Perdurable Johnson

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Shake\-spere, Johnson remarks, “long outlived his century,” the rough proof of a classic mentioned by Horace. Johnson himself is now entering his fourth. What explains the stamina of his reputation? Why do skeptical and restless readers, even more than docile and traditional ones, develop a life-long passion for his writing? The relevance of his radical power continues to surprise. Of all authors in English not regarded chiefly as poets or novelists, Johnson remains the most popular and most profound. And no other writer’s life, in so far as it is known by fact and not fueled by speculation, has fascinated readers more.

His varied record as an author remains astonishing, hardly believable. He stands as one of a handful of superb poet-critics constantly read and consulted. The Lives of the Poets is widely regarded as the greatest single work of criticism in English. His moral writings, primarily in the Rambler, Idler, and Adventurer, depict a complex, modern ethical universe. His wit, uniting strength of mind with happiness of language, is quoted almost as often as Pope’s work, which itself falls second only to Shake\-spere’s. Johnson’s conte philosophique or fiction Rasselas, written in one week first to raise money for his ill mother and then to defray the cost of her burial, has never gone out of print. Translated into dozens of tongues, it sells thousands of copies every year. His Dictionary proves him the greatest lexicographer in English, or any language. Given the texts and scholarship available to him, his edition of Shake\-spere permanently elevates Johnson in the ranks of all succeeding commentators and editors, who continue to draw on remarks in his Preface as well as on observations and notes attached to individual plays. The broad, brilliant imitations of the Roman satirist Juvenal, London and The Vanity of Human Wishes, offer trenchant social, political, and personal attacks, yet in the Vanity Johnson cuts satire short in order to create enduring wisdom literature. He distills Juvenal’s bile and Pope’s emetic into a bittersweet liquor. Possessing the verbal sharpness of Pope, as well as the moral outrage and scathing reductionism of Swift, Johnson foregoes exercising them fully. Instead, he turns them to a meditation on the inadequacy of any human spirit to meet its own case, be its own god.

Johnson is also one of the most intriguing and accurate of travel writers. A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland forms the perfect companion to Boswell’s Tour.
Sermons Johnson wrote still find hearing in services. The five volumes of the Hyde edition of his letters reflect his place in the highest company of either familiar or formal correspondents. The twenty-seven Parliamentary Debates, almost a half million words, reveal Johnson as an acute political journalist. He writes speeches that for decades everyone would credit to Pitt the Elder, Walpole, and others as model orations rivaling the best of ancient performances. Johnson translates the French version of Father Lobo’s Voyage to Abyssinia, some of it ex tempore while propped up in bed, as well as later rendering part of Sallust into English. Working early in his life with the Harleian Miscellany, he becomes the cataloguer and annotator of some 35,000 titles from that extraordinary private collection. His tragedy Irene, performed in 1749 some twelve years after its composition, runs nine nights at a time when three recovered all costs.

“Goldsmith,” he said, “was a man, who, whatever he wrote, did it better than any other man could do” (Life). Yet, what Johnson produced as a Latin epitaph for Goldsmith, a writer whose career and fame he secured by recognizing the genius latent in the manuscript of The Vicar of Wakefield—that Goldsmith left scarcely any style of writing untouched and touched nothing that he did not adorn—could serve as his own with more justice. Austin identifies Johnson as her favorite prose author—for contemporary poetry she remarks that she would not mind being called Mrs. George Crabbe, and Crabbe is, not coincidentally, another writer whose career Johnson promotes. A young Mary Woolstonecraft meets and admires Johnson (she invokes him often in her work). So does Frances Burney, and the admiration becomes mutual. Later in his life, at Oxford, he makes a toast to shock, “Here’s to the next insurrection of the negroes in the West Indies,” knowing that insurrections were murderous and bloody. Elsewhere he asks, “How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?” and writes a court brief in behalf of a man threatened with slavery to argue that slavery is illegal in Scotland. Johnson becomes a proto-abolitionist. In youth he considered law as a career. Later, in helping Robert Chambers compose the Vinerian law lectures, Johnson emerges as a significant if ghostly legal authority. “The law is the last result of human wisdom acting upon human experience for the benefit of the public.” Oxford does not confer on him the degree L.L.D., but rather Doctor of Civil Law.

