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JAMES BOSWELL:

THE IMAGINATION OF A BIOGRAPHER

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Mary Ruth Baxter, B.A., M.A.T.

* * * * * *

The Ohio State University
1972

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Studies in Dryden. Professor A.E.W. Maurer

Studies in Eighteenth-Century Novel and Criticism. Professor William A. Gibson

Studies in the Age of Johnson. Professor E.P.J. Corbett

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CHAPTER I

THE CONTEXT OF THE LIFE OF JOHNSON

Intellectual and Social Conditions

Since the main part of this dissertation is a study of the private, sometimes almost subconscious, associations and preconceptions which influenced Boswell's image of the character of Samuel Johnson, I shall devote this introductory chapter to a brief survey of the context of the Life of Johnson. After sketching the social and intellectual conditions under which eighteenth-century biography and autobiography flourished, I shall turn to the most fully-formulated theory of biography of the day, the theory of Samuel Johnson, so important in influencing Boswell's practice. I shall then outline Boswell's own theory, showing its relation to Johnson's dicta, to Boswell's own reading, and to contemporary understanding of Johnson's character. I have found it useless to make careful distinctions between biography and autobiography, since the theories both of Johnson and of Boswell make no such distinction.

John Dryden was the first English author to use the word biography (or as he wrote, biographia).[1] To Dryden, biography was a species of history, inferior in scope and dignity to history proper, but equal or even superior in pleasure and instruction. Both general history and biography honor the memory of great men, and provide examples of virtue to posterity, but "as the sun beams, united in a burning-glass to a point, have greater force than if they were darted from a plain superficies; so the virtues and actions of one man . . . strike upon our minds a stronger and more lively impression, than the scattered relations of many men and many actions." But, Dryden continues, biography need not confine itself to the hero's public life; it descends into "minute circumstances, and trivial passages of life." The reader sees great men at play. "The pageantry of life is taken away; you see the poor reasonable animal, as naked as ever nature made him; are made acquainted with his passions and his follies, and find the Demy-God a man."

Dryden notwithstanding, English biographers often preferred "Demy-Gods" to men. Throughout the Restoration and eighteenth century, discreet biography had important advocates. Thomas Sprat refused to include private letters

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1 In "The Life of Plutarch," prefixed to Plutarch's Lives, Translated from the Greek by Several Hands (1683-6), I. Quoted in James L. Clifford, ed., Biography as an Art, Galaxy Books (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 17-19.

in his biography of the poet Cowley, on the grounds that "in such letters the souls of men should appear undressed: and in that negligent habit, they may be fit to be seen by one or two in a chamber, but not to go abroad into the streets."[2] The biographical subject, far from appearing "as naked as ever nature made him," to use Dryden's words, should remain always in full dress.

Joseph Addison condemned the Grub Street biographers who profited from the deaths of great men by hurrying into print with inaccurate accounts of their lives.[3] But it was not simply inaccuracy which disturbed Addison, who resented any invasion of privacy. "This manner of exposing the private concerns of families, and sacrificing the secrets of the dead to the curiosity of the living" deserved to be suppressed by government censorship. Addison was convinced that impartial biography could be written only after the passions of "antagonists and adherents" had died down--a position opposed to that of Samuel Johnson for whom excellent biography could only be written, as we shall see, from fresh, living recollection.

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[2] From "An Account of the Life and Writings of Mr. Abraham Cowley," in Works (1668). Quoted in Biography as an Art, p. 12.

[3] In The Freeholder, No. 35, April 20, 1716. Quoted in Biography as an Art, pp. 25-6.

As late as 1788, meditating on the Johnsoniana which had already appeared, Vicesimus Knox wrote, "Biography is everyday descending from its dignity. Instead of an instructive recital, it is becoming an instrument to the gratification of an impertinent, not to say a malignant, curiosity."[4] In exposing the faults of great men, Knox reasoned, biography defeated its own moral purpose, the setting up of patterns of virtue for emulation. Men would not seek eminence for fear of being exposed by biographers, and readers would feel justified in imitating the vices of great men. Just as anatomical dissection ruins the beauty of the human body, so biographical dissection ruins the beauty of the human character.

