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SAMUEL JOHNSON:
NEW CONTEXTS FOR A NEW CENTURY

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Johnson and Scott, England and Scotland, Boswell, Lockhart, and Croker

James Engell

This essay enlarges on the literary relations between Samuel Johnson and Sir Walter Scott. It also examines an analogy: as Johnson came to represent England and English culture, so Scott, though in somewhat different ways, came to embody Scotland and Scottish culture. The essay treats their biographers, Boswell and Lockhart, and explores how they shaped their subjects as national representatives, as well as how Lockhart employed Johnson's presence to enhance his portrait of Scott.

Warm Esteem
Late in life, having doggedly and brilliantly written himself and others largely out of massive debt during the six previous years but now broken in health and seeking a climate in which to recover, Sir Walter Scott, before leaving for Italy, sends to the press the last line of manuscript he will ever submit. It is by Samuel Johnson. With grace, Scott writes that he hopes it may not apply to himself: “Superfluous lags the veteran on the stage.”¹ He had always loved The Vanity of Human Wishes (1749) and may have also had in mind Johnson's Rambler 207 (March 10, 1752), on the folly of remaining too long on the stage. Scott also has recourse to Johnson's poem in his letters, one of which John Gibson Lockhart includes in the Memoirs (3:14). There Scott cites the “fears of the brave, and follies of the wise.” Elsewhere he remarks that Johnson's poem “has often extracted tears from those whose eyes wander dry over pages professedly sentimental.”² For Scott, the poem concerns, in his wonderfully suggestive phrase, “the debt of humanity” (5:370). Its lines occur to him on personal occasions, with solemn thoughts of the limitations of life, its insecurity and illnesses, and the need for compassion and benevolence.

¹. John Gibson Lockhart, Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, 5 vols. (Boston, 1901), 2:186 (hereafter cited as Memoirs); see also 5:370. The line was, at least, the last one Scott wrote that Lockhart himself submitted for publication. Lockhart did not submit The Siege of Malta or Bizarro. See Donald E. Sultana, “The Siege of Malta” Rediscovered: An Account of Sir Walter Scott's Mediterranean Journey and His Last Novel (Edinburgh, 1977); see also Castle Dangerous, ed. J. H. Alexander (Edinburgh, 2006), 194–216, for Lockhart's decisions regarding publication of Scott's late works.

Gwin Kolb remarks that “Scott’s warm esteem for Samuel Johnson and his works, including Rasselas, is a solidly established fact in literary history,” but specialization in literary studies has driven the two writers apart. The paucity of anything treating the two is remarkable. Kolb’s brief article twenty years ago is a rare exception. He contends that Scott wrote the advertisement and acted as “editor” of Rasselas, for which I have found corroborating evidence: the author of the advertisement mentions Johnson reflecting “deeply upon the vanity of human wishes” and associates “Lobo’s History of Abissinia” with the “royal family of Gondar.” In a note Scott wrote for Boswell’s Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides (1785), he connects “Bruce, the Abyssinian traveller,” with “a king named Brus” in that region, and the Scottish-sounding link “occasioned some mirth at the court of Gondar.” Scott’s notes to the Tour were first published in 1831.

Of a dozen biographies of Scott in the past century, only three mention Johnson with any pertinence (those of Moray McLaren and John Sutherland, cited below, and that of A. N. Wilson), and then only to quote Scott’s reverting to some of Johnson’s words, or to make a brief comparison. None acknowledge what Kolb calls Scott’s “warm esteem” for Johnson. We still hear Thomas Macaulay’s essay on Johnson quoted regularly, but how often Scott’s appreciative “Memoir”—what Lockhart calls “his Sketch of Johnson’s Life”? Citing it, Lockhart also relays Byron’s favorable, sensitive reflections on The Vanity of Human Wishes (Memoirs, 2:186).

For a century or more, the common estimate was that the two greatest biographies in the language were by Boswell and Lockhart. In one of many instances, Leslie Stephen in the Dictionary of National Biography (1893) states that Lockhart turned his “admirable materials . . . to such account that the biography may safely be described as, next to Boswell’s Johnson, the best in the language. He handed over all the profits to Sir Walter Scott’s creditors.” H. J. C. Grierson, the most accomplished biographer of Scott in the earlier twentieth century and also editor of his letters, affirms that Lockhart’s biography “as a work of art is rivalled only by Boswell’s Johnson, and [James Anthony] Froude’s Carlyle, while it has pages which in beauty of feeling and style rise to a higher level than anything in these works.”

Scott himself had long ago praised Johnson and Boswell’s Life in print:

8. H. J. C. Grierson, Lang, Lockhart, and Biography (London, 1934), 17 (originally the Andrew Lang Lecture at St. Andrews, December 6, 1933).
Of all the men distinguished in this or any other age, Dr. Johnson has left upon posterity the strongest and most vivid impression, so far as person, manners, disposition, and conversation are concerned. We do but name him, or open a book which he has written, and the sound or action recall to the imagination at once his form, his merits, his peculiarities, nay, the very uncouthness of his gestures, and the deep impressive tone of his voice. We learn not only what he said, but form an idea how he said it; and have, at the same time, a shrewd guess of the secret motive why he did so, and whether he spoke in sport or in anger, in the desire of conviction, or for the love of debate . . . he is, in our mind’s eye, a personification as lively as that of Siddons in Lady Macbeth, or Kemble in Cardinal Wolsey. All this, as the world knows, arises from his having found in James Boswell such a biographer as no man but himself ever had, or ever deserved to have . . . Considering the eminent persons to whom it relates, and the quantity of miscellaneous information and entertaining gossip which it brings together, his Life of Johnson may be termed, without exception, the best parlour-window book that was ever written.9

“Parlour-window book” echoes a letter sent earlier to Scott and quoted in Lockhart’s Memoirs. When Scott’s Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border (1802–3) appeared, George Ellis wrote to him that it was “a collection which must form a parlor-window book in every house in Britain which contains a parlor and a window” (1:322). There is no slight in Scott’s designation of a “parlour-window book,” just as there was none in Ellis’s compliment. It meant a volume achieving popular fame that rests on real merit. Later, conscious of but not self-satisfied with his own literary fame, Scott directed in his will that Lockhart, his son-in-law, should take up the task of recording his life. Lockhart, like his subject, knew and esteemed Boswell’s Life. Yet, for all the shadows cast by these twinned biographies, as far as I can tell no one has examined them, their authors, or their subjects, in any comparative way in the last forty-five years, and before that only Ian Jack in his 1965 essay, “Two Biographers: Lockhart and Boswell,” a study of the temperaments, merits, and techniques of the two biographers.10

A crucial link exists between the two great books. In 1831 John Wilson Croker’s edition of Boswell’s Life appeared. Lockhart reviewed it in November of that year for the Quarterly Review, where he served as editor—and lived in London, not Scotland—for almost thirty years. Scott’s will assigning Lockhart in 1832 the undertaking of his biography may not have been the first time Lockhart considered that task; but the appearance of Croker’s edition about a year earlier did not prompt Lockhart to

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indicate he had ever entertained the possibility. Reviewing Croker’s edition, Lockhart encountered Croker’s notes that paint Johnson as an Englishman who held harsh views of Scotland. Lockhart’s review calls Boswell’s *Life* “that English [not British] book which, were this island to be sunk tomorrow . . . would be most prized in other days and countries, by the students ‘of us and of our history.’” Lockhart credits Boswell as a founding genius of subsequent memoirs.11 Some of Macaulay’s most negative statements about Johnson came in his review of Croker’s edition of Boswell’s *Life*, as if Croker, not Johnson, had elicited them.12

Yet, Lockhart said that for his own part he “never thought of being a Boswell.” He would not cooperate with literary gentlemen who “designed to *Boswellize* Scott.”13 Near the end of the *Memoirs*, he states, “I am not going to ‘peep and botanize’ upon his grave” (5:442). The phrase is from Wordsworth, “A Poet’s Epitaph,” asking if one is a “slave, / One that would peep and botanize / Upon his mother’s grave?” (lines 18–20). While this may distance him from Boswell’s technique and temperament, it does not rule out writing a biography of similar scope.

A great deal might be said about Johnson and Scott, Boswell and Lockhart, though for nearly half a century next to nothing has been.14 This essay highlights one aspect of the two writers and their biographers: the way in which Johnson and Scott, in part through those biographical writings, came to stand as embodiments and limit cases of national character and identification, English and Scottish. This is only one aspect. There are other reasons why Johnson, Scott, Boswell, and Lockhart claim our attention: history, morality, preservation, politics, and the life of authorship.

The issue of national identification is complicated and enriched by the fact that Boswell and Lockhart were both Scots, both Tories, and both spent time in London—Lockhart, for decades. Ian Jack explores these and other intersections of their careers. The national aspect is strongly inflected by Johnson’s apparent opinions of Scotland and the Scots, opinions reported by Boswell, sometimes provoked by him, at other times aimed at him in humor or mild exasperation.

More than two decades prior to Croker’s 1831 edition of Boswell’s *Life*—for which, in the section devoted to *A Tour to the Hebrides*, Scott would provide copious notes—the Wizard of the North had decided how he would deal with Johnson’s attitudes to Scotland. With characteristic generosity, Scott called on Johnson’s own moral sentiments. In 1810, quoting from memory, he consoled his dear friend J. B. S. Morriss on the deaths of Morriss’s brother-in-law and another close friend:

> The beautiful and feeling verses by Dr. Johnson to the memory of his humble friend Levet [sic], and which with me, though a tolerably ardent Scotchman, atone for a thousand of his prejudices, open with a

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14. Carol Ray Berninger, “Across Celtic Borders: Johnson, Piozzi, Scott” (PhD diss., Drew University, 1993), treated the attitudes of these writers to older Celtic cultures in Scotland and, for Mrs. Piozzi, in Wales. Scott’s *Waverley* (1814), *The Antiquary* (1816), and *Rob Roy* (1817) chiefly represent his views.
sentiment which every year’s acquaintance with this *Vanitas Vanitatum* presses more fully on our conviction.