His learning—vast and varied, not restricted to literature and history—is comparable to Milton’s or Coleridge’s. Adam Smith would declare that “Johnson knew more books than any man alive,” and Smith was no friend. Yet, Johnson writes a style open and accessible to the entire literate culture, now as well as then. His language stretches but doesn’t baffle the mind. Citation, reference, and pedantry were in his day common and increasing, but he applies learning to the business of living more than to the display of knowledge. Aside from editorial work on Shakespeare and Crousaz’s commentary on Pope’s Essay on Man, his pages harbor few notes, all short.
By force of character and conversation, in reflection and repartee, as well as through the stunning gifts of Boswell—who spent fewer than 400 days in his company, not the years many suppose—Johnson becomes the subject of a brilliant biography, the enduring touchstone for that kind of writing. Among the first to realize that modern fiction would increasingly portray the fabric of daily life, his own conduct and work lay the groundwork for life writing that has strong affinities with the novel. Boswell the biographer learns much from Johnson.

Of all this any attentive or scholarly reader is probably aware. It is a precarious thing to propose, but if generations of readers in various walks of life continue to cherish his thought and language for more than cultural authority, clubable familiarity, and sound bites veneered with age (“trumping life with a quote,” as Heaney puts it), those readers discover and return to him because they recognize in Johnson a refusal to narrow his focus, a desire to regard literature as a source of delight—“tediousness is the most fatal of all faults.”

The unweathered appeal of his writing does not rest in providing refinement for learned journals or seminars any more than his own life acquires its lasting interest by offering a caricature of his person for a quip or cartoon. A strong, multi-dimensional individual invites caricature, and for contracted minds the temptation to reduce a larger figure becomes hard to resist. Every generation entertains its superficial Johnson, Great Cham, Ursa Major, High Church and Tory persona, its Macaulay-inspired way of cramming an eagle in a pigeon hole. As with all such tags, those applied to Johnson contain some truth, but accepted as the truth they are false.

The endless accumulation of details impervious either to a general consideration of persistent human concerns or to an allied interpretation of perennial literary debates is an undertaking Johnson actually detests. He belongs more to the common reader than to the common scholar. Common scholars realize this least. What he says of the reception of Gray’s “Elegy” expresses his sentiment: “I rejoice to concur with the common reader, uncorrupted with literary prejudices.” Johnson seems always to keep in mind that his reader might well be poor rather than rich (yet interested in learning and art), and employed in gainful business rather than research. To make Johnson the province of professors or the property of editors betrays his own efforts. His authorial aims are to increase happiness by rendering vivid a sober though entertaining account of human ethical motives, faults, and successes; to advocate reduction of undeserved inequality and injustice; and to engage both his audience and himself in a quest for virtue and self-knowledge. He values what can be put to use and for this reason admits, “the biographical part of literature is what I love most.” It “gives us what comes near to ourselves, what we can turn to use,” or, as he puts it in Idler 84, what is “most easily
applied to the purposes of life.” Perhaps the advertisement to the Lives of the Poets sums it up best: “the honest desire of giving useful pleasure.”

“Quid faciam?”

Johnson’s achievement grew from the odyssey of his own self-examined life checkered by, as Aeschylus calls it, “what is fated.” Tubercular infection in infancy and early childhood left his face scarred for life, with sight and hearing both impaired. As a child or in adolescence (we do not know which), he suffered smallpox, which further disfigured him. Time in his father’s bookshop, as well as early acquaintance with his cousin Cornelius Ford, secured precocious learning. But after thirteen months at Oxford, poverty forced him to leave. His only sibling, a brother, seems to have committed a serious, perhaps a capital offence, and then died young. (The only reference we have to him from Johnson comes years later in a single diary entry immediately following a prayer for their mother, who had just died: “The dream of my Brother I shall always remember.”) As a young teacher founding his own school, Johnson failed financially, though he formed a life-long bond with one pupil, David Garrick, who later helped produce and acted in Irene. Johnson’s varied friendships tended to last, for he was loyal. Years later he stood at Garrick’s grave during the funeral, as Richard Cumberland reported, “bathed in tears.”

Depression hit Johnson hard in his early twenties and again in his mid fifties. He feared for his sanity, and there is clear evidence that soon after he left Oxford he seriously contemplated suicide. Boswell’s biography largely leaves out this private fear and fact. Johnson felt, during these two periods of his life, that rational self-control might disintegrate. He was experiencing mental dissociation and depression so severe that he might not recover. Later, Heéster Thrale said that in his diligent study of medicine he “had given particular attention to the diseases of the imagination, which he watched in himself with a solicitude destructive to his own peace, and intolerable to those he trusted” (Anecdotes). After completing more than a decade of gifted jobwork, much of it for the Gentleman’s Magazine, he can, in retrospect, be seen as one of the most famous anonymous authors in English. Lord Chesterfield’s promised patronage of the huge Dictionary project paid him nothing, but did prompt one of the most dignified and acerbic letters of retort in the language. Not until Johnson was forty did any significant work, The Vanity of Human Wishes and Irene, appear under his own name.