Knox is very much of his century in regarding serious biography as a monument to the mighty dead and as a source of moral instruction for the living, who, knowing that virtue will be commemorated, will aspire to excellence. (Knox feared the result of the commemoration of faults, as we have seen.) One of the most authoritative of the innumerable collective biographies of the time, the Biographia Britannica purported to be: "A BRITISH TEMPLE OF HONOUR,

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[4]Winter Evenings: or, Lucubrations on Life and Letters (London: Charles Dilly, 1788), II, 188. For a more extended discussion of the topic see James L. Clifford, "How Much Should a Biographer Tell? Some Eighteenth-Century Views," in Essays in Eighteenth-Century Biography, ed. Philip B. Daghlian (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 67-95.

sacred to the piety, learning, valour, publick-spirit, loyalty and every other glorious virtue of our ancestors, and ready also for the reception of the WORTHIES of our OWN TIME, and the HEROES OF POSTERITY."[5]

Regarding biography as a "Temple of Honour," it is evident, involves the risk that panegyric will replace truthful narrative. The advocates of discreet biography, certainly, preferred edification to truth. Strong, however, as was the commemorative impulse--the desire to praise famous men--the eighteenth-century mind at its best was motivated by a stronger desire to know the truth: not so much large metaphysical truths about the nature of Being as factual, concrete truths about men and the world. The Biographia Britannica, to cite only one instance, was, with all its faults, a serious scholarly venture as well as a "Temple of Honour." The first editor, William Oldys, proposed to imitate the method of Bayle's Dictionary, providing narratives supplemented by extensive annotation which would preserve intelligence which might otherwise be lost. Only the most authentic information would be acceptable, to be arrived at by a careful examination of authorities. Donald Stauffer

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[5] Biographia Britannica: or, the Lives of the Most Eminent Persons Who Have Flourished in Great Britain and Ireland . . . . (London: W. Innys et al., 1747-1766), I, viii.

calls the Biographia a "noble experiment in systematizing English biography."[6]

Such compilations as the Biographia perpetuated the conception expressed by Dryden of biography as a branch of history. Biographical researches were a manifestation of what Thomas Warton called "the growing spirit of curiosity, which increases in proportion as it is gratified . . . . After many general histories have been written, inquisitive minds are eager to explore the parts of what they have hitherto surveyed at large . . . and at length personal history commences."[7] The eighteenth century was a great age of scholarship, and the habit of patient investigation into the records of the past bore fruit in making serious biography ever more concerned with factual authenticity and less timid in exposing the whole truth about great men.

One biographical ideal came to be a candid, impartial examination of character, almost a judicial proceeding. As David Mallet put it in his Life of Francis Bacon:

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[6]The Art of Biography in Eighteenth Century England, (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1941), p. 249. Referred to hereafter as Stauffer, it is the most complete available treatment of the whole range of biography of the period. A brief but excellent discussion of eighteenth-century biography can be found in Richard D. Altick, Lives and Letters: A History of Literary Biography in England and America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965).

[7]The Life of Sir Thomas Pope . . . (London: T. Davies et al., 1772), pp. v-vi.

> The antient Egyptians had a law, which ordained, that the actions and characters of their Dead should be solemnly canvassed before certain Judges; in order to regulate what was due to their memory. No quality, however exalted, no abilities, however eminent, could exempt the possessors from this last and impartial trial. To ingenuous minds this was a powerful incentive, in the pursuit of virtue: and a strong restraint on the most abandoned, in their career of vice. Whoever undertakes to write the life of any person, deserving to be remembred [sic] by posterity, ought to look upon this law as prescribed to him. He is fairly to record the faults as well as the good qualities, the failings as well as the perfections, of the Dead; with this great view, to warn and improve the Living. For this reason, tho I shall dwell with pleasure on the shining part of my Lord Bacon's character, as a writer; I shall not dare either to conceal or palliate his blemishes, as a man. It equally concerns the public to be made acquainted with both.[8]

We note that the moral purpose is not simply to edify the living, but to warn them.