“Condemn’d to Hope’s delusive mine,
As on we toil from day to day,
By sudden blast[s,] or slow decline
Our social comforts melt [drop] away.”

I am sure Mrs. Morritt must have deeply felt these repeated strokes of misfortune.15

The “vanity of vanities” recalls Scott’s admiration of the poem that in 1749 commenced Johnson’s decade of moral writing, a period that ended with another of Scott’s favorites, *Rasselas*. The tenderness Scott expresses over Johnson’s poem on Levet was no passing straw. He felt Johnson’s power as a moral historian who could examine not only the ambitious Charles XII of Sweden but also Richard Savage and Robert Levet, two of Johnson’s personal acquaintances. Savage desired recognition and literary reward. Levet was an obscure medical practitioner who knew he would never have either, yet attained them through Johnson’s tribute to his anonymous charity and patient care that asked no remuneration.

Thirteen years later, in 1823, Scott confronted the death of Dr. Matthew Baillie, brother of Joanna Baillie, an author whom he admired—as did Wordsworth—and judged among Scotland’s finest. Scott wrote to John Richardson:

> There is a sort of firmness which arises even out of the extent of such a calamity, much like that which enables men to start up and exert themselves after receiving a dreadful fall; the extent of the injury received is not perceived till long after. I am truly concerned about Joanna... He is himself an inestimable loss to society, and... always put me in mind of Johnson’s beautiful lines, though made for a humbler practitioner:—

> “When fainting nature called for aid,
And hovering Death prepared the blow,
His powerful [vig’rous] remedy displayed
The force [power] of art without the show.”16

Again, Scott’s memory of the lines is imperfect, yet ready and apposite. For him, this sentiment in Johnson far outweighs any prejudices against Scotland.

### Johnson and Scotland

The crudest and, for some readers, most memorable way in which Boswell portrays Johnson as quintessentially English is in his reporting what Johnson said about Scotland and the Scots. Boswell takes a cue from statements such as Johnson’s *Dictionary*

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definition of “oats” as a food that in England is fed to horses “but in Scotland supports the people.” 17 Conscious of his own pedigree as a Scot, yet in awe of Johnson, Boswell primes, induces, or openly invites Johnson to counter with some quip or criticism imputing to Scotland a lack of sophistication, learning, cleanliness, or culture. Johnson is often happy to oblige. He likes to pique Boswell, pull his leg, or score a point when Boswell prods. 18 It is as if Boswell wants him to say provocative things, to reply brusquely, though on the Tour, Boswell wants to show off Scotland and a select group of its citizens, too. A far better guide to Johnson’s attitude to Scotland is not Boswell’s prose, engaging as it is, but Johnson’s Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland (1775). Johnson on Scotland differs a great deal from Boswell on Johnson on Scotland.

The best place to begin assessment of Johnson’s attitude to Scotland in his Journey is the final paragraph. After admitting that in England he has “passed my time almost wholly in cities” and “may have been surprised by modes of life and appearances of nature” more familiar to others, he concludes his book: “Novelty and ignorance must always be reciprocal, and I cannot but be conscious that my thoughts on national manners, are the thoughts of one who has seen but little.” 19 It is no false modesty. Aside from his concern with England, Johnson wrote more on, thought more about, and spent more time in Scotland than any other nation. Yet, he concludes with self-admonition. If we distrust Boswell as the complete guide to Johnson, in part because Boswell spent no more than a year in his company, we might follow Johnson in distrusting his own reaction to Scotland, where he spent less than a third of that time.

Johnson’s Journey has elicited divergent judgments about his attitudes. No wonder, for as Mary Lascelles points out, “Johnson’s sympathies, and antipathies, were closely engaged” with what the “deliberate counterpoise of evidence” means not only for Scotland’s past but also for her future (YE, 9:xv). Balancing his words “ancient,” “ruins,” “declining,” “small or straggling market-towns,” “waste of reformation,” and “a place of little trade” are their opposites: “new,” “civility, elegance, and plenty,” “trade,” and “great civility.” Afrighted at some villagers’ “very savage aspect of wildness and manner” (42), in other locations he enjoys “true pastoral hospitality” (33). He finds certain dwellings smoky and cramped, yet other structures are “well built, airy, and clean” (12). He questions his own “English vanity” (7) and overturns the well-worn idea that England is always clean, Scotland dirty: an inviting lane “would have had the appearance of an English lane, except that an English lane is almost always dirty” (31–32). He is more likely to praise than to blame Scottish letters;
for example, “Literature is not neglected by the higher ranks of the Hebridians” (54), who commonly have books in two or more languages. Freya Johnston analyzes Johnson’s *Journey* with acuity. She stresses his “scrupulous indecision,” an uncertainty how to judge what he sees and witnesses, something characteristically un-Johnsonian.20

Two major points permeate his text. First, the prosperous middle state that Johnson sees as a prized hallmark of England struggles to emerge in Scotland—not enough people are yet comfortable and leisureed. He wonders if this will happen, which raises the second point: the changes sweeping over Scotland are so powerful, rapid, and often painful that, in addition to the loss of a native oral culture, forced emigration and the specter of poverty are all too real. “The true state of every nation,” Johnson remarks with distilled political wisdom, “is the state of common life” (*YE*, 9:22). That state in Scotland hangs in the balance. The Scots, for example, have “attained the liberal, without the manual arts” (28). Absent the latter, their economy and prosperity remain in jeopardy.

Lascelles closes her introduction to the *Journey* by comparing Scott’s views on the depopulation and possibility of improvement in the Border and Highlands with Johnson’s views on the same subject in the Highlands and the Hebrides, though Johnson is on one occasion skeptical about declining population (66). They do not quite see eye to eye—Lascelles says Scott puts trust in “the pride of some landlords and the compassion of others,” while Johnson looks “for the intellectual capacity and energy which might make good will effectual” (xxvi). Yet, she sees that Scott and Johnson identify very similar problems.

Boswell’s advertisement to the second edition of the *Life* (1793) lauds Johnson as a defender of English values against “that detestable sophistry which has been lately imported from France, under the false name of philosophy.”21 That comment carries political insinuations about a French revolution unknown to Johnson. For Boswell to compare Johnson’s views not with French or Italian ones, but with Scottish, proved more effective as a nursery for what Nicholas Hudson calls the virtually “iconic” identification of Johnson with England.22 A contrast closer to home would be stronger and, for many readers, more rousing—or maddening—though Scott himself would never rise to the bait.

**Johnson Champions the English by Contrast**

Boswell records Johnson drawing national contrasts, generally to English advantage. Here are two with France, and in the second, Johnson even relegates the French below the Scots: “An eminent foreigner . . . was very troublesome with many absurd inquiries. ‘Now there, Sir, (said he,) is the difference between an Englishman and a Frenchman. A Frenchman must be always talking, whether he knows any thing of the matter or not; an Englishman is content to say nothing, when he has nothing to say’” (*Life*, xxvi).

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ed. Hill, 4:14–15). Johnson also observes, “France is worse than Scotland in every thing but climate. Nature has done more for the French; but they have done less for themselves than the Scotch have done” (2:402–3). A pointed jibe comes in this comment reported by Boswell about “a Scotchman,” which Johnson clinches by invoking, with irony, Dryden’s line praising Milton:

I put him in mind that the landlord at Ellon in Scotland said, that he heard he [Johnson] was the greatest man in England,—next to Lord Mansfield. “Ay, Sir, (said he,) the exception defined the idea. A Scotchman could go no farther:

‘The force of nature could no farther go.’” (2:336)

William Murray, Earl of Mansfield, was born in Perthshire, Scotland, but became a prominent English jurist and political figure.

Yet, Johnson also is determined to catch Boswell thinking too much about his apparent “prejudice against the Scotch,” as Boswell dutifully records:

And as to his prejudice against the Scotch . . . he said . . . “When I find a Scotchman, to whom an Englishman is as a Scotchman, that Scotchman shall be as an Englishman to me.” His intimacy with many gentlemen of Scotland, and his employing so many natives of that country as his amanuenses [for the Dictionary], prove that his prejudice was not virulent; and I have deposited in the British Museum . . . the following note in answer to one from me, asking if he would meet me at dinner at the Mitre, though a friend of mine, a Scotchman, was to be there:—

“Mr. Johnson does not see why Mr. Boswell should suppose a Scotchman less acceptable than any other man. He will be at the Mitre.”

(2:306–7)

Is Johnson probing Boswell’s own sense of inferiority? Or teasing him about assuming that Johnson is prejudiced? Later in their friendship, Boswell retaliates. He mentions a Scotsman who

had the same contempt for an Englishman compared with a Scotsman, that he had for a Scotsman compared with an Englishman; and that he would say of Dr. Johnson, “Damned rascal! to talk as he does of the Scotch.” This seemed, for a moment, “to give him pause.” It, perhaps, presented his extreme prejudice against the Scotch in a point of view somewhat new to him, by the effect of contrast. (3:170)

Boswell is no match, however, for the agility of Johnson’s "extreme prejudice.” He reports that an Irish friend once expressed to Johnson “an apprehension, that if he
should visit Ireland he might treat the people of that country more unfavourably than he had done the Scotch.” Johnson answered “with strong pointed double-edged wit, ‘Sir, you have no reason to be afraid of me. The Irish are not in a conspiracy to cheat the world by false representations of the merits of their countrymen. No, Sir; the Irish are a fair people;—they never speak well of one another’” (2:307). Johnson formulates the response at Boswell’s expense. Everyone loses except the English, but the Scots lose the most. Next to Boswell, the condescending estimate of Sir John Hawkins takes the color and nuance out of Johnson’s views concerning Scotland.23

Johnson “a stern true-born Englishman” and “John Bull”

Invoking a phrase from Richard II, Boswell qualifies Johnson’s “prejudice” as one of “no ill will”:

That he was to some degree of excess a true-born Englishman, so as to have ever entertained an undue prejudice against both the country and the people of Scotland, must be allowed. But it was a prejudice of the head, and not of the heart. He had no ill will to the Scotch; for, if he had been conscious of that, he would never have thrown himself into the bosom of their country, and trusted to the protection of its remote inhabitants with a fearless confidence. (Life, ed. Hill, 2:300–301)

And Boswell leavens the true-born Englishman with a sense that Johnson can criticize his own compatriots for their frigid reserve:

Though a stern true-born Englishman, . . . he had . . . candour enough to censure, the cold reserve too common among Englishmen towards strangers: “Sir, (said he,) two men of any other nation who are shewn into a room together . . . will immediately find some conversation. But two Englishmen will probably go each to a different window, and remain in obstinate silence. Sir, we as yet do not enough understand the common rights of humanity.” (4:191)

By the 1830s, however, Johnson had become a popular caricature. The Monthly Magazine comments on Croker’s edition of Boswell’s Life and Tour: “The doctor was a first-rate John Bull, that is, a first-rate bull-dog, and nothing could be more formidable

23. Hawkins writes: “[Johnson’s prejudices were too strong to permit him to extend his philanthropy much beyond the limits of his native country, and the pale of his own church; and, that he was unable to conquer his habits of thinking and judging, is the only apology that can be offered for his asperity towards the people whose country and manners he, in his journey above spoken of [to Scotland], has taken upon him to describe; or that he has forborne to display any such generous sentiments respecting the inhabitants of Scotland as others have done who have visited that country”; Sir John Hawkins, The Life of Samuel Johnson, L.L.D., ed. O M Brack Jr. (Athens, Ga., 2009), 292. It is impossible to give Johnson’s Journey a fair reading and agree with this sentiment.
than his gripe [sic], when he once took the trouble to tear down his antagonist.”24 Boswell is much to blame. In his exuberance, especially in the Tour, he couples Johnson as “true-born Englishman” with “John Bull” (Life, ed. Hill, 5:20). Boswell handles neither phrase well. He is supposedly cautious—“if I may be allowed the phrase”—about Johnson as “much of a John Bull.” But there it is. The phrase originated with John Arbuthnot, a Scot, and Boswell seems unaware of this. He also seems unaware of Daniel Defoe’s satiric poem The True-Born Englishman (1701), which points out that many among the nobility and gentry descended from foreign invaders. Scott later did not care for John Bull. In 1830 he wrote to Lady Louisa Stuart bemoaning that the simplistic views of the time gull “the ass’s ears of John Bull” (Memoirs, 5:279).

Johnson Praises English Intellects

In the all-important semiotic systems of mathematics and of words, Boswell provides two instances in which Johnson does champion English thinkers: “In a Latin conversation with the Père [Roger Joseph] Boscovitch… I heard him maintain the superiority of Sir Isaac Newton over all foreign philosophers, with a dignity and eloquence that surprised that learned foreigner” (Life, ed. Hill, 2:125–26). In The Advancement of Learning (1605), Bacon called for a science of semiotics, and Johnson praises Bacon’s grasp of English as the supreme practice of semiotics manifested as national language. Boswell relays Johnson’s comment that Bacon “was a favourite author,” one he had not read until compiling the Dictionary, in which Johnson often quotes him. William Seward recollects Johnson having mentioned “that a Dictionary of the English Language might be compiled from Bacon’s writings alone,” and that Johnson had once considered giving an edition of Bacon’s English works, and “writing the Life of that great man” (3:194).

Johnson’s emphasis on Bacon as a master of English and his concomitant interest in him suggest the most important factor in Johnson’s reputation as the epitome of English culture: his earned authority in the language itself. The first example of this, however well worn, is telling, for it combines contrasting another nation with control over one’s native tongue. Dr. Adams and Johnson discuss the Dictionary, and Adams asks how he can complete it in three years when forty members of the French Academy took forty years to compile their dictionary. Johnson replies with a witty ratio: “This is the proportion. Let me see; forty times forty is sixteen hundred. As three to sixteen hundred, so is the proportion of an Englishman to a Frenchman” (1:186).

Again, language is the essential element in national identity, and for Johnson its use can help or hinder a larger integration of the United Kingdom. Holding to one’s own dialect tends to promote provincialism or clannishness, the implication of which Lockhart will later absolve Scott. Yet Johnson is unaware of the hegemonic implications of his attitude. Perhaps it is, as he says in the Journey, his “English vanity” at work:

He observed that “The Irish mix better with the English than the Scotch do; their language is nearer to English. . . . They have not that extreme

nationality which we find in the Scotch. I will do you, Boswell, the justice to say, that you are the most unscottified of your countrymen. You are almost the only instance of a Scotchman that I have known, who did not at every other sentence bring in some other Scotchman.” (2:242)

The most telling remark that Boswell reports, however, suggests that Johnson was so intimate with the English language that the Dictionary had grown in his own mind “insensibly.” This is not strictly true—Johnson relied on “the best authors” to illustrate and to provide many of its words and, by inference, their definitions. Then again, judging and selecting those authors required a mind saturated in literature of the English language, all imaginative or learned works in any genre or field of knowledge. When Boswell asked him how he had acquired such a grasp of English and then planned to compile the Dictionary, “He told me, that ‘it was not the effect of particular study; but that it had grown up in his mind insensibly’” (1:182).

Transcending Nationality
With Johnson, any reader should frequently find resort in yet, but, or however—words that provide the pivots for The Vanity of Human Wishes, many essays, and the Preface to Shakespeare. And so, Boswell in his inclusiveness reveals a figure belonging to a nation but promoting uppermost the ideal of a republic of letters, a confederacy of knowledge that transcends boundaries. Boswell tells how, according to Sir William Forbes, several friends proposed translated emendations to Johnson’s fine Latin epitaph for Goldsmith. “‘Sir Joshua agreed to carry it to Dr. Johnson, who received it with much good humour and desired Sir Joshua to tell the gentlemen, he would alter the Epitaph in any manner they pleased, as to the sense of it; but he would never consent to disgrace the walls of Westminster Abbey with an English inscription’” (Life, ed. Hill, 3:84–85). Though we no longer regard Latin as the language of universal learning, the point remains, and we recall that his conversation championing Newton was in Latin. For Johnson, there exists a geography of intellect and morality whose territory is bounded only by the human mind and whose most common language should be as widely understood as possible.

The pith of this attitude Peter Levi states well:

He was committedly on the side of American Indians, Negro slaves, the British poor, and every other underdog he knew. It is important to realize that these attitudes could go together with the most progressive analysis of human society. There is a crucial sense in which Johnson belongs outside an English context, to the European Enlightenment. . . . Johnson believed utterly in the republic of letters, the community of learning, with . . . all human enterprise and improvement depending on it. His roots were in the renaissance.25

To this admirable and accurate assessment may be added Nicholas Hudson’s acute statement, which returns us to Johnson’s reputation as “true-born Englishman” and “first-rate John Bull.” Hudson remarks that while Johnson “was skeptical of English contemporaries prejudiced in favor of their homeland,” he “did become a virtually iconic Englishman for the Victorians, a tradition that still endures. . . . Nor did any author of his time contribute so much to . . . a self-reflexive image of nationhood constructed above all in dictionaries, editions of canonized authors, histories, works of fiction, and all the publicly disseminated products of “print-culture.””

Only the largest of figures, cultural or political, can be identified so closely with their own cultures or systems, yet also transcend, even criticize, such nationalities to help pay, as Scott says, “the debt of humanity.” This paradox is true of Virgil, for example, Cervantes, Goethe, and Tolstoy. Ben Jonson praises Shakespeare as “Soul of the age!” Yet in the same poem, “To the Memory of My Beloved, The Author, Mr. William Shakespeare, and What He Hath Left Us,” Jonson asserts, “He was not of an age, but for all time!” (lines 17, 43).

Enter Croker

Between Boswell’s first edition of his Life of Johnson in 1791 and that of George Birkbeck Hill, the most important is that by John Wilson Croker in 1831. Croker included Boswell’s Tour, which its author had printed separately (1785–86). Croker obtained notes for the Tour, seventy-seven by Scott and a few by Lockhart. They repay study, though Boswell’s later editors largely ignored them.27 Many of Scott’s notes to the Tour are informative, with his own eyewitness travels as warrant for his statements.

Thanks to Jack Lynch’s Bibliography of Johnsonian Studies, 1986–1998, I located a study of Scott’s notes published by Ann Bowden and William B. Todd in 1995.28 It prints all of Scott’s notes and annotates their fate in five subsequent editions of the Tour from 1835 through 1964. Having reconstructed some of this history, I was relieved to see my hunch about Scott’s notes already verified by Bowden and Todd. “As it was once observed for Johnson,” they comment, “so it now appears for Scott: early notes since disregarded are occasionally more informative than later discourse.” After Croker’s edition, Scott’s notes enjoyed only “sporadic recurrence.” Croker’s invitation to Scott to contribute produced on January 30, 1829, “a highly evocative letter” and “numerous other communications, most of which, in one form or another, also found their way

humanists, see Robert DeMaria Jr., Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading (Baltimore, 1997), 8, 10, 39–40, 49, 69, 84, 73–75, 97–100, 114, 116–21, 124–25, 217.


27. Peter Levi’s superb 1984 reading edition does not seem to avail itself of them. R. W. Chapman’s 1924 edition bypasses Croker’s edition and its notes. Frederick Pottle and Charles Bennett in 1936 quote a few notes by Croker but less than half a dozen by Scott, dismissing one this way: “like all Scott’s Boswelliana, it should be read as historical fiction, not as a record of fact.” This comment seems ungenerous and itself something of an ahistorical fiction; see James Boswell, Boswell’s Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, ed. Frederick A. Pottle and Charles H. Bennett (New York, 1936), 375–76n2.

below the text.” Scott’s seventy-seven notes and a few he wrote for the Life were “widely publicized” and reviewed “as the principal feature of the 1831 edition.” 29

Reviewing Croker’s edition, Lockhart was convinced that the notes “will never be divorced from the text which they so admirably illustrate, and indeed, invest with a new interest throughout.” Although Lockhart admits that the note concerning Johnson and Adam Smith arguing over David Hume may be specious, his prediction concerning Scott’s notes proved false. In 1860 Robert Carruthers suppressed fifty-three notes entirely, gave his own in place of twenty-two, and indirectly printed but two. Hill and Powell use twenty-seven of Scott’s notes in full, but only seven others are variously employed. 30 Many valuable ones slipped away. The reasons given—if any—for stinting Scott are meager. Any future editor of the Tour should consult Bowden and Todd’s study. They provide one other fascinating item I have not seen mentioned elsewhere.

The now-established practice of including Boswell’s Tour with his Life “may not have originated with Croker,” nor the idea of including notes by Scott. On January 19, 1829, eleven days before Croker’s invitation to Scott, Lockhart wrote to John Murray, publisher of Croker’s edition, “Pray ask Croker whether Boswell’s account of the Hebridean Tour ought not to be melted into the book. Sir Walter has many MS. annotations in his ‘Boswell,’ both ‘Life’ and ‘Tour,’ and will, I am sure, give them with hearty good will.” 31 Lockhart seems the first to hatch the idea not only of including notes by Scott but also of folding Boswell’s Tour into any edition of the Life, something Bowden and Todd call “a radical innovation,” and one that has lasted.

Croker, who used the notes by Scott and Lockhart, often appears combative concerning Boswell, Johnson, and Scotland. When Boswell states that Johnson “was to some degree of excess a true-born Englishman,” but that his prejudice against “the people of Scotland . . . was a prejudice of the head, and not of the heart,” Croker retaliates by asking if Boswell thinks he helps his case by regarding “Johnson’s dislike of Scotland as the result not of feeling but of reason? In truth, in the printed Journal of his Tour, there is nothing that a fair and liberal Scotchman can or does complain of; but his conversation is full of the harshest and often most unjust sarcasms against the Scotch, nationally and individually” (Life, ed. Croker, 5:234n1).

Latching on to Boswell’s observation about Johnson’s “wonder at the extreme jealousy of the Scotch,” Croker alters “jealousy” and in turn wonders at “the extreme prejudice of Johnson against Scotland and the Scotch . . . because he was himself a Jacobite, and many of his earliest acquaintances and some of his nearest friends were Scotch.” Croker concludes, “I have a strong suspicion that there was some personal cause for this unreasonable and, as it appears, unaccountable antipathy” (5:240n2). Croker grasps for an ad hominem cause when the situation, complicated by Boswell’s

interventions, would have been enlightened by reference to Johnson’s *Journey*, which Croker earlier has named but here ignores.

Croker’s tone, occasionally sniping, often carries implicit or explicit criticism of Boswell (for example, 4:226–27, 245) and a self-confident exposition of Johnson’s views. He dismisses Boswell’s account of Johnson’s comments on religion, particularly Boswell’s characterization of Johnson’s trust in the efficacy of “deathbed repentance.” Croker ascribes Boswell’s readiness to infer that Johnson had such a belief to the “personal or national offence which he took at Dr. Johnson’s deprecation of the Scottish clergy” (4:277n1), a motive that seems doubtful. However innovative the inclusion of the *Tour* in an edition of Boswell’s *Life*—Croker accepted Lockhart’s suggestion to Murray—his own notes are erratic.

Scott’s notes to the *Tour*, largely informative, reflect an awareness of how long ago the tour took place. If Scott corrects, he does so gently. On Johnson’s doubt about the ability of a Scotch family to “tell of themselves a thousand years ago,” Scott counters, “More than the Doctor would suppose” and gives as evidence his own reading of that family’s history dating to 1263, “modestly drawn up, and apparently with all the accuracy which can be expected when tradition must be necessarily much relied upon” (4:242n1). Scott identifies landmarks. He largely avoids commenting on Jacobite issues and rarely imputes views to Johnson. Indeed, one of Scott’s anecdotal notes assumes reconciliation and honor to be above politics (4:330n1). His most severe “correction” of Johnson is mild: “It is strange that Johnson should not have known that the ‘Adventures of a Guinea’ was written by a namesake of his own, Charles Johnson” (4:307n1). Johnson may be excused. The work (1760–65) originally was anonymous, and the actual author was Charles Johnstone (*Life*, ed. Hill, 5:275n2).

Scott validates the danger Johnson and Boswell experienced when they sailed in a small boat between islands. His authority stems from his own experience in the Hebrides, where he knows travel is risky: “Indeed, the whole expedition was highly perilous, considering the season of the year, the precarious chance of getting seaworthy boats, and the ignorance of the Hebrideans, who, notwithstanding the opportunities, I may say the necessities of their situation, are very careless and unskilful sailors—Walter Scott” (*Life*, ed. Croker, 5:7n1).

One of Scott’s notes, the veracity of which Carruthers calls into question on the grounds it was a story told by others, should be reproduced at least in part.32 L. F. Powell admits it may be accurate. It involves Boswell’s father, Johnson, and Boswell himself, and it depicts the conflict between Scottish Whig and English Tory when Johnson visited Lord Auchinleck. “‘There’s nae hope for Jamie, mon,’” Boswell’s father “said to a friend,” and continued:

“Jamie is gaen clean gyte. . . . He’s done wi’ [Pasquale] Paoli . . . and whose tail do you think he has pinned himself to now, mon?” Here the old judge summoned up a sneer of most sovereign contempt.

“A dominie, mon—an auld dominie; he keeped a schûle, and cau’d it an acaadamy” [Johnson’s school at Edial]. . . . the controversy between Tory and Covenanter raged with great fury, and ended in Johnson’s pressing upon the old judge the question, what good Cromwell, of whom he had said something derogatory, had ever done to his country; when, after being much tortured, Lord Auchinleck at last spoke out, “God, doctor! he gart kings ken that they had a lith in their neck”—he taught kings they had a joint in their necks. Jamie then set to mediating between his father and the philosopher, and availing himself of the judge’s sense of hospitality, which was punctilious, reduced the debate to more order.—Walter Scott (Life, ed. Croker, 5:131n1; see Life, ed. Hill, 5:382n2)

Scott reports a witty reply to Johnson’s infamous definition of oats, for England was renowned for the quality of its horses: “Lord Elibank made a happy retort on Dr. Johnson’s definition of oats as the food of horses in England and of men in Scotland: ‘Yes,’ said he; ;and where else will you see such horses and such men?’ —Walter Scott” (Life, ed. Croker, 5:136n1).

I have dwelt on Scott’s notes to the Tour because for 180 years they have been lost in the shuffle. Nearly all deserve to rejoin the deck as valid cards, not jokers. And Lockhart deserves credit as the originator of folding the Tour into the Life.

Johnson’s Presence in Scott’s Life and Lockhart’s Memoirs
Lockhart’s Memoirs of the Life of Scott is cast with Boswell’s biography in mind as a broad formal model and, to a certain extent, a thematic one—the development and career of a writer whose eminence became clear decades before his death and whose fame while alive shaped a national culture. There are key differences, with the richness of conversation in Boswell’s Life perhaps the most significant one, as Ian Jack notes. However, Jack assumes that Boswell prints Johnson’s “ipsissima verba.”33 We now know that Boswell altered some of Johnson’s language. Scott was not the talker Johnson was, nor Lockhart the eager stenographer. His devotion took other forms. Lockhart begins his study by printing Scott’s own autobiographical essay, the “Ashiestiel Fragment,” of 1808. Its second paragraph includes a clear reference to Johnson’s Life of Mr Richard Savage (1744). Scott presents it in the context of admonitions drawn from the lives of writers, failings against which his own habits he hopes will prove defense. He says Thomas Percy’s Reliques of Ancient English Poetry (1765) shaped his sensibility, a collection by an editor he admired and whom he almost certainly knew had received aid from Johnson, despite Johnson’s occasional antipathy to the ballad form. Scott writes: “But above all, I then first became acquainted with Bishop Percy’s Reliques of Ancient Poetry. [Scott omits “English” from the title.] . . . I remember well the spot where I read these volumes for the first time” (Memoirs, 1:31–32).

When, after Scott’s self-portrait of several dozen pages, the autobiography turns to biography, Lockhart soon quotes and extends a parallel that Scott mentions in his preface to *Guy Mannering* (1815). It refers to Johnson’s boyhood memory of being touched by the queen in order to cure the king’s evil, his scrofula or tubercular infection. Lockhart frames his quotation from Scott’s preface with a particular parallel:

“As Dr. Johnson had a shadowy recollection of Queen Anne as a stately lady in black, adorned with diamonds,” so his own [Scott’s] memory was haunted with “a solemn remembrance of a woman of more than female height, dressed in a long red cloak, who once made her appearance beneath the thatched roof of Sandy-Knowe.” . . . This was Madge Gordon, grand-daughter of Jean Gordon, the prototype of Meg Merrilies [in *Guy Mannering*]. (1:61–62)

Scott states in his autobiographical essay that he suffered “constitutional indolence,” to which Lockhart soon provides another Johnsonian parallel by juxtaposing an anecdote in which William Gifford quotes Johnson’s own confession that “he knew little Greek,” to which Jacob Bryant counters, “but how shall we know what Johnson would have called much Greek?” Lockhart makes an analogy with Scott’s experience by concluding, “What Scott would have called constitutional diligence, I know not; but surely, if indolence of any kind had been inherent in his nature, even the triumph of Socrates was not more signal than his” (1:117).

Lockhart also quotes James Ballantyne’s “Memorandum,” written after Scott’s death. It reveals how Scott’s publishing partner recognized the parallels that Scott and his career might suggest with Johnson and Boswell. In 1796 Ballantyne and Scott met in a coach and renewed their friendship. Forty years later, Ballantyne congratulates himself: “I doubt if Boswell ever showed himself a more skilful Reporter than I did on this occasion” (1:232). Ballantyne never wrote a valuable biography of Scott. Boswell, the famous Scottish predecessor, did not intimidate Lockhart. Rather, he seems to have steeled Lockhart, perhaps because Lockhart admired Boswell’s subject and knew that his own temperament and technique differed from Boswell’s.

Having virtually disowned his younger brother Daniel, whose bad behavior worsened when he was sent to Jamaica, Scott later regretted his own pride and coldness. Dan returned home, soon to die, but Scott refused even to see him. In *The Fair Maid of Perth* (1828), in the character of Conachar, he addresses this history obliquely. Scott told Lockhart that Conachar expressed his own remorse and expiation. He confessed that the characterization of Conachar was his version of Johnson standing bareheaded in the rain many long minutes at Uttoxeter, where as a youth he had refused to accompany his father to help sell books.34 Such acts of penance in the marketplace were associated with the punishments of ecclesiastical courts, but for Johnson it was self-imposed.

No doubt, too, Scott remained throughout his life conscious that Johnson had in 1773 discussed and perhaps visited his high school six years before Scott attended it

Life, ed. Hill, 5:80, also 2:144n2). William Strahan, Johnson's publisher, was also a graduate.

In other places, Johnson's or Boswell's shade intervenes. Johnson said he loved biography above all other forms of composition because it could be put to use. Lockhart includes one of Scott's letters of 1803 to Anna Seward, “the Swan of Lichfield,” in which Scott states that biography is “the most interesting perhaps of every species of composition,” though spoiled if done inaccurately (quoted in Memoirs, 1:348). Seward personally knew and generally admired Johnson and Scott, and Lockhart relates that after Scott visited Seward in Lichfield, she wrote to Henry Francis Cary, the translator of Dante: “Not less astonishing than was Johnson's memory is that of Mr. Scott; like Johnson, also, his recitation is too monotonous and violent to do justice either to his own writings or those of others.” (quoted in Memoirs, 2:9). Lockhart does not qualify the parallels others draw between Johnson and Scott; he emphasizes and augments them.

As one example, Lockhart stresses that Scott helped minor writers: “This part of Scott's character recalls by far the most pleasing trait in that of his last predecessor in the plenitude of literary authority—Dr. Johnson” (2:59). Lockhart overlooks the fact that Scott seems to have underestimated and perhaps underserved such a writer as James Hogg. There are other Johnsonian comparisons, too (for example, 1:215 and n; 2:56–57). One parallel is that Scott not only provided notes for Croker's edition of Boswell's Life including Boswell's Tour but also in 1814 took a lengthy Johnsonian excursion, a “Vacation,” prompted by curiosity about the culture of native inhabitants of the far north, the folk populating the Shetland Islands, Fair Isle, the Orkney Islands, Harris, and the Hebrides. Though his journal of the voyage, kept in “five little paper books,” is not comparable to Boswell's Tour or Johnson's Journey, it is attractive in its own right, and Lockhart includes it entire (2:401–512 at 401), much as Croker had included Boswell's Tour in his edition of the Life—following Lockhart's suggestion.

Scott and Johnson converge, perhaps unexpectedly, in their judgments of Ossian and of James Macpherson, so much so that it becomes hard to distinguish their opinions. Scott writes in 1808 that, when young, he read Shakespeare and “became intimate with Ossian and Spenser” but preferred Spenser: “The tawdry repetitions of the Ossianic phraseology disgusted me rather sooner than might have been expected from my age” (1:30). In 1805 he had written to Anna Seward, “I should be no Scotishman if I had not very attentively considered” the Ossian dispute. However, he concludes, “I am compelled to admit that incalculably the greater part of the English Ossian must be ascribed to Macpherson himself, and that his whole introductions, notes, etc., etc., are an absolute tissue of forgeries” (1:437).

Scott avers that Macpherson knew originals in an oral tradition but emphasizes that the Highland Society, trying to defend Macpherson, found instead “that

37. See, however, Duncan, Scott’s Shadow, 279–80.
there were no real originals—using that word as is commonly understood.” Macpher-
son was “a man of high talents, and his poetic powers as honorable to his country, as
the use which he made of them, and I fear his personal character in other respects,
was a discredit to it” (4:39–40). Scott does not mention Johnson on Ossian in this let-
ter to Anna Seward, but his conclusions are nearly identical with Johnson’s. He con-
firms this verdict years later in a note to Croker’s edition, where he acknowledges
and validates Johnson’s view (Life, ed. Croker, 4:264n2).

Scotland and Britain
Boswell highlighted Johnson’s national attitudes by the method of contrast, especially
England versus Scotland. Lockhart modifies this tack to reflect that Scott endeavored
to be—and was—thoroughly successful in England as well as Scotland. Here he follows
Scott’s lead in the autobiographical essay, for example, where Fielding, an Englishman,
and Smollett, a Scot, are both among “our best novelists.” Lockhart will similarly
speak of “our earlier dramatic authors,” when he means chiefly English ones. Lock-
hart records Scott’s interest in Norse and German fables, “but for the treasures of diction
he was content to dig on British [not ‘Scottish’] soil. He had all he wanted in the
old wells of ‘English undefiled’ [another echo of Johnson], and the still living,
though fast shrinking, waters of that sister idiom which had not always, as he flattered
himself, deserved the name of a dialect” (Memoirs, 1:32, 135, 114).

In place of Boswell’s contrast between England and Scotland, Lockhart, knowing
how securely Scott was fixed in the Scottish heart, employs what Scott intimated—and
lived—a literary citizenship in both worlds. Of course, Lockhart also knew that, as
Nicholas Hudson remarks, no one would mistake Scott for an English writer.38 The
point is Scott’s cosmopolitan attitude and popularity, his roots in native soil yet his
branches extending everywhere: “His works were the daily food, not only of his countrymen, but of all educated Europe. His society was courted by whatever England
could show of eminence,” yet “whoever had Scotch blood in him, ‘gentle or simple,’ felt
it move more rapidly through his veins when he was in the presence of Scott” (3:236).39

This national hybrid vigor Lockhart establishes early in the biography when he
quotes Jane Anne Cranstoun. Hearing Scott’s rhymed translation of Lenore in 1795,
she effuses, “‘Walter Scott is going to turn out a poet—something of a cross, I think,
between Burns and Gray.’” Lockhart emphasizes that Scott possessed “minute and
accurate knowledge of the leading persons and events both of Scotch and English
history” (1:217, 2:136).

No stronger symbolic instance of Scott’s British as well as Scottish literary
appeal and importance—and of his generosity to a fellow writer, Robert Southey—can
be found than his decision to decline the place of poet laureate and to suggest Southey
as the better choice. Scott declines the laureateship on grounds that it requires regular,
frequent publication and expressions of commemoration. The former is not his habit, and the latter he feels he cannot perform as well as others. He notes his two offices in government affording decent income, and he says that the laureateship might more appropriately be held by someone whose exclusive work and remuneration are connected with literature. Scott probably could not imagine himself the person most fit “to commemorate the events of his Royal Highness’s administration” (2:350—his letter to the Marquis of Hertford, September 4, 1813), and feared that the honor would detract from, even damage, his role as a poet of Scotland’s traditions and history. Of course, he would not breathe a word of this in declining the honor.

For his self-identity and career, the better decision was to decline. Yes, he may have had Southey in mind—and so what might look like ingratitude he turns to credit his own generous nature without stain of hypocrisy. This view gains reinforcement from Scott’s letter to Byron of November 6, 1813: “I am somewhat an admirer of royalty, and in order to maintain this part of my creed, I shall take care never to be connected with a court, but stick to the ignotum pro mirabili” (2:366). The maxim means to remain unacquainted or at a distance in order to admire or marvel. It is an ejectation, yet a triumph. He did not despise the honor. His much-loved Dryden, whom he edited, was first to hold it (his treatment of Dryden in some respects surpasses Johnson’s, which Scott knew), but Scott was wary of it. Privately he wrote to Joanna Baillie: “If the Regent means to make it respectable, he will abolish the foolish custom of the annual [birthday] odes, which is a drudgery no person of talent could ever willingly encounter—or come clear off from, if he was so rash. And so, peace be with the laurel, “Profaned by Cibber and contemned by Gray.”” (2:362)

Lockhart lets Scott’s correspondence and that of others relate details. He notes only that “the Regent had good sense and good taste enough” soon to hold the custom of the birthday ode “‘more honored in the breach than the observance,’” and, as a result, “the whole fell completely into disuse” (2:356). This validates Scott’s opinion. Southey did not seem to mind being second choice, and Lockhart, in a note added in 1839, quotes Southey’s praise of Scott’s conduct as “characteristically generous, and in the highest degree friendly” (2:356n). Sometimes a biographer does best when letting documents speak for themselves. In this manner, Lockhart achieves a dignity and usually an accuracy that surpasses encomium or protest. He so admired Scott—he returned from Italy himself to die in the room next to the one in which more than twenty years earlier Scott had died, and he is buried at his feet—that his veneration and Scott’s advice checked Lockhart’s youthful satirical bent and set the course for his entire life.

Scott and National Culture

By the time of Scott’s death, identification of him with Scottish history and culture was so pervasive, popularly acknowledged, and, by scholars, already championed,
that Lockhart needed to do nothing to encourage it. He had exerted himself to estab-
lish it a dozen years earlier. In Peter’s Letters to His Kinsfolk (1819), Lockhart articulates
what Ian Duncan calls “the first programmatic account of the ideological formation
of a romantic cultural nationalism in Great Britain,” 40 something that, I would add,
Lockhart had impetus to do from his study of modern German literature. Duncan
ventures that, for Lockhart, Scott represents the “hero as a man of letters” who can
perform what Macpherson botched. Lockhart, writing as Peter Morris, might
describe the landscape near Scott’s Abbotsford as “bare and sterile.” However, as Dun-
can explains, for Lockhart, “Scotland, Abbotsford, and Scott’s poetry all stand for one
another.” 41 Lockhart’s praise is high: “this great genius seems to have been raised up to
counteract . . . this unfortunate tendency of his age [“mere speculative understand-
ing”] by re-awakening the sympathies of his countrymen for the more energetic char-
acters and passions of their forefathers.” 42

Duncan analyzes such recovery of a national culture, however, as “a Frankenstei
operation,” 43 something almost ghoulish. Nevertheless, when we encounter Lockhart’s
Memoirs, written more than fifteen years after Peter’s Letters, Lockhart’s view is no less
sympathetic but more tempered and balanced—a shift from his earlier, almost blind
hero worship of Scott. In the biography, Lockhart sets about to give evidence that Scott’s
identification with Scotland was earned, genuine, and present from Scott’s early child-
hood to his last days. Commenting on the Border Minstrelsy, Lockhart says that
Scott’s “taste and fancy” were formed “as early as his moral character.” Even before he
became an author, he had “assembled about him, in the uncalculating delight of
native enthusiasm, almost all the materials on which his genius was destined to be
employed” (1:355). This “uncalculating delight” is Lockhart’s equivalent to Boswell’s
reporting Johnson’s use of “insensibly” for the manner of conceiving the Dictionary.
The materials left by Scott—his sketch of Johnson’s life, his notes to Boswell’s
Tour, his references to Johnson in his letters, his comments on Boswell’s Life, his quo-
tations from Johnson and the context of those quotations—all encouraged Lockhart
to employ the completeness demonstrated by Boswell. Lockhart plays upon the analogy
of Johnson as the prime representative of English culture, significantly embodied by
Boswell, in order to illustrate how Scott fused old, romantic Scotland with modern
Scottish life; how Scott blended Scottish lore and British literature in a culture larger,
perhaps, than Johnson had envisioned sixty years earlier. In this task Lockhart nei-
ther strains nor exults. He lets the written words of Scott and others do the work. He
does not engage or repeat Croker’s less charitable views about Johnson on Scotland.

Playing off Scott’s statement in his autobiographical essay that “Every Scottish-
man has a pedigree” (1:2), Lockhart weaves that pedigree, and the places Scott lived

40. Duncan, Scott’s Shadow, 47.
41. Duncan, Scott’s Shadow, 48–49, 65.
42. J. G. Lockhart, Peter’s Letters to His Kinsfolk, 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1819), 2:348, quoted in Duncan,
Scott’s Shadow, 68.
43. Duncan, Scott’s Shadow, 69.
and knew, with the content of Scott's own literary efforts, so that the man, his works, and
his native heritage are amalgamated as a larger whole (1:51–61). Just as one instance: “So
long as Sir Walter retained his vigorous habits, he used to make an autumnal excursion,
with whatever friend happened to be his guest at the time, to the Tower of Harden, the
incunabula of his race. A more picturesque scene for the fastness of a lineage of Border
marauders could not be conceived,” and Scott had nearly renovated “the dilapidated peel [fortified
house or tower] for his summer residence” (1:55).

As Lockhart reports, Scott later jokes about his ancestors. His “grandfather was
a horse-jockey and cattle-dealer, and made a fortune; my great-grandfather a Jacobite
and traitor (as the times called him), and lost one; and after [that is, before in time] him
intervened one or two half-starved lairds, who rode a lean horse, and were fol-
lowed by leaner greyhounds . . . fought duels; cocked their hats,—and called them-
selves gentlemen” (2:308). Lockhart, too, harbors a healthy suspicion of pedigrees: “It
hardly needed Swift’s biting satire to satisfy the student of the past, that the very high-
est pedigrees are as uncertain as the very lowest” (5:442).

Yet, Lockhart also quotes Scott’s verse epistle to William Erskine, famous lines
that describe Scott’s early fascinations, which Lockhart dates to Scott’s third year! Scott
recounts “feelings rous’d in life’s first day,” which “Glow in the line and prompt the
lay.” By the winter hearth he heard “patriot battles won of old / By Wallace Wight
and Bruce the Bold,” how later Highland clans broke “the scarlet ranks,” and how as a
boy “stretched at length upon the floor,” he laid out “Pebbles and shells” in mimic con-
flict:  “And onward still the Scottish Lion bore, / And still the scattered Southron fled
before” (1:69–70).

Those “feelings rous’d in life’s first day” of loyalty to an older order are exempli-
ﬁed by an anecdote concerning Scott’s father, who in his own home met a political
enemy, Murray of Broughton, privately on business. Murray had borne evidence
against one of Prince Charles Stuart’s adherents. Intruding and curious about the
guest, Scott’s mother brought Murray a cup of tea as refreshment. Scott’s father later
smashed the cup and told his wife, “I can forgive your little curiosity, madam, but you
must pay the penalty. I may admit into my house, on a piece of business, persons
wholly unworthy to be treated as guests by my wife. Neither lip of me nor of mine
comes after Mr. Murray of Broughton’s” (1:162).

Lockhart includes Scott’s statement about the author of Sir Tristram, that
“Philo-Tomas, whoever he was, must surely have been an Englishman; when his hero
joins battle with Moraunt, he exclaims—

‘God help Tristrem the Knight,
He fought for Inglan.’

This strain of national attachment,” concludes Scott, “would hardly have proceeded
from a Scottish author, even though he had laid his scene in the sister country.” Regard-
ing Scott’s work on Border Minstrelsy, Lockhart mentions “the patriotic enthusiasm
which mingled with all the best of his literary efforts” (1:309, 317). The Field of Waterloo apparently “disappointed” the public, but Lockhart adds: “The burst of pure native enthusiasm upon the Scottish heroes that fell around the Duke of Wellington’s person bears, however, the broadest marks of the ‘Mighty Minstrel’” (3:76).

In literary societies Scott joined when young, Lockhart reports that he spoke of Anglo-Saxon and Norse sagas but “was deep … in … all the Scotch chronicles; and his friends rewarded him by the honorable title of Duns Scotus,” a sobriquet he employed to sign at least one letter (1:135, 139). In part because Scott translated works from the German (for example, Goethe’s Götz von Berlichingen), Lockhart goes out of his way to state that Glenfinlas is based on “Gaelic tradition” and “far more likely to draw out the secret strength of his genius, as well as to arrest the feelings of his countrymen, than any subject with which the stores of German diablerie could have supplied him” (1:281). We need to suppose the word therefore inserted before “far more likely.” That is Lockhart’s reasoning. And we might bear in mind that Lockhart admired German literature. His first conversation with Scott centered on his own visit to Goethe, and Lockhart translated Friedrich Schlegel’s lectures on the history of literature.

Perhaps the most dramatic instance of Scott’s love of country comes in 1806. It carries a clear but not rancorous political tinge, and it involves not literature but law, another deep interest he shared with Johnson. Scott engages in Tory politics and fights Whig innovations, especially those to alter “the courts of law and the administration of justice.” After one meeting, walking on the way to Castle Street, “between Mr. [Francis] Jeffrey and another of his reforming friends,” even as they compliment him and suggest treating matters “playfully,” Scott is overcome and exclaims,

“No, no—‘t is no laughing matter; little by little, whatever your wishes may be, you will destroy and undermine, until nothing of what makes Scotland Scotland shall remain.” And so saying, he turned round to conceal his agitation—but not until Mr. Jeffrey saw tears gushing down his cheek—resting his head until he recovered himself on the wall of the Mound. (1:487–88)

Jeffrey reappears later when he reviews Marmion. Lockhart says the review mentions “‘manifest neglect of Scottish feelings’” — perhaps, Lockhart guesses, leveled as a criticism because the poem also expresses “the boldness and energy of British patriotism.” Jeffrey’s charge exasperates Lockhart for years after the review, for Lockhart insists that Scott “had just poured out all the patriotic enthusiasm of his soul in so many passages of Marmion, which every Scotchman to the end of time will have by heart” (2:42, 35). As if to answer Jeffrey’s charge again, Lockhart remarks that The Antiquary, like Scott’s previous novels, Waverley and Guy Mannering, is “the transcript of actual Scottish life” (3:105).

As a symbol of respecting older loyalties, Lockhart describes how Scott had a lock of hair from the head of Charles I encased in a large ring specially made, “and for
some years he constantly wore the ring, which is a massive and beautiful one, with the word *Remember* surrounding it in highly relieved black-letter” (2:373). At times Scott is playful, writing J. B. S. Morrît on November 11, 1814, concerning *The Lord of the Isles*: “I think you will like it: it is Scottified up to the teeth” (3:10). Interestingly, Johnson felt no need to write long works chronicling or glorifying English culture. His fame and commercial success spread for other reasons.

### Language and a Larger Culture

Just as Johnson’s authoritative relation to the English language proved crucial for his stature as quintessentially English, so Lockhart tackles Scott’s relation to English, a tricky negotiation for almost every Scottish writer.44 Edwin Muir early in the twentieth century concluded that “the Scots language,” “the Scottish literary tradition,” and “the political and social state of Scotland” were “all three . . . unsatisfactory as bases for a genuinely autonomous literature.”45 Muir’s chief example was Scott. Lockhart had felt obliged to say this about Scott:

> His pronunciation of words, considered separately [not in total rhythm and phrasing, but as pronounced syllabically], was seldom much different from that of a well-educated Englishman of his time; but he used many words in a sense which belonged to Scotland, not to England, and the tone and accent remained broadly Scotch, though, unless in the *burr*, which no doubt smacked of the country bordering on Northumberland, there was no *provincial* peculiarity about his utterance. (1:76)

Yes, language was an issue. Suffice it to say that the categories of minority and majority cultures and literatures may be applied to Scott’s predicament, and Lockhart knew as much. He reports that Scott stated to him (almost as a confession) that, regarding a young lady at Mertoun, he counted “not as the least” among her kindnesses and helps “the lady’s frankness in correcting his Scotticisms, and more especially his Scottish *rhymes*” (1:229). We now know that in helping Lockhart prepare his biography for the press, J. B. S. Morrît excised many of Lockhart’s Scotticisms.46

Language remains a primary marker in the minds of everyone. The more that English became standardized—thanks in part to Johnson—the more any deviance from its norms suggested something foreign. Scott adjusted to this situation, identifying with Scotland and yet, through the English he employed, claiming British identity. In language, too, hybrid vigor: a grafting of minority to majority.


46. Jack, ”Two Biographers,” 278.
We have seen how Lockhart emphasizes Scott’s appeal to “all educated Europe.” Perhaps this is because, at bottom, though most at home in Scotland, and then most in certain locales, Scott was fascinated by human interest, by traditions and old stories wherever he found them. Scott’s romantic appeal was universal. Mark Twain famously claimed that Scott—not Harriet Beecher Stowe, as Lincoln had remarked—was the writer responsible for starting the Civil War: Scott’s fictions of chivalry permeated Southern households. In Natchez, Mississippi, in old homes open to the public, I have noticed invariably a set of Scott’s novels. Twain satirizes all this in such novels as *Huckleberry Finn*. Yet, it is a humane sense of a lost past being rescued and made dramatically urgent again that gives Scott popularity without borders. And in this is something of the moral historian who realizes the vanity of human wishes, the “fears of the brave, and follies of the wise,” another line from Johnson that Scott found reason to quote (3:14). The context of the line is revealing, for it deals, respectively, with the last days of a great warrior and of a great writer:

```plaintext
In life’s last scene what prodigies surprise,  
Fears of the brave, and follies of the wise?  
From Marlborough’s eyes the streams of dotage flow,  
And Swift expires a driv’ler and a show.47
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In the final analysis, then, it is as a representative and epitome not so much of national character but of national culture and the larger res publica of letters that Johnson remains presiding—and brooding—over England, Great Britain, and the English-speaking world, seated as a statue in Lichfield, looking over the Midlands and beyond, or standing in St. Paul’s, fixed in marble and muscular thought. The memorial inscription there (1796) is in Latin. Similarly, Scott in his statue presides and broods over Edinburgh and Scotland, looking over Lowlands and Highlands, over the United Kingdom and beyond. By their own works they achieved this vision. Yet, were it not for Boswell and Lockhart, whatever their shortcomings, the lives of their subjects as prime embodiments and shapers of their cultures, and of ours, would be poorer and less secure. Scholars and critics should separate Johnson’s views from Boswell’s, Scott’s from Lockhart’s, but for a common cultural inheritance—and for the common reader—this is a harder goal to expect.

During the Tour in 1773, Johnson turns to the Rev. Donald Macqueen and to Boswell, who records:

```plaintext
Talking of Biography, he said, he did not think that the life of any literary man in England had been well-written. Beside the common incidents of life, it should tell us his studies, mode of living, the means by which he attained to excellence, and his opinion of his own works. He told us, he
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had sent [Samuel] Derrick to Dryden’s relations, to gather materials for his Life; and he believed Derrick had got all that he himself should have got; but it was nothing. (*Life*, ed. Hill, 5:240)

Both Boswell and Lockhart supplied what Johnson had said was missing from English biography. Johnson in his complaint overlooked his own *Life of Savage*, which Scott had identified as formative on the first page of his own autobiographical essay. Perhaps the only other candidate when Johnson made the remark would be Robert Lowth’s *Life of William of Wykeham* (1758), though Wykeham might not be considered a “literary man.”

In Scott’s lifetime a stage musical of *The Lady of the Lake* appeared. The character of James Fitz-James, the king in disguise, is drawn after James V of Scotland. But the figure of Roderick Dhu, a highland chief, enjoys an accompanying melody now associated with another head of state. When asked his favorite song, John F. Kennedy replied, probably without knowing its origin, that he had always been partial to “Hail to the Chief.”

Yet, where are the American statues to poets and moralists? They are not well known. There is no poets’ corner or poets’ plot in Arlington National Cemetery; no poet or novelist graces the Mall in Washington, D.C. Helen Keller rests at the National Cathedral, but few know this. Its most famous statue is a gargoyle of Darth Vader. No poet or writer is buried in Poets’ Corner in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. The Literary Walk in Central Park has statues only of Shakespeare, Walter Scott, Burns, and Fitz-Greene Halleck, an American poet largely forgotten. What writer has found Washington, D.C., a home, as Johnson did London, or Scott Edinburgh? Perhaps Lincoln, or Walt Whitman during the Civil War.

**Imagination and the Biographies of Writers**

Neither Boswell nor Lockhart was a poet, at least not a good one. Their monuments are in prose. Yet it seems appropriate here to quote verse, the medium in which Johnson and Scott first revealed themselves by name in their literary works. William Cowper’s epitaph in 1785 already registers national identification:

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Here Johnson lies—a sage, by all allow’d,
Whom to have bred may well make England proud . . .
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For Scott we have a sonnet by his friend Wordsworth, who in 1803 emphasized to Scott how seriously he regarded that word “friend” (1:377–78; 461). He wrote “On the Departure of Sir Walter Scott from Abbotsford, for Naples” when Scott, seriously ill, prepared to leave in 1831. Wordsworth mentions “Eildon’s triple height” near Abbotsford, as well as Scott’s beloved Tweed. As Scott departs, Wordsworth proclaims, “the whole world’s good wishes with him goes.” Wordsworth implores “winds of ocean, and the midland sea,” the Mediterranean, to be true, “Wafting your charge to soft Parthenope,” the ancient name, through Virgil, for Naples (lines 3, 9, 13–14).
Wordsworth knew that the imagination Scott exercised had first found its home in the local. Despite the gorgeous rhyme and climax it supplies, Parthenope is the least important place in the poem. The Eildon Hills and the Tweed are vital, and Abbotsford is in the title. Scott and Wordsworth had climbed Helvellyn together and walked near Abbotsford. Each knew the hills the other loved, from which came their strength and craft.

About this Lockhart is explicit (as is Scott), for Scott often states his love for those hills, and for Tweedside, however unremarkable and bare they might appear to other eyes. In the “Conclusion” to the Memoirs, Lockhart makes the case for family, clan, and locale as the guiding stars of Scott’s imaginative voyage. He wished to rescue the fading past, and he held such associations with ancestors and family, and with the landscape of his home, that these were not only of supreme personal value but also fuel for his reconstructions of other worlds:

An imagination such as his . . . soon shaped out a world of its own—to which it would fain accommodate the real one. The love of his country became indeed a passion. . . . But the Scotland of his affections had the clan Scott for her kernel. . . . The author of the Lay would rather have seen his heir carry the Banner of Bellenden gallantly at a foot-ball match on Carterhaugh, than he would have heard that the boy had attained the highest honors of the first university in Europe. . . . [H]e desired to plant a lasting root, and dreamt not of personal fame, but of long distant generations rejoicing in the name of “Scott of Abbotsford.” By this idea all his reveries—all his aspirations—all his plans and efforts, were overshadowed and controlled. (5:444–45)

Lockhart says that even when Scott “had reached the summit of universal and unrivalled honor, he clung to his first love with the faith of a Paladin,” a faith that “was at least a different thing from the modern vulgar ambition of amassing a fortune. . . . The lordliest vision of acres would have had little charm for him, unless they were situated on Ettrick or Yarrow, or in

—‘Pleasant Tiviedale,
Fast by the river Tweed’—

—somewhere within the primeval territory of “the Rough Clan” (5:445). The verse is from Chevy Chase.

Lockhart remained devoted to Scott and portrays him favorably, though at times inaccurately—for example, at the expense of James Hogg and the Ballantyne brothers, a slant owing in part to how Robert Cadell, the publisher, handled the proof sheets.48 Yet, Lockhart’s final comments strike a tone altered from his earlier Peter’s

Letters. While exculpating Scott from his financial missteps, Lockhart remarks on his “rashness about buying land, building, and the like” (5:448), the very actions that helped create Abbotsford as a symbol of Scotland and Scott’s writing.

Lockhart has no illusions now about what he had admired in 1819: “The whole system of conceptions and aspirations, of which his early active life was the exponent, resolves itself into a romantic idealization of Scottish aristocracy.” Lockhart continues, “I can, therefore, understand that he may have, from the very first, exerted the dispensing power of imagination very liberally, in virtually absolving himself from dwelling on the wood of which his ladder was to be constructed” (5:448–49). It is a remarkable sentence. It counters Ian Duncan’s sense that Lockhart’s Memoirs are based on “the circular logic that sustains modern literary biography, whereby the works generate the meaning of the life supposed to be their explanatory ground.”

This is for Scott and his works a “circuit” in which, as Duncan invokes Clifford Siskin, “author, reader, and nation” are folded “into a unified organic formation” that “comes decisively together in Romanticism under the disciplinary title of ‘literature.’” Yet, Lockhart realizes this; he critiques it at the end of the Memoirs. Scott was engaged, he says, in “a romantic idealization.” Scott’s imagination acted as dispensation and absolution. Lockhart acknowledges that “the author of such a series of romances as his, must have, to all intents and purposes, lived more than half his life in worlds purely fantastic.” Here, “fantastic” means imaginative. Scott was, as Lockhart puts it, “willing, in his ruminative moods, to veil, if possible, from his own optics the kind of machinery by which alone he had found the means of attaining his darling objects” (5:449–50).

What import do Lockhart’s statements carry? All great imaginative and experiencing natures create formative illusions. Self-potentiating, their inventive aspirations are necessary heralds for the fulfillment of their creative acts. To anatomize what Coleridge calls “a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief . . . which constitutes poetic faith” is to break the spell and banish its magic. Only by a “negative faith” does any artist create such illusions. The circular logic of imaginative achievement yoked to personal life is, like the circular logic of much faith, to be fully expected. Coleridge remarks that faith and “all spiritual truths” exhibit always something of a “seeming argumentum in circulo.” The writer’s life is largely a life of imagination, and so the works and primarily the works become the high road to see the landscape of that life, especially that part of the life dedicated to their creation. Lockhart knew this. So did Johnson; moreover, Johnson had no qualms about identifying the works of gifted authors as indispensable to national identity. He states in the preface to his Dictionary, “The chief glory of every people arises from its authors.” This is what Wordsworth means in his

49. Duncan, Scott’s Shadow, 276.
50. Duncan, Scott’s Shadow, 277–78.
52. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, 2:244.
sonnet, quoted above, when he claims of Scott: “Blessings and prayers in nobler retire / Than sceptred King or laurelled Conqueror knows, / Follow this wondrous Potentate.”

Johnson was terse and to the point about his own home. “You find no man, at all intellectual, who is willing to leave London... . When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford” (Life, ed. Hill, 3:178). Yet Johnson was fascinated by Scotland from his youth and traveled there at an advanced age under adverse conditions, to see what he could of its older culture and disappearing ways of life. When young, Johnson devoured romances, and the opening of The Vanity of Human Wishes is rife with romantic images—“the clouded maze of fate,” “As treach’rous phantoms in the mist delude,” “Walks the wild heath,” “The rustling break alarms, and quiv’ring shade” (YE, 6:92–93). Where does Johnson make the decision to write his Journey to the Western Islands? Overcoming his aversion to the bare, treeless landscape of much of Scotland, he seems near Anoch as struck with his surroundings as Scott later was with his near the Tweed. Johnson relates:

I sat down on a bank, such as a writer of romance might have delighted to feign. I had indeed no trees to whisper over my head, but a clear rivulet streamed at my feet. The day was calm, the air soft, and all was rudeness, silence, and solitude. Before me, and on either side, were high hills, which by hindering the eye from ranging, forced the mind to find entertainment for itself. Whether I spent the hour well I know not; for here I first conceived the thought of this narration.

He admits that he and Boswell “had no evils to suffer or to fear” there, then reverts to the power that informs his great poem: “yet the imaginations excited by the view of an unknown and untravelled wilderness are not such as rise in the artificial solitude of parks and gardens. . . . The phantoms which haunt a desert are want, and misery, and danger . . . man is made unwillingly acquainted with his own weakness, and meditation shews him only how little he can sustain, and how little he can perform” (YE, 9:40–41). The setting and Johnson's reflections on it strongly echo in vocabulary and theme his account in chapter 4 of Rasselas: “One day, as he was sitting on a bank, he feigned to himself” a romantic tale. Soon, however, Rasselas “recollected himself” and then raised “his eyes to the mountain,” which by its barrier had forced him to invent such entertainments.53

53. Rasselas and Other Tales, vol. 16 of YE, ed. Gwin J. Kolb (1990), 18. Rogers, Transit, 110, draws attention to Johnson's letter to Hester Thrale of September 21, 1773, written during the Tour regarding the spot where he reports in the Journey to have “first conceived the thought” of that book: “I sat down to make notes on a green bank, with a small stream running at my feet, in the midst of savage solitude, with Mountains before me” (The Letters of Samuel Johnson, ed. Bruce Redford, 5 vols. [Princeton, N.J., 1992–94], 2:73). Earlier in his letter Johnson states, “the place at which we now are, is equal in strength of Situation, in the wildness of the adjacent country, and in the plenty and elegance of the domestick entertainment, to a Castle in Gothick romances” (2:71).
Near the end of Scott’s life, when he had completed his *Tales*, writing their preface and quoting from Johnson’s *Vanity*, he reflects on “an uncommon share” of blessings, but he must now experience life’s “usual proportions of shadow and storms.” He wishes, in effect, for “a healthful mind” — “that the powers of his mind . . . may not have a different date from those of his body!” — and hopes that he may again meet his friends, “if not exactly in his old fashion of literature, at least in some branch, which may not call forth the remark, that —

‘Superfluous lags the veteran on the stage.’” (*Memoirs*, 5:369–70)

Scott’s last personal line given to the public is by his much-esteemed Johnson.

Several years before this, Scott had discovered that he and others were on the brink of financial disaster and grave embarrassment. In his own *Journal*, to whom does he turn to brace himself for the task of working off the debts? What writer gives him courage to confront the worst? Scott faces “absolute ruin.” He considers leaving the United Kingdom. Then, he turns: “I will not yield without a fight for it. It is odd, when I set myself to write *doggedly*, as Dr. Johnson would say, I am exactly the same man as ever I was, neither low-spirited nor distraint.”

Scott is remembering Johnson’s remark that “a man may write at any time, if he will set himself *doggedly* to it.” Boswell invokes this statement in the *Life* to illustrate how Johnson overcame “constitutional indolence, his depression of spirits,” and his work on the *Dictionary* to write the *Rambler* essays “twice a week.” But Boswell had first reported Johnson’s statement, with “*doggedly*” italicized, in the *Tour*. Reading that book, Scott would have noticed where Johnson made the remark. It was in the building in Edinburgh where “the records of Scotland . . . are deposited” (*Life*, ed. Hill, 1:203, 5:40).

James Ballantyne related that Johnson had always been Scott’s support and pleasure:

“He had often said to me that neither his own nor any modern popular style of composition was that from which he derived most pleasure. I asked him what it was. He answered, Johnson’s . . . and I think I never saw his countenance more indicative of high admiration than while reciting aloud from those productions.” (*Memoirs*, 2:186)

The longer that literary history is around, the more we feel we know its lessons when, in fact, the more opportunity this affords to suffer amnesia and suffer the consequences. Johnson valued such history. Scott venerated it. Literary history and biography find their appeal in their application to present life and present circumstances. This Johnson and Scott held fervently. I hope to have brought the two authors closer to modern readers in that warm relation that Scott felt, and which honors Johnson. If

this essay rekindles interest in literary biography and in pairing Boswell and Lockhart, whose subjects came to epitomize English and Scottish culture, this may add something, too.

I am indebted to Joshua Wilson and Nicole Miller for research assistance; to Matthew Ocheltree and Richard Johnston for helpful comments; to Sol Kim-Bentley and Nicole Miller for manuscript preparation; to many scholars of Johnson and Scott, in particular to Ian Duncan, Freya Johnston, and—as catalyst and better craftsman of this effort—Howard D. Weinbrot, none of whom bear responsibility for errors. The Long Eighteenth-Century and Romanticism Colloquium at Harvard provided salutary critique. Finally, recalling that Sir Walter Scott kept at his writing desk “arranged in careful order” small objects that he associated with his parents (Memoirs, 5:454), I recall mine, in whose modest home library I spent happy hours as a child, among its volumes reading Boswell’s Tour and Scott’s Ivanhoe.