As a young man he was grateful to think that any woman might find him attractive, but his seventeen-year marriage, however devoted at times, was strained and childless. Elizabeth Porter, twenty years his senior, died when he was forty-two, and he never remarried. His grief remained for years. “He that outlives a wife whom he has long loved, sees himself disjoined from the only mind that has the same hopes, and fears, and interest; from the only...
companion with whom he has shared much good and evil; and with whom he could set his mind at liberty, to retrace the past or anticipate the future” (*Life*).

He struggled continually against what he identified as melancholy, escapism, procrastination, and guilt, exacerbated by what Hester Thrale called “vain hopes of performing impossibilities.” “No disease of the imagination,” claims Imlac in *Rasselas*, “is so difficult of cure as that which is complicated with the dread of guilt: fancy and conscience then act interchangeably upon us, and so often shift their places that the illusions of one are not distinguished from the dictates of the other.” In middle age Johnson fought successfully—and certainly feared—incipient alcoholism. (“Abstinence is as easy to me as temperance would be difficult.”) Beset by what has variously been diagnosed as Tourette’s Syndrome, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or simply nervous tics that he could not suppress even in familiar company—Pope said these habits made the young Johnson “a sad spectacle,” and they didn’t improve—he later also suffered insomnia and acute loneliness. If he found some comfort in the church and in the belief that the crucifixion of Jesus redeems humankind, he also found no easy rest in religion but instead, often, a rebuke to his own habits. He rarely attended services, something for which he criticized Milton severely. Inner conflict characterized his inner life. One diary entry simply reads, “Mens turbata. This afternoon it snowed.” Shortly before he died, he burned at least two quarto volumes of private writing. Some infrared reading of a long-buried London ash heap would reveal secret thoughts that he carefully recorded but then just as deliberately destroyed.

His own efforts at self-knowledge involve self-imposed guilt. “Know Thyself,” written in 1772 after enlarging and correcting the *Dictionary*, speaks about “one punishment, for the most impenitent. . . . I find myself still fettered to myself. . . . My heart is illiterate, and my mind’s strength an illusion. What then am I to do? Let my declining years go down to the dark? Or get myself together. . . . and hurl myself at some task huge enough for a hero?” (original in Latin, trans. John Wain). As if he had not already performed several such tasks—but he was never satisfied with himself. His personal life presents a series of struggles that he does not always resolve but at least endures, often by humor, and by finding a way to endure he gives hope to anyone facing similar trials.

**A Mind of Large General Powers**

In conversation he can “talk for victory” and vie with opponents for the last word, but his essays rarely take the vantage of personal superiority. While articulated in an uncommonly superior way, their structure grows from a felt moral commonality. The *Rambler* essays engage generation after generation of readers because their author has read then corrected his own reading by experience, because he continues to learn and correct apparently even
as he writes, turning on himself, and because he grapples with difficulties unfolding on the page that prove as hard for him to resolve as for his readers. He becomes a sympathetic though persistent and tough-minded inquisitor, interrogating others and at the same time asking himself if the critical reflections and ethical judgments by which one lives possess that quality without which all else—learning, wealth, prizes, degrees, privilege—becomes empty chatter or, as he calls it, cant. That quality is hard to define, but if any single word represents it, perhaps the best choice is honesty, including being honest with one’s self. The desire to achieve this quality—and it must be achieved, any dolt can express an opinion—he approximates in his thoughts on the Lives of the Poets, the critical and biographical work culminating his career and drawing on almost every other kind of writing he practiced. He remarks in April 1779 that he was composing the Lives “I hope in such a manner, as may tend to the promotion of Piety.” By this he means not cultivating religious thought alone, or even primarily religious devotion, but family experiences, scholarly learning, artistic creativity, civic responsibility, and personal integrity, all dedicated toward living life ethically, not by receipt but by trial and effort. Such honesty is a form of modern heroism.

Johnson’s honesty, coming from observation, reading, and painful self-correction, is literary (expressed in language drawn in part from reading), religious, and traditional, but also experiential and at times remarkably uneasy about tradition. As it was for the Royal Society, the general motto of the Rambler, from Horace, is “take nothing on authority,” Nullius additius jurare in verba magistri. Characteristically, Johnson in the Life of Dryden later remarks, “Reason wants not Horace to support it.” Even an authority warning against authority is no genuine argument against—or for—authority. Johnson recognizes a changed world in which force, wealth, and station, while powerful and at times commanding deference, can no longer stand unchallenged. They must pass tests of empirical scrutiny or else perish: “We have done with patronage.” “No man was ever great by imitation.” “Knowledge is more than equivalent to force.” His own Irene helps to persuade him that imperial tragedy has little future on the stage. He rejects the critically revered dramatic unities of time and place. For him, the heroic ceases to mean prowess in arms and romance, exploits in sex and violence. Instead, it points to the individual, independent mind attempting to renovate known truths, establish new knowledge, and improve personal and institutional conduct.

Yet, more than renovating known truths, Johnson’s thought unearths private truths about ourselves we would rather not face, exposes the evasions we practice, and adds this twist: the more sophisticated and resourceful we are, then the more elaborate, successful, and even pleasing are the self-delusions we practice. The benevolent, wise, benign, and thoroughly mad Astronomer in Rasselas, one of the most psychologically compelling characters in English fiction—he might by another name be plucked from
the pages of Dickens—demonstrates this humanely analytic power of Johnson's writing, but only if we realize that the story is about ourselves. Thankfully, by the end of the tale, the Astronomer appears at least partially rehabilitated by the friendship, conversation, and support of Nekayah, Pekuah, Rasselas, and Imlac.

In many statements Johnson advocates reason, but he never discounts the inadequacy of reason, riven with error and punctuated by mortality, to meet its own predicament. Errors of government and war, errors of intelligence, errors of parenting, errors of filial duty, errors of ingratitude and loyalty alike, errors of temptation to power or despair—these he has experienced intimately, and they become his theme from “The Young Author” through *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, the moral essays, and *Rasselas*. The most common phrase in his poetry comprises but two words: “in vain.” As if this inadequacy were not enough, something worse intervenes. The world rewards genial mediocrity with a comfortable place, or higher, more regularly than it recognizes merit that has only merit to recommend itself. Without personal favor, prejudicial group support, financial advantage, and concerted networks of advancement—all of which average talent frequently enjoys—superior accomplishment finds it hard even to appear equal. Furthermore, such accomplishment raises resentment, often seems a rebuke (because occasionally it is), and plants the seeds of envy: “Many need no other provocation to enmity than that they find themselves excelled.”

Beyond the world of literature—formal literary study was just beginning to shape itself into a particular, professional branch of knowledge that would, for better or worse, increasingly be associated less with the older sense of literature or letters as all knowledge conveyed in language and more with individual artistic expression and critical opinion—Johnson actively pursues interests in chemistry, agriculture, commerce, manufacturing, navigation, and technology. He writes prefaces and advertisements for books on, among other subjects, geography, trigonometry, medicine, geometry, and foreign trade. He studies medical diagnoses and advances. A main motive for his travel to the extremities of Scotland, then considered remote and primitive, is intense curiosity about an oral culture barely surviving. He concludes that he has arrived too late to witness its vitality. Johnson grasps the place and often unfair fate of indigenous populations and, despite his opposition to the American Revolution (urged by his close friend Henry Thrale, a member of parliament, to write against it), he is of no imperial mind. *Idler* 81 for Saturday, November 3, 1759, excoriates Europeans, and for their treatment of native North Americans calls both the French and English “the sons of rapacity.” White settlers and their armies are fast turning a missionary religion into hypocrisy. One of Johnson's political pamphlets, *Thoughts on the Late Transactions Respecting Falkland's Islands*, meditates how frequently and with what facile calculation many leaders urge war, and how readily many unthinking citizens follow them.
Readers perusing the full run of *Rambler* may be surprised to see how many he devotes to marriage, courtship, and domestic affairs, presenting, for his time, a surprisingly even-handed treatment of gender. In Johnson’s characters and personae there is no particular distribution of wisdom between the sexes. If Imlac seems wise (and a little weary), Nekayah can be wise, too, yet fresh. Johnson chides Milton for “something like a Turkish contempt of females, as subordinate and inferior beings. . . . He thought woman made only for obedience, and man only for rebellion.” Johnson notes caustically that Milton “diligently sustained” the “superiority of Adam” over Eve, both “before and after the Fall.”

Anyone who claims a new angle on Johnson must temper self-advertisement with an incalculable debt to generations of writers and teachers who have worked to present him fully. The task, then, is not so much to reveal aspects of Johnson that no one has ever recognized—that verges on arrogance. The difficulty is to keep in play and give to active memory a comprehensive account of all his thought. Few have done this. It is difficult for at least two related reasons: first, the restless fertility and surprisingly unorthodox nature of that thought—surprising even to Johnsonian specialists—enmeshed, as many of its particulars are, in a world that at times seems distant and alien, at other times weirdly familiar; and, second, the resulting temptation to simplify and reduce Johnson’s thought, to domesticate and label it, compounded by the inevitable process of intellectual amnesia that infects humanistic more than scientific learning.

Such a fragile hold on collective learning possessed by any generation Johnson respects and emphasizes. “Men more frequently require to be reminded than informed.” Or, “No place affords a more striking conviction of the vanity of human hopes than a public library.” In facing rather than finessing or denying these facts, he attains impersonal strength—strength of intellect, not personality—and this establishes his paradoxical authority. Paradoxical, because his authority is, in the end, not personal, but based on an extraordinary ability to see, admit, and express objectively the complex process of human reality, of the individual inner life confronting a global presence at times so discomfiting or, at the least, so relatively impervious to any one person’s existence, that we spend much of life alternately seeking and rejecting that reality in, as Frost phrases it, “a lover’s quarrel with the world.” Johnson’s admiration of Shakespeare and his explanation for that playwright’s continued popularity rest on Shakespeare’s artistic adherence to this broader reality, reality perceived imaginatively yet without illusion. Shakespeare presents “the stability of truth.” His dialogue “seems scarce to claim the merit of fiction,” and “even where the agency is supernatural the dialogue is level with life.”

To apprehend such an encompassing reality and then to make sense of it from the standpoint of almost any compartment of knowledge is rare. It does not characterize
the mind that specializes, however brilliantly, in one field because it can never hope to excel in any other. Rather, it has a capacity to turn intelligence almost anywhere. So, in the *Life of Cowley*, Johnson does not define genius as it’s usually understood—an individual of supreme gifts in one career or endeavor. Instead, “The true genius is a mind of large general powers, *accidentally* determined to some particular direction” (emphasis added). Such a mind could pursue myriad other directions with distinction.

It is, mostly, a lost art of judicious criticism carefully to balance positive qualities of a writer against flawed or deficient ones. Yet, every critic who exercises this (Johnson on Shakespeare, Coleridge on Wordsworth) realizes that here there is no immunity: *all* writing is subject to such an assay, a conclusion expressed by the oldest of critical proverbs, even Homer nods. “For faults and defects every work of man must have,” says Johnson of *Paradise Lost*, and “it is the business of impartial criticism to discover” them. A fully disinterested criticism, which does not exist except as an ideal approached asymptotically, though an ideal worthy of emulation rather than of sophistical scorn, will look at every detail and will suspekt, then recognize, and finally excoriate, as best it can, its own pre-judgment. Prejudice is present at the outset of every critical act.

We sometimes are by wishful affinity and identification seduced into patching over the cracks in our idols. Johnson makes some summary judgments that betray a lack of imagination and prescience. His dismissive verdict on *Tristram Shandy* is one example. The violent preference he expresses for Richardson over Fielding reveals something almost prudish. Few critics berate Shakespeare for puns, yet Johnson does so severely. His impatience forecloses appreciation of *Lycidas* and of the pastoral mode generally. His understanding and rejection of Hume as an atheist is inaccurate, and this misconception colors his entire approach to Hume’s thought. Johnson usually belittles romances as fantastic, even corrupting, but he cannot “cure” his own long-time addiction to them, and romance imagery often animates his writing, for example, at the beginning of *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. The *Life of Milton* is at times patently unfair. Johnson’s initial letter to Herter Thrale on hearing about her marriage to Gabriel Piozzi is harsh and without sympathy. (He makes amends, as he usually does, this time in another letter four days later.) Johnson realizes that Burke thinks more deeply in judgment and in a more complex manner than he does about many matters and all political ones. Burke is the only person he declines to debate. *Taxation No Tyranny* seems child’s play next to Burke’s *On Conciliation with the Colonies*. Johnson thinks it takes more artistic imagination to animate and imitate the complexity and cellular structure of reality than it does to create fantasy. (“The basis of all excellence is truth.”) But were he alive in a later century he might look with interest on the creations of Lear, Carroll, Clarke, Bradbury, Stapledon, Tolkien, Lessing, and Pullman.
Language Allied to Life and Manners

Johnson realizes that mundane language will not conjure up reality or lived experience with interest or credibility. Such usage only deepens verbal ruts. Yet, he grasps that no convention can simply be ignored. The ruts may be avoided but not the road. The admixture of convention with innovation, the avoidance of stock phrases coupled with the ingenious neologism, by these the language is preserved and refreshed. The Dictionary is in actuality the work of many hands; the examples that Johnson selects from “the best writers” evince his predilection for usage that marries the common and familiarly accepted with the newly normative drawn from authors of special talent. Like Chaucer before him (Johnson once proposed a life of Chaucer and an edition of all his writing), he understands that language cannot be fixed; it alters as common usage alters but also becomes a sharper medium through which to see the world when resourceful writers both listen to the crowd and have its ear. For that reason he turns to those writers as authorities and, by doing so, vicariously makes himself one. Shakespeare employs more words than any other poet; Milton comes second; Milton collected three volumes of notes for a Latin dictionary; Johnson wrote a two-volume folio one of English; Coleridge was the inspiring grandfather of the Oxford English Dictionary (his grandson was its first editor). It is more rare than commonly assumed for poets and critics to consider works, words, and world fully in concert.

Above all, Johnson keeps in mind and heart the paramount weight of common human experience. If class, gender, race, or privilege create divisions in national or global society, and if those divisions are accepted by habit tacitly, or by oppression unwillingly, then common humanity—and justice, even truth—become driven asunder, too. Once separated and divided, interests tend to polarize, self-magnify, and repel by increasing degrees. The common is lost in favor of a partial good that to its limited participants and factions seems greater. As a moralist, Johnson knows few compers. His early illness, poverty, and relative obscurity taught lessons no syllabus could secure, no monograph enhance, no theory magnify.

Because the arts can, at their best, not only express but actively create and extend sympathy and the evolution of a humane spirit, and because they are not quantitative, repeatable, and iterative, not “demonstrative and scientific,” their practice attains an amalgam of thought, feeling, intelligence, and experience unobtainable in science, and approximated only abstractly in social science. Yet, Johnson, championing this unique strength of the arts—of theater, poetry, music, fiction, and visual representation—also knows that, concomitantly, the arts cannot eject pretense, posturing, pandering, gossip, and envy. He has the courage to realize that, over time, the self-interested qualities of the arts, and of artists and critics, can subvert their own production. Fame may accompany
high mediocrity for a few decades, but what survives a few lifetimes or centuries does not begin by thinking foremost of current trends or levers of publicity. Coteries die, and the opinions of cliques dissipate.

He believes, passionately, in human progress. As a moralist he could remark that the cure for human ills is more palliative than radical, and that to keep humankind in a middle state and prevent it from sliding downward was about as much as could be expected. But when examining history and institutions he insists that permanent, collective gains are actual. Admiring Shakespeare, Johnson yet talks of “the barbarity” of Queen Elizabeth’s age, which cannot extenuate how Shakespeare “sacrifices virtue to convenience.” Petrarch’s age is “rude and uncultivated.” The manners of the mid-seventeenth century “were so tinged with superstition” (Cowley). Johnson states that the war in heaven found in Paradise Lost “is, I believe, the favorite of children, and gradually neglected as knowledge is increased.” In A Journey he praises Thomas Braidwood’s school in Edinburgh for the deaf and dumb and reflects, “It was pleasing to see one of the most desperate of human calamities capable of so much help: whatever enlarges hope, will exalt courage; after having seen the deaf taught arithmetic, who would be afraid to cultivate the Hebrides?”

Johnson puts his belief directly: the duty of a writer is to make the world better. How that is to be done, exactly along what lines, he never prescribes. There is no system. Criticizing Shakespeare for lack of moral care, he yet admits, “he that thinks reasonably must think morally.” So, from Shakespeare’s “works may be collected a system of civil and economical prudence,” and “a system of social duty may be selected.” Collected and selected but not prescribed. Johnson the moralist becomes Johnson the explorer, renovating known truths but pushing their limits and discovering through them previously uncharted paths that examine the self. He realizes that the comfort of knowing those truths grows treacherous without the ballast of self-knowledge. More than with the conditions of his life, difficult as they could be, his most heroic struggles are with himself. Heider Thrale noted the three books he would never tire of: Robinson Crusoe, Pilgrim’s Progress, and Don Quixote, lonely figures, each surviving with belief in something larger than the self, but each beset by loss, doubt, even delusions.

Despite his prizing of general truths and regard for what he called “the common reader,” Johnson does not eschew archival scholarship if it serves a larger, meaningful interpretive framework. He ransacks sources for whatever he writes, particularly evident in the Lives. When younger, he subtitles the Introduction to the Harleian Miscellany “An Essay on the Origin and Importance of Small Tracts and Fugitive Pieces.” His recall of writers is so exact and exacting that John Hawkesworth confesses to him, “You have a memory that would convict any author of plagiarism in any court of literature in the world.” While Johnson rejects detailed scholarship simply as an end in itself,
he contends that minute learning can be turned to conditions of “the living world.” In short, knowledge actively invested with a degree of relevance will produce most value. What is desired is “the accuracy of a learned work” coupled with “the facility of a popular” one (Cowley).

**The Choice of Life**

A main endeavor of Johnson’s writing tests the antinomies of the moral imagination. (Burke first uses the phrase “moral imagination” a half dozen years after his friend dies.) These antinomies are not flat contradictions or oppositions. More like Blake’s *contraries*, they exhibit a vacillating difference of conviction between activities and positions that are equally plausible and equally necessary, and whose tension must therefore be regulated because it can never be settled. No hope germinates or survives without imagination, but some hopes are vain, some grow inflated, even harmful. Progress depends on discontent, but gnawing dissatisfaction steals away happiness. Cowley conjectured that he’d be happier if he removed to an island in the Americas. He “forgot, in the vehemence of desire, that solitude and quiet owe their pleasures to those miseries, which he was so studious to obviate; for such are the vicissitudes of the world, through all its parts, that day and night, labour and rest, hurry and retirement, endear each other; such are the changes that keep the mind in action; we desire, we pursue, we obtain, we are satiated; we desire something else, and begin a new pursuit” (*Rambler* 6).

These antinomies mark the structure of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* where, repeatedly, at crucial junctures, verse paragraphs begin, “Nor,” “But,” “Yet.” In “Reflections on the Present State of Literature,” Johnson candidly remarks, “Whatever may be the cause of happiness, may be likewise made the cause of misery.” In *Rasselas* Nekayah advises her brother, “Flatter not yourself with contrarieties of pleasure. Of the blessings set before you, make your choice and be content. . . . No man can at the same time fill his cup from the source and from the mouth of the Nile.”

Yet, exploring these moral antinomies presents no closure. The concluding chapter of *Rasselas* is “The Conclusion in Which Nothing Is Concluded.” Even on some matters in which Johnson proclaims, with barely concealed scorn, that tendencies of the imagination can and ought to be kept in check, he later finds himself differing from his own earlier conviction, or giving into those tendencies himself. In *Idler* 11 Johnson excoriates the idea that genius flows or is impeded by the seasons as if it were a blindly animate process, like sap rising in the sugar maple, and warns that to believe this “is no less dangerous, than to tell children of bugbears and goblins. . . . This distinction of seasons is produced only by imagination operating on luxury. . . . He that shall . . . exert his virtues, will soon
make himself superior to the seasons.” Milton's vigor of composition surfacing only half the year, Johnson, again on his high horse, denigrates by saying, “This dependence of the soul upon the seasons, those temporary and periodical ebbs and flows of intellect, may, I suppose, justly be derided as the fumes of vain imagination” (Milton). Johnson then quotes—of all texts!—Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy, to the effect that the skies, stars, and heavens may exert influence on us but “a wise man may resist them.” Then, in 1781, in a letter tellingly filled with Miltonic echoes, Johnson admits, “I thought myself above assistance or obstruction from the seasons, but find the autumnal blasts sharp and nipping and the fading world an uncomfortable prospect.”

The benevolent Astromomer in Rasselas was mad for believing that he controlled the seasons, rain, and sun, but Johnson himself finally admits that to insist the reverse, that we can control, completely, the effect of the seasons on us, is itself an antinomy of imaginative folly, too. What he says in Rambler 184 about the world being under the total guidance of a benevolent power, where apparent evil contributes to the larger calculus of good, he virtually mocks, more than two decades later, in comments on Pope’s Essay on Man. One of Johnson’s favorite Rambler themes is how the life of an author almost inevitably differs from the wisdom of that author’s works. “The teachers of morality,” says Imlac, “discourse like angels, but they live like men.”

The extent to which Johnson yokes or puts in close proximity the words “disease,” “dangerous,” “restless,” “hunger,” “vain,” and “imagination” is extraordinary. Yet, he says in full praise, “Milton had that which rarely fell to the lot of any man—an unbounded imagination, with a store of knowledge equal to all its calls” (JM II, 165). The balance must always be adjusted, the exception found. Even in loyal friendship lurks deception: “Friendship has no tendency to secure veracity” (Pope). Richard Savage, Johnson observes, “lulled his imagination with . . . ideal opiates,” but later warns, “nor will a wise man presume to say, ‘Had I been in Savage’s condition, I should have lived, or written, better than Savage.’”

“Where then shall Hope and Fear their objects find?” How can anyone settle these antinomies? They resist resolution. Their moral tension remains, and all responses are, if relied on blindly, doubtful. Some are destructive. Imlac advises Nekayah, “Do not entangle your mind by irrevocable determinations.” For Johnson, faith is one answer (“Nor deem religion vain”), but it is neither easy nor comfortable. Faust finally says, Verweile doch! Yet in Johnson the cry never comes; the restless desire may be for knowledge, it may be for vanity, fame, sex, power—for any wish or desire, but it never ceases. Johnson’s deeper psychological theme identifies a modern Faust who cannot even find a Mephistopheles with whom to bargain. This is a worse predicament. Collectively, his protagonists, examples, and personae seek anything that can be desired, illustrated particularly in Vanity and Rasselas. And yet, not to desire is, for all but the
cloistered adepts of a rare enlightenment, inhuman and impossible. Rasselas lives in an apparent utopia: “All the diversities of the world were brought together . . . and its evils extracted and excluded”—“Every desire was immediately granted”—the happy valley. (The adverb immediately is not so innocent or inviting as it seems.) Why would the prince grow restless and wish to escape its walls and mountains? The entire world he must use as a comparison with his incomparable state waits outside. It is usually not recalled that Imlac at first tries to deter Rasselas from leaving. When, some years later, the prince returns, having witnessed so many moral antinomies in others, he yet seems unable to escape his own: we look ahead to a time when “he could never fix the limits of his dominion, and was always adding to the number of his subjects.” By what method is not mentioned. The antinomies of the moral imagination prove as hard to escape as the happy valley itself.

This consideration of the bind—at times the trap—that individuals, sects, and even whole nations (“by darling schemes oppress’d”) create for themselves in negotiating the antinomies of the moral imagination makes all the more urgent its concomitant presence in Johnson’s thought: the free agency of the human spirit, the effective power of individual resolution and hard work. By this free agency all advances in learning, science, technology, trade, and justice occur. Observing the determination of Rasselas to breach the walls of the happy valley, Imlac, rather than counselling despair, gives encouragement: “Few things are impossible to diligence and skill.” Even the Astronomer seems able by efforts of his own will, assisted with aid and compassion from others, to dispense many of the thick mists clouding his reason.

If it is countered to this emphasis on will and benevolence that Johnson believes in social subordination, several things might be said. Yes, he does, though no society has yet in practice devised an order without some form of subordination, de facto if not de jure. These orders vary from the evil to the tolerable. Aside from deference to hereditary monarchy, moderated by the settlement of 1714, Johnson advocates little in the form of a system of subordination established by birth or wealth. He rejects the racism, sexism, and ethnic hatred practiced by many Europeans and Americans of his day and even now. He supports significant social and economic mobility. It is Boswell, defending race slavery and aristocratic privilege, who constantly brings up “subordination.” Boswell often injects it as Johnson’s “favorite topic.” The implied reader of The Vanity of Human Wishes, the moral essays, Rasselas, and the Lives of the Poets remains the common reader, the reader whose only qualification is literacy. Johnson’s intended audience owns no special privilege. His sympathy favors no station. He gives to the poor and houses the homeless, several under his own roof for years. Despite his criticism of religious poetry, Heister Thrale relates, “When he would try to repeat the celebrated Ecclesiastica pro Mortuis . . . beginning Dies irae, Dies illa, he could never pass the stanza ending thus,
"Tantus labor not sit cassus [May such suffering be not in vain], without bursting into a flood of tears."

Dedicated in gratitude to the memory of Mary Hyde Eccles. For her generation and for posterity she cared intellectually, materially, and personally to strengthen and support a central arch of civilization: learning, libraries, and books, the presentation and preservation of original texts and manuscripts. Few eighteenth-century scholars of academic reputation match the quality of her research, archival discoveries, and publications. Her critical work prompts the grateful thanks of scholars and readers. Her personal and intellectual encouragement endeared her to every life she touched.
Donald and Mary Hyde in their library at Four Oakes Farm. Photograph. MS Hyde 98 (2001)