This judicial tone is often evident in the character sketches which capped off many a biography. In his influential Life of Gray, for example, William Mason adopted a sketch which, as it turned out, was the work of James Boswell's oldest and most intimate friend, the Reverend William Johnston Temple. Mason's avowed purpose was to do justice to Thomas Gray's virtues and genius, but justice

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[8]Published 1740. In The Works of David Mallet Esq. in Three Volumes, New Edition (London: A. Millar, 1759), III.

includes the recognition of faults as well as of virtues and genius. The character sketch reads in part:

> Perhaps he [Gray] was the most learned man in Europe . . . but he was also a good man, a well-bred man, a man of virtue and humanity . . . . I think the greatest defect in his [character] was an affectation in delicacy, or rather effeminacy, and a visible fastidiousness, or contempt and disdain of his inferiors in science.[9]

Mason's Gray is by no means the frank biography that Boswell's Life of Johnson is, but it pays tribute to the ideal of even-handed biographical truth.

The philosophic spirit of the age was also congenial to the biographer. The ideals of factual authenticity and judiciousness dear to the scholar joined with a disinterested empirical approach to the study of human nature. John Locke, Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, Adam Smith, and lesser lights insisted that genuine knowledge is derived from experience not from a priori reasoning, and that valuable observations about human nature may be made by introspection, by studying human beings as they actually behave in society, and by studying history, the record of past human actions.

The next chapter deals at length with the impact of empirical philosophy upon the mental outlook of one James Boswell. I need only suggest here that he was not alone among biographers in regarding himself as a philosophical

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[9] The Poems of Mr. Gray: to Which are Prefixed Memoirs of His Life and Writings, 2nd ed. (London: J. Dodsley and J. Todd, 1775), p. 402-03.

student of human nature. The compiler of a mid-century set of poets' lives observed in his "Life" of Swift that, while the biographer "is astonished with the high efforts of genius, [he] is at the same time enabled to observe nature as it really is, and how distant from perfection mankind are in this world, even in the most refined state of humanity" [my italics].[10] And Matthew Maty remarked: "It is from observing different individuals that we may be enabled to draw the outlines of that extraordinary complicated being, man."[11]

Maty, in fact, in the introduction to his Memoirs of Chesterfield, summarizes the values of biography which we have been examining. Not only does the biographer provide data for the study of man, he aids our understanding of history and gives us instruction in achieving eminence by providing examples for emulation. Maty deplores biased biography and does not scruple to mix shades with his colors. To these ideas, already familiar to us, he adds praise of

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[10] Mr. Cibber, The Lives of the Poets of Great Britain and Ireland to the Time of Dean Swift (London: R. Griffiths, 1753), V, 73. Robert Shiels and Theophilus Cibber were jointly responsible for this, according to Boswell's note in the Life, III, 30-31.

[11] Miscellaneous Works of the Late . . . Earl of Chesterfield: . . . to Which Are Prefixed Memoirs of his Life Tending to Illustrate the Civil, Literary, and Political History of His Time (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1777), I, 2. Maty gathered Chesterfield's works into two quarto volumes and added an extensive account of his life.

immediacy in biography--a value, as we shall see, important in Samuel Johnson's theory, which was no doubt familiar to Maty from Rambler No. 60 and Idler No. 84. Maty writes: "Characters should be drawn, while they are still fresh in the memory of the living, and anecdotes should be snatched from the destructive hands of time and oblivion."[12]

Biography, after all, was not exclusively a repository of historical, moral, and philosophical truth. When the sober Maty presented his dignified and serious theory of the value of biography, he did not mention the public appetite for sheer entertainment. Anecdotes, especially in the latter part of the century, were all the rage. Readers, like their twentieth-century counterparts, were interested in personalities. As Stauffer points out, the curiosity which demands detailed information about the private lives of the famous and the notorious was as active in the eighteenth century as the more rarefied curiosity of antiquarians, historians, and philosophers. It is perhaps not fair to a scholar like Thomas Warton to suggest that he is motivated by an impulse similar to that which made best-sellers of the memoirs of actresses or the lives of highwaymen, but it is true, nevertheless, that Boswell, for example, associated with the condemned sheep-stealer John Reid and the ambiguous Margaret Caroline Rudd as well as with General Pascal Paoli,

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[12] Maty, p. 3.

Lord Kames, Edmund Burke, and Samuel Johnson.

Biography, after all, grew up with the novel and both appealed to the taste of a reading public increasingly bourgeois and even including apprentices and servant girls (Pamela was a reader). Samuel Johnson marked with approval the wider diffusion of knowledge among his countrymen and especially among his countrywomen.[13] Many of these readers preferred books which described a life with which they could sympathize; they demanded a realism of character, setting, and action which the older, more artificial forms of fiction such as the French romance could not provide. Defoe was a master of this circumstantial realism, and it is significant that novels like Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders purport to be factual narratives. As the century progressed, biographers increasingly used the techniques of the novel to make their works lively and convincing--dialogue, description, psychological analysis.[14]

This fascination with human personality expressed itself in the wide variety of biographical subjects treated.

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[13] All references to the Life, which subsequently will be given in parentheses, are to the Hill-Powell edition, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934). Johnson's comment on the growth of the reading public can be found in III, 32.

[14] For a fuller treatment of the relations between novel and biography, see Stauffer, Ch. II. See also Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1957), Ch. II. I am much indebted to Professors Stauffer and Watt for analysis and information.

Biography in the eighteenth century was not a temple adorned only with busts of great men but a swarming marketplace where men and women of all professions and all degrees of respectability jostled each other. Queens, prostitutes, murderers, divines, adventurers, servant girls, merchants, poets, philosophers, eccentrics--all found their chroniclers. Stauffer suggests that this democratization went along with a tendency for biography to insist less on its moral usefulness, and to seek mostly to convince and to entertain.

An exception to Stauffer's conclusion were the many narratives of personal religious experience, especially by Quakers and Methodists, which certainly were not intended merely as entertainment. Boswell was, it is true, amused by extracts from the diary of the Quaker, Dr. John Rutty, which he came across in the Critical Review (See Life, III, 170-72). Yet Rutty, according to Boswell, "exhibited, in the simplicity of his heart, a minute and honest register of the state of his mind; which, though frequently laughable enough, was not more so than the history of many men would be, if recorded with equal fairness." The Critical Reviewers commend Rutty's attempt to fulfill the first precept of morality, "know thyself." Boswell registered the state of his own mind at great length, dwelling on his religious experiences, and the

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[15]See Critical Review, 42 (1777), 204-206. Available on microfilm, English Literary Periodicals, 2E, reel 9 of 29.

Life is to some extent a spiritual biography, as I shall suggest in my final chapter. Religion was still of prime concern to eighteenth-century readers. They read Locke and novels, but there was a brisk demand for the 200 or so religious books published every year: sermons, treatises, guides to devotion of all kinds.

The familiar Horatian formula, that literature provides both delight and instruction, was an eighteenth-century cliché of criticism. Biography certainly did both. Historical facts, data about human nature, moral lessons, sheer entertainment abounded in the rich harvest of lives ranging from tales of rogues and vagabonds to a stately edifice like Thomas Carte's Life of the heroic Duke of Ormond. Many biographers prefaced their works with a statement of purpose which shows that they were thinking seriously about the nature of biography, but the most completely worked out theory of biography was that of Samuel Johnson, which now must be considered.

Samuel Johnson on Biography

Johnson's love of truth and his conviction that the purpose of biography is to serve the living rather than to honor the dead pervade his theory of biography.[16] Poetry,

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[16] The most complete treatment of Johnson's views is Bergen Evans, "Dr. Johnson's Theory of Biography," RES, 10 (1934), 301-310. Other particularly valuable discussions

perhaps, should portray general nature and forbear to "number the streaks of the tulip," but biography, to Johnson, is a different genre, with its own characteristic excellences, among which is particularity. The powerful generalizations which fill Johnson's works ought not to prevent us from noticing how very empirical his mind was. In secular matters, he valued highly the truths gained from patient, accurate, and minute observation of the world--in short, from experience.[17] Natural science and technology deeply interested him although his poor eyesight limited him; he once said that if he were to become a botanist, he would first have to become a reptile. But he performed chemical experiments in his garret, learned all he could about medicine, and sought to understand every kind of manufacture. The diary of his tour in France (Life, II, 396) describes the silvering of mirrors.

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are C. R. Tracy, "Johnson and the Art of Anecdote," Univ. of Toronto Quarterly, 15 (1945), 86-93; John Butt, Biography in the Hands of Walton, Johnson, and Boswell (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1966). The most authoritative modern edition of Johnson's periodical essays is The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, The Idler and The Adventurer, ed. W. J. Bate, John M. Bullitt, and L. F. Powell, vol. II (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963); The Rambler, ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, vols. III, IV, V (1969). Rambler No. 60 and Idler No. 84 are wholly devoted to discussion of biography.

[17]See Jean Hