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Johnson on Blackmore, Pope, Shakespeare—and Johnson

James Engell

Readers . . . are to impute to me whatever pleasure or weariness they may find in the perusal of Blackmore, Watts, Pomfret, and Yalden.¹

This essay treats Johnson primarily through Sir Richard Blackmore, a novel path, and since many readers may not be acquainted with Blackmore's work, nor is there a compelling reason why anyone should be, I apologize at the outset. Yet, this path to Johnson provides understanding of his cherished personal values and of his deeply held principles of criticism. It reveals a central conflict holding in tension Johnson's personal life with his professional career.

I should like to present a piece of Johnson's writing that has, for 225 years, remained overlooked. On the surface, reasons appear for that. He wrote in 1780 about an author whose reputation had for decades been dark. While many of his *Lives of the Poets* are consulted more than the works of the poets they criticize, readers have found scant cause to consider his life of Blackmore. Short sections of one solitary article discuss its sources.² Scholars of Blackmore—Rosenberg, Solomon, Giacomini—quote the life, too.³ It's a risky thing to speak of writing on which so few have commented even briefly, concerning an author whose poetry Johnson judged, in general, unmemorable, and whose prose he thought, on the whole, weak. Nonetheless, Johnson cared keenly about this life, and cared enough about some of Blackmore's work to make the effort to add it to the project when the booksellers had intentionally omitted Blackmore.

1 Samuel Johnson, "Watts," in *The Lives of the Poets*, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. John H. Middendorf, vols. 21–23 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 23:1296 (hereafter cited as *Lives of the Poets*).

2 Pat Rogers, "Johnson's Lives of the Poets and the Biographical Dictionaries," *The Review of English Studies*, n.s. 31, no. 122 (1980): 149–171.

3 Albert Rosenberg, *Sir Richard Blackmore: A Poet and Physician of the Augustan Age* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1953); Harry M. Solomon, *Sir Richard Blackmore* (Boston: Twayne, 1980); Michela Pizzol Giacomini, *Sir Richard Blackmore and the Bible: A Reading of His Physico-Theological Poems* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2007).

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And why should we care? This life reveals, first, much about Johnson's attitude to Pope, Swift, and the wits surrounding them; second, something noteworthy about Johnson's religion and his habitual suspicion that religious, especially devotional, poetry must fall short of its subject; third, a good deal about Johnson's conceptions of ideal criticism; and, finally, this life discloses a fundamental tension running through the entire *Lives of the Poets*, a conflict in Johnson's professional *and* personal life, one that produces much of his best writing.

Johnson remarks that Blackmore's heroic poems "are now little read,"⁴ and that "His works may be read a long time without the occurrence of a single line that stands prominent from the rest."⁵ After the first edition, Johnson quotes not a single line of Blackmore's verse in the life proper. "Of his four epick poems the first had such reputation and popularity as enraged the criticks; the second was at least known enough to be ridiculed; the two last had neither friends nor enemies."⁶ *Prince Arthur* (1695) was wildly received, *King Arthur* (1697) less so. *Eliza* (1705) attracted some notice, mostly negative, and *Alfred* (1723) was ignored.

Blackmore was also a prominent physician, yet of his medical books Johnson says, "By the transient glances which I have thrown upon them, I have observed an affected contempt of the ancients, and a supercilious derision of transmitted knowledge." (In terms of then contemporary medical knowledge, this now casts Blackmore in a favorable light.) Johnson speaks of Blackmore's "indecent arrogance" toward older learning and quotes one passage only to say it is "less reprehensible" than another he cites.⁷ He states, "Blackmore's prose is not the prose of a poet; for it is languid, sluggish, and lifeless; his diction is neither daring nor exact, his flow neither rapid nor easy, and his periods neither smooth nor strong. His account of wit will shew with how little clearness he is content to think, and how little his thoughts are recommended by his language."⁸

At this point we might stop, as generations before have. Blackmore seems a prosaic poet, an arrogant physician, a failed critic. Isn't Johnson simply repeating the reasons Blackmore was already decanonized? Hadn't Dryden, Dennis, Pope, Swift, and others, at times goaded by political motives as well as by personal taste, succeeded in discrediting Blackmore? The coffin didn't need more nails, it was long in the ground. What were Johnson's motives? While he composed the life, Hester Thrale conjectured:

That of Blackmore will be very entertaining, I dare say, and he will be rescued from the old wits who worried him, much to your disliking: so a little for love

4 *Lives of the Poets*, "Blackmore," 22:776n.

5 *Ibid.*, 22:775.

6 *Ibid.*, 22:771.

7 *Ibid.*, 22:771–772.

8 *Ibid.*, 22:766.

of his Christianity, a little for love of his physic, a little for love of his courage—and a little for love of contradiction, you will save him from his malevolent criticks, and perhaps do him the honour to devour him yourself—as a lion is said to take a great bull now and then from the wolves which had fallen upon him in the desert, and gravely eat him up for his own dinner.⁹

This gets closer to the mark. Johnson sent the life to her before publication and expressed anxiety about her judgment of it, intimating to her that she had disliked it (August 18, 1780). Two days later, sensing how important he thought the issue, she replied, “Blackmore’s life is admirable; who says I don’t like it?”¹⁰

However, the life did not turn out quite the lion’s dinner she envisioned. There’s more subtlety and discrimination, and something more deeply involved, than her image suggests. Regarding Johnson’s aim in reviving Blackmore, let’s examine the points mentioned earlier, some of which Hester Thrale has adumbrated.

First, let us look at Johnson’s attitude to Pope and the “old wits” who “attacked” Blackmore.¹¹ He concludes that they made themselves enemies of Blackmore not from principles of critical objectivity but through envious, personal “malignity” aroused by the praise given Blackmore’s first epic. Johnson also in part identifies with Blackmore, of whom he says, “his indigence compelled him to teach a school; an humiliation with which, though it certainly lasted but a little while, his enemies did not forget to reproach him, when he became conspicuous enough to excite malevolence; and let it be remembered for his honour, that to have been once a student-master is the only reproach which all the perspicacity of malice, animated by wit, has ever fixed upon his private life.”¹² Johnson’s memories of setting up as a schoolmaster himself at Edial, a choice of life that failed, remained with him, and throughout the *Lives* he says something about the teachers of poets. “Not to name the school or the masters of men illustrious for literature, is a kind of historical fraud, by which *honest* fame is injuriously diminished.”¹³

Frequently, Johnson contrasts the “malice” and “malignity” of Pope and the other wits with the honest, even temper of Blackmore facing their vitriolic criticism. Blackmore was far the lesser poet, but as “the malignity of the wits,” and “the animadversions of Dennis, insolent and contemptuous,” as well as “tedious and disgusting,”¹⁴ heaped derision on Blackmore, he responded without malice or personal attack, something

9 Letter to Samuel Johnson, May 9, 1780, Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Letters to and from the late Samuel Johnson*. *LL.D.* 2 vols. (Dublin: R. Montcrieffe et al., 1788), 2:122.

10 *Ibid.*, 2:182.

11 *Lives of the Poets*, “Blackmore,” 22:758.

12 *Ibid.*, 22:755–756.

13 *Ibid.*, “Addison,” 22:598.

14 *Ibid.*, “Blackmore,” 22:759, 758.

unusual in those days of ad hominem criticism, unusual today as well. Dryden, too, “pursued him with great malignity,” and the wits who in their “malice” courted Dryden’s favor “easily confederated against” Blackmore.¹⁵

As the nastiness mounted, Blackmore rose above it. Johnson, altering a line from Pope himself, puts it this way: “of Blackmore it may be said, that as the poet sinks the man rises.” When Blackmore wards off attacks of the wits, “he scorns to avert their malice at the expence of virtue or of truth.”¹⁶ Johnson implies that those two qualities were more cheaply valued at the wits’ table. Johnson himself rarely responded to negative criticisms of his writing and let his own work, not a hot reply, speak for itself over time. Of Blackmore, Johnson says, “I hold him to have been very *honest*.”¹⁷

By contrast, if we shift our eyes to Pope, we see that the most common word Johnson applies to Pope’s life, character, and actions, as opposed to the genius of his poetry, is, repeatedly, “malignity”: Pope’s “tedious malignity”; “the incessant and unappeasable malignity of Pope”; “when Pope had exhausted all his malignity” on Cibber; or “his malignity to Philips.”¹⁸ Lyttelton, whom Johnson associates with Pope in political leanings, is characterized as “acrimonious and malignant.”¹⁹ Johnson refers to Swift’s “long visit to Pope,” and speaks of Swift, then “at fifty-nine the pupil of turpitude, and liable to the malignant influence of an ascendant mind.” Further, “from the letters that pass between him and Pope it might be inferred that they, with Arbuthnot and Gay, had engrossed all the understanding and virtue of mankind . . .”²⁰

Second, regarding Johnson’s religion and his attitude to religious poetry, his treatment of Blackmore is revelatory. It isn’t Blackmore’s “Christianity,” as Hester Thrale put it, that attracts Johnson. Many poets were Christians; Lyttelton became a devout Christian, yet Johnson’s treatment of him and his work many considered unfair. Moreover, the religious poetry of Blackmore that Johnson praises is not explicitly Christian. Like the *Vanity of Human Wishes* it is theistic and pictures a fragile, desperate state of humankind unanchored by religious faith in God. Blackmore’s poem *Redemption* (1722) Johnson mentions only to say that Blackmore wrote it because “he thought his undertaking imperfect, unless he likewise enforced the truth of revelation.”²¹ As far as poetry and religion are concerned, Johnson so often expressed doubts about the success or advisability of modern religious poetry that it would be difficult to cite all the instances, e.g., from “Waller,” “Let no pious ear be offended if I advance, in

15 Ibid., 22:760, 767.

16 Ibid., 22:759, 767.

17 Ibid., 22: 760. Emphasis added.

18 Ibid., “Pope,” 23:1145, 1152–1153, 1179.

19 Ibid., “Lyttelton,” 23:1475.

20 Ibid., “Swift,” 22:1019–1020.

21 Ibid., “Blackmore,” 22:770.

opposition to many authorities, that poetical devotion cannot often please”;²² see also “Milton”²³ and “Denham.”²⁴ About Watts, the great hymnist, he says, “his devotional poetry is, like that of others, unsatisfactory.”²⁵

So, it's unusual when Johnson recommends a religious poem with enthusiasm, and astonishing, given what he says about Blackmore's four epics on national subjects, that such a religious poem should be authored by Blackmore: *Creation, A Philosophical Poem* (1712) in seven books. Johnson thinks so well of it that he insists the booksellers print it entire in the collection, something they had planned to skip. This entailed cost and labor, for the poem runs about 4,800 lines! Physico-theological poetry was passing out of fashion late in the century, but Johnson warns, “Whoever judges of this by any other of Blackmore's performances, will do it injury”;²⁶ it is by far his best. Dennis and Addison had lauded it, as did Cowper and Southey thereafter.

In *Creation* and nowhere else, Johnson states, Blackmore revised, sought aid, corrected, and re-corrected. As a result, Blackmore's *Creation*, “if he had written nothing else, would have transmitted him to posterity among the first favourites of the English Muse.”²⁷ The revisions paid off handsomely, as such labor usually does, and they represent what Johnson would later call, referring to its greatest practitioner, who “excelled every other writer in it,” “poetical prudence.”²⁸ Johnson had originally underlined “poetical prudence” for emphasis. That excellent writer is Pope himself, who, malignant in criticism, Johnson sees as supremely gifted in the practice of poetry.

In paragraphs that conclude the life of Blackmore, Johnson again praises the versification, thought, diction, and design of *Creation*, its “varied excellence” and skillful blending of the didactic with the illustrative and descriptive. “To reason in verse is allowed to be difficult; but Blackmore not only reasons in verse, but very often reasons poetically.”²⁹ Then, Johnson cannot resist jabbing sharply at Pope, not at his malignity but in this one case at his poetic inferiority to Blackmore: “This is a skill which Pope might have condescended to learn from him, when he needed it so much in his *Moral Essays*.” (Pope's *Essay on Man*, especially the first epistle, owes very clear debts to *Creation*).³⁰ In this one instance, Blackmore's poetical prudence outstrips Pope's, and Johnson takes pains to point it out. Finally, to the literary merit of *Creation*, Johnson says must be added “the original position” of the poem, “the fundamental

22 Ibid., “Waller,” 21:313–316.

23 Ibid., “Milton,” 21:89.

24 Ibid., “Denham,” 21:195.

25 Ibid., “Watts,” 23:1306.

26 Ibid., “Blackmore,” 22:762.

27 Ibid., 22:764.

28 Ibid., “Pope,” 23:1185.

29 Ibid., “Blackmore,” 22:775.

30 Solomon, *Sir Richard Blackmore*, 177–180.

principle of wisdom and of virtue.”³¹ Here, poetry and virtue go hand in hand. Today, we would likely read *Creation* as an anti-Lucretian poem promoting the idea of “intelligent design,” yet we also need to recall that Blackmore wrote it well more than a century prior to the work of Charles Darwin, and that in Blackmore’s time “intelligent design” was widely accepted as scientific.

Third, while Johnson’s discussion of *Creation* has not gone unnoticed—scholars of Blackmore mention it—something else nearly has, and this is the fact that Johnson quotes at length from an essay Blackmore wrote for the periodical the *Lay-Monastery*, which appeared in late 1713. When Johnson first read it I’ve been unable to ascertain (he owned a copy of *Creation* while an undergraduate at Oxford),³² but the passage he extracts from it is one of the longer quotations in the *Lives*, and one of the longest in prose from the direct subjects of Johnson’s attention rather than from others who provide information about them. Johnson quotes from No. 2 (November 18, 1713).

This quotation is Blackmore’s description of “a gentleman that owes to nature excellent faculties and an elevated genius, and to industry and application many acquired accomplishments.”³³ Blackmore then provides the character of “a critic of the first rank; and, what is his peculiar ornament, he is delivered from the ostentation, malevolence, and supercilious temper, that so often blemish men of that character.”³⁴ What follows reads like a mini-catalogue of key critical values and principles later invoked by Samuel Johnson: taste keen and practiced, spirited imagination but carefully considered ideas, knowledge of nature and the world, moral probity, judgment unswayed by previous authority merely for the sake of precedent, refusal to apply mechanically the rules of the ancients, the desire to produce something both useful and agreeable (what in the advertisement to the *Lives* is called “the honest desire of giving useful pleasure”), the willingness to praise as well as censure, a generous sense that no work can be perfect, the effort to be impartial, encouragement for the young, and an ability, occasionally, to write good poetry. Rarely have the principles of criticism espoused and practiced by Johnson himself been so clearly set out.

Johnson remarks that next to this critic the rest of the fraternity in the *Lay-Monastery* seem “but feeble mortals.” He says little more about the entire passage, other than “there is no great genius in the design, nor skill in the delineation.”³⁵ Why, then, does he quote it at length, especially when he could have selected from more than two dozen other papers by Blackmore, or quote none at all? He was drawn deeply to its critical ideals. He devotes far more space to them than he does, for example, to examining or quoting the qualities of the critic found in Pope’s *Essay on Criticism*,

31 *Lives of the Poets*, “Blackmore,” 22:776.

32 Aleya Lyell Reade, *Johnsonian Gleanings*, 11 vols. (London: Francis & Company, 1909–1952), 5:227.

33 *Lives of the Poets*, “Blackmore,” 22:764.

34 *Ibid.*, 22:765.

35 *Ibid.*, 22:764.

published the year before Blackmore's essay. If the paragraphs on criticism are argued to be mere paraphrases of Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, why doesn't Johnson indict Blackmore for that? He does attack Mallet for exactly such an operation.

When Johnson soon afterward writes his life of Pope, two remarks concerning his own approach to criticizing Pope's poetry directly echo the principles enunciated by Blackmore. "In him [Joseph Spence] Pope had the first experience of a critic without malevolence, who thought it as much his duty to display beauties as expose faults; who censured with respect, and praised with alacrity."³⁶ And, "the works of Pope are now to be distinctly examined, not so much with attention to slight faults or petty beauties, as to the general character and effect of each performance."³⁷ Fifteen years earlier, Johnson expressly characterized his own critical attitude to Shakespeare's qualities as a writer by declaring, "I shall show them . . . without envious malignity or superstitious veneration."³⁸

The name of the critic Blackmore creates, "the hero of the club," the literary and intellectual gathering he heads, as Johnson's life points out, "is one Mr. Johnson."³⁹ This would have deepened the memory of it for Samuel Johnson and reinforced the identification he felt. When Johnson walked and rode with Garrick to London, he carried a letter of recommendation written by Gilbert Walmsley that asked the recipient, John Colson, to assist "one Mr. Johnson," who "is a very good scholar and poet . . ."⁴⁰ Johnson was amused and at times excited when he became mixed up with other Johnsons. As Sir John Hawkins noted, Johnson did not like being called *Dr. Johnson*; Boswell confessed that he rarely used that title, even in formal correspondence. After receiving the Oxford degree of Doctor of Civil Law, his second doctoral degree, he still called himself "Mr. Johnson."⁴¹

Samuel Johnson ends discussion of the passage by referring to Blackmore's critic as "the gigantick Johnson."⁴² Perhaps a little skepticism and a lot of humor are at work here,

36 Ibid., "Pope," 23:1106.

37 Ibid., 23:1193.

38 Johnson's remarks are cited in *Johnson on Shakespeare*, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Arthur Sherbo, vols. 7–8 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), 7: 71 (hereafter cited as *Johnson on Shakespeare*).

39 *Lives of the Poets*, "Blackmore," 22:764.

40 John Overholt and Thomas A. Horrocks, *A Monument More Durable Than Brass: The Donald & Mary Hyde Collection of Dr. Samuel Johnson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Library, 2009), 51–52.

41 Sir John Hawkins, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed. O M Brack Jr. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 268; *Boswell's Life of Johnson. Together with Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides and Johnson's Diary of a Journey into North Wales*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934–1950), 2:331–333, 332, n. 1.

42 *Lives of the Poets*, "Blackmore," 22:766.

but he also speaks of “all his abilities” and his “constellation of excellence.”⁴³ This may be mixed with Johnson’s awareness of his own now huge reputation and the phrases (for example, “Great Cham” or “Ursa Major,” which itself names a constellation) used to describe his own person and powers. As far as I can tell, only Larry Lipking, in his 1998 book *Samuel Johnson: The Life of an Author*, has drawn any attention to “gigantick Johnson” and Samuel Johnson’s sense of an ideal critic.⁴⁴ Roger Lonsdale calls the Johnson-Johnson connection “self-mocking” and a “joke,” yet, citing only Lipking, remarks what small attention it has received.⁴⁵ It is self-mocking perhaps, but with a serious side, too.

Fourth, Johnson contrasts Blackmore’s lack of genius—accompanied by his virtue, piety, and good will—with the consummate genius, the supreme “poetical prudence” of Pope, who expended against Blackmore all that young envy and later mature malignity, prompted by his own sense of superiority, could muster.

This uncovers the central tension in the *Lives*, one that creates not only unease and conflict but also profound insight throughout Johnson’s life and work: the exceptional literary genius or wit may not be the good person at all, and the good person often lacks genius, or even talent, while hoping for it. We see this tension even in little remarks; for example, Johnson says of Pope, “He passed over peers and statesmen to inscribe his Iliad to Congreve, with a magnanimity of which the praise had been compleat, had his friend’s virtue been equal to his wit.”⁴⁶

Why did Blackmore so often fall short if he could, according to Johnson, soar high in *Creation*? Because in his other poems, “Having formed a magnificent design, he was careless of particular and subordinate elegancies; he studied no niceties of versification; he waited for no felicities of fancy; but caught his first thoughts in the first words in which they were presented; nor does it appear that he saw beyond his own performances, or had ever elevated his views to that ideal perfection which every genius born to excel is condemned always to pursue, and never overtake.”⁴⁷ Perhaps recalling this passage, Coleridge, too, conceives qualities of the poet in “*ideal perfection*.”⁴⁸ What for Johnson sets apart “genius born to excel” from mediocrity is sheer intellect coupled with obsessive craft; it has little to do with personal virtue. This attitude calls

43 Ibid., 22:766, 764.

44 Lawrence Lipking, *Samuel Johnson: The Life of an Author* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 272–273.

45 Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets; With Critical Observations on their Works*, ed. Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 3:331, n. 27 (hereafter cited as *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*).

46 *Lives of the Poets*, “Pope,” 23:1172.

47 Ibid., “Blackmore,” 22:775.

48 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 2:14.

to mind the sentiment later attributed to Valéry, that no poem is ever finished but only abandoned in despair.⁴⁹ Likewise, Theodor Adorno remarks, “No improvement is too small or trivial to be worthwhile. Of a hundred alterations each may seem trifling or pedantic by itself; together they can raise the text to a new level.”⁵⁰

It’s easy now to pass over the fact that what Johnson is saying is a matter of major importance in the annals of criticism. Again, Blackmore’s purpose in writing was, according to Johnson, nobler than Pope’s, for it was “not for a livelihood” but “if he may tell his own motives . . . to engage poetry in the cause of virtue.”⁵¹ Indeed, he provoked “the unremitting enmity of the wits . . . *more* by his virtue than his dullness.”⁵² Still, Blackmore remains a markedly inferior poet. At a time later in the century when Joseph Warton and others were demoting Pope as incapable of sublimity, passion, or pure poetry, Johnson goes out of his way to defend Pope’s genius and to argue for Pope’s place in the first rank. The chiasmus of Blackmore’s poetic mediocrity yet sterling character crossing Pope’s “poetical prudence” and “genius” yet “incessant malignity” means that, once and for all, the *Lives* destroy any comforting convictions that a great writer must in any way be a good or even decent person, and they confirm that a most admirable individual may desperately aspire to artistic distinction and never, despite early fame, reach even its lower rungs. For Blackmore, *Creation* is the exception that proves the rule.

We may congratulate ourselves for taking this for granted today, almost as child’s play, but for many of Johnson’s audience, and in a critical tradition moving from at least as early as Quintilian, down through Ben Jonson, and permeating many neo-classical critics, virtue and poetry seemed inseparable. Running against this grain, Johnson deliberately identifies Shakespeare’s chief fault this way: “he sacrifices virtue to convenience,” a judgment that shocks some readers even today, especially when we add to it his claim that Shakespeare’s faults “are sufficient to obscure and overwhelm any other merit.”⁵³ Even the highest genius misses an ethical beat and, according to Johnson, misses it often. Without overt statement but in the *Lives* by massive evidence and critical acuity, Johnson rejects the theory that only a good person can be a good poet and a good poet must perforce be a good person. This tenet becomes untenable. The genius of the wits exceeds that of Blackmore by as much or more as their malignity outdistances his virtue. Yet for Johnson the good *critic* should be objective, free from

49 Paul Valéry, “Au Sujet du ‘Cimetière Marin,’” in *Variété III* (Paris: Gallimard, 1936), 56; Ralph Keyes, *The Quote Verifier: Who Said What, Where, and When* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006), 167.

50 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978), sec. 51: 85.

51 *Lives of the Poets*, “Blackmore,” 22:757.

52 *Ibid.*, 22:773–774, emphasis added.

53 *Johnson on Shakespeare*, 7:71.

professional enmity, malignity, personal envy, and scores to settle. In this sense, the good critic must be virtuous.

The nub of the matter as far as Blackmore is concerned, is, as Johnson says, “that malignity takes hold only of his writings, and that his life passed without reproach.”⁵⁴ The *Lives of the Poets* themselves, as a collected body, take up the character and manners of writers in public conduct and private life as well as the quality of their productions. On April 2, 1779, Johnson notes in his *Diary*: “Last week I published the lives of the poets written I hope in such a manner, as may tend to the promotion of Piety.”⁵⁵ By *honesty* of observation, perhaps as much as is granted to any one individual, Johnson provides the first massive work of criticism that draws both one line clearly separating, and another line suggestively connecting, the content of character in real life and the content of art. The line drawn to connect life and work may already be illustrated by the motive he ascribes to Shakespeare’s fault of sacrificing virtue to convenience: “His first defect is that to which may be imputed most of the evil in books *or* in men.”⁵⁶ After all, Johnson had devoted several *Rambler* essays to the difference between an author’s life and work.

The *Lives* represent the first time that any critic had, clearly, convincingly, and elaborately, drawn the connections *and* the boundaries between lived experience and literary excellence, between virtue and genius, on such a scale, for such a significant part of an artistic tradition, in the entirety of western art. What made this possible? The increasing availability of biographical information, Johnson’s own intimate, often personal acquaintance with many of the poets and their circles, his candor, his unrivalled knowledge of the minute qualities of their work not only in themselves but compared with a much larger body of literature in several languages ancient and modern, his sympathy, and his virtue—in short, the qualities of “gigantick Johnson.” Criticism would not again be the same, nor would literary biography. Frequently a close though rarely a sympathetic reader of Johnson’s criticism, Coleridge would nevertheless express the matter similarly: “In other works,” such as poetry, “the communication of pleasure may be the immediate purpose; and though truth, either moral or intellectual, ought to be the *ultimate* end, yet this will distinguish the character of the author, not the class to which the work belongs.”⁵⁷

Was Johnson satisfied with the frequent rift between personal virtue and poetic genius? He wished it away but knew his wish futile. He so felt the neglect and malice heaped on Blackmore that he added that life to his labor for no additional payment. He wished to rescue Blackmore and diligently sought materials for that life, while he once

54 *Lives of the Poets*, “Blackmore,” 22:774.

55 Samuel Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Donald and Mary Hyde, vol. 1 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958), 294.

56 *Johnson on Shakespeare*, 7:71. Emphasis added.

57 Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 2:12.

declined information about Swift from Swift's relative,⁵⁸ and testily rejected information about Pope, too, though later recanted and valued it. Even though Swift and Pope fall in the late-middle of the chronology determined by the booksellers, the three writers Johnson most closely links in "malignity," "malevolence," and "malice," Pope, Swift, and Lyttelton, are precisely the last three whose lives he composes, with Pope's the very last. This does not prove cause and effect but suggests it. To their malignity Johnson contrasts "the honours" of Blackmore's "magnanimity," not only as a person but even "as an author."⁵⁹ This is a great, productive tension in Johnson: he devoted himself to a profession, undertaking, and practice, that of literature, in which those who excel in genius and accomplishment often fall short of or contradict flatly the inner moral life of virtue to which Johnson devoted himself not equally but even more.

Commenting on certain lines in Gray's ode *The Progress of Poesy* (1757), Johnson criticizes the reality represented by the lines, yet concludes, "But that poetry and virtue go always together is an opinion so pleasing, that I can forgive him who resolves to think it true."⁶⁰ He doesn't say "an *illusion* so pleasing," nor does he say he "can forgive him who *is misled* to think it true." He sympathizes with the ideal but knows in reality that it is not always, perhaps not often, true. He believes that one of his motives as a critic to undertake the *Lives* is "the promotion of Piety," meaning not religion narrowly understood, but the large sense of virtuous conduct running through privacy, family, faith, community, country, and humanity. The moral life is here, though in a critic we may occasionally resist it. But that criticism and virtue go always together is an opinion so pleasing, that perhaps we can forgive whoever resolves to make it true.

58 *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, 4:428.

59 *Lives of the Poets*, "Blackmore," 22:774.

60 *Ibid.*, "Gray," 23:1466.

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