, the year after the publication of the complete *Dictionary*, an abridged edition was released.⁶⁴ Johnson prepared the abridgement himself. This edition, in two octavo volumes, dramatically outsold the folio edition. In Johnson's lifetime there were four editions of the folio (1755-73), and *seven* of the octavo abridgement (1756-83).⁶⁵ Furthermore, as J.D. Fleeman shows in his *Bibliography*, the total numbers of copies printed of these editions were respectively, 5,042 of the folio, and 35,000 of the abridgement (5,000 copies in each edition).⁶⁶ But the greater visibility and lasting qualities of the folio, the fact that it would have been purchased by institutions and the wealthier classes, who are more likely to preserve books, and the fact that anyone doing scholarly work on the *Dictionary* will want to use the full text, has lead to the octavo abridgement being rather overlooked. The folio has also been reprinted four times in twentieth-century facsimile editions.⁶⁷

⁶³ "Considerations on the Case of Dr. T[rapp]'s Sermons", Johnson's *Works* [ed. F.P. Walesby] (London and Oxford: Pickering /Talboys and Wheeler, 1825), v, 465.

⁶⁴ It was advertised in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in January (*Life* 1, 303).

⁶⁵ I mean numbered London editions from Johnson's publishers; see Gwin J. Kolb and Robert DeMaria, Jr., "The Preliminaries to Dr. Johnson's *Dictionary*: Authorial Revisions and the Establishment of the Texts", *Studies in Bibliography* 48 (1995), 121, 130.

⁶⁶ See Fleeman, *Bibliography*. For figures for the folio *Dictionary* (item 55.4D) see 415, 420, 424, 429; for the abridgement (56.1DA) see 487, 489, 492, 495, 497, 499, 500.

⁶⁷ Fleeman, *Bibliography*, gives three facsimiles (1967, 1979, 1983) of the first edition (items 55.4D/1b [-d]), and one (1978) of the fourth (55.4D/4b).

The abridgement is, however, a major work of its kind, and must have cost Johnson considerable time and effort, particularly as it seems to have appeared hardly six months after the folio. It is, as Clifford describes it, "[d]rastically condensed, with quotations omitted, explanations shortened, and a number of words left out."⁶⁸ Johnson explains his strategies in a new short Preface. This Preface, which few students of Johnson can have seen, is very much of the nature of an advertisement, stating the virtues of the work and Johnson's qualifications as the writer.⁶⁹ In justifying the publication of an abridgement, Johnson writes that unlike the folio, which was intended "for the use of such as aspire to exactness of criticism, or elegance of style," an abridgement will be quite sufficient for the needs of "the greater number of readers, who, seldom intending to write, or presuming to judge, turn over books only to amuse their leisure, and to gain degrees of knowledge suitable to lower characters, or necessary to the common business of life."⁷⁰

If this sounds rather condescending, we should consider that he is likely to have been under pressure from the booksellers to do the work, and that the actual labour (involving little more than "the vexation of expunging") would have been far from pleasant, especially after having taken seven years to complete the *Dictionary*, at which point Johnson was no doubt anxious to move on to new tasks, such as his projected *Annals of Literature*, or the edition of Thomas More.⁷¹ In the *Dictionary*, he defines *abridgment* [1] as "The epitome of a larger work, contracted to a small compass; a compend; a summary,"⁷² and provides quotations from two of his most personally authoritative sources:

Surely this commandment containeth the law and the prophets; and, in this one word, is the *abridgment* of all volumes of scripture. *Hooker.*

Idolatry is certainly the first-born of folly, the great and leading paradox; nay, the very *abridgment* and sum total of all absurdities. *South's Sermons.*

⁶⁸ James L. Clifford, *Dictionary Johnson: Samuel Johnson's Middle Years* (London: Heinemann, 1980), 145.

⁶⁹ Its text does not appear to have ever been included in editions of Johnson's works, nor is it on either of the CD-ROM editions, the *Dictionary* or the *Major Authors*.

⁷⁰ Preface, *A Dictionary of the English Language ... abstracted from the folio edition*, by the author Samuel Johnson (London: J. Knapton, et al., 1756).

⁷¹ See Appendix, 372-73.

⁷² This is from the revised Fourth Edition (1773); the first had "The contraction of a larger work into a small compass."

Abridgement does not alter the character of a text. An abridgement of something noble is noble itself, and an abridgement of something absurd, absurd.

Textual extent, taken past some indefinable point, becomes a trope of infinity. Many artfully self-conscious writers have used strategies which exploit this perception. We might cite various examples: Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, which starts in the middle of a sentence of which the beginning is the last thing we read on the final page of the book; or the supposedly unfinished but in some ways unstated *Tristram Shandy*, or John Ashbery's book-length poem or pseudo-poem, *Flow Chart*, of which the length and discursiveness seem to satirize the whole process of reading and writing.⁷³ Johnson, we feel, would have been neither patient nor amused with such explicit and deliberate efforts to waste the time of the reader, detecting in them a dangerously cheerful nihilism.

IV. Resisting the Narrative Imperative

None of these strategies for the control or management of long texts can be practised by the purveyors or consumers of the most pervasive and persuasive variety of text: narrative. For a narrative to arrive abridged or indexed, or for the consumer to browse rather than read, is to undermine the essence of narrative, and certainly what is most appealing about it. For a text to be narrative is to (seem to) have extension in time.

The realistic prose fiction was still a new and uncertain form in Johnson's time. But despite his doubts about novels, what he responds to most strongly in the plays of Shakespeare are attributes that we can only describe as novelistic. "[H]is real power," Johnson says, "is not shown in the splendour of particular passages, but by the progress of his fable, and the tenour of his dialogue." The appeal of, for instance, the novels of Jane Austen is exactly the 'progress of her fable, and the tenour of her dialogue.' "Fable" Johnson uses in the sense of the Latin *fabula*, 'plot' or 'story.' In the *Dictionary*, *fable* [4] is defined as "The series or contexture of events which constitute a poem epick or dramattick," and is illustrated by the following quotations:

The moral is the first business of the poet: this being formed, he contrives such a design or *fable* as may be most suitable to the moral. *Dryden's Dufresnoy*.

⁷³ John Ashbery, *Flow Chart* (London: Carcanet, 1991). For a discussion which takes up this issue, see my article, "An Empty Gesture: John Ashbery's *Flow Chart*," *Meridian* 16:1 (May 1997), 33-46.

The first thing to be considered in an epick poem is the *fable*, which is perfect or imperfect, according as the action, which it relates, is more or less so.

Addison's Spectator.

These two authorities, with their contrary assertions about the first thing in poetry or first business of poets, can only have been so placed by Johnson in order that they debate with each other. Whether, in a narrative poem ("epic or dramatick"), the place of priority belongs to the fable or the moral, is a question that must be undecided, and the quotations seem to have been deliberately chosen to reflect Johnson's own ambiguity, and his recognition of the strength of the two positions. What cannot be doubted is Shakespeare's "real power." The effects to which Johnson is responsive are not characteristic of his favorite or customary reading or, in an age pre-dating the dictatorship of the novel, of most of the texts available to be read by anyone. But perhaps the "power" of the Shakespearean "fable" is felt all the more strongly for that. Johnson is not at all ambiguous about identifying these effects as justified by the effectiveness in achieving the fundamental writerly aim: to *be read*. Of Shakespeare again, he says,

he always makes us anxious for the event, and has perhaps excelled all but Homer in securing *the first purpose of a writer*, by exciting restless and unquenchable curiosity, and compelling him that reads his work to read it through.⁷⁴

This is an impressive tribute; every reader knows of Johnson's resistance to *reading* books *through*.

But the anxieties that are registered in his choice of illustrative quotations for *fable* are apparent in a number of frequently reiterated expressions of Johnson's which indicate a nervousness about the tendencies of long texts, especially when they are narratives, and even more especially when they are imaginative. Such texts, he tells us, *enchain attention, seize the mind, and take possession of the memory*. Although it involves returning to some passages we have already considered, at least in part, we will examine each of these expressions in turn.

⁷⁴ Preface, *Johnson on Shakespeare* VII, 83 (my emphasis).

Enchain the attention:

The power of Shakespeare, according to Johnson, is second only to that of Homer; Milton too is surpassed by and dependent upon the same classical exemplar.

Milton cannot be said to have contrived the structure of an epic poem, and therefore owes reverence to that vigour and amplitude of mind to which all generations must be indebted for the art of poetical narration [i.e., to Homer], for the texture of the fable, the variation of incidents, the interposition of dialogue, and all the stratagems that surprise and *enchain attention*.⁷⁵

To "enchain attention" seems here to be Johnson's summary of the chief aim of "poetical narration" (and the first of the stratagems he mentions, unsurprisingly, is "the texture of the fable"). The expression also occurs in the Preface to Shakespeare, where he briefly and incidentally summarises Shakespeare's purposes as "amusing *attention* with incidents, or *enchaining* it in suspense."⁷⁶ Whilst "incidents" — a stream of discrete events — may "amuse" our attention, where "suspense" over the various turns and ultimate outcome of the narrative is primary, the attention is enchained. In *Rambler* 88, one of the series on Milton's versification, he characterises poetry as "that harmony that adds force to reason, and gives grace to sublimity; that *shackles attention*, and governs passion."⁷⁷ Yet the enchaining of attention is far from being an effect which Johnson unreservedly recommends. In one of his *Sermons*, he advises that we should not postpone until old age any intention of reformation of life, because "[i]mmediate pain and present vexation will then do what amusement and gaiety did before, will *enchain the attention*, and occupy the thoughts, and leave little vacancy for the past or future." Now, he challenges Taylor's congregation, with the emphasis of a preacher about to make an altar call, "We are in full possession of the *present* moment; let the *present* moment be improved."⁷⁸ Part of the appeal of extended fictitious narratives is that they withdraw us from engagement with the present moment, and potentially from confronting the need for reformation of life.

At every stage of life, it is a danger that, despite our possessing moral agency only with regard to the present, we will not give the present sufficient attention. Much of what

⁷⁵ 'Milton,' *Lives* I, 194.

⁷⁶ Preface, *Johnson on Shakespeare* VII, 74.

⁷⁷ *Rambler* 88; IV, 99.

⁷⁸ *Sermons*, no. 10; 113 (Johnson's emphasis).

we naturally do with our minds and imaginations — our dreams, schemes and memories — are fodder for this fatal inattention, without our needing to seek out fictions for our distraction. In his notes on Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, on the lines, "Thou hast nor youth, nor age; /But as it were an after-dinner's sleep, /Dreaming on both" (III.i.32), Johnson comments:

This is exquisitely imagined. When we are young we busy ourselves in forming schemes for succeeding time, and miss the gratifications that are before us; when we are old, we amuse the languour of age with the recollection of youthful pleasures or performances; so that *our life, of which no part is filled with the business of the present time*, resembles our dreams after dinner, when the events of the morning are mingled with the designs of the evening.⁷⁹

Johnson writes of "how the attention can be seized ... by a tale of love," but notes that an unimaginative and un-idea'd man of business may not be so moved. However, he says of biography that "no species of writing ... can more certainly *enchain the heart* by irresistible interest."⁸⁰ Whether for its seizing or enchaining, the heart, mind, or attention, Johnson is anxious about the effects of narrative.

Seize the mind:

In the following extract, of which we considered the conclusion a moment ago, Johnson starts by suggesting that the turns of a narrative have the strongest appeal to rather primitive, vulgar and unsophisticated tastes. Again, he is writing about Shakespeare.

His plots, whether historical or fabulous, are always crowded with incidents, by which the *attention* of a rude people was more easily caught than by sentiment or argumentation; and such is the power of the marvellous even over those who despise it, that every man finds his *mind more strongly seized* by the tragedies of Shakespeare than of any other writer; others please us by particular speeches, but he always makes us anxious for the event, and has perhaps excelled all but Homer in securing the first purpose of a writer, by exciting restless and unquenchable curiosity, and compelling him that reads his work to read it through.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Johnson on Shakespeare VII, 193 (my emphasis).

⁸⁰ Rambler 60; III, 319.

⁸¹ Preface, Johnson on Shakespeare VII, 83 (my emphasis).

Whilst he asserts, as always, sheer readability as a writer's first aim, and affirms Shakespeare as irresistibly successful in achieving it, Johnson's expression "even ... those who despise it" shows that his hesitation about the appeal of "the marvellous" and (which is only a step away from it) any fictitious narrative, is a moral hesitation. His implicit warning is not only to "rude people" but "every man." The mind which allows — or which invites — itself to be seized by Shakespeare could almost as easily be seized by anything else, especially if, as Johnson seems to fear, many people are in active pursuit of any opportunity for mere mental abandonment. Hester Thrale writes of Johnson having, in writing his *Lives of the Poets*, been

inspired by the same laudable motive which made him reject every authority for a word in his dictionary that could only be gleaned from writers dangerous to religion or morality — "I would not (said he) send people to look for words in a book, that by such a casual *seizure of the mind* might chance to mislead it for ever."⁸²

According to Johnson, it does not require the power of Shakespeare to seize a reader's mind — it may be seized *casually*, in a moment of inattention, and be led forever astray. He would agree with T.S. Eliot, who wrote,

I incline to come to the alarming conclusion that it is just the literature that we read for 'amusement' or 'purely for pleasure' that may have the greatest and least suspected influence upon us. It is the literature we read with the least effort that can have the easiest and most insidious influence upon us.⁸³

Take possession of the memory.

Even people who are careful about the thoughts they entertain may be diverted from the paths of virtue by taking pleasure in a vivid narrative. This is from the well-known *Rambler* 4, his only substantial piece about modern novels.

But if the power of example is so great, as to take *possession of the memory* by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without the intervention of the will, care ought to be taken that, when the choice is unrestrained, the best examples

⁸² Thrale, *Anecdotes*. *Johns. Misc.* 1, 272.

⁸³ T.S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature," *Selected Essays*, 3rd edn. (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 396.

only should be exhibited; and that which is likely to operate so strongly, should not be mischievous or uncertain in its effects.⁸⁴

Most people's beliefs, he fears, are held to rather loosely, and any accident may shake them from them. He asserts in a particularly cynical moment that "the greater part of humankind speak and act wholly by imitation";⁸⁵ and if a novel depicts a corrupt mode of life, and does not encourage nor even seem to allow sober reflection on the subject, its effects are sure to be "mischievous." It is not, of course, only literature that is able to exert this sort of influence: "We are in danger," he says in *Rambler* 7, "from whatever can get possession of our thoughts; all that can excite in us either pain or pleasure has a tendency to obstruct the way that leads to happiness."⁸⁶ Unless our thoughts are well under our control, we are likely to be formed in our most inward beliefs and attitudes by very shallow influences: the pains or pleasures need not be very intense. In his long note on the witches in *Macbeth*, Johnson accounts for the prevalence in Shakespeare's day of belief in witchcraft, by the simple observation that "the greatest part of mankind have no other reason for their opinions than that they are in fashion."⁸⁷

Whilst, as I have said, the effects that Johnson found in long narrative texts may not have been characteristic of his customary or favorite reading, he felt them very strongly. He is not, like many moralists, concerned to condemn impulses and weaknesses that he does not share. I mentioned in the last chapter his fondness for romances, and it is time to further consider the subject. Bishop Percy told Boswell that Johnson was, as a boy, "immoderately fond of reading romances of chivalry, and he retained his fondness for them through life." Percy mentions Johnson passing some weeks at his home in the country, in the summer of 1764, and "he chose for his regular reading the old Spanish

⁸⁴ *Rambler* 4; III, 22.

⁸⁵ *Rambler* 164; v, 107.

⁸⁶ *Rambler* 7; III, 38.

⁸⁷ Note on *Macbeth* I.i.1, *Johnson on Shakespeare* VIII, 754. Johnson also remarks on people's subjection to fashion, in matters deeper than clothes and hairstyles, in *Ramblers* 135 (IV, 351: "most will feel, or say that they feel, the gratifications which others have taught them to expect") and 188 (V, 223: "the greater part of mankind are gay or serious by infection, and follow without resistance the attraction of example"). This topic could be pursued at much greater length. Fernand Braudel identifies fashion as emerging as a force in Europe with the increased wealth and leisure (of certain classes) in the early modern period, as a force in a dangerous relation to everyday life. "Fashion seems to enjoy freedom to act and to pursue its whims. In fact, its path is largely ordained in advance and its range of choice limited." Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life: The Limits of the Possible*, New edn., rev. Sian Reynolds; trans. from the French [by Mary Kochan] (London: Collins, 1981), 321.

romance FELIXMARTE OF HIRCANIA, in folio, which he read quite through."⁸⁸ In 1776, he was reading *Il Palmerino d'Inghilterra* on his annual jaunt, although Boswell seems slightly sceptical in reporting that "He said, he read it for the language."⁸⁹ Eithne Henson lists fourteen "[r]omances referred to or demonstrably read by Johnson."⁹⁰

DeMaria characterises Johnson's fondness for such fiction as a weakness, asserting that he "struggled against such noncritical absorption in a book."⁹¹ It is the kind of reading (or attention to a text) characteristic of children and "rude [that is, primitive] people." Romance represents the acme of the kind of absorption demanded by all fiction, because it features events and devices that are not and are not meant to be credible, and so it seems to insist on being read uncritically. Johnson writes in a tone of condescension that "the writers of barbarous romances invigorated the reader by a giant and a dwarf."⁹² Stories with giants and dwarfs, knights and dragons, are to be read rapidly, and without pausing for thought — because to do so would rob the story of its power. So such stories are particularly enjoyed — and are probably the only sort of reading enjoyed — by people who do not wish *ever* to pause for thought. The pleasures that they receive from their reading are almost merely sensual: they are "invigorated" by reading. The three long stories that Johnson could enjoy without any feelings of ambiguity offer something more than mere narrative. *Robinson Crusoe* is full of moral uplift, *Pilgrim's Progress* is an allegory of the Christian life, and *Don Quixote* is a long parable about the dangers of reading romances.

De Certeau makes a similar point, when he argues that fictitious narrative aims to colonize the everyday life of ordinary people, to make a science of it. "To define the position of the other (primitive, religious, mad, childlike, or popular) as a 'fable' is not merely to identify it with 'what speaks' (*fari*), but with a speech that 'does not know' what it says."⁹³ The "primitive, religious, mad, childlike, or popular" here represent people whose lives are not caught up in encoding and decoding text. To write, in other words, a

⁸⁸ *Life* I, 49 and n.1. 1725.

⁸⁹ *Life* III, 2. 27 March 1776.

⁹⁰ Eithne Henson, *"The Fictions of Romantick Chivalry": Samuel Johnson and Romance* (Rutherford, NJ.: Fairleigh Dickinson U.P., 1992), 254.

⁹¹ DeMaria, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading*, 7.

⁹² Preface, *Johnson on Shakespeare* VII, 64.

⁹³ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 160.

fictitious story about extra-literary everyday life, is to co-opt the oral and ordinary for the scriptural economy. Writing always purports to and seems to *interpret*; and fictitious narrative therefore implies that everyday life, if it remains outside of what is written, is unconscious and without meaning. It is this that constitutes what Johnson calls 'promiscuous description' — that is, realistically to describe ordinary life, without drawing particular moral lessons, which is to imply that there *are* no lessons to be gained from life.

His nervousness about the effects of narrative on a reader or a viewer is underlined by the warmth of his response to certain scenes in Shakespeare, which is testified to by a number of memorable and hence often-repeated anecdotes. He writes in his notes to *King Lear*, about his distress at the death of Cordelia, "I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor."⁹⁴ He told Hester Thrale a similar story about his response as a child to the ghost in *Hamlet*:

when he was about nine years old, having got the play of Hamlet in his hand, and reading it quietly in his father's kitchen, he kept on steadily enough, till coming to the Ghost scene, he suddenly hurried up stairs to the street door that he might see people about him.⁹⁵

It is perhaps this experience that was in his mind when he made a note about the portrayal of night in *Macbeth*, upon which he reflected, "He that peruses Shakespeare, looks round alarmed, and starts to find himself alone."⁹⁶

"A play read," he asserts, "affects the mind like a play acted."⁹⁷ Whether this was, in his time, something true only of Johnson in particular, or of a wider readership is hard to say. It is a remark that strikes a reader today as far from obvious. For most readers, a "play read" is a far less intense experience than a novel read, and both experiences exert far less of a pull on the mind than television or the cinema. Plays and film-scripts are nowadays read merely as adjuncts to performances, or for the purposes of study. Furthermore, both sorts of texts would today contain far more information than

⁹⁴ General note to *King Lear*, *Johnson on Shakespeare* VIII, 704.

⁹⁵ Thrale, *Anecdotes*. *Johns. Misc.* 1, 158.

⁹⁶ Note on *Macbeth* II.i.49, *Johnson on Shakespeare* VIII, 770.

⁹⁷ Preface, *Johnson on Shakespeare* VII, 79.

printed plays of Johnson's time, when play writing conventions did not extend to detailed scene descriptions, descriptions of characters, instructions as to how lines are to be spoken, or even stage directions. A reader of an eighteenth-century play would require a good imagination. Yet Johnson apparently found himself vividly engaged by reading plays, silently and alone. The novel, with its possibility of vivid description, unifying narratorial voice, passages of extra-diegetic reflection, and so forth, exerts a far stronger pull on the mind. Novels have since his day developed even more techniques to enhance their immediacy and realism, such as unreliable narrators, multiple points of view, non-linear narrative — many of them techniques adapted from the cinema. Johnson's comment on how reading a play "affects the mind" is certainly testimony to a powerfully vivid imagination. His awareness of this power in part accounts for his qualms about realistic prose fiction. (What Johnson's feelings would be about modern cinema — the colour, the noise, the volume, the speed, the sheer size of the screen — can only be imagined.)

An anxiety such as I have described might be at the bottom of his ambiguous feelings toward music (which we will consider again and more fully in Chapter Seven). It is often asserted, and usually to humorous effect, that Johnson had no feeling whatever for music. But I suspect he exaggerated his coldness in order to distance himself from the uncritical raptures expressed by many people whose pleasure in music he felt to be at least half-feigned. When not merely mocking music and those who were (or claimed to be) sensible to its appeal, Johnson occasionally allows himself to register an awareness of its power to bypass the intellect, and commandeer the attention. Like plays in performance, and narrative texts, music is an art of which the extent, in this case, extension in time, may not be subverted. One sits and listens, surrenders oneself, to a piece of music, for however long it takes. Johnson understands and knows himself to be susceptible to this sort of power — though not so much with regard to music, as to narrative — and is nervous about allowing it a foothold. Indeed, music seems to him to bypass the rational faculties completely. On Mull, Boswell recorded, "Tonight he said, that, 'if he had learnt musick, he should have been afraid he would have done nothing else but play. It was a method of employing the mind, without the labour of thinking at all, and with some applause from a man's self.'"⁹⁸ Not only does music save us from thinking, it leaves room in the mind for "nothing else": the phrase is repeated (twice) in another conversation on the subject five years later.⁹⁹ The "applause from a man's self" he recognises as rational, in a master

⁹⁸ *Life* v, 315. *Tour*, 15 October.

⁹⁹ See *Life* III, 242. 7 April 1778: "Had I learnt to fiddle, I should have done nothing else ... I might as well have played on the violoncello as another; but I should have done nothing else."

musician ("There is nothing," he observed, "in which the power of art is shown so much as in playing on the fiddle"¹⁰⁰), but he is contemptuous of the tone of self-congratulation, in a mere listener, for having fine feelings — of which Boswell later provides a convenient example:

I told him, that it ["musick"] affected me to such a degree, as often to agitate my nerves painfully, producing in my mind alternate sensations of pathetick dejection, so that I was ready to shed tears; and of daring resolution, so that I was inclined to rush into the thickest part of the battle. "Sir, (said he,) I should never hear it, if it made me such a fool."¹⁰¹

That the mind might be fully occupied, but "without the labour of thinking," whether by images, music, or narrative, seems to Johnson a dangerously attractive proposition, but something which in the end reduces us to something foolish, childish, rude — less than fully human.

V. The Present Moment

Johnson's anxiety about human employment of the "the present moment" is a perennial concern of moralists, exacerbated by various new conditions of the early modern era. Although he has nothing in particular to say about the actual phrase, Stuart Sherman identifies in Johnson's time, "conflicts ... at large in the culture between the new fascination with *the present moment*, and long-standing religious traditions that stipulated a focus on futurity and eternity." These conflicts have been, he says, brought into prominence in the eighteenth century (at least in part) by the development of accurate and portable time-keeping devices. "To the degree that time is palpable," he argues, "it can also be possessed;"¹⁰² or so it might seem to the owner of a watch. That we can see time by the minute, and can not only see it but hold it in our hand, suggests that time is moment by moment ours for the using. Such a perspective, it is argued, has the potential to distract us from attending to our future state.

¹⁰⁰ *Life* II, 226. 15 April 1773.

¹⁰¹ *Life* III, 197. 23 September 1777. In the Journal account, Johnson appears to be saying that he (Boswell) "should never hear it" (*Boswell in Extremes*, 182).

¹⁰² Stuart Sherman, *Telling Time: Clocks, Diaries, and English Diurnal Form, 1660-1785* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 1996), 188, 44; my emphasis.

Now, there is a certain ambiguity about some of this, which it might be well to clarify. The future, to which conventional religious moralists would have us attend, is not our own temporal future, the years ahead of mortal life, but the life eternal, which is "in the future" only insofar as we enter it (or at least, only become inescapably aware that we have entered it) after our death. We might well plan for our temporal future, and moralists as well as common sense will argue that we ought to do so. Equally, however, moralists may advise us against wasting the present time, in which we could take useful action, by fruitlessly dreaming about the future. Johnson argues thus in the following:

That the mind of man is never satisfied with the objects immediately before it, but is always breaking away from the present moment, and losing itself in schemes of future felicity; and that we forget the proper use of the time now in our power, to provide for the enjoyment of that which, perhaps, may never be granted us, has been frequently remarked¹⁰³

It has indeed been frequently remarked, and it is not Johnson's business in this essay to contradict it. But here, in Johnson's own words, are some remarks that seem to tug in the opposite direction: some famous words from his *Journey to the Western Islands*, "Whatever withdraws us from the power of our senses; whatever makes the past, the distant, or the future predominate over the present, advances us in the dignity of thinking beings."¹⁰⁴ Hester Thrale quotes him saying, concerning one of her children, "whoever lays up his penny rather than part with it for a cake, at least is not the slave of gross appetite; and shews besides a preference always to be esteemed, of the future to the present moment."¹⁰⁵ Here is the ambiguity. Does Johnson advocate that we think about the future, or that we be occupied with the present moment? But, of course, it is not our attending to the present moment that he rejects in the *Journey*, any more than he is advocating that we occupy ourselves with vain imaginings about alternative past or futures. What he is warning against is our being in the thrall of sensory experience, which is of course only available to us in the present. Sensory experience is an inescapable condition of living in the present. But it ought not to drive all else out of the minds of a rational being. A thoughtful character such as Imlac can occupy his time in the Happy Valley by learning and reminiscence, but of his companions he considers that "The rest, whose minds

¹⁰³ *Rambler* 2; III, 9.

¹⁰⁴ Johnson, *Journey to the Western Islands*, ed. Fleeman, 123-24.

¹⁰⁵ Thrale, *Anecdotes. Johns. Misc.* I, 251-52.

have no impression but of the *present moment*, are either corroded by malignant passions, or sit stupid in the gloom of perpetual vacancy."¹⁰⁶ The present moment ought to drive out neither the rational contemplation of the past or the future, nor the knowledge that, as creatures with an eternal destiny, the present is our only sphere of moral action.

The image of Christians as fixated with a possibly imaginary future state at the expense of engagement with the present moment, with the material world, and with the culture and society in which they live ("pie in the sky when you die," in the words of Joe Hill), is a caricature, or the caricature of a heresy. We might cite the almost entirely orthodox C.S. Lewis, "The present is the only time in which any duty can be done or any grace received,"¹⁰⁷ and in another place, "the Present is the point at which time touches eternity."¹⁰⁸ For a more weighty and canonical source, T.S. Eliot,

Time past and time future

Allow but a little consciousness.

To be conscious is not to be in time

But only in time can the moment in the rose garden,

The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,

The moment in the draughty church at smokefall

Be remembered; involved with past and future.

Only through time time is conquered.¹⁰⁹

Indeed, the *Four Quartets* as a whole is a meditation on this theme. That Johnson is to be identified with this tradition is apparent in such remarks as, "It matters not how a man dies, but how he lives."¹¹⁰ The conflict described by Sherman, between "the present moment, and long-standing religious traditions," is for him an illusion, but a potent one.

That the recognition of the *present moment* is, in the eighteenth century, in some ways a new phenomenon, may be seen in the use of the word *moment*. Prior to the eighteenth century, a "moment" was seen not as something present, but something *passing*.

¹⁰⁶ *Rasselas*, Ch. XII, 55 (my emphasis).

¹⁰⁷ Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1942), 76 (Ch. xv).

¹⁰⁸ Lewis, "Learning in War-Time," *Transposition, and Other Addresses* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1949), 53.

¹⁰⁹ Eliot, "Burnt Norton" II, *Four Quartets*.

¹¹⁰ *Life* II, 106-07. 26 October 1769.

The term comes from the Latin, *momentum*, that is, movement; early English uses, as given in the *OED*, stress the moment as that point in time at which something changes or happens, as in Tyndale's 1526 translation of 1 Corinthians 15:52, "We shall all be chaunged and that in a *moment* and in the twincklyng of an eye." In the seventeenth century, Johnson's favorite philosopher, John Locke, wrote that "all the parts of duration are duration;"¹¹¹ he might thus be credited with the idea that a moment is not something analagous to a mathematical point, but a particle. The *OED* cites him under *moment* as follows, "Such a small part in Duration, may be called a Moment, and is the time of one Idea in our Minds, in the train of their ordinary Succession there." In his *Dictionary*, Johnson defines *moment* [3] as "An indivisible particle of time." The idea that a moment could be put to use seems to have still been a novelty when in 1748 Lord Chesterfield (as cited in the *OED*) writes to his son, "The value of moments, when cast up, is immense, if well employed.... Every moment may be put to some use."

But the present moment is not exactly there for the taking; he says in *Rambler* 41, "almost all that we can be said to enjoy is past or future; the present is in perpetual motion, leaves us as soon as it arrives, ceases to be present before its presence is well perceived, and is only known to have existed by the effects which it leaves behind."¹¹² If we are to put the present to some use, we must be ever ready; as he asserts in the *Idler*, "We must *snatch* the present moment, and employ it well, without too much sollicitude [*sic*] for the future, and content ourselves with reflecting that our part is performed."¹¹³ His ideal is that, by taking possession of each present moment as it comes, we may be empowered to live the whole of our lives in the context of eternity. If we are "in full possession of the present moment" we will resist strategies and devices that would enchain us to a present which is characterised merely by the ongoing processing of sensory data.

This construction finds strong and surprising parallels in de Certeau's analysis of the practice of everyday life. These *strategies* of control, that seek to render us passive consumers, are according to de Certeau employed by "a subject of will and power."¹¹⁴ The sorts of subjects he means are institutions (legal, religious, military or bureaucratic),

¹¹¹ Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. A.S. Pringle-Pattison (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924), 118 (Bk. II, Ch. 15).

¹¹² *Rambler* 41; III, 223-24.

¹¹³ *Idler* 4; 15 (my emphasis).

¹¹⁴ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xix.

employers and proprietors, technologies and infrastructures, like cities. According to Johnson, who sees humans as moral and rational beings, other such subjects are parts of our own nature: fashions, habits, and our own bodily senses. De Certeau says that whereas a strategy "assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *proper*," the *tactics* whereby a consumer negotiates a life necessarily lived within the space of such structures, do not have a proper *place*. "[A] tactic," he says, "depends on time — it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized 'on the wing'" (xix). A tactic has mobility, but it is "a mobility that must accept *the chance offerings of the moment*, and seize ... *the possibilities* that offer themselves at any given moment" (37, my emphasis). It is not everyday tactical behaviour to stockpile winnings, fortify a position, or plan raids, for to do so requires a place. Johnson's exhortation to "snatch the present moment" acknowledges that we are always pulling against material nature; to "snatch the present moment" is a quintessentially tactical move, and hence, an affirmation of the everyday.

"[T]he present moment" is in fact a very frequent expression in Johnson's writings. He stresses its evanescence ("some extemporary joy, which the present moment offers, and another perhaps will put out of reach"¹¹⁵), and our disinclination to engage with it ("Let us trust that a time will come, when the present moment shall be no longer irksome"¹¹⁶). He laments human passivity and sensual enslavement ("They have no uneasy expectation of what is to come; but are ever *tied* down to the present moment"¹¹⁷). But when he is speaking directly to his readers from the chair of wisdom, without irony, without rueful sorrow, it is in the language of exhortation, linking the present moment with eternity. These three sentences are from *The Rambler*:

The great consideration which ought to influence us in the use of the present moment, is to arise from the effect, which, as well or ill applied, it must have upon the time to come

[W]hatever portion of it [happiness] the distributing hand of heaven offers to each individual, is a needful support and refreshment for the present moment, so far as it may not hinder the attaining his final destination.

¹¹⁵ *Idler* 94; 290.

¹¹⁶ *Letters* 1, 207. Letter to Guiseppi Baretti, 20 July 1762.

¹¹⁷ Atterbury, quoted in the *Dictionary*, under *tied*.

All have agreed that our amusements should not terminate wholly in the present moment, but contribute more or less to future advantage.¹¹⁸

The most notable such expression is one which mirrors the sentence from *Sermon* 19, which started us on this theme, "We are in full possession of the present moment; let the present moment be improved." In a later sermon, that which he wrote in 1752 to be preached at the funeral of his wife, he has the preacher — with a rare use of the exclamation point — exhort the hearers, "The present moment is in our power: let us, therefore, from the present moment, begin our repentance!"¹¹⁹

By the late seventeenth century, Stuart Sherman tells us, watches had ceased to be displayed publicly by men, as an item of ornament, and had begun "disappearing into pockets." This tended to privatise time, to suggest that the ways in which any one ought to employ the time were, in the end, what we call 'personal.' Furthermore, Sherman argues, the precision in the measurement of time achieved in the seventeenth century by the personal watch "intensified the privacy of its data." "[T]he watch," he says, "amounts to a kind of capital, whose yield is increased possession of time and self through an enhanced knowledge of the way the self operates over time."¹²⁰ It seems appropriate that at a time when there is the emergence of a leisured and educated middle-class, and this new sense of private ownership of time, that the novel should develop as a literary form perfectly adapted to occupy this newly vacant property.

Novel-reading is a private not a social or a communal occupation. It imposes an isolation upon the individual, and demands the giving over of tracts of time to absorption in one's own mental processes, yet in a context in which it seems a requirement that those processes are completely subject to strategies that are working perhaps against our wills, and at least against our interests. Without too much exaggeration, we might see novel-reading as being in Johnson's view analogous to other solitary vices, but this is a theme we must leave for a chapter, in order to explore in more detail the neglected varieties of reading and disreputable kinds of text to which Johnson was unambiguously attracted.

¹¹⁸ *Rambler* 41 (III, 225); No. 44 (III, 242); No. 89 (IV, 108).

¹¹⁹ *Sermons*, no. 25; 271.

¹²⁰ Sherman, *Telling Time*, 85, 96, 91.

CHAPTER SIX

Minutiæ Literariæ

I. Anti-Canonical Genres

In the previous chapter we have considered the modes of text that *minutiae literariae* are not, and their affects and implications for readers. There is perhaps less now to be said on the positive side, as these are types of text that are as various in origin and description, as the items of any particular collection may be in essence. The forms themselves we may summarise as *quotations, ana, maxims, proverbs, aphorisms, apophthegms, anecdotes*, although many other literary artefacts (or other names for the same artefacts) could be included. These minor forms are not, in fact, easy to distinguish. We recognise the items, but, as Isobel Grundy observes, "to give them their right name is harder."¹ The defining characteristics of each are in different categories. Anecdotes are small narratives, aphorisms and apophthegms are distinguished by a precision and sparseness of verbal form, *ana* by its origins in conversation, proverbs by their currency in oral tradition, quotations by the use to which any of the foregoing are or have been put. Proverbs, that is, have been communally selected for oral preservation and transmission; quotations are circulated by individuals and may be written or spoken. Small texts, even if they are not actually oral in origin, are implicated in orality, as their size, pointedness, verbal pungency, makes them prone to circulation by quotation. All of them are to be distinguished from the major and (not coincidentally) larger prose literary forms by their everydayness.

There are, of course, degrees (as well as types) of literary everydayness. Aphorisms are particularly everyday forms, being composed of spoken language, but having a shape which corresponds directly to the thought which they contain, and severe size limits that facilitate recall. There are many aphorisms of which we may not wish to say they are everyday — say, those of Heraclitus — but although a lifetime may not be long enough in which to finish thinking about some such thought as "the way up and the way down are one and the same," a moment is sufficient to both read it, and remember it forever. Understanding need not necessarily be coterminous with the experience of

¹ Isobel Grundy, "Samuel Johnson: Man of Maxims?", in Grundy, ed., *Samuel Johnson: New Critical Essays* (London /Totawa, NJ.: Vision /Barnes & Noble, 1984), 13.

reading. The understanding of an aphorism will grow and unfold itself in the mind. Conversely, the reader or student of a long text feels under an obligation to understand the text whilst he is reading, and to understand all that has been read up to any point before he can proceed. Understanding that this is the condition on which he can proceed, he may not proceed, and may not commence. For the aphorist, epigrammatist, or retailer of anecdotes, simply getting one's text into the reader's head is far more important. Once lodged there, by whatever means, a short text may put down roots into the sub-conscious, and much later and when necessary bear fruit in action.

Johnson believes all truth to be partial and cumulative, such that an aphorism, and a series of mutually exclusive aphorisms, may properly represent it. We have noticed this in his citation of authorities for *fable* in the *Dictionary*. As Imlac told Rasselas, "Inconsistencies ... cannot both be right, but, imputed to man, they may both be true."² We have in Chapter Three observed, in his discussion of Pope's *Essay on Man*, the quotation from Hooker, "It is possible that by long circumduction, from any one truth all truth may be inferred." The cynicism and, it must be said, intellectual modesty of this seems to undermine something of the sheer *power* that we expect as a characteristic of significant works of art. We are accustomed to describing work that has a claim to being regarded as canonical (even if we wish to reject that politically-charged and now contested notion), by words such as great, powerful, or (the word of choice of the canon's most recent champion, Harold Bloom) *strong*. This vocabulary has no word that can be convincingly attached to small literary artefacts; can there be great aphorists, or powerful epigrams, or strong retailers of anecdotes? The forms themselves always seem to carry a sense of being oral and hence unoriginal; we are surprised when some particular item is able to be traced back to an originator. They are frequently extracted from longer works. They do not change our lives, as some great novel may seem to, or seem on repeated readings full of endless resonances with our lived experience, as some great poem might. In all these senses they are what I have already called anti-canonical. They undermine authorship, the integrity of a literary work, literary power, the imagination, critical acuity, reading itself: all literary constructs that might shackle our attention.

We have mentioned aphorisms in our earlier discussion of Johnson's prose. In that place I left unsolved a problem of Bacon's about the effect or use of aphorisms, and it may help to see them in the rather vulgar light of textual extent, that is, in relation to other

² *Rasselas*, Ch. VIII, 33.

kinds of short text. If aphorisms are magistral rather than "of probation," as Bacon asserted, it may be on the basis of both their precision of form, and their frequent anonymity, both of which are implicated with oral memorability. Literary quotations, by contrast, need not be memorable in form — as writing in this instance replaces memory — and are more frequently attached to the name of an originating individual. The author's name — certain names in certain circles — may lend authority; contrariwise, the attachment of a particular sentence to a particular name also suggests that another name or authority could supply a quotation with an alternative perspective.

The positive side to Johnson's attraction to small texts may be seen in his catalogue of literary designs, in which more than a dozen of his listed projects may be said to partake of these modes. In addition to the item labelled "Minutiæ Literariæ," there are proposed collections of epigrams, proverbs, exemplary stories, maxims, classical miscellanies, moral and devotional advice, notes on language, three books of letters and three topical dictionaries.³ All these items he imagines to be potentially interesting and useful, relatively straight-forward to produce (a not-unimportant consideration), and having no tendency to enslave the attention of the reader. We may consider them also as subject to what Boswell in the *Tour to the Hebrides* observes as his characteristic pleasure in "little things"⁴ (on which we shall comment further). The *Tour* alone affords innumerable instances of this: his love of anecdotes, his regard for the state of common life, his fondness for slight reading, his attention to detail, his admiration for the proud spirit of little nations, and simply the immense variety of subjects on which he has an informed opinion. Isobel Grundy has devoted a chapter to Johnson's "Vindication of Littleness," which she explains as based on his Christian faith: "His own strong sense of the dignity of mankind was grounded on his belief in our accountability to God for all our actions, a belief which ensures that, though the greatest human event is petty *in itself*, the smallest is immense in its eternal consequences."⁵ We shall now consider the positive textual manifestations of this in more detail.

³ See Appendix, 330-34.

⁴ *Life* v, 249. *Tour*, 23 September.

⁵ Grundy, *Samuel Johnson and the Scale of Greatness*, 77.

II. Aphorisms, Apophthegms

We should look for more insight at Johnson's entries from the *Dictionary* for this family of words.

APHORISM. *n. s.* [αφορισμός.] A maxim; a precept contracted in a short sentence; an unconnected position.

He will easily discern how little of truth there is in the multitude; and though sometimes they are flattered with that *aphorism*, will hardly believe the voice of the people to be the voice of God. *Brown's Vulgar Errors, b. i. c. 3.*

I shall at present consider the *aphorism*, that a man of religion and virtue is a more useful, and consequently a more valuable member of a community. *Rogers's Sermons.*

APHORISTICAL. *adj.* [from *aphorism*.] In the form of an aphorism; in separate and unconnected sentences.

APHORISTICALLY. *adv.* [from *aphoristical*.] In the form of an aphorism.

These being carried down, do seldom miss a cure of the former, as Hippocrates doth likewise *aphoristically* tell us. *Harvey on Consumptions.*

The features Johnson emphasises are shortness and self-containedness. The first two quotations show that an *aphorism* may be true or false, that its suggestion of authority is contingent. An *apophthegm* is a very similar species of text.

APOPTHHEGM. *n. s.* [αποφθεγμα.] A remarkable saying; a valuable maxim uttered on some sudden occasion.

We may magnify the *apophthegms*, or reputed replies of wisdom, whereof many are to be seen in Laertius and Lycosthenes. *Brown's Vulgar Errors, b. i. c. 6.*

I had a mind to collect and digest such observations and *apophthegms*, as tend to the proof of that great assertion, All is vanity. *Prior's Pref. to Solomon.*

A further location of his thoughts on the subject is, perhaps oddly, at the word *apothegm*, which he admits is actually a mistake, but glosses anyway.

APOTHEGM. *n. s.* [properly *apophthegm*; which see.] A remarkable saying.

By frequent conversing with him, and scattering short *apothegms*, and little pleasant stories, and making useful applications of them, his son was, in his infancy, taught to abhor vanity and vice as monsters. *Watson's [sic] Life of Sanderson.*

Here Johnson chooses a quotation which emphasises the teaching function of both *apothegms* and anecdotes ("little pleasant stories").

The difference between aphorisms and apophthegms is a matter of some dispute. G.B. Hill attaches to a brief discussion of the subject in Johnson's 'Life of Blackmore,' a note which considers the entries for the words in the *New English Dictionary*, and concludes, "According to present usage, therefore, *aphorism*, in its second meaning is a synonym for *apophthegm*." The meaning on which they overlap or coincide is 'a general truth expressed in a few words' (my redaction); that of *aphorism* alone, "A definition or concise statement of a principle in any science." Certainly he was aware of the tradition of scientific literature using aphorisms rather than connected discourse. He knew the work of Herman Boerhaave, whose Life he wrote over four issues of the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1739. One of Boerhaave's works is *Aphorismi de cognoscendis et curandis morbis, in usum doctrinae domesticae digesti* (1709) ["Aphorisms on the knowledge and cure of illness, arranged for the use of domestic teaching"]. The work of Hippocrates himself was the model as an aphorist for medical writers. For Johnson, the distinction between aphorisms and apophthegms seems to be that the former are or may be written, the latter are spoken: they are, as he quotes from Browne, "the reputed replies of wisdom." We may cite an example or two from Bacon's collection of *Apophthegmes New and Old* (1625), stories of purported witticisms delivered by various notables, ancient and modern, on particular occasions.

71. Queene Elizabeth was dilatorie enough in sutes, of her owne nature: And the Lo. Treasurer Burleigh, to feed her humour, would say to her; *Madam, you doe well to let Suters stay; for I shall tell you; If you grant them speedily, they will come againe the sooner.*

107. Plato entertained some of his Friends at a Dinner, and had in the Chamber, a Bed or Couch, neatly and costly furnished. Diogenes came in, and got up upon the Bed, and trampled upon it, and said; *I trample upon the pride of Plato.* Plato mildly answered; *But with greater pride.*⁶

⁶ Francis Bacon, *Apophthegmes New and Old* (London, 1625), 92-93, 131-32.

If an apophthegm is "a remarkable saying," it is what was said in each of these by Burleigh and Plato that constitutes the apophthegm. But unlike an aphorism, these sayings cannot be separated from the stories by which they were occasioned.

Hippocrates was also the case at issue when Johnson discussed aphorisms and apophthegms in connection with Blackmore. He says, "when the reader finds, what I fear is true, that when he [Blackmore] was censuring Hippocrates he did not know the difference between *aphorism* and *apophthegm*, he will not pay much regard to his determinations concerning ancient learning." Unless I am misreading him, Johnson's pedantry has a playful edge here; he has introduced the paragraph from which I am quoting by asserting that he has not read the books in question by Blackmore, and that he relates his strong criticisms of them on the basis of what "I have been told" and "the transient glances which I have thrown upon them." And then after giving the passage which he censures, he says he would be sorry to leave Blackmore in "total disgrace, and will therefore quote from another Preface a passage less reprehensible."⁷ I think it is evident that the difference between aphorisms and apophthegms is not a matter of great import. In any case, the passage which he gives from Blackmore is the following,

As for this book of Aphorisms it is like my Lord Bacon's of the same title, a book of jests or a grave collection of trite and trifling observations, of which though many are true and certain, yet they signify nothing, and may afford diversion, but no instruction: most of them being much inferior to the sayings of the wise men of Greece, which yet are so low and mean that we are entertained every day with more valuable sentiments at the table-conversation of ingenious and learned men.⁸

Johnson is perhaps annoyed that Blackmore should describe Bacon's *Apophthegmes New and Old* in such dismissive terms. The collection is light enough, but Johnson likes such works, and is happy to have such material on easy terms. The reference to conversation here reminds us that aphorisms are — whether actually oral or not — oral in character; their neatness and concision of form, and intellectual coherence makes them memorable, and therefore orally tellable. They seem to imply, no matter what the particular content, that something of the character of the world to which they refer is

⁷ It reminds one of his criticism of a ms. play by Arthur Murphy, which he told the writer had "too much Tig and Tirry in it," on the basis of having only read the *dramatis personae* (Thrale, *Anecdotes. Johns. Misc.* 1, 332).

⁸ *Lives* II, 251. Blackmore is quoted from the Preface to his *Treatise upon the Small Pox* (1723).

likewise capable of summary, or neat categorization. There is, says the aphorism which is referred to in the first quotation in the *Dictionary* entry, an irresistible will for the world, and it is that of the multitude (which as Johnson himself observed, it is pointless to oppose). So we may conclude that Browne's — and by implication Johnson's — objection to this particular aphorism is not the implied irresistibility of the voice of the people, but the sense of divine sanction. The second actual aphorism given in the *Dictionary* entry — which is given by Johnson framed by Samuel Rogers as a subject for discussion — though less memorable in form, suggests that it is a legitimate, indeed, normal and straightforward, procedure to divide people in the generality into categories of more and less useful. It also suggests that there is some relationship between such utility and value more broadly construed.

However, Johnson also recognises the general point made by Blackmore about aphorisms, that they are often empty, and circulated merely as a high-sounding species of cliché, by those too lazy to think for themselves.

[I]f we consider the conduct of those sententious philosophers, it will often be found, that they repeat these aphorisms, merely because they have somewhere heard them, because they have nothing else to say, or because they think veneration gained by such appearances of wisdom, but that no ideas are annexed to the words, and that, according to the old blunder of the followers of Aristotle, their souls are mere pipes or organs, which transmit sounds, but do not understand them.⁹

As Isobel Grundy hints, since Johnson's time this form of coin has been much cheapened, for the generality of readers, by — among other factors — new media. Grundy blames "Naturalism in fiction" (which was a new medium for Johnson) as contributing to weakening the appeal of aphoristic literature; we might link to this the effects of realism, including realistic scale and duration (as described last chapter), on the readers' attention. More suggestively, she highlights the purposes for which such genres have come to be used: "Maxims are for advertising, for lapel buttons, for graffiti, not for imaginative literature."¹⁰ At the end of the second millennium, in the free and globalised capitalist economy, we are exposed to an abundance of discontinuous text, much of it exploitative

⁹ *Rambler* 71; IV, 7-8.

¹⁰ Grundy, "Samuel Johnson: Man of Maxims?", 14.

and dishonest (such as advertising slogans), some of it offensive (such as bumper stickers or tee-shirt messages), and a considerable amount of it meaningless. We are subjected to bulk electronic mailings of cyber-junk: time-wasting and supposedly amusing, or bureaucratic and supposedly serious, or frankly promotional. Text is so easily transferable and cheaply reproducible, that we have been obliged to become somewhat inattentive. We are less susceptible to being moved or persuaded — or even interested — by language, and are used to being cynical about much that we read.

Readers accustomed to such conditions ought to be comfortable with the way in which Johnson uses aphorisms himself. In the essay already quoted, Isobel Grundy shows how Johnson, in citing or coining an aphoristic statement, "is less fond of lacing himself up in a formula than of trying it on experimentally: sometimes he then endorses it; sometimes he demonstrates its limitations, or goes on to offer a means of escape."¹¹ All readers of Johnson must have noted the frequency with which he uses in his essays formulae such as,¹² that it has been "frequently observed" (III, 253), "frequently remarked" (III, 9), "often remarked" (III, 245), "remarked ... by every writer" (III, 334), "formerly remarked" (II, 483), "long ago remarked" (II, 468), "commonly remarked" (III, 158), "commonly received" (III, 159), "generally remarked" (III, 288; IV, 132; V, 33), and so on. This is an invitation to on the one hand recognize, as Grundy says, "the existence and persistence of aphoristic wisdom,"¹³ but also to test and challenge received wisdom, to stretch and qualify some straight-forward aphorism, and perhaps to arrive at some new position, equally aphoristic. It involves too a recognition that mere repetition can, as well as making an aphorism familiar and convenient, also lessen its impact, so that it will need what he proceeds in each case to supply: expansion, qualification, reiteration.

In *Rambler* 175, Johnson asserts that "the excellence of aphorisms" consists in "the comprehension of some obvious and useful truth in a few words." Of the aphorist, he says,

he may therefore be justly numbered among the benefactors of mankind, who contracts the great rules of life into short sentences, that may be easily impressed

¹¹ Grundy, "Samuel Johnson: Man of Maxims?", 17-18.

¹² The following are references by volume and page to Johnson's essays in vols. II-V of the Yale Edn.

¹³ Grundy, "Samuel Johnson: Man of Maxims?", 23.

on the memory, and taught by frequent recollection to recur habitually to the mind.¹⁴

The kind of truth 'contracted' into aphorisms is, he says, "obvious and useful"; it is not something witty and startling, but some idea which we recognise, and are perhaps encouraged to learn is not merely our own intuition, but the universal perception of mankind. In order that the point, whatever it is, be made strongly and shortly, aphorisms are stripped of qualifications, subtle discriminations or illustrative instances. This is why, as we have remarked above, that two contrary aphorisms may both be true. No aphorism aims to explain everything — which is why it is best to read them in collections. Johnson observed that "In all pointed sentences some degree of accuracy must be sacrificed to conciseness."¹⁵ So long as we first have them convenient to hand, different aphorisms will be found useful in different circumstances.

Aphorisms are not so much to be believed, or to be repeated or collected, as to be engaged with. They provide something convenient and intellectually compassable, against which to test one's own mind and experience. This is the virtue which Boswell called providing "*steel for the mind*," and found in its highest concentration in Johnson's *Rambler*.¹⁶ To create a new literary work by providing a commentary on aphorisms was a standard literary procedure, particularly in the renaissance. Erasmus's *Adages* is the exemplar of such texts, and might be considered a model for quite a number of works which Johnson considered producing, as recorded in his *Designs*.¹⁷ Boerhaave's *Aphorisms* were the subject of a commentary in five volumes, *Commentaria in Hermanni Boerhaave Aphorismos* (1741-42), by his pupil and assistant, Gerard van Sweiten (1700-72). Johnson had a copy (see *SJL*). The English translation (1744-73) is a work of eighteen volumes.

¹⁴ *Rambler* 175; v, 160.

¹⁵ Johnson, "On the Bravery of the English Common Soldier," *Political Writings*, ed. Donald J. Greene (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1977), 281.

¹⁶ *Life* 1, 215 (Boswell's italics). 1750.

¹⁷ See the Appendix, under Collection of Proverbs (350) and Collection of Epigrams (353-54).

III. Anecdotes

Anecdotes are not, like aphorisms, verbal formulae, but miniature narratives, patterns of related events. They are short stories which dispense with character, scene-setting, any sort of realistic detail. This is unnecessary because much of the force of an anecdote is that it purports to be true. They frequently terminate in a point or witticism, which may need to be recalled *verbatim*. The late eighteenth century may be regarded as the Age of the Anecdote, when authorship and publishing were boom industries, there was a great expansion in middle-class readership, with an uncritical, sub-literary interest in curious details about their favourite authors, and a host of minor scribblers with whom the larger writers associated familiarly, who were ready and able to make a living by supplying this. Among the largest and best sources for eighteenth-century literary gossip is John Nichol's *Anecdotes, Biographical and Literary, of the Late Mr. William Bowyer, printer* (1778, 1782), greatly enlarged for the second edition, of which Johnson had a copy (see *SJL*). The work eventually became Nichol's *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century* 9 v. (1812-16). (It is a characteristic of these types of text that they grow, as demonstrated by the layers of footnotes that have gathered like geological strata beneath the text of Boswell's *Life*.)

The most obvious location for Johnson's involvement in the world of such "little pleasant stories" is Boswell's *Life*, which is virtually a string of anecdotes. Whilst it is at one level a shapeless gossippy book, with no order or balance (there are no chapters, and Boswell gives disproportionate attention to Johnson's later years), it is the book from which to derive self-contained extracts of all lengths, *par excellence*. Furthermore, Boswell is conscious of the place of anecdote in his scheme, and it is interesting to notice how, especially in the *Tour to the Hebrides* — a taster, after all, for the *Life* — he is attracted to comments on the subject that seem to reinforce his methodology.

Last night Dr. Johnson gave us an account of the whole process of tanning, — and of the nature of milk, and the various operations upon it, as making whey, &c. His variety of information is surprizing; and it gives one much satisfaction to find such a man bestowing his attention on the useful arts of life.... — A strange thought struck me, to try if he knew any thing of an art, or whatever it should be

called, which is no doubt very useful in life, but which lies far out of the way of a philosopher and poet; I mean the trade of a butcher.¹⁸

Of course, Johnson does know about butchering, and Boswell goes on to give us a long paragraph of his discourse on the subject. We do not, as readers, know who to admire the more; Johnson for his breadth of knowledge, or Boswell for his ability to 'entice' Johnson to talk at length on just about anything in response to the whims of Boswell's curiosity. Boswell is at pains to explain his behaviour, in an effort to make a pre-emptive strike against the charge of incivility, as he manipulates the conversation (and Johnson) into the subject of butchering solely for the purposes of putting his champion through his paces. Johnson it may be who is shown off in the original setting of this episode; but it is Boswell who is shown off in the account.

Be that as it may, Boswell throughout his Johnsonian books depicts himself as perpetually amazed at his hero's intellectual breadth and readiness. Indeed, he has been judged as right to remark that Johnson's most enduring interest to readers derives from the permanent quality of unexpectedness in the discourse he has generated, his preparedness to discuss in detail and have strong feelings about a great variety of subjects, many of which seem not to be, in the nature of things, matters of conventional concern to the man of letters. Boswell constantly affirms but plays against a sense of what we might call the writerly virtues. Writing seems to many people to be, if not useless, at least impractical. Much of the amusement value of Boswell's narrative of Johnson's life is in his depiction of Johnson as a man of letters who is interesting quite apart from (with a slide in the direction of 'despite') his being a Great Writer. The narrative, of course, pays extravagant lip-service to the notion of the greatness and interest of Johnson's writing, as one justification for the biography. In the anecdote just quoted, the premise is encapsulated in Boswell's referring to Johnson as "such a man," which he goes on to elaborate as "a poet and philosopher." It is these references that justify Boswell's incessant display of the trivial, anecdotal and discursive. By constantly displaying Johnson in the midst of and actively engaging with the domestic, daily and practical, Boswell slyly evokes and argues for — using Johnson's own testimony — other values in literary art, for the gossippy, the anecdotal, the formless, for the constant veer in style away from the epic and the formal that is intrinsic to Johnson's own writing, but far more to Boswell's own great book.

¹⁸ *Life* v, 246. *Tour*, 23 September.

Such values are highlighted not only by Boswell but also by all those who have contributed to the iconisation of Johnson. Illustrations of this contention could be quoted from almost any page of the various memoirs of Johnson, and even the most cynical observer will concede that there must have been that about Johnson which seemed to his contemporaries to call for this sort of treatment. It is hard, for instance, to imagine Johnson as a horseman, but in Skye he told Boswell at breakfast "that he rode harder at a fox-chace than any body."¹⁹ Hester Thrale reports that "He certainly rode on Mr. Thrale's old hunter with a good firmness, and though he would follow the hounds fifty miles an end sometimes, would never own himself either tired or amused." He presumably felt that it would be undignified to be elevated and unmanly to be exhausted by mere physical activity. The story which she then goes on to relate might have been reported to her by Johnson himself. One day, while riding to hounds with Johnson on Brighthelmstone Downs, William Gerard Hamilton called out, "Why Johnson rides as well, for aught I see, as the most illiterate fellow in England." Mrs. Thrale comments, "no praise ever went so close to his heart."²⁰ We might ask why this should be so: why this particular remark did not merely amuse Johnson but went "close to his heart"; or why at least he wished her to believe that it had, or why she wishes Johnson to be imagined as a writer who would take such a witticism as praise. The remark as Hamilton reportedly made it implies (ironically, I presume) that greater physical prowess is to be expected among the illiterate than the lettered, or that it is at least conventional to assume that the man of letters and the practical man or man of action are two different orders of being. The man of letters is a brain worker: he works alone, at a desk, in a library or otherwise surrounded by books. Get him outdoors, and we can properly expect him to be hopeless. And Johnson is depicted as actively subverting this: upsetting the notion of what is normal of a man of letters.

When Johnson is depicted with books he is wrestling with them, "tearing the heart out" of them, shifting them about and banging them together, bending them out of shape, using them as weapons — anything rather than reading them. When, where or how he read or wrote we have from his biographers almost no idea. Instead, what his biographers frequently emphasise is Johnson's physicality: his size, strength, physical passions, his appearance, tics, hungers, zests: he sprints, swims, rolls down hills, eats vast amounts, intimidates others physically, is able to look after himself in a punch-up.

¹⁹ *Life* v, 253. *Tour*, 24 September.

²⁰ *Anecdotes. Johns. Misc.* 1, 287-88.

Boswell takes every opportunity to show Johnson in this light. His biographical method was thought by many of his contemporaries to trivialise Johnson, not only by focusing on such minute detail, but also by exhibiting Johnson's own absorption in the *minutiae* of life. Johnson himself, Boswell says, was amused by small matters, such as the fantasy of being the owner of a Scottish island. In the Hebrides, on the same day as the conversation about butchering, Boswell reports a conversation in which M'Leod said that he would give to Johnson "a beautiful little island in the Loch of Dunvegan, called *Isa* ... on condition of his residing on it three months in the year; nay, one month."

Dr. Johnson was highly amused with the fancy. I have seen him please himself with little things, even with mere ideas like the present. He talked a great deal of this island; — how he would build a house there, — how he would fortify it, — how he would have cannon, — how he would plant, — how he would sally out, and *take* the isle of Muck; — and then he laughed with uncommon glee, and could hardly leave off. I have seen him do so at a small matter that struck him, and was a sport to no one else.²¹

The whole-heartedness of Johnson's affirmation of imaginative pleasure is notable, but we might also detect in such incidents as these almost a sense of relief or gratitude on Johnson's part for coming across something detailed and extravagant, yet innocent, with which to be mentally absorbed.

It is in this light that we should see the discussions about butchering, industrial processes, medical practice, chemical procedures, history and the law, child-rearing, questions of political philosophy. Some of this is what Johnson would call "useful knowledge," of the sort with which he originally wished to fill the *Dictionary*. But removed from its conversational context, the character of such discourse is radically altered. It becomes not (so much) *useful* as *interesting* or *amusing*. In fact, even in the original conversations such information is not exactly useful. It is not because we (or Boswell) aim to set up as butchers that we enjoy reading the account of a discussion of butchering, or that Boswell initiated the conversation. For Boswell, as for his reader, this aspect of Johnson's character — that he should have informed opinions on most subjects — is a source of constant surprise. To read a succession of these opinions and gain a

²¹ *Life* v, 249. *Tour*, 23 September. Johnson mentions the offer in a letter to Hester Thrale (*Letters* II, 71). This anecdote is reminiscent of that concerning Johnson's merriment at Langton making his will (*Life* II, 262), which Boswell contrasts with "what might be expected of the authour of 'The Rambler.'"

growing sense of and respect for the movements of Johnson's mind and the cadences of his talk, is to find the figure of Johnson vivid, eccentric and — in the end — endearing. Summative and authoritative paragraphs on a wide variety of specialised subjects are also gratifying to intellectual curiosity, which wishes for a variety of knowledge, but does not have the initiative to locate it, and could not be bothered with the drudgery of sorting through the detail. It is my contention that such interests in Johnson testify not to intellectual dissipation or a dilettantish lust for trivia, but a commitment to the sphere of the everyday.

The following story, also from the *Tour*, is a teasingly self-referential anecdote about anecdotes. It begins with a typical allusion to Johnson's habitual use of books: he was not 'reading' Hailes, but 'looking into' him.

He had last night looked into Lord Hailes's 'Remarks on the History of Scotland.' Dr. Robertson and I said, it was a pity Lord Hailes did not write greater things. His lordship had not then published his 'Annals of Scotland.' — *Johnson*. "I remember I was once on a visit at the house of a lady for whom I had a high respect. There was a good deal of company in the room. When they were gone, I said to this lady, 'What foolish talking have we had!' — 'Yes, (said she,) but while they talked, you said nothing.' — I was struck with the reproof. How much better is the man who does any thing that is innocent, than he who does nothing. Besides, I love anecdotes. I fancy mankind may come, in time, to write all aphoristically, except in narrative; grow weary of preparation, and connection, and illustration, and all those arts by which a big book is made. — If a man is to wait till he weaves anecdotes into a system, we may be long in getting them, and get but few, in comparison of what we might get."²²

Whatever we might think about Boswell's reliability as a reporter, this passage — like so much of Boswell — certainly represents aspects of Johnson's character and opinions which are found elsewhere, often in Johnson's own writings: his silence in conversation, his preference for doing anything rather than nothing, his love of anecdotes and aphorisms, his impatience with big books. How Boswell must have rejoiced in hearing Johnson talk like this, in justification of his own biographical method, of weaving a pair of big books from a gathering of anecdotes.

²² *Life* V, 38-39. *Tour*, 16 August. Hailes' name arises again later when they are discussing the comparative rating of various writers as 'Men of anecdotes' (*Life* V, 255. *Tour*, 24 September).

This fancy of Johnson's might easily be a prophecy about the state of literacy in the Cyberage, when new communications technologies allow readers to skip effortlessly from channel to channel and from text to text, and texts are abridged and truncated accordingly, and new texts are written pre-abridged.²³ Long books, requiring weeks to work through by reading, become electronically searchable; but can the results, the effects, of the experience for the reader (or user) be said to be remotely similar? As well as texts being increasingly written for the new technologies, traditional books seem to be being written on the same model, with shorter chapters and more widely spaced print, to allow for faster page-turning. As well as the usual small novelty books, there are now also many series of very small but serious books, containing short texts or extracts from literature, or introductions to the thought of the great philosophers.²⁴ I have a book by an Information Technologist that is "written in subject bytes [i.e., chapters] of about 600 words. These 24kbyte monologues can be read in less than five minutes."²⁵ This surely is a book for those "weary of preparation, and connection, and illustration." Johnson excepted narratives from his vision of the deconstructed future of reading, but he could not have foreseen movie film. Even a long novel, such as Dickens' *David Copperfield* — which on first publication could only be read at the rate of three chapters per month²⁶ — can be turned from a 900-page or nineteen month reading experience into a three-hour viewing experience.²⁷

Johnson's perspective is that if we were to write anecdotally and aphoristically, we would simply *get more* material. The "arts by which a big book is made," the effort to assemble "a system" out of a succession of interesting insights and pointed observations, are imposed means of order, which are not in his view intrinsic to knowledge. But then how are such fragments of narrative experience to be dealt with? As discrete items of trivia? It is not sufficient merely to collect such juicy verbal morsels; collecting and

²³ It is, oddly I think, not referred to by DeMaria in the final chapter in *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading*, on "Samuel Johnson and the Future of Reading."

²⁴ Examples of the first kind are the three series of *Penguin 60s* (1995-96), the *Phoenix 60p Paperbacks* (1996-97) and the *Bloomsbury Quids* (1996). See my "Pockets of Wisdom, Samples of Text."

²⁵ Peter Cochrane, *Tips for Time Travellers: Visionary Insights into New Technology, Life and the Future by One of the World's Leading Technology Prophets* (London: Orion Business Books, 1997), 1.

²⁶ To be precise, thirteen of the monthly parts contained three chapters, there were two of two, and three of four; and the last of the monthly parts was a double number, of seven chapters. See Paul Davis, *The Penguin Dickens Companion: The Essential Reference to His Life and Work* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), 105-110.

²⁷ I have in mind the BBC/WGBH Boston Co-production of *David Copperfield*, dir. Simon Curtis, prod. Kate Harwood (1999), which screened in Australia on ABC-TV in February 2000. It consisted of two ninety-minute episodes.

retailing anecdotes is not Learning. In *Rambler* 177, one of the Rambler's correspondents reports on attending one of "the little societies of literature which are formed in taverns and coffee-houses." There he meets collectors — of English black-letter books, of halfpence, of old newspapers and broadsheets. Of the first of these characters he says, "Hirsutus had no other reason for the valuing or slighting of a book, than that it was printed in the Roman or the Gothick letter."²⁸ It is not enough simply to indiscriminately collect such textual fragments, however interesting we may find them. They need to circulate in a well-stocked mind, or to be discussed socially — to generate commentary.

In *Rambler* 83 he writes in defense of the virtuoso, Quisquilius, the supposed contributor of the previous issue. Although *virtuoso* is defined in the *Dictionary* as "A man skilled in antique or natural curiosities; a man studious of painting, statuary or architecture," Quisquilius makes it apparent that the chief manifestation of his enthusiasm for "the productions of art and nature" is an insatiable and almost indiscriminate urge to collect things. The Rambler professes himself grieved that "a man capable of ratiocination or invention" should occupy himself with a "secondary class of learning."²⁹

As always, Johnson's entry in the *Dictionary* has been constructed so as to offer another suggestive lead into reflection on its subject.

ANECDOTE. *n. s.* [ἀνεκδοτον]

1. Something yet unpublished; secret history.

Some modern *anecdotes* aver,

He nodded in his elbow chair.

Prior.

2. It is now used, after the French, for a biographical incident; a minute passage of private life.³⁰

The example from Matthew Prior (from his "Hans Carvel")³¹ that Johnson gives under *anecdote* points to the frequent tendency of anecdotes to swerve towards the scandalous: debunking or undermining what is related in more respectful, sober, official histories. Their secrecy is, for Johnson, implied by their necessarily oral (because unpublished)

²⁸ *Rambler* 177; v, 169, 170.

²⁹ *Rambler* 83; iv, 75.

³⁰ This second definition was not in the first edition of the *Dictionary*.

³¹ In Prior's *Poems on Several Occasions* (1709). In his 'Life of Prior,' Johnson calls the poem "not over-decent" (*Lives* II, 201).

character. Being oral, they escape the attention of cultural gatekeepers: scholars, editors, publishers, censors. This seems odd — that something in oral currency could be said to be secret — but, of course, the everyday is that which escapes attention. As Kevin Hart suggests, "it is in the nature of everydayness not to be sharply registered."³² For us, anecdotes are not defined by an oral or unpublished context; there are innumerable books of anecdotes. (Presumably, by Johnson's definition, a true anecdote becomes something else when it is written down and put in a book.) But they are *the sort of stories* that, whether written down or not, live or *could* live outside of literary discourse. They are vivid, personal, frequently humorous, narrative-driven, self-contained, memorable. Because they are set in the everyday, they have potentially illustrative force; they are not just memorable, but usable. Johnson, as a name or a subject, is far less likely to be introduced into an everyday conversation, for example, for having been born in 1709, or having written *The Rambler*, or even (or especially) for having written such-and-such in *The Rambler*, than as for how he looked while he was eating, or for his having said of Berkeley's philosophy, "I refute it *thus*," as he kicked a large stone.

A narrative may be 'merely anecdotal,' in the sense of unauthorised and by implication very likely not true. In particular, scandalous anecdotes are circulated only because they amusingly transgress official narratives. They are similar at least in form to jokes, with their swift formulaic setting of scenes ("There was an Australian, an American and an Irishman ..."), and conclusion in a punch-line — the structural equivalent of the moral point of an anecdote. The appeal of the anecdote partly depends upon this potential. Our ears prick up when, in the midst of some other kind of discourse — say, a lecture — we sense we are about to be told a true story: not from a book, but from the speaker's own knowledge, orally circulated, and in that sense private, and potentially personal. In the eighteenth century, we find 'anecdotes' often contrasted with 'history,' not on the basis of accuracy, but of style. Textual historian Anthony Grafton observes,

Thus the compiler of *Anecdotes about Mme. la comtesse du Barry*, which appeared in 1775, claimed to have called his work "anecdotes" in order that he could include in the text a "multitude of details which would have sullied the majesty of a

³² Kevin Hart, *Samuel Johnson and the Culture of Property*, 159.

history." Otherwise, he would have been forced "to omit, or to relegate to notes," such "spicy" facts.³³

Johnson, in a review of the *Memoirs of the Duchess Dowager of Marlborough* (1742), notes that such memoirs — "Accounts of publick Transactions as have been written by those who were engaged in them"³⁴ — are of interest because we believe that such books will "always contain a thousand Incidents, of which the writer could not but have acquired a certain Knowledge, and which he has no Reason for disguising."³⁵ We are thus enabled to gain a better understanding of the characters and motivations of the participants in public affairs,

we have a more exact Knowledge than can be expected from general Histories, because we see them in their private Apartments, in their careless Hours, and observe those Actions in which they indulged their own Inclinations, without any Regard to Censure or Applause.³⁶

Whether that which (while still unpublished) is secret and personal is in fact scandalous, the invasion of privacy is in itself somewhat scandalous. People who can relate such stories, in print or in conversation, are always going to be popular. Finer qualities, such as wit, reason or imagination are admired, but they are not, Johnson knows, talents which actually attract genuine friendship.

For this reason, no stile of conversation is more extensively acceptable than the narrative. He who has stored his memory with slight anecdotes, private incidents, and personal particularities, seldom fails to find his audience favourable.³⁷

Johnson was not himself superior to the appeal of anecdotes. He was intrigued by a needy acquaintance of the Thrales, a Miss Hudson, whom he presumes to have some sort of story. He wrote to Hester Thrale, "She seems to make an uncommon impression upon

³³ Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard U.P., 1997), 111. He quotes the text of the *Anecdotes* from R.C. Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1995), 337-38.

³⁴ [Johnson,] Review of *Memoirs of Duchess Dowager of Marlborough*, *Gentleman's Magazine* XII (1742), 128.

³⁵ Review of *Memoirs of Duchess Dowager of Marlborough*, 129.

³⁶ Review of *Memoirs of Duchess Dowager of Marlborough*, 129.

³⁷ *Rambler* 188; V, 221.

You. What has she done or suffered out of the common course of things? I love a little secret history."³⁸ This tendency to contradict more official and stately accounts is another aspect of the anti-canoncity of minor genres.

But being both a subject of anecdote and a connoisseur of anecdote does not necessarily qualify Johnson as a retailer of anecdote. With regard to his own use of anecdotes in the *Lives of the Poets*, Robert Folkenflik argues that "Johnson's love of anecdotes fuses aesthetics and morality."³⁹ For another sort of biographer, it is enough that some story is true, and adds a detail to the larger picture; it is a bonus if it is vivid or amusing. But Johnson's method, Folkenflik asserts, is "not that of the novelistic or dramatic biographer, but that of the philosophical biographer." He will give an anecdote in order to generalize about the tenor of life, as the basis of satire, or even to remark on the randomness, pettiness or paucity of things remembered, even about the famous. Folkenflik's account impresses on us a sense of "Johnson's skill at combining the narrative anecdote with his interpretative commentary." (178) Johnson expresses his approval for this procedure in his review of Joseph Warton's book on Pope: "The facts which he mentions though they are seldom *anecdotes* in a rigorous sense, are often such as are very little known, and such as will delight more readers than naked criticism."⁴⁰ By "a rigorous sense," Johnson means the first of his two *Dictionary* definitions, as given above, and the only one that was in the first edition. What he implies is that they are anecdotes in his reluctantly-adopted second sense, of "a minute passage of private life." He is aware that anecdotes "delight" readers, but his wonderful term "naked criticism" also suggests that clothing criticism with anecdote makes it less raw, brusque, self-centred, unapologetic, self-indulgent, confronting, forbidding, and more amiable and polite. We see further implications for theoretical discourse later in the chapter.

IV. *Ana*

Closely related to the anecdote, particularly in its 'secret history' aspect, is the species of text called *ana*. The term may not be familiar today, and although I have used it a number of times already, we might turn from the outset to Johnson's *Dictionary* for an explanation.

³⁸ *Letters* IV, 147. 13 June 1783.

³⁹ Robert Folkenflik, "Johnson's Art of Anecdote," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* III (1973), 177-81.

⁴⁰ [Johnson,] Review of Joseph Warton, *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Pope*, in *The Literary Magazine: or, Universal Review* I (1756), 35.

ANA. *n. s.* Books so called from the last syllables of their titles; as, *Scaligerana*, *Thuaniana* [*sic*]; they are loose thoughts, or casual hints, dropped by eminent men, and collected by their friends.

Ana are, in other words, sayings — although that word (like the word *ana*) has evolved in meaning, and is often used for snippets of discourse, irrespective of their origins. However, until the late eighteenth century, *ana* were literally sayings — oral fragments, of the subjects' unwritten lectures or conversations. Johnson was fond of *ana*, and a number of collections are mentioned in connection with him. We have met a number of their subjects already. The *Dictionary* refers to those of two great continental scholars. Johnson very much esteemed the humanist Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540-1609), whom Robert DeMaria calls Johnson's "idol."⁴¹ He is addressed by Johnson in the Latin poem (with the Greek title, *Gnothi Seauton*) which he wrote after revising the *Dictionary* for the fourth edition, and praised as:

... that rare man, erudite, lofty, rigorous,

.....

the shifting sands of governance, the swirl of the shining spheres

his mind could read and unriddle, and the vast earth's revolving.⁴²

The two volumes of *Scaligeriana* (1666, 1669) were the first such collections with the *-ana* title and were, like most such collections, gathered and published by his students. The *Thuana* (1669) is that of the historian, Jacques-August de Thou, known by the Latinised name Thuanus.⁴³ Johnson talked of translating de Thou's *Historia sui Temporis*.⁴⁴ In his library Johnson had the *Scaligeriana*, as well as the *Naudaeana et Patiniana* (1701) of Gui Patin (1601-72), physician, and Gabriel Naudé (1600-53), physician and pioneer librarian, and the *Ménagiana* (1693; 3rd ed., 4 v. 1715), of Gilles Ménage (1613-92).⁴⁵

⁴¹ DeMaria, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 27, 139.

⁴² "Know Thyself," trans. John Wain, *Samuel Johnson* (Oxford Authors), 28.

⁴³ The sixth and best edition of the *Thuana* is found in the London edition, prepared by Thomas Carte, of de Thou's *History* (1723). See Thomas Kinser, *The Works of Jacques-August de Thou* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), 252.

⁴⁴ *Life* IV, 410. See Appendix below, 382.

⁴⁵ The full titles of these works, which give a good indication of the anticipated nature of their appeal to readers, are: *Thuana, sive Excerpta ex ore Jac. Aug. Thou*, per F.F.P.P. [fratres Puteanos] (1669), *Scaligeriana, sive Excerpta ex ore Josephi Scaligeri*, per F.F.P.P. (1666), *Naudaeana et Patiniana, ou Singularitez Remarquables prise de conversations de M.M. Naudé et Patin* [ed. Antoine Lancelot] (1701), and *Menagiana, ou Bon Mots, rencontres agréables, pensées judicieuses, et observations curieuses, de M. Ménage* [ed. Antoine Galland] (1693). Subtitles varied in subsequent

Ménage was a philologist and critic, who had conducted *Mercuriales* (literally, Wednesday meetings) at which Parisian poets and critics discussed literature. This collection of his literary judgements, jokes and observations, was very popular; it had expanded to four volumes in 1716, and reached its seventh edition by 1789. Robert DeMaria calls it "an example of perhaps his [Johnson's] favourite kind of book, a collection of short, pithy remarks and anecdotes," and points out that Johnson read and remembered enough of it to cite it in his own marginal cross-references in another book.⁴⁶ Boswell records Johnson relating a *bon-mot* from "one of the *Ana*," which also comes from this collection.⁴⁷

Collections of the conversational remarks of French scholars and physicians of the previous century would, perhaps, strike a modern English-speaking reader as a rather odd species of book. But such works obviously appealed to Johnson and other contemporary readers as a pleasant and easy means of entry into the everyday knowledge of various specialists. The popularity of the genre is indicated by a long detailed entry on the subject in the eighth edition (1853) of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. They were also a means of seeing eminent people in a relaxed mode, and thus potential sources of frank comment and intelligent humour. Paul Korshin, who has briefly surveyed the (mainly French) *ana* tradition, sees them as "a plausible source of late eighteenth-century attempts at intellectual biography."⁴⁸ This rather unEnglish style of learned but unpedantic conversation is something Johnson admires in the French. He contrasts the two societies in the following extract from his own *ana*, although he characteristically will not allow the last word to be praise of the French at the expense of the English.

"There is, perhaps, more knowledge circulated in the French language than in any other. There is more original knowledge in English." — "But the French (said I [Boswell]) have the art of accommodating literature." *Johnson*. "Yes, sir; we have no such book as Moreri's Dictionary." *Boswell*. "Their *Ana*⁴⁹ are good."

editions; the second (Paris) edition of *Menagiana* added after "Bon Mots", *les pensées critiques, historiques, morales et l'erudition de M. Ménage, recueillies par ses amis*.

⁴⁶ DeMaria, *Life of Reading*, 49.

⁴⁷ *Life* III, 322 and n. 25 April 1778.

⁴⁸ Paul J. Korshin, "Ana-Books and Intellectual Biography in the Eighteenth Century," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* III (1973), 197.

⁴⁹ "Johnson looked upon *Ana* as an English word, for he gives it in his *Dictionary*" (G.B. Hill's note). However, in the *Dictionary* the headword is given in italics, which indicates a foreign word.

—Johnson. "A few of them are good; but we have one book of that kind better than any of them; Selden's *Table-talk*."⁵⁰

There were other English works of this type, apart from John Selden's *Table-Talk* (1689); indeed, in England in the late eighteenth century, there was a flurry of this sort of publication. The collection made by Joseph Spence, that was eventually published as *Anecdotes, Observations, and Characters of Books and Men: collected from the conversation of Mr. Pope, and other eminent men of his time* (1820), was used in manuscript by Johnson in the *Lives of the Poets*; Hester Thrale records it being delivered to him at Streatham by Dr. Lucas Pepys, who had borrowed it from the Duke of Newcastle.⁵¹ The *Walpoliana*, comp. J. Pinkerton (1799), is bogus, or at least not actual *ana*, in that it mostly consisted of anecdotes that Walpole himself had recorded, supplemented by contributions from others. It nevertheless demonstrates the anticipated appeal of *ana*, and signals the extension of the term to miscellaneous pieces (e.g., *Johnsoniana*), or private material on miscellaneous topics (e.g., *Thraliana*), and finally books of extracts from people's writings and correspondence. The *Sheridaniana; or, Anecdotes of the Life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan; his Table-Talk, and Bon-Mots* (1826) was a collection of actual *ana*, but interspersed with anecdotes, extracts from Sheridan's plays and speeches, and suchlike. Johnson's expressed desire for a "Footeana" was met by *Memoirs of Samuel Foote, with a collection of his genuine bon-mots, anecdotes, opinions, & c., mostly original*, by William Cooke (1805) 3 v., from which were later extracted *The Table-talk and Bon-mots of Samuel Foote* (1889).⁵² Of course, although they all concern his contemporaries, these publications were after Johnson's time. Perhaps they were inspired by the French examples of the seventeenth century that Johnson enjoyed, but is more likely that they fed a taste developed in English general readers by the success of Boswell. Robert Southey in his miscellany *The Doctor*, wrote that the *Life of Johnson*, for its "stamp of authenticity ... as well for its intrinsic worth, is the *Ana* of all *Anas*."⁵³

As something of an aside, the history of the term "Johnsoniana" is perhaps worth tracing. Hester Thrale was fond of the French *ana*, and with the help of William Seward,

⁵⁰ *Life* v, 310-11. *Tour*, 14 October.

⁵¹ *Thraliana* I, 424 and n. 2 February 1780.

⁵² Johnson's relationship with Foote is examined in detail in the next chapter, 232 ff.

⁵³ [Robert Southey,] *The Doctor*, 8 v. (1834-47), vii, 347 (Ch. CCXXXI); partly quoted in the *OED*, under *ana*.

she eventually acquired thirty-one published collections.⁵⁴ It is, therefore, for a number of reasons not surprising that she had started as early as 1768 making a collection of Johnson's pronouncements, which she called "Johnsoniana." She mentioned it to Johnson on 18 July 1773. Boswell also knew of it, and would occasionally invite her to share her harvest with him.⁵⁵ The collection was eventually entitled "Thraliana" (a title which she herself thought pompous), as that word had been inscribed on the front of the lavish bound notebooks which her husband gave her to make her notes in. But the first published volume to be called *Johnsoniana* (1776), the one Johnson called "a mighty impudent thing" (*Life* II, 432), had nothing to do with either Boswell or Mrs Thrale. It was claimed by its anonymous editor to have been collected by "a person of fashion and sense, lately deceased."⁵⁶ It is not, for the Johnsonian, a particularly interesting collection. An examination of the book shows that a mere nineteen of the 149 anecdotes claim to concern Johnson (more concern Foote, and Chesterfield). Soon after Johnson died, the *European Magazine* published two selections of Johnsonian anecdotes which it called "Johnsoniana," but in 1789 the journal applied the same title to a list of literary attributions to Johnson. By the mid-nineteenth century, the word had become attached to the non-Boswellian biographical material about Johnson, of which there were two editions with the title, *Johnsoniana*.⁵⁷ By this time, the *-ana* suffix seems to have acquired the twentieth-century meaning suggested by Paul Korshin, "materials peripheral to but in some way concerned with the writings or life of a literary or historical figure."⁵⁸

The shifting meaning is understandable: there is considerable overlap between the various minor genres, particularly anecdotes and *ana*, as most anecdotes have a verbal aspect, and most *ana* occur within an anecdotal frame. And like the *anecdote*, as Johnson defines it, *ana* is a glimpse into a public person's privacy, and to collect and publish such material was not regarded, at least by people in some way implicated in the privacy it

⁵⁴ Katherine Balderston, "Introduction," *Thraliana*, xi. See *Thraliana*, 467 and n.3.

⁵⁵ *Thraliana*, 173 and n.4.

⁵⁶ *Johnsoniana; or, A Collection of Bon Mots, etc. By Dr. Johnson, and others. Together with the choice sentences of Publus Syrus, now translated into English* (London: J. Ridley [et al], 1776). The second edition, with a preface which claims to be by "T.M.," a different anonymous editor, is described on the title page as "being the only Jest Book proper to be read in families, in which no obscenity, or profane oath is to be found."

⁵⁷ *Johnsoniana; or, Supplement to Boswell: Being Anecdotes and Sayings of Dr. Johnson*, John Murray (1836); this was a supplement to Croker's edition of the *Life*. The *Johnsoniana*, ed. Robina Napier (1884), was a supplement to Alexander Napier's edition of the *Life*. Both are almost entirely superseded by Hill's *Johnsonian Miscellanies*.

⁵⁸ Paul J. Korshin, "Ana-Books and Intellectual Biography...", 197.

purported to represent, as without moral difficulties. Boswell apparently thought it necessary to devote the last five paragraphs of the *Tour* to a defense of his methods.

It may be objected by some persons, as it has been by one of my friends, that he who has the power of thus exhibiting an exact transcript of conversations is not a desirable member of society. I repeat the answer which I made to that friend:— "Few, very few, need be afraid that their sayings will be recorded. Can it be imagined that I would take the trouble to gather what grows on every hedge, because I have collected such fruits as the *Nonpareil* and the *BON CHRETIEN*?

On the other hand, how useful is such a faculty, if well exercised! To it we owe all those interesting apothegms and *memorabilia* of the ancients, which Plutarch, Xenophon, and Valerius Maximus, have transmitted to us. To it we owe all those instructive and entertaining collections which the French have made under the title of *Ana*, affixed to some celebrated name. To it we owe the *Table-Talk* of Selden, the *Conversation* between Ben Jonson and Drummond of Hawthornden, Spence's *Anecdotes* of Pope, and other valuable remains in our own language. How delighted should we have been, if thus introduced into the company of Shakspeare and of Dryden, of whom we know scarcely any thing but their admirable writings! What pleasure would it have given us, to have known their petty habits, their characteristick manners, their modes of composition, and their genuine opinion of preceding writers and of their contemporaries! All these are now irrecoverably lost. — Considering how many of the strongest and most brilliant effusions of exalted intellect must have perished, how much is it to be regretted that all men of distinguished wisdom and wit have not been attended by friends, of taste enough to relish, and abilities enough to register, their conversation! ...

They whose inferiour exertions are recorded, as serving to explain or illustrate the sayings of such men, may be proud of being thus associated, and of their names being transmitted to posterity, by being appended to an illustrious character.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ *Life* v, 414-15. *Tour*, conclusion.

Of course, this passage looks forward as much as it looks back, in that the *Tour* was a taster for the *Life of Johnson*. Boswell acknowledges the casual and private nature of conversation, and that people are accustomed to being less guarded in conversation, in ways that may otherwise compromise their public reputation. He has two responses; firstly, that most people need not be worried that their own casual remarks will be regarded as important enough to give anyone offense; and, secondly, that the remarks of the great will be of such consequence, or at least interest, as to more than justify their being recorded. He adds a not-too subtle reference to his own taste and abilities as the recorder of such conversation. The play of issues of power in these arguments — to diminish the objector, elevate the persons quoted, and (not coincidentally) elevate the quoter — are strategies central to the practice of quotation.

V. Quotations

It is under this head that a number of the themes of this work come together. I hope to have established the fact (and clarified the nature) of Johnson's particular attraction to small texts and suspicion of large ones. I have said that the various species of *minutiae literariae* are, above all, quotable. Now, it is common to talk of 'a quotation'; but *quotation* is not a genre. It is a practice or strategy. It is a practice to which small texts are prone, for reasons which are not accidental, and which is intrinsic to the attractiveness of small texts to Johnson. It is a practice which is, furthermore, imbedded in his vision of the broader purposes of writing and discourse generally.

Quotation is ostensibly a strategy of intellectual containment. Any text, from which a quotation is made, is first violated, and then a part surgically removed and re-packaged in another discourse. (Of course, in most cases, the original text remains as it was; but not always.) To quote any particular passage from a long text is to appropriate not only the passage but (in a sense) the whole text for one's own different purposes, and to implicate the text and the author quoted into that project. I may quote from de Certeau (or from Johnson), and thereby suggest or claim that 1) I have grasped de Certeau's thought so comprehensively as to be able to manipulate it to my own purposes, and 2) that de Certeau's thought co-incides, or at least intersects, with my own. By artful (and sometimes unintelligent or dishonest) quotation, we purport to claim the whole of an author's authority. But quotation is a promiscuous strategy. By quoting one does not only press another text and its author into one's own service; one also serves and transmits the

quoted author. If the object of writing is to be read, a writer may achieve that object by being quotable, and thus ensuring that their text will be carried by others into unknown futures. A writer may exist and be read as quotation, who will not be read in any other way. And a quotation is always subject to re-appropriation, to being 'quoted out' of the text in which it has been quoted, and into yet another text, its authority seemingly undiminished. We have already seen, with regard to the *Dictionary*, that as de Certeau said, a quotation may be *used*, but may nevertheless still *speak*.

The *Dictionary* defines the verb, *To quote* as, "To cite an authour or passage of an authour; to adduce by way of authority or illustration the words of another." Quotation features interestingly in the illustrations under *pedantry*.

Horace has enticed me into this *pedantry* of quotation.

Cowl[ey].

Make us believe it, if you can: it is in Latin, if I may be allowed the *pedantry* of a quotation, *non persuadebis, etiamsi [sic] persuaseris*.⁶⁰

Addison.

The two other illustrations he gives suggest nothing further than that *pedantry* is something acquired in school or university. The only practice which he gives (twice) as an instance of *pedantry* is that of *quotation*. Both of these remarks must look humourous, quoted, in a huge book composed of quotations. He who quotes, the lexicographer tells us, is a pedant — and he gives two quotations to prove it. (But then, the third sense he gives of *scholar* is "A pedant; a man of books.") Even more appositely, Johnson has quoted, under *quotation*, from Locke,

He, that has but ever so little examined the citations of writers, cannot doubt how little credit the quotations deserve, where the originals are wanting.

A scholarly reader, whose business it is to conduct his own research, should not take as authoritative, quotations that are taken out of context and mediated through the discourse of another. And this is, of course, what the *Dictionary* is composed of.

Quotation is a power-game, and no better does it seem to be exhibited than in scholarship, where merely the range, length, and obscurity of quoted material can give

⁶⁰ The Latin says, "You will not persuade, even though you [will try to] persuade" (i.e., even though you exercise persuasion).

quite a false sense of intellectual authority. Boswell observes that before a dinner at Bennet Langton's, Johnson had been "at first in a very silent mood"; we get the impression that Johnson is being watched and listened to closely, in the hope of some pungent remark. When he does speak, it is in gentle mockery both of the others' expectations of him, and of those who aim to impress by introducing passages of their reading into general conversation. Langton told Boswell that Johnson's entire pre-dinner conversation (in addition to saying "Pretty baby" to one of the children) consisted of having "said that he could repeat a complete chapter of 'The Natural History of Iceland,' from the Danish of *Horrebow*," which he did, thus,

'CHAP. LXXII. *Concerning snakes.*

'There are no snakes to be met with throughout the whole island.'⁶¹

(And it is fair to add that Johnson also shows off a bit, by in fact recalling a chapter of his reading, and demonstrating that scholars who are not so literal-minded as Horrebow can appropriate his text for humorous uses.) If conversation has a competitive element — and who could say that Johnson's did not? — it should be based on native wit, not mere verbal memory, and the appropriation of the verbal and intellectual power of other people. Johnson did not want, by his conversation, to be thought of as a man of quotations, a scholar, and thus a pedant. In the Hebrides, after he has looked at (and made some corrections to) Boswell's journal, he remarks, rather defensively (sounding, indeed, a trifle hurt), "They call me a scholar. And yet how very little literature there is in my conversation." 'Sir,' said I, 'that must be according to your company. You would not give literature to Coll and McSweyn. Stay till we meet Lord Elibank.'⁶²

Boswell seems to have observed rightly. There may have been very "little literature" (in the sense of literary knowledge) in his general conversation, because Johnson is worldly enough to realise that among the non-literary, a little bit of literary quotation goes a long way. Commenting on the respect in which, so Oliver Edwards claimed, he was held by his contemporaries at Oxford, Johnson observed, "Sir, it is amazing how little literature there is in the world."⁶³ But among the genuinely learned, for whom the

⁶¹ *Life* III, 279. 13 April 1778.

⁶² 12 October 1773. *Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D., 1773*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle and Charles H. Bennett (London: Heinemann, 1963), 294. In the published version of the *Tour*, Boswell replaces the names of Coll and McSweyn with, "those who cannot taste it" (*Life* V, 307).

⁶³ *Life* III, 303 n.4. 17 April 1778.

citation and discussion of text is their stock-in-trade, quotation is a different matter. Johnson strongly defends the practice, in a conversation with Wilkes (part of which sentiment I have already cited):

The subject of quotation being introduced, Mr. Wilkes censured it as pedantry. JOHNSON. "No, Sir, it is a good thing; there is a community of mind in it. Classical quotation is the *parole* of literary men all over the world." WILKES. "Upon the continent they all quote the vulgate Bible. Shakspeare is chiefly quoted here; and we quote also Pope, Prior, Butler, Waller, and sometimes Cowley."⁶⁴

But of course, one might say, Johnson *would* disagree with Wilkes, with whose levelling inclinations he was deeply unsympathetic, and which inclinations Wilkes' opening comment may seem to represent. Nevertheless, it seems that he has talked Wilkes around, to recognise that when he himself is not among his electors in Middlesex, but in exile in Europe, he mixes with educated people, with whom he speaks a language based on common reading.

But Johnson is aware that there is something less than intellectually respectable about dealing in quotable fragments of larger works. We have already quoted part of the following, from the Preface to Shakespeare,

It was said of Euripides, that every verse was a precept; and it may be said of Shakespeare, that from his works may be collected a system of civil and oeconomical prudence. Yet his real power is not shewn in the splendour of particular passages, but by the progress of his fable, and the tenour of his dialogue; and he that tries to recommend him by select quotations, will succeed like the pedant in Hierocles, who, when he offered his house to sale, carried a brick in his pocket as a specimen.⁶⁵

The propriety of quotation is a matter both of the company in which it is practiced, as well as of the context from which the quoted particle is extracted. Indeed, as we have seen, some texts are made in order to be extracted from, and others to be consumed whole. The selection and transmission of quotations is a practice which easily falls into — as in the

⁶⁴ *Life* IV, 102. 8 May 1781.

⁶⁵ Preface, *Johnson on Shakespeare* VII, 62.

case of Shakespeare and real estate — a sort of decadence, which Johnson and Hierocles call pedantry. His *Dictionary* definition of *pedantry*, as the "Awkward ostentation of needless learning," is a minor masterpiece: "ostentation" tells us that the pedant indulges in quotation or other respectable scholarly practices, only in order to show off. What he thus contributes to discussion is not in itself useful, it is "needless learning," beyond what is pertinent, and shows a lack of discrimination. And it is done in an "awkward" manner — suggesting that one *can* show off, and dispense useless information, and so long as it is done in an open and entertaining manner, and not with the intention to confuse or baffle, one will not be thought a pedant.

What the pedant lacks is common sense, to be able to see under what circumstances a quotation will convey something meaningful, or to understand where meaning is located. The pedant, under the impression that meaning is always and exclusively located in detail, gets into what is simply a habit of focussing on minutiae, but makes no effort to render it useful. The following paragraphs from a letter from Johnson to Hester Thrale might be considered as an example of how pedantry can be entertaining, can be displayed and mocked at the same time, in appropriate company. Johnson writes to explain that his time away from Streatham, on his annual summer jaunt to Lichfield and Ashbourne, will be extended another week or so. Among his humorous devices, he seems to mock the use of quotations, proverbs and literary allusions.

When we meet we may compare our different uses of this interval. I shall charge you with having lingred [*sic*] away in expectation and disappointment, two months which are both physically and morally considered as analogous to the fervid and vigorous part of human life, two months in which Nature exerts all her powers of benefaction, and graces the liberality of her hand by the elegance of her smile; two months which, as Doodle says, you never saw before, and which, as la Bruyere says, you shall never see again.

But complaints are vain, we will try to do better another time. — to morrow and to morrow. — A few designs and a few failures, and the time of designing will be past.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ *Letters* 1, 379-80. To Hester Thrale, 3 August 1771.

In this generous and artful passage, he seems playfully to subvert a number of his own characteristic public voices: that of the moral philosopher ("physically and morally considered as analogous ..."), and that of the poet ("graces the liberality of her hand by the elegance of her smile"). The third clause in this pseudo-Johnsonian triplet of descriptions of the "interval" of two months, is a mere cliché, the worthlessness of which he emphasises firstly by implausibly splitting it into two commonplace phrases, and secondly by 'authorising' each by worthless literary evocations — attributed in a rather tasteless manner to one disreputable source, and to one canonical source, but quite unidentifiably.⁶⁷ The allusion to *Macbeth* seems to bring him down to earth, and the unfinished and uncontested expressions with which he concludes are a simple and seemingly heartfelt *memento mori*. The whole nicely illustrates what Isobel Grundy identifies, in Johnson's letters to Hester Thrale, as the endless play between the great and the little, "for the purposes of self-mockery, mockery of the pretensions of others, and celebration of the domestic, the diminutive, the merely human."⁶⁸

What Johnson finds ludicrous is the attempt of the quoter to cheaply and as it were fraudulently appropriate authority. This may be done by quoting inappositely, inaccurately, or without understanding. The quoted quotation of the 'chapter' from Horrebow is a good if satirical illustration of futile quotation: here is a text which tells us very little. It already seems pedantic of its author to devote a chapter to a non-existent subject.⁶⁹ For Johnson to quote such an empty sentence, and to jokingly boast of quoting a whole chapter, merely emphasises the sense of its pointlessness, and the vanity of attempts to 'cap' the quotations of others. Johnson has one of the Idler's fictitious correspondents introduce a literary conversation circle, one of the members of which he describes,

Jack Solid is a man of much reading, who utters nothing but quotations; but having been, I suppose, too confident of his memory, he has for some time neglected his

⁶⁷ Hill's note refers us to Ravenscroft, *The London Cuckolds*, for the character 'Doodle,' and Redford's to the first line of Fielding's *Tom Thumb the Great*, for the commonplace phrase "a day as ... was never seen" — for which Fielding could hardly have been the source. (For Hill's note, see his edition of *The Letters of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, 2 v. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1892], I, 184 n.5.) Wisely, neither editor attempts to source the second phrase to La Bruyère.

⁶⁸ Grundy, *Samuel Johnson and the Scale of Greatness*, 70.

⁶⁹ In fairness to Niels Horrebow, Hill explains that the laconic style of this and another chapter in *The History of Iceland* is the result of the author's scheme to respond point by point to an earlier book, as well as some degree of truncation by the English translator.

books, and his stock grows every day more scanty. Mr. Solid has found an opportunity every night to repeat from *Hudibras*,

Doubtless the pleasure is as great
Of being cheated, as to cheat.⁷⁰

Mr. Solid's literary knowledge is not an intellectual resource which stimulates and extends his own discursive power. What he has read has apparently not been processed by him sufficiently to become a source of ideas or images that he can adapt, and has not equipped him even to renovate his language. It is simply a "stock" of packaged and perishable materials, that are dispensed, without intelligent discrimination, and are soon exhausted. It neither enhances knowledge nor advances the conversation. Quotations have been for Jack Solid a substitute for learning, and have become merely a mark of learning's absence.

The maxims and proverbs with which Johnson has often been observed to commence many of his moral essays might usefully be regarded as oral and anonymous quotations. Among the learned, as he and Wilkes agreed, one may quote from the classics, the Latin Bible, Shakespeare, and certain modern poets. Among common readers, one may use, as a conversational touchstone, more widely-spread and down-to-earth sources of wisdom: the orally transmitted commonplaces, without dates or authors or strict verbal forms. They are quotations nonetheless. The use of proverbs is, as Pat Rogers observes, an aspect of the "sense of the closeness to ordinary life which pervades Johnson's doings with words."⁷¹ We find him, according to Boswell, telling an acquaintance, without any recorded preface, apology or elaboration, "Sir, Hell is paved with good intentions."⁷² As he says, "few maxims are widely received or long retained but for some conformity with truth and nature."⁷³ But Johnson's usual practice in dealing with proverbs or received wisdom in his writings is not to repeat them in order to end discussion, but to test them in order to open up discussion. We see this in both his essays and, as Rogers shows, his conversation.

⁷⁰ *Idler* 78; 245.

⁷¹ Pat Rogers, "Johnson and the Diction of Common Life," *Johnson Society Transactions* (1982), 12.

⁷² *Life* II, 360. Under 14 April 1775. (Oddly, this does not feature under "Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings" in the Hill-Powell Index, nor the Additions to the Index.)

⁷³ *Rambler* 2; III, 11.

Michel de Certeau argues that if there were no quotation, nothing could be written. "In scriptural culture, quotation ... makes the production of texts possible." This he identifies as one extreme of the function of quotation, which is particularly exemplified in the quotation in writing of oral language. What he calls "the *quotation—pre-text*, which serves to fabricate texts (assumed to be commentaries or analyses) on the basis of relics selected from an oral tradition functioning as an authority," may just as validly or by extension be said to describe all quotation of text. Consider a text such as this thesis. It is fabricated as a commentary or analysis of the work of Samuel Johnson (a "tradition functioning as an authority"), which is represented in the text by a succession of quotations. Scholars do not have to look very far in order to see that, as de Certeau says, "quotations become the means by which discourse proliferates."⁷⁴ But the process happens at a more commonplace level, too; quoting gives us something to say. By being able to say, for instance, "As Johnson once said, 'worth seeing, but not worth *going* to see,'" a speaker has at their disposal a way of thinking, and a way of progressing and refining discussion.

Whilst having a quotation from someone else may enable, equip or qualify someone to speak, it is, on the other hand, through being quoted (e.g., by me) that Johnson or de Certeau is enabled to speak — given a voice. De Certeau calls this "the *quotation-reminiscence*, marking in language the fragmented and unexpected return (like the intrusion of voices from outside) of oral relationships that are structuring but repressed by the written." Again, I would argue that the written does not only 'repress' "oral relationships," but that every discursive written text potentially silences the voice of all others. It is through being quoted in the midst of my discourse that other writers are able, as de Certeau points out, to "interrupt it."⁷⁵ In writing, unlike in conversation, the *interruption* is a thing of permanent effect. Whether or not a scholar or commentator has understood or validly interpreted some text of another writer, by providing a quotation of that text, the scholar enables his or her readership to see for itself, to hear the voice of Johnson or de Certeau independent of the frame of his purported explicator. The use of the *quotation-reminiscence* is a practice which Johnson noted with evident pleasure, as the manner in which the Duchess of Marlborough used personal letters in her *Memoirs*.

⁷⁴ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 156.

⁷⁵ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 156.

The Method of confirming her Relation, by inserting at length the Letters that every Transaction occasioned, has not only set the greatest Part of the Work above the Danger of Confutation, but has added to the Entertainment of the Reader, who has now the Satisfaction of forming to himself the Characters of the Actors, and judging how nearly such as have hitherto been given of them agree with those which they now give of themselves.⁷⁶

De Certeau observes (in emphatic italics) that "*The voice makes people write*" (161). Certainly, some voices make some people write, as Johnson's voice made Boswell, Mrs. Thrale, and others write. De Certeau is suggesting not so much that we only write in order to quote oral language, as that anything that anyone says has a tendency to make other people say other things. It is the function of text to draw out discourse from other people. Even texts that seem to stifle discourse can be manoeuvred around by people who are sufficiently alert. It is de Certeau's belief that within imposed systems of control, there will always be some exercise of everyday creativity. Where there are not particular tactics (such as employees taking 'sickies,' or making use of the company telephone), there will inevitably be personal programs which workers can and will pursue in the very midst of their work for the company, such as relationships to be negotiated, or merely day-dreaming. Johnson seems both far less optimistic than de Certeau as to how alert people are to their opportunities and the need to exploit them, and to have a far higher threshold of what he regards as a proper and fruitful exercise of the everyday.

VI. "Useful Knowledge"

Of course, these functions occur simultaneously. Quotations — whether we are thinking of verbally or structurally memorable oral artefacts or simply compassable literary artifacts — potentially attract commentary, and providing such commentary is the main means by which Johnson works. Literary quotations are the touchstones of a common learned language, and proverbs and the like may be the touchstones of a more everyday style of discussion about general topics. Lipking, in the context of a discussion of the *Lives of the Poets*, identifies the "chain of commentary upon commentaries"⁷⁷ as the model of classical scholarship that was fundamental to Johnson's own scholarly practice. In his

⁷⁶ [Johnson,] "Review of *Memoirs of the Duchess Dowager of Marlborough*," 129.

⁷⁷ Lipking, *Samuel Johnson*, 268.

edition of Shakespeare, Johnson conducts through his annotative commentary a conversation with previous commentators. Pope, Theobald, Hanmer and Warburton are quoted, often at length, in the notes, so that the reader can judge whether they have been convincingly amended or refuted. Bertrand Bronson says of Johnson's notes, that, "in the spirit of ongoing, informal exchange of opinion, they are close to spoken discourse."⁷⁸ Johnson, in his "Considerations" on literary abridgement, says that quotation is necessary for the advancement of knowledge: "to confute an erroneous book ... it has always been a custom to abridge the author whose assertions are to be examined, and, sometimes, to transcribe all the essential parts of his book."⁷⁹

Whether other authors are cited for support or to be refuted, in the democracy of scholarly enterprise, all contribute to the spread and refinement of knowledge. There is a community which transcends difference of opinion, and ownership of knowledge. Naturally enough, we will find most of this meta-critical discussion in paratextual locations. In writing to Thomas Warton, about a collection of notes that he supplied for Johnson's edition of Shakespeare, Johnson engagingly expresses these sentiments.

Your notes upon my poet were very acceptable to me, I beg that you will be so kind as to continue your searches. It will be reputable to my work, and suitable to your professorship to have something of yours in the notes. You have given no directions about your name, I shall therefore put it. I wish your Brother would take the same trouble.... A commentary must arise from the *fortuitous discoveries of many men*, in devious walks of literature.⁸⁰

A scholar like Johnson or Warton can feel a debt of gratitude to and a sense of kinship with not only his living colleagues, but also the silent and unmet community of scholars whose minds engaged with the same texts and the same issues as his own. As Nicholson Baker observes, the scholar "can, if he wishes to wax eschatological, think of these as friends and colleagues of a sort, as Housman seems to have regarded Scaliger and Bentley,

⁷⁸ Bronson, Introduction, *Selections from Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Bertrand H. Bronson with Jean O'Meara (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1986), xxvi.

⁷⁹ Johnson, "Considerations on the Case of Dr. T[rapp]'s Sermons", *Works* (1825), v, 466.

⁸⁰ *Letters* 1, 162 (my emphasis). 14 April 1758. This is an expression of what Isobel Grundy identifies as "the theme of intellectual concatenation" in Johnson's work. See her *Samuel Johnson and the Scale of Greatness*, 124.

and 'the next Bentley or Scaliger';⁸¹ and as Samuel Johnson also regarded Scaliger and Bentley, as we have seen.

"Literary men" do not (or at least, not always, or not ideally) bandy quotations in order to display what they know or pretend to know, hoping that their erudition will startle others into silence, and end discussion. Quotations are to be used not to stifle or end, but to promote and refine discussion, to draw it towards consensus and commonality. This is an ideal which in the wider society is often, perhaps always, under threat, although (at June 2000) the forth-coming end of the second millenium seems to have induced a recent upsurge in anxiety. As the essayist Robert Dessaix observes, "*general* conversation itself is now breaking down" into "rival monologues."⁸² Now, scholarship cannot be called "*general* conversation," but it has at least always avoided the monologic, by the use of 'pedantic' devices such as footnotes, commentary, quotations. "Only the use of footnotes," says the modern historian of that quinessentially pedantic subject, "enables historians to make their texts not monologues but conversations, in which modern scholars, their predecessors, and their subjects all take part."⁸³ It is Dessaix's concern that certain species of contemporary intellectual discourse, especially those to which has been sweepingly appropriated the description "Theory," have tended to abandon some of these discursive markers. As a result, such discourses seem to aim to exclude, rather than to invite discussion, dispute, even understanding.

It might be argued that the students and exponents of Theory learn from it a repertoire of procedures by which something which looks like a radical scepticism may be exercised. The growth of this particular kind of theoretical discourse, in all disciplines of the humanities, has produced a body of written material which in contrast to older kinds of criticism seems only theoretical — purely abstract, and centrifugal in its focus. In this way, "Theory" has itself become a subject, a body of knowledge, a discourse about itself. As Mark Turner observes, "criticism has become its own fuel, susceptible of a higher-order critical analysis that is not merely self-sustaining but, beyond fission, self-feeding, its output continuous with its input, a perpetual breeder reactor, unrestrained by laws of

⁸¹ Nicholson Baker, "Lumber," *The Size of Thoughts*, 264.

⁸² Robert Dessaix, "Russia: The End of an Affair," (*and so forth*) [*sic*] (Sydney: Macmillan, 1998), 317 (Dessaix notes that he is borrowing phrases from Edmund White).

⁸³ Grafton, *The Footnote*, 234.

entropy."⁸⁴ Such types of discourse may be "learning," but they are not what Johnson regards as "useful knowledge."

In *Rambler* 83, he remarks, "many subjects of study ... seem but remotely allied to useful knowledge."⁸⁵ Talking of his friend, the writer Dr. John Campbell, Johnson said, "he has very extensive reading; not, perhaps, what is properly called learning, but history, politicks, and, in short, that popular knowledge which makes a man very useful."⁸⁶ Is it not as well that *useful* knowledge makes a man very *popular*? Useful knowledge is or may be practical, quotable, debatable; it generates discourse and thus forms a kind of social bond. The social bond this formed is perhaps the very basis of its utility. We noted earlier, from *Rambler* 188, that narrative is the most "extensively acceptable" 'stile' of conversation. Anecdotes and other useful knowledge, is not owned by anyone, but circulates around society and down through the generations. The distinction between "what is properly called learning" and the "popular knowledge that makes a man very useful" is highly suggestive about Johnson's own work. Johnson was immensely learned, a fact of which the recent full-length biographical assessment by Robert DeMaria reminds us, but he never wrote the sort of scholarly treatise of which he was probably capable. (That he thought of doing so we see from his literary *Designs*.) But he belongs, therefore, not to the history of any particular scholarly discipline (at least, not until literature itself becomes merely a scholarly discipline), but to the sort of living and extra-literary memorableness that comes to an identifiable figure — as identifiable as a character in a novel — together with the sense of that same character that we detect in his writing. It is his fund of 'popular knowledge' that has enabled Johnson to remain useful.

Learning proper, we are to assume, is by contrast frequently not useful. In the *Dictionary*, Johnson four times uses a quotation from Henry More's *Antidote Against Atheism* (1653), "Providence would only initiate mankind into the useful knowledge of her treasures, leaving the rest to employ our industry, that we live not like idle loiterers and truants."⁸⁷ In other words, most of that which we need to know is readily knowable (this is a subset of the theme of *Rambler* 108), and the more that we may discover is only really

⁸⁴ Mark Turner, *Reading Minds: The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U.P., 1991), 3.

⁸⁵ *Rambler* 83; IV, 71.

⁸⁶ *Life* V, 324. *Tour*, 17 October.

⁸⁷ He varies the quotation each time he uses it; see under *industry*, *loiterer*, *truant* and *useful*.

there to keep us occupied. Indeed, much of Johnson's literary labour, as both a writer and a reader, may be seen as an effort to make writing useful. He embodies much of his wisdom in periodical essays, that fit as conveniently into the pocket as into the patterns of daily life and business, or by contrast in a Dictionary, a huge and comprehensive work, but one that is designed to be opened anywhere. He throws books about, refusing to be tyrannised by them, or to be tyrannised by the seeming demand of the book form for comprehensive attention in the reading or the writing. He reads so as to 'tear the heart out' of a book. And when writing, he won't cross the street to verify an anecdote for the *Lives of the Poets*. One of his *Designs* is a Table of *Spectators*, *Tatlers* and *Guardians*, with notes and points awarded for value! One feels in him an anxiety that as little as possible stand between books and those who would benefit from them: usefulness is all.

It is not therefore great totalising single-voiced discourses (of fiction or diction) that a writer with a mind to an honest and equal relationship with his readers is called upon to produce. An open text requires other voices, and/or subject matter which exists independently of the text, which may be the common possession of (at least all the readers in) a culture, in order to implicitly invite readers to so far as they can interact with the text, and not merely surrender themselves to it. To construct any discourse — oral or literate — worth the participation of a rational being, Johnson believes that people's minds need to be well-supplied with material from without. Useful or entertaining conversation cannot merely be spun out of our own heads. "He that thinks," he asserts in *Idler* 24, "must think upon something.... [It is] impossible to think without materials."⁸⁸ Of course, we also need to be attentive, to bring to our experience, however interesting, a lively intelligence. Speaking of travel writing, Johnson observed, "a man must carry knowledge with him, if he would bring home knowledge."⁸⁹ In order to be able to provide an amusing travel narrative for other people, it is not sufficient merely to go to exotic places: the mind which views these things must be capable of discrimination. By contrast, in discussing the writing of poetry, which many people assume is a purely inward-looking activity, Johnson emphasises the other side of intellectual activity:

We had, in the course of our tour, heard of St. Kilda poetry. Dr. Johnson observed, "it must be very poor, because they have very few images." —*Boswell*.

⁸⁸ *Idler* 24; 75, 77.

⁸⁹ *Life* III, 302. 17 April 1778. Cf. his remark, "I would advise no man to marry, Sir ..., who is not likely to propagate understanding" (*Life* II, 109 n.2).

"There may be a poetical genius shewn in combining these, and in making poetry of them." — *Johnson*. "Sir, a man cannot make fire but in proportion as he has fuel. He cannot coin guineas but in proportion as he has gold."⁹⁰

The poet needs, in addition to the poetic powers of his own mind, material from the external world; the travel writer needs, in addition to the stimulus of the external world, a well-equipped mind. Somewhere in the tension and interaction between these two sources the different discourses — all discourses — are made to happen. But neither poetry on the romantic model nor travel narrative is, as we have seen, the native discourse of Johnson. Johnson's characteristic diction is modelled on conversation. The tensions which all connected discourse both creates and negotiates, are supplied in wholesome discourse by a multiplicity of voices.

That useful knowledge makes a man *popular* is to be understood as suggesting that there are kinds of knowledge of which all (all, that is, who are interested in knowledge) can contribute to the discussion and circulation. The world of writing and scholarship is or ought to be, in Johnson's view, a model of the proper functioning of conversation and social relationships. The presence in a discourse of different voices, and anecdotes not owned by the author, is an invitation to the reader to contribute his or her own voice to the great conversation. An anecdote, like a quotation, is a locus around which commentary circulates. The circulation of commentary is for Johnson essential to the life of literature. Boswell's attitude in this story seems far more professional than that of Johnson:

Both Sir John Hawkins's and Dr. Burney's History of Musick had then been advertised. I asked if this was not unlucky: would not they hurt one another? — *Johnson*. "No, sir. They will do good to one another. Some will buy the one, some the other, and compare them; and so a talk is made about a thing, and the books are sold."⁹¹

The ambition of a writer, he suggests, ought not (only?) to be to produce some great work, which attempts to exhibit mastery over some subject. What is at least as valuable is to write in such a way as to contribute to what amounts to an ongoing conversation between men, with books as the medium.

⁹⁰ *Life* V, 228-29. *Tour*, 19 September.

⁹¹ *Life* V, 72. *Tour*, 20 August.

George Saintsbury was, in 1900-04, the first English writer to tackle the *History of Criticism*, a subject which Johnson himself had projected,⁹² as Saintsbury acknowledges. In a later informal work of reflection, he made this observation about the subject.

There can be no "finality" in criticism... The idea of criticism as something attainable and ascertainable, once for all — like the quotient of a sum, or the cast of a death-mask — is a mere delusion. *Criticism is the result of the reaction of the processes of one mind on the products of another....*⁹³

It is a sentiment with which Johnson would have concurred. Commonality is not finality. Finality is death. In fact, the lack of a last word (*a* theory, and a number of theories, rather than Theory) leads to commonality. One eighteenth-century term for what we call literary criticism was *philology* (two of the older British journals in the field of literary criticism are *Studies in Philology* and the *Philological Quarterly*). In the *Dictionary*, under *philology*, Johnson quotes Isaac Watts.

He who pretends to the learned professions, if he doth not arise to be a critick himself in *philological* matters, should frequently converse with dictionaries, paraphrasts [that is, writers of paraphrases], commentators, or other criticks, which may relieve any difficulties.

The word *converse* here is very suggestive, but I want us also to notice the emphasis that learning be grounded in minute critical knowledge. Without it, learning is vain and worthless: the kind of maggotty or vermiculate knowledge we saw Bacon condemn in Chapter Three. In his review of Warton's book on Pope, Johnson points out "a remark which deserves great attention: 'In no polished nation, after criticism has been much studied, and the rules of writing established, has any very extraordinary book ever appeared.'⁹⁴ I take this to imply, among other things, that a lack of definition of genre boundaries makes literature not simply more interesting, but possible. Once literature has fallen into conventional forms, it is able only to be put to conventional uses. The living

⁹² See Appendix, 331, 336.

⁹³ George Saintsbury, "Criticism: I. Its Infinity," *A Scrap Book* (London: Macmillan, 1922), 26-27; Saintsbury's emphasis.

⁹⁴ [Johnson,] Review of Joseph Warton, *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Pope*, 37.

text becomes governed by external considerations, rather than the needs of the present moment.⁹⁵

Is this perhaps why Johnson's various works all seem to remind readers more of each other than of anyone else's writings? What I have elsewhere called the *midrashic* footnotes to the Yale Edition of Johnson's *Rambler* essays are testimony to this.⁹⁶ And despite the powerful counsels of the Boswellian sceptics, his recorded conversations (although, as "oral confidences," they are technically what Genette calls a *public epitext*⁹⁷ to his writings) on the whole feel to readers to be part of the same discourse. They are not a counterpoint, or an amusing supplement or corrective to his writings, but seem of a piece with them.⁹⁸ This is, I emphasise, not so much an endorsement of Boswell's skill (or even accuracy, necessarily) as a testimony to the conversational qualities of Johnson's writings.

In *minutiae literariae*, and texts composed of what I have called *diction*, Johnson found sources of textual pleasure which provide variety and choice (the essence of all pleasure), and allowed him possession of his own mind and the present moment. Johnson is very aware that there are powerful pleasures in having our minds or attentions seized or enchained or possessed, just as there are pleasures in being overwhelmed by bodily sensation, but they are pleasures which if indulged without restraint diminish our moral agency and hence our humanity. This, I take it, to be a succinct account of Johnson's views.

I have been at pains to describe the types of texts which may be said to be *minutiae literariae*, in order to emphasise their importance to Johnson, and their resemblances to each other, because I wish to locate them centrally in the everyday. They

⁹⁵ We are reminded of Johnson's belief that certain kinds of books in fact write themselves; of his saying of *Gulliver's Travels*, "When once you have thought of big men and little men, it is very easy to do all the rest" (*Life* II, 319. 24 March 1775).

⁹⁶ Almost half the general (i.e., non-textual) annotation in the first volume of the Yale *Rambler* (113 of 259 notes) refer to other places in his works where he expresses similar (or contrasting) ideas to those of the footnoted passages. See my "The *Rambler*'s Second Audience: Johnson and the Paratextual 'Part of Literature,'" *Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand Bulletin*, 24:4 (Fourth Quarter, 2000), 250.

⁹⁷ Genette, *Paratexts*, 385.

⁹⁸ Indeed, much of Hill's annotation to his edition (1887) of the *Life of Johnson* has a midrashic quality. L.F. Powell observed on revising Hill's work, "I have not attempted to supplement systematically Dr. Hill's numerous illustrative quotations from Johnson's own writings ..., as I believe that he has developed this feature of his work as much as is desirable or legitimate." Powell, "Preface to the New Edition," *Life* I, ix.

are for Johnson like conversation, also a centrally everyday activity, in that they generate a perpetual series of mental acts of engagement and disengagement with the self. Johnson's conversation, in particular, is characterised by Allen Reddick in very similar terms.

[T]he published accounts of his conversation, notably Boswell's and Mrs. Piozzi's, not to mention the other less important biographies and collections of anecdotes, portray his conversation not as extended exposition or narrative, but as consisting more of isolated propositions, followed or preceded by brief exposition, or of responses to statements or questions put to him by Boswell or another interlocutor, or in reference to some situation or experience.⁹⁹

Good conversation, and these types of written discourse, allow us alternatively to both represent and withhold ourselves, and thus to properly engage with the minds and experiences of others. This same sense of a "community of mind" was for Johnson the essence of the practice of quotation, another such strategy of successive acts of engagement and disengagement. Through such strategies as these we are enabled to build relational bonds with other people.

⁹⁹ Reddick, *The Making of Johnson's Dictionary*, 30.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Johnson and Pleasure

I. Everyday Pleasures

In previous chapters, we have seen Johnson's attachment to devices and strategies, textual or otherwise, which allow (or, we might say, host) a movement away from fixation upon the self and toward engagement with others. I say "textual or otherwise," but our interest is inevitably mainly textual, since that is our only form of contact with Johnson. Johnson's own interest in these strategies, at least as expressed in his writings, is also mainly textual, in that it is as readers that he engages with us. The fact that we are readers is almost the only thing Johnson can know about us, and it must seem the best common ground. As I have remarked elsewhere, Johnson, in *The Rambler*, constantly brings the subject of writing to the attention of the reader.¹ Betty Rizzo says that this is partly because he was "committed to establishing the profession of authorship as a respectable one."² But it is hard to credit this practice as motivated, consciously or otherwise, by such political considerations. As de Certeau reminds us, reading is a quinessentially everyday activity; indeed, it seems to de Certeau to be the inevitable starting point from which to describe the range of "everyday practices that produce without capitalizing, that is, without taking control over time."³ This too is a reason for Johnson's concern about reading. As a moral writer, he is anxious about how people employ their everyday, and reading will seem, particularly to readers actually engaged in reading, the most obvious instance.

When as readers we are occupied with texts such as narrative, or with monologues as opposed to conversation, or with longer texts as opposed to short ones, the attention becomes more fully engaged by what is going on in one's own mind, just as powerful sensation occupies us with what is going on in or with one's own body. In either case, it

¹ I count twenty-two essays in *The Rambler* devoted to specific authors, texts or genres, and a further twenty concerning the life of writing or study. See the Appendix to my "The Rambler's Second Audience," 256. There are many more instances in which writers are used as examples.

² Betty Rizzo, "Johnson's Efforts on Behalf of Authorship in *The Rambler*," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 264 (1989), 1188.

³ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xx. Parenthetical references follow in text.

is the self that engages us, to the exclusion of a sense of the reality of other people. Bodily sensation provides us with essentially uncommunicable feelings, which enhance both our sense of ourselves as (purely) material and bodily entities, and our sense of our apartness from other minds. In a moral or intellectual vacuum, bodily sensations do nothing to build relationships or diminish isolation. This is more than sufficient in Johnson's view to render them unworthy of the deliberate or concentrated attention of a rational and benevolent being.

However, all these strategies which aim at the enchainment of attention we might also characterise as effecting a displacement of the everyday. De Certeau would contend that the everyday is never displaced, that it always finds ways to escape or subvert systems of control or management. He believes that although "the steadily increasing expansion of these systems no longer leaves 'consumers' any *place*" (xii) for a *poiesis* of usage, users will always *make something* of the representations imposed upon them. As we will see, Johnson is not so optimistic. If people increasingly experience their daily lives as lacking a location for the fulfillment of their own everydayness, for the exercise of their own self-defining productive behaviour, the types of behaviours to which they resort — what de Certeau calls *tactics* — risk becoming arbitrary and chaotic, more morally ambiguous. De Certeau says that in a power economy, in which there is for the everyday neither "a 'proper' (a spatial or institutional localization), nor ... a border-line distinguishing the other as a visible totality," all tactical activity therefore "insinuates itself into the other's place" (xix). He depicts the life of an individual in an expanding technocracy as follows:

Increasingly constrained, yet less and less concerned with these vast frameworks, the individual detaches himself from them without being able to escape them and can henceforth only try to outwit them, to pull tricks on them, to rediscover, within an electronicized and computerized megalopolis, the 'art' of the hunters and rural folk of earlier days. (xxiii-xxiv)

Such a model of behaviour — with its suggestions of cunning deception, illegality, and savagery — would seem to Johnson monstrously inadequate.

Even without de Certeau's specific prompt (xix), shopping might seem to be a model of the kind of everyday activity that gives many of us a sense that we are fulfilling our own purposes, even whilst we are in the thrall of a culture of exploitation and manipulation. It is, after all, the modern equivalent of hunting. However, unlike hunting

(at least, in a pre-agricultural society), shopping is increasingly figured (in the commercial media) as an end in itself, as a potential pastime or hobby. Phrases such as "born to shop," originally satirical in intent, are even used by consumers, without irony, as self-descriptive. De Certeau would rightly point out that it is in this way that humans carve out pathways for the everyday in the midst of strategies of control. But to a moralist, no amount of private 'consumer pleasure' that we extract from the experience can alter its materialistic and dehumanising central character. Shopping, we might imagine, could hardly have been in eighteenth-century London an activity which was of very much concern to Johnson or other moralists. However, he intriguingly comments in his *Journey to the Western Islands* on the lack of a shop in Skye,

To a man that ranges the streets of *London*, where he is tempted to contrive wants for the pleasure of supplying them, a shop affords no image worthy of attention; but in an Island, it turns the balance of existence between good and evil. To live in perpetual want of little things, is a state not indeed of torture, but of constant vexation.⁴

In the same way, an everyday activity such as reading can feel as if it is merely a source of entirely personal pleasure, whilst by enchainning our attention it deprives us of choice and agency.

The subjects of shops, shopping and shop-keeping are introduced a considerable number of times in what is arguably Johnson's most amiable work, the third of his four series of periodical essays, *The Idler*.⁵ As I will focus on this series of essays a number of times in this chapter, it might be best to characterise it first. *The Idler* has received very little attention in its own right. Johnson's periodical essays have usually been treated by commentators as the one body of approximately the same material, or as an encyclopaedic collection of 340 individual works, each on a different topic. The customary use made of this material by critics is as a mine for gobbets representing Johnson's opinions, paying no attention to the series as distinct literary entities; and whilst *The Rambler*, as the most substantial of the series, has received some consideration as a work on its own, the shorter and later *Idler* has been neglected. It is thought to be

⁴ Johnson, *Journey to the Western Islands*, ed. Fleeman, 108.

⁵ In addition to the *Rambler*, *Idler*, and contributions to the *Adventurer*, Johnson contributed three numbers of an essay series titled the "The Weekly Correspondent" to the *Public Ledger* in December 1760. See E.L. McAdam, Jr., "New Essays by Dr. Johnson," *Review of English Studies* XVIII (April 1942), 197-207.

basically the same as the earlier series, but shorter and lighter. Walter Bate asserts that any study of it must either "concentrate largely on dates and other external details, or else ... fall into repetition of [Johnson's major or central] ideas."⁶ *The Idler* is frequently passed over in surveys of Johnson's writings, subsumed into discussions of Johnson as a periodical essayist. For the purpose of his survey of Johnson's works, Bate lumps the three series in with *Rasselas* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, as "moral writings," and says "What is most important in any one of them cannot be isolated." This, of course, makes a point, but it is an over-statement that does an injustice to Johnson's sharp awareness of matters of genre and paratextuality.

Whilst it is primarily and perhaps only in the quasi-paratextual matter of length that any one *Rambler* could be reliably distinguished from any one *Idler*, these two major series of essays have, as entire works, their own particular and recurring themes. Robert DeMaria observes, "the *Idler* is not merely an inferior version of its grandiloquent predecessor,"⁷ and he identifies in it a "more social and less abstract psychology" than that of the *Rambler*, as well as a deliberate effort (in the early numbers in particular) to establish the character of his persona, Mr. Idler. However, a range of different concerns can be identified as the recurring themes of the series. For a start, *The Idler* is about idling in a way that *The Rambler* is not about rambling. James Woodruff observes, and wryly plays down his surprise that it should need saying, that it is the experience of readers that "idleness comes up from time to time in Johnson's *Idler*."⁸ He explores how assuming the character of 'the Idler' does not simply give Johnson a basis for the broad view of society which all periodical essayists require, but also provides a restricted thematic focus which remains central to the work. It is remarkable that despite Woodruff's ground-breaking essay on the subject, *The Idler* — a work, after all, of about 100,000 words — continues to do a disappearing trick in surveys of Johnson's writing. Donald Greene (1989) treats the periodical essays encyclopedically; it is nowhere separately discussed in the *Cambridge Companion to Johnson* (1997); Lawrence Lipking (1998) barely mentions it in his book-length account of Johnson as an author. *The Idler* is quoted, but not discussed.

⁶ Bate, *Samuel Johnson*, 296; see also 334-36

⁷ DeMaria, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 195.

⁸ James F. Woodruff, "Johnson's *Idler* and the Anatomy of Idleness," *English Studies in Canada* 6 (1980), 22.

The number of purely moral essays (works of diction rather than fiction) in *The Idler* is lower than that in *The Rambler* (19 of 104, as against 64 of 208), as is the number of essays on literary subjects (14 /104: 39 /208); the number employing the device of the letter is about the same (33 /104: 65 /208). However, the number of essays employing portraiture or narrative (excluding letters) is much higher (32 /104: 39 /208).⁹ A number of subjects arise in the *Idler* essays that do not appear to the same degree in the earlier series; and shops are one of these.

Johnson's contention in the *Journey* that in London "a shop furnishes no image worthy of attention" is reinforced a number of times in the *Idler*, even though shops are a common setting in the series: Zachary Treacle is a grocer; his wife and another shopkeeper write to Mr. Idler; Betty Broom lived with a shopkeeper; Peter Plenty's wife haunts the shops for bargains; Deborah Ginger's husband keeps a shop, as does Tim Wainscot.¹⁰ Shops constitute an important scene of everyday life; they are depicted in the *Idler* as occupying many people, and the Idler gently mocks people who suppose themselves too smart for shopwork (such as Mr. Ginger and Wainscot Jr.¹¹). But Johnson's refrain on shops, when not spinning these fictions, is a line from the *ana* of Socrates, who on visiting the market at Athens is supposed to have exclaimed, "How many things are here which I do not want!" It is a pronouncement to which Johnson is obviously drawn, using it in *Idler* 37 and twice in the earlier *Adventurer* essays.¹² In *Adventurer* 67, he says that the visitor to London

beholds a thousand shops crouded with goods, of which he can scarcely tell the use, and which, therefore, he is apt to consider as of no value; and, indeed, many of the arts by which families are supported, and wealth is heaped together, are of that minute and superfluous kind, which nothing but experience could evince possible to be prosecuted with advantage, and which, as the world might easily want [that is, do without], it could scarcely be expected to encourage. (385)

But encourage such "arts" it does. Five years later, in *Idler* 30 he observes,

⁹ As there are 208 *Ramblers* and 104 *Idlers*, doubling the number of the *Idlers* in these statistics makes the figures exactly comparable.

¹⁰ See *Idler* Nos. 15, 28, 26, 35, 47, 95.

¹¹ And also Dick Serge the draper in *Adventurer* 53; 369.

¹² *Idler* 37; 116. *Adventurer* 67; 384-85. *Adventurer* 119; 466. Parenthetical references in text follow.

many shops are furnished with instruments, of which the use can hardly be found without enquiry, but which he that once knows them, quickly learns to number among necessary things. (*Idler* 30; 93.)

This 'learning' to number useless items among the necessities is yet another illustration of how easily (and how "quickly," he says) our minds may be seized. Socrates' purported *anax* on the subject is an assertion of sturdy independence, a celebration of how much rubbish he is *not* possessed by. But those less able to provide themselves with things to think about, such as the young beauty about to return to London for the season, take such pleasure in the array of intellectually compassable items, that she visits the silk shops in her dreams (*Idler* 80; 249).

One would imagine that there is, for the moralist, a considerable scope for righteous indignation at the pettiness of the preoccupations of the mass of people, and the grossness of their sources of pleasure. But the *Adventurer* essay we have just quoted, in which he contemplates the occupations of Londoners, is in fact a celebration of "the secret concatenation of society" (67; 386). A philosopher might well sniff at the "popular and modish trifles" (385) of which the shops are full. But that the majority of us so easily adapt ourselves to their use is for Johnson testimony (although an admittedly low-level and perhaps morally ambiguous or corrupt testimony) to our equality with and dependence upon other people. There may be people either outside of civilised communities, in remote or rural situations, or who imagine themselves superior to the refinements of urban life: savages, and a few remote and abstracted individuals (such as that "rugged Being," a "mere antiquarian"¹³); but there are dangers in such individualism, or (as Johnson would say) 'singularity.' One is that independence, real or imagined, makes it likely that we will mistake our duty to live in the reciprocation of benevolence with others. But also, Johnson is aware that in such a society, for all its waste and complexity, we are each free to live the life of the mind and take charge of our own destiny. Of course, it is a risk that perhaps poetry and science will be regarded by many or most people as inferior forms of entertainment and employment to sensual and consumer pleasures. As he observes, "There is such a difference between the pursuits of men, that one part of the inhabitants of a great city lives to little other purpose than to wonder at the rest" (*Idler* 56; 175).¹⁴ Rather than be astonished or disgusted by the chosen pleasures of other folk, Johnson is content that

¹³ *Letters* III, 114. Letter to Boswell, 23 April 1778.

¹⁴ This is a sentiment we find echoed in Jane Austen, *Emma* (1816), Ch. 9: "One half of the world cannot understand the pleasures of the other."

under the same regime, he and others may contribute to the advancement of art and knowledge, and that there at least be sufficient moral knowledge and restraint abroad that other people occupy themselves harmlessly.

II. Harmless Pleasure

Johnson recognised the force of sensual and immediate pleasures, and that he does so is an important aspect of his enduring attraction as a writer and a literary personality. He is a writer who constantly looks beyond writing to the quotidian realities of the world around both him and the reader. He aims to break down or subvert the formal barriers of genre between his writings and their readers. The world into which he invites us is the world we are already in. And of course, when — mainly by courtesy of Boswell — we picture Johnson himself, it is in the midst of a vivid and detailed social and physical environment. The last place we envisage Johnson is at his writing desk, to which we believe he only dragged himself with the utmost reluctance. Boswell even figures Johnson's engagement with books as not so much an intellectual engagement as a physical one, and it is hard to believe that Johnson himself did not welcome and perhaps 'play up to' this reading of his character.

His going on a pre-dawn 'frisk' with Beauclerk and Langton, his 'taking a roll,' his 'great fondness' for pocketing, scraping and drying as vivid and pungent a substance as orange peel, his walking and running, his experiments, such as drying leaves and shaving patches of his body hair, his minding his belly, his oaken staff and his three-legged chair, his cat, his bulk, stature and the noise of his laugh: all are celebrated by Boswell as emblematic of Johnson's enthusiastic and energetic involvement with the world of the senses. Even the fact of his poor eyesight and tone-deafness do not detract from but rather support this impression. His lack of appreciation of music and the visual arts is more than compensated for by his enthusiastic absorption in the least-intellectualised of sensual pleasures, the physical, tactile and visceral.

Nevertheless, in Johnson's own writing, and his commentary upon it, we see a very different approach to the subject of pleasure. He is powerfully aware of the attractions of pleasure, and that pleasures — of the most unworthy variety — can attract people to the neglect of any other consideration. The following story is very well-known. Boswell reports having challenged Johnson about the terms in which he had praised David Garrick.

Johnson had written, in his 'Life of Smith,' that Garrick's death had "impoverished the publick stock of harmless pleasure."¹⁵ Boswell asked him,

"Is not *harmless pleasure* very tame?" JOHNSON. "Nay, Sir, harmless pleasure is the highest praise. Pleasure is a word of dubious import; pleasure is in general dangerous, and pernicious to virtue; to be able therefore to furnish pleasure that is harmless, pleasure pure and unalloyed, is as great a power as man can possess."¹⁶

Boswell confesses himself to be unconvinced by this "ingenious" defence. He may have been more satisfied if he had recalled the passage from *Rasselas* in which Johnson first coined the expression.

"The liberty of using *harmless pleasures*," proceeded Imlac, "will not be disputed; but it is still to be examined what pleasures are harmless. The evil of any pleasure that Nekayah can image [that is, imagine] is not in the act itself, but in its consequences. Pleasure, in itself harmless, may become mischievous, by endearing to us a state which we know to be transient and probatory, and withdrawing our thoughts from that, of which every hour brings us nearer to the beginning, and of which no length of time will bring us to the end. Mortification is not virtuous in itself, nor has any other use, but that it disengages us from the allurements of sense [that is, sensation]. In the state of future perfection, to which we all aspire, there will be pleasure without danger, and security without restraint."¹⁷

Imlac's critique of pleasure is that the taste for even morally innocuous varieties can easily become habitual, enchaining our attention to the present moment. Such an enchainment may be so total as to disable us from seeing the present in the context of eternity and from seeing the possibility and necessity of our own moral agency within the present. To be "in full possession of the present moment," and to be possessed *by* the present are two very different states. That pleasure is of itself a good thing Johnson strongly affirms, as an ingredient in the perfection of the future state to which we are destined, but in our mortal condition a lifestyle of pleasure-seeking will only serve to seize and enchain us to a dangerously transitory present.

¹⁵ 'Smith,' *Lives* II, 21. In quoting it, Boswell says "diminished" rather than "impoverished."

¹⁶ *Life* III, 388 (Boswell's italics). 24 April, 1779. None of the words after "import" are present in the Journal account; see *Laird of Auchinleck*, 99.

¹⁷ *Rasselas*, Ch. XLVII, 166-67.

It is in this context that we must understand various of Johnson's offhand remarks, such as his comment that music is "the only sensual pleasure without vice."¹⁸ This is quoted often enough in explorations of his attitude to music, but if we find the remark amusing, we do so not because of this opinion *per se*, but in recognition of its implied dogmatic moralism about "sensual pleasure." In fact, we scarcely now think of music as a "sensual pleasure" at all, except possibly in the context of a (now mostly superseded) Christian fundamentalist disquietude about the 'pagan rhythms' of rock'n'roll. To see the music of Handel, Boyce or J.C. Bach as "sensual" seems the height of imaginative delicacy. In any case, many of Johnson's own pleasures that I listed a moment ago — his taking a roll down a hill at Langton's,¹⁹ and his early morning London frisk — seem to be sensual without vice. He celebrates harmlessness when he finds it, in what sometimes appears to be an excessive even exaggerated manner, such as his great merriment in the proposal that he be made laird of the islet of Isa. This incident, which we saw in Chapter Six, is a vivid evocation of Johnson's pleasure in the innocent exercise of the mental and imaginative powers. It is the reverse side of the anxiety which is behind many of his doubts and condemnations of things that other people find enjoyable. The moralist is obliged to be cynical about a great many things that pre-occupy his fellow citizens, even if those things are worthy or at least innocuous, if they pre-occupy people to the exclusion of more vital matters. Surprising and fortuitous pleasures cannot enchain us, no more can activities of which the pleasurable reward is rather low. Johnson's affirmation of harmless pleasure also makes his *Dictionary* definition of *lexicographer* as "a harmless drudge" seem to be ever-so slightly more than a mere joke.

Imlac's remarks on "harmless pleasure" in *Rasselas* occur in the context of a discussion about the wisdom of withdrawing into the cloister from "publick life," from the pleasures of music, or the theatre (to which Garrick of course contributed). The realm of harmless pleasure could be thought to coincide roughly with what Joseph Addison, in a series of eleven consecutive essays in *The Spectator* in 1712, calls "the Pleasures of the Imagination." Such pleasures are, he says, "not so gross as those of sense, nor so refined as those of the understanding," establishing a reasonably obvious continuum. Although the pleasures of the understanding are "indeed more preferable, because they are founded on some new knowledge or improvement in the mind of man," he also notes that the pleasures of the imagination "have this advantage above those of the understanding, that they are

¹⁸ William Seward, "Anecdotes" (from the *European Magazine* of 1795), in *Johns. Misc.* II, 301.

¹⁹ H.D. Best, "Minor Anecdotes," *Johns. Misc.* II, 391.

more obvious, and more easy to be acquired."²⁰ An implication would seem to be that the pleasures of the senses are still "more obvious, and more easy."

The sorts of arts and experiences which Addison considers are pictures, statues, descriptions, views, architecture and (to a very slight degree) music. For Addison, the imagination seems to be a purely visual faculty (a matter of images, literally) so he identifies as imaginatively pleasurable those things that we may see in nature, or (what he calls the "secondary pleasures of the imagination") which remind us of things seen in nature. That nature is believed to be the source of images, either directly or through the recognition of resemblance to nature, explains why Addison glosses over such an abstract art as music. Here also may be the source of Johnson's seeming to consider music as a purely sensual pleasure, occupying the mind but requiring no use of the intellect. As he said of music, "It was a method of employing the mind, without the labour of thinking at all, and with some applause from a man's self."²¹

The ease and obviousness of the low and dangerous pleasures of the senses, and the difficulty of the pleasures of the understanding, poses a problem for Johnson. If the intellectual pleasures are those that would be of most benefit to us, why is it that they are for most people so difficult or unappealing? He would like to believe that the world has been providentially ordered, so that what we most need is also most easily available. In *Rambler* 108 he addresses this subject, encouraging his readers that although much of life is taken up with various bodily necessities and social obligations, there remains quite enough time for us to do what we would choose, or most desire. But an interesting and characteristic Johnsonian slippage occurs in this essay. He commences by regretting the few hours "which we can spend wholly at our own choice," but as he moves into his main theme, which is intended to be a heartening message of how much may nonetheless be accomplished, he quickly shifts the ideal employment of our time from "our own choice" to "the exercise of reason and virtue" and "great performances."²² Whether most people would in fact ideally choose to employ themselves upon "the exercise of reason and virtue" is not a question that Johnson allows himself to consider. Yet that is the crux of the matter: that despite the scarcity of time, we frequently choose to occupy ourselves with gross pleasures or pointless activities. He generously attributes this to modesty, that we

²⁰ *Spectator* 411. *The Spectator*, a new edition, carefully revised, with prefaces biographical and critical, by Alexander Chalmers, 6 v. (New York: Appleton, 1860), 1, 31.

²¹ *Life* v, 315. *Tour*, 15 October.

²² *The Rambler* 108; iv, 210-11, 211.

imagine that vast tracts of time are necessary to worthwhile achievements, when in fact we may accomplish many of our best ambitions by using wisely all smaller portions of time.

Reading is one such activity, and we have in the previous chapter considered at some length the potential of the most popular and pleasurable modes of reading to enchain the attention, seize the mind, and take possession of the memory. Like all writers, Johnson is an apologist for literate culture, and he is so more frequently and more explicitly than most. Yet in many informal locations, Johnson acknowledges that most people will do anything rather than read. He remarks sadly, "You see, now, how little any body reads,"²³ and later expands on this as follows,

People in general do not willingly read, if they can have any thing else to amuse them. There must be an external impulse; emulation, or vanity, or avarice. The progress which the understanding makes through a book, has more pain than pleasure in it. Language is scanty, and inadequate to express the nice gradations and mixtures of our feelings. No man reads a book of science from pure inclination. The books that we do read with pleasure are light compositions, which contain a quick succession of events.²⁴

For this reason, although he doubts the tendency of certain types of books, he in general encourages reading as a means of mental occupation. Reading itself, irrespective of what is being read, is so different from every other form of pleasure, that to derive pleasure from reading is to learn something that for many people is counter-intuitive: that there are such things as non-sensual pleasures. The reader learns that pleasure takes place not in the body, but in the mind.

I am always for getting a boy forward in his learning; for that is a sure good. I would let him at first read any English book which happens to engage his attention; because you have done a great deal when you have brought him to have entertainment from a book. He'll get better books afterwards.²⁵

²³ *Life* IV, 20. 1780 (Anecdotes from Bennet Langton).

²⁴ *Life* IV, 218. 1 May 1783.

²⁵ *Life* III, 385. 16 April 1779.

Of course, the boy may not necessarily "get better books afterwards"; but he certainly has no such chance unless he starts reading somewhere. Johnson wrote to his own boy, his black servant, Frank Barber, "Let me know what English books you read for your entertainment. You can never be wise unless you love reading";²⁶ not, we notice, 'If you love reading, then you will become wise.' That would be to claim too much.

Johnson is prepared to indulge new readers, in order that they be converted to this perspective. On one occasion,

Snatches of reading (said he) will not make a Bentley or a Clarke. They are, however, in a certain degree advantageous. I would put a child into a library (where no unfit books are) and let him read at his choice. A child should not be discouraged from reading any thing that he takes a liking to, from a notion that it is above his reach.²⁷

His counsel that educators should make all efforts to maximise for their students the pleasures of reading are expressed forcefully and at length in his Preface to the *Preceptor*. He emphasises the different tastes and abilities of individual students, and the hunger of the mind for variety; "Weariness looks out for Relief, and Leisure for Employment, and surely it is rational to indulge the Wanderings of both."²⁸ Libraries, schools and textbooks are all strategies of control, but the aim of education is not merely management. To insist that such strategies of control be submitted to entirely on their own terms will mean in the end that even their own inscribed purposes will not be achieved. "A man ought to read just as inclination leads him; for what he reads as a task will do him little good."²⁹ That is, reading has its effect on the reader (which Johnson understands to be to "do him ... good") by being a pleasure, by being appropriated by the reader, for whom what is read becomes part of the everyday. For a book to be duller or less various than is possible, is one strategy of control too many, and requires more tactical imagination on the part of the reader than most can manage.

²⁶ *Letters* I, 350. 25 September 1770 (Boswell includes this letter at *Life* II, 116).

²⁷ *Life* IV, 21. 1780 (Anecdotes from Bennet Langton).

²⁸ Johnson, *Prefaces and Dedications*, ed. Hazen, 177. The fourth, fifth and sixth paragraphs of the Preface, pp. 176-78, concern this theme.

²⁹ *Life* I, 428. 14 July 1763.

But wisdom, even when acquired, does not necessarily preserve its patrons from folly or moral danger in everyday life. As Johnson observes in *Idler* 18 (57), "Very few carry their philosophy to places of diversion, or are very careful to analyse their enjoyments." It is this implied conflict between pleasure and wisdom which we will pursue in this chapter.

III. Johnson and Samuel Foote

The *Dictionary* gives the term *fun* very short shrift: it is defined as "Sport; high merriment; frolicsome delight," but it is prefaced by the stern Johnsonian warning that it is "a low cant word."³⁰ "Fun" suggests pleasure of an unapologetically trivial nature. The one citation given is from Edward Moore:

Don't mind me, though, for all my *fun* and jokes,
You bards may find us bloods good-natur'd folks.³¹

Johnson has chosen a quotation which seems, oddly, to contrast fun with good-nature. This implication makes more sense in the light of the first meaning given in the *OED*, which asserts that *fun* is "A cheat or trick; a hoax." It certainly captures something of the ambiguity Johnson senses about pleasure, its proper and genuine attractiveness, and its undoubted dangers.

One of the best locations we have in which to view Johnson's encounters with trivial and, one might think, harmless pleasure is in his relationship with and remarks about the comic actor and dramatist, Samuel Foote (1720-77). Foote lingers in readers' minds as one of the major minor characters in Boswell's *Life*, but it is interesting to realise that despite being frequently mentioned and discussed, Foote himself never appears directly in the narrative. Johnson knew him, but he was not a friend. Foote's presence in the *Life of Johnson* says considerably more about Boswell's interest in him, than about Johnson's. Nevertheless, Boswell's instincts are worthy of our respect, and he seems right in noticing that Foote provides as it were a touchstone for the discussion of a number of issues. Foote's name mainly arises when Johnson and his friends are discussing public figures and

³⁰ Johnson gives no entry for *funny*, although the *OED* traces it back to 1756.

³¹ *Gil Blas: A Comedy* (1751), The Prologue.

comparing their personal qualities, or telling each other stories about how funny Foote is. Despite his actual absence from the diegesis, reading such conversations gives us a strong sense of Foote's qualities, from the impression he made and the feelings he aroused in his contemporaries.

It seems a pity to write about Foote, and to give so few of his actual jests; but most of his humour seems not to have been, like Johnson's own, quotable. As Johnson observes, "it was properly not as narratives that Foote's stories pleased us, but as collections of ludicrous images" (II, 434). After Foote's death, Johnson wrote (to Hester Thrale) that his, Foote's and Mrs. Thrale's mutual friend Arthur Murphy "ought to write his life, at least to give the world a Footeana."³² In her diary, Mrs. Thrale records the same sentiment, but amplified thus, "we shall be pestered with sad Trash, and all going under his Name else."³³ Foote is apparently inimitable. Despite this, his bon-mots and witticisms (as first gathered in the anonymous *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Samuel Foote* [1777]) have not survived in the public memory.³⁴ Johnson's friend Giuseppe Baretti noted of the suggested *Footeana*, "One half of it had been a string of obscenities";³⁵ but as both a foreigner and notoriously bad-tempered, Baretti was perhaps the sort of person who made a tempting target for Foote. In any case, it seems that Foote's humour, although it had its verbal and witty side, was at its strongest when broad, ribald and slapstick, a matter of startling grimaces and bold-faced mimicry, combined with social daring.

Johnson is deeply divided in his attitude to this apparently very funny man. He wants, at least at times, not to enjoy him or approve of him. But there is about humour in general, and Foote's in particular, that which slips under one's guard. As Johnson notes in *Idler* 58, "Merriment is always the effect of a sudden impression. The jest which is expected is already destroyed.... All other pleasures are equally uncertain" (181). There are, in Johnson's view, occasions upon which and subjects about which one ought not to laugh. Samuel Foote knew no such restraint. A few days after his wife died, Foote is

³² *Letters* III, 93. 3 November 1777.

³³ *Thraliana* I, 223.

³⁴ There is a modest gathering (four items) in the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, one of which is from Boswell, and of the five items in the Everyman volume, *Tabletalk: by Various Writers, from Ben Jonson to Leigh Hunt*, ed. James Thornton (London: Dent, 1934), one of them — on Lord Chesterfield's *Letters* — is also attributed to Johnson.

³⁵ Baretti made the comment in the margin of his copy of the first printed version of Johnson's letters. See *Life* III, 185 n.1 (21 September 1777).

reported to have dined out; the company finding him very dejected, even weepy, was quite subdued — until Foote announced that he "had been all the morning looking for a second-hand coffin to bury her in."³⁶ For him, anything and anyone is 'fair game.' Johnson contrasts his talents with those of David Garrick, and says, "Garrick is restrained by some principle; but Foote has the advantage of an unlimited range" (v, 391). On another occasion, Johnson observed that Foote "has a great range for his wit; he never lets truth stand between him and a jest, and he is sometimes mighty coarse" (III, 69). Johnson says that this gives him an unfair advantage in any contests of humour.

The difficulty is this sense that if we are to have principles, we ought not to be able to observe and discard them as convenient: for the sake of a joke hardly seems a sufficient reason to abandon all moral restraint. Yet there is a class of concerns which seem to *resemble* principles, which Johnson calls *scruples*, which gave him intermittent difficulty throughout his life. Whether any particular scruple is in fact a (minor) matter of principle, or — as Johnson usually decides — a doubt or reluctance of a more or less mischievous nature masquerading as a principle, is the matter to be determined. We shall explore Johnson's preoccupation with *scrupulosity* in our final chapter, but we should note that one of the scruples which he records himself, late in life, as still needing to combat is a scruple about Comedy. In his diary for 30 August 1783, he records the following resolution,

To endeavour to conquer scruples, about
Comedy
Books in Garret
Books on Shelves
Hebrew. Pollution.³⁷

The Yale editors supply a note commenting, "There is no other evidence that he had any scruples about comedy. In 1773 he had defined the 'great end' of comedy as 'making an audience merry' (Life II.233). Whatever scruples he had of this kind were surely of short duration." However, I think we can fairly characterise Johnson's ambivalence about Samuel Foote as rooted in a "scruple about Comedy," and see that it was of long-standing concern.

³⁶ Percy Fitzgerald, *Samuel Foote: A Biography* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1910), 215 n.

³⁷ *Diaries*, 363.

Foote's advantage over Garrick — his being unrestrained by truth, principle or politeness — may be unfair, but Johnson knows that we cannot be pleased on principle. Scruples are not always appropriate, and perhaps in comedy, as in love and war, all's fair. "Nothing," he says (in *Idler* 58; 180), "is more hopeless than a scheme of merriment." To attempt to fix the precedence between the great contemporary stage figures, Garrick, Foote and others, seems to have been a recurring subject of conversation of the Johnson circle, as depicted by Boswell. Boswell, of course, is drawn to both the subject of acting in particular (as we saw in Chapter One) as well as to any other subject where he senses a tension or aporia in Johnson's attitudes. In comparison with Garrick, whose "gaiety of conversation has delicacy and elegance," Johnson asserts, "Foote has the air of a buffoon" — but, he admits, "Foote makes you laugh more" (III, 183); on another occasion, he says virtually the same thing, that Garrick is more elegant and "has some delicacy of feeling"; but "he allowed Foote extraordinary powers of entertainment" (V, 391). When Boswell suggested to him that the tragedian Thomas Betterton is a figure more worthy of *respect* than Foote, who is "a mere theatrical droll," Johnson was more firm in his praise: "If Betterton were to walk into this room with Foote, Foote would soon drive him out of it. Foote, Sir, *quatenus* Foote, has powers superiour to them all" (III, 185). However, on yet another occasion, he says that Foote's art "is not a talent, it is a vice; it is what others abstain from. It is not comedy, ... it is farce...." (II, 95).³⁸

If there is any pattern to Johnson's comments on Foote, it is that he defends him when others (usually Boswell) try to belittle his craft, and adopts a sterner tone when others make high claims for him. In talking on yet another occasion, not of humour as such, but of conversational power, Boswell asserts that "Foote was a man who never failed in conversation." Johnson agrees, but says that whilst Foote is comical, his conversation is not to be compared with, for example, that of Edmund Burke, which demonstrates extraordinary *character*, and would in any company earn him immediate respect (IV, 276). The terms "respect" and "character" represent an order of commendation that does not apply to Foote. Nor is Johnson comfortable with allowing his style of humour to be called *wit* — which is an almost transcendently significant eighteenth-century value. But he cannot in conscience declare Foote's conversational humour to be pure buffoonery either; it is, he equivocates, "a kind of conversation between wit and buffoonery" (II, 155). A man who has written dozens of successful plays, adapted and translated many more, who could

³⁸ The same ambiguity and sense of transgression occurs in the story Boswell relates of Johnson and Foote, with some others, visiting Bedlam (*Life* II, 374; 8 May 1775). Johnson is "arrested" by the melancholy spectacle, but Foote's account of the excursion, and of Johnson's serious and compassionate reaction, turns it into an entertainment.

(unlike Garrick) read Greek and Latin, and who could amuse almost any company, is not a mere fool. When Edward Dilly calls Foote a buffoon, Johnson defends him: "But he has wit too, and is not deficient in ideas, or in fertility and variety of imagery, and not empty of reading; he has knowledge enough to fill up his part" (III, 69). Foote had his own dignity, and had a real entitlement to it, and to being celebrated, as he was, as "the English Aristophanes."³⁹ When Foote was told by (of course) Boswell, of Johnson's remark about him being "an infidel as a dog is an infidel; that is to say, he has never thought upon the subject," Boswell tells us in a footnote,

I never saw Foote so disconcerted. He looked grave and angry, and entered into a serious refutation of the justice of the remark. "What, Sir, (said he,) talk thus of a man of liberal education; — a man who for years was at the University of Oxford; — a man who has added sixteen new characters to the English drama of his country!"⁴⁰

One feels sorry for Foote here, at least in part because Johnson's jocularly is not a repayment to Foote in his own coin; it is a serious criticism of his character, and Foote takes it as such, whereas Foote's own abuse of his contemporaries is merely extravagant and outrageous. To give offense to known persons of the town, and to surprise and thrill the audience who witness this social transgression, is its essence. It is offensive, to be sure, but the very indiscriminateness of his abuse means that no one of any sense should take it seriously, or at least personally, or not for long. It is a humour that, unlike the remark of Johnson's that offended him, is not serious or personal. On two occasions, Johnson says that Foote is not "a good mimick" (II, 154; III, 69); his style of mimicry was not, it seems, intended to be accurate in a way that could be admired, or taken by the victim as flattery. It is a humour at the expence of the minor pretensions and vanities that seem fundamental to the human condition. As Johnson says, "Foote is quite impartial, for he tells lies of every body" (II, 434). When Boswell, in a pious mask, criticizes Foote for mocking in his act the people who call on him socially, Johnson forcefully defends him,

Why, Sir, when you go to see Foote, you do not go to see a saint: you go to see a man who will be entertained at your house, and then bring you on a publick stage; who will entertain you at his house, for the very purpose of bringing you on a

³⁹ This was an image and description which Foote himself encouraged. See Elizabeth N. Chatten, *Samuel Foote* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), 78. Thomas Tyers refers to him as "a shameless Aristophanes"; see *Johns. Misc.* II, 345.

⁴⁰ *Life* II, 95 and n.2. 19 October 1769.

publick stage. Sir, he does not make fools of his company; they whom he exposes are fools already: he only brings them into action.⁴¹

So Foote does not "make fools" of people, but shows everyone their foolishness. Few of us are as worthy as we would like to believe of genuine respect, and of course we all agree that some particular traits deserve the attention of the satirist. We can laugh at this, so long as the immediate impact of the joke is deflected to some pompous notable. In Scotland, Johnson agrees with Boswell that a particular stingy host "would do well, if introduced in one of Foote's farces" (v, 277). Johnson also approved of the idea of Foote satirizing Lord Chesterfield, by introducing to his stage "a father who had thus tutored his son, and to shew the son an honest man to every one else, but practising his father's maxims upon him, and cheating him."⁴² As Elizabeth Chatten observes, Johnson "could recognize the corrective aspect of Foote's satire, especially when it was directed at others."⁴³ He was less calm and generous when he was informed that Foote "had resolved to imitate [him] on the stage, expecting great profits from his ridicule of so celebrated a man." Johnson made it clear that he would not quietly endure this, and enquired after the price of a larger than ordinary oaken cudgel, saying, "I am told Foote means to *take me off*, as he calls it, and I am determined the fellow shall not do it with impunity." Foote apparently abandoned his plans (II, 299).

There is part of Johnson that believes that humour cannot be left to be a principle unto itself, or the way is left open for cruelty, falsehood, disrespect, lack of sense and morality. This is itself a matter of principle, of the mind and the will; but those faculties do not always dominate our behaviour. To demonstrate this was Foote's unique strength. He cannot be got around, by wisdom, strategy or principle; to threaten him with physical retribution simply confirms the tendency of his humour. Johnson once said, "Foote is the most incompressible fellow that I ever knew: when you have driven him into a corner, and think you are sure of him, he runs through between your legs, or jumps over your head, and makes his escape" (v, 391). This was the impression that Foote made on Johnson on the first occasion they met, and it was the impression that lasted. Johnson told the story whilst at the famous dinner at Dillys' with John Wilkes.

⁴¹ *Life* II, 98. 26 October 1769.

⁴² Johnson thought the satire would be stronger if the son were "a consummate rogue" and the "father should be the only sufferer by the son's villainy" (*Life* IV, 333).

⁴³ Chatten, *Samuel Foote*, 87.

The first time I was in company with Foote was at Fitzherbert's. Having no good opinion of the fellow, I was resolved not to be pleased; and it is very difficult to please a man against his will. I went on eating my dinner pretty sullenly, affecting not to mind him. But the dog was so very comical, that I was obliged to lay down my knife and fork, throw myself back upon my chair, and fairly laugh it out. No, Sir, he was irresistible....⁴⁴

What are we to make of such a person? The problem is posed, and no answer is given. In the interest of being funny Foote is prepared to risk not simply giving offense and perhaps being violently repaid (he was in fact beaten up on a number of occasions); he also risks having himself judged a mere buffoon. Foote demonstrates that there is something morally ambiguous about too nice a concern for one's own respectability, for standing on one's ultimately rather petty dignity. But to demonstrate such salutary truths, and to do so in a way that makes people laugh, is in many ways a generous and self-sacrificial gesture. Foote's rudeness and mockery, too, is not unambiguously offensive to morality; there is, in its impartiality (God, after all, is "no respecter of persons"⁴⁵) and 'incompressibility' and irresistibility, something almost noble.

Despite Johnson's assertion that it is hard "to please a man against his will," he knows that the mind and the will are often betrayed by the body, and that it is vain to imagine this is not the case. When Sir Joshua Reynolds "observed that the real character of man was found out by his amusements, — Johnson added, 'Yes, Sir; no man is a hypocrite in his pleasures' (IV, 316). It says, in his view, something profoundly important about humanity that we are so amused by such humour as Foote's. Were Foote to have been simply malicious and witty at this dinner at Fitzherbert's, Johnson could perhaps have held out against him, but his being absurd, ludicrous and comical dissolved all Johnson's dignity and resolution, and reduced him from one sort of distinctively human creature — a rational animal — to another equally distinct and human: an animal that laughs.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *Life* III, 69-70. 15 May 1776.

⁴⁵ Acts 10:34.

⁴⁶ "If we may believe our logicians, man is distinguished from all other creatures by the faculty of laughter." Addison, *The Spectator*, No. 494. Johnson mentions this view, among others, in the first *Idler* (p. 4). Boswell also refers to laughter as "that distinguishing faculty of man, which has puzzled philosophers so much to explain." See *Life* II, 378 (17 May 1775).

IV. The *Idler* and the Falsity of Cultural Pleasures

The account of Johnson's feelings about Foote is almost exclusively based on Boswell. Even allowing for Boswell's selection of material, and his active engineering of the direction of the original conversations to explore his own interests, we might doubt the propriety of this procedure. But similar ambiguities about pleasure are prominent in Johnson's own writings, and I want now to return to *The Idler*. In the same way as Foote uses offensive methods to expose the falseness of social dignity and reputation, so Johnson chooses the morally reprehensible figure of an Idler as his emblematic man-in-the-street, to symbolise the pettiness of all human endeavour.

If we classify and pare away the specifically generic pieces in each series, we see that whilst *The Rambler* has a substructure of essays about moral problems, *The Idler* is based on a foundation of essays about more everyday matters; not so much particular aspects of behaviour, but of what is going on (or not going on) in the conscious mind.

Johnson's assertion that I noted above, that "No man is a hypocrite in his pleasures," is importantly qualified by one of the main themes of *The Idler*. We find the Idler remarking, "The public pleasures of far the greater part of mankind are counterfeit" (18; 57),⁴⁷ and it is an idea that is frequently repeated. "Public pleasures" may be regarded as the things that we publicly claim that we most enjoy, or that we are able to enjoy in public. The important division among pleasures in Johnson's mind seems not to be Addison's categories of those of the senses, imagination and mind, but into the public and private. The public are the cultural/intellectual and the private, the sensory/tactile; it is only with regard to the latter that hypocrisy is not possible. With regard to the former, pretence is in Johnson's view commonplace; we have observed in Chapter Two his belief that the learned are frequently dishonest in what they claim to appreciate or understand. One of the characteristics of an idler is that, being without any pressing duties to engage him, he is free to indulge his taste for pleasure, and the more active kind of idler will find that pleasure requires seeking out. There are an infinite variety of ways in which an idler may choose to fill his time, and we can instance reading, music, travel, art galleries and conversation as representative of the cultural and intellectual variety of pleasure. These are the pastimes that John Brewer has recently surveyed in a masterly fashion in *The Pleasures*

⁴⁷ Parenthetical references to *The Idler*, by essay and page number, follow in the text.

of the *Imagination*, giving a strong impression of the extent and importance of the cultural pleasure industry in the eighteenth century.

Johnson's scepticism of these pursuits he may perhaps over-state for effect, but strikes us nonetheless as characteristic:

If no man was to express more delight than he felt, those who felt most would raise little envy. If travellers were to describe the most laboured performances of art with the same coldness as they survey them, all expectations of happiness from change of place would cease. The pictures of Raphael would hang without spectators, and the gardens of Versailles might be inhabited by hermits. All the pleasure that is received ends in an opportunity of splendid falshood, in the power of gaining notice by the display of beauties which the eye was weary of beholding, and a history of happy moments, of which, in reality, the most happy was the last. (*Idler* 50; 157)

In his view, we pretend — not only to others but to ourselves — to be more heartily entertained by spectacles such as pictures and gardens, than we in fact experience ourselves to be at the time. Mrs. Thrale observes,

The truth is, he hated to hear about prospects and views, and laying out ground and taste in gardening: "That was the best garden (he said) which produced most roots and fruits; and that water was most to be prized which contained most fish."⁴⁸

Most of our experience of pleasure in these public activities is in the external public circumstances and the sense that others will be impressed with or envious of either our social prestige, instinct for fashion, or heightened sensibility. The supposed pleasures of solitary contemplation, of the mind alone with sublimity, Johnson believes (or pretends to believe) are to do only with self-congratulation, and the pleasurable anticipation of drawing the experience and its flattering implications to the attention of others. In *Idler* 50 this is explained thus: "The ambition of superior sensibility and superior eloquence disposes the lovers of arts to receive rapture at one time, and communicate it at another; and each labours first to impose upon himself, and then to propagate the imposture" (157). In *Idler*

⁴⁸ Thrale, *Anecdotes*. *Johns. Misc.* 1, 322-23.

80 he comments, "happiness is nothing if it is not known, and very little if it is not envied" (249). The final *Idler* begins with the observation that "Much of the pain and pleasure of mankind arises from the conjectures which every one makes of the thoughts of others; we all enjoy praise which we do not hear, and resent contempt which we do not see" (103; 314).

There is a positive angle on this, of which Johnson is not unaware. The same impulses which drive us to follow fashions, and (as we saw earlier) to buy unnecessary consumer goods merely because they are available, also cause us to seek some semblance of community through the emulation of other people. Johnson says in *Idler* 41, "Happiness is not found in self-contemplation; it is perceived only when it is reflected from another" (130). If this sounds less cynical than the versions of the same sentiment that I have just quoted, it is because it occurs in the course of an essay in which a fictitious correspondent addresses Mr. Idler and his readers on the subject of the death of a friend. We learn from his testimony that there is nothing foolish in the fact that all people depend, for their happiness, on their lives being enmeshed with those of others. This is proper, as it is in these relationships that we fulfill our duties as well as completing our happinesses; "we were born," it is insisted in *Idler* 80, "for the help of one another" (80; 251). The true foolishness of the value we give to our ability to appreciate the pleasures of the imagination, is that we foolishly think that we have solely within ourselves sufficient resources to fully appreciate them. In boasting of our enjoyment of such pleasures we do not (and do not intend to) form bonds with other people, but rather alienate ourselves from them. (Johnson was perhaps particularly sensitive to this tendency, as he would have been disqualified for participation in conversations about the arts, due to the limitations on his ability to even see the pictures or hear the music.)

In one of his most sustained passages of satire, he offers a vivid portrait that seems inspired by direct observation of the circles of which he speaks:

Pleasure is therefore seldom such as it appears to others, nor often such as we represent it to ourselves. Of the ladies that sparkle at a musical performance, a very small number has any quick sensibility of harmonious sounds. But every one that goes has her pleasure. She has the pleasure of wearing fine cloaths, and of shewing them, of outshining those whom she suspects to envy her; she has the pleasure of appearing among other ladies in a place whither the race of meaner mortals seldom intrudes, and of reflecting that, in the conversations of the next

morning, her name will be mentioned among those that sat in the first row; she has the pleasure of returning courtesies, or refusing to return them, of receiving compliments with civility, or rejecting them with disdain. She has the pleasure of meeting some of her acquaintance, of guessing why the rest are absent, and of telling them that she saw the opera, on pretence of inquiring why they would miss it. She has the pleasure of being supposed to be pleased with a refined amusement, and of hoping to be numbered among the votresses of harmony. She has the pleasure of escaping for two hours the superiority of a sister, or the controul of a husband; and from all these pleasures she concludes that heavenly musick is the balm of life.

All assemblies of gaiety are brought together by motives of the same kind.
(18; 57-58)

Such a view as this is ungenerous and cynical, but the Idler is not disbelieved. Despite the argument of Woodruff that Johnson's *eidolin* is intended to be a "vice figure," representing a particular morally limited viewpoint,⁴⁹ the Idler is also meant to represent Everyman; as it is observed in the first *Idler*, "Every man is, or hopes to be, an Idler" (3-4). But however companionable the Idler might be, Woodruff is right in suggesting that he does not inspire uncritical trust. We recognise in his exposé of polite society a certain worldliness and cynicism, which is also perhaps ignorant and self-serving: there are many corrupt motives to not believing that anyone else's standards can be higher than one's own. Johnson is playing a double game (a practice which he frequently adopts), in which we can agree with what the Idler says by way of description of human character, whilst resisting any sense that it ought to be prescriptive; we can be amused by the lady at the opera, but only on condition that we recognise ourselves in the portrait.

If everyone is or hopes to be an idler, we can at least agree that we are all, in one way or another, on the look-out for pleasures of one kind or another. Pleasures, like words, must be sought where they are used, and the pleasures of dissimulation and raising petty jealousies are not the worst vices. Class or social level has nothing to do with the taste for pleasure, at this level,

⁴⁹ James Woodruff, "Johnson's *Idler* and the Anatomy of Idleness," 26.

The high and 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. (84; 263)

This is a nice piece of levelling talk. Princes and farmers are merely men, material and sensate entities. The princes of this world had better not forget it. But would not everyone nevertheless prefer to be a prince than a farmer? And why be a prince, if "sensation is sensation"? The pleasures which the Idler allows to cultural products may be imaginary, or other than what we claim, but pleasure takes place, after all, in the mind, and perhaps it is this important truth that Johnson sees such dissimulation and confusion as tending to demonstrate.

V. Travel

Travel is the only pleasure of the imagination for which Johnson went to any efforts to indulge himself, and its place in his life and work is therefore worth a more detailed examination. Travel might be regarded as fundamental to the other pleasures, in that they all concern things that one 'goes to see.' The enthusiasm for travel — indeed, for most people the possibility of it — only became general in Johnson's time. Earlier, people mainly went 'abroad' for professional reasons, as scholars, soldiers, merchants or diplomats, or else on pilgrimage, for spiritual purposes. John Brewer observes that,

travel for mere knowledge and pleasure had been uncommon before the eighteenth century... [It was] not until the end of the eighteenth that recreational travel on the continent and throughout the British Isles, something equivalent to the modern holiday, was a fashionable activity of the polite classes.⁵⁰

From when he received his pension in 1763, that is, from when he could afford to do so, Johnson left the metropolis every year for an extended period, although he only left England on three occasions, on trips to Scotland, Wales and France (in three consecutive

⁵⁰ John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 632.

years, 1773-75).⁵¹ These trips, and the anticipation of them, were very important to him; but he did not mistake their effects. The Idler tells us that "the general remedy of uneasiness is change of place; almost every one has some journey of pleasure in his mind, with which he flatters his expectation" (58; 181). But like other cultural pursuits, the pleasure is not what it is imagined or claimed to be. It is not what one sees (the "pictures of Raphael ... and the gardens of Versailles"), but the travel itself that is gratifying. John Wiltshire remarks,

Johnson shared his contemporaries' belief that traveling, whether on horseback, as Dr. Thomas Sydenham had recommended, or in a coach, was good for both body and mind.... Motion in itself, underwritten by a conception of the body as a system of tubes and vessels that become hardened and blocked in sickness, is understood to perform the therapeutic function.⁵²

We might imagine that we feel healthier, or more elevated in our spirits, or morally improved, for having seen some particular vista or spectacle, but those feelings are simply the physiological effect of making the journey. Of course, such a belief as this reinforces Johnson's cynicism about cultural pleasures; we imagine some noble prospect or experience will gratify our imaginations, but inevitably find that our imaginations are always capable of presenting us with something different, more or better to desire. We have, he observes, a special "mode of utterance" for pain, but none for pleasure, because "Man ... never has pleasure but in such degrees as the ordinary use of language may equal or surpass" (50: 157). At least while we are actually travelling, there is room for hope, and a constant provision of something new to talk about.

We have seen in the previous chapter Johnson's insistence that the chief source of textual pleasure is simple variety. Being constantly presented with something new simultaneously engages and distracts us, without us needing to trouble with exercising our minds. Variety is what travel inevitably supplies, and books about travel combine both pleasures. "Travel books," says Thomas Curley, in his survey of *Samuel Johnson and the Age of Travel*, "constituted the second most popular reading matter of the period,"⁵³ but

⁵¹ G.B. Hill summarised "Johnson's Travels and Love of Travelling," in Appendix B, *Life* III, 449-59.

⁵² John Wiltshire, "'From China to Peru': Johnson in the Traveled World", *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, ed. Clingham, 210.

⁵³ Thomas Curley, *Samuel Johnson and the Age of Travel* (Athens: U. of Georgia P., 1976), 48.

in *Idler* 97, Johnson says, "few books disappoint their readers more than the narrations of travellers" (298). He continues,

He that enters a town at night and surveys it in the morning, and then hastens away to another place, and guesses at the manners of the inhabitants by the entertainment which his inn afforded him, may please himself for a time with a hasty change of scenes, and a confused remembrance of palaces and churches; he may gratify his eye with variety of landscapes; and regale his palate with a succession of vintages; but let him be contented to please himself without endeavour to disturb others. (97; 298-99)

"Please himself" here means "delude himself." The taste for variety is easily gratified, but the gratification is not long-lasting, and requires to be constantly renewed. The satisfaction which he pictures the traveller here obtaining is deliberately figured as purely sensual: he may "gratify his eye ... and regale his palate." There is nothing for the mind in such an occupation. Johnson's own enthusiasm for travel at this rather basic level is well-known, "If (said he) I had no duties, and no reference to futurity, I would spend my life in driving briskly in a post-chaise with a pretty woman; but she should be one who could understand me, and would add something to the conversation."⁵⁴ His enthusiasm is carefully qualified, both before and after. He insists that there is nothing really worthwhile (in terms of either our moral duties or the destiny of our immortal souls) about this sort of travel; and certainly such travellers had better not attempt to waste the time of others by writing books about their experiences.

In the long central paragraph of *Idler* 97 (299), Johnson gives his own satirical rendition of a travel narrative. We might expect him to satirize travellers' tales for being exaggerated and incredible, but Johnson's satire has the opposite tendency. He gives a pedestrian description of things seen and passed by in an unknown country, which is scarcely known better for being seen, interspersed with casual and uninformed speculations. The account is almost believable, and is not exactly uninteresting. We might characterise it as a pure narrative, which is, as he says, "without incidents, without reflection." However, what it is also is pointless; it is just one damned thing after another (as Elbert Hubbard⁵⁵ said life is). But such travel, and accounts of such travel, take up

⁵⁴ *Life* III, 162. 19 September 1777.

⁵⁵ Or possibly Frank Ward O'Malley; see the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*.

the time and feed the almost bodily hunger for variety. In *Rambler* 188, Johnson observes that "it is not easy, and in some situations of life not possible, to accumulate such a stock of materials as may support the expence of continual narration" (v, 222); but travel is a time-honoured way of gaining material about which to converse, or to write.

An interesting sub-branch of the travel theme is represented by a considerable number of essays in *The Rambler* in which Johnson reflects on the habit in fashionable society of making an annual summer retreat to the country, and then of coming back up to London for the 'season.' James Woodruff has drawn attention to this, as an aspect of *The Rambler's* often unremarked topicality.⁵⁶ In August 1750 there is an account of a fashionable lady's anticipation of "some nameless pleasure in a rural life" (42; III, 229), and of her boredom after a few weeks of actually being in the country. Euphelia tells the Rambler how her expectations had been raised: "the chief conversation of all tea tables, in the spring, arises from a communication of the manner in which time is to be passed till winter," and as she described the pleasures she had been promised, "every one told me how much she envied me, and what satisfaction she had once enjoyed in a situation of the same kind" (228). These are, of course, exactly the kinds of conversational and counterfeit pleasures that he writes about in *The Idler*, pleasures merely in boasting of one's own heightened sensibility and in raising the envy of others. In *Rambler* 51, in September, another young lady writes to give the Rambler "some account of my entertainment in this sober season of universal retreat" (III, 273). Her emphasis is on the mindless domestic bustle that, contrary to rumours of rural tranquillity, consumes all a country-woman's life. Then in October there is a letter from a young woman bred in the country, and happy enough with her life there,

had not my curiosity been every moment excited by the conversation of my parents, who whenever they sit down to familiar prattle, and endeavour the entertainment of each other, immediately transport themselves to London, and relate some adventure in a hackney coach, some frolick at a masquerade, some conversation in the park, or some quarrel at an assembly, display the magnificence of a birth-night, relate the conquests of maids of honour, or give a history of diversions, shows, and entertainments, which I had never known but from their accounts. (62; III, 332)

⁵⁶ James F. Woodruff, "Johnson's *Rambler* and its Contemporary Context", *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities* 85 (1982), 35-37.

As a result, Rhodoclia is now full of the anticipation of her first season in London. The Rambler does not follow up this essay with a history of her disappointment. Readers are left to imagine this, but our rueful smiles are combined with a fear that her final words evoke, that she may *not* be disappointed, at least insofar as she appears to be no longer interested in mere pleasure, but declares herself to be "now intent only on conquest and destruction" (334).

The following year, Johnson attends to the summer retreat more promptly. On 25 May, he commences *Rambler* 124 by announcing, "The season of the year is now come, in which the theatres are shut, and the card-tables forsaken; the regions of luxury are for a while unpeopled, and pleasure leads out her votaries to groves and gardens, to still scenes and erratick gratifications" (IV, 296). The essay that follows is an ironical commiseration with those who, accustomed in town to "a continual tumult of diversion" (296) and lacking "some internal principle of activity" (297), are likely to spend the next "four long months" (298) in the country in "a state of hopeless wishes and and pining recollection" (298). This "continual tumult of diversion" is to be understood as characteristic of London life; in fact, we find the phrase echoed twice (and only twice) in *The Rambler*, each time in reference to town life. Euphelia, the young lady of *Rambler* 42, who is bored in the country, describes herself as having been "bred from my earliest infancy in a *perpetual tumult of pleasure*" (III, 227), and in *Rambler* 132 (June 1751) the tutor of the young country-bred nobleman who comes to winter in London says that "His imagination was filled with the *perpetual tumult of pleasure* that passed before him" (IV, 339). *Tumult* is defined in the *Dictionary* as "1. A promiscuous commotion in a multitude. 2. A multitude put into wild commotion. 3. A stir; an irregular violence; a wild commotion." To be attracted by "tumult" is to be attracted mindlessly and indiscriminately to noise and stir for its own sake.

In July 1751, Johnson directly addresses the folly of annual retreats, introducing the essay by a reflection on the nature of pleasure. It is, he says, reasonable to copy the practice of others in matters of hazardous choice and in which we have no expertise, but why do we select our lawful pleasures by reference to the practice of others? The essence of pleasure, he asserts, is choice, "Yet we see that the senses, as well as the reason, are regulated by credulity; and that most will feel, or say that they feel, the gratifications which others have taught them to expect" (135; IV, 351). (This will remind us of his cynical view of the irresistible power of fashion, which we observed in Chapter Five.) It is reasonable for those whose daily business is taken up in with complex matters of

consequence, generals or statesmen, to require retreat, and for scholars to seek a peaceful environment in which to pursue mental work without distraction. But most who retreat to the country have no such needs. He acknowledges that there are also in the country more "easy pleasures" — "Novelty is itself a source of gratification" — but says that most who make the retreat will be found staring out the window in "unideal vacancy," or amusing themselves in exactly the same way and with exactly the same people as they did in London. The same theme is neatly summarized in the opening to *Idler* 78, in the *Idler*'s distinctive idiom,

I have passed the summer in one of those places to which a mineral spring gives the idle and luxurious an annual reason for resorting, whenever they fancy themselves offended by the heat of London. What is the true motive of this periodical assembly, I have never yet been able to discover. The greater part of the visitants neither feel diseases nor fear them. What pleasure can be expected more than the variety of the journey, I know not... (242).

The story in *Rambler* 132 of the young nobleman dazzled by London is followed up in *Ramblers* 194 and 195. After he enters London society, he soon gets in with a gang of equally foolish young men, and spends his days gambling, fighting, disrupting a play and getting into debt. His parents decide to send him back to the country, but his mother weakens, and the tutor reports in conclusion that "he therefore begins his travels to-morrow under a French governor" (195; v, 257). *Travels* and *a French governor*, we are to understand, represent an infallible formula for dissipation.

These accounts centre around the disparity between hope and reality, and of how much pleasure is exaggerated in conversation, either in anticipation or remembrance. Travel is seen by Johnson as a means of making place dominate over time, and therefore just another means of avoiding engagement with the everyday. However, the accounts of travel, such as Johnson has satirised in *Idler* 97, frequently use diaristic structure and detail, which displaces the reader's everyday. As Stuart Sherman observes of that satire, "By preoccupying himself too minutely with the temporal details of his particular sojourn, the traveler has rendered the significant life of the place visited inaccessible to the reader."⁵⁷ His own travel book, the *Journey to the Western Islands*, is significantly *not* a

⁵⁷ Sherman, *Telling Time*, 198-99.

journal, as Sherman points out. It is organised by location rather than by date, allowing the readers to employ their own everyday tactics in their engagement with the text.

VI. The senses

In addition to the public cultural pleasures, there are private sensual pleasures. This is Johnson in *Idler* 90, "It is certain that the senses are more powerful as the reason is weaker; and that he whose ears convey little to his mind, may sometimes listen with his eyes till truth may gradually take possession of his heart" (280). But it would be uncharacteristic of Johnson to begin an essay with such a concession. This remark represents a qualificatory conclusion to a discussion of the utility and propriety of accompanying spoken discourse with bodily gestures, in which his basic argument is that in learned contexts and in ordinary conversation gesture is useless and unnecessary. Parliament, the courts and particularly sermons in church, kept the art of oratory ever before eighteenth-century folk. Johnson, by the language he uses and the examples he describes, makes the use of gesticulation appear exotic and ridiculous. Throughout this essay his appeal is successively to "men intent only upon truth" and those "whose only pleasure was to discover right." But having paid the rational in man its due, he concludes by conceding that in church "the preacher addresses a mingled audience," and that "[i]f there be any use of gesticulation, it must be applied to the ignorant and rude, who will be more affected by vehemence than delighted by propriety."

It is not sensible to pretend that man is *always* rational, or even that all men are (or even desire to be) *predominantly* rational; but the primacy of the rational side of man must be asserted first, loudly and often, because it is under seige from every side. In *Idler* 89, an essay published in the last week of the year, Johnson asserts, "If the senses were feasted with perpetual pleasure, they would always keep the mind in subjection" (277). Of course, perpetual pain would have the same effect, of demanding that all the sufferer's attention be directed to the bodily and the immediate, as Johnson powerfully argues in his review of Soame Jenyns; but in seeking to avoid and minimise pain, we too easily err in the opposite direction.

Johnson was constantly on the lookout for any sentiments or expressions that would tend to detract from or undermine "the dignity of thinking beings" as a centrally human attribute. To advance in this dignity was, we recall, the justification he gave in his

Journey to the Western Islands for asserting that "local emotion" is to be cultivated in any places, such as Marathon or Iona, that have "been dignified by wisdom, bravery, or virtue."⁵⁸ In such places, we are elevated not by what we actually perceive by our senses, but by the activity of the mind and the imagination. To those of a "frigid philosophy" (124) one plot of earth is indistinguishable from any other. (Johnson is, of course, artfully flattering those who may be "indifferent and unmoved" by a visit to Iona, expecting that his readers will recognise that indifference to local emotion is in fact less likely to be due to an adherence to Stoicism than to "stark insensibility" [*Life* I, 60].) But whether philosophically frigid or starkly insensible, such people have become immune to the appeal of "Whatever withdraws us from the power of our senses; whatever makes the past, the distant, or the future predominate over the present."⁵⁹ The power of the senses is not in need of any reinforcement, because our subjection to such power is a condition of bodily life. We can be withdrawn from being tyrannised or *possessed* by "the power of our senses" only by mental activity, by ideas, morality, memory, imagination.

The desire for sensual pleasure is for Johnson a disturbing impulse. For a start, if left to itself the desire for sensory/tactile pleasure is almost entirely indiscriminate; Johnson once told Boswell, "Were it not for the imagination, Sir, (said he,) a man would be as happy in the arms of a chambermaid as of a Duchess" (*Life* III, 341). Allowing for changes in class and fashion which make a duchess remind us of the character from *Alice in Wonderland*, and a chambermaid sound rather appealing, we can see what he is saying. The purely physical pleasure of "the sensual intercourse between the sexes" has little relationship to the qualities, virtues or beauty of one's partner. It consists of sensations which may be obtained in any number of ways, which may only be preferentially discriminated by the powers of the mind and moral awareness. That humans are moved to so discriminate, to commit themselves in love to one person, is evidence of rationality. The use of our rational powers in such circumstances is, however, far from commonplace.

We do not ... willingly decline a pleasing effect to investigate its cause. He that is happy, by whatever means, desires nothing but the continuance of happiness, and is no more solicitous to distribute his sensations into their proper species, than the common gazer on the beauties of the spring to separate light into its original rays. (*Idler* 18; 57)

⁵⁸ Johnson, *Journey to the Western Islands*, ed. Fleeman, 124, 123, 124.

⁵⁹ Johnson, *Journey to the Western Islands*, ed. Fleeman, 123-24.

One morning when they were together in Scotland, Johnson told Boswell, "sensation is sensation."⁶⁰ In the context, all Johnson means by this hard-headed reductionism is that he knows that he ought to feel grateful for Sir Alexander McLeod's kindness and generosity, but in fact he feels bored and tired after too many days in Aberdeen, and he longs to be on the road again; and his knowledge of his obligations does not alter his sensations. To be appropriately polite and grateful to his host will require from him a rational recognition of the hospitality he has received, and an effort of the will. On this particular occasion, Johnson apparently made this effort. Until he disclosed to Boswell that he was "fatigued and teased by Sir Alexander's doing too much to entertain him," Boswell had "fancied Dr. Johnson quite satisfied." But Johnson has used the opportunity to make the point, and to make it against himself, that pure sensuality is a self-contained system and that pure sensation offers a rational being no guidance as to how to live.

But rationality is certainly no reliable defense against sensuality, and if we did not fear disease or poverty, he suggests, sensuality would claim everyone. Johnson seldom has anything good to say about disease and poverty — and in this he recognises that he departs from many more sheltered and complacent moralists, such as Soame Jenyns.⁶¹ Nevertheless, so corrupt is our state that nothing short of the knowledge, anticipation and remembrance of pain is sufficient to restrain sensual indulgence. "Physical evil moral good" is the title given in the collected edition to *Idler* 89 (xi), although it is an expression which does not sound to have come from the pen of the reviewer of Jenyns. And, of course, knowledge, anticipation and remembrance are themselves operations of the mind, of which we must suppose the beasts to be incapable. We must be temperate in our indulgence of whatever pleasures are available to us, otherwise we neglect the functions by which we fulfil our humanity. As he argues,

Sobriety, or temperance, is nothing but the forebearance of pleasure; and if pleasure was not followed by pain, who would forbear it? ... if neither disease nor poverty were felt or dreaded, every one would sink down in idle sensuality, without any care of others, or of himself. To eat and drink, and lie down to sleep, would be the whole business of mankind. (89; 276)

⁶⁰ *Life* v, 95. *Tour*, 23 August.

⁶¹ "Poverty, or want of riches, is generally compensated by having more hopes and fewer fears, by a greater share of health, and a more exquisite relish of the smallest enjoyments, than those who possess them are usually bless'd with." Jenyns, quoted by Johnson in his review of [Jenyns'] *Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil*, in *The Literary Magazine; or, Universal Review* II, (1757), 173.

"To eat and drink, and lie down to sleep" sounds to be an existence of merely vacant brutality, a wasteful but arguably *harmless* way of passing one's life. But in conversation Johnson could put a more vicious spin on approximately the same impulses. Thomas Campbell, an Irish clergyman, who on a visit to London in 1755 kept a record of meetings with Johnson and his circle, reported the following discussion.

Murphy gave it (on Garricks authority) that when it was asked what was the greatest pleasure, Johnson answered f_g & the second was drinking. And therefore he wondered why there were not more drunkards, for all could drink tho' all could not f_k.⁶²

Garrick (it was claimed) had told this to Murphy, and Murphy told a gathering at the Thrales' which included Baretti, Boswell and Dr. Campbell, and at which neither Johnson nor Garrick was present to confirm or deny the tale. Some have been reluctant to credit the story (first published in 1854), but it seems entirely consistent not only with Johnson's expression in the *Idler*, but also his preparedness to repel any propensity for cant in private conversation with something outrageously down-to-earth. Not for him to sit idly by, listening to his friends warble on about the sublimity of a wide landscape or an air of music.

It might be worth our noting that Johnson's resistance to the claims made on behalf of auditory and visual pleasures may have a great deal to do with the fact that his sight and hearing seem both to have been very weak. He was virtually blind in the left eye, and was myopic in the right. We recall him squinting at books and bookcases, failing to recognise Hester Thrale and Fanny Burney, and telling Dr. John Amyatt that if he were to study botany he would need to become a lizard first.⁶³ That he had contracted scrofula (a lymphatic tuberculosis) in infancy, badly damaging his eyesight, is well-known, but it is less often remarked that the disease was also thought to have done "irreparable damage to the auricular organs, which never could perform their functions since I knew him," as

⁶² [Thomas Campbell,] *Dr. Campbell's Diary of a Visit to England in 1775*, ed. James L. Clifford (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1947), 68. Entry for 1 April 1775. The incident is also recorded by Boswell; see *Ominous Years*, 114 (1 April 1775). Clifford's note on this passage observes that the story is told by "Murphy, who was not noted for accuracy, on the authority of Garrick, who was not present" (125).

⁶³ Reynolds' 1775 portrait, which Johnson dubbed "*blinking Sam*" (Thrale, *Anecdotes. Johns. Misc.* 1, 313). For his failing to recognise Hester Thrale, and Burney herself, see *Dr. Johnson and Fanny Burney*, 1, 33. Burney describes him as "shockingly near-sighted" (1). For the lizard remark, *Life* 1, 377 n.2 (Summer 1762).

Hester Thrale reports.⁶⁴ Obviously his deafness did not prevent him from joining in conversation, although it may have contributed to the fact remarked by many people who had a chance to observe him closely, that "like a ghost"⁶⁵ he never joined a conversation uninvited, nor spoke until he had been particularly addressed. This habit would also have had the effect of making his conversation far more deliberate and focussed, far more of an intellectual pursuit, than that of most people. But of what is usually regarded as the highest auditory pleasure, music, so Boswell reported, "he owns he neither likes it, nor has hardly any perception of it" (v, 314). In the Highlands he was rather taken with "the great drone" of the bagpipe, which he stood close by "for some time," suggesting that his response to this particular instrument was more visceral than purely auditory. Johnson's own pleasures, then, seem to proceed from the purely intellectual to the purely sensual (such as eating), by-passing the customarily aesthetic completely.

It is not surprising that he found books so absorbing, and that when introduced to social parties, he was attracted first to the bookshelves, at least until dinner was served, when the social interactions would become more manageable.⁶⁶ The hub-bub of pre-dinner general conversation baffled him, and not being able to identify people from a distance would have acted as a social restraint upon him. Bookcases could be stared at without causing offense. The attraction of scholarly pursuits — particularly before our own time — has often been most strongly felt by those whom weak eyesight debar from more active occupations.⁶⁷

But whatever might be the circumstantial factors involved, Johnson strongly felt and therefore greatly feared abandonment to sensation, believing that without the exercise and control of the rational faculties, man is reduced to something less than human. For

⁶⁴ *Anecdotes. Johns. Misc.* 1, 152. Fanny Burney also remarks on his deafness, "It is requisite to speak so loud in order to be heard by him..." (*Dr. Johnson and Fanny Burney*, 72).

⁶⁵ In Boswell's *Tour*, Johnson says he was thus described by Thomas Tyers (20 August. *Life* v, 73; Boswell repeats this, III, 307). Johnson approved of this description and "often repeated it," according to Hester Thrale, who agreed (*Anecdotes. Johns. Misc.* 1, 290). That Johnson was silent in conversation until drawn out was also remarked by Frances Burney remarked that "he is the most silent creature, when not particularly drawn out, in the world", and that "he never speaks at all, but when spoken to; nor does he ever start, though he so admirably supports, any subject" (Burney, 2). Similar observations are made by Hannah More (*Johns. Misc.* II, 184), and Frances Reynolds (*Johns. Misc.* II, 255).

⁶⁶ Burney describes him as having "pored over them, [shelf by shelf,] almost touching the backs of them with his eyelashes, as he read their titles" (Burney, 2; bracketed section in source). Better known is a visit to the home of Richard Owen Cambridge, at which Boswell reports, "No sooner had we made our bow to Mr. Cambridge, in his library, than Johnson ran eagerly to one side of the room, intent on poring over the backs of the books" (*Life* II, 364 and see n.3. 18 April 1775).

⁶⁷ I am told that this is a "stereotype," and therefore wrong. However, the man with the most defective vision I know, short of complete blindness, is a researcher and part-time librarian.

Johnson, humanity is a particularly high calling. It is a call to a life which is lived at every moment in the context not merely of a past and future — for most people, more than enough of a responsibility — but, potentially, of an eternal destiny, in which all the most vividly sensual pleasures of this life will seem pale and shadowy. This aspect of his faith-knowledge, whilst acting as a constraint upon unlawful sensual indulgence, is encouraging in its affirmation that better things are promised. The (male) hedonist's traditional summation of sensual pleasure as comprised of wine, women and song, is touchingly glossed by Johnson in a set of *ex tempore* verses,

At sight of sparkling bowls or beauteous dames,
When fondness melts me, or when wine inflames,
I too can feel the rapture, fierce and strong;
I too can pour the extemporary song:
But though the numbers for a moment please,
Though musick thrills, or sudden sallies seize,
Yet, lay the sonnet for an hour aside,
Its charms are fled and all its powers destroyed.
What soon is perfect, soon alike is past;
That slowly grows, which must for ever last.⁶⁸

VII. Savagery

A location at which humanity, pleasure and the everyday intersect is the phenomenon or idea of savagery. It was a subject that was very present to European thinkers, in an age on the verge of the colonial project, and it was a difficult topic for Johnson, pregnant with complex tensions. Boswell, with his customary instinct for subjects which annoy Johnson or about which he displays a troubled ambivalence, is responsible for introducing savages and savagery into the conversation on at least six occasions.⁶⁹ (Not for the first time we

⁶⁸ Verses in Baret's Commonplace Book, *Poems*, 256.

⁶⁹ See *Life* II, 73 ("I attempted to argue for the superior happiness of the savage life"), 165 ("A question was started..."), 248 ("I am well assured that the people of Otaheite..."), 475 ("Then, Sir, (said I,) the savage is a wise man"); III, 49 ("A gentleman [Boswell] expressed a wish to go and live three years at Otaheite, or New Zealand..."), 180 ("I mentioned to him a saying ... of an American savage..."); IV, 308 ("I do not think the people of Otaheite can be reckoned Savages").

notice Boswell's part in determining the direction of Johnson's conversation.)⁷⁰ More than many other thinkers of his time, Johnson recognises the God-imagining humanity of uncivilised peoples, and his compassion towards and controversial pronouncements in favour of colonised and enslaved races — such as his proposing a toast in Oxford "to the next insurrection of the negroes in the West Indies" (*Life* III, 200) — are well known.⁷¹

In his writings, we can see these attitudes exhibited most powerfully in one of his more obscure works, his Introduction to *The World Displayed*, a compilation of stories of European voyages and discoveries, published (1759-61) by John Newbery. Johnson's lengthy Introduction⁷² is remarkable for the consistent tone of irony, heavy cynicism and undisguised indignation with which he describes the dealings of the European explorers and conquerors with various savage peoples. Their motives appear to him as mainly different varieties of greed, occasionally tempered with sheer blood-lust, and not very effectively disguised by insincere or at least superficial religious rhetoric. As interesting as he found first-person travel narratives (there were at least eight such works in his library⁷³), he is plainly out of sympathy with travel as a public enterprise, the kind of national and commercial adventuring which lead to European conquests in Africa and the Americas. His grounds are explicitly political and humanitarian, but I suspect too that he simply believes that most people have quite enough in the way of duties to perform in their own immediate environment, without seeking new theatres for inevitably corrupting activity. Talking about books of travel, he told Boswell,

As the Spanish proverb says, "He, who would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry the wealth of the Indies with him." So it is in travelling; a man must carry knowledge with him, if he would bring home knowledge.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ As John Wiltshire shows, "The *Life* gives the impression that topics of conversation arise by chance, or are propelled by Johnson himself, but the journals show us that, in fact, they tend to be referable to James Boswell's own psychological dramas." "In Bed with Boswell and Johnson," *The Johnson Society of Australia Papers*, 3 (1999), 32.

⁷¹ As Boswell's determination of the focus of Johnson's conversation is emerging as a sub-theme, it might be further observed, that as John Wiltshire notes, "Johnson's views on colonial exploitation are less well-known than they ought to be, partly because Boswell was less than sympathetic towards them." "All the Dear Burneys, Little and Great," *The Johnson Society of Australia Papers*, 2 (1998), 22.

⁷² For the text, see *Prefaces and Dedications*, 221-37.

⁷³ See *SJL*, 21, and the Appendix, 352, under "Collection of Travels."

⁷⁴ *Life* III, 302. 17 April 1778.

Clearly, so far as most individuals are concerned, travel (like viewing pictures and listening to music) is not something from which they benefit as much as they profess and would like to imagine, and is frequently simply a means of gratifying various lusts and evading responsibilities.

But in *The World Displayed*, he is not called upon to advise any one about travel as a pastime. He is reviewing the very beginnings of a great cultural enterprise, which had become by his own time the source of scientific discoveries, great human displacement and migrations, the extension of political and economic hegemonies. One might expect him to be enthusiastic about the expansion of the field of human knowledge. However, Johnson sums up the first voyage of Columbus, upon which topic his Introduction ends and the main text of the book begins, saying that it "gave a new world to *European* curiosity and *European* cruelty" (236); this encapsulates the tone of the whole essay. In one tale he relates, of Portuguese explorers in Africa in the 1430s, he describes an instance of "the savage manners of that age" (223); we have to re-read the story to see that by "savage" he is referring not to the West African natives with their javelins, but the two Portuguese horsemen who attacked them without provocation. This is the first of only three uses of the term *savage* in the essay; throughout it, the African peoples contacted, exploited and enslaved by the Spanish and Portuguese are calmly referred to not as savages but as 'natives,' 'inhabitants,' or 'negroes.' The second instance of *savage* occurs in a passage which reflects one of Johnson's Portuguese sources, and uses the term only in the context of a broad condemnation of this entire habit of thought and language.

We are openly told, that they [the Portuguese] had the less scruple concerning their treatment of the savage people, because they scarcely considered them as distinct from beasts; and indeed the practice of all the *European* nations, and among others of the *English* barbarians that cultivate the southern islands of *America* proves, that this opinion, however absurd and foolish, however wicked and injurious, still continues to prevail. Interest and pride harden the heart, and it is vain to dispute against avarice and power. (227)

Despite this, savagery is to Johnson a meaningful category; it is not to be regarded as a 'viable alternative lifestyle'; it is of its essence a condition that diminishes our humanity. But whilst, as Clive Probyn writes, "Johnson knew ... that barbarism was also a

function of ignorance and isolation, rather than a matter of nationality,"⁷⁵ he has only scorn for European philosophers who extol the primitive life. The desire on the part of civilised people to return to a savage state he certainly attributes to corrupt motives. One of his companions in conversation once "expatiated on the happiness of a savage life," maintaining that an English officer who had apparently lived in the wilds of America, with a gun and an Indian woman, "free and unrestrained, amidst the rude magnificence of nature," might claim to have all that "can be desired for human happiness." Johnson was outraged.

Do not allow yourself, Sir, to be imposed upon by such gross absurdity. It is sad stuff; it is brutish. If a bull could speak, he might as well exclaim, — Here am I with this cow and this grass; what being can enjoy greater felicity?⁷⁶

The bottom line of his critique of the romanticised view of the primitive life, after its absurdity and sadness, is that it is "brutish." A life that involves only what Johnson has deemed to be the two greatest (as in 'most compelling') pleasures, that of bed and board, is not a life fit for the destiny to which he believes all humanity — 'savages' included — to be called.

As usual, we can see his views tidily encapsulated in the *Dictionary*. After two meanings in which the adjective *savage* is applied to attributes of nature, Johnson gives a meaning specifically for people: "Uncivilized; barbarous; untaught; wild; brutal."⁷⁷

Thus people lived altogether a *savage* life, 'till Saturn, arriving on those coasts, devised laws to govern them by. *Raleigh.*

The *savage* clamour drown'd
Both harp and voice. *Milton.*

A herd of wild beasts on the mountains, or a *savage* drove of men in caves, might be so disordered; but never a peculiar people. *Sprat's Sermons.*

⁷⁵ Clive Probyn, 'Pall Mall and the Wilderness of New South Wales': Samuel Johnson, Watkin Tench and 'Six' Degrees of Separation (Melbourne: The Johnson Society of Australia, 1998), 16.

⁷⁶ *Life* II, 228. 21 April 1773.

⁷⁷ The last two words were added in the Fourth Edition.

In this last illustration, *peculiar* is used by Bishop Sprat in a sense that Johnson does not clearly distinguish under that word,⁷⁸ but which has its origin in an expression from the Authorised Version of the Bible, from Deuteronomy 14:2, "For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God, and the LORD hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth." The usage is taken up in the New Testament, in the First Epistle of the Apostle Peter, 2:9, "but ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people...." For the word *savage* as a noun, Johnson gives only one meaning, "A man untaught and uncivilized; a barbarian." The two negatives are interesting: the savage state is natural, and it is not the fault of the savage that he has been neither taught nor civilised; there is certainly no mention of inherent cruelty or corruption. Of the three illustrative quotations, that which gives the best explanation of meaning rather than simply of usage is the last,

To deprive us of metals is to make us mere *savages*; to change our corn for the old Arcadian diet, our houses and cities for dens and caves, and our clothing for skins of beasts: 'tis to bereave us of all arts and sciences, nay, of revealed religion.

Bentley.

Richard Bentley here is chosen by Johnson for his reinforcement of Sprat's theme, that savagery is incompatible with Christian profession; the clinching deprivation of the savage life, Bentley's trump card, is to be without knowledge of the Christian revelation. A savage people become or start to become civilised when they become Christian, and certainly Christian people may not become savages.

The savage life is not to be imagined as without its pleasures, and in fact, it is the perceived lack of restraint on the indulgence of those pleasures that Johnson suspects to be the motivation of the call to return to savagery. As well as lacking the spiritual benefit of specific revelation, Johnson imagines savage societies to be without the kinds of pleasure which he rates most highly, the two pleasures of the mind, conversation and remembrance.

⁷⁸ The OED explains as a special use of 'peculiar', in the sense of "Of separate constitution or existence; independent, particular, individual, single": "*Peculiar people*: said of the Jews, as God's own chosen people; hence *transf.* of Christian believers", though it does not give the biblical reference.

VIII. Intellectual Pleasure

We started our review of the Johnsonian senses of pleasure by considering the more-or-less intellectual pleasure of reading — which is obviously a pleasure not consistent with the savage life. Our own enjoyment of Johnson, by reading, is implicated almost inextricably with the pleasure of conversation. The accounts of Johnson's conversation have given over the past two hundred years at least as much readerly pleasure as his writings. He valued conversation himself, and we might observe that conversation (with a pretty woman), was an end to which his ideal pleasure of driving in a post-chaise was only the means. Over the years, Johnson was involved in the setting up of three London clubs,⁷⁹ for the purpose of conversation, fuelled by good food and drink. Johnson's preference for a tavern over a private house as a venue for social conversation is based on the ease of conversation, which arises from the "general freedom from anxiety" outside of the host/guest relationship, and enables them all to unself-consciously attend to conversation.⁸⁰

Conversation is defined in the *Dictionary* as "1. Familiar discourse; chat; easy talk: opposed to a formal conference," and "2. A particular act of discoursing upon any subject; as, *we had a long conversation on that question.*" Although the first definition opposes conversation to "formal conference" and gives *chat* as a synonym, the second definition suggests that conversation may be focussed and serious, and shifts its meaning away from that of mere chat. The verb *to chat* is defined in its place in rather dismissive terms as, "To prate; to talk idly; to prattle; to cackle; to chatter; to converse at ease." It is obviously far less formal than conversation; most of the other words Johnson uses for it here suggest not human talk but animal noises. There appears, then, to be a continuum of seriousness or formality in discourse, on which conversation occupies a middle position.

We might figure conversation as "talk that gives or for the sake of pleasure." The everyday pleasures of talk are typically pursued tactically in the midst of the practical activities and relationships that talk enables us to negotiate. Johnson asserts in *Rambler* 188, that "the faculty of giving pleasure [by "the arts of conversation"] is of continual use" (v, 220). Conversation as a social occupation is available only to people who are able to be occasionally at leisure, and is a more self-conscious pastime, and for some people a

⁷⁹ Ivy Lane Club (1748), Literary Club (1764), Essex Head Club (1783).

⁸⁰ *Life* II, 451. 21 March 1776.

more anxious one. The question of what to talk about arises, for instance, for a man brought up in a trade, but who becomes rich and leisured. The question of the best styles of conversation, and the idea of conversation as an art, are ones we often encounter in eighteenth-century writings on manners and morals, and Johnson makes a number of contributions. As we noted in the previous chapter, in Johnson's view conversation (and all discourse) must be fuelled by information. In *Idler* 7 (22), he justifies the work of "the writers of news" in that they supply material for general conversation, about matters "in which all the talkers have, or think they have, an interest" (23). In a society where there is leisure for talk, but "[w]here such facts cannot be known," he continues, "the pleasures of society will be merely sensual." We will leave the question of sensuality for a moment.

That most conversation is about news or facts, and that the best style is narrative, Johnson explains in *Rambler* 188. A man may give pleasure in conversation without being witty, knowledgeable or virtuous. In fact, such solid accomplishments usually excite envy, whereas "[h]e who has stored his memory with slight anecdotes, private incidents, and personal particularities, seldom fails to find his audience favourable" (v, 221). We have in *Rambler* 177 (v, 169), the example of Vivaculus the private scholar, who finds him disabled for conversation by solitude and study:

I was no longer able to accommodate myself with readiness to the accidental current of conversation, my notions grew particular and paradoxical, and my phraseology formal and unfashionable; I spoke, on common occasions, the language of books. My quickness of apprehension, and celerity of reply, had entirely deserted me: When I delivered my opinion, or detailed my knowledge, I was bewildered by an unseasonable interrogatory, disconcerted by any slight opposition, and overwhelmed, and lost in dejection, when the smallest advantage was gained against me in dispute. I became decisive and dogmatical, impatient of contradiction, perpetually jealous of my character, insolent to such as acknowledged my superiority, and sullen and malignant to all who refused to receive my dictates....

I therefore resolved for a time to shut my books, and learn again the art of conversation....

The detail with which Vivaculus's disability is described testifies to Johnson's concerns about the pedantry of the learned, which we discussed in Chapter Three. But the art of

conversation as successfully practised in polite society does not necessarily excite Johnson's respect. The bulk of this essay is devoted to showing that the conversation of the learned circle into which Vivaculus is introduced in London is petty and jealous. And as he points out in *Rambler* 188, to succeed in more ordinary conversation only requires very mean abilities. To have much information, be it travel narrative, news or gossip, is useful; but information can be exhausted. Johnson then sketches four other character types, who by indiscriminate approbation, mere amiableness, passivity or sheer buffoonery find themselves regarded as companionable. Their abilities represent a progressive rupturing of what we might assume to be a nexus between talk and the mind.

None of this is the conversation which Johnson thought of as a high pleasure. Hester Thrale records a similar expression to that quoted above, contrasting conversation with sensuality, "There is in this world no real delight (excepting those of sensuality), but exchange of ideas in conversation...."⁸¹ This contrast is of great interest to Boswell. In a conversation about Johnson's abstaining from wine, Boswell suggests to him that not drinking is "a great deduction from life." Johnson does not disagree:

JOHNSON. "It is a diminution of pleasure, to be sure; but I do not say a diminution of happiness. There is more happiness in being rational." BOSWELL. "But if we could have pleasure always, should not we be happy? The greatest part of men would compound for pleasure." JOHNSON. "Supposing we could have pleasure always, an intellectual man would not compound for it. The greatest part of men would compound, because the greatest part of men are gross." BOSWELL. "I allow there may be greater pleasure than from wine. I have had more pleasure from your conversation. I have indeed; I assure you I have."

Boswell proposes conversation, and in particular, conversation with Johnson, as the acme of intellectual pleasure, and as the appropriate counter to the merely sensual pleasure of drinking. Johnson does not respond directly to this base flattery, but I think it is very likely that he intends, in turning from the second to the first of the two great pleasures, to rebuke the hypocrisy of Boswell, whose amorous instincts were frequently out of control, and of whose own preoccupations, rather than Johnson's, this whole conversation is representative.

⁸¹ Thrale, *Anecdotes*. *Johns. Misc.* 1, 324.

JOHNSON. "When we talk of pleasure, we mean sensual pleasure. When a man says, he had pleasure with a woman, he does not mean conversation, but something of a very different nature. Philosophers tell you, that pleasure is *contrary* to happiness. Gross men prefer animal pleasure. So there are men who have preferred living among savages. Now what a wretch must he be, who is content with such conversation as can be had among savages!"⁸²

It is not Boswell but Johnson who introduces the savage life into this conversation, as an implicit response to Boswell's known fixation with the subject. Johnson believed that the main attraction of the savage life, or more particularly of the *idea* of the savage life to a civilised man such as Boswell, is the possibility it suggests of sensual indulgence, unbridled by conventional manners and ethics, and beyond the reach of religious censure. A man who has only known life in a savage society is not to be blamed for licentious behaviour as a consequence of the fortune dispensed to him by Providence. But Johnson is warning Boswell that he should not expect or hope to indulge without restraint in the pleasures of drinking and whoring, in a society which also offers him the pleasures of such rational and edifying conversation as they are now enjoying.

When Johnson condemns "such conversation as can be had among savages," the root of his dissatisfaction seems to be his belief that people who have leisure for other than practical talk need to be well-supplied with material to talk about. The facts of daily life can only supply so much material for narrative. In a letter to an old friend, Saunders Welch, who had gone to Rome, Johnson writes: -

The world has few greater pleasures than that which two friends enjoy, in tracing back, at some distant time, those transactions and events through which they have passed together. One of the old man's miseries is, that he cannot easily find a companion able to partake with him of the past.⁸³

Johnson cannot be thought to imagine that savage people do not have memories, or that two savage friends would not in old age have plenty of shared experiences to talk about. But what savage societies lack is the well of *communal* memories represented by a reliable learned tradition. Without written history, and other material from texts in common

⁸² *Life* III, 245-46. 7 April, 1778. The *Journal* records Johnson saying, instead of "something of a very different nature," "that he *tailed* her." See *Boswell in Extremes*, 248.

⁸³ *Letters* III, 107. 3 February 1778.

circulation, what can there be for an intellectual man for that delightful "exchange of ideas in conversation" that he mentioned to Hester Thrale? We should note too that "idea" for Johnson very likely means something more than something 'in the mind' and hence unreal or insubstantial, but something more like Locke's use of the word. For Locke, ideas are not only in our minds when we think, but when we feel or have any kind of mental awareness.⁸⁴

In a conversation in the *Life*, which Boswell (calling himself, "a gentleman") initiates, he supposes that one would learn a great deal during "three years at Otaheité, or New-Zealand," from observing mankind in a state of pure nature. Johnson challenges this, "What could you learn, Sir? What can savages tell, but what they themselves have seen? Of the past, or the invisible, they can tell nothing."⁸⁵ It seems not to occur to Johnson that one could learn from simply observing the customs of a savage people; or else we must conclude that his own strong interest in "the state of common life," which in the Scottish tour he asserted is the "true state of every nation,"⁸⁶ is here overwhelmed by some other concern. His interest is what they could or could not *tell*. Their ignorance of their own past is the first objection that occurs to him, before he gets on the safer ground that savages "are not in a state of pure nature." His main objections are that they can have no reliable religious tradition: he says that talk of savages having a mythology "must be invention." "The past and the invisible" is a convenient summing up of the province of religious knowledge, at least, of that of a religion based on an historical revelation. The source of any such knowledge must be a literary tradition, although his defence of this point seems weak: most "gross men" in English society could give a pretty poor account of their religion, despite the advantages of a sacred text, an order of clergy, and a designated Sabbath; how much worse, he asks, would be a savage's account of his religion?

This suggests why he is so determined in his rejection of the supposed poems of Ossian. To admit that poetry may be passed on from generation to generation among illiterate people leaves open the possibility of spontaneous and independent development of competing religious traditions, and thus casts doubt upon the historical claims of his own religion.

⁸⁴ See Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Bk. II, Ch. 1), 42 ff.

⁸⁵ *Life* III, 49. 26 April 1776.

⁸⁶ Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands*, ed. Fleeman, 16.

Alas! sir, what can a nation that has not letters tell of its original. I have always difficulty to be patient when I hear authours gravely quoted, as giving accounts of savage nations, which accounts they had from the savages themselves. What can the *M'Craas* tell about themselves a thousand years ago? There is no tracing the connection of ancient nations, but by language; and therefore I am always sorry when any language is lost, because languages are the pedigree of nations.⁸⁷

It might seem to be an uncomfortably swift transition from talking about the *M'Craas* to talking about savages. But for Johnson the vital resemblance is not having "letters." We moderns who tend to valorise the primitive, perhaps rightly feeling that the technical side of western civilization has much to answer for in terms of social dislocation and environmental destruction, will be uncomfortable with Johnson's dismissal of the primitive.

But if we look further, we see that according to Johnson it is possible to live in a lettered society, and not oneself possess enough literature or literacy or lettered learning to qualify one for useful and informative conversation. A sentence already quoted about conversation occurs in the *Anecdotes* in the context of a long passage of remarks on supposed social pleasures, notable for a vividness and intensity of expression.

Nor was Mr. Johnson more merciful with regard to the amusements people are contented to call such: "You hunt in the morning (says he), and crowd to the public rooms at night, and call it *diversion*; when your heart knows it is perishing with poverty of pleasures, and your wits get blunted for want of some other mind to sharpen them upon. There is in this world no real delight (excepting those of sensuality), but exchange of ideas in conversation; and whoever has once experienced the full flow of London talk, when he retires to country friendships and rural sports, must either be contented to turn baby again and play with the rattle, or he will pine away like a great fish in a little pond, and dies for want of his usual food."

The rhetorical force and compassionate appeal of "your heart knows it is perishing with poverty of pleasures" is the voice not of a moralist, concerned about the trivial ways in which people consume their time, but of a man anxious for others that they fulfill their

⁸⁷ *Life* v, 224-25. *Tour*, 18 September. These sentiments are echoed in a letter to William Drummond, 13 August 1766; see *Letters* 1, 269).

humanity Most of us do not so much want too much out of life, as settle for far too little. He continues:

the minds of men who acquire no solid learning, and only exist on the daily forage that they pick up by running about, and snatching what drops from their neighbours as ignorant as themselves, will never ferment into any knowledge valuable or durable....⁸⁸

The image in this second sentence, of men running about, foraging like hunter-gatherers after information, is in its context applied not to a savage or nomadic people, but to the mer. who "study manners ... only in coffee-houses." We have in this passage images that compare life without learned conversation to being savage, infantile, bestial, or dead. In the *Life* we are told that "He used to quote, with great warmth, the saying of Aristotle recorded by Diogenes Laertius; that there was the same difference between one learned and unlearned, as between the living and the dead."⁸⁹

One of Johnson's household at Bolt Court was Poll Carmichael, about whom almost nothing is known, beyond what Fanny Burney recorded Johnson as saying of her, "I took to Poll very well at first, but she won't do upon a nearer examination.... Poll is a stupid slut; I had some hopes of her at first; but, when I talked to her tightly and closely, I could make nothing of her; she was wiggle-waggle, and I could never persuade her to be categorical."⁹⁰ It is significant that in talking of Poll's stupidity, Johnson's language breaks down. Wiggle-waggle? Genuine stupidity is a mystery beyond civilised adult language: that is, that a person may not be in any obvious way brain-damaged, but be nevertheless unable to comprehend simple and practical questions, to regard anything apart from the sensate and immediate, to partake of disinterested conversation, or even to recognise their own best long-term interests.

Part of the pleasure of conversation is in artfully negotiating various tensions, which Johnson describes in *Idler* 34, with the elaborate analogy between conversation and mixing a punch. A good punch will contain spirits, acid juices, sugar and water: too little or too much of any, and the punch will be defective, perhaps undrinkable. In *Adventurer*

⁸⁸ Thrale, *Anecdotes. Johns. Misc.* 1, 324, 324-25.

⁸⁹ *Life* IV, 13. 1780 (*Anecdotes of Bennet Langton*).

⁹⁰ Burney, *Dr. Johnson and Fanny Burney*, 34 (September 1778).

85, he says that in conversation we are "frequently betrayed" into using modes of argument and rhetoric "such as are not in themselves strictly defensible.... Some caution, therefore, must be used, lest copiousness and facility be made less valuable by inaccuracy and confusion" (416). But as he points out in *Idler* 100, conversation which is "habitually cautious" is too vague or conventional to be sincere and interesting (307). Although we have observed moments in Johnson's own conversation when he has been too blunt or hasty or contrary, I do not think an instance could be found of him erring on the side of over-caution.

To a rational creature, such 'mental operations' ought to be pleasing. In *Idler* 44, Johnson asserts that "To collect and reposit the various forms of things, is far the most *pleasing* part of mental occupation" (137; my emphasis). The pleasures of memory and the pleasures of conversation are mutually implicated in each other, in Johnson's experience. Memory, then, will be the subject of our final chapter.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Johnson's *History of Memory*

I. The 'History of Memory'?

In the very early hours of New Year's Day 1766, Johnson took up his latest journal notebook. There he composed a prayer (or prayed in writing), calling himself "the wretched mispender [*sic*] of another year."¹ He was apparently restless and ill at ease, and was still awake an hour later at 3 a.m., when he wrote down four resolutions, and finally composed himself for sleep. But his sleep was fitful and unsatisfactory, and with some relief he rose in the morning unwontedly early (at 8 a.m.) — thus already fulfilling one of the resolutions from the night before. The first of January was a Wednesday. He took up some spiritual reading, but his sleeplessness had made him lethargic. Fortunately he had an engagement to have midday dinner at Tom Davies's (Johnson, so Boswell tells us, "was very much his friend, and came frequently to his house"²). He was sufficiently at home there to take a nap for an hour after lunch, and to stay on reading until seven. He returned to his home in Johnson's Court in the evening, alone and restless, and again stayed up late, reading devotional works and drinking tea until two the following morning,³ when he resorted again to his journal. In it, he noted the day's activities and, it seems as something of an afterthought, made a pregnant note to himself, "*To write the History of Memory.*"⁴

This idea, of which, as his Yale editors remark, "there is no further mention," emerges from the sparse, miscellaneous and self-accusatory records which Johnson kept of his daily life, like a glimpse of movements in his un-conscious, when a number of thoughts or subjects that have been exercising his mind coalesce briefly into a form of words. The *History of Memory* sounds to be a work very different in character to those forty-eight

¹ Jeremy Taylor, in *Holy Living and Holy Dying* (1657), warns his readers against "misspendings of their time." See *Holy Living and Dying: Together with Prayers containing The Whole Duty of a Christian*, New, revised edn. (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1856), 8. This is an important book for Johnson, as we shall see in the next chapter.

² *Life* I, 390. May, 1763.

³ The painter Ozias Humphry, in a letter about a year and a half before this time, described visiting Johnson and noted that "he seldom goes to bed till near two in the morning" *Minor Anecdotes, Johns. Misc.* II, 401.

⁴ *Diaries*, 100 (italics in original). See also Appendix, 376.

literary *Designs* of which he made the detailed list which is reprinted by Boswell. They are all far more concrete and conventional. The *History of Memory* we might expect to be a project of Umberto Eco's, or something from a tale by Borges. For Johnson, it seems to have been a sudden (and momentary) crystallisation of shifting and unknowable preoccupations, perhaps typical of insights imagined and scribbled down very late at night. I want then, in this chapter, to consider memory as a fundamental component of everyday life, which has in relation to Johnson received little attention. It is a critical topic on which many of his works and motivations seem to intersect, and we need to consider Johnson's vision of the functions of memory, in the life of society and the individual, and his own memory and its meaning. The subject involves unfamiliar assumptions, and will have unexpected trajectories and destinations.

The phrase, the 'history of memory' seems to embody an unwritable and unresolvable contradiction, *history* (as the *Dictionary* says, "1. A narration of events and facts delivered with dignity") being an inanimate artefact, the literary and necessarily stylised account of the past as given in books, and *memory* ("1. The power of retaining or recollecting things past; retention; reminiscence; recollection") being a human faculty, a fragile but living thing. History pulls towards literacy, memory towards orality. We have for the past seven chapters mainly considered print texts, Johnson's but also Boswell's; although with texts and genres such as conversational dialogue, 'diction' or non-fictional prose, *minutiae literariae*, and a dictionary full of quotations, the oral character of language has never been far away. Johnson's involvement with literate culture, of which he remains an almost quintessential representative, does not preclude a deep interest in the oral world (or, of course, his being deeply implicated in it). Alvin Kernan is correct to assert that Johnson is "at once, the ideal of oral society, the person with the prodigious and accurate memory of what has been said, and of print culture, the person who knows exactly what is in books and can find information at once."⁵

Where culture is oral, memory rules. That is to say, in a pre-literate society, the faculty of memory is all-important for socio-cultural continuity, and those whose memories are copiously supplied — such as the aged — are valued. But literacy does not drive out oral patterns of thought, and certainly does not do so immediately. Walter Ong, who has written most influentially and comprehensively on such subjects, gives examples from twelfth-century England to show "how much orality could linger in the presence of

⁵ Kernan, *Printing Technology, Letters and Samuel Johnson*, 215.

writing."⁶ But for Samuel Johnson too, six centuries later, the pre-literate world is always just back over the horizon. Despite the dispersal of books and private learning in England, he still thought himself able to assume the persistence of orality and memory, when in his early "Essay on Epitaphs," he says that the more eminent "a Hero, or ... a Philosopher," the shorter his epitaph should be. He gives Sir Isaac Newton as an example, and asserts, "The bare Name of such Men answers every Purpose of a long Inscription."⁷ Such a spare text as a name, publicly displayed, announces an assumption that it has its meaning within the frame of a culture wider than the culture of writing. Certainly, not everyone who gazes on his stone in St. Paul's will have read the *Principia*, but all from simply living in England will know his name. The "bare name" of Newton (or of Johnson) will serve to draw attention to what they have bequeathed to the future, only in a society in which the living memory of such people is orally maintained.

As a number of writers have shown, as a society becomes committed to the print-based transmission of knowledge and culture, memories (as in people's faculties of memory) weaken and fade, and memories (as in the contents of our memories) dissipate. Some years ago, an American anthropologist had to be brought to Australia, to remind an indigenous community in Arnhem Land (after only a few decades of exposure to Western print and television) how to build their own canoes. I wish to argue that Samuel Johnson is very aware of the fragility of memory, and this awareness is frequently close to the surface of his mind. As he observes in his *Journey to the Western Islands*, "memory, once interrupted, is not to be recalled."⁸ Of course, it was said long ago that not only print but writing itself displaces memory. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates tells a tale in which the Egyptian god Theuth, who invented writing, claims "I have discovered a sure receipt for memory and wisdom." He is rebuked in the tale by the king of Egypt, for partiality for his invention, in these terms:

Those who acquire it [the art of writing] will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful; they will rely on writing to bring things to their remembrance by external signs instead of on their own internal resources. What you have discovered is a receipt for recollection, not for memory. And as for wisdom, your pupils will have the reputation for it without the reality: they will receive a

⁶ Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982; London: Routledge, 1988), 96.

⁷ [Johnson,] "An Essay on Epitaphs," *Gentleman's Magazine* x (1740), 593.

⁸ *Journey to the Western Islands*, ed. Fleeman, 92.

quantity of information without proper instruction, and in consequence be thought very knowledgeable when they are for the most part quite ignorant.⁹

Although this prediction continues to resonate forcefully, it has never quite come to pass. Western European culture, with its derivatives, has long been a literate culture, but in both scholarly and popular contexts memory and orality survive and are valued. A number of theorists have argued that the slightest dose of literacy necessarily and decisively displaces the oral mindset; yet oral culture seems to exist alongside literacy, indeed, something like an oral substructure is necessary for literacy to be built upon. Barry Sanders argues that "[a] rich experience of orality is an indispensable prelude to literacy."¹⁰ Perhaps, because literacy has historically depended upon orality, its potential has never yet been fulfilled. Most people would say that literacy has done what it seems to do; that is, rather than making us forgetful, as it is argued in the *Phaedrus*, as Sanders says, "[l]iteracy furnishes us with a new way of remembering."¹¹

Perhaps too, the media by which literacy has been conveyed — books and print generally — have never been quite as efficient or reliable, or as overwhelming, as able to "take possession of our minds," as we might fear or imagine. Most of us have to exercise a considerable amount of memory and intelligence both to retrieve and to process literary knowledge. Perhaps we should hear Johnson's famous dictum about the two kinds of knowledge, that "[w]e know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it,"¹² both as an expression of his own insight into the effects of the steadily increasing accumulation of literary materials, and as a response to this ancient doubt about literacy and memory. As he suggests, knowing where in literature to find something in particular, and then knowing how to extract it, are types of knowledge not to be despised; or not, at least, until — perhaps in the near future — all types of knowledge are drawn into the one (universally distributed and infinitely accessible) electronic vortex, that the world wide web promises or threatens to become. At which stage, no one will need anymore to remember anything, except how to turn on the computer.

⁹ Plato, *Phaedrus* [275 a-b], trans. Walter Hamilton (Harmondsworth: Penguin "60s Classics," 1995), 75-76.

¹⁰ Sanders, *A is for Ox*, 13.

¹¹ Sanders, *A is for Ox*, 60.

¹² *Life* II, 365. 18 April 1775.

This fear I prefer to leave to reverberate for a moment, uncontested. It might, in the end, be subject to the death of a thousand qualifications, but I would like us to at least recognise its ongoing power, and what sort of a fear it is; and why Samuel Johnson is so sensitive to it. We will return to this later.

As any literate society persists in time, and its literature accumulates, its traditions become embodied, increasingly, in its texts. We saw in the introductory chapter how Johnson recognises this in his *Dictionary* definitions of *tradition* and its cognates. The texts we call histories represent the subject that encompasses or at least frames all learning. From Johnson's historical and biographical projects, real and projected, — his *Lives of the Poets*, *Lives of the Painters*, *Lives of the Philosophers*, *Lives of Illustrious Persons* — one would learn not simply biographical data, but about poetry, painting, natural philosophy. In Johnson's view, history is therefore the second most important branch of learning:

Whether we provide for action or conversation, whether we wish to be useful or pleasing, the first requisite is the religious and moral knowledge of right and wrong; the next is an acquaintance with the *history of mankind*, and with those examples which may be said to embody truth and prove by events the reasonableness of opinions.¹³

The study of history equips people, he says, for *conversation*, but also for *action*: that is, it will suggest to its students policy, ways in which to behave *in the future* which are not random, and which may be supposed likely to have desirable or at least predictable outcomes. Some opinions will be seen "by events" to be unreasonable: a knowledge of history should prevent us from believing at least some stupid things.

The importance of such knowledge he strongly affirms in writing, but in conversation he expressed quite a deal of anxiety about the subject. History is particularly tied up in the knowledge of matters of such fundamental importance as human and communal origins and destiny. We read in the previous chapter his rhetorical questions, "Alas! sir, what can a nation that has not letters tell of its original.... What can the *M'Craas* tell about themselves a thousand years ago?"¹⁴ In a later conversation, which at least testifies that it is not only Scotland that is the subject of his dissatisfaction, he says,

¹³ 'Milton,' *Lives* I, 99-100 (my italics).

¹⁴ *Life* V, 224-25. *Tour*, 18 September.

All that is really *known* of the ancient state of Britain is contained in a few pages. We *can* know no more than what the old writers have told us; yet what large books have we upon it, the whole of which, excepting such parts as are taken from those old writers, is all a dream....¹⁵

There is in these expressions a tone not merely of regret but of exasperation and wistful longing, that the foundations of all that seems knowable are so insubstantial. They seem to represent a deep vein of perturbation, a nostalgia for lost origins. Johnson was interested in the origins of societies, and we might note among the thirteen biographical and historical works on the list of thirty books that he recommended for Daniel Astle, two works in particular: "Prideaux's Connection" and "Shuckford's Connection," which together purport to present a narrative of biblical history from the Creation, "connected" with the histories of other ancient peoples.¹⁶ Johnson had also carefully read and was evidently moved by Matthew Hale's *The Primitive Origination of Mankind* (1677), which defends the Mosaic account of Creation as consistent with reason.¹⁷ He also owned and had read Thomas Burnet's *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1689), a controversial proto-Darwinist work which expounds a fanciful geological history based on a non-literal reading of Genesis.¹⁸

Whether we speak of an oral community, in which memory is embodied in ritually rehearsed mythological traditions, or a literate society, much of the memory of which will be embodied in texts, the maintenance of communal memory is a high social priority. The myths must be recited, the texts must be read. Without a reliable memory, a person has a drastically diminished sense of self — of their own identity *vis-à-vis* other people, of their place in society, of their power over their own life. Johnson, understandably, cannot imagine how amongst an oral, pre-literate people, this function could be fulfilled (of course, in very different ways) by narratives of a mythological rather than historical

¹⁵ *Life* III, 333 (Boswell's italics). 29 April 1778.

¹⁶ These works are Humphrey Prideaux, *The Old and New Testament Connected in the History of the Jews and Neighbouring Nations* (1716-18), and Samuel Shuckford, *The Sacred and Prophane History of the World Connected* (1728-37). For the text of the list, and a description of its contents, see my "A Clergyman's Reading," 126, 131-32.

¹⁷ Robert DeMaria, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading*, 46-48.

¹⁸ The Latin original, *Telluris Theoria Sacra* (1681), was in *SJL*. Johnson seems to mock "the theoretical Burnet" in the 'Meditation on a Pudding' which Boswell recorded (*Life* V, 352. *Tour*, 24 October). He does not say, as Donald Greene asserts in *SJL*, that the *Sacred Theory* is a book "which the critick ought to read." This expression does not occur on the page he gives, but in the 'Life of Rochester,' where it refers to Gilbert Burnet's life of that poet (*Lives* I, 222).

character. Not until the researches early in the twentieth century, by Milman Parry and others, were these processes appreciated.¹⁹ Johnson seems to ask himself what a people without recorded history (and without the dispensation of special revelation) can know of themselves. His answer might be supposed to be similar to his vision of the mental world inhabited by someone unversed in the science of Chronology, which he described in the *Preceptor*: "his Memory will be perplexed with distant Transactions resembling one another, and his Reflections be like a Dream in a Fever, busy and turbulent, but confused and indistinct."²⁰ Not understanding oral tradition, Johnson fears that this is what savage societies must be like.

But the contemplation of the primitive might be said simply to bring to the surface deeper doubts about the origins, continuity and destiny of all human society, literate or otherwise. On the same afternoon as he spoke of the two kinds of knowledge, he said,

"We must consider how very little history there is; I mean real authentick history. That certain Kings reigned, and certain battles were fought, we can depend upon as true; but all the colouring, all the philosophy, of history is conjecture." BOSWELL.
 "Then, Sir, you would reduce all history to no better than an almanack, a mere chronological series of remarkable events."²¹

Johnson did not, according to Boswell, disagree. What is lost beyond recovery, and is not made up for by speculation or flowery prose, is the history of everyday life. Discussing Robert Henry's *History of Britain*, Johnson said, "I wish much to have one branch [of history] well done, and that is the history of manners, of common life."²²

Johnson may have been exhibiting a limited understanding of the operations of oral tradition when he asserted, in his *Journey to the Western Islands*, that "[i]n an unwritten speech, nothing that is not very short is transmitted from one generation to another";²³ he

¹⁹ Parry's work, and that of his student and successor, Albert Lord, began as an effort to understand the composition of Homeric poetry, by recording the narrative poetry still recited by illiterate bards in Macedonia. See Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 18-27, 57-62.

²⁰ Preface to *The Preceptor*, in *Prefaces and Dedications*, 183. This sounds very like the past as imagined by the inhabitants of Orwells' 1984, with capitalists in top hats driving around in limousines.

²¹ *Life* II, 365-66. 18 April 1775.

²² *Life*, III, 333. 29 April 1778.

²³ *Journey to the Western Islands*, 97.

is thinking in terms of exact verbal recall, and anthropologists agree that "exact recall simply cannot exist in orality."²⁴ This emphasises the oral consideration in Johnson's commitment to short forms, and provides a background against which to consider his fanciful prediction (quoted in Chapter Six) that Boswell recorded in Edinburgh, that humanity would come in time to write all in aphorisms or anecdotes. But Johnson does assume the persistence, to some degree, of oral culture, when (as previously quoted) he asserts,

he may therefore be justly numbered among the benefactors of mankind, who contracts *the great rules of life* into short sentences, that may be easily impressed on the memory, and taught by frequent recollection to recur habitually to the mind.²⁵

He also indicates here that it takes some effort and commitment to maintain cultural continuity and social coherence. In the passage just quoted from the *Western Islands*, he clearly has in mind texts on the literary model; "a long composition" is what he imagines (and indeed, all that he *can* imagine) the purported poems of Ossian are supposed to be. (Even though he did not know as much as is now known about the modes of transmission of oral tradition, his ideas about verse which we shall consider later reflect a real insight into these processes.) Nevertheless, Johnson was certainly not in error when he continues, "[i]n an unwritten speech, ... what is once forgotten is lost for ever." But he knows that he does not need to look as far as the Hebrides to discover people who forget their ultimately divine origins.

II. Beattie, the *Britannica* and the Art of Memory

Under a variety of converging impulses, the literature-making industry took a dramatically encyclopedic turn in the eighteenth century, committing vast resources to long-term, multi-volume projects. In France, these were often called *bibliothèques*. "Eighteenth-century bookseller-publishers published great numbers of these multiple-volume collections," Roger Chartier says, "gathering together published works in a given genre such as novels, tales,

²⁴ Sanders, *A is for Ox*, 15.

²⁵ *Rambler* 175; v, 160 (my italics).

or travel accounts."²⁶ We could illustrate this in Johnson's own immediate literary world by reference to such projects as the sixty-five volume *Universal History* (1736-68),²⁷ John Newbery's twenty-volume collection of travel narratives, *The World Displayed* (1759-60),²⁸ and of course the sixty-eight volume edition of *The Works of the English Poets* (1779-81) for which Johnson wrote the "Prefaces, Biographical and Critical": his *Lives of the Poets*. And there are the actually encyclopedic works, great and nationalistic projects such as the *Biographia Britannica*, 6 v. in 7 (1747-66), the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert, 17 v. (1751-65), the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 3 v. (1768-71),²⁹ and so forth. The implications for memory in these sorts of texts are profound, as many writers have observed:

The first true boom of technical literature occurs in the second half of the eighteenth century. The dictionary constitutes a very evolved form of external memory, but one in which thought is infinitely moralized; the Great Encyclopedia of 1751 is a series of little manuals bound up in a dictionary ... the encyclopedia is a dispersed, alphabetical memory in which each cog contains an animate part of the total memory.³⁰

Of course, this development depends upon both economic and technological developments, as well as upon the build-up of a sort of critical mass of texts printed and distributed, from which literary hacks may extract material from which to assemble new texts. Nevertheless, we may also read the boom in this sort of publishing as an intuitive response to either a gnawing anxiety about the failure of memory in a literary economy, or simply a heeding to the siren-song of list-making, an appreciation of the roots of literature in lists. Johnson's own list of literary *Designs* reflects this trend. It is remarkable how few of his projects are either discursive or poetical works, but are rather discontinuous and compendious texts, such as histories, collections, anthologies, dictionaries: that is, texts that exploit the specific

²⁶ Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Stanford, CA.: Stanford U.P., 1994), 66. (Translation of *L'Ordre des Livres* [1992].)

²⁷ Johnson recommended this work in his reading list for Daniel Astle; his other connections with the project are described in my article, "A Clergyman's Reading," 128.

²⁸ For which Johnson wrote the Introduction, as discussed in Ch. 7, 255 ff. See also Appendix, 352.

²⁹ The *EB* took some time to develop. The 2nd edn. (1778-83) was in ten vols., and the 3rd (1797) in eighteen.

³⁰ André Leroi-Gourhan, *Le geste et la parole* (Paris, 1964-65), v. 2, 70-71. Cited in Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, trans. Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Clamen (New York: Columbia U.P., 1992), 85. (Translated from *Storia e Memoria* [1986].)

potentials of literary media — texts that like lists are *unsayable*, and could have no equivalent in oral culture.

A browse through an eighteenth-century edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* shows, as one would expect, an oddly different configuration of the field of knowledge. Whereas ELECTRICITY is described in a couple of lines as a natural curiosity, the entry for LAUGHTER takes up four pages. Of course, in late twentieth-century editions, the situation is reversed. As we have seen, there are ten columns about ANA in the eighth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, but no entry at all in recent ones. If there was a more narrow field of what we would call scientific knowledge, there was more room for speculation.

The entry for MEMORY in the third (1797) edition of the *Britannica* takes up six columns. There are only two authorities whose work on the subject is quoted. Aristotle, perhaps, and John Locke, might one imagine? Actually, the article at the outset explains that "the opinions of philosophers concerning the means by which the mind retains the ideas of past objects" is to be found in the article on METAPHYSICS. In the MEMORY article, the encyclopedists intend to "throw together some observations on memory ... of a practical rather than of a speculative nature."³¹ The two works, extracts from which comprise most of the article, are the *Elements of Moral Science* (1790) of the Scottish philosopher, James Beattie, and *The Idler* of Samuel Johnson.³²

It is unlikely that as casual a work as a periodical essay series would be cited on any subject in an authoritative reference work today. But the earlier encyclopedists were correct in seeing Johnson as, if not exactly an 'authority' on memory, at least someone who had not only throughout his life given considerable thought to the subject, but regarded the subject as of great importance and was frequently preoccupied by it. Three papers from *The Idler* and one from *The Rambler* explicitly deal with the subject of memory, but there are resonances throughout his work.

The section concerning memory in Beattie's *Elements* is an abridgement of the essay "Of Memory and Imagination" in his *Dissertations Moral and Critical* (1783), which latter work was based on his lectures to Scottish university students. James Beattie was

³¹ "Memory," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 3rd edn. (1797).

³² The marginal attribution of various passages of the entry to Johnson or Beattie is imprecise, and some passages are mislabelled. I have traced four passages to Johnson, and eight to Beattie (these constitute about 60% of the article). Four passages are wrongly attributed. This entry is unaltered in the fifth (1815) edition.

Professor of Moral Philosophy and Logic at Marischal College, Aberdeen, where he stayed for most of his life, apart from trips to elsewhere in Scotland, and to London. He was popular and influential as a teacher, as much for the clarity of his teaching and elegant prose style, as for his ardent Christian piety and evident good-heartedness. He first visited London in 1763, and became a very popular guest in the metropolis. On his visit of the summer of 1771, he brought with him from Edinburgh a letter of introduction, from James Boswell, and thus first met Samuel Johnson. By this time, Beattie had published the first canto of his major poem, *The Minstrel* (1771, 1774) and his *Essay on Truth* (1770). There were four editions and three translations of the latter by 1772. Johnson wrote with gratitude to Boswell for the introduction; he introduced Beattie to the Thrales, in whose salon he was very popular,³³ and always wrote and spoke with great warmth of Beattie and his writings. Both the *Essay on Truth* and the *Dissertations* were in his library and, according to Allen Reddick, Beattie is the "only living prose writer quoted at length" by Johnson in the revised fourth edition of the *Dictionary*.³⁴

Beattie quotes from *Idler* 74 in his essay "Of Memory and Imagination" (although not in the more distilled account of this subject in the *Elements*), and calls Johnson "an ingenious author."³⁵ However, there are in both of these works echoes of Johnson. In Johnson's *Idler* 74 (232), it is insisted, "The true art of memory is the art of attention"; in Beattie's *Dissertations* (16) we read, "The great art of Memory is attention," and in the *Elements*, "The art of memory, therefore, is little more than the art of attention."³⁶ This same sentiment is reiterated in the *Britannica* article, which, after recommending "a treatise entitled *A new Method of Artificial Memory*" to any readers who may wish to try its strategies, also concludes with the assertion, "but the true art of memory is attention and exercise." As indicated here by the recommendation and implied contrast, the 'art of memory' was not, as we might first imagine, an ironic, hyperbolic or metaphorical expression. The *Britannica* makes it clear that the force of all these re-iterated assertions is to challenge the legitimacy of a pseudo-science known as the 'Art of Memory,' also known as Artificial Memory or *Mnemonic*. This 'Art of Memory' was developed in classical times, and there had been revivals of interest in it during the renaissance and

³³ *Letters* 1, 388 (15 March 1772; to Boswell concerning Beattie); 383 (30 August 1771; to Beattie inviting him to the Thrales).

³⁴ Reddick, *The Making of Johnson's 'Dictionary'*, 160.

³⁵ James Beattie, *Dissertations Moral and Critical* (1783), Fasc. rpt., ed. Bernhard Fabian (Hildesheim /New York: Georg Olms, 1974), 30.

³⁶ Beattie, *The Elements of Moral Science* (Edinburgh, 1790), 93.

more recently. In the fifth edition of the *Britannica* (1815), the article on MEMORY from which I have quoted is followed immediately (i.e., out of alphabetical sequence) by an entry on the subject of MNEMONICA.

The term 'the Art of Memory' referred to a number of specific techniques whereby the memory could supposedly be trained and strengthened, originally for the needs of scholarship and rhetoric in a pre-print society. Briefly (for its details are of no real concern to us here), the art consisted of establishing a more-or-less elaborate system of mental correspondences between the elements of a known physical environment — such as a building or a street-scape — and the elements of whatever topic one wished to commit to memory, so that by recalling the former one would draw forth from one's mind the structure of the latter. The ancient sources for descriptions of the art are Cicero's *De oratore*, Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* and an anonymous work (long attributed to Cicero) known as the *Auctor ad Herennium libri IV*. It seems clear that the Greeks also knew about the subject, as the Latin writers assert that it was invented by them, although no Greek writings on the subject are extant. The art dropped out of notice in the middle ages, but Aquinas was interested in memory as part of the virtue of prudence, and his thought resembles the principles of the classical art. In the renaissance, various thinkers such as Giordano Bruno and Ramon Lull became preoccupied with using memory structures, the images and hierarchies, to achieve occult knowledge.³⁷

In *Idler* 72, Johnson comments that "no art of memory, however its effects have been boasted or admired, has been ever adopted into general use, nor have those who possessed it, appeared to excel others in readiness of recollection or multiplicity of attainments" (224-25). Accounts of the subject which Johnson could have known include *The Art of Memory; a treatise useful for all, especially such as are to speak in publick*, by Marius D'Assigny (1697),³⁸ or *The Art of Memory, ... as it Dependeth Upon Places and Idea's* (1621), by John Willis.³⁹ But the 'art of memory' which he most likely had in mind is the one recommended in the *Britannica*, the *Memoria Technica: or, A New*

³⁷ For an historical account, see Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (1966; Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books, 1969), particularly chapters 1, 5, 7, 8.

³⁸ Johnson knew D'Assigny as the translator of Charles Drelincourt's *Les Consolations de l'âme fidèle contre les frayeurs de la Mort*, as *The Christian's Defense Against the Fear of Death* (1675, 24th edn. 1810). See *Life* II, 163 and n.4, 493 n.

³⁹ This work was Willis's own translation and revision of Book 3 of his own, *Mnemonica; sive, Reminiscendi ars* (1618). A complete translation was made by Leonard Sowerby, *Mnemonica; or, The Art of Memory: drained out of the pure fountains of art and nature, digested into 3 books: also a physical treatise of cherishing natural memory, diligently collected out of divers learned mens writings* (London, 1661).

Method of Artificial Memory (1730) of Richard Grey, which was many times reprinted during the following century.⁴⁰ Grey's method, however, does not 'depend upon places and ideas.' Rather, he recommends forming words which begin with the first syllable of the subject, and conclude with a formula that represents the information to be recalled. These 'words,' and lines of such words, may by repetition be committed to memory like verse, each one containing in a compressed form a vast amount of precise historical and geographical data. It does not seem surprising that, as one historian of the subject has observed, "By the late 1700s ... the 'art of memory' was commonly regarded as impractical and somewhat ridiculous."⁴¹

Nevertheless, there was in the early 1800s a revival of interest in mnemonic techniques, with a number of professors of the craft giving lectures and conducting courses in various European capitals. There are three mnemonists who are mentioned in the MNEMONICS article in the fifth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Johann Christophe, Baron von Aretin, and his pupil Christian August Lebrecht Kästner, both commenced teaching and publishing in Germany in the early 1800s. But the mnemonist who had the biggest impact in Britain was Gregor von Feinaigle (1760-1819), a former Cistercian father, who set himself up as a teacher of the art after his monastic community was closed. Equipped with the bogus title of Professor (and a bogus "von"), he taught in Paris in 1806, and gave lectures in London, Liverpool, Edinburgh and Glasgow in 1811.⁴² Early in 1813, he gave demonstrations in Dublin, followed by courses in his technique. A number of Protestant gentlemen in that city were so impressed that Feinaigle was invited to conduct a school in Dublin, which he did with great success, until his death six years later. Mnemonists were inclined to be secretive about their systems (the two books about Feinaigle's system were published anonymously by former students, presumably without his permission), mainly because it was their aim to make a living by recruiting people to undertake their courses. Therefore, published accounts of their activities excited public interest. Most of the *Britannica* (1815) article on the subject is taken up with an account

⁴⁰ It reached its sixth London edition in 1781, and new (unnumbered) editions came out regularly until 1880. I imagine this Richard Grey was the one not to be confused with Zachary Grey, as the taciturn 'Demosthenes' Taylor insisted (*Life* III, 318).

⁴¹ A. Bryan Laver, "Gregor Feinaigle, Mnemonist and Educator", *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 15 (1979), 18.

⁴² See *DNB*. (Laver's research corrects the date of Feinaigle's birth given in *DNB*; he does not appear to notice the description of Feinaigle in Paris given in the *EB*.)

(a letter from Paris, to the *Philosophical Magazine*) concerning Feinaigle's activities, and the *Gentleman's Magazine* reported his London and Liverpool experiments.⁴³

Of course, all of these teachers and their publications were after Johnson's time. But they taught variations of the same ancient system of memory of which Johnson knew, and which his assertion about the contrary "art of attention" is intended to counter. The methods they employed offered nothing new or exceptional, and the leading article in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of February 1814, by a correspondent called "Mnemonicus," pointed out the resemblance of Feinaigle's system to that of 'Cicero' in the *ad Herennium*, particularly in regard to its use of "places and images."⁴⁴ The methods of the mnemonists, whether they are the ancient system of visual correspondences, or Grey's system of verbal codes and repetition, treat information as mere data that is radically abstracted from human discourse, and from use or even meaning. Considering such systems, the learned reader must be first struck with their lack of resemblance to the processes by which memories are usually acquired. They seem cumbersome and tedious, and to depend — in a way that seems counter-intuitive — upon mastering by sheer effort of will *extra* information, complex conceptual frameworks of no intrinsic value. 'Knowledge,' as it is figured by such memory systems, appears to be of far less *interest* than it might be in the original contexts or the more humane and everyday situations in which knowledge is usually located. The 'arts of memory' divorce knowledge from the pleasure of its acquisition, which is surely the main impetus to learning. They are means of 'acquiring' information that one does not necessarily understand, by way of shortcuts that do not respect its integrity.

Johnson knew that foolish people consider intellectual prowess, and other successful species of competence, to be in fact some sort of a trick. He observed in *Idler* 92, "they who cannot be wise are almost always cunning."⁴⁵ The 'arts of memory' offer to such people the tantalising suggestion that by some one learnable technique, a sort of intellectual sleight-of-hand, *all* knowledge can be once-and-for-all mastered. Wisdom, however, does not come so cheaply. "The difficulty of obtaining knowledge is universally confessed," Johnson asserts, and expands on the theme as follows:

⁴³ "Historical Chronicle — Domestic Occurrences — June 22," *Gentleman's Magazine* LXXXI (1811), 281.

⁴⁴ *Gentleman's Magazine* LXXXIV (1814), 107-08.

⁴⁵ *Idler* 92; 284. It is an idea re-iterated in a letter to John Taylor (3 October 1782), "To help the ignorant commonly requires much patience, for the ignorant are always trying to be cunning" (*Letters* IV, 75-76).

To fix deeply in the mind the principles of science, to settle their limitations, and deduce the long succession of their consequences; to comprehend the whole compass of complicated systems, with all the arguments, objections, and solutions, and to reposit in the intellectual treasury the numberless facts, experiments, apophthegms, and positions which must stand single in the memory, and of which none has any perceptible connection with the rest, is a task which, tho' undertaken with ardour and pursued with diligence, must at last be left unfinished by the frailty of our nature.⁴⁶

Under such circumstances, he believes that "To make the way to learning either less short or less smooth is certainly absurd." (Specifically, what he has in mind here is studying foreign authors, when writings in English will convey the same lessons just as well.) Therefore, it is not because they make learning too easy that Johnson is sceptical about the arts of memory.

Learning is not simply a matter of securely storing and readily retrieving information: as well as the "numberless facts [etc.] ... which must stand single in the memory," there are whole systems to be 'comprehended' and principles to be 'fixed deeply in the mind.' No art of memory, no technique, is going to make one learned in these terms. Neither an *idiot savant*, who has memorised the telephone directory, nor an electronic data-base, can be said to be learned. We might distinguish and summarise the objections to artificial systems of memory as follows:

- They distort the nature of knowledge, and imply the same distortion about the world our knowledge describes;
- They cut us off from the mind-disciplining process of knowledge acquisition, and the intellectual expansion which comes from finding particular knowledge located in wider contexts;
- They absolve us from the responsibility for knowledge which is suggested by art of attention.

Philosophers two millennia after Plato first expressed his doubts might, we imagine, be even more concerned about the effects of writing, given its immensely greater dispersal through print, and its accessibility through education to a far larger literate proportion of

⁴⁶ *Idler* 91; 281-82.

society. But this has of course not been the case. Plato's doubts seem never to have influenced the fortunes of literature; rather, immersion in written texts has become recognised as the most fundamental means of acquiring learning. Despite the fact that a high percentage of books have never pretended to contain anything of the kind, books are seen as synonymous with knowledge. 'Bookish' means learned.

Even the mnemonicist Willis admits that his technique is a poor second to being literate: "Writings (I confess) are simplie the most happie keepers of any thing in memorie, and doth for speed and certaintie go beyond any art of Memorie."⁴⁷ This realisation seems to have still been novel when it was famously articulated by Johnson, in his dictum about the two kinds of knowledge. But perhaps this insight is not so much novel, as a clear truth that perpetually startles, as it confronts an unresolvable contradiction, or tension. That is, that knowledge strikes us as immaterial, and yet literature (in the broad sense, of all writing) purports to *store* knowledge, outside of any living human mind, in a way that seems independent from the human community to whom knowledge would seem to belong. Can knowledge be not known; or can there be knowledge without a knower? Clearly, not all accumulated data can be possessed in the memory of individuals; but, equally, *some* knowledge must be current, and known by human agents; and all people must know something.

Literature, I would assert, was not regarded by Johnson (or anyone else) as an artificial system of memory because it does *not* seem to distort the nature of knowledge and its acquisition in the three ways I have distinguished above. We may represent the common experience of readers as follows. Firstly, books seem to represent knowledge as we experience it, that is, as existing perpetually in a tension between isolated facts and experiences, and comprehensive systems of causes and consequences. Secondly, the world of books is a large world, and does not appear to limit our experience; like the world of nature and society, it is to be explored with a trained intuition and critical intelligence, and with curiosity and openness to the serendipitous. That is, in books we learn whilst we are searching (by "*fortuitous discoveries ... in devious walks of literature,*" as we have quoted Johnson to Warton); this is not the case with artificial systems of memory. And finally, literature maintains the nexus between knowledge and the knowing community: in dealing with books, we can for the most part feel ourselves to be dealing with other people, whose

⁴⁷ John Willis, *The Art of Memory, ...as it Dependeth Upon Places and Idea's* (London, 1621), A3v.

words we are following, and who invite our assent, our our interruption, our disagreement, and in any case our attention.

III. The Habit of Attention

Johnson's belief, which is affirmed by Beattie and the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, is that effective memory is not a matter of mastering a particular technique, but the result of what we might characterise as *an unrelenting intellectual and moral commitment to whatever people, objects or circumstances are presented to us*. This, as we have seen, he calls "the art of attention," and his coinage is taken up by Beattie and the Britannic Encyclopædists. In the *Dictionary*, Johnson gives twelve definitions of the verb *To attend*, of which the first, "To regard; to fix the mind upon," is the one relevant here, although there is something suggestive also about the second definition, "To wait on; to accompany as an inferior." The noun *attention* requires only one definition, "The act of attending or heeding; the act of bending the mind upon anything." He cites as his authorities (with Shakespeare, Bacon and Milton) two of his favourite writers, John Locke and Isaac Watts. The latter is quoted from his *Improvement of the Mind*, thus, "Attention is a very necessary thing; truth doth not always strike the soul at first sight." According to Locke, attention is the faculty by which "the ideas, that offer themselves, are taken notice of, and, as it were, registered in the memory."⁴⁸

It has been frequently observed that Locke is quoted in the *Dictionary* whenever Johnson wishes to explain human mental processes.⁴⁹ In the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke asserts that attention is necessary for all that may be dignified with the name thought: "thinking, in the propriety of the English tongue, signifies that sort of operation of the mind about its ideas wherein the mind is active; where it, with some degree of voluntary attention, considers anything" (73). Ideas — mental images — 'offer themselves' to us continually, but only when we *consciously do something* with them can we be said to be thinking. "That there are ideas, some or other, always present in the mind of a waking man, every one's experience convinces him; though the mind employs

⁴⁸ Johnson's citations are frequently silently truncated or re-arranged, as in this case. Here Locke will be quoted in his own words. Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Bk. 2, Ch. 9), 133. Parenthetical references follow in the text.

⁴⁹ For example, perceive, perceptivity, reason, to reason, retention, sensation, senseless (twice), senselessly, sensible, understanding (twice). James McLaverty says, "There are some 3,241 acknowledged citations of Locke in the *Dictionary*." McLaverty, "From Definition to Explanation," 384.

itself about them with several degrees of attention" (134). He implies that thinking and remembering are inseparable: when we attend to our ideas we can be said to both be thinking and to be 'registering' our ideas in the memory. In particular he says that 'a man' will have no "clear and distinct ideas of all the operations of his mind, and all that may be observed therein ... unless he turn his thoughts that way, and considers them *attentively*" (46). This sort of self-knowledge, the ability to consider objectively oneself and one's mental processes, is not automatic: "growing up in a constant attention to outward sensations, [most men] seldom make any considerable reflection on what passes within them till they come to be of riper years; and some scarce ever at all" (47).

Attention is not, according to Locke, the only means by which ideas are admitted to our memories: "Attention and repetition help much to the fixing any ideas in the memory: but those which naturally at first make the deepest and most lasting impression, are those which are accompanied by pleasure and pain" (80). Johnson echoed this thought in conversation when he asked,

Pray, Sir, do you ever forget what money you are worth,⁵⁰ or who gave you the last kick on your shins that you had? Now, if you would pay the same attention to what you read as you do to your temporal concerns and your bodily feelings, you would impress it as deeply in your memory.⁵¹

But for him attention remains primary — pleasure and pain are not (as Locke suggests) alternatives to attention, but means by which our attention may be commandeered; in *Idler* 74 he says, "pleasure always secures attention" (232). Before wisdom can be acquired, the attention must be wrested away from other things. Johnson's *Rasselas* begins with an acknowledgement of this, in its deliberately archaic imperative:

Ye who listen with credulity to the whispers of fancy, and pursue with eagerness the phantoms of hope; who expect that age will perform the promises of youth, and that the deficiencies of the present day will be supplied by the morrow; *attend* to the history of Rasselas prince of Abyssinia.⁵²

⁵⁰ In this vivid example, it may be that he also echoes Beattie. No old man, says Beattie, "ever forgot the place where he had deposited his money," to illustrate that even "old men are forgetful of those things only, to which they are inattentive" (*Dissertations*, 10).

⁵¹ William Seward, "Anecdotes," *Johns. Misc.* II, 308.

⁵² *Rasselas*, 7 (my emphasis).

It is an instruction as old as English literature. The first word of the first long work in what was to become English, *Beowulf*, is "Hwæt!" — "Harken! Listen! Attend!" And what this eighteenth-century *scop* offers in order to secure our attention is the same as that of the *Beowulf*-poet: a story, a pleasurable reading experience, a discourse that promises to satisfy our hunger for narrative and novelty — not a homily, but a "history."

To have our attention mainly directed towards, and therefore our memories mainly occupied by, "temporal concerns and ... bodily feelings," all those "phantoms" and "promises," is understandable, but is also to be something less than that of which human beings are capable. Feelings are in themselves undifferentiated, that is, they are not self-interpreting and offer to a rational being no guidance to behaviour. If we allow our sensations to remain independent from our meaning-making faculties, we risk seeking after sensation indiscriminately.

The imagination, which Johnson said enables us to discriminate between a Duchess and a chambermaid, is by both Beattie and Aristotle associated with memory, as both faculties are means by which images and ideas of things not present to us may occupy our minds. Aristotle, in his short text, *De Memoria et Reminiscentia*, asserts that "memory belongs ... [to] the same part of the soul as that to which imagination belongs,"⁵³ and the first chapter of Beattie's *Dissertations* is devoted to distinguishing the two. Beattie argues that memories and the ideas in which we believe are not more vivid ("lively") than what we imagine; rather, memories are distinguished by this, that "it occurs to our minds, in regard to this thing which we now remember, that we formerly heard it, or perceived it, or thought of it."⁵⁴ (He acknowledges Aristotle for this idea.)

When Boswell describes Johnson's methods in writing the essays for *The Rambler*, he speculates as to how it was possible for Johnson to have produced such dense, direct and accurate prose without great deliberation. "It can," he says,

be accounted for only in this way; that by reading and meditation, and a very close inspection of life, he had accumulated a great fund of miscellaneous knowledge, which, by a peculiar promptitude of mind, was ever ready at his call, and which he

⁵³ Aristotle on Memory, [trans. and ed.] Richard Sorabji (London: Duckworth, 1972), 49.

⁵⁴ Beattie, *Dissertations Moral and Critical*, 6.

had constantly accustomed himself to clothe his thoughts in the most apt and energetick expression.

All the terms of this explanation recall the "art of attention": *close inspection, promptitude, ready, constantly accustomed*. The same skill and attitude, Boswell realised, also was responsible for Johnson's achievements in conversation; and he follows the passage just quoted with the following:

Sir Joshua Reynolds once asked him by what means he had attained his extraordinary accuracy and flow of language. He told him, that he had early laid it down as a fixed rule to do his best on every occasion, and in every company; to impart whatever he knew in the most forcible language he could put it in; and that by constant practice, and never suffering any careless expressions to escape him, or attempting to deliver his thoughts without arranging them in the clearest manner, it became habitual to him.⁵⁵

In this account, Boswell emphasises Johnson's constant ("every occasion, ... every company, ... what ever he knew") and indeed "habitual" practice of attention. Johnson's defective eyesight, which has the potential in some ways to limit his engagement with public life, is in Boswell's opinion more than compensated for by "force of his attention and perceptive quickness," what he also calls his "habit of attention."⁵⁶ Frances Burney, who as a young woman was a shrewd observer of the elderly Johnson, makes a similar linkage between Johnson's mental and visual powers (although she reaches a different conclusion), says, "his blindness is as much the effect of absence [of mind] as of infirmity, for he sees wonderfully at times."⁵⁷ When, at the end of the *Life*, Boswell is summing up Johnson's character and claim on the attention of history, he does so in these terms:

his superiority over other learned men consisted chiefly in what may be called the art of thinking, the art of using his mind; a certain *continual power of seizing the useful substance of all that he knew*, and exhibiting it in a clear and forcible

⁵⁵ *Life* I, 203-4. March, 1750.

⁵⁶ *Life* I, 41 (1712-17); IV, 311 (16 June 1784).

⁵⁷ *Dr. Johnson and Fanny Burney*, 81 (4 Nov. 1782).

manner; so that knowledge, which we often see to be no better than lumber in men of dull understanding, was, in him, true, evident, and actual wisdom.⁵⁸

If these accounts are to be believed, Johnson's practice seems to conform exactly to the counsels of Beattie; if Johnson was not in fact the inspiration for Beattie's advice, he could easily have been cited as an appropriate model for Beattie's students. "If ... we wish to have a due regard for others, or for ourselves," Beattie advises, "let us endeavour to acquire *a habit of strict attention* at all times, and in all circumstances; of Attention, I mean, to that, whatever it is, in which we happen to be engaged."⁵⁹ Beattie argues that there are many advantages to be gained by the cultivation of such a habit, even when one is in the company of those whose "insipid prattle ... can neither instruct, nor entertain." When one finds oneself with such people, he counsels,

be attentive and civil. If you are you will contribute to their happiness, which it is your duty to do; and you will ensure their good-will, which is better than their hatred: you may, at the same time, improve yourself in benevolence and patience; you contract no evil habits of inattention; you will find entertainment in the discovery of their characters, and so enlarge your acquaintance with the human heart; and it will be strange indeed, if you do not gather something from them, which may either inform by its novelty, or divert by its singularity. (18-19)

It is clear nevertheless that he regards attention as a moral rather than an intellectual duty; "inattention," he says, "implies negligence, and negligence often proceeds from contempt." It is reasonable to suppose that for Johnson too, the cultivation of attention is not simply part of a strategy of self-improvement, but reflects his view of the natural duty owed by one rational and benevolent being to another.

Beattie's main line of argument for the developing the habit of attention is moral, although he does mention in passing its necessity if we are to have "a due regard ... for ourselves." Johnson was, at least privately, more aware of the psychological effects of attention, and what he describes is not so much continual and undifferentiated attention, as the possibility of what we might call (rather than inattention) *negative* attention. In writing to his old friend John Taylor, who has been going through a period of ill-health and mental

⁵⁸ *Life* IV, 427-28 (my emphasis). 1784.

⁵⁹ Beattie, *Dissertations*, 19.

disturbance, he says, "I had formerly great command of my attention, and what I did not like could forebear to think on."⁶⁰ If we can command our attention, we will be as well able to deliberately think on particular things as determinedly *not* to think on particular things. "[T]his power ...," he continues, "is of the highest importance to the tranquillity of life."

Johnson's second definition of "To ATTEND," "To wait on; to accompany as an inferiour," clearly refers to the duty of politeness towards superior classes in a hierarchical society. (Johnson, seeking patronage for the *Dictionary*, memorably "waited" in Chesterfield's outward rooms, and "found [his] attendance ... little encouraged."⁶¹) But a scrupulous regard for principle would insist that what is owed our social betters (or at least, what the worldly power of our social betters makes it foolish to deny them) is in fact owed to all people. Rather surprisingly, perhaps, this aspect of attention resonates with a religious figuring of attention, which we find explicitly articulated in the work of the twentieth-century philosopher and mystic Simone Weil.

In her frequently aphoristical writings, Weil constantly returns to the theme of attention, as a duty we have to all things with which we engage: people, environments, or activities. Attention, she says, is (or is the key to, or the means of) love, creativity, and prayer. In public life, within the imposed categories of social stratification, submission and dominance are enforced on the basis of what is perceived as owing to people at different social levels. Weil claims that *attention* is necessary to a recognition of *all* other people as one's "neighbours," to whom one owes — according to the second of Christ's two great commandments — a duty of love. "Not only does the love of God have attention for its substance; the love of neighbour, which we know to be the same love, is made of this same substance."⁶² Beattie may have been more practical, and slightly guarded about the mystical implications, but he says basically the same thing. Attention is not only a social virtue. Beattie says that we ought to be attentive to "whatever it is, in which we happen to be engaged," and talks very generally about "evil habits of inattention." It is not the sort of leap in either rhetoric or practice that we might at first imagine, from such practical eighteenth-century didacticism, to the assertions of Simone Weil, that "intense, pure,

⁶⁰ *Letters* I, 395 (31 August 1772).

⁶¹ The letter to Chesterfield, 7 February 1755. *Letters*, I, 95.

⁶² Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies," *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (New York: David McKay, 1977), 51.

disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention is love"⁶³ and "Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer."⁶⁴

To "pay attention" is the elementary and fundamental instruction in any learning situation. But far from being an imperative only appropriate to children, to 'pay attention' is the necessary precondition for any meaningful engagement of the uniquely human faculties with the external world. It is to at least momentarily submit to experience, or to open oneself to receive experience. Mystical experiences have been known to impose themselves on unwilling recipients, but ordinary day-to-day experiences will not be given their due, or as fully assimilated as may be otherwise, by people whose attention is elsewhere. And 'elsewhere' includes attending to oneself, and includes, furthermore, attempting to *will* oneself to attend. Attention is opposed to will; it is not, Weil asserts, "a kind of muscular effort."⁶⁵ She expands on this as follows,

I can will putting my hand flat on the table. If inner purity, inspiration, or truth of thought were necessarily associated with attitudes of this kind, they might be the object of will. As this is not the case, we can only beg for them.... What could be more stupid than to tighten up our muscles and set our jaws about virtue, or poetry, or the solution of a problem? Attention is something quite different.⁶⁶

Attention, rather, "consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the other."⁶⁷ In the act of attending, she says, "all that I call the 'I' has to be passive. Attention alone, that attention which is so full that the 'I' disappears, is required of me."⁶⁸

We may not readily associate Samuel Johnson and Simone Weil — although aspects of her character might connect with the sides of his nature that responded with warmth of feeling to Mrs. Knowles or with sympathy to Christopher Smart, or with his generosity to the English Benedictines. Genuine religious feeling he could always identify

⁶³ Weil, "Human Personality," *The Simone Weil Reader*, 333.

⁶⁴ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, intro. Gustave Thibon, trans. Arthur Willis (New York: Putnam, 1952), 170.

⁶⁵ Weil, "Reflections," 47.

⁶⁶ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 169.

⁶⁷ Weil, "Reflections," 49.

⁶⁸ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 171.

with — at least when he was actually confronted with it, rather than being asked at some distance for an authoritative pronouncement. As he made clear in his comments about Smart's madness,⁶⁹ or the Catholic beliefs with regard to purgatory, saints and the eucharist,⁷⁰ over-belief is always to be greatly preferred to under-belief. Mrs. Knowles, for all her gentleness and piety, he would argue with,⁷¹ because as a doctrinally-minimalist Quaker she would represent under-belief, and a too-easy confidence.

But under-belief is not yet scepticism. To exercise the faculty of attention, with the intensity that Simone Weil urges, may be construed as another way of saying what Johnson does when he urges us to be "in full possession of the present moment." When we attend to something, we are not concentrating on what we want to get out of the object of our attention. Attention, Weil says, "should be a looking and not an attachment,"⁷² yet it is or is a mark of *real* desire, or consent.⁷³ It is an implied affirmation of the givenness and significance of all things.

To James Beattie, the view that we cannot trust our memories to be true, or at least, that we cannot know or prove that we can trust our memories, seemed a part of the sceptical project, which as a whole tended "to harden and stupify the heart, bewilder the understanding, sour the temper, and habituate the mind to irresolution, captiousness, and falsehood."⁷⁴ Here is another aspect of Johnson's attraction to the subject of memory, and his tendency to condemn practices which he felt devalued it or contributed to its erosion. Despite the fact that more and more knowledge is not in minds but in books, and that the knowledge of "where we can find information" is ever more widely dispersed, the phenomenon of human memory, like the faculty of attention, is to be valued for its implicit critique of scepticism. If we come or return to a point in cultural evolution at which we do not possess our memories, we risk falling into a state of neither believing nor particularly disbelieving anything.

⁶⁹ "[R]ationally speaking, it is greater madness not to pray at all, than to pray as Smart did...." *Life* I, 397 (24 May 1763).

⁷⁰ Of the first of these, he says, "It is a very harmless doctrine," and the other defenses that follow are in terms of them as consistent and unobjectionable elaborations of scripture. *Life* II, 104 (26 October 1769).

⁷¹ See the long conversation at *Life* III, 284-300. 15 April 1778.

⁷² Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 174.

⁷³ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 171; "Reflections", 46.

⁷⁴ Beattie, *Essay on the Immutability of Truth. Essays* (1776), fasc. rpt. ed. Bernhard Fabian (Hildesheim /New York: Georg Olms, 1974), 141.

Johnson took careful note when he felt that he observed a state of mind like this, among the Scottish highlanders. The purported poems of Ossian clearly engage many threads of his thought, and has on his journey made inquiries relevant to them when opportunity has arisen. Reflecting on the little he has been able to discover, he says of his informants,

I do not say that they deliberately speak studied falsehood, or have a settled purpose to deceive. They have inquired and considered little, and do not always feel their own ignorance. They are not much accustomed to be interrogated by others; and seem never to have thought upon interrogating themselves; so that if they do not know what they tell to be true, they likewise do not distinctly perceive it to be false.

Mr. Boswell was very diligent in his inquiries; and the result of his investigations was, that the answer to the second question was commonly such as nullified the answer to the first.⁷⁵

Boswell and Johnson's findings are confirmed in other cultures by later researchers. Reporting the research conducted in the 1930s by Russian psychologist A.R. Luria, among illiterate Uzbeki and Kirghiz peasants, Walter Ong writes,

They were convinced that thinking other than operational thinking, that is, categorical thinking, was not important, uninteresting, trivialising.... [They] seemed not to operate with formal deductive procedures at all.⁷⁶

But this is not only a habit of mind in a society without literacy. As we noted last chapter, Johnson could not get Poll Carmichael to be *categorical*. What did she know or believe? She apparently could not say.

⁷⁵ *Journey to the Western Islands*, 97.

⁷⁶ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 52.

IV. Johnson's Practice of Memory

Johnson could afford to be dismissive of the Art of Memory because his own memory was so powerful. Boswell says that Johnson "never forgot any thing that he either heard or read" (*Life* I, 48). A strong memory is a power which seems to conquer time. To someone who does not or cannot forget, nothing is lost.

Boswell gives us many instances of Johnson's prodigious memory, and his editors — their own imaginations apparently captivated by this aspect of Johnson's abilities — have been moved to identify in the text or to add as footnotes many more.⁷⁷ Such anecdotes are consistent with the image of Johnson as a titan, of extraordinary intellectual and physical power. From the story of when he was "a child in petticoats," and memorised the Prayer Book collect for the day having no more than twice read it over (*Life* I, 40), we are told of Johnson recalling passages of text, of verse and prose, in Latin, Greek and Italian as well as English, of minor and ephemeral writing as well as significant literature, frequently after having only seen them once and briefly, often years earlier. One of the nicest of these stories is an anecdote of Langton's, in which Johnson deals with a clergyman who parodically quotes a bawdy verse:

Johnson rebuked him in the finest manner, by first shewing him that he did not know the passage he was aiming at, and thus humbling him: "Sir, that is not the song: it is thus." And he gave it right. Then looking stedfastly on him, "Sir, there is a part of that song which I should wish to exemplify in my own life:

'May I govern my passions with absolute sway!'"

(*Life* IV, 19.)

Hill gives as a note John Nichols's story of Johnson's 'Life of Rowe': "This *Life* is a very remarkable instance of the uncommon strength of Dr. Johnson's memory. When I received from him the MS. he complacently observed that the criticism was tolerably well done, considering that he had not read one of Rowe's plays for thirty years" (*Life* IV, 36 n.3). There is little (apart from the pleasure of anecdote) to be gained from rehearsing each of these in detail, but we might examine one well-documented instance, concerning a text of Johnson's as famous as any — but not, I think, from this point of view.

⁷⁷ Most of these may be found in the index to the Hill-Powell *Life*, vi, 205. To be precise, Boswell gives six anecdotes of Johnson's memory in the *Life* and the *Tour*, Malone points out another, Hill adds a further three in the notes, and Powell in the Index identifies a further five stories in Boswell's text as examples of Johnson's extraordinary memory (and omits a further story identified by Hill in the 1st edn. of the index).

For the satisfaction of the curious, Johnson twice dictated from memory copies of his letter to Lord Chesterfield, firstly to Guiseppe Baretti, then, some years later, to Boswell. The original of the letter has not been seen since Chesterfield brazenly showed it off to visitors, pointing out its most pungent passages. Boswell had for some time asked Johnson about the contents of the letter, but he had mislaid Baretti's version among his papers. Johnson finally dictated a text to Boswell on 4 June 1781 (*Life* IV, 128). Later, Baretti's version (with Johnson's handwritten corrections) surfaced, and was given by Johnson to Bennett Langton. Boswell used his version when in 1790 he published the letter separately, as a taster for the *Life*.⁷⁸ When he came to publish the *Life*, he used the Baretti copy, which he had by then also secured (*Life* I, 260-63). Boswell tells us that the variations between the two versions are "slight," but it was not possible for scholars to compare them until Boswell's copy emerged from his papers at Yale.⁷⁹ When the two texts are compared, it appears that there are between them a total of twenty-two phrasal or verbal differences, thirteen of them differences of a single word.⁸⁰ None of them could be called anything other than a minor variation. What is particularly impressive is that the structure of the paragraphs, indeed, the rhythms of the sentences, are exactly the same in both versions. This emphatically demonstrates both the power of Johnson's memory, and that his memory for text is deeply grounded in a strong feeling for verbal rhetoric, based on its aural resonance and its mirroring the movements of his mind.

The aural resonance of language is of course greatly magnified when we are dealing with texts in verse. Talking with Boswell and Goldsmith of the composition of verse, Johnson said,

When composing, I have generally had them [the verses] in my mind, perhaps fifty at a time, walking up and down in my room; and then I have written them down,

⁷⁸ See Fleeman, *Bibliography of Samuel Johnson* I, 1726 (item 88.31/3).

⁷⁹ Boswell says that "I have deposited both the copies in the British Museum" (*Life* I, 263 n.2). Powell found the Baretti version there, but not Boswell's (*Life* I, App. G, 540). In the final stages of preparing his 1952 edition of Johnson's *Letters*, R.W. Chapman was able to see the Boswell version, and the printer's copy made from it, and describes them in a preface (xxxi-xxxv). (There remain problems with this history. There is no entry in Boswell's journals for the date on which he says Johnson dictated his copy of the letter; the version in the published journal, *Laird of Auchinleck*, is taken from the first draft of the *Life*. The dictation of the letter is not mentioned. Furthermore, the journal account of Boswell's receiving Baretti's version from Langton, and the mentions of the letter prior to this, give no suggestion that he has a copy already, and show his strong interest in those people—Boswell, Adams, Jephson, who had been admitted to what he might feel to be something of a secret. See *Applause of the Jury*, 244-45, 321, 322.)

⁸⁰ Twenty of these variations are to be seen in Redford's edition of Johnson's letters. Marshall Waingrow notes two more in his edition of the MS. of the *Life*. See *Letters* I, 94-7 (7 February 1755). See James Boswell's *Life of Johnson: An Edition of the Original Manuscript* (v. 1), ed. Marshall Waingrow (Edinburgh and New Haven: Edinburgh U.P./Yale U.P., 1994), 444 (notes 14 to p. 188, and 3 to p. 189).

and often, from laziness, have written only half lines. I have written a hundred lines in a day. I remember I wrote a hundred lines of "The Vanity of Human Wishes" in a day.⁸¹

The Yale editors of his *Poems* comment,

The rough draft of the poem, now in the Hyde Collection, bears out this statement with the utmost exactness: the first half of each line is in a different ink from the second half; evidently Johnson knew that the rime words would keep the second halves in mind.⁸²

Milton could not have used such a procedure, because blank verse offers no such clues to the memory of the reader or the writer.

We noted in Chapter Two Johnson's objections to blank verse, as a pedantic and academic form of writing, requiring "tumid and gorgeous" diction to compensate the reader for spurning the pleasure of rhyme. It is time to focus on another aspect of his aversion to blank verse, which might be regarded as a Johnsonian quirk or prejudice, but is in fact deeply grounded in his extra-literary values. To put it briefly, blank verse, Johnson believes, makes insufficient allowance for human weakness, for the materiality of the human condition. It is in these terms that he takes up the argument with Milton. "'Rhyme,' he [Milton] says, and says truly, 'is no necessary adjunct of true poetry.' But perhaps of *poetry as a mental operation* metre or musick is no necessary adjunct...."⁸³ Yes, Johnson says, poetry — if we consider it in some de-humanised and purely intellectual form — does not need rhyme, nor verbal music, nor even metre. But whilst poetry is written by, and for the pleasure of, embodied beings, it ought to partake of the fundamental conditions of their existence and experience. Milton he is content to treat as an exception, whose inimitable subject matter seems to excuse him from such (literally) mundane considerations: "He that thinks himself capable of astonishing may write blank verse, but those that hope only to please must condescend to rhyme."⁸⁴ But under normal

⁸¹ *Life* II, 15, 9 March 1766.

⁸² Editorial note, "The Vanity of Human Wishes," *Poems*, 90-91. The illustration, facing p. 98 in this edition, confirms this clearly enough.

⁸³ 'Milton,' *Lives* I, 192 (my emphasis).

⁸⁴ 'Milton,' *Lives* I, 194.

circumstances, the particular pleasure that poetry gives is that of a sensual, aural experience. Johnson rejects the notion of "poetry as a mental operation," and continues,

it is however by the *musick of metre* that poetry has been discriminated in all languages, and in languages melodiously constructed ... metre is sufficient.... [But t]he musick of the English heroick line *strikes the ear* so faintly that it is easily lost, unless all the syllables of every line co-operate together; this co-operation can be only obtained by the preservation of every verse unmingled with another as a distinct system of sounds, and this distinctness is obtained and preserved by the artifice of rhyme.⁸⁵

We quoted in Chapter Two Johnson's identification of the pleasure of verse: "The great pleasure of verse arises from the known measure of the lines and uniform structure of the stanzas, by which the voice is regulated, and the memory relieved."⁸⁶ The combination of metre and rhyme in traditional verse creates an aural pattern which lodges in the memory, whereas "[b]lack verse left merely to its numbers has little operation either on the ear or mind."⁸⁷ (Obviously, the same would apply in spades to 'free verse,' a phenomenon which Johnson did not live to see.) Verse is a device, as Johnson pictures it, which gives pleasure by testing and stimulating the memory. It is a verbal machine which produces a rapid succession of curiosity and satisfaction, an agreeable balance of comforting regularity and enticing distraction. Too much regularity and predictability, and readers will be bored, too much variety and distraction and readers will seek out something less mentally demanding.

It might not be irrelevant to note that de Certeau observes, in passing, that "the rules of meter and rhyme for poets" ("of earlier times," he adds) are "a body of constraints stimulating new discoveries, a set of rules with which improvisation plays."⁸⁸ That poetry is created he reads as an illustration of how "the ruling order serves as a support for innumerable productive activities." Blank verse, and certainly free verse, may then be read as signs of an abrogation of everyday, tactical activity.

⁸⁵ 'Milton,' *Lives* I, 192 (my emphasis).

⁸⁶ 'Cowley,' *Lives* I, 47.

⁸⁷ 'Roscommon,' *Lives* I, 237.

⁸⁸ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xxii.

The less there is in a text to please or interest the readers, the more their patience to read at all will be worn down by mere length. Tedium is, as we have seen in Chapter Seven, the worst of all possible faults of literature, and Johnson feels blank verse to be constantly at risk of falling into it. Of Shenstone he observes, "[h]is blank verses, those that can read them may probably find to be like the blank verses of his neighbours."⁸⁹ So, all blank verse is, he suggests, very much the same; and by "those that can read them" he means 'those who can endure the tedium of reading them,' as is made clear in a later 'Life,' when he aims another blast at blank verse: "the disgust which blank verse, encumbering and encumbered, super-adds to an unpleasing subject, soon repels the reader, however willing to be pleased."⁹⁰

Tedium makes us feel that everyday life is unimportant; and the expectation that people ought happily to endure tedium implies that everyday life is unimportant. The faculty of memory (and each person's own memory, full of their own individual or communal memories) functions for Johnson as the register that daily life is important, as the theatre for action which is never without moral significance. He objects to blank verse because it accustoms readers to more tedium than is necessary, and for no better reason than the writer indulging his or her own arrogance or laziness.⁹¹ Verse that is memorable, on the other hand, stimulates the mind to remember, and embodies an implication that we ought to be alert to the significance and memorability of passing experience. The fact that, in a society with its traditions increasingly embodied in literature, people nevertheless have innumerable texts — long rhyming poems, pointed aphorisms, funny, moving or uplifting stories — clattering about in their memories, represents the historical continuity of society and in Johnson's view substitutes for the bonds of oral community.

⁸⁹ 'Shenstone,' *Lives* III, 358.

⁹⁰ 'Dyer,' *Lives* III, 346. (This might remind us of Johnson's describing Milton's *Lycidas*, because it is a pastoral, as "easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting." *Lives* I, 163.)

⁹¹ "Milton, ... finding blank verse easier than rhyme, was desirous of persuading himself that it is better" ('Milton,' *Lives* I, 192). According to Percival Stockdale, Johnson said that Pope knew he lied when he claimed he found it easier to translate the *Iliad* into rhyme than blank verse ('Pope,' *Lives* III, 238 n.3).

V. Recollecting the future

It may be more instructive for us to project Johnson's doubts and anxieties not into his past, but into our future. We are authorised to do so by currents in Johnson's thought. In the past, the distinction between *knowledge* as the human faculty for knowing, and in the sense of 'that which is known,' has been notional but not practical. They are rather tangled in Johnson's *Dictionary*; he gives as the primary meanings, "1. Certain perception; indubitable apprehension. 2. Learning; illumination of the mind," followed by, "4. Acquaintance with any fact or person. 5. Cognisance; notice." Our dependence as a society upon knowledge (or at least, data), mediated to human users through increasingly complex and invasive information technologies, is making this distinction into a divorce.

A post-literate society is not or will not be the same as a pre-literate society. A post-literate society is not a society in which oral culture will somehow have been magically re-established: "what is once forgotten is lost for ever." What is inclined to being 'once forgotten' in a literate society is not so much particular information, as the knowledge that such information exists, and what the use of it is. If, as Plato suggests in the *Phaedrus*, writing tends to abolish memory, what happens to a society when globalised media abolishes reading and writing? It may be that a society which forgets, not exactly *how* to read, but simply *to* read, will not suddenly remember how to remember, much less remember *what* to remember. Who then will know "the great rules of life"?

There are implications of this line of thought not only for the destiny of the 'data' that we have hitherto privileged by the appellation 'knowledge,' but also for the human capacities which have hitherto been occupied with the acquisition, preservation, study and application of this material. What history (or in an oral society, tradition) represents in the life of the community, memory seems in Johnson's view to signify in the life of an individual. In *Rambler* 41 (III, 223), Johnson tells us that "Memory is the purveyor of reason," and that it "may be said to place us in the class of moral agents." This is in essence the same idea as later thinkers have expressed in different language. "Human memory," says Theodore Roszak, "is the invisible psychic adhesive that holds our identity together from moment to moment."⁹² Memory is not a faculty that we utilise on particular occasions; far from being concerned only with the past, memory is always present and active. It is not events that we remember, but who we are, our everyday life.

⁹² Theodore Roszak, *The Cult of Information: The Folklore of Computers and the True Art of Thinking* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 1986), 96-97.

As Agnes Heller says, "the unity of personality has always been constituted in and by everyday life."⁹³ The "memory" of a computer, Roszak goes on to argue, only resembles the human memory by a loose metaphor. The differences between memory and the data storage capacities of computers bring into play a distinction which is central to Johnson's thinking about memory.

Johnson's anxieties about memory do not concern our ability to retrieve particular information in response to specific instruction, but knowledge being present when needed. It is a distinction that Johnson emphasised; we recall one of his better known remarks on the subject of memory, from *Rambler* 2 (III, 14): "men more frequently require to be reminded than informed"; that is, to have knowledge that we already possess brought back to active awareness. Johnson, Boswell relates, maintained,

that forgetfulness was a man's own fault. "To remember and to recollect (said he) are different things. A man has not the power to recollect what is not in his mind; but when a thing is in his mind he may remember it." The remark was occasioned by my leaning back on a chair, which a little before I had perceived to be broken, and pleading forgetfulness as an excuse. "Sir, (said he,) its being broken was certainly in your mind."⁹⁴

Johnson's language here is not clear, or perhaps Boswell has not quite grasped the distinction he is making. It seems at first that Johnson could with equal clarity have used the same word (either remember or recollect) in both places. The distinction which he seems to be emphasising is that between recovering to immediate awareness and utility something that is in one's mind, and not recovering it until after events have prompted its recall. Boswell does not claim never to have known about the chair: he has recalled knowing about the defect and so has not now *completely* forgotten it. But he has failed to *recollect* it, that is, to have the fact accessible to his awareness at the moment it is required; although when he is reminded about it by the chair toppling under him, he can readily recollect the fact. This is the distinction with which Johnson commences his rebuke. Johnson fears Boswell to be implying that the knowledge has somehow dropped of its own accord out of his memory. Rather, the problem, as Johnson insists on characterising it, is that Boswell failed to give the chair's fault sufficient *attention* when it

⁹³ Heller, *Everyday Life*, 7.

⁹⁴ *Life* IV, 126-27. 3 June 1781.

first came to his awareness. His failure to recollect was a result of his original failure to attend. He pursues the same argument in *Idler* 74. His assurance that few people have truly deficient memories, does not turn out to be as encouraging as it might seem in isolation, for he shifts the blame for failures of memory from the mere mechanics of the faculty itself, to the "culpable inattention" and "want of ... diligence" of its subject.⁹⁵

Boswell's confusion may be simply that both these phenomena have the one antonym. 'To forget' is both to fail to remember (that is, to store the information in one's memory) and to fail to recollect (that is, to recover information to conscious awareness at the appropriate time or given the appropriate prompt). In the *Dictionary*, the order of these are reversed:

To *FORGET*.

1. To lose memory of; to let go from the remembrance.
2. Not to [n.b.] attend; to neglect.

In *Idler* No. 44, Johnson says that the two tasks of the memory are to collect, that is, to accumulate images, and to distribute, that is, to produce images for use. To 'distribute' here is what he also calls to recollect. We have already seen the distinction made by Plato, "What you have discovered [i.e., writing] is a receipt for recollection, not for memory." It is the basis of Aristotle's *De Memoria et Reminiscentia*. Fundamental to memory, says Aristotle, is that a memory seems to be inseparable from the knowledge that is not a present perception or theorizing, but a true recollection of our own past experience; "For whenever someone is actively engaged in remembering, he always says in his soul in this way that he heard, or perceived, or thought this before."⁹⁶ It operates by a combination of the faculties of perception (which we share with other species), but with a peculiarly human awareness of the passing of time. Memory does not, however, depend upon powers of judgment or intellect, but it does depend upon a certain undisturbed depth of experience into which memories may be imprinted.

We can remember continuously, as it were, without having to recollect. We do not always recollect: we can learn the same thing, meet the same person, twice. No other animal recollects, because recollecting is a kind of reasoning: we know we had such-and-

⁹⁵ *Idler* 74; 230.

⁹⁶ *Aristotle on Memory*, 48.

such an experience, and conduct a sort of search for our memories of it. As Beattie wrote, "Brutes have memory, but of recollection they seem to be incapable; for this requires rationality, and the power of contemplating and arranging our thoughts."⁹⁷ A good memory does not simply store information, but is able to produce it (without being asked) when required. No one doubts that cultural knowledge is now being safely encoded, byte by byte, into data storage devices around the globe (although the hysteria surrounding the rumours of the "Y2K" problem indicated an anxiety on that subject too). These data-bases may outlive the human species — which is a somewhat ambiguously comforting thought. What is less certain is the availability, the presentness, of knowledge when it is relevant to unanticipated future circumstances. The slowly and constantly accumulated and re-ordered intellectual product of experience that we call *wisdom* needs to ferment in a living mind, rather than to gather cosmic dust in an electronic archive.

On the brink of a new millennium, western society is moving, it seems inexorably, beyond reading and writing, towards a state in which all cultural knowledge is theoretically *retrievable*, but at the cost of all knowledge having been archived. At a time when knowledge has never been more owned — in a commercial sense — it is increasingly not 'owned' in the contemporary psychological sense. Even the customary cultural repositories of knowledge — libraries and universities — are succumbing to the (hardly disinterested) commercial and technological pressure to let the past look after itself. An executive of the Ford Motor Company (whose founder famously said, "History is more or less bunk"), can assert, "If you're not replacing everything you know every three years, then your career is going to turn sour" — and be thought to be making a serious contribution to the debate about the public funding of higher education.⁹⁸ Such talk is presumably aimed to panic anyone considering the pursuit of, say, literature, history or philosophy, subjects which will not require their students constantly to buy new "information" to re-outfit or make-over their mental equipment, from the corporate purveyors of data (which are of course increasingly indistinguishable from car manufacturers). It takes merely a moment's thought to identify the brutal and bullying aspects of such an idea, and to realise that, of course, anyone who replaces everything they know every three years will remain forever, and at best, a three year-old. But whatever its credentials, this view is one in which knowledge is thought to no longer need custodians. That is to say, knowledge is imagined to be available, but it is not present; it is possessed but not known.

⁹⁷ Beattie, *Elements*, 92.

⁹⁸ Louis Ross, quoted in Fiona Stewart, "Liberal arts are way of the future," *The Australian* (25 July 2000), 13.

Sensing these developments, de Certeau emphasises memory as a vital constituent of the everyday. Memory always concerns that which is *not* present: "Memory comes from somewhere else, it is outside of itself, it moves things about."⁹⁹ People without memory, like infants, with their rootedness in immediate sensation, are able to be accurately located. If they live in an evolved society with developed institutions of power, they are able to be exploited. Memory, de Certeau says, "sustains itself by *believing* in the existence of possibilities and by vigilantly awaiting them" (87). Possibility, that is, rather than inevitability; to engineer an acceptance (preferably a joyful acceptance) of inevitability is the strategy of an institution of power. Thus, only a person or a society with memory is capable of change. Johnson observes in *Rambler* 41 (III, 222) that animals, without memory, "seem always to be fully employed, or to be completely at ease without employment." Before we are tempted to imagine that this sounds like the ideal life ("what being could enjoy greater felicity?"), he points out what must be obvious, that they have "few intellectual miseries or pleasures, and ... no exuberance of understanding to lay out upon curiosity or caprice." Their 'culture' does not develop: a nest, he says, is built by instinct, but a ship (or, he might have added, a book: "many men in devious walks of literature") by collective knowledge, passed down and ever improved. Only people with a memory have a history; as de Certeau says, "Its [memory's] foreignness makes possible a transgression of the law of place" (85).

The vision of the future promoted by information technocrats and Ford executives is nothing like the everyday intimacy of relationship that Johnson advocates and seems to live in, with regard to the life of the senses and the mind. Our knowledge, of the import of the name Sir Isaac Newton, or of the "great rules of life," should not be shut up in books unless there are clear passages of memory to and from the everyday world of orality. The coherence of human society as well as human personality depends upon memory. Lawrence Lipking, discussing Johnson's attraction to Goldsmith's poem, *The Traveller*, says "the national memory depends upon holding interests in common.... Memory is the ultimate social tie."¹⁰⁰ Johnson found such thoughts about memory and orality in *Locke on Education*, and quoted him in the *Dictionary*, under *primer*: "The Lord's Prayer, the creed and ten commandments he should learn by heart, not by reading them himself in his *primer*, but by somebody's repeating them before he can read." The knowledge — whatever it may comprise — that tells us who we are, and from whence we

⁹⁹ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 87. Parenthetical references to follow.

¹⁰⁰ Lipking, *Samuel Johnson*, 286.

have come, should not be hidder away in data-bases, whether it be the *Britannica Online* or the Human Genome Project, but it must be imbibed with our mothers' milk, and circulate in our arts and conversation, in our breath and our pulse.

HEART.

8. Memory.

We call the committing of a thing to memory the getting it by *heart*; for it is the memory that must transmit it to the heart; and it is in vain to expect that the heart should keep its hold of any truth, when the memory has let it go.

South.

We are not surprised to find Johnson, despite living in a house full of books, nonetheless making a written resolution, "To treasure in my mind passages for recollection."¹⁰¹ Memory may survive the advent of History, that is, the writing down of the tradition, but the end of History will certainly also be in some important sense the end of memory.

¹⁰¹ *Diaries*, 82 (18 September 1764).

EPILOGUE

Johnson's Lists of Resolutions

I. Johnson's Journals

We began our overview of Johnson's everyday with a text which has for generations seemed to readers of literature to convey a stronger sense of everyday life than perhaps any other book; but we have emphasised too that it is a text which Johnson did not exactly make, or at least made in collaboration, and was not aware of himself making. His relationship to what has come down to us as his conversation cannot be called authorship. We have considered the type of discourse of which most of his written works are composed, which he made habitually, but which achieves a type of generic invisibility, and for which literary studies has no agreed name. We have looked at his most visible book, a book in which the author is scarcely visible, and the bulk of which is written by many other writers. We have considered the pseudo-fragmentary style of texts to which he was himself most attracted. In the appendix are considered the almost one hundred books to which he staked some sort of an authorial claim, but never started writing. We end now with a text which he was writing, literally writing, all his life and with his life, and which could only have remained unfinished.

Whilst Johnson produced works such as the huge and highly visible *Dictionary*, he also wrote many texts which have varying degrees of invisibility. His *Designs* is only just above the level of visibility, and it represents dozens of paratexts with no textual existence. In concluding my account of Johnson's textual transactions with the everyday, I want to make visible and intelligible another text and a kind of text that is not usually read or identified. This text is buried in the compilation that is called his *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*. This volume itself made of dozens of different — often generically different — documents, some major, and some the merest scraps. There are more or less formal journals, made on a day-by-day basis, a portion of autobiographical memoir (the *Annals*), written prayers, memoranda and accounts. There are also throughout these materials a number of lists of resolutions.

His resolutions are emblematic of his practice as a journal-keeper. That is to say, among them we find frequently reiterated the resolution to keep a regular journal. Despite his failure to keep a regular journal (or perhaps stimulated by his inability to subject himself to

the discipline of such a routine), he used the private journal mode of writing, in its introspective and self-regulatory function. Johnson made his notes to himself particularly when his determination to keep a journal was reinforced by some external pressure. His resolutions both record his failure as a journal keeper, and represent the little he achieved.

The external pressures to which he was almost always responsive were major liturgical days and his own personal anniversaries. It is impossible to make precise calculations, given the unsystematic nature of Johnson's journal-keeping, and the haphazard state of the documentary preservation. Nevertheless, we may draw some conclusions about Johnson's mental habits, on the basis of the approximately 662 days of his life on which he made a prayer or some note to himself which has survived.¹ If we exclude from this number the entries that occur in particular diaries kept for extraordinary purposes — his travel diaries and that of his final illness² — there are 445 entries remaining. Of these, 103 entries occur on anniversaries,³ and 18 as response to some other event or change in his life.⁴ That is, 27% of Johnson's prayers or journal entries have this 'occasional' character; they represent the intersection of his life with the passing of public time, and the sense of his own life passing into history. Sometimes, too, the keeping for a few days of a regular journal commences only after one of these events draws his attention again to the perceived duty of keeping an account of his days. His fragmentary private papers are not, like Boswell's journals, an indiscriminate celebration of the everyday.

In the Yale volume of Johnson's *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, the resolution to keep a journal occurs eight times. Boswell says Johnson told him "that he had twelve or fourteen times attempted to keep a journal of his life, but never could persevere."⁵ He recommended

¹ These calculations could with greater effort be made more precise, but I feel there is little point to dealing more systematically with this material. There is no way of telling how much of such material has been lost, or was destroyed by Johnson himself. Some days Johnson made a number of entries (especially, one before retiring after midnight on New Year's Day, and another later after getting up). Often he made retrospective entries, of varying degrees of accuracy. I hope that my calculations are useful and my conclusions valid in any case.

² I count 72 day's entries in Johnson's North Wales diary, 28 in the Paris diary, and 117 in his "Aegri Ephemeris." I exclude them because travel is an escape from the everyday and travel writing a species of 'occasional' writing. (Twentieth-century novelists, such as Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene, began their writing careers by taking trips in a deliberate ploy to secure an ongoing supply of material to write about, while learning their craft and establishing their reputations.) The "sick man's journal" (written in Latin, and concentrating entirely on his medical condition) is also generically distinct from a regular daily journal.

³ Such as New Year's Day, his birthday, Easter, or the anniversary of his wife's death.

⁴ Such as leaving on a trip, learning of a death, undertaking some new project, suffering a medical trauma. Or when, on 22 July 1773 (*Diaries*, 157), he made an entry in a particular notebook simply because he happened to locate it.

⁵ *Life* II, 217. 11 April 1773.

the practice to others, and his advice is particularly recorded by Boswell, anxious to gather Johnson's authorisation for (at least one of) his own over-powering inclinations.

He recommended to me to keep a journal of my life, full and unreserved. He said it would be a very good exercise, and would yield me great satisfaction when the particulars were faded from my remembrance.... He counselled me to keep it private, and said I might surely have a friend who would burn it in case of my death.⁶

Johnson himself "burnt large masses" of diary and other personal writing before his death (*Life* IV, 405), but Boswell chose to differ from his master in this matter. After recording in his journal his gratification with this advice, Boswell assures the journal that his affection for it is such that the very idea of it being burnt rather shocks him.

This is understandable, as their approaches to journal-keeping could hardly be more different. Johnson's journals ought to be burnt, because they have no purpose other than as part of a strategy of self-management. On another occasion he told Boswell,

The great thing to be recorded, (said he), is *the state of your own mind*; and you should write down every thing that you remember, for you cannot judge at first what is good or bad; and write immediately while the impression is fresh, for it will not be the same a week afterwards....⁷

Boswell's journals are constantly self-dramatising, in a way that Johnson's never are; they aim to *portray* him, to an imaginary audience, vaguely figured as his own future self or his remote descendants. He is, in his journals, a living figure in a richly detailed social environment. Boswell rejoices to depict himself in his journals as proud, amiable, bold and free, good-humoured, lively, thoughtful and gay, firm and gay and sound, and so on. He announces, for example, "I was rather too singular. Why not? I am in reality an original character. Let me moderate and cultivate my originality." Later he cries out to himself, with astonished fascination, "What a singular being do I find myself! Let this journal show what variety my

⁶ *Life* I, 433. 14 July 1763. (In the account in his *London Journal*, 305, Boswell gives vent to his satisfaction, "O my journal! art thou not highly dignified? Shalt thou not flourish tenfold? No former solicitations or censures [such as from his father] could tempt me to lay thee aside; and now is there any argument which can outweigh the sanction of Mr. Samuel Johnson?")

⁷ *Life* II, 217. 11 April 1773.

mind is capable of."⁸ There is nothing we could even remotely call a depiction of himself in Johnson's journals, in which on one occasion he resolves, by contrast with Boswell, "[t]o avoid all singularity."⁹

Johnson likes the idea of a journal which depicts everyday life, and enjoys reading such accounts, but he cannot invest the task of making such a work as being (to him) of any real existential importance. On a third occasion, Boswell records Johnson's advice to him, as follows, "He again advised me to keep a journal fully and minutely, but not to mention such trifles as, that meat was too much or too little done, or that the weather was fair or rainy."¹⁰ We know what he means. People without the talent for such writing keep journals in which ordinary variations such as the weather are highlighted ("12th: Rainy. 13th: More rain. 14th: Some sun. 15th: Rain," etc.), to the exclusion of what is — like the weather — ever various and unpredictable, but is — unlike the weather — curious, entertaining and useful: human behaviour. As we have seen in Chapter One, Johnson was amused by what he read of Boswell's journal. When Lord Monboddo said in conversation with Johnson, "The history of manners is the most valuable," Johnson agreed and added, "therefore I esteem biography, as giving us what comes near to ourselves, what we can *turn to use*."¹¹

Johnson's journal is writing 'turned to use;' turned, that is, to *his own* use. It is an instrument, rather like a surgical tool, by which he probes tender and troublesome places in his own soul. Jeremy Taylor, a writer whose works Johnson knew well,¹² in his classic *Holy Living and Holy Dying*, advises the reader to set aside "solemn time" in which to "make up his accounts, renew his vows, make amends for his carelessness," and also, "before we sleep, every night ... [to] examine the actions of the past day with a particular scrutiny."¹³ Taylor does not counsel that these things be performed in writing; but for Johnson, who found it helpful and natural to address his prayers to God in writing, as if they were letters, writing would be the obvious means by which to keep accounts, to vow, to examine himself, and so

⁸ *Boswell on the Grand Tour: Germany and Switzerland, 1764*, 28 (20 July 1764), 296 (29 December 1764). Such examples could be found in many other places in Boswell's journals.

⁹ *Diaries*, 97 (October 1765). Further references, when frequent, will be included parenthetically in the text.

¹⁰ *Life* II, 358. 14 April 1775.

¹¹ *Life* V, 79 (my emphasis). *Tour*, 21 August.

¹² On 11 June 1784, he discussed him with Boswell (*Life* IV, 294). In Johnson's library were three editions of Taylor's *Polemical Discourses* (1674), and his *Ductor Dubitantium: or, The Rule of Conscience* (1676); see *SJL*. There are good reasons to believe he had read this part of *Holy Living*, as we shall see.

¹³ Taylor, *Holy Living and Dying*, 10, 11.

on. He follows, at a distance, a seventeenth-century Puritan tradition, which is somewhat at odds with aspects of his nature, but to which he was obviously strongly drawn.¹⁴

The true secular journal writer, like Boswell, responds to the day purely in terms of his own direct experience of what happened in it. Johnson is of an entirely different temper: he is responsive instead to the communally observed and historical identity of the day, to the *date* rather than to the day and its particular contents. He is drawn to his journal on such days, because the identity of such a day is for him a reminder of what the day *ought* to be like. Any day, by this reckoning, is an occasion (like a birthday) on which to give thanks for his life, or (like the anniversary of his wife's death) on which to remember prayerfully those who have loved him, or (like Christmas and Easter) on which to recall events in the history of salvation, or (like New Year) on which to examine his life, or (like every Sunday) on which to worship God. We do not *give* our days meaning by what or how much we are able to do (or to record) about them. Our days *have* meaning, which we either observe or neglect. Even in the de-regulated economy of postmodern societies, when the shops and casinos are always open, Christmas is always Christmas; and for a man who keeps track of such things, the anniversary of his wife's death is never just a day like any other. That days such as these are "kept" signifies the operation of active and deliberately renewed powers of memory, which functions communally as the cement of society, and in the life of the individual as a point of reference and coherence.

II. A Summary of Johnson's Resolutions

There are thirty or more occasions of resolution preserved in the *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, spanning over thirty years of Johnson's life until shortly before his death. We could see his lists of resolutions as comparable to successive editions of a periodical, or else as the one text which he was constantly in the process of revising. On some occasions he would make only one resolution, but frequently the act of recording a resolution seems to set in motion a drive to further resolution. We can see again the importance for him of the lay-out of text on the page. His resolutions are carefully set apart from his prose, indicating a less prosaic, more deliberate, regulatory and business-like mode of thought. No sooner has he written, "My purpose is" (73, 308), "I resolve" (82), "I purpose" (93) or some equivalent, than he starts a new line, mentally anticipating that any one resolution will inevitably lead to a list of

¹⁴ On this tradition, see Sherman, *Telling Time*, 49 ff.

resolutions, which the constant waywardness of his life and routines seems to demand. On one occasion, he writes his resolutions in prose, but only because he recognises the futility of seeming to be too deliberate, prefacing a number of the usual items with the words, "My hope is, for resolution I dare no longer call it..." (160).

There is far more repetition between the lists than there is introduction of new matters, and it is therefore not too difficult to group identical or similar resolutions together, to arrive at a list which represents something like a final copy. If the lists of resolutions were some other form of text, their constant revision would ideally lead to some such conclusion as this. The following, then, is a summary and pastiche of his resolutions, listed in order of their frequency of occurrence.¹⁵

1. To rise early, or earlier, at six or eight, or at least in the morning, and in order to do so, to regulate my sleep (24).
2. To study or read methodically the Scriptures, some part each week, particularly on Sundays, or the whole over a year, sometimes in the original languages, perhaps with commentaries (19).
3. To be diligent, and avoid Idleness, to waste less time, to work as I can (14).
4. To study books of Divinity (speculative or practical), Theology, the Christian religion, the Evidences of Christianity (10).
5. To go to Church, frequently and regularly; to worship God diligently in public, every Sunday, perhaps twice (9).
6. To keep a journal, both of employment and expenses (8).
7. To combat, conquer, drive out or resist vain or needless scruples (including about Comedy); to combat notions of obligation (7).

¹⁵ Whilst there is a slightly arbitrary aspect to this (some resolutions could be fitted into other categories, some categories could be amalgamated, or further divided), the list seems to me meaningful and useful. There are, of course, other expressions of intention. But Johnson usually distinguishes his resolutions by his setting out, and this is what I have followed.

8. To apply to study or my studies, for four hours, or eight hours, or some proper portion of each day (6).
9. To write particular works — a History of the War, the History of Memory, a History of his Melancholy, The Arguments for Christianity, A book of Prayers (5).
10. To live temperately, methodically, or by some scheme (5).
11. To reclaim imagination, to reject sensual images, to avoid loose or idle thoughts, to repel sinful thoughts, to excite in myself such a desire of pleasing God as should suppress all other passions (5).
12. To examine the tenour of my life, to review my life and former resolutions, especially those made at Tetty's death (4).
13. To put my books, or rooms, or books in particular rooms, in order (4).
14. Resolutions about behaviour at Church (3).
15. To drink less wine or strong liquour (2).
16. To set down each day a plan for the day following (2).
17. To keep accounts (2).
18. To do good, to set aside something for charity (2).
19. To serve and trust God & be cheerful (2).
20. To take the sacrament at least three times a year (2).
21. (On Sundays,) To use some extraordinary devotion in the morning (1).
22. (On Sundays,) To wear off by meditation any worldly soil contracted in the week (1).
23. (On Sundays,) To instruct my family (1).
24. To treasure in my mind passages for recollection (1).
25. To care for my health, by various means such as washing (1).
26. To avoid all singularity (1).
27. To be temperate in food (1).

Some of these are merely momentary ideas (the History of Memory), some responses to particular circumstances (to eat or drink less). Others we must see as matters of permanent concern. The character of this list may be made more apparent by a further summary into categories, as follows (with each category beginning with a note of the total number of occasions on which the resolutions occur).

Religious duties (45)

- 2. read bible
- 4. study divinity
- 5. go to church
- 14. behaviour at church
- 20. sacrament
- 21. devotion
- 23. instruct family

Strategies for management of time (38)

- 1. rise early
- 6. keep a journal
- 12. examine life, review resolutions
- 16. plan each day

General management of time (19)

- 3. avoid idleness
- 10. live by a scheme

Regulation of the mind (14)

- 7. combat scruples
- 11. reclaim imagination
- 22. meditation
- 24. recollection

Professional duties (11)

- 9. write
- 8. study

Domestic duties (6)

- 13. order his rooms or books
- 17. keep accounts

Social duties (5)

- 18. charitable works
- 19. serve and be cheerful
- 26. avoid singularity

Personal habits (4)

- 15. drink
- 25. washing
- 27. food

Whilst specifically religious (in the narrow sense of devotional) duties are a large part of the list, the two categories concerning the management of time, taken together, represent more than a third of the total number of the resolutions I have included. This ought not to be surprising, as we have seen that it is, according to Michel de Certeau, through the tactical use of time that individuals experience the everyday life in which we locate the sense of our own power and identity.

The frequency with which Johnson resolves to get up earlier (§1) is almost slightly pathetic, and we might well conclude that he has allied himself to a particular tradition of piety that, however admirable, was not designed for people of his temperament, or for freelance writers living in the metropolis. As Sarah Jordan points out, Johnson was a late riser because he usually went late to bed, and he put off going to bed until the small hours because "chronic insomnia frequently [kept] him from sleeping."¹⁶ Yet his resolutions indicate that he saw getting up early, or earlier, or by a particular time as the key to a life of pious orderliness. Although he once aimed for six in the morning (82), usually it is eight,¹⁷ and on New Year's Day 1772, he had only sufficient ambition to resolve, "[t]o rise in the morning" (146); that is, rather than after noon. On one occasion, he comments on his "purpose to rise at eight," that although eight is not early, "it will be much earlier than I now rise, for I often lye till two" (92-3). For someone who for a time carried the verse, "The night cometh [when no man can work]" (John 10:4) engraved in Greek upon the dial-plate of his pocket-watch,¹⁸ sleeping during the daylight hours would seem ungrateful and wasteful. This is not simply on the theory that the more time one is awake, the more one can get done. To sleep less may only mean there are more waking hours to fritter away. But to be awake and alert, during all the hours that the sun is up, is (particularly in an age pre-gas or electric lighting) to maximise the time available for productive labour. Jeremy Taylor, at Chapter One, Section One of *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living*, describes "The first general Instrument of Holy Living, Care of our Time." The first of the twenty-three Rules which Taylor provides to assist to that purpose states, "Let your sleep be necessary and healthful, not idle and expensive of time, beyond the conveniences of nature; and sometimes be curious to see the preparation which the sun makes, when he is coming forth from his chambers in the

¹⁶ Sarah Jordan, "Samuel Johnson and Idleness," *The Age of Johnson* 11 (2000), 163.

¹⁷ *Diaries*, 92, 110, 131, 162, 258, 268, 297, 303.

¹⁸ *Life* II, 57. Spring 1768.

east."¹⁹ Perhaps Johnson had been reading that rule when the idea of rising at six o'clock temporarily attracted him.

Writing is deeply implicated in Johnson's strategy of management. To keep a journal, to plan for each day, to keep accounts (§6, 16, 17), are all writing tasks, and demonstrate Johnson's belief in the use of writing as a mechanism for control and order. To 'keep' a Journal or an account of expenditure is not for Johnson simply to make a record, for posterity or his own amusement, and neither is 'to plan' merely to write down or to dream or to dream in writing. Writing is a means of changing reality, making things happen. De Certeau says that writing "refers to the reality from which it has been distinguished *in order to change it*. Its goal is social efficacy [*sic*. Efficacy?]."²⁰ If one can account for what what one has done with the time, one can target the time spent doing nothing in particular, and minimise or eliminate it. As the editors of the Yale volume say, keeping a journal was for Johnson "a way to place in permanent form one's daily mental processes, to review them, and to compare them. Nothing could be more welcome to the moral philosopher."²¹ But this method of management also implies that there are some means by which time may be filled which cannot be written, which the threat of their being written will serve to eliminate. What things? — day-dreaming, procrastination, idle thoughts, pointless rummaging about the room or browsing in books, or (possibly) masturbating.²² If one plans one's day, one cannot in conscience allow space for such things; if one accurately records one's doings, one will be confronted by the culpable waste which such ill uses of time represent. That such activities waste time is of their essence, and they would not be allowed by any strategy of management.

Writing is also the means of executing other resolutions; not simply the resolutions (§8 and 9) to study and to undertake certain literary projects, but also the resolution (§12) to resolve. To resolve *means*, for Johnson, to write something down, to make a text; he resolves to "consult" and "review" his former resolutions, which are apparently not simply determinations he has made in his heart, but particular texts which he can (if his rooms are tidy enough) locate and read, and against which he can assess the current tenor of his life.

¹⁹ Jeremy Taylor, *Holy Living and Dying*, 5.

²⁰ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 135 (de Certeau's italics).

²¹ Introduction to *Diaries*, xii.

²² A scholarly debate as to whether or not Johnson was an habitual practitioner of this minor but unseemly vice spanned a number of volumes of *The Age of Johnson*. See Donald Greene, "'A Secret Far Dearer to Him than His Life': Johnson's 'Vile Melancholy' Reconsidered," *Age of Johnson* 4 (1991), 1-40; Barry Baldwin, "The Mysterious Letter 'M' in Johnson's Diaries," *Age of Johnson* 6 (1994), 131-46; J.D. Fleeman, "Johnson's Secret," *Age of Johnson* 6 (1994), 147-50.

On 21 April 1764, he elaborates his very frequent resolve (§2) to read the scriptures, with the purpose "To write down my observations"(78). 'Read' often slides into 'study,' with its implications of note-taking.

There is hardly anything personal, in the sense of idiosyncratic to Johnson, in his resolutions. Those resolutions involving books (§4, 8, 9, 13) are the exceptions. The rest of them could be vowed by almost anyone sympathetic to Johnson's moral outlook, and at any time. All the resolutions concern his life as a private citizen, and represent that area in which all human lives have most in common: the everyday. Says another of Johnson's spiritual guides, William Law, "if we are to follow Christ, it must be in our common way of spending *every day*."²³ Although the resolutions all concern how he is employed or occupied, the only indication we get of employment or occupation in the formal income-generating sense, is that he writes (§9) — as an author, who envisages particular works, and not simply as a means to other ends — and that he studies (§8), or he at least intends to. Johnson's occasional resolution to undertake particular designated writing projects is a subset of his activity (mental activity) as a literary projector, although it is notable that resolving to perform these tasking was no more reliable means than any other of getting them done.

To study may not strike us as a general religious obligation, but it is, for a man of learning. Johnson clearly regards study as an integral part of his life in a number of senses. The high-ranking resolve (§4) to study books of divinity, theology or the Christian Religion is the natural overlap of his religious commitment and his personal talents and inclinations: it is proper that a scholar should deal with his faith in a scholarly manner. That he should resolve on ten occasions to do so, suggests that study and reading was of more sustenance to his faith than church-going, from which it seems he often found little benefit. In October 1765, he resolved at church, "If I can hear the sermon to attend it, unless the attention be more troublesome than useful; else to employ my thoughts on some religious subject" (97). His library shows him well-provided for the task of private theological study.

In addition, he refers (§8) to "my studies" and twice resolves to study "every day," for a certain length of time (as "eight hours" at Easter 1764, but modified to "four hours" by 18 September 1766).²⁴ He told Boswell, "A young man should read five hours in a day, and

²³ Law, *Serious Call*, 10 (my emphasis). Cited DeMaria, *Life of Reading*, 134.

²⁴ *Diaries*, 79, 110.

so may acquire a great deal of knowledge."²⁵ This would fit well with Taylor's second rule in the same list cited above: "Let every man that hath a calling be diligent in pursuance of its employment, so as not lightly or without reasonable occasion to neglect it."²⁶ Johnson's calling is to scholarship, and studying is part of what he envisages for his everyday. In the prayer which he calls "the prayer against scruples," he prays that he "may discharge the duties of my calling with tranquillity and constancy,"²⁷ which *calling* seems to be to the life of writing and scholarship. Despite this resolution, he told Boswell in the same conversation just cited, "I myself have never persisted in any plan [of study] for two days together." But, as Boswell, comments, for someone so attracted to desultory reading, and so able to profit from it, such plans of study are hardly necessary.

Putting his books in order (§13) was something that Johnson was often struggling to do, and which was seen by very early observers as somehow emblematic of his life and work. We may be permitted the guess that to tidy up his house was mainly to shift piles of books. Boswell memorably records him tidying up (when he should have been readying himself for an encounter with John Wilkes), "I found him buffeting his books, as upon a former occasion, covered with dust, and making no preparation for going abroad." When Boswell has sorted out with Mrs Williams who of them is to have Johnson's company for the evening, he returns to Johnson to find him "still in dust."²⁸ Boswell obviously wants to keep before the reader's imagination vivid images of Johnson engaged in this activity. The "former occasion" to which we are referred by Boswell's footnote, is the following:

On Wednesday, April 3, in the morning I found him very busy putting his books in order, and as they were generally very old ones, clouds of dust were flying around him. He had on a pair of large gloves, such as hedgers use. His present appearance put me in mind of my uncle, Dr. Boswell's description of him, "A robust genius, born to grapple with whole libraries." (III, 7)

Boswell clearly uses the image as a metaphor of Johnson's power in the world of letters. (It is not surprising that this scene is one which E.H. Shephard chose to illustrate in the truncated version of the *Life, Everybody's Boswell* [1930].) But for Johnson, it is one of those

²⁵ *Life* I, 428. 14 July 1763.

²⁶ Taylor, *Holy Living and Dying*, 5.

²⁷ *Diaries*, 108, 107.

²⁸ *Life* III, 67. 15 May 1776.

preliminary sorts of activities, like getting up early, which clears the decks, as it were — making it at least physically possible for him to attend to his duties. On the occasion of one resolution "[t]o put my rooms in order," he made this note to himself, "*Disorder I have found one great cause of Idleness."²⁹ Yet it is clear to dispassionate observers (Boswell, and ourselves) that, not only can a man who wrote so much as Johnson hardly be called idle, but that he gained by a lack of system in his habits and domestic regime in ways that he would not have otherwise. Boswell notes,

Dr. Johnson advised me to-day, to have as many books about me as I could; that I might read upon any subject upon which I had a desire for instruction at the time. "What you read *then* (said he) you will remember; but if you have not a book immediately ready, and the subject moulds in your mind, it is a chance if you again have a desire to study it."³⁰

This tension in Johnson, between a fear of disorder yet a rejection of system, is suggestive of one last thread from Johnson's resolutions at which I wish to tug.

III. Scruples

It might be imagined that someone such as Johnson, who is inclined to the frequent making of resolutions, could be thought of as a *scrupulous* person: a person who is, as the *Dictionary* puts it, "hard to satisfy in determinations of conscience." But whilst Johnson's resolutions do represent the pull of an over-active, hard-to-satisfy conscience, they are also the site of a frequent (§7) determination to "overcome and suppress," "drive out," "combat," "contend with," and "conquer" scruples.³¹ He does not wish to overcome his scruples in order to be *unscrupulous* — for although this is perhaps the form in which now we most frequently meet the word, it is not a usage that is found in his *Dictionary* or that occurs in Johnson's writings at all.³² The point is that there are good scruples and bad (what he often calls "vain" or "needless") scruples, and that whilst some people certainly tend in the direction of having too few scruples, Johnson believes himself to have too many. This is what constitutes

²⁹ *Diaries*, 77 (Johnson's asterisk for emphasis). 20 April 1764.

³⁰ *Life* III, 193. 22 September 1777.

³¹ *Diaries*, 70, 82, 99, 105.

³² The *OED* dates it to 1809.

scrupulosity, which he defines as, "1. Doubt; minute and nice doubtfulness," and "2. Fear of acting in any manner; tenderness of conscience." Although Johnson is able to give, in the *Dictionary*, his old friends Hooker and South, with the *Decay of Piety*, as authorities for *scrupulosity*, it is apparently an odd enough word for its use to have been regarded by some of his contemporaries as characteristic of Johnson. G.B. Hill points out, in notes to Johnson's use of the word in *Rasselas* and the *Life of Johnson*, that Sir William Jones remarked in 1776, "You will be able ... to examine with the minutest *scrupulosity*, as Johnson would call it."³³

Johnson might be identified with a concern about scruples *per se*, although not with a concern about any (recorded) particular scruple. What scruples of his own he thought vain or needless, and wished to combat, can only be guessed at. Whatever they were, the point is that such scruples seem to Johnson far too frequently to distract people from higher and more difficult duties. In one of four prayers that (in addition to the resolutions) focus on the issue, he asks that God may "remove from me all such scruples and perplexities as encumber and obstruct my mind" (368). Rather than a mark of great moral character, Johnson sees *scrupulosity* as often a sign of weakness, as he indicates by the *Dictionary* quotation from Hooker.

They warned them, that they did not become scandalous, by abusing their liberty, to the offence of their weak brethren which were *scrupulous*.

Scrupulosity is an attempt — and an attempt destined to failure — at a radical solution to the difficult work of living a moral life in a complex world. Scrupulosity puts one permanently at odds with the world, without (and this is the issue) contributing at all to positive virtue or enhancing its reputation. Hester Thrale described Johnson's rebuke to

a friend who, looking out on Streatham Common from our windows one day, lamented the enormous wickedness of the times, because some bird-catchers were busy there one fine Sunday morning. "While half the Christian world is permitted (said he) to dance and sing, and celebrate Sunday as a day of festivity, how comes your puritanical spirit so offended with frivolous and empty deviations from exactness? Whoever loads life with unnecessary scruples, Sir (continued he),

³³ Hill's notes to his edition of *The History of Rasselas* (1887), Ch. XXVI, 98 (note p. 185), and *Life* IV, 5 n.2. Jones is quoted from Teignmouth's *Memoirs of Sir William Jones* (1804). See *Rasselas*, 97 and n.6, 161.

provokes the attention of others on his conduct, and incurs the censure of *singularity* without reaping the reward of superior virtue."³⁴

Some instances of scrupulosity he seems to believe to be a mere show of virtue. Some, however, are genuine and conscientious. But the genuinely over-scrupulous would see potential minor causes of scandal everywhere, and may therefore become paralysed from taking action. Boswell relates that, "Talking of a point of delicate scrupulosity of moral conduct, he said to Mr. Langton, 'Men of harder minds than ours [that is, less scrupulous men] will do many things from which you and I would shrink; yet, Sir, they will, perhaps, do more good in life than we.'³⁵

Johnson's concern about pedantry, which we considered with learned diction in Chapter Three, may be regarded as a sub-set of his concern about scrupulosity (which might be almost defined as a form of moral pedantry). Pedants make scholarship look ridiculous, in the same way as scruplers make morality look ridiculous. As a scholar and a moralist, Johnson regards both of these types as being something akin to his enemies, or at least dangerous allies. The pedantic scholar's attraction to the clarification of minor truths (such as the precise distinction between aphorisms and apophthegms³⁶) is a culpable waste of human ingenuity, if it is indulged to the neglect of "that comprehension and expanse of thought which at once fills the whole mind, and of which the first effect is sudden astonishment, and the second rational admiration."³⁷ This sentence, which I have cited before, powerfully conveys what Johnson thought was the potential of the human mind and imagination. The mind can be occupied by ideas that are so powerful, that connect us so deeply with the true workings of the world, that they genuinely take us out of ourselves. The moral life, likewise, is a more profound and more glorious affair than is represented by scruplers. As he quotes Jeremy Taylor, in the *Dictionary*, "The duty [of care of our time] consists not *scrupulously* in minutes and half hours."³⁸ This advice actually occurs in the last of those twenty-three rules about the management of time, at the opening in *Holy Living*, of

³⁴ Thrall, *Anecdotes*. *Johns. Misc.* 1, 301-2 (my emphasis).

³⁵ *Life* IV, 5. 1780 (*Anecdotes of Langton*).

³⁶ We noted, in Chapter Six (182), Johnson toying with this distinction in the 'Life of Blackmore.'

³⁷ 'Cowley,' *Lives* I, 20-21.

³⁸ Taylor, *Holy Living and Dying*, 11.

which I quoted the first two earlier.³⁹ As such, the warning against scrupulosity frames, with compassion and an affirmation of human freedom, the whole of the moral life.

To live a moral life does not consist of simply refraining from evil, particularly if in order to do so one refrains from doing anything. Life must be filled. If people cannot conquer their scruples, and not merely refrain from doing evil, but start doing good, perhaps the world is not the place for them. This was, Johnson said, one justification of the monastic life:

Those who are exceedingly scrupulous, (which I do not approve, for I am no friend to scruples,) and find their scrupulosity invincible, so that they are quite in the dark, and know not what they shall do, — or those who cannot resist temptations, and find they make themselves worse by being in the world, without making it better, may retire [to a monastery].⁴⁰

But those who remain in the world must learn to live in ways that neither scandalise the scrupulous, nor that make the less-than-scrupulous imagine the life of virtue to be too difficult or unpleasant to be attempted. The quotation above from Hooker, which was given under *scrupulous* in the *Dictionary*, was truncated by Johnson from the following, which he gives under *scrupulosity*,

The one sort they warned to take heed, that *scrupulosity* did not make them rigorous in giving unadvised sentence against their brethren which were free; the other, that they did not become scandalous, by abusing their liberty and freedom to the offence of their weak brethren, which were scrupulous.

Isobel Grundy says that Johnson's horror of the vacuity of life "gives the impression that he was more strongly repelled by the idea of passing our time in nothingness than in wickedness."⁴¹ Perhaps it is an over-statement, but we can see its point. Johnson, as we have seen earlier, echoes Pope's words, that "the greater part of mankind 'have no character at all,'" but as he continues he gives a more generous gloss, that mankind "have little that

³⁹ This might be seen to confirm what we already know about Johnson's reading habits.

⁴⁰ *Life* V, 62. *Tour*, 19 August 1773.

⁴¹ Grundy, *Samuel Johnson and the Scale of Greatness*, 100.

distinguishes them from others equally good or bad."⁴² For Johnson, little is something; but the "greater part of mankind" are not, as he apparently believed himself to be, at much risk of being too 'singular.'

Johnson's own everyday life finds him ever walking a line between scandalousness and scrupulosity. "You'll be in the Chronicle," Garrick told him, *apropos* of his 'frisk' with Beauclerk and Langton;⁴³ and we considered in Chapter One the dangerous edges of his conversational playfulness. Yet this is the same man whose *Dictionary* is a moral encyclopedia, who had "scruples about Comedy," and who "resolved not to be pleased" when he dined in company with Samuel Foote. He walks this line, as it can only be walked by a man of character, not with fear or delicacy, but with vigour and commitment. To err in one direction and then another is inevitable, but a life without such an effort is not worthy of a moral or rational being. This vision of the parameters of human life also underlines the earnestness of Johnson's affirmation of the value of "harmless pleasure."

His list of resolutions is like a moral shopping list, to prompt the memory. But whilst the resolutions are of course aimed at the future, they take place in the present; they are written down in order to give him, in the future, something to recollect. Recollection is for Johnson, as we have seen, a mental process that distinguishes humanity from the rest of the animal creation. Stuart Sherman says:

the resolutions leave the present unaccounted for, except (by implication) as a site of emptiness, failure, and intent.... Whether by the tacit elimination of accomplishments, or the express enumeration of resolutions, Johnson's [journal] entries write the present as empty, and only the future as (potentially) full.⁴⁴

I cannot agree. Rather than seeing the present represented in Johnson's diaries as a site of emptiness, we should see it as a site of resolution. Rather than seeing resolution as focussed on the future, we should see it as a tactic effecting change in the everyday. Johnson's resolutions — however inadequately they are fulfilled — enable him to maintain control of the everyday, rather than giving life over to habit, necessity, or immediate and sensual pleasure. Let the present moment be improved. Let us, from the present moment, begin our

⁴² 'Pope,' *Lives* III, 263-64.

⁴³ *ibid.* 251. 1752.

⁴⁴ Sherman, *Telling Time*, 189.

repentance! Resolution does not have nothing to do with the present; it is almost as much as we can do in the present. As T.S. Eliot says, and Johnson would have agreed, "For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business."⁴⁵ Johnson confronts himself in his journal,

When I look back upon resoluti[ons] of improvement and amendments, which have year after year been made and broken, either by negligence, forgetfulness, vicious idleness, casual interruption, or morbid infirmity, when I find that so much of my life has stolen unprofitably away, and that I can descry by retrospection scarcely a few single days properly and vigorously employed, why do I yet try to resolve again? I try because Reformation is necessary and despair is criminal. I try in humble hope of the help of God.⁴⁶

But this is not in his view an isolated experience. In *Idler* 27, he says "most men may review all the lives that have passed within their observation, without remembring [*sic*] one efficacious resolution."⁴⁷ Resolution is *of itself* an everyday and tactical manoeuvre. De Certeau comments that "a *tactic* is a calculated action.... It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow.... What it wins it cannot keep."⁴⁸ Even to resolve and to go on resolving is a tactic that saps strategies of their power. Time is on the side of the resolver, who "by timely caution, ... may effectually resolve to escape the tyrant [of habit], whom they will very vainly resolve to conquer."⁴⁹

To lodge some thought to resonate in the memory, to stir the mind and to prompt the will to action, is the function of writing, and the writer in society. They are functions which Johnson by his writing continues to fulfill, and will, so long as people read (which is a thought-provoking qualification). But, for Johnson and de Certeau, reading and writing come under a larger banner, of everyday tactical behaviours. We have seen how Samuel Johnson depicts and enacts an everyday life of significance and power: by writing and reading, by his choice of genre, by conversation, by recollection and resolution, and generally by the use of a mind that is able to constantly adjust to and manoeuvre around the material with which the world presents him. He feels the power of, say, narrative or sensuality, but resists those things

⁴⁵ Eliot, *Four Quartets* ("East Coker" v).

⁴⁶ *Diaries*, 225. 14 April 1775.

⁴⁷ *Idler* 27; 85.

⁴⁸ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 36-37.

⁴⁹ *Idler* 27; 86.

that would enchain or take possession of him, and lives fully and by resolution in the present moment. A journal is an appropriate site for such resolution, because, as the twentieth-century aphorist and dictionary-maker,⁵⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, expressed it in one of his own unsystematic collection of reflections, "[o]nly someone who can reflect on the past can repent."⁵¹

⁵⁰ See L. Wittgenstein, *Wörterbuch für Volksschulen* (1926, rpt. 1977).

⁵¹ Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright - 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), entry no. 519.

APPENDIX

"That Great Literary Projector"

Samuel Johnson's *Designs*, or Projected Works

SUMMARY

Samuel Johnson had throughout his life a great many ideas for writing that he did not undertake. This Appendix comprehensively surveys for the first time Johnson's ninety-one projected works, beginning with the forty-eight projects included in his own manuscript list, called *Designs*. I also give an account, gathered from a wide variety of sources, of forty-three further ideas for literary work in which Johnson had expressed an interest. I have made a new transcription of the text of the *Designs* from a copy of the manuscript. Each project is examined in relation to literary history and the contemporary literary context, as well as in relation to Johnson's life and work. Whilst an early aim was to shed light on the origins of the *Designs*, the result is a virtual alternative bibliography for Johnson, offering a one-man account of the entire world of learning.

Samuel Johnson was not simply a writer, but someone deeply involved in the world of writing. One cannot read Johnson or read about him without being struck by the attention which he gives to what we might call, with a Johnsonian resonance, the paratextual part of literature. Paratexts, as defined by Gérard Genette (who coined the term), are the "verbal or other productions [which] surround [a text] and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it ... to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its "reception" and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book."¹ Johnson was deeply attracted to and involved in paratextual practices, such as cataloguing, and the writing of prefaces and dedications; he composed 'mottoes' or epigraphs to his own texts and those of others; he indexed, edited, abridged, revised and translated; and he thought about the size of books. Even his use of the form of the periodical essay can be seen as a concern to "extend" his text, to draw it out, to increase the potential occasions of encounter with the reader, "to ensure the text's presence in the world."

¹ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1997), 1 (Genette's italics). Translation of *Seuils* (1987).

In this essay, I will examine Samuel Johnson's most neglected works — works that have no "presence in the world" — the works that Johnson neglected himself. These are his literary schemes or projected works. One particular gathering of ideas for literary projects is the long catalogue he made in a small notebook, with the title "Designs." None of the items in this list was brought to execution — certainly not by Johnson himself, or in the form in which they are depicted. They are not books, or even 'texts,' but "paratexts without texts."² In this intriguing description, Genette includes "works — lost or aborted — about which we know nothing except their titles."³ As he goes on to observe, such paratexts "certainly provide food for thought." Johnson's ninety-one projected works — forty-eight from the catalogue that he made and a further forty-three to which references are made elsewhere — are an important if ghostly aspect of his literary career: they not only provide a key to his own interests and activities, but they are representative of the scope and quality of his literary imagination, and his sense of his potential range as a writer. They can give us a vision of the world of letters as it was constructed in the eighteenth century — a far more fluid and complex world than the study of any one canonical author, or of the century's "major works" would suggest.

Johnson's readiness to envisage new literary labours is a distinctive characteristic of his imagination. His projecting inclinations are a sign of his literary preparedness and versatility as well as his notable lack of preciousness about his writing, and demonstrate to us that however much he could do, he was always aware that he could do more and do different jobs of writing. His was not "the single talent well employ'd," a skill carefully tended, marketed and doled out on highly specific projects. His talents conformed rather to his own idea of 'Genius' as expressed in the 'Life of Cowley,' "a mind of large general powers, accidentally determined to some particular direction."⁴ He had ideas to spare, but he was constrained by lack of time, energy, and particular external motives — those 'accidental determinations'; so that we might regard the tasks which he actually undertook and brought to execution as having been chosen for the attention of posterity rather arbitrarily. The list of his projected works is a virtual alternative bibliography, of which this essay is a catalogue and partial history.

² Genette, *Paratexts*, 3-4.

³ Perhaps most paratexts without texts are ancient, but a modern instance is the list of W.H. Auden's "Lost and Unwritten Work," Appendix to *Prose, 1926-38*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1997).

⁴ Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the English Poets*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 3 v. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1905), 1, 2. Hereafter cited by volume and page in the text as *Lives*.

We know of Johnson's own list of his projected works because Boswell gives us the text as a long footnote,⁵ a gloss to his observation that in Johnson's old age, "Still his love of literature did not fail." In the main narrative of the *Life*, this remark is made in reference to Johnson having given another literary list (that of the contributors to the *Universal History*)⁶ to John Nichols, "a very few days before his death." The Catalogue (as Boswell calls it) of Johnson's literary schemes also fits into the chronology at this point because it was in November 1784 that Johnson gave the notebook containing it to Bennet Langton (although Boswell does not directly mention this circumstance). The notebook itself is extant, but Boswell's reprinting the text has ensured it an independent immortality.

Although a number of entries in the list are dated by Johnson to the winter of 1752-53,⁷ the list as a whole is undated. It would appear therefore to have been begun at an earlier date. That it is to some degree a classified list suggests that it was, in the main, made on one occasion, rather than compiled progressively over a longer period. Boswell's reason for including it in his account of the last weeks of Johnson's life is possibly for convenience: as all readers of Boswell know, he frequently inserts undated anecdotes into his mainly chronological narrative at points where he has a shortage of material. But it would seem unlikely that the list came to his notice only after he had prepared the earlier and more appropriate parts of the book. He must have been aware of it, if only because it had already been published in its entirety by Sir John Hawkins, in his semi-official biography of Johnson.⁸ In any case, Boswell uses the document to reinforce his point about Johnson's unabated interest in literary work. Some of the main themes of his *Life of Johnson* are Johnson's curiosity, range of interests, and physical energy, and to imagine Johnson dreaming up ambitious new projects in the last weeks of his life strengthens this vision of Johnson. But if on a careless reading we come away with the impression that

⁵ James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. L.F. Powell, 6 v. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1934-64), hereafter cited by volume and page in the text as *Life*. The *Designs* are given in a footnote, IV, 381-82.

⁶ The list of contributors to the *Universal History* was not included in the *Life* by Boswell, but Malone included it with an accompanying letter from Johnson, in the 3rd edn. (1799), IV, 409-10. It is, after all, not of particular Johnsonian interest, and does not appear in the Hill-Powell *Life* (although it may be found in the Everyman's Library, 1949 edition). The *Universal History* itself is included in yet another of Johnson's literary lists, that of recommended reading for Rev. Daniel Astle (*Life* IV 311-12), which I examine in "A Clergyman's Reading: Books Recommended by Samuel Johnson," *The Age of Johnson* 11 (2000), 125-43.

⁷ Although Robert DeMaria asserts that in the long central part of the list are "twenty-four projected editions, translations, and collections that Johnson noted, mostly in the winter of 1752-3," there are only two dates in this section (both 9 November 1752), and it is difficult to know whether they refer to two specific items, all the previous items, or some or all of the items that follow. See Robert DeMaria, *The Life of Samuel Johnson: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 45.

⁸ Sir John Hawkins, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (London: Buckland, [et al.], 1787), 81-84, fn.

any of these projects were in Johnson's mind in November 1784, we have been bamboozled by the tenuous chain of connections between the narrative and the footnote. Johnson was not close to death when he made the list, and his giving it to Langton at this time does not indicate that he was still thinking about undertaking any of these tasks — if indeed he ever had. It seems more sensible to believe that he had simply unearthed the little book when tidying up, as he was during the last months of his life.

The Manuscript

Most of the subsequent history of the manuscript is scattered through the strata of editorial notes to the *Life of Johnson*. Boswell's footnote records that Langton presented the notebook to George III, and an endorsement in the King's hand on the first page of the manuscript dates this event to April 16th, 1785. However, it seems that before the *Designs* became part of the Royal collection, Johnson's friend and early biographer, Thomas Tyers, had somehow got to peruse it. In his "Biographical Sketch" of Johnson, which appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in December 1784, within weeks of Johnson's death, he mentions two of the projects, though in his breezy fashion he perhaps pretends to more knowledge than he has. He mentions a third in the "Additional Sketches" he supplied to the *GM* the following February.⁹ John Nichols also had somehow had a look at the manuscript. Sir John Hawkins asserted that as he wrote about the list in his *Life*, the catalogue was "now lying before me."¹⁰ John Wilson Croker examined the manuscript for his editions of Boswell's *Life* and made a number of observations about it, of which George Birkbeck Hill, and later L.F. Powell, included portions in their editions. Powell notes that he was unable to find the notebook (*Life* IV, 551). David Fleeman subsequently located it in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle.¹¹ It has most recently been described (and a photograph of two pages of it reproduced)¹² by Robert DeMaria.

⁹ Tyers' "Biographical Sketch" of Johnson appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine* LIV (December, 1784), 899-911. This is the text reprinted in the *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 2 v. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1897), II, 335-81. He sent to the *Gentleman's Magazine* (hereafter as *GM*) a number of extra paragraphs of remarks, printed as "Additional Sketches," *GM* LV (February 1785), 86. These were incorporated into the whole when it was revised for pamphlet publication later that year. This is the text included in O M Brack, Jr. and Robert E. Kelley, eds., *The Early Biographies of Samuel Johnson* (Iowa City: U. of Iowa P., 1972). The *Johnsonian Miscellanies* will be cited hereafter as *Johns. Misc.*

¹⁰ Hawkins, 81.

¹¹ J.D. Fleeman, *A Preliminary Handlist of Documents & Manuscripts of Samuel Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1967), item 243.

¹² DeMaria, *Life of Samuel Johnson*; see pl. 10.

The catalogue is in "a small duodecimo note-book bound in rough calf," as Croker described it (quoted in *Life* IV, 549), which Johnson possibly made himself.¹³ The leaves are 3½ x 6 inches (90 x 150 mm.). There is a title page, on which Johnson has written *Designs*, which is how it will be referred to hereafter. From the manuscript, it is possible to make a number of tentative suggestions about the compilation of the list.¹⁴ Johnson arranged the catalogue as if it were itself to be a published book. The first leaf he left blank; the recto now carries King George's handwritten endorsement. Johnson's title, *Designs*, is on the recto of the second leaf. The text proper begins on the recto of the third leaf, at which point Johnson commences numbering the pages from '1.'¹⁵ He started a number of sequences of contents at various points throughout the book, originally leaving room between them in order that he might make subsequent additions. Under the first heading, 'Divinity,' he made only one entry; the rest of the page is blank, and is followed by nine more blank pages. The long sequence of 43 items that follows the next heading, 'Philosophy, History and Literature in general,' begins on leaf 8 recto (the page numbered 11), and concludes on leaf 13 recto (p. 21). However, the bottom section of leaf 10 (pp. 15-16) has been removed and the top half pasted down to 11 recto (p. 17), and the whole written over, so that there is no text for pp. 16 and 17. At the join in p. 15 is a date (Nov. 9. 1752) omitted by Boswell. It is possible that page 18 represents the start of a new sequence — there is no new heading, but the last nineteen projects of the 43 are (in the main) dictionaries and collections; similar to each other, and similarly difficult to classify.¹⁶ The first four of those on p. 18 are individually dated, but are not in chronological order, which may suggest that Johnson transcribed them from his Diaries or other memoranda. (There are no entries for these dates in his surviving Diaries.) There are five blank (but numbered) pages after p. 21. On the final page of text, p. 27, is the third sequence, with a heading, 'Poetry and Works of the Imagination.' Johnson continued numbering the pages up to p. 41, and the remaining 67 pages in the notebook are blank.

¹³ Johnson probably learnt this craft as a young man in his father's bookshop. He practised it at other times later in life, as a letter of Hester Thrale testifies. See *Life* I, 56, n.2.

¹⁴ I am grateful to the Royal Library at Windsor for supplying me with a microfilm copy of the manuscript, and particularly to Emma Stuart, for her patient and detailed responses to my queries about it, and for checking my transcription. I am also indebted to Prof. Robert DeMaria for advice and material assistance.

¹⁵ In the following description, pages numbers will refer to Johnson's pagination in the manuscript.

¹⁶ The other pointers towards the possibility that a new sequence was commenced on p. 18 are: 1) there seems to be a lack of continuity between Johnson's handwriting at the bottom of p. 15 and the top of the now verso, numbered 18; 2) the entries on p. 18 are set out more spaciouly and deliberately; and 3) there were blank pages left before p. 18, before Johnson pasted down p. 15.

When Johnson began the list he took some trouble over it. As well as carefully starting a number of separate sequences, he used a more formal or semi-printed hand for the headings, as well as to highlight particular words in the description of certain projects. This is consistent with the attention that he gives to page layout that we see in the displayed complimentary subscriptions to his letters. As R.W. Chapman observes, "Johnson, like others of his time, normally 'displayed' his conclusions, which at their most elaborate might, if space allowed, run to five or six lines. The motive of this was partly deference, but it is partly aesthetic."¹⁷ Johnson was also very aware of the page layout of books. The elements of the rhetoric of print that he employed in this manuscript suggest that he was already seeing the names of each of these projects on the title pages of printed books. He capitalises, albeit intermittently, and starts new lines. These practices are inconsistently followed, and Johnson became more hurried and careless later in the list, but the effort is apparent. Neither Hawkins's nor Boswell's transcriptions represent this effort, and I have therefore made a new transcription of the manuscript. I have followed Johnson's line breaks exactly. There are some alterations to the spelling of the published versions, a few extra words, and less punctuation. Johnson's deletions are shown in <angled brackets>, and later insertions above the line ^between caret marks^.

*The Text*¹⁸

leaf 1 recto.

Original Manuscript

of D^r. Samuel Johnson

presented by his Friend

Langton Esq^r.

April 16th. 1785.

G.R. [endorsement of King George III]

Vol. 12 f. 128-1 [handwritten, in pencil]¹⁹

¹⁷ Chapman (ed.), *The Letters of Samuel Johnson, with Mrs. Thrale's Genuine Letters to Him* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), I, viii. The editor of Thomas Warton's letters, David Fairer, comments further, "During my years of editing eighteenth-century correspondence I became aware of how handwriting and layout could sometimes be expressive.... One thing noticeable about Johnson's letters ... is that the closing formalities are displayed — sometimes with a flamboyant formality, occupying up to seven separate lines" (personal communication).

¹⁸ The transcription of the text of the *Designs* has been made and is reproduced with the permission of the Royal Collection © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

¹⁹ This is not in Johnson's or George III's hand. It is presumably a shelf note by a librarian.

Leaf 2 recto.

Designs

Leaf 3 recto

1

Divinity

A Small book of precepts and directions for Piety. the hint taken from the directions in the Morton's Exercise.

Leaf 8 recto.

Philosophy, History,
and Literature in general.

History of Criticism as it relates to judging of Authours from Aristotle to the present age. An account of the rise and improvements of that art, of the different Opinions of Authours ancient and Modern.

Translation of the History of
Herodian.²⁰

New Edition of Fairfax's translation of Tasso with notes, Glossary, &c.

Chaucer a new Edition of him from Manuscripts and old Editions with various readings, conjectures, remarks on his Language and the changes it had undergone from the earliest times

Leaf 8 verso

12

to his age, and from his to the present. With Notes explanatory of customs &c and references to Boccace and other Authours from whom he has borrow'd, with an account of the Liberties he has taken in telling the Stories, his life, and an exact etymological Glossary.

Aristotle's Rhetorick. A translation of it into English.

A Collection of Letters translated from the Modern Writers, with some account of the several Authours.

Oldham's Poems <[indecipherable]>
With Notes historical and critical

²⁰ All underlining from this point is in pencil, and appears to have been added later.

Roscommon's Poems
with Notes.

Leaf 9 recto

13

Lives of the Philosophers written with a polite air, in such a manner as may divert, as well as instruct.

History of the Heathen Mythology, with an explication of the Fables, both allegorical and Historical with references to the Poets.

History of the State of Venice in a Compendious manner.

Aristotle's Ethicks an English translation of them. with Notes.

Geographical Dictionary from the French. Utrecht.

Hierocles upon Pythagoras translated into English, perhaps with notes. — [in later hand] This is done by Norris. Nov. 9. 1752²¹

Leaf 9 verso

14

A <collection> book of Letters upon all kinds of Subjects.

Claudian a new Edition of his works, cum notis Variorum, in the manner of Burman.

Tully's Tusculan Questions a translation of them.

Tully's De Natura Deorum, a traslation [*sic.*] of those Books.

Benzo's New History of the New World, to be translated.

Machiavel's Hist. of Florence to be translated.

History of the Revival of Learning in Europe. containing an account of whatever contributed to the Restoration of Literature, such as controversies, Printing, the Destruction of the Greek

Leaf 10 recto

15

Empire, <controversies,> the encouragement of Great Men, with the Lives of the most eminent Patrons <of> and most eminent ea<|>rly professors of all kinds of Learning in different Countries.

A Body of Chronology in verse

²¹ The date may read 1759. The edge of the leaf is very worn.

with Historical notes.

[top portion of leaf pasted to p. 17, remainder missing]

Nov.9. 1752

A table of the Spectators, Tatlers, and Guardians. distinguished by figures into six degrees of <excellence> value with notes giving the reasons of preference or degradation.

A Collection of Letters from English Authours, ^with prefaces^ giving some account of <some of> the writers, with reasons for Selection and criticism upon stiles, remarks on each letter if needful.

Leaf 10 verso

18

A Collection of Proverbs frō various Languages. Jan.6—53.

A Dictionary to the Common Prayer in imitation of Calmet's Dictionary of the Bible. March.—52.

A Collection of Stories and Examples likethose [*sic.*] of Valerius Maximus. Jan.10.—53. [some marks]

From Ælian a volume of Select Stories. perhaps from others.

(Jan.28.53)

Collection of Travels, Voyages, Adventures, and Descriptions of Contries. [*sic.*]

Dictionary of Ancient History and Mythology.

Leaf 11 recto

19

Treatise on the Study of Polite Literature, containing the History of Learning, directions for editions, Commentators &c

Maxims, Characters, and Sentiments, after the manner of Bruyere, collected out of Ancient Authours, particularly the Greek with apophthegms.

Classical Miscellanies, Select Translations from ancient Greek and Latin Authours.

Lives of Illustrious Persons as well of the active as the Learned. in imitation of Plutarch.

Leaf 11 verso

20

Judgement of the Learned

upon English Authours.

Poetical Dictionary ^of the^ English tongue

Considerations upon the present State of London.

Collection of Epigrams with notes and observations.

Observations on the English Language relating to words phrases and modes of speech.

Minutiæ Literariæ. Miscellaneous Reflections, Criticisms, Emendations, Notes.

History of the Constitution

Leaf 12 recto

21

Comparison of philosophical and Christian Morality by Sentences collected from the Morals and Fathers.

Plutarch's Lives in English with notes.

Leaf 15 recto

27

Poetry, and Works of Imagination.

Hymn to Ignorance.

The Palace of Sloth, a vision.

Coluthus to be translated.

Prejudice a Poetical Essay

The Palace of Nonsense a Vision.

Despite Boswell's prefacing the 'catalogue' with a remark about "the extent and constancy of Johnson's literary ardour," it would appear, from both the content of the list and conjectures about its dating based on manuscript evidence, that its purposes may have been far less personal and more specific. Boswell certainly understood enough about Johnson's handwriting to know that the list does not belong in the narrative of the end of his life. At this point, it will do well to examine the individual designs themselves, which is the main burden of this essay.

Johnson provided the list with three headings. Given the disorder of the long central sequence, and my feeling that Johnson may have intended it to be further divided, I have in what follows re-ordered and sub-classified it. Of the total of forty-eight projects listed in the *Designs*, twenty-three refer directly to some other particular literary work as subject or model. I have in these cases given full titles, authors' and translators' names,

dates of publication, and numbers of editions within Johnson's lifetime.²² I have added other notes to aid identification and to establish the work's relationship with Johnson, in particular if the work is mentioned in the records we have of the contents of his library.²³ Where it seems appropriate, I have tried to clarify the nature of the project by reference to Johnson's known interests, and to the wider eighteenth-century literary context. Where the item is vague or the subject very broad, I have tried to refrain from uninformative generalizations. Johnson's own words from the *Designs* are given in bold type, in full, but somewhat regularised.

Commentary

Designs

Divinity (1)

A small book of precepts and directions for Piety, the hint taken from the directions in Morton's Exercise.

Anne Douglas, countess of Morton (d. 1700), *The Countess of Morton's daily exercise: or, A book of prayers and rules how to spend our time in the service and pleasure of Almighty God* (1666; 24th edn. 1766). Printed as a small pocket-book (4" x 2", 12mo), this was a very popular work of materials for private devotions; most copies seem to have been used for their intended purposes, for despite being much reprinted, only three copies are recorded in *ESTC*. It consists of prayers, lessons and litanies for morning, afternoon, evening and other occasions and circumstances, interspersed with 'rules and advertisements' about the employment of time.

It seems in character that Johnson should have piously intended 'Divinity' to be an extensive category, but then have found no specific subjects occurring to

²² I will not attempt to disguise my dependence on standard reference tools: the *English Short Title Catalogue, 1473-1800 (ESTC)*, the *National Union Catalog - Pre-1956 Imprints (NUC)*, the *Catalogue Général de Livres Imprimés de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, the *Dictionary of National Biography (DNB)*, and the *New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature (NCBEL)*. I hope it will be seen that in most cases I have examined the books I describe.

²³ *Samuel Johnson's Library: An Annotated Guide*, by Donald Greene (Victoria, B.C.: U. of Victoria "English Literary Studies," 1975). This will be cited in the text as *SJL*; most references will be clearly to particular entries, which are organised alphabetically by author. *SJL* is based on the printed Sale Catalogue of Johnson's library, and Greene (p. 10) reminds users "that it represents only about a fourth of the nearly 3,000 books in Johnson's library at his death."

him. A gloss on this experience might be his observation in the 'Life of Watts,' where he says of Watts's devotional poetry, "The paucity of its topicks enforces perpetual repetition, and the sanctity of the matter rejects the ornaments of figurative diction" (*Lives* III, 310). Many years later, Johnson talked of compiling a book of his own prayers, which project will be discussed in the second list below.

**Philosophy, History,
and Literature in general (43)**

HISTORIES (5)

History of Criticism as it relates to judging of Authours, from Aristotle to the present age. An account of the rise and improvements of that art, of the different opinions of Authours, ancient and Modern.

Although this may at first sight appear to be a rather conventional literary labour, it is without doubt one of the most ambitious and interesting of the Designs. In the eighteenth century, the field of literature about literature (and particularly, as in this case, of literature about literature about literature) was rather crowded, with a wide variety of material often of an undisciplined and idiosyncratic nature, from plain descriptions and expositions of particular texts, and inquiries into the canons of critical judgement (frequently derived from or responding to the classical writers) to highly speculative treatises on the origins of language, speech, and so on. In this Design, Johnson proposes something which had not hitherto been attempted: not his own literary theory or exposition of or attempt at constructing that of some other writer (such as many critics have attempted to do for Johnson), nor an epitome of a range of critical writings aiming to set up a canon. Studies had been made of critical writing as a field of controversy, on the assumption that the critical canons need to be fixed. But it had not been attempted to do so scientifically and comparatively, as a study of what is changing and constant in the history of human intellectual and aesthetic pleasures. George Saintsbury, in the Preface to his *History of Criticism*, says that (apart from this unwritten work of Johnson's) he can find "only two actual attempts to deal with the whole subject,"

both dating from a century later than this Design, and neither of them in English.²⁴

Dryden, says Johnson in his 'Life' of the poet, "may be properly considered as the father of English criticism." As he surveys Dryden's critical writings in the pages that follow, Johnson gives a sample of what he may have intended for this project, and describes the critical practices that he believes most appropriate and useful (*Lives* I, 410 ff.).

Towards the end of Johnson's life, James Harris's *Philological Inquiries* (2 v., 1781) appeared. Harris (1709-80) was known to Johnson, who expressed dissatisfaction (recorded by Boswell) with his character, politics, and knowledge of Greek, and "thought he did not understand his own system" (which is developed in his most famous book, *Hermes; or, A Philosophical Inquiry concerning Language and Universal Grammar* [1751]).²⁵ In the *Philological Inquiries*,²⁶ published after his death, Harris is credited by J.W.H. Atkins with providing "for the first time a surprisingly accurate and exhaustive sketch of criticism from ancient days."²⁷ Surveying the work's chapter-headings, Saintsbury says, "here is the great gap going to be filled. At last a critic not merely takes a philosophic-literary view of criticism, but actually proposes to supplement it with an inquiry into those regions of literature on which his predecessors have turned an obstinately blind eye."²⁸ However, as may be guessed from his tone, Saintsbury finds Harris's work in execution disappointing: he calls it "haphazard ... perfunctory ... discursive ... positively irritating." Harris's modern biographer agrees: "What he needed for this project was not more learning but a sophisticated theory of literary causality

²⁴ George Saintsbury, *A History of Criticism, and Literary Taste in Europe: from the Earliest Texts to the Present Day*, 3 v. (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1900-04), I, v. Saintsbury mentions two predecessors to his work: Augustin-François Th  ry, *Histoire des opinions litt  raires chez les anciens et les modernes*, Nouv.   d. (Paris, 1848) (the first c. 1844), and Bonaventura Mazzarella, *Della Critica, Libri Tre*, 2 v. (Genova, 1866-68) (this he had not seen). They did not concern him and need not concern us.

²⁵ Listed in *SJL*. For Johnson's copy, see J.D. Fleeman, *A Preliminary Handlist of Copies of Books Associated with Dr. Samuel Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1984), item 78.

²⁶ Although we now understand philology as being to do with the scientific study of languages and their development, *philological* is defined by Johnson in the *Dictionary* as, "Critical; grammatical," and gives two quotations from Isaac Watts: "Studies, called *philological*, are history, language, grammar, rhetoric, poesy, and criticism"; and "He who pretends to the learned professions, if he doth not arise to be a critic himself in *philological* matters, should frequently converse with dictionaries, paraphrasts [i.e., writers of paraphrases], commentators or other critics, which may relieve any difficulties."

²⁷ J.H.W. Atkins, *English Literary Criticism: 17th and 18th Centuries* (London: Methuen, 1951), 354.

²⁸ Saintsbury, *History of Criticism*, II, 474.

and a definable concept of intellectual history."²⁹ Of Johnson, however, it is noted that "The posthumous volumes of Mr. Harris of Salisbury (which treated of subjects that were congenial with his own professional studies) had attractions that engaged him to the end."³⁰

History of the Heathen Mythology, with an explication of the Fables, both allegorical and Historical with references to the Poets.

An ancient model for such a work is the compendium to Greek mythology called *The Library*, to which has long been attached the name of Apollodorus of Athens, the Grammarian. The Augustan efforts were more comprehensive. There were a number of such works, some in narrative, precursors to Bulfinch's *Mythology*, others organized alphabetically. One very popular Latin example, the *Pantheum Mythicum, seu fabulosa deorum historia, hoc epitomes eruditionis volumine breviter dilucidèque comprehense* (1659; 9th ed. 1757) by Fr. François Pomey (1618-73), was translated into English by Andrew Tooke as *The Pantheon, representing the fabulous histories of the heathen gods, and most illustrious heroes, in a short, plain, and familiar method, by way of dialogue* (1694). By 1787, this translation had been through 28 numbered London editions alone. The title page of the work emphasises its didactic purpose, "For the Use of Schools." Johnson mentions another *History of the Heathen Gods*,³¹ written in 1711, also for schools, by the poet William King (*Lives* II, 30 and n.2).

Capitalising on the name and popularity of Pomey's and Tooke's work was a posthumous publication by Johnson's friend, Samuel Boyse (1708-49), *A New Pantheon: or, fabulous history of the heathen gods, heroes, goddesses, &c., explained in a manner intirely new.... To which is added a discourse on the theology of the ancients* (1753). With at least fourteen eighteenth-century editions, this was the most successful work of this minor poet. In the 2nd edition ([1760?]), which William Cooke "revis'd and corrected," Cooke regrets in his dedication (which is in fact the only entirely new part of the work), that "the ingenious Author of this Work" had not "liv'd to revise it carefully." The work is in 67

²⁹ Clive T. Probyn, *The Sociable Humanist: The Life and Works of James Harris, 1709-1780: Provincial and Metropolitan Culture in Eighteenth-century England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 261.

³⁰ Thomas Tyers, "A Biographical Sketch of Dr. Samuel Johnson" (1784), *Johns. Misc.*, II, 344.

³¹ Actually, *An Historical Account of the Heathen Gods and Heroes* (1710).

short chapters, which Boyse asserts in his Preface to be an arrangement "much more useful, more rational, and less dry than any that has gone before" (iv). It is a book for reading, rather than use in the classroom. Boyse was an early associate of Johnson's at St. John's Gate.

Johnson had a copy of *A Compendious Dictionary of the Fabulous History of the Heathen Gods and Heroes: Design'd for the more ready understanding of poets, paintings and statues* (1731), which he inscribed to his wife.³² This work was republished circa 1761 (reprinted in 1776) as *The Gentleman and Lady's Key to Polite Literature; or A Compendious Dictionary of Fabulous History*, both editions being in duodecimo.³³ The 'Fabulous History' element of the title suggests that these works are simply indexes or alphabetical rearrangements of material in the *Pantheon* or *New Pantheon*. John Bell, the bookseller whose multi-volume edition known as Bell's Poets competed with the series for which Johnson wrote the prefatorial *Lives*, published *Bell's New Pantheon, or, Historical dictionary of the gods, demi-gods, heroes, and fabulous personages of antiquity* (1790), which is a much more detailed and comprehensive work, published in two quarto vols. (This dictionary arrangement is itself similar to that of another project, discussed below under Dictionaries.)

History of the State of Venice, in a compendious manner.

A French work by Abraham Nicolas Amelot de la Houssaye (1634-1706), the *Histoire du gouvernement de Venise* (1676) was issued in London in an English translation, *The History of the government of Venice. Wherein the policies, councils, magistrates and laws of that state are fully related*, in 1708.

History of the Revival of Learning in Europe, containing an account of whatever contributed to the Restoration of Literature, such as controversies, Printing, the Destruction of the Greek empire, the encouragement of Great Men, with the Lives of the most eminent Patrons and most eminent early professors of all kinds of Learning in different Countries.

Walter Bate is typical of many writers in observing of Johnson that "no one of his time felt more deeply drawn to the period from the renaissance to the end of the

³² Fleeman, *Copies of Books*, item 59.

³³ I am grateful to Robin Alston for this advice (personal communication).

seventeenth century."³⁴ This Design suggests a desire to give a scholarly background (i.e., in history) for the hitherto rather too haphazard — subjective and impressionistic — surveys of or keys to 'learning' which had appeared prior to 'the Age of Reason.' But Johnson was far from the first writer to have regarded this period as of unique importance. The notion of a revival of learning, beginning in northern Italy in the late 1300s, was promoted even whilst it was taking place by humanist propagandists such as Petrarch, who "may well be regarded as the originator of the concept of the 'dark ages,' which was for centuries to ... furnish the contrasting background for the Renaissance."³⁵ Johnson revered Petrarch as "one of the restorers of learning" and told Boswell that some of the first serious reading that he did was in Petrarch, having as a boy stumbled across the volume in his father's shop (*Life* I, 57). By the sixteenth century, humanists were looking back to figures such as Petrarch and Giotto as heroic re-discoverers of the lost glories of classical knowledge and art. Marsilio Ficino wrote of his own day, "It is undoubtedly a golden age which has restored to the light the liberal arts that had almost been destroyed: grammar, eloquence, painting, architecture, sculpture, music. And that all in Florence."³⁶ (See below, for Johnson's projected translation of the history of Florence.)

In his 'Life of Collins,' Johnson notes that in about 1744 the poet "published proposals for a *History of the Revival of Learning*.... But probably not a page of the *History* was ever written" (*Lives* III, 335). Joseph Warton mentions this work as "The History of the Age of [Pope] Leo X," which "a friend of mine is at present engaged in writing."³⁷ Collins's most recent biographer notes that it was said by some contemporaries that Collins in 1744 had both started the work and issued subscriptions, but that there is no evidence.³⁸ In the absence of a substantial account of the subject, there were various brief attempts. Johnson notes (*Lives* III, 415-16) that in 1756 the poet-physician Mark Akenside addressed

³⁴ Walter Jackson Bate, *Samuel Johnson* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1978), 540.

³⁵ Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), 8.

³⁶ Cited Ferguson, 28.

³⁷ Warton, *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Pope* (1756), I, 182.

³⁸ Richard Weindorf, *William Collins and Eighteenth Century English Poetry* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota P., 1981), 185.

precisely this subject in lectures to the College of Physicians.³⁹ Oliver Goldsmith began his literary career with a short work, *An Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning in Europe* (1759). Johnson's friend, Thomas Warton prefaced the first volume of *The History of English Poetry* (1774-81) with a dissertation "On the Introduction of Learning into England." (The term 'renaissance' to describe this period did not enter English usage until the nineteenth century.) Thomas Tyers asserts that Johnson had thought of writing this "soon after his coming to London" (*Johns. Misc.* II, 372), but there is no reason to believe that he had any more information than the *Designs*.

Johnson's history would have a strong biographical focus, on "eminent Patrons and ... early professors," exhibiting his admiration for and perhaps identification with the scholars who had functioned as, as it were, entrepreneurs of learning. As Robert DeMaria has observed, "Johnson was as interested in the work of his favorite humanist scholars as he was in the classical writers they edited."⁴⁰ To have achieved any of a number of these *Designs* would have added his own name to the tradition of scholars such as Erasmus, Bentley, the Scaligers, the Heinsiuses, or the Burmans (see below), who laboured to recover texts, assemble frameworks for study from obscure sources, and make the useful fruits of specialised study available to a wider readership.

History of the Constitution.

In his *Dictionary*, Johnson's relevant definitions of Constitution are, "6. Established form of government; system of laws and customs," and "7. Particular law; established usage; establishment; institution." There was not, in the eighteenth century, the notion of a constitution (by Johnson's sixth definition), being a written text. The fifth edition (1815) of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* devotes only six lines to the subject, whereas the equivalent entry in the 1965 edition takes up ten columns. Legal histories in the seventeenth century usually had a political agenda, the issue being whether ultimate sovereignty resided historically in the parliament or the monarch. As an undergraduate at Oxford, Johnson had with him two discussions of the issue, Salmasius's *Defensio Regia pro Carolo I* (1649) and

³⁹ There seems to be no authority other than Johnson for the statement that the topic of the three Croonian (or Crounian) Lectures was "a history of the revival of learning." The lectures were not published, and Johnson seems to be wrong in saying that Akenside did not finish the series. See Charles Theodore Houpt, *Mark Akenside: A Biographical and Critical Study* (1944; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1970), 134 and fn.

⁴⁰ Robert DeMaria, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading*. Johns Hopkins U.P. (Baltimore, 1997), 92.

Milton's reply to it, *Defensio pro Populo Anglicano* (1650).⁴¹ Although the issues were still of interest, Johnson believed the matter to have been decided; he pleads in the Preface to the *Dictionary* that Englishmen "make some struggles for our language," in the same way that "we have long preserved our constitution."⁴²

Johnson was always interested in the law and political history, as his library shows, and would have been well-equipped to write such a work. He owned "30 vols of acts of parliament" and other collections of statutes (*SJL*, 106). In 1743, he wrote to Edward Cave about an "Historical Design" (subsequently unfinished, and since lost), which was to be a large and comprehensive history of the British Parliament.⁴³ From 1766 to 1770, he assisted Robert Chambers as Vinerian professor at Oxford with the preparation of his Lectures on English Law. Discussing this latter work, Robert DeMaria says that "perhaps the whole emphasis of the Lectures on strict inquiry, beginning with a strict inquiry into the history of law, is Johnson's most important contribution."⁴⁴

TRANSLATIONS (10)

Translation of the History of Herodian.

Herodian (fl. c. 230 AD.), *History of the Roman emperors, from the death of Marcus Aurelius to the accession of Gordian III* (i.e., 180-238 AD). *SJL* has an edition in the original Greek with a Latin translation by Politian (Geneva, 1581), which, DeMaria points out, is "apparently identical to no. 1081 in volume 3 of the *Harleian Catalogue*."⁴⁵ A translation by C.B. Staphylton into English heroic verse was published in 1652.

Aristotle's Rhetorick. A translation of it into English.

SJL held at least four editions of Aristotle's works. The first English version of the *Rhetorica* was a summary outline, *A Briefe of the Art of Rhetoricke* by Thomas

⁴¹ Aleya Lyell Reade, *Johnsonian Gleanings* (1909-52), 10 v. (New York: Octagon Books, 1967), v, 215.

⁴² *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 v. (London: Strahan, [et al.], 1755), Preface, C2' (para. 91).

⁴³ *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford. 5 v. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U.P., 1992-94), 1, 34. (Hereafter cited in the text by volume and page, as *Letters*.) This project will be listed later in this article.

⁴⁴ DeMaria, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 238.

⁴⁵ DeMaria, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 105.

Hobbes, published in London in 1637. Sir Thomas Wilson's *The Arte of Rhetorique, for the use of all suche as are studious of eloquence, sette forth in Englische* (1553; many reprints), is not a translation of Aristotle, but Wilson seems to have been acquainted with it.⁴⁶ Johnson also had a copy of Wilson, which he gave to George Steevens in 1765.⁴⁷ The first edition of the text of the *Rhetorica* to be published in England was by Theodore Goulston in 1619, after which, as Herrick remarks, "The studious seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were to make Aristotle a veritable dictator in literary criticism."⁴⁸ The first complete translation, *Aristotle's Rhetoric; or The True Grounds and Principles of Oratory* (1686); the identity of its translator(s) is unknown.⁴⁹

Aristotle's Ethicks. An English translation of them, with Notes.

SJL has an edition of the *Nichomachean Ethics*, by Denis Lambin (Basel, 1566). There was an English version by John Wilkinson (1547), and another, by E. Pargiter, *Ethica: Of Morals to Nicomachus*, was published in 1745.

Geographical Dictionary from the French. Utrecht.

This refers to Michel-Antoine Baudrand's *Dictionnaire géographique universel, contenant une description exacte des états, royaumes, villes, forteresses, montagnes, ccps, isles, presqu'iles, lacs, mers, golfes, détroits. &c. de l'univers* (1701). The earlier Latin work of which this was a revision, *Geographia ordine litterarum disposita* (1682), was in *SJL*.⁵⁰ In a note (not included in previous transcriptions of the *Designs*) Johnson specifies the Utrecht edition of 1711, a "Nouv. ed. cor. & beaucoup augm." Although there seems not to have been an acknowledged English translation, there were at least half a dozen eighteenth-century English geographical dictionaries (for example, Richard Brookes's *The*

⁴⁶ Johnson gives a passage from "Dr. Wilson," on the state of the English language in his time, at the conclusion of his "History of the English Language" in the *Dictionary* (K2), introducing him as "a man celebrated for the politeness of his style, and the extent of his knowledge."

⁴⁷ Fleeman, *Copies of Books*, item 284.

⁴⁸ See Marvin T. Herrick, "The Early History of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* in England," *Philological Quarterly* 5 (1926), 242-57 (p. 257).

⁴⁹ See *The Rhetorics of Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Lamy*, ed. John T. Harwood (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois U.P., 1986), 2, 3 and fn.

⁵⁰ A work which rivalled Baudrand's was Louis Moréri's *Le Grand dictionnaire historique, ou le mélange curieux de l'histoire sacrée et profane* (1674). *SJL* has the 2nd edition of this work (1681), and Boswell records Johnson expressing admiration for it (*Life* IV, 311). There were English translations of Moréri by Jeremy Collier (1694, 1701, 1705, 1721).

General Gazetteer: or, Compendious Geographical Dictionary [1762] passed through twelve editions), some of which acknowledge a general indebtedness to the work of Baudrand, Moréri and others. Johnson's interest in geography is further expressed by his writing a preface for *A Dictionary of Ancient Geography* (1773) by his former amanuensis, Alexander McBean.

Hierocles upon Pythagoras translated into English, perhaps with notes. — This is done by Norris.

Hierocles (of Alexandria), Stoic ethicist (fl. c. 430 AD); his *In aureum Pythagoreorum carmen commentarius*, was translated as *Hierocles upon the Golden Verses of the Pythagoreans*, by John Norris (London, 1682). *SJL* has an edition of the text by Meric Casaubon (1655), and another edition, possibly that of Needham (1709). The *Carmen Aureum* or *Golden Verses* itself is a poem of 71 verses, for which recent scholarship suggests a date of c. 350-300 BC, expressing the ethical and philosophical teachings of the school of Pythagoras.⁵¹ Nicholas Rowe made an English version, *The golden verses of Pythagoras* (1716), which Johnson thought "tedious" (*Lives* II, 77). The *Golden Verses* were highly regarded in classical times, and there are four extant commentaries, of which this Neo-Platonic reading by Hierocles was the best known and most substantial. (The text called the "Jests of Hierocles," which was also published in Needham's edition, is probably not by Hierocles, and the authorship of the translation of it in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1741,⁵² which Boswell attributes to Johnson (*Life* I, 150), is now uncertain. Johnson does however refer to this text in his Preface to Shakespeare.⁵³)

Tully's Tusculan Questions, a translation of them.

Cicero's *Tusculanae Disputationes*, or Table-talks at Tusculum, is a dialogue about the value of philosophy. *SJL* has a number of editions of Cicero's works. This and the following are two of Cicero's works of general philosophy. An English translation by John Dolman, *Those fyve questions which Marke Tullye Cicero,*

⁵¹ *The Pythagorean Golden Verses: with an introduction and commentary*, ed. Johan C. Thom (Leiden and New York: E.J. Brill, 1995).

⁵² *GM*, XI (September, 1741), 477-49.

⁵³ *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo, intro. Bertrand H. Bronson, 2 v. (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1968), VII, 62 and n.4. Sherbo's note refers to Hill's and Greene's differing views of the translation. Robert DeMaria believes it to be Johnson's work (see DeMaria, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 92, 127).

disputed in his *Manor of Tusculanum*, was published in 1561, and anonymous translations in 1683 (*The Five Day's debate at Cicero's House in Tusculum*, thought to be by Christopher Wase), 1715 (*M. Tully Cicero's five books of Tusculan Disputations*) and 1758 (*The Tusculan Disputations*). Rather like Johnson himself, Cicero did not aim to be an original philosophical thinker, but "to provide Rome with a kind of philosophic encyclopedia,"⁵⁴ mainly derived from Greek sources.

Tully's *De Natura Deorum*, a translation of those Books.

Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*. This is a dialogue which presents the theologies of three schools of Greek philosophy, the Epicurean, Stoic and Academic. English translations were Cicero's *three books touching the nature of the Gods* (1683), and that by Franklin Thomas, *M. Tullius Cicero of the Nature of the Gods* (1741, 1775). Johnson had three books of Cicero with him as a young man at Oxford.⁵⁵

Benzo's *New History of the New World*, to be translated.

Girolamo Benzoni (1519- after 1566), *Historia del nuovo mundo* (1565); translated into French by Eustance Vignon as the *Histoire nouvelle du Nouveau Monde* (1579), which is, from his version of the title, presumably how Johnson knew the work. Benzoni was a sailor, and his work is autobiographical. No English translation appeared until 1857, *The History of the New World*, by W.H. Smyth, for the Hakluyt Society.

Machiavel's *History of Florence*, to be translated.

Le Istorie Fiorentine (1525), by Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), the writer and statesman best known as the author of *The Prince*, was translated into English as *The Florentine Historie* by T.B., Esquire [i.e., Thomas Bedingfield] (1595), and by M.K. (1674; rpt. Glasgow, 1761). *SJL* has a 1772 edition of Machiavelli's works edited by Johnson's friend Giuseppe Baretti. In the judgement of W.K. Ferguson, Florence was "always the leader in the cultural movements of the Renaissance."⁵⁶ Its humanist historians, beginning early in the fifteenth century with Leonardo

⁵⁴ John Ferguson, "Cicero," *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1965), v, 762.

⁵⁵ *Johnsonian Gleanings* v, 223.

⁵⁶ W.K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*, 9.

Bruni's *Historiarum Florentini Populi libri xii* (History of the Florentine People, in twelve books), saw the free city-states of Italy (rather than papal Rome) as the true successors of the Roman past. Florence was depicted as playing a crucial role in the revival of learning. Machiavelli's *Istorie* departed from this pattern in having a less negative view of the period which Petrarch had called the Dark Ages and a less self-congratulatory view of contemporary history.

Plutarch's *Lives* in English with notes.

The *Vitae Parallelae*, or *Parallel Lives*, of Plutarch (c. 50-120 AD), was very widely read. Some of it was lost in antiquity; it consists now of fifty Greek and Roman lives, mostly arranged in pairs, followed by an ethical comparison. The first edition was published in 1517; the English translation by Sir Thomas North, 1575-1603; the so-called Dryden edition, 1683-86. Boswell appeals to Plutarch, as "the prince of ancient biographers," to justify his own approach to writing *The Life of Johnson* (I, 31). This scheme was remarked on by Thomas Tyers in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for February 1785 — that is, before Hawkins or Boswell had published a transcription of the *Designs* — on the basis of what he calls Johnson's "literary memorandum-book." But he seems undecided as to his source, and also writes that "The booksellers gave it out as a piece of literary news, that he had an inclination to translate the *Lives of Plutarch* from the Greek."⁵⁷

CRITICAL EDITIONS (5)

New Edition of Fairfax's translation of Tasso with notes, Glossary, &c.

Torquato Tasso (1544-95); his epic poem, *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1574), or *Jerusalem Delivered*, was greatly admired in England, and was used as a source by Spenser. It was translated into English as *Godfrey of Bulloigne*, by Edward Fairfax (1600). The 4th edition of this translation was published in 1749, with a considerable number of alterations to the text and an index and glossary. Johnson discusses Tasso in relation to Cowley's epic poem *The Davideis* (1656; *Lives* I, 55) and subjoined to his 'Life of Waller' an extract from Fairfax's Tasso, "[a]s Waller professed himself to have learned the art of versification from Fairfax" (*Lives* I, 296). In proposing this appendix in a letter to John Nichols on 2 May, 1778, Johnson asked, "do you think a few pages of Fairfax would enrich our edition?"

⁵⁷ *Johns. Misc.* II, 372, n.4. See *GM* LV (February, 1785), 86.

Few readers have seen it, and it may please them" (*Letters* III, 116-17). Fairfax's nineteenth-century editor, Robert Aris Willmott, in commenting on these remarks, somehow imagined Johnson not to have been familiar with the poem: "If Johnson had read the book which he slighted, he might have escaped the disgrace of writing a dedication for Hoole."⁵⁸ Hoole is Johnson's friend John Hoole, for whose translation of Tasso (1763) Johnson wrote the dedication. He subscribed to the work,⁵⁹ and his copy is in *SJL*.

Chaucer, a new Edition of him, from Manuscripts and old Editions, with various readings, conjectures, remarks on his Language and the changes it had undergone from the earliest times to his age, and from his to the present. With Notes explanatory of customs &c, and references to Boccace and other Authours from whom he has borrow'd, with an account of the liberties he has taken in telling the Stories, his life, and an exact etymological Glossary.

SJL has John Urry's edition of Chaucer's complete works (1721), which was the first not to be printed in black letter (although this had not been part of Urry's design). Urry's edition was planned on a grand scale, but his editorial methods were not adequate to the task. In the most detailed single entry in the *Designs*, Johnson describes a very comprehensive edition, of which Thomas Lounsbury judges that "It was projected, if anything, on an even more extensive scale than that of either Urry or Morell [who published in 1737 a specimen of an ambitious edition that was never continued]," although Lounsbury goes on to say,

Scholarship suffered no loss by the failure to carry out a scheme which was probably never more than vaguely thought about. Literary criticism certainly has. An edition of Chaucer by Johnson could never have been an authority, but it would always have proved an entertainment.⁶⁰

More recent scholars will agree that this is an opinion based on an inadequate assessment of Johnson's serious commitment to scholarship and his deep interest in

⁵⁸ Robert Aris Willmott (ed.), *Godfrey of Bulloigne, or, Jerusalem Delivered*, by Torquato Tasso, trans. Edward Fairfax (London: Routledge, 1865), iii.

⁵⁹ Donald D. Eddy and J.D. Fleeman, *A Preliminary Handlist of Books to which Dr. Samuel Johnson Subscribed* (Charlottesville: The Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia, 1993), item 61.

⁶⁰ Thomas R. Lounsbury, *Studies in Chaucer: His Life and Writings* (1892), 3 v. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), I, 299.

editorial methods. All that he may have lacked would be the time and financial support necessary to execute such a demanding project. (See the note on the projected "Treatise on the Study of Polite Literature," below.) There was an essay, "Some Account of the Life and Writings of Chaucer," in the *Universal Visiter* (January 1757), which was attributed to Johnson when it was reprinted in the *European Magazine* after his death. Boswell rejected it (*Life* I, 306), and Fleeman finds no convincing evidence for it.⁶¹

Oldham's Poems. With Notes historical and critical.

John Oldham (1653-83); a collection of his *Poems and Translations* was published in 1683, and his *Works* (1684) went through twelve reprints in the next forty years. In 1722 the first edited edition of his works appeared, in two volumes. There was an edition, with memoir, in three volumes by E.R. Thompson, *The Compositions in Prose and Verse of Mr. John Oldham* (1770). Thompson was a Naval Officer, a very minor poet and a friend of Garrick. Oldham is not included in the *Lives*, although Johnson quotes him in the lives of Cowley and Butler. His poems include many imitations, a form which he pioneered, and have a mainly satirical bent. He notably imitated the third satire of Juvenal, the same satire which Johnson drew on for his *London*.

Roscommon's Poems, with Notes.

Wentworth Dillon, Earl of Roscommon (1633?-86), *Works* (1707); many reprints. Johnson, in the *Lives*, is very lukewarm about his work: he remarks on the scantiness of it, and that his poems are more correct than beautiful. He is more interested in Roscommon's design for "a society for refining our language, and fixing its standard" (*Lives* I, 232), although he is, of course, not sanguine about the possibility of its success. In this connection, *SJL* has Charles Gildon, *The Laws of Poetry* (1721), which is a commentary on three critical essays about the nature of poetry, by Roscommon (*An Essay on Translated Verse* [1684]) and two other seventeenth-century writers.

⁶¹ J.D. Fleeman, *A Bibliography of the Works of Samuel Johnson: Treating His Published Works from the Beginnings to 1984*, ed. James McLaverty, 2 v. (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 662 (item 56.1UV/1a).

Claudian, a new Edition of his works, cum notis Variorum, in the manner of Burman.

Claudius Claudianus (fl. 395-404 AD) was the last great Latin poet in the classical tradition, and was thought of by renaissance humanists as the last poet for nine centuries before Dante.⁶² Claudian wrote political and love poems, an unfinished mythological epic (*The Rape of Proserpine*) and many shorter poems. Johnson had an edition of Claudian by Nicholas Heinsius (Leyden, 1650) with him at Oxford,⁶³ and *SJL* has Claudian's *Opera* in an unspecified edition. Pieter Burmann (the elder, 1668-1741) was an eminent Dutch scholar, professor of history and rhetoric at Utrecht, then of Greek at Leyden, where he died. He prepared many editions of the Latin classics. Johnson wrote a life of Burmann for the *Gentleman's Magazine*⁶⁴ and owned his editions of Lucan, Ovid, Valerius Flaccus, Velleius Paterculus (all *SJL*), and Phaedrus (*Aesop's Fables*).⁶⁵ Some confusion has arisen from the fact that the Works of Claudianus were in fact published (Amsterdam, 1760) in an edition by Pieter Burmann; but this Pieter Burmann (1714-78) was the nephew of the above, and there seems no basis for A.L. Reade's conclusion⁶⁶ that this item was added to the *Designs* after 1760.

COLLECTIONS (11)

A Collection of Letters, translated from the Modern Writers, with some account of the several Authours.

Which modern writers? Foreign ones, since they are to be translated. Any further it would be foolish to speculate. In *The Rambler*, Johnson asks why few books of letters have been published in England and says that "it must be imputed to our contempt of trifles"; but follows this with the typically softening observation that

⁶² "After Claudian ... almost all poetry decayed ... [until] that great man Dante Allagherii [*sic*] ... set the fallen art upon its feet." Filippo Villani, *Liber de civitatis Florentiae famosis civibus* [Book concerning the Famous Citizens of the City of Florence] (c. 1382), cited in W.K. Ferguson, 20.

⁶³ Fleeman, *Copies of Books*, item 40. (The index in DeMaria, *Life of Samuel Johnson* identifies Daniel Heinsius, the father of Nicolaus, as the editor of Claudian, which is not the case. DeMaria gives a correct account in his discussion of the work in the more recent *Life of Reading* [1997], 82.)

⁶⁴ *Life* I, 153. "Account of the Life of Peter Burman," *GM* XII (April 1742), 206-10.

⁶⁵ Fleeman, *Copies of Books*, item 226.

⁶⁶ *Johnsonian Gleanings* V, 221.

the human condition requires us "to learn how to become little without becoming mean."⁶⁷ Two further books of letters will be encountered in the *Designs*.

A Collection of Letters from English Authours, with a preface, giving some account of the writers, with reasons for selection, and criticism upon styles, remarks on each letter if needful.

There were in Johnson's time many such compilations; they were frequently manuals for teaching the art of correspondence, which is likely to have been the ostensible object of this project, given its stylistic focus. Some would include letters of the famous as models. Such a work need only be as trivial or merely workmanlike as its compiler is prepared to make it. A writer is not likely to make a literary reputation by such a work, but it could be a useful and saleable book, and the contents could be selected to make a variety of points, both aesthetic and moral. From our perspective there are two interesting examples of the genre. *A compleat Introduction to the Art of Writing Letters ... to which is prefixed, A Grammar of the English Language*, by S. Johnson (1758), is mentioned by Powell (*Life* v, 553), who describes it as "an anthology of real and fictitious letters, preceded by a very compendious grammar, and a few brief remarks on letter-writing, trite, but not foolish." Another, with original letters, is *The new London letter writer: containing the compleat art of corresponding with ease, elegance, and perspicuity* [c. 1790], published by T. Sabine, and is said on the title page to be "by Samuel Johnson, M.A."⁶⁸ It almost certainly has nothing to do with Johnson, nor are there indications of this work having been written by the two contemporary writers who shared his name. The author's name as given is presumably a marketing deceit.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, ed. W.J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, 3 v. (New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 1969), "The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson," v. III-V. *Rambler* 152, v, 43-44.

⁶⁸ A selection edited and with engravings by Averil MacKenzie-Grieve, was published (London: Golden Cockerel, 1948). She notes in her Foreword that the original is a rare work in any edition. The one copy in ESTC is said to be "A new edition."

⁶⁹ Powell mentions the first of these works in connection with Johnson's discussion of his name (or what might be his name, i.e., "S. Johnson") being used by others, for their profit. See *Life* v, 295. There is, perhaps, another whole sub-category of Johnsonian bibliography here.

A Collection of Proverbs from various Languages.

This entry reminds Paul Korshin⁷⁰ of the *Adagia* of Erasmus, which was first published in 1500, radically reworked and expanded in 1508, and then republished numerous times throughout Erasmus's life, successively augmented. In its final version, it consisted of 4251 adages from Greek and Latin sources, with commentaries varying in length from a few lines to nine lengthy essays.⁷¹ Pat Rogers shows that Johnson did not scorn proverbial expressions; he respects them for "their attention to the daily facts of experience,"⁷² although he frequently re-words and re-thinks proverbs in the instances where he employs them. Johnson is aware that frequent repetition dulls the force of proverbs, as when he observes to Mrs. Thrale, on the death of a school-fellow, *Mors omnibus communis* (Death is common to all) and says ironically that this is "a new reflection," in order to stress that it is no less true for being a common-place (*Letters* 1, 372). As with the letters above and the epigrams below, it is the possibility of an edifying and amusing commentary, and the sense of engaging in an age-old moral conversation, which gives point to such an otherwise rather dry exercise of literary exhumation.

A Collection of Stories and Examples like those of Valerius Maximus.

Valerius Maximus (fl. C1st AD.) was the author of the *Factorum et dictorum memorabilium*, a popular collection of unreliable but interesting historical anecdotes, used as examples for rhetoricians. It was available in many editions and translations. *SJL* has an edition by Abraham Torrenius (Leiden, 1726).

From Ælian, a volume of Select Stories. Perhaps from others.

Claudius Ælianus (c. 170-235 AD) a Stoic rhetorician, whose works include *Varia historia*, a collection of moralising anecdotes, and *De historia animalium*. As Greene says, there were "numerous 16th- to 18th-century editions of both"; the title of the volume in *SJL* was not given in the sale catalogue. The stories were often used by Christian writers for sermon illustrations. There were English translations: *Clawlius. A registre of hystories, delivered in Englyshe*, by Abraham Fleming

⁷⁰ Paul J. Korshin, "Johnson and the Scholars," *Samuel Johnson: New Critical Essays*, ed. Isobel Grundy (London/Totawa, N.J.: Vision/Barnes & Noble, 1984), 51-69 (p. 62).

⁷¹ See Margaret Mann Phillips, *The 'Adages' of Erasmus: A Study with Translations* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1964).

⁷² Rogers, "Johnson and the Diction of Common Life," *Transactions of the Johnson Society of Lichfield* (1982), 8-19 (p. 13).

(1567), and *Aelianus Claudius - his various history*, by Thomas Stanley (1665; 3rd edn. 1677). Johnson recommends Aelian to his cousin, Samuel Ford, in order to improve his Greek (*Letters* 1, 11).

Collection of Travels, Voyages, Adventures, and Descriptions of Countries.

Johnson was very interested in first-hand accounts of travels to remote regions and had eight or more such works in his library.⁷³ This project has the distinction of being the only one in the *Designs* that it could be argued was brought to execution. Johnson wrote the Introduction to a series of small (18mo) volumes, published monthly, called *The World Displayed; or, a curious collection of voyages and travels, selected from the writers of all nations*, 20 v. (1759-61). The work was compiled under the direction of the publisher, John Newbery, and although the details of its authorship are beyond discovery, Allen Hazen says, "I ... find nothing improbable in the suggestion that Goldsmith and Smart prepared the volumes, and that Johnson who knew the general plan of the work furnished the Proposals and the Introduction."⁷⁴ The individual volumes passed through many editions, and there was a 10 v. edition, and an edition revised by William Mavor, published by Newbery's firm in 1796-97. The Introduction describes voyages of discovery, mainly around Africa, made before those of Columbus (with an account of which the main text of the first volume commences), and was compiled by Johnson from two Spanish authorities.

Although anyone may have compiled a work to fit this description, and many did, that compiled by Johnson's friend Samuel Derrick is another good example; it was called: *A Collection of Travels, thro' various parts of the world; but more particularly thro' Tartary, China, Turkey, Persia, and the East-Indies* (1762), 2 v. The date would suggest that it was designed to capitalise on the success of *The World Displayed*. Derrick (1724-69) was a very minor poet and man of letters, known to Johnson and Boswell, and whose career weaves in and out of the *Life*.

⁷³ See *SJL*, entries under Boswell, Capper, Cook, Drummond, Greaves, Hughes, Phipps, T. Shaw, Twiss.

⁷⁴ Johnson, *Prefaces and Dedications*, ed. Allen T. Hazen (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1937), 217.

Maxims, Characters, and Sentiments, after the manner of Bruyère, collected out of Ancient Authours, particularly the Greek, with apophthegms.

Jean de La Bruyère (1645-96): *Les Caractères de Théophraste, traduits du grec; avec, Les Caractères, ou, les mœurs de ce siècle* (1688). There were eight editions of this book in the next seven years. The first part of the book is a translation of the Greek *Characters* of Theophrastus, the second descriptions of various of La Bruyère's contemporaries, which made the work both popular and controversial. English translation, *The Characters, or the manners of the age* (1699, 1700). In his 'Life of Addison,' Johnson remarks that although "it is written without connection," the work "certainly deserves great praise for liveliness of description and justness of observation" (*Lives* II, 93). He discusses an anecdote from the *Caractères* in *Adventurer* 128.

Classical Miscellanies, Select Translations from ancient Greek and Latin Authours.

Books of this kind, of translated fragments from the classics, may be looked on as literary convenience food; but Johnson, with his own strong belief in literary utility, would sympathise with the humble reader, who desires to read the classics but needs the guidance of a scholar or more experienced reader. The compiler of such a book would typically be a hack writer with a scholarly education, who has done the hard work of thoroughly reading the classical texts; the unscholarly, busy or lazy are able to, in effect, read the best of the compiler's readings. The gathering of useful and portable fragments from one's reading, and recording them for later reference, is the keystone of all scholarship, and in the renaissance, when the books themselves were more rare, "[c]ollecting of common-places was part of the educational training of all students."⁷⁵ Johnson knew that it could no longer be assumed that all readers would have been educated in the classical languages and thought it worthwhile to include English translations of the mottoes to *The Rambler* when the papers were reprinted in volumes.

Judgement of the Learned upon English Authours.

If this was intended to be an anthology of criticism, it would make an appropriate companion to the History of Criticism, projected above. Alvin Kernan points out that Johnson "thought of writing a *history* of criticism, not a *poetics*,"⁷⁶ and this

⁷⁵ Marjorie Donker and George Muldrow, *Dictionary of Literary-Rhetorical Conventions of the English Renaissance* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood, 1982), 46.

⁷⁶ Alvin Kernan, *Printing Technology, Letters, and Samuel Johnson* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U.P., 1987), 266.

project also emphasises his preference for empirical accounts rather than systematised philosophical speculations.

Collection of Epigrams, with notes and observations.

An Epigram, according to Johnson in the *Dictionary*, is "A short poem terminating in a point." Epigrams were a very popular form, on classical models, and many collections were published, often translated from the classics. One such is *A collection of epigrams. To which is prefix'd, a critical dissertation on this species of poetry* (London, 1727), which went through a number of editions, with a second volume appearing in 1737. It is attributed to Johnson's partner in the Harleian enterprise, William Oldys (1696-1761). Johnson wrote a Latin version of Oldys's epigram 'The Fly, An Anacreontic.'⁷⁷ Johnson also owned and annotated a copy of Inocui Sales's *Collection of New Epigrams* (1694).⁷⁸ Johnson said, apropos of his assistance to Elphinston with his translation of Martial's epigrams, that "[I] am a little of an epigrammatist myself, you know" (*Life* III, 258). There are among his poems many short verses, translated and original, in justification of this remark. His collected *Rambler* papers, with their epigrammatical translations of the classical notices by which they were advertised in newspapers in the days prior to publication, and the frequency with which they use commonplaces (or purported commonplaces) as reference points in discussion, might themselves almost be said to fulfill the specifications for this project.⁷⁹

A point which could be made here as well as at other entries in the *Designs*, is that Johnson is deeply attracted to short, memorable, semi-oral texts, variously called maxims, proverbs, precepts, dicta, sententia, adages and apophthegms, as well to the more distinct and specific forms of epigrams and anecdotes, as well as to collections and miscellanies of such texts. More than a dozen items in the *Designs* could be said to partake of these modes. This style of text fits with Johnson's reputation as a talker, whose conversation is forceful and pithy. But his conversation in its turn sounded to his contemporaries like a book. These short forms are frequently employed in written texts as the basis for

⁷⁷ See Barry Baldwin, *The Latin & Greek Poems of Samuel Johnson: Text, Translation and Commentary* (London: Duckworth, 1995), 109-12.

⁷⁸ Fleeman, *Copies of Books*, item 238.

⁷⁹ See Isobel Grundy, "Samuel Johnson: Man of Maxims?", in Grundy, ed., 13-30.

uplifting or cautionary generalizations about the moral life — as in Erasmus's *Adages* — and as such were very popular in the renaissance.⁸⁰ The project described immediately below, and the two works that I describe in connection with it, are also demonstrations of the use of print for what is essentially a pre-print scholarly practice, of reading in order to find and transcribe "sentences," perhaps into one's own book, a "commonplace" collection that can be kept after the few manuscript books which any scholar may consult are no longer accessible. Such practices figure scholarly and literary labours not so much as the "creative" composition of original work, but the preservation, augmentation and circulation of ideas.

Comparison of philosophical and Christian Morality, by Sentences collected from the Moralists and Fathers.⁸¹

This is a project more characteristic of the seventeenth than the eighteenth century, but one with a strong appeal to Johnson, presumably with the point of showing the coincidence of moral teaching among the wise of whatever tradition, and hence testimony to what is variously called common sense or the natural law. Paul Korshin observes that this project "Surely would have encompassed Stoicism and would thus have been indebted to Lipsius,"⁸² the sixteenth-century Belgian humanist scholar, whose ground-breaking studies of Stoicism were inspired by Seneca. Johnson owned an edition of Lipsius's collected works. He also had a work called *Homeri, Poetarum omnium seculorum facile Principis, Gnomologia*, ed. Jacobus Duportum [i.e., James Duport] (1660), which is a selection of passages from Homer, in Greek and Latin, with an extensive Latin commentary, together with references to parallel ideas and expressions from the Bible. (*SJL* also has Duport's translation of the Psalms into Greek and Latin.)

Johnson also had among his books (from 1732, when he inscribed and dated the book) a copy of a seventeenth-century Latin work, *Manuductio ad Coelum: Medullam continuens Sanctorum Patrum, & veterum Philosophorum*

⁸⁰ See the entries for 'Common-place,' 'Copia,' 'Epigram' and (particularly) 'Sententia' in Donker and Muldrow.

⁸¹ G.B. Hill suggests that this project is what Tyers refers to, when he says, "A system of morals next was proposed"; though when, next to what, and proposed by whom, Tyers does not say. Again, my feeling is that Tyers has seen the *Designs*, and is attempting by his confident vagueness to suggest he knows more about Johnson's literary schemes and activities than he does. See Tyers, "Biographical Sketch," *Johns. Misc.* II, 373 and n.1.

⁸² Korshin, "Johnson and the Scholars," 62.

(1658), by Cardinal Giovanni Bona (1609-74), which he annotated.⁸³ This work was very popular in English, translated: by Sir Roger L'Estrange as *A Guide to Eternity: extracted out of the writings of the holy fathers and ancient philosophers* (1672; 6th ed. 1712); by James Price, *A Guide to Heaven: or moral instructions compiled partly out of the maxims of holy fathers, and partly out of the sentences of antient philosophers* (1675); and into verse by James Chamberlayne (1681). The work is in thirty-five short chapters, dealing mainly with the various vices and virtues. Bona does not distinguish between Christian and pagan thought, weaving both into his short essays. Johnson's project seems more scholarly and critical — not so obviously devotional, although a text which a certain kind of reader would put to devotional use.⁸⁴

LIVES (2)

Lives of the Philosophers, written with a polite air, in such a manner as may divert, as well as instruct.

The classical exemplar of such a compilation is the *De Vitis Philosophorum*, of Diogenes Laertius (c. C3rd AD) which gives a summary of the lives and teachings of ancient philosophers from Thales to Epicurus. An edition of 1583 was in *SJL*. Gilles Ménage, a seventeenth-century French scholar whom Johnson greatly admired, wrote a long commentary on it, *In Diogenem Laertium Observationes et Emendationes* (1663).⁸⁵ There were a number of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century works on Diogenes' model. *SJL* has a 1743 edition of Thomas Stanley's compendious *The History of Philosophy: containing the lives, opinions, actions and discourses of the philosophers of every sect* (1655-61), based on that of Diogenes. In conversation, Johnson quoted *ana* of Aristotle from Diogenes, that "He who has friends, has no friend" (*Life* III, 289, also 386), and that "there was the same

⁸³ Fleeman, *Copies of Books*, item 28. Johnson had an edition published in Cologne, 1671. DeMaria, *Life of Reading*, 124, says that this is the first publication, although *NUC* records a copy with the imprint "Romae, typis Angeli Bernabò, 1658," which is given by the *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (1960-97) as the first publication. DeMaria discusses this book and the importance to Johnson of the kind of reading which it provides, although he does not note that Johnson's *Designs* includes a very similar item.

⁸⁴ C.S. Lewis provides a collection of precepts from a variety of spiritual traditions, which he calls "Illustrations of the Tao," as an Appendix to *The Abolition of Man: or, Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (1946; Rpt. London: CollinsFount, 1978), by which he aims to illustrate the consistency of natural law. But he notes, "For those who do not perceive its rationality, even universal consent could not prove it" (49).

⁸⁵ Ménage also wrote, as a sort of supplement to Diogenes, the *Historia Mulierum Philosopharum* (Leyden, 1690), the History of Woman Philosophers.

difference between one learned and unlearned, as between the living and the dead" (IV, 13). In his essays, he quotes three times, from Diogenes, the *ana* of Socrates on surveying the fair at Athens, "How many things are here which I do not want!"⁸⁶ Robert Folkenflik speculates that an anecdote from Diogenes, about Diogenes the Cynic, may be the remote 'source' for Johnson's famous refutation of Berkeley.⁸⁷

A modern model for Johnson may have been the work of the remarkable Bernard de Fontenelle (1657-1757), a man of letters and a writer on science, who was the secretary of the French Academy for most of his long life. In this role, it was his responsibility to publish the memoirs of the Academy, and to write its history, which he did in a series of annually published volumes, *Histoire de l'Académie royale des Sciences* (1702-42). Fontenelle supplemented this work with the *Histoire du renouvellement de l'Académie royale des sciences en M.DC.XCIX, et les éloges historiques des tous les academiciens mort depuis ce renouvellement* (1708), and the *Histoire de l'Académie royale des sciences, depuis son établissement en 1666, jusqu'à 1686* (1733). A selection of the biographical parts of these works was translated by John Chamberlayne, *The Lives of the French, Italian and German philosophers, late members of the Royal Academy of Sciences in Paris* (1717). Murphy tells us that Johnson regarded Fontenelle's work as a model of biographical composition, saying of him and some other writers, "They have *embalmed* the dead."⁸⁸ Johnson had translated a short work of Fontenelle's for the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1741 (*Life* I, 150)⁸⁹, and Boswell records him in 1778 at the Thrales' reading the *Mémoires de Fontenelle*, "leaning and swinging upon the low gate into the court, without his hat" (*Life* III, 247). This is the Abbé [Nicolas-Charles-Joseph] Trublet's *Memoires pour servir à l'histoire de la vie et des ouvrages de M. de Fontenelle* (1759).

We should keep in mind that *philosopher* is defined in Johnson's *Dictionary* as "A man deep in knowledge, either moral or natural." He does not

⁸⁶ *Idler* 37, *Adventurer* 67, and 119. Samuel Johnson, *'The Idler' and 'The Adventurer'*, ed. W.J. Bate, J.M. Buliitt, L.F. Powell (New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 1963), 116, 384-85, 466.

⁸⁷ Folkenflik, "That Man's Scope," in Grundy (ed.), 39-40.

⁸⁸ Arthur Murphy, "An Essay on the Life and Genius of Samuel Johnson, LL.D." (1792), *Johns. Misc.*, I, 434 (Murphy's italics).

⁸⁹ "A Panegyric for Dr. Morin," *GM* XI (August 1741), 375-77. See Fleeman, *Bibliography*, 59 (item 41GM11).

mean (or at least, not exclusively) the highly abstract academic professionals, but teachers of wisdom more broadly. A modern *Lives of the Philosophers* by Johnson would have been an appropriate companion series to his *Lives of the Poets*. Throughout the *Designs*, in the Characters after Bruyère, the translation (and the following design, an imitation) of Plutarch, the biographical part of his renaissance history, and the biographical prefaces and commentary to the collections of letters, we see Johnson's love of "the biographical part of literature" and the value he assigns to 'life-writing' as a means of Criticism in its broadest sense: an instruction in the art of living.

Lives of Illustrious Persons, as well of the active as the Learned. in imitation of Plutarch.

Plutarch has been referred to above. This project would presumably supplement Plutarch with the lives of more modern notables, in the same way as I imagine the previous project as a modern supplement to Diogenes Laertius.

DICTIONARIES (3)

A Dictionary to the Common Prayer in imitation of Calmet's Dictionary of the Bible.

The work referred to here is Augustin Calmet (1672-1757), *Dictionnaire historique, critique, chronologique, géographique, et littéral de la Bible* (1722-25) 4 v., English translation by S. D'Oyly and J. Colson (1732) 3 v. (Another *Dictionary of the Bible* [1779] was written by Johnson's former amanuensis, Alexander McBean, whose *Geographical Dictionary* was mentioned above.) Johnson also noted in one of his diaries that (on 2 March, 1766) he "Thought on writing a small book to teach the use of the Common Prayer."⁹⁰ No such guide to the Anglican liturgy existed in Johnson's day, although there were two very late eighteenth-century works along these lines, *A Dictionary for the Book of Common Prayer* (Sherborne, 1793) and John Malham, *A Dictionary of the Common prayer, or, Church of England man's companion. Being an ... explanation of more than 350 words or phrases* (1795). Four of Johnson's copies of the Common Prayer are known.⁹¹ In one of these described by Robert DeMaria, Johnson has "numbered

⁹⁰ Samuel Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, ed. E.L. McAdam, Donald and Mary Hyde (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1958), 103. Hereafter cited in the text as *Diaries*.

⁹¹ Fleeman, *Copies of Books*, items 42-45.

the pages and lettered the verses for easy reference," and he also "took the trouble to appropriate or tip in some blank pages at the back of the book for 'observations'."⁹²

Dictionary of Ancient History and Mythology.

Dictionaries of classical mythology (that is, not including history) have been discussed above, under the 'History of Heathen Mythology.' But a number of such works as this (i.e., of history *and* mythology) also appeared in the eighteenth century, the one which best conforms with Johnson's description being *An historical, genealogical, and classical dictionary: containing the lives & characters of all the illustrious personages in the several ages and nations of the world ... With an abstract of heathen mythology, and of the history of the heathen deities in particular* (London, 1742), 2 v.

Poetical Dictionary of the English tongue.

Fussell asserts that this was "doubtless planned as a poet's handbook ... with rhyming dictionary and prosodic instructions";⁹³ but this might be over-optimistic. A contemporary publication which seems admirably to fulfil this project is *A Poetical Dictionary; or, the beauties of the English Poets, alphabetically displayed. Containing the most celebrated passages in the following authors, Shakespeare [to]... Smart* (1761), in 4 volumes. This is said (CBEL, ESTC, NUC) to have been edited by Johnson's friend, Samuel Derrick, who has been referred to above. It is not a dictionary of poetical, literary or critical terms, but an alphabetically arranged collection of passages of verse, by topic. The passages do not seem particularly to have been chosen with a view to illustrating word usage.

MISCELLANEOUS (7)

Treatise on the Study of Polite Literature, containing the History of Learning, directions for editions, commentators, &c.

This project is a centrally Johnsonian one: it proposes the mastery of vast fields of scholarship, with the intention of making scholarly endeavour compassable, and enabling the further diffusion of knowledge through scholarly editions of the works

⁹² DeMaria, *Life of Reading*, 58-59.

⁹³ Fussell, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing*, 23.

of the learned (of which he proposes particular examples elsewhere in the *Designs*). Paul Korshin, in writing about the "kinds of endeavour" which constituted scholarship in Johnson's day, identifies the category of "*books on method*" such as "books of logic or rhetoric, handbooks of scholarly terminology ... or guides to a particular kind of knowledge ... and approaches to scholarly method [and] ... works dealing with the classification of all learning, guides to bibliography, and synopses of scholarship."⁹⁴ A number of works in the *Designs* seem to fit these types, but most particularly this entry.

I have already mentioned Johnson's interest in and admiration for scholarly editors as "restorers of learning." DeMaria also notes that Johnson cared not only for the texts of the classics, but the scholarly commentary and the editors who provided it. He observes that "Johnson became increasingly sophisticated about scholarship as he got older, acquiring more editions of his favorites and forming opinions about their quality."⁹⁵ Such a collection of books would clearly be necessary for the execution of this project.

A Body of Chronology, in verse, with Historical notes.

What seems to the twentieth-century mind a bizarre combination of serious history (i.e., not a satire) with an imaginative or trivial form was not uncommon in the eighteenth century. The use of verse rather than prose is presumably for didactic purposes — to attract children and others and to enable them better to commit dates and events to memory. Samuel Wesley (the father of John, the founder of Methodism) produced histories of both the New Testament (1701) and the Old (1704) in verse. Other similar works are: John Fellowes, *The History of the Holy Bible ... Attempted in easy verse* (1713); Charles Egerton, *A New History of England, in verse* (1780); [Edward ("Ned") Ward,] *The History of the Grand Rebellion ... Digested into verse* (3 v., 1713). Chamberlayne's verse translation of Bona's *Manuductio* has already been mentioned. We can see from this list that 'translation' into verse is a process which seemed particularly appropriate for works that serve pious and patriotic purposes.

⁹⁴ Korshin, "Johnson and the Scholars," 53, 57. Korshin's italics.

⁹⁵ DeMaria, *Life of Reading*, 92-93.

Chronology itself was regarded into Johnson's time as a study separate from and necessarily prior to the study of history. In the Preface to *The Preceptor*, Johnson describes Chronology as "the Science by which Events are ranged in their Order, and the Periods of Computation are settled."⁹⁶ Paul K. Alkon, in a detailed study of "Johnson and Chronology," observes that chronological tables, which give spatial representation to relationships in time, enable the reader to take in at a glance the extent and sequence of history, and therefore allow a "ready appreciation of moral patterns. God's providential designs are made visible."⁹⁷ Chronology is a means of situating oneself morally, in relation to other people and times, giving a sense of mortality and the transience of fashion. Johnson attempts to imagine the mental landscape of someone with a degree of learning but without a distinct and accurate impression of broad chronological relationships: "he will consume his Life in useless reading, and darken his Mind with a Croud of unconnected Events, his Memory will be perplexed with distant Transactions resembling one another, and his Reflections be like a Dream in a Fever, busy and turbulent, but confused and indistinct."⁹⁸ Paul Korshin observes that this project "doubtless would have derived to some extent (as all such works after the early seventeenth century did) from the younger Scaliger's chronological labours."⁹⁹ Korshin means *Scaliger de Emendatione Temporum* (1583), to which Johnson refers in the Preface to *The Preceptor* as the ultimate reference for "the Technical Part of Chronology."¹⁰⁰ Johnson wrote dedications to two works of chronology: the *Chronological Tables of Universal History* (1762) by Lenglet de Fresnoy, and *A Complete System of Astronomical Chronology* (1763), by John Kennedy (a friend he had made years before during visits to Ashbourne). These and other works of chronology by Eusebius, Marshall, Newton and Petavius are in *SJL*.

A book of Letters upon all kinds of Subjects.

We have already encountered proposals for two collections of letters by other writers, for unknown purposes. It may be that Johnson has in mind the sort of

⁹⁶ "The Preceptor," *Prefaces and Dedications*, ed. Hazen, 182-83.

⁹⁷ "Johnson and Chronology," *Greene Centennial Studies: Essays Presented to Donald Greene in the Centennial Year of the University of Southern California*, ed. Paul J. Korshin and Robert R. Allen (Charlottesville: U.P. of Virginia, 1984), 143-71.

⁹⁸ "The Preceptor," 183.

⁹⁹ Korshin, "Johnson and the Scholars," 62.

¹⁰⁰ "The Preceptor," 183.

'correspondence' that we find in Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques* (1734, an English edition having already appeared, under the title *Letters concerning the English Nation*, in 1733). Voltaire is a correspondent, at least in the sense that newspapers have foreign correspondents, as an actual Frenchman in England purporting to write for a French audience. But a fashion for books of fictitious letters supposedly sent home from European countries by visiting foreigners was started by Giovanni Paolo Marana's *Letters writ by a Turkish Spy, who liv'd five and forty years at Paris* (1687-93, 22 edns. by 1734). Works in this genre include Charles Gildon's *The post-boy rob'd of his mail: or, the paquet broke open* (1692, 1693), Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* (1721), George Lyttelton's *Letters from a Persian in England to his friend at Ispahan* (1735), Marquis d'Argen's *Lettres Chinoise* (1739-40). Most famous of all is Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World* (first published periodically 1760-61 and gathered under this title in 1762), in which a fictitious Chinese visitor describes contemporary English events and manners. Purported letters and collections of letters were literary devices used for a variety of satirical, political and didactic purposes. Sixty-five of the 208 papers of *The Rambler* make use of the device of the fictitious Letter to the Editor. Epistolary novels such as those of Richardson were also popular. The purported 'book of letters' is a literary device which offers many conveniences to the moral writer.¹⁰¹

A table of the Spectators, Tatlers, and Guardians, distinguished by figures into six degrees of value, with notes giving the reasons of preference or degradation.

These three series of periodical papers, by Addison, Steele and others, first appeared March 1711 to Sept. 1714, April 1709 to Jan. 1711 and March to Oct. 1713 respectively. They were the models for many later series of essay-periodicals, of which Johnson's own *Rambler* was to be the most famous. They were frequently republished. In 1776, Johnson himself wrote the Proposals for a new edition of *The Spectator*.¹⁰² An indication of their continuing popularity is that over forty years after their first publication there was published a book similar to what is here projected, *A General Index to the Spectators, Tatlers and*

¹⁰¹ See my essay, "The Moral Writer and the Struggle with Selfhood: Lewis's 'Screwtape' and Johnson's 'Mr Rambler,'" in *The Fantastic Self: Essays on the Subject of the Self*, ed. Janeen Webb and Andre Enstice (North Perth, W.A.: Eidolon, 1999), 206-13.

¹⁰² See Powell's notes at *Life* II, 503. The only known copy of the original Proposals leaf was reported and described by James Woodruff, *Notes and Queries* CCXVI (February 1971), 61-62. See also Fleeman, *Bibliography*, 1283 (item 76.11SP).

Guardians (1757; 2nd edn., 1760)¹⁰³ It is simply an alphabetical subject index to the three periodicals, claimed in its Preface to be no more than "an Endeavour to make these inestimable writings more useful"; it does not attempt to assign a value to the individual papers. We could speculate on the attraction exerted by large essay-series to index-makers; over a century later another such index appeared: William Wheeler, *The Spectator: A Digest-Index*. London (Routledge, 1892).

As I have said, Johnson was at all times attentive to paratextual issues. In his own *Rambler* essays, he demonstrates an awareness of the essay and the pamphlet as media far more useful and accessible than treatises and volumes, and of the functions of such devices as indexes.¹⁰⁴ Steele and Addison's series of essays, after their first publication as periodicals, appeared collected in dozens of multi-volumed editions. Johnson here proposes a tool by which to give readers access to this density of text, by providing (presumably) a summary of the contents, a point-score system as used by movie reviewers, and a brief assessment of each essay. There are various implications of such a project: that no reader will have time for the works in their entirety, that readers have different needs, and that some of the essays are more valuable than others. In 1776, Johnson remarked on the latter issue to Boswell: "Talking of 'The Spectator,' he said, 'It is wonderful that there is such a proportion of bad papers, in the half of the work which was not written by Addison; for there was all the world to write that half, yet not a half of that half is good....'" (*Life* III, 33). By Genette's analysis, this is an unauthorised form of "public epitext" to the work of Steele and Addison.

Considerations upon the present State of London.

Johnson's devotion to London is well-known. *SJL* has a 1754 reprint of John Stow's *Survey of London* (1598-1603), as well as a copy of Gwynne's *London and Westminster Improved* (1766), a book of proposals for enhancing the cityscape, and for which Johnson wrote the dedication to George III.

¹⁰³ The 'second edition' is the same work with a new title-page. See Henry B. Wheatley, *What is an Index?: A Few Notes on Indexes and Indexers* (London: Longmans, 1879), 24.

¹⁰⁴ See my article, "The *Rambler*'s Second Audience: Johnson and the Paratextual 'Part of Literature,'" *Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand Bulletin* 24:4 (Fourth Quarter 2000), 239-56.

Observations on the English Language, relating to words phrases and modes of speech.

Articles on aspects of language are still a very popular species of journalism. However, the "word-men of the press" (and radio) who arbitrate issues of linguistic correctness — people such as Ivor Brown, Frank Muir, Bill Bryson, Frank Devine, Israel Shenker — are seldom professional lexicographers, who are too aware of the dynamic nature of language to make the sorts of authoritative pronouncements that popular audiences require. Nevertheless, such a work as this design is a natural by-product of the labour of dictionary-making. The chief editor of the Oxford English Dictionaries 1971-84, Robert Burchfield, has, since completing the four volumes of *A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary* (1972-86), published a number of collections of lectures and articles about miscellaneous aspects of English, many garnered from a column he began in 1987 in the (London) *Sunday Times*, called "Words and Meanings." Since a dictionary is about words and words are about everything, lexicography can be used as a perspective from which a writer may authoritatively offer oblique comment on any subject.

Minutiæ Literariæ. Miscellaneous Reflections, Criticisms, Emendations, Notes.

This sounds like a one-man *Notes and Queries*, a grab-bag of notes about literature and the study of it. In his recent book on Johnson's reading, Robert DeMaria describes Johnson's fondness for books that "resemble notebooks already," and says that this "may be the kind of reading to which Johnson was most attracted."¹⁰⁵ It was the kind of material that he found in two of his favourites, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* and Macrobius, as well as anecdotes and *ana* — to which his own conversations have so conspicuously contributed.

Boswell records Johnson as being fond of little things, small ideas, minute observations and petty activities. On the Scottish tour Boswell observes, "I have seen him please himself with little things, even with mere ideas like the present" (i.e., the fancy of M'Leod giving him the islet of Isa, if he would live there for a month every year).¹⁰⁶ On another occasion, Johnson makes the comment that "Women have a great advantage that they may take up with little things, without disgracing themselves.... [A] man would never undertake great things, could he

¹⁰⁵ DeMaria, *Life of Reading*, 89.

¹⁰⁶ *Life* v, 249. *Tour to the Hebrides*, 23 September 1773.

[i.e., without disgrace] be amused with small." He proceeds to discuss knotting (i.e., macrame, which he had attempted) and knitting stockings (which he says is a good amusement) (*Life* III, 242). Johnson discusses his fondness for anecdotes, in very similar terms: "I fancy mankind may come, in time, to write all aphoristically, except in narrative; grow weary of ... all those arts by which a big book is made."¹⁰⁷ As he says in the Preface to the *Dictionary*, "A large work is difficult because it is large."¹⁰⁸ It is weariness that alienates us from the large or difficult; to undertake that which is small or easy is considerably better than doing or thinking about nothing, and may be sufficient to keep the mind active, which is in Johnson's view the great project. Such a book as this design may be better than larger histories or treatises simply because, being more easily readable, it may actually be read rather than left unopened. But his fondness for little things is, with regard to text, not simply a matter of avoiding weariness. In discussing Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Buriall* and *Garden of Cyrus*, he observes, "Some of the most pleasing performances have been produced by learning and genius exercised upon subjects of little importance. It seems to have been, in all ages, the pride of wit, to shew how it could exalt the low, and amplify the little."¹⁰⁹ To be profound on little subjects and on small occasions not only shows a writer's powers, but has the potential to elevate the minds of readers not accustomed to profundity, and to Johnson no doubt reinforces the sense that the world from highest to lowest is permeated with significance.

Poetry, and Works of Imagination (5)

Hymn to Ignorance.

In *Adventurer* 81, Johnson tells the story of "the Admirable" Crichton (1560-85?), one of whose lesser exploits was to have concluded a public disputation in Padua with an oration *ex tempore* "in commendation of ignorance."¹¹⁰ Robert DeMaria says of this project,

¹⁰⁷ *Life* v, 39. *Tour*, 16 August 1773.

¹⁰⁸ Preface, *Dictionary*, C2^r (para. 83)

¹⁰⁹ Johnson, "The Life of Sir Thomas Browne," in Sir Thomas Browne, *Christian Morals: The Second Edition with the 'Life' of the Author*, by Samuel Johnson, ed. S.C. Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1927), 23.

¹¹⁰ Johnson, *Adventurer*, 403.

It was a great seventeenth-century theme on which many writers from Fulke-Greville to Cowley performed, and its roots are in Christian literature, going back to Cornelius Agrippa, Nicholas of Cusa, and Lactantius. From thence it can be traced back to the wisdom literature of the Bible with interesting collateral expressions in Socratic teaching.... Ignorance is a theme of pious writers because a recognition of it leaves room for faith and religion. A hymn to ignorance would be a religious poem: it would be, like so much of Johnson's other writing, ironic and satirical, yet patient about human wishes and human achievements.¹¹¹

Thomas Gray (1716-71), the poet best known for *An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751), wrote a short and fragmentary "Hymn to Ignorance" in 1742. It was first published posthumously in 1775. This Dunciad-like subject attracted a number of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century moral satirists, particularly in the service of religious polemic. Book-length treatments include: Edmund Hiceringill, *A burlesque poem in praise of ignorance* (1708, but composed 58 years earlier); Edward Nicklin, *Pride and Ignorance, a poem* (1770); Michael Smith, *Christianity unmasked; or unavoidable ignorance preferable to corrupt Christianity. A poem* (1771); and Chapman Whitcomb, *A poem on religious ignorance, pride and avarice: or, The modern priest* (1795).

The Palace of Sloth, a vision.

James Thomson, whose poems comprising *The Seasons* (1726-30) are best known, published in 1748 a mock-Spenserian poem in two cantos, *The Castle of Indolence*. Johnson comments in the *Lives of the Poets*, that the poem "was many years under his hand, but was at last finished with great accuracy" (*Lives* III, 293-94).

Coluthus, to be translated.

The late-Greek poet, Colluthus (C4-5th AD) is known only for a long poem (although short for an epic), Homeric in form and inspiration, called *The Rape of Helen*. There was a critical edition by John Daniel von Lennep (Leovardiae [i.e., Leeuwarden], 1747) and an English verse translation by Edward Sherburne (London, 1651). In 1780, a translation into English verse was included in the volume *The Argonautics of Apollonius Rhodius*, translated by Francis Fawkes

¹¹¹ DeMaria, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 121-22.

[completed by Henry Meen], published by J. Dodsley. Fawkes (1720-77) and Johnson were associated in a number of ways over the years. Of Fawkes's translations of Anacreon, Johnson told Mrs. Thrale, "Frank Fawkes had done them very finely."¹¹² Johnson did a character of Collins for volume 12 of *The Poetical Calendar*, which Fawkes and William Woty had assembled as a supplement to Dodsley's collection. Johnson subscribed to Fawkes's translation, *The Idylliums of Theocritus* (1767), and there is a copy in *SJL*. Johnson is thanked in the Preface to this work for correcting part of it and for having "furnished [the author] with some judicious remarks."¹¹³

Prejudice, a Poetical Essay.

The primary sense of 'Prejudice' in the *Dictionary* is, "Prepossession; judgment formed beforehand without examination. It is used for prepossession in favour of any thing or against it." There are at least two poems which took 'prejudice' as a title and a theme: Timothy Brecknock (d. 1752), *A Prejudice Detected: an ethical epistle* (1752); and *An essay on prejudice; a poetical epistle to the Hon. C.J. Fox* (1781), and George Alexander Stevens, "Prejudice," in his *Songs, Comic and Satirical* (1788).

The Palace of Nonsense, a vision.

Ignorance, sloth, prejudice and nonsense: these are Johnson's four proposed topics for original verse. They all represent his impatience and disgust with human characteristics inimical to wise judgment and the useful exercise of the rational faculties. They would each have made an interesting target for what could only have been satirical treatment, and more interesting in the light of Bate's well-known identification of Johnson as a "satirist *manqué*,"¹¹⁴ who had all the equipment for satire but lacked the determination to be consistently uncharitable that satire requires.

¹¹² Hester Thrale, *Anecdotes. Johns. Misc.* 1, 176 (see also n.2).

¹¹³ Eddy and Fleeman, *Books to which Dr. Samuel Johnson Subscribed*, item 62. (Greene, in *SJL*, does not mention this personal connection between the two writers.)

¹¹⁴ W. Jackson Bate, "Johnson and Satire *Manqué*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies: In Honor of Donald F. Hyde*, ed. W.H. Bond (New York: Grolier Club, 1970), 145-60. Bate repeats and summarises his argument in his *Samuel Johnson*, 493-7.

I have indicated above, under particular entries, the ways in which some of the projects resemble Johnson's actual works.¹¹⁵ As noted, the only design which may possibly have developed, on Johnson's initiative, any further than being described in this list, is the 'Collection of Travels, Voyages' which resembles Newbery's *The World Displayed*. There is no evidence that Johnson himself took a single step toward executing any other of these designs. It is more significant that none of the projects on which Johnson actually embarked seems to be indicated here; although it is perhaps to be expected that a writer like Johnson, all of whose major literary labours were initiated by booksellers, would not devote serious work to any project which he had merely thought of himself.

Most of the *Designs* are works of scholarship, varying from popular compilations which could be assembled by "index-scholars,"¹¹⁶ translators, lexicographers and other "drudges of the pen"¹¹⁷ to works requiring considerable learning and sophistication — at least if they were to be done well. The subjects for the group of suggestions for poems and imaginative works seems very characteristic of Johnson, but we are surprised — perhaps, disappointed — that there are so few of them. Lawrence Lipking observes that "So far as we know, he did not dream of writing an epic poem,"¹¹⁸ although as we have seen, he did dream of editing or translating a number (Tasso, Claudian, Colluthus, and — yet to come — Camoens). But originality is not, in Johnson's mind, anything like as highly-esteemed a literary virtue as we regard it today. In writing of Watts's 'philosophical treatises' he notes that they are indebted to Le Clerc and Locke and comments that, "no man who undertakes merely to methodize or illustrate a system, pretends to be its author." It is sufficient praise to be able to say (as he proceeds to in Watts's case) that his work is "in the highest degree useful and pleasing" (*Lives* III, 309).

¹¹⁵ These may be summed up as follows: Resemblances to his work: *Directions for Piety* (posthumous *Prayers and Meditations*), *History of the Constitution* ("Historical Design," unfinished and abandoned; predates *Designs*), *Collection of Travels* (*The World Displayed*); resemblances to works by friends and associates: *History of Mythology* (Boyse's *New Pantheon*), *Collection of Travels* (Derrick's), *Geographical Dictionary* (McBean's), *Poetical Dictionary* (Derrick's), *Translation of Colluthus* (Fawkes'); resemblances to works for which Johnson wrote dedications: *State of London* (dedication to *London and Westminster Improved*), *Chronology* (dedications to Lenglet de Fresney, and Kennedy).

¹¹⁶ The Rev. Samuel Badcock, in a letter to John Nichol, told of having, in Johnson's presense, called Joseph Priestley an 'index-scholar.' Johnson, he said, "was not willing to allow him a claim to even that merit," and said that Priestley "borrowed from those who had been borrowers themselves" (quoted in *Life* IV, 408, n.). This may be taken to indicate not so much a particularly low opinion of Priestley, as Johnson's higher-than-customary regard for index-scholars.

¹¹⁷ *Rambler* 145; V, 10.

¹¹⁸ Lawrence Lipking, *Samuel Johnson: The Life of an Author* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard U.P., 1998), 241.

The *Designs* demonstrates Johnson's vital intellectual interest in scholarly methods, and we have noted throughout it his interest in the scholars themselves. The item on the list which we are likely to most regret his not having written is the "Treatise on the Study of Polite Learning," which was to include "directions for editions." Had he made any of the editions which are listed here, he could have said, as he did of the *Dictionary*, "I knew very well what I was undertaking, and very well how to do it, and have done it very well" (*Life* III, 405). Johnson envisages a literary climate of scholarly rivalry, in which competing editions of translations and texts challenge existing readings and spark learned debate. As Lipking observes, a "chain of commentary on commentaries" was the traditional pattern of classical scholarship, and Johnson followed this plan in his edition of Shakespeare.¹¹⁹ He was a prime mover in another such project, for Cave, being involved as editor and translator in the publication of two studies from the French by Jean-Pierre de Crousaz of Pope's *Essay On Man*.¹²⁰ The translation from Crousaz, *A Commentary on Mr. Pope's Principles of Morality, or Essay on Man* (1739), is the most obscure of all Johnson's accomplished works; it has only occasionally been attributed to him and has never been reprinted. It is a topical and opportunistic work which is very much in the spirit of entries in the *Designs*.

The sub-classification which I have made to the central sequences of the *Designs*, whilst revealing certain characteristics of the choice of projects, distracts us from noticing others. For example, the particular kind of literary effort which any of the projects would require seems not, for the purpose of the list, to be especially important. Thus, Johnson makes no distinction between original works of scholarship and works of scholarship to be translated, although the difference in the sort of labour required would be considerable — even if we allow for a less sharp distinction between translation and original writing.¹²¹ Johnson at least partly dictated his first published book, his translation of Lobo's *Voyage to Abyssinia*, from his bed — something he could hardly have done for a definitive edition of Chaucer, or a History of Criticism. Yet the short list of Poetry and Works of Imagination includes one (Colluthus) which is a translation — a labour as much of

¹¹⁹ Lipking, *Samuel Johnson*, 268.

¹²⁰ See O M Brack, "Samuel Johnson and the Translations of Jean Pierre de Crousaz's *Examen* and *Commentaire*," *Studies in Bibliography*, 48 (1995), 60-84. Brack has prepared an edition of the *Commentary*, which may yet appear in the Yale Edition of Johnson's Works.

¹²¹ Johnson's early Lives, of Sarpi, Boerhaave, Morin and Pieter Burmann, that he wrote for the *Gentleman's Magazine* (sometimes republished together with others as *Lives of Eminent Persons*), are mainly translated, abridged and paraphrased from various continental sources, with occasional comments. See Thomas Kaminski, *The Early Career of Samuel Johnson* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1987), 53 (Sarpi), 54 (Boerhaave), 145 (Morin), 154 (Burmann).

scholarship as of poetic imagination. And there are two histories of Italian city-states, Florence and Venice — the one to be translated from Machiavelli, the other to be written "in a compendious manner." In both of these cases the end results may look similar — two poems, two histories — but from the point of view of the writer, the type of ability and the amount of effort they would require are very different. But whether it is a translation, an edition, or an original composition, each involves 'making a book.' This suggests a possible conclusion about the status of the *Designs*.

List of further projects, with commentary

However, the question of the origins and purpose of the *Designs* manuscript may be, in the end, a less interesting subject than as full as possible an account of Johnson as a literary projector. For the sake of a complete coverage of the theme, I now list the other ideas for writing projects which are elsewhere mentioned in connection with Johnson, by him or by his associates, ordered chronologically by their first mention. Given that data about these forty-three further projects are gathered from wide variety of sources, and that the dating of each of them is not an issue (in the way that it is with the manuscript of the *Designs*), I shall in general not attempt to trace their literary precedents.

1742 "Charles of Sweden." Johnson wrote to John Taylor (10 August. *Letters* 1, 28 ff.), that he intended to "get [a play on] Charles of Sweden ready for this winter." He eventually used the example of the adventurous general Charles XII (1682-1718) seven years later, as something of a climax in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, ll. 191-222, and also describes him as a troublesome "royal projector" in *Adventurer* 99.

1743 "[A]n historical account of the British Parliament." This is how Boswell (*Life* 1, 155) identifies the "historical design," of which Johnson described the layout in a letter to Edward Cave (Autumn. *Letters* 1, 34-35). Donald Greene says that the 'Historical Design' was to concentrate especially on the reign of George I, but other than this, there appears no further light can be shed on this project.¹²²

¹²² Greene, *The Politics of Samuel Johnson*, 2nd edn. (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1990), 147-48, 313-14.

- 1746 "The Life of Alfred." Johnson had spoken with "warmth" of this project to his old tutor, William Adams (*Life* I, 177). Years after, he wrote to his friend Thomas Astle, who proposed to publish the will of King Alfred, "I have much curiosity after the manners and transactions of the middle ages, but have wanted either diligence or opportunity, or both" (17 July 1781. *Letters* III, 355). He had in his library two translations into Anglo-Saxon which were prepared under the supervision of the scholarly king: that of the *Historiarum Adversus Paganos* of Paulus Orosius (fl. 415), and of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, in the *editio princeps* (1644).
- 1750 A life of Walton. Moses Browne mentions the possibility of Johnson producing this work, in the Preface to his first edition (1750) of Walton's *Complete Angler*. This edition, which Browne says was "instigated" by Johnson, was the first to appear since the fifth edition of 1676, which was the last published in Walton's lifetime. Walton's modern bibliographer asserts that "The *Angler's* popularity dates from this edition."¹²³
- 1752 A translation of the *Lusiad* of Camoens. Johnson's intention is mentioned in a letter to Boswell by William Mickle, whose own translation of the Portuguese epic poem on the discovery of India was published in 1778 (*Life* IV, 251). Mickle acknowledges Johnson's encouragement, in an Introduction that Johnson himself dictated.¹²⁴
- 1753 A Catalogue of his works. Boswell had a partial list which Johnson made, with the heading "*Historia Studiorum*, May, 1753," which is now lost.¹²⁵ Later, Boswell (and others) tried to extract this information from Johnson, and Boswell says that he heard Johnson say that "he intended to do it" (25 April, 1778. *Life* III, 321-22).¹²⁶ In Johnson's last days, so his physician

¹²³ Rodolphe L. Coigney, *Izaak Walton: A New Bibliography, 1653-1987* (New York: James Cummins, 1989), 12.

¹²⁴ Fleeman, *Bibliography*, 1279 (item 76.8ML/1).

¹²⁵ Fleeman, *Documents & Manuscripts*, item 59.

¹²⁶ Boswell also mentions in the *Life* (I, 112), a list which he received from a friend of Johnson's, and which had been compiled in Johnson's presence by this friend with the assistance of Robert Levet. What is presumably a copy of this list, in Boswell's hand, is printed in Marshall Waingrow, ed., *The Correspondence and Other Papers of James Boswell Relating to the Making of the 'Life of Johnson'* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 5-8. The friend was Thomas Percy.

Richard Brocklesby wrote to Boswell, "Mr. Ste[e]vens took away (as I hear) the Catalogue of his works."¹²⁷ Soon after, George Steevens serially published a Johnsonian bibliography in *The European Magazine*, Dec. 1784 to April 1785.

Before 1754.

The Life of Dryden. Johnson told the company, at the famous dinner at the home of the publishers Charles and Edward Dilly in May 1777 where he met John Wilkes, that he had intended as "a young fellow" to write Dryden's life and had applied for materials "to the only two persons then alive who had seen him; these were old Swinney, and old Cibber" (*Life* III, 71). Owen Mac Swirney died in 1754, and Colley Cibber in 1757. The few scraps of information Johnson collected eventually made their way into *The Lives of the Poets*.

1755 "The Annals of Literature, foreign as well as domestick." Johnson made some notes under this heading in a memoranda-book, since lost (*Diaries*, 56). Boswell saw these notes, and included them in the *Life*, describing the project as a "Review or Literary Journal." He also quotes Johnson's mention in a letter (25 March) to Thomas Warton of the scheme for a *Bibliothèque* (*Letters* I, 101), and Dr. Adams's testimony to the seriousness of Johnson's intention, having seen Johnson in his parlour with "parcels of foreign and English literary journals" (*Life* I, 284). Had he brought the proposal to execution, it would have been a major and ongoing commitment, after the conclusion of his labour on the *Dictionary*. Boswell says, "The scheme, however, was dropped," but the Yale editors of Johnson's *Diaries* assert that this "project apparently became the *Literary Magazine*, which Johnson largely wrote and supervised, beginning in May 1756" (56 n.). In this identification they follow J.W. Croker, although J.D. Fleeman says that Johnson "was too quickly committed to preliminary work on Shakespeare ... to be more than an energetic contributor. Griffith Jones (1722—86) was a professional editor and is a likelier candidate than EJ for the editing of the *Lit. Mag.*"¹²⁸ Furthermore, as Brian Hanley

¹²⁷ Letter of 13 December 1784. See Waingrow, ed., *Correspondence ... of James Boswell*, 26.

¹²⁸ Fleeman, *Bibliography*, 689 (item 56.4LM, n.13), includes ref. to Croker.

points out, the three models which Johnson mentions in his diary entry, "Le Clerk — Bayle — Barbeyrac" (*Diaries*, 56), suggest a far more scholarly and international kind of a journal.¹²⁹

An edition of the unpublished writings of Sir Thomas More [?]. In a letter (7 August 1755. *Letters* 1, 112-13) to Thomas Warton in Oxford, Johnson gives his friend the titles of eleven of More's mss., which he knew from the published catalogue to be in the Bodleian,¹³⁰ and requests Warton to examine them for him. He asks if Warton could then "procure the young Gentleman in the library" to make a copy of the opening passages of each text, so that they may be "compared with what I have" (presumably, his own copy of More's works¹³¹), to see "whether they are yet unpublished." Johnson says that he will instruct the Oxford bookseller, Daniel Prince, to pay the costs of the transcription. This letter was published by Boswell (*Life* 1, 290-91), but has attracted no explanatory commentary from either his editors, or those of Johnson's *Letters*. That he was thinking seriously about an edition of a selection of More's works seems a reasonable conclusion.¹³²

Johnson had quoted More (seven of his works) at great length (sixteen folio columns) in the "History of the English Language" in the *Dictionary*. The 'History' and other preliminaries were the last parts of the *Dictionary* to be written, and Johnson had spent August 1754 in Oxford working on them in the libraries, and enjoying the companionship of Warton.¹³³ In the 'History,' he says that More wrote at a time when the language was "formed and settled" and that "his works are carefully and correctly printed," but further that "his works were considered as models of

¹²⁹ Brian Hanley, *Samuel Johnson as Book Reviewer: A Duty to Examine the Labors of the Learned* (Newark: U. of Delaware P., 2001), 59.

¹³⁰ What Johnson refers to as the "Catalogue of Bodl. MS." is the *Catalogus librorum manuscriptorum, Angliae et Hiberniae Oxon.* (1697), compiled by Edward Bernard. His own copy is in *SJL* (under "Oxford University", 89).

¹³¹ Johnson had a copy of the first collected edition of More's *English Works*, ed. William Rastell (1557). See *SJL*.

¹³² Robert DeMaria asserts that around this time Johnson "looked into doing a life of Sir Thomas More," which seems to me less likely (DeMaria, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 182).

¹³³ See Allen Reddick, *The Making of Johnson's 'Dictionary,' 1746-1773*, Rev. edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1996), 74-75.

pure and elegant style."¹³⁴ At the conclusion of his lexicographical labors Johnson seems, from his journals, to be casting about for a new sense of direction, and More has obviously been on his mind. We find (*Diaries*, 57-58) a resolution to "read books of divinity either speculative or practical," and prayers "On the Study of Philosophy," and the "Study of Tongues," for either of which More could have been a starting-point. (Of the five pieces of More's minor verses that Warton quoted in the third volume (1781) of his *History of English Poetry*,¹³⁵ three had been used by Johnson in the "History of the English Language.")

- 1756 A new edition of Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*. In his 'Life of Sir Thomas Browne,' prefaced to an edition of his *Christian Morals*, Johnson suggests with regard to Browne's long work on 'Vulgar Errors' that

It might now be proper, had not the favour with which it was at first received filled the kingdom with copies, to reprint it with notes partly supplemental and partly emendatory, to subjoin those discoveries which the industry of the last age has made, and correct those mistakes which the author has committed not by idleness or negligence, but for want of BOYLE'S and NEWTON'S philosophy.¹³⁶

He has explicitly said that such a work would be superfluous, but it is remarkable with what readiness he envisages in detail what such a task might require.

- 1757 "An Ecclesiastical Hist. of England." As mentioned, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* was in *SJL*, as were at least two other works necessary for such a study. Thomas Fuller, *The Church History of Britain; from the Birth of Jesus Christ until the year M.DC.XLVIII* (1655) was a popular work by this prolific

¹³⁴ 'History,' *Dictionary*, G2".

¹³⁵ Thomas Warton, *The History of English Poetry, from the close of the eleventh century to the commencement of the eighteenth century*, New edn., 4 v. (London: Tegg, 1824), III, 383-88.

¹³⁶ Johnson, "The Life of Sir Thomas Browne," in Sir Thomas Browne, *Christian Morals*, 18.

writer.¹³⁷ The *Anglia Sacra, sive, Collectio Historiarum* (1691) of Henry Wharton is a pioneering compilation of English church chronicles. This project and the three following were suggested by Johnson in a letter to (most probably) Thomas Warton, for the recipient's own use (27 October. *Letters* I, 156). The letters of 1754-55 between the two men (only Johnson's side of the correspondence survives) often mention their various literary projects, and they each offer and request assistance with finding books.¹³⁸

"A Hist. of the Reformation (not of England only but of) Europe." As an orthodox Anglican, Johnson's attitude toward the Reformation in England was less than enthusiastic. In the *Dictionary*, he defines *reformation* in its historical sense as "The change of religion from the corruptions of popery to its primitive state," although of his quotations under *reformer* in a general sense, this from King Charles I is first and typical, "Public reformers had need first practise that on their own hearts, which they purpose to try on others." He disapproved of pre-Reformation practices such as private sacramental confession, but regretted the diminution of the English Church's income, and did not uncritically revere the Protestant martyrs (*Life* III, 60, 138; II, 251). And as is well known, few things tempted him to stronger language than extremes of dissent, such as he found in particular in Scotland.¹³⁹ He emphasises the European perspective in this project, which may have allowed a less ambiguous view of the Reformation, perhaps on account of Gilbert Burnet's *History of the Reformation of the Church of England* (1679-81), which went through many editions in the complete and abridged form.

"The Life of Richard the First." The English King, Richard I (1157-99), called *Coeur de Lion*, came to the throne in 1189, and led the third Crusade to Palestine. He was in fact absent from England for most of his reign, with which period the figure of Robin Hood is associated. His modern scholar-

¹³⁷ Johnson appears to have been reading Fuller's more famous *History of the Worthies of England* (1662) shortly before he died; see *Life* IV, 543 n.

¹³⁸ *The Correspondence of Thomas Warton*, ed. David Fairer (Athens, GA.: U. of Georgia P., 1995). Johnson reports on the progress of his *Dictionary* and the edition of Shakespeare, and inquires after Warton's translation of Apollonius Rhodius (Letter 42), and a companion volume to his *Observations on the Faerie Queene* (Letter 33, n.3), neither of which were completed.

¹³⁹ A good account may be found as Ch. VIII, "Johnson as a Church of England Man," in Maurice Quinlan, *Samuel Johnson: A Layman's Religion* (Madison: U. of Wisconsin P., 1964).

biographer John Gillingham says, "In his own lifetime Richard was a semi-legendary figure and by the mid-thirteenth century he was a popular hero — the first king since the Norman conquest to achieve this status."¹⁴⁰ 'Since the Norman conquest' means virtually since Edward the Confessor, and it might be these considerations, of Christian heroism and of chivalric romance (in which we shall note Johnson's interest again shortly) which attracted Johnson to this and the following royal subject.

"The Life of Edward the Confessor." Pre-conquest King of England, from 1042, Edward (ca. 1003-66) is said to have been the first king to have exercised the gift of the 'royal touch' for the healing of king's-evil or scrofula, which ministry the infant Johnson received in 1712 at the hand of Queen Anne, the last monarch to have performed the ceremony. He built Westminster Abbey, in which both he and Samuel Johnson are buried. Edward was canonised in 1161.

1760 "Hist. of war." Boswell supposes this project (which is noted in Johnson's journal on his birthday, 18 September; *Diaries*, 71) to be an account of Britain's recent military successes in what was later known as the Seven Years War (*Life* I, 354). However, John A. Vance, noting that Johnson's prompt to himself says, "Send for *books for Hist. of war*," wonders "what books he would be referring to concerning a war that still had over two years remaining before the Peace of 1763." He suggests that a "more likely candidate would be the War of the Austrian Succession during the 1740s."¹⁴¹ It also is possible (as Hill suggests¹⁴²) that Johnson intended it to be a history of war generally.

1763 Further imitations of the *Satires* of Juvenal. Boswell recorded this intention on 16 July,¹⁴³ and says that Johnson agreed that "he probably should give more, for he had them all in his head" (*Life* I, 193). Of course, his two greatest

¹⁴⁰ John Gillingham, *Richard Coeur de Lion: Kingship, Chivalry and War in the Twelfth Century* (London: Hambledon, 1994), 181-82.

¹⁴¹ John A. Vance, *Samuel Johnson and the Sense of History* (Athens, GA.: U. of Georgia P., 1984), 135.

¹⁴² George Birkbeck Hill, note to Johnson's "Prayers and Meditations," *Johns. Misc.* I, 25 n.5.

¹⁴³ *Boswell's London Journal, 1762-1793*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (London: Heinemann, 1950), 306.

poems, *London* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, were imitations of Juvenal.

- 1765 A translation of Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. In her edition of Johnson's *Letters* (1788), Hester Thrale Piozzi included a number of passages from the medieval Roman philosopher, Boethius, translated into English verse by herself and Johnson in collaboration. Mrs. Thrale records that they engaged on the translation as a social activity early in their relationship, on a number of successive Thursdays in "about the year 1765," but Johnson had long been interested in this early work of Christian devotion. In 1738 he had advised Elizabeth Carter to undertake a translation, but she did not do so (*Life* I, 139). It was his intention to translate the whole work; but he let the project drop rather than compete with a more needy writer who had undertaken the task.¹⁴⁴ The 1491 edition of Boethius in *SJL* is the only incunabulum in the catalogue.

- 1766 "[T]he History of Memory" (1 January. *Diaries*, 100). This mysterious and suggestive project, of which this is Johnson's only mention, is imagined by Paul Fussell to be "an inquiry, starting from Lockean assumptions, into the operations of memory in the making of poetry, myth, and history."¹⁴⁵ Memory is an important subject for Johnson, and four of his periodical essays (*Rambler* 41; *Idlers* 44, 72 and 74) are particularly devoted to the subject.

"[A] small book to teach the use of the Common Prayer." (2 March. *Diaries*, 103; this has been mentioned under "Dictionary to the Common Prayer" in the *Designs*, above. Neither project is elaborated, and they may be regarded as two not particularly distinct forms of the same idea.) In talking of his own proposed book of prayers, discussed below, Johnson asserted, "I know of no good prayers but those in the 'Book of Common Prayer'" (*Life* IV,

¹⁴⁴ See Johnson, *Poems*, ed. E.L. McAdam, Jr., with George Milne (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1964), 257-63, for the text and an informative note, which refers us to the *Letters to and from the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D., To which are added some poems never before printed...*, [ed.] by Hester Lynch Piozzi, 2 v. (London, 1788); see Preface, I, vi. There is also a good account in J.L. Clifford, *Hester Lynch Piozzi (Mrs. Thrale)* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1941), 57-58.

¹⁴⁵ Paul Fussell, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing*, 23. (I might remark here that Fussell, with DeMaria, is one of the few writers to have made more than a passing reference to any of Johnson's projects. However, the proposed "military dictionary" which he mentions is in fact the project of another writer; see *Life* I, 138.)

293). Paul Fussell has suggested that Johnson himself "learned a style as well as a substance from *The Book of Common Prayer*."¹⁴⁶

1768 "[T]he history of my melancholy." On his fifty-ninth birthday, Johnson noted in his diary, "This day it came into my mind to write the history of my melancholy. On this I purpose to deliberate. I know not whether it may not too much disturb me" (18 September. *Diaries*, 119). There is no evidence of his having pursued this project, but it would of course have been a very private document. See also the next item. Hester Thrale noted of Johnson that he "had studied medicine diligently in all its branches; but had given particular attention to the diseases of the imagination, which he watched in himself with a solicitude destructive of his own peace, and intolerable to those he trusted."¹⁴⁷ Early in his life he had written for the Lichfield physician, Samuel Swinfen, a paper in Latin describing his mental afflictions. Swinfen was so impressed and moved by this case history that he indiscreetly showed it to a number of people; Johnson was very offended by this breach of trust (*Life* I, 64).

1773 An Autobiography. Discussing the various prospective writers of his life, with Hester Thrale on 18 July, Johnson said that he intended "to disappoint the rogues" by writing it himself and that he was "keeping a diary, in hopes of using it for that purpose."¹⁴⁸ Boswell tells us that in the days before his death, Johnson "burnt large masses" of his personal papers, including "two quarto volumes, containing a full, fair, and most particular account of his own life, from his earliest recollection," which (Boswell supposes) included "many curious circumstances relating both to himself and other literary characters" (*Life* IV, 405).

"[T]he arguments for Christianity." On the Hebrides tour, Boswell urged Johnson to "write expressly in support of Christianity," like Grotius and Addison, and Johnson assented (22 August. *Life* V, 89). More than three years later, he noted in his journal his 'purpose' "To gather the arguments for Christianity" (6 April 1777. *Diaries*, 268).

¹⁴⁶ Fussell, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing*, 79.

¹⁴⁷ Thrale, *Anecdotes*. *Johns. Misc.* I, 199.

¹⁴⁸ Thrale, *Anecdotes*. *Johns. Misc.* I, 166.

1774 Chambers's *Cyclopaedia: or, An Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (1728).

Percival Stockdale records that when he told Johnson that he had declined to edit a new edition, Johnson said that he would undertake it. He was disappointed when the work was offered to Dr. Abraham Rees (*Life* II, 203 n.3). Rees's edition was published 1779-88. (It might be added, that Boswell reports that Johnson told him that "he had been asked to undertake the new edition of the *Biographia Britannica*, but had declined it; which he afterwards said to me he regretted" [*Life* III, 174]. Andrew Kippis's edition was published 1777-93.)

1775 A life of General James Oglethorpe. Oglethorpe (1696-1785), had seen military service in Europe, and as a Member of Parliament campaigned for prison reform. He established the American colony of Georgia in 1732, on Christian principles. Johnson admired his bravery, enterprise and humanitarianism, and the two men met in the early 1770s and became friends.¹⁴⁹ Boswell says (10 April) that Johnson urged Oglethorpe to write his Life, and said that "If I were furnished with materials, I should be very glad to write it" (*Life* II, 351). Thomas Campbell recorded the same conversation in his diary (*Johns. Misc.* II, 51).

1776 "[A] journal of his Tour upon the Continent." On the basis of Johnson's speculation that he "should be glad to get two hundred pounds, or five hundred pounds, by such a work," Boswell claimed that it "was not wholly out of his contemplation" to write an account of the planned Italian trip (which was later abandoned), with the Thrales (*Life* III, 19). This is despite Johnson's having exhibited a firm determination not to give an account of his earlier visit to France in 1775. He told Boswell, "The reason is plain; intelligent readers had seen more of France than I had. *You* might have liked my travels in France, and THE CLUB might have liked them; but, upon the whole, there would have been more ridicule than good produced by them" (*Life* III, 301).

"[A]n edition of Cowley." Johnson mentioned this idea in conversation with Murphy and others, as he was dissatisfied with Bishop Hurd's selection of Cowley's poems (*Life* III, 29).

¹⁴⁹ See Thomas M. Curley, *Samuel Johnson and the Age of Travel* (Athens: U. of Georgia P., 1976), 20-22.

A Life of Goldsmith, with an edition. It appears from a letter of 1776 to Johnson from the poet's brother, Maurice Goldsmith, that materials for a life of Goldsmith, to be written by Johnson, were given to Thomas Percy, to accompany an edition for the benefit of the poet's family. This work was forestalled by Johnson's contract in 1777 to write the *Lives for the English Poets*. There appear to have been copyright difficulties about Johnson's desire to include Goldsmith in that edition, although Percy wrote to Malone in 1785 that he had obtained various materials from Goldsmith's brother and others of his family "for a life of Goldsmith which Johnson was to write and publish for their benefit."¹⁵⁰ After Johnson's own death, the collected materials were given to his friend Rev. Thomas Campbell, who died in 1795 with the book incomplete. The task then reverted to Percy, whose life of Goldsmith was published in 1801.

1778 A "Book of Cookery." At another dinner (April 15) at the home of the Dilly brothers, Johnson asserted that he "could write a better book of cookery than has ever yet been written; it should be a book upon philosophical principles" (*Life* III, 285). By the end of this conversation about cooking and cookery books, Johnson is proposing to make arrangements with Dilly about the copyright.

1779 An edition of the works of David Garrick, with a life. Johnson's old friend died on 20 January. Arthur Murphy says that "After Garrick's death he never talked of him without a tear in his eyes. He offered, if Mrs. Garrick would desire it of him, to be the editor of his works and the historian of his life."¹⁵¹ Johnson gave his assistance to Thomas Davies, whose *Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick* was published in 1780; Fleeman says "The opening paragraph is certainly SJ's."¹⁵² Arthur Murphy's own life of Garrick was published in 1801.

¹⁵⁰ The whole matter is rather complex. The difficulties are whether one or two editions were proposed, and whether the copyright problems are sufficient to explain why the work was not accomplished and why Goldsmith was not included in the *English Poets*. See Powell's note on the subject, *Life* III, 100, n.1), and Arthur Tillotson, "Dr. Johnson and the 'Life of Goldsmith,'" *Modern Language Review* XXVIII (October 1933), 439-43.

¹⁵¹ Murphy, "An Essay on the Life and Genius of Samuel Johnson," *Johns. Misc.* I, 457-58.

¹⁵² Fleeman, *Bibliography*, 1523 (item 80.5DMG/1).

1780 A life of Edmund Spenser. This was suggested by "his last employers" (the proprietors of the *Lives*), but Johnson felt that after Thomas Warton's researches, there was nothing more to be known about Spenser to justify the effort.¹⁵³ John Nichols (who printed the *Lives*) also mentions this proposal (*Life* IV, 410). Hannah More recorded Johnson as having told her that the King (at an apparent second meeting with Johnson, in 1780, not recorded by Boswell) had "enjoined him to add Spenser to his *Lives of the Poets*" (*Life* II, 42 n.2), to which encouragement Nichols also referred.

1783 A history of the Boswell family. In Boswell's Journal notes for 20 April, he reminds himself to ask Johnson, "Will he write history of family?"¹⁵⁴ In the *Life* (IV, 198), as an undated anecdote immediately before 10 April, Boswell relates that he "presumed to solicit" Johnson to record and illustrate "the history of my family from its founder Thomas Boswell, in 1504," and that Johnson replied, "Let me have all the materials you can collect, and I will do it both in Latin and English; then let it be printed and copies of it be deposited in various places for security and preservation." This is so flattering and extravagant, that it is easy to suspect that Johnson was toying with Boswell. Boswell, however, took it seriously, and in Edinburgh on 7 February 1784 recorded his hope that Johnson would "put the memoirs of the family of Auchinleck into the permanent form of his noble style, both in Latin and English."¹⁵⁵

"[T]he life of Oliver Cromwell." Johnson's design to write this is reported by William Bowles, who (as Hill notes) was a Whig, and proud of being related to the Protector (*Life* IV, 235 and n.5). Bowles says that Johnson "thought it must be highly curious to trace his extraordinary rise to the supreme power, from so obscure a beginning." As with the *Life* of Spenser, Johnson abandoned the idea, believing that all that could be discovered about him had been related. Johnson stayed with Bowles at his house near Salisbury in September, 1783, when (presumably) most of the remarks of Johnson's that he describes were made.

¹⁵³ Tyers, "Biographical Sketch," *Johns. Misc.* II, 372-73.

¹⁵⁴ Boswell, *The Applause of the Jury, 1782-1785*, ed. Irma S. Lustig and Frederick A. Pottle (London: Heinemann, 1981), 108, and n.6.

¹⁵⁵ Boswell, *Applause of the Jury*, 184.

"[A] work to shew how small a quantity of REAL FICTION there is in the world; and that the same images, with very little variation, have served all the authours who have ever written." This description is also from the notes Boswell had from William Bowles (*Life* IV, 236).¹⁵⁶ Hester Thrale glossed this passage in her copy of the *Life*, "That would have been pretty. Johnson used to say that he believed no combination could be found and few sentiments that might not be traced up to Homer, Shakespeare & Richardson" (*Life* IV, App. J, 524). In the Preface to Shakespeare, he says of Homer that "nation after nation, and century after century, has been able to do little more than transpose his incidents, new name his characters, and paraphrase his sentiments."¹⁵⁷ (Hill gives other different instances of the same sentiment at *Life* II, 358 n.3.) Eithne Henson suggests that Johnson is thinking in particular of the heroic and chivalric romances, as he makes the same point, speaking of Tasso and Ariosto in *Idler* 66.¹⁵⁸

- 1784 A book of prayers. This has been mentioned above under the first of the *Designs*, a book of spiritual exercises. Boswell records Johnson at Oxford, in June and August, talking with Dr. Adams of editing a book of prayers, "adding some prayers of my own, and prefixing a discourse on prayer" (11 June. *Life* IV, 293). At this time, despite the urging of his friends, he seemed to feel himself incapable of the task. But on 1 August, while at Ashbourne, he noted a resolution to do it in his journal (*Diaries*, 378), and when again in Oxford, on his (final) return journey to London, he told Adams (as Adams reports in a letter to Boswell) that "he was now in a right frame of mind, and as he could not possibly employ his time better, he would in earnest set about it" (*Life* IV, 376). John Nichols, however, in his anecdotes given to Boswell of Johnson's final days, says that Johnson was "invited to publish a volume of *Devotional Exercises*; but this, (though ... a large sum of money was offered for it,) he declined, from motives of the sincerest modesty" (*Life* IV, 410). In a little notebook headed "Repertorium," he wrote on 31 October some notes on topics for prayers

¹⁵⁶ G.B. Hill's note at *Life* II, 358 n.3, illuminates the sentiment.

¹⁵⁷ Preface, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo, intro. Bertrand H. Bronson (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1968), "The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson," v. VII-VIII; VII, 60.

¹⁵⁸ Eithne Henson, "The Fictions of Romantick Chivalry": *Samuel Johnson and Romance* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson U.P., 1992), 12-13. See *Idler* 66; 206.

("Preces"), and a list of the causes of scepticism (*Diaries*, 412-14). His posthumous *Prayers and Meditations*, ed. George Strahan (1785), went only part-way toward such a work.

A Life of John Scott, of Amwell. Johnson had known Scott (1730-83), a Quaker and poet, since being introduced to him by John Hoole (the translator of Tasso), in about 1766. Scott had published critical pamphlets in response to both Johnson's *False Alarm* and *The Patriot*, but despite their political and religious differences, the two held each other in affection and esteem. After Scott's death, his friend the publisher and fellow Quaker, David Barclay, intended to publish a volume of his essays, for which he invited Johnson to write a biographical preface. Johnson agreed to do so (16 September. *Letters* IV, 404), despite his own *Lives of the Poets* being the object of criticism in the work,¹⁵⁹ but died himself before he could perform the task.¹⁶⁰ Scott's *Critical Essays on some of the Poems of several English Poets* (1785), was published with a Life by Hoole.¹⁶¹

A translation of Thuanus. The French historian, Jacques-Auguste de Thou (1553-1617); the first edition of his major work *Historia sui Temporis* (1604-08, 5 v.) was in *SJL*. It is a detailed history of Europe during the period of the writer's life. Thomas Tyers says that during "the winter before he died, he talked seriously of a translation of Thuanus."¹⁶² Hawkins says that that "he entertained a design of giving the world a translation of the voluminous work of Thuanus, the history of his own times."¹⁶³ In John Nichols's account, given to Boswell, of Johnson's final days, he says that Johnson had often mentioned this project (*Life* IV, 410) and had said that he could easily execute it by dictation. Johnson's admiration for de Thou surfaces in the *Harleian Catalogue* (which he compares to the catalogue of

¹⁵⁹ Johnson's work is referred to in seven of the nine essays, and his views are contested in five of them. There is a facsimile edition of the *Critical Essays* (Westmead, England: Gregg, 1969).

¹⁶⁰ J.D. Fleeman includes this project as item 84.9LS in his *Bibliography*, 1567, in the belief, I think, that the letter to Barclay "attests" that Johnson actually "began the task," and therefore that some of his work may survive in John Hoole's memoir of Scott. I see no evidence for this in the letter.

¹⁶¹ See Lawrence D. Stewart, *John Scott of Amwell* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 1956), 2-3, and Herman W. Liebert, *Johnson's Last Literary Project: An account of the work which he contemplated on his death-bed but did not survive to execute* (New Haven: Privately printed, 1948).

¹⁶² Tyers, "Biographical Sketch," Brack and Kelley, ed., *Early Biographies*, 87.

¹⁶³ Hawkins, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 539.

de Thou's library¹⁶⁴) and in *Rambler* 60. Johnson also knew the collection of his table-talk, the *Thuana* (1669), and refers to it in the *Dictionary* entry for *ana*.

"[I]n Latin verse, an epitaph for Mr. Garrick." Hawkins says that Johnson contemplated making this in his final illness, at the same time as he composed the Latin epitaphs for his father, mother and brother (about which he gave instructions in a letter to Richard Greene in Lichfield, on December 2, 1784. See *Letters* IV, 443). However, he "found himself unequal to the task of original poetic composition in that language."¹⁶⁵

"[A] regular edition of his own works." Lawrence Lipking remarks that Johnson does not "seem to care much about his legacy as an author, some future edition to keep his works alive."¹⁶⁶ However, John Nichols records Johnson saying, in his last days, that he had the legal right to print such an edition, but he was too weak to think of doing it (*Life* IV, 409). Boswell says much earlier that Johnson had "a serious intention that they [i.e., his writings] should all be collected" (*Life* I, 112), and presumably bases this assertion on Brocklesby's letter of 13 December 1784, which says that in the final weeks of his life Johnson "talked of preparing an edition of his works in the same type and letter press as his *Lives of the poets* are already printed in large duodecimo."¹⁶⁷ Perhaps, as Lipking says, he cannot be said to care *much* about a posthumous edition; but he certainly cared a bit.

Undated

A "complete collection of his [poetical] works." From the context (Boswell's account of the publication of *The Vanity of Human Wishes*; *Life* I, 193), it seems to be Johnson's poems that are referred to; but it may be that this is another discussion of a collected edition of his writings, noted immediately above. Boswell himself proposed to publish a full edition of Johnson's poems, but failed to do so (*Life* I, 16 n.1).

¹⁶⁴ "An Account of the Harleian Library," *Samuel Johnson*, ed. Donald Greene (Oxford: Oxford U.P. "The Oxford Authors," 1984), 116.

¹⁶⁵ Hawkins, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 578. See also Murphy, "Life and Genius," *Johns. Misc.* I, 458.

¹⁶⁶ Lipking, *Samuel Johnson*, 292.

¹⁶⁷ Waingrow, ed., *Correspondence ... of James Boswell*, 26.

"[T]he lives of the painters." Thomas Tyers asserts that Johnson once had an intention to write such a work, but offers nothing more about the work or the circumstances in which he heard of it. He seems to admit its unlikelihood, adding that Johnson "had no eye, nor perhaps taste for a picture, nor a landscape."¹⁶⁸

"[A]n edition of Bacon, at least of his English works," with a life. William Seward informed Boswell of this project (*Life* III, 194. 22 September 1777). At this time, Johnson told Boswell that he had not read Francis Bacon until he came to compile the *Dictionary*. This may not be strictly true, as Bacon is highly praised in the *Harleian Catalogue*,¹⁶⁹ which Johnson had helped to compile two years before he began his work on the *Dictionary*. All of his references to him date from the mid-1740s. He seems to have fallen for him very powerfully, and from that time he considered Bacon a "favourite authour." He is cited in the *Dictionary* more than any other prose writer, which given his relatively recent acquaintance with him suggests that he had read his works thoroughly and carefully.¹⁷⁰ Bacon's works were published in a new edition in 1740, prefaced with a life by the Scottish poet David Mallet, to which Johnson gives qualified approval (*Lives* III, 403-04).

A Life of Bishop Berkeley. The philosopher, whose idealism Johnson famously 'refuted,' died in 1753. According to Berkeley's son, George Monck Berkeley, Johnson made "repeated requests for permission to write a Life of the Bishop," which were refused because young Berkeley had been upset when he encountered Johnson at Oxford, possibly in 1754, by Johnson's ridicule of his father's scheme for settling the Bermudas.¹⁷¹ The "Memoirs of Bishop Berkeley," attributed to Johnson by Isaac Reed in

¹⁶⁸ Tyers, "Biographical Sketch," *Johns. Misc.* II, 363.

¹⁶⁹ *Catalogus Bibliothecae Harleianae* II (1743): no. 12532 (cited in DeMaria, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 101).

¹⁷⁰ I.e., not except Locke, contrary to what is often said. In the first volume alone, Bacon is cited 2,439 times, Locke 1,674. See W.K. Wimsatt, *Philosophic Words: A Study of Style and Meaning in the 'Rambler' and 'Dictionary' of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1948), 34 n.17.

¹⁷¹ See "A Johnson Anecdote," *The Johnsonian News Letter*, June 1951, 11-12, in which Donald Greene first drew this matter to the attention of Johnson scholars. The source is the younger Berkeley's widow's Preface to the *Poems by the Late George Monck Berkeley* (London, 1797), ccl-ccliii. The surmise that the Oxford incident took place in 1754 is Clifford's; see *Dictionary Johnson*, 125.

a supplementary volume (vol. XIV, 1788) to Johnson's Works, was soon rejected by George Gleig, on the authority of G.M. Berkeley.¹⁷²

"[A] new edit" of Hooker's *Eccl. Polity*." The seminal text of Anglican doctrine and church government, *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1593-97), by Richard Hooker, is also a classic of English prose style and was on both accounts a favourite book of Johnson's. In the *Dictionary*, it is the third most frequently cited work of prose.¹⁷³ Edmond Malone recorded, in an unpublished notebook, Johnson's intention to edit the work. James M. Osborn first published the note, but the part concerning Hooker is well worth reprinting here.

He once said he had thought of publishing a new editⁿ of Hooker's *Eccl. Polity*—to which book it was an objⁿ that there was not a sufficient number of breaks or pauses in it.—But if he had executed his scheme, he said he sh^d have thought it incumbent upon him to distinguish the beginning of all Hooker's Paragraphs by a certain mark, & his own by another—lest perhaps he sh^d break sentences which the author perhaps would have thought more properly conjoined.¹⁷⁴

As well as showing, as Osborn notes, Johnson's respect for "the sanctity of an author's text," this passage emphasises Johnson's awareness of the role of paratextual elements (such as paragraph breaks) in mediating text to readers. (The influence of Hooker upon Johnson is comprehensively discussed in a forth-coming article by Jack Lynch.)

Conclusion

The letter of 1757 to Thomas Warton, in which Johnson gives four of the above projects, suggests that he is responding to a request for ideas for profitable literary work which

¹⁷² See Fleeman, *Bibliography*, 1640, 1641 n.3 (item 87.3W/1.4).

¹⁷³ Wimsatt, *Philosophic Words*, 34 n.17.

¹⁷⁴ Bodley MS Malone 30, folio 64-65, quoted in James M. Osborn, "Johnson on the Sanctity of an Author's Text," *PMLA* 50 (September 1935), 929. I am indebted to Prof. Jack Lynch for drawing my attention to the project and this article. (Paul Fussell, *Life of Writing*, 23, mentions the project in passing, but provides no reference.)

might be conveniently undertaken by "an inhabitant of Oxford," such as Warton (27 October. *Letters* 1, 155-56). Johnson says that he had discussed the matter with Edmund Allen, a London printer, presumably to get advice on what sort of works there might be a market for. The practicalities of these projects are foremost: they would (like the Thomas More project) be focussed on research in the Oxford libraries, and he specifies that the first two — the two histories — "must not exceed 4 vols. 8vo." He concludes his letter with a stern warning to his correspondent: "I impart these designs to you in confidence that what you do not make use of yourself shall revert to me, uncommunicated to any other. The schemes of a writer are his property, and his revenue, and therefore they must not be made common." It appears that the letter was unsent (it was found among Allen's papers). Some similar circumstance may have been the motive (and fate) of the *Designs* manuscript. That is, Johnson may well have made the long list in a speculative and disinterested spirit, believing in the utility and profitability of the various works proposed, half-interested in their subjects himself, but prepared to 'impart' the ideas to a friend or colleague on the same terms in which he writes to Warton. Like that letter, the *Designs* may even have been written for someone else in particular, but not in the end communicated to them.¹⁷⁵

The viewpoint in the *Designs* is not necessarily that of someone who wants to write or assemble these works himself, but of someone who would like to have them written: someone who might be a reader, editor or publisher. If this is the case, it is possible that (apart from some later additions, the dates of which Johnson notes) the list originates in the period when he was working for Cave. Johnson had at other times lost a notebook and then returned to using it when he happened later to unearth it.¹⁷⁶ It may then be seen not as Johnson's vision of the works he wished himself to write, but as a list of suggested projects for publication — possibly for Cave, or perhaps Dodsley, who published *The World Displayed* — in a number of which Johnson envisaged he could be closely involved and his talents employed, and others which he could, at the very least, commission and edit. Whilst certain of the projects, if well-executed, might have earned a writer a solid reputation, some are works of more humble utility, filling a perceived niche in the contemporary market for text. The writers of many such works were anonymous, partly as a hangover of the older tradition of the writer as a gentleman-amateur, but the practice was not discouraged by the contemporary custom of booksellers buying literary work from writers, together with the copyright. This applied in particular to perceived

¹⁷⁵ Letter (probably to Thomas Warton), 27 October 1757. *Letters* 1, 156.

¹⁷⁶ *Diaries*, 157. 22 July 1773.

'hack-work' such as compiling or translating, and the daily journalism which Johnson dignifies with the title "the *Ephemeræ* of learning,"¹⁷⁷ in a *Rambler* essay which seeks raise the regard given to the lowliest sorts of writers.

Certainly, the *Designs* is a list of a very different literary character to the second list I have assembled. The projects in the latter are more personal, less works of drudgery. There are notably fewer translations, collections and dictionaries. Such works are 50% of the *Designs* (24 of the 48), whereas in the second list, fewer than 12% of the projects (5 of the 43) could be squeezed into those categories. They are works which one would undertake for money, but little else, and look to have been designed with a publisher's eye to the market. The second list includes a number of works that are more personal to Johnson; there are three works of Divinity, three of autobiography, three projects to serve his own literary reputation, and six concerning personal friends. There is only one such work in the *Designs* (the very first). On the other hand, there is in the second list one play (an early idea, as his only play was an early work), but no poems, save the suggestion that he could produce more imitations of Juvenal. Poetic composition is not, perhaps, very close to his heart — or else, it is not the kind of writing that can be 'projected.'

By having an account of all of Johnson's projects, we are able to see many aspects of the eighteenth-century literary scene which go unobserved in reading the accomplished works of the great writers. It is vividly illustrated that there was a ready market for translations from the classics — whether the particular work had been recently translated or not. In fact, a new translation was likely to stimulate an interest in the work which might accommodate rival translations. Men of learning could easily churn out a translation; I have already mentioned Johnson's dictating his translation of Lobo, and he said of his proposed translation of Thuanus that "it would not be the laborious task which you [John Nichols] have supposed it. I should have no trouble but that of dictation, which would be performed as speedily as an amanuensis could write" (*Life* IV, 410). That translation was an obvious form of intellectual occupation, irrespective of an intention to publish, may be seen by Johnson's translation of Sallust's *Bellum Catilinæ*,¹⁷⁸ which he made very late in his life, apparently more as a mental exercise than for any other purpose.

¹⁷⁷ *Rambler* 145; V, 11.

¹⁷⁸ See Samuel Johnson's *Translation of Sallust: A Facsimile and Transcription of the Hyde Manuscript*, ed. David L. Vander Meulen and G. Thomas Tanselle (New York /Charlottesville: The Johnsonians /The Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia, 1993).

It can hardly be called one of Johnson's "Works," but the mere fact that it exists (in part) seems to make it something more than a "project."

In the present connection, the figure of Catiline may in fact be pursued further in Johnson's writings. The *Conspiracy of Catiline* was a very popular eighteenth-century text, with many translations passing through many editions. But Johnson's attraction to the figure of Catiline has a more personal element, which is relevant to our present inquiry. We find Johnson, some decades earlier before attempting his translation, in an issue of *The Adventurer*, discussing Catiline in a most suggestive context. He considers Catiline as a "projector," and asserts that his reputation has in later times suffered in comparison with that of Caesar, merely on account of Caesar having succeeded where Catiline ("with equal abilities, and with equal virtue") failed.¹⁷⁹ But whereas the *Adventurer* asserts that successful and unsuccessful *military* marauders ought to be equally detested, he wishes to "conciliate mankind" to those *literary* projectors "who are searching out new powers of nature, or contriving new works of art" (433). Projection of this kind, he continues,

is commonly the ebullition of a capacious mind, crowded with variety of knowledge, and heated with intenseness of thought; it proceeds often from the consciousness of uncommon powers, from the confidence of those, who having already done much, are easily persuaded that they can do more... (433).

This subject clearly engages the *Adventurer's* sympathies very deeply, and his description of the "capacious mind" and "uncommon powers" could easily be applied to the author of the *Designs*. But projectors, he says, are treated with "incessant obloquy" and "universal contempt," and there can be no mistaking the mood that Johnson was in during this particular week in October 1753, when he was at work on the *Dictionary*, which had been commissioned seven years before and which would still not be published for another year and a half.

In the *Dictionary*, Johnson defines a projector as, firstly, "One who forms schemes or *designs*" (my emphasis) and offers a quotation from Addison: "The following comes from a *projector*, a correspondent as diverting as a traveller; his subject having the same grace of novelty to recommend it." If the citation sounds condescending, the second definition moves firmly beyond neutrality: "One who forms wild impracticable schemes."

¹⁷⁹ *Adventurer* 99; 431.

This is supported by quotations from L'Estrange, "Chymists, and other *projectors*, propose to themselves things utterly impracticable," and Pope, "Astrologers that future fates foreshew, / *Projectors*, quacks, and lawyers not a few."¹⁸⁰ The citation from L'Estrange seems to me ambiguous: he may mean no more to define or limit projectors than chemists as proposers of the impracticable. In the line quoted, Pope attempts to taint the word "lawyers" by association with "quacks"; whether the word "projectors" is there to taint or to be tainted is not clear. But the drift of the line seems to be from the ambiguous "projectors" to the unambiguous "quacks" and thence to the unexpected and therefore humorous "lawyers."

By these definitions, Johnson illustrates the tendency that his *Adventurer* essay describes. To form schemes is to attract attention and to risk failure, for which mockery is the customary reward. To Hill Boothby, Johnson wrote (30 December 1755): "no man can know how little his performance will conform to his promises, and *designs* are nothing in human eyes till they are realised by execution" (*Letters* I, 117; my emphasis). The crucial phrase here is 'in human eyes.' Miss Boothby, to whom Johnson wrote "the most emotional series of letters in his entire lifetime,"¹⁸¹ was one little concerned with such worldly perspectives, but she is as aware as Johnson that what is not seen by human eyes is that to form no plans or schemes is as likely to be a symptom of timidity, laziness and lack of imagination. In *Rambler* No. 21, Johnson also writes tenderly of the projector. He is again comparing literary reputation with more active kinds of greatness and fame, and comments,

He that happens not to be lulled by praise into supiness [*sic*], may be animated by it to undertakings above his strength.... By some opinion like this, many men have been engaged, at an advanced age, in attempts which they had not time to complete....¹⁸²

The only way that a projector may avoid being ridiculous is not simply to achieve his design but to do so swiftly. In February 1764, when Johnson was eight years into his work on another major project, his edition of Shakespeare, we find him referred to — if

¹⁸⁰ From *The Temple of Fame* (1715), ll. 463-4.

¹⁸¹ Clifford, *Dictionary Johnson*, 161.

¹⁸² *Rambler* 21; III, 120.

not with obloquy and contempt, at least ironically — in a letter in *The St. James's Magazine* as "that great literary projector, Mr. Samuel Johnson."¹⁸³

The *Dictionary* and the edition of Shakespeare may each have taken a long time to appear, but they did, and in such a way as to silence any facile mockery. It is publication that distinguishes the author from the projector. But whereas publication is for a text a relatively unproblematic status, there are many *degrees of projection*. There are items in the second list which might fairly strike us as being mere wishful thinking on the part of Boswell, or exaggerations prompted by his desire to exhibit Johnson as a being of eclectic and ceaseless (indeed, almost indiscriminate) intellectual energy. There are others that could easily be hearsay, or invention ("the lives of the painters"?). For Johnson himself to have made a formal note of a design (such as in the *Designs*) is a greater degree of projection than to have merely mentioned an idea in conversation, possibly in a jocular spirit (the cook-book, or the Boswell family history); to have communicated an intention in writing, to a number of people (the "Review or Literary Journal") is more formal again, to have made a commitment to a bookseller (the Life of John Scott) still more formal, and to have written and published proposals the most formal of all. There are two final unfulfilled projects of Johnson's that reached this degree of seriousness, although the published proposals earn them a place in Johnson's actual bibliography rather than his imaginary bibliography.¹⁸⁴

And there must be, of course, many, many designs of which there was never any trace — those which Johnson thought of, possibly just once, or which he perhaps turned over in his mind a thousand times.

¹⁸³ *The St. James's Magazine*, ed. Robert Lloyd (London: February 1764), 402. (See *English Literary Periodicals* [microfilm], reel 651.) The letter (signed "A.P.") introduces and attributes to Johnson an essay which was originally published anonymously in the *Universal Visiter*, April 1756 (under the title, "Reflections on the Present State of Literature and Authors"), which is here reprinted as "A project for diminishing the present number of authors." 'A.P.' "will not pretend to say" whether it has "ever been made public before." (To further confuse matters, this same essay is referred to by Boswell as, "A Dissertation on the State of Literature and Authours" [*Life* 1, 306], and in Johnson's *Works* [1825; v, 355] is entitled "A Project for the Employment of Authors.") The new interest of 'A.P.' in the essay is its being attributed it to Johnson, particularly in the light of his pension, to which 'A.P.' wryly alludes.

¹⁸⁴ Early in his career, Johnson publicly announced two projects which he failed to fulfil: firstly, an edition of the Latin poems of the humanist scholar, Politian (Angelo Poliziano), with some history of modern Latin poetry, for which he published proposals in August 1734 (Fleeman, *Bibliography*, 5 [item 34.7PP]); secondly, an annotated translation of Fr. Paul Sarpi's *Istoria del concilio Tridentino* (1619, History of the Council of Trent), for which the proposals were announced in October 1738 (*Bibliography*, 32 [38.10SP]). Both were to be published by subscription. For the first, Boswell speculates that there were not sufficient subscriptions. The second was abandoned, in the face of a competitor (which also failed to appear), after Johnson had completed a considerable portion (which is now lost) of the work. See *Life* 1, 90, 135, and Kaminski, *Early Career*, 4, 8-9, 67-76.

With regard to the ms. *Designs*, I have shown that there are many suggestive links between particular individual projects and books actually produced by friends and associates of Johnson — Francis Fawkes, Alexander McBean, Samuel Derrick, Samuel Boyse — but none that in the end serve to show anything more profound than that literary London was a small enough place for a great many writers to be known personally to each other, and that certain particular ideas that Johnson had at some stage had for literary work were in the air and were entertained by others. Whether Johnson mentioned the idea for a collection of travels or for a poetical dictionary to Samuel Derrick, or for a new dictionary of heathen mythology to Samuel Boyse, or to a bookseller who might have commissioned such works from those writers, can only be speculation.

The entries in the *Designs* that I have grouped and sub-classified as Collections seem at first glance to be rather dull and pedestrian; they are, as I hope to have shown, all potentially more interesting in the context of the literary genres of the times, and particularly so if we imagine them as vehicles for the ruminations of Johnson, casting around for any literary and rhetorical frame in which to hang miscellaneous observations, which would be illuminating in themselves and also serve to show the moral mind at work. Something like that may be the object in its own smaller way even of such minor works of browsing, assembling and annotation as the present essay. Johnson certainly did not think that the potential value of a literary work was constrained by its subject or genre. His remarks about "books of travels" could be applied more widely: he says they "will be good in proportion to what a man has previously in his mind; his knowing what to observe; his power of contrasting one mode of life with another" (*Life* III, 301-02).¹⁸⁵

The *Designs* itself, when looked into with any curiosity, threatens at each entry to overwhelm the text to which it was originally published as a mere footnote. This is in some senses always the tendency of referential footnotes: to connect the reader in a hypertextual manner to other texts which are likewise infinitely interconnected. Boswell's and Hawkins's notes comprising the complete text of the *Designs* take the reader to a ghostly library of Johnson's works, in which we find only a selection of the works he could and might have written. As Genette observes, notes are themselves a paratextual element that represent "the borders, or absences of borders" between texts, and between

¹⁸⁵ Another aspect of Johnson's projecting imagination are the various travels which he contemplated. At different times, and with varying degrees of seriousness, Johnson talked of going to France and Italy, to Sweden and the Baltic, to Iceland, to Poland, to the Netherlands, "to Cairo, and down the Red Sea to Bengal, and take a ramble in India", to the East Indies, to see the wall of China, and even of going around the world with Banks and Solander. G.B. Hill gathers most of the data in App. B, *Life* III, 455-60.

texts and their paratexts. Any note emphasises the "always partial character of the text being referred to,"¹⁸⁶ particularly when the note is a window from one or two actual and accomplished *Lives of Johnson*, into an infinity of other alternative literary biographies that might under other circumstances have been lived, and written. Any list too, whether a summary of the past or a plan for the future, rescues from non-existence in the actual what were at some time options, alternative futures. It performs the quintessentially literate function of allowing the absent, the distant, the ephemeral, the forgettable and the imaginary to be gathered, collected and kept. If we cannot do all that we would do or would have done, we can at least by list-making represent our imagination and extend the empire of the human mind, something which Johnson — as a constant list-maker and reader of catalogues — knew very well.

¹⁸⁶ Genette, 319.

Bibliography of Works Cited and Consulted

There are a considerable number of books that I have in this thesis merely mentioned or described by way of evidence, but have not consulted. They are not included here. The Appendix, because of its particular character, is bibliographically self-contained. However, I do include here texts that I have consulted, but have not in the end either quoted or mentioned.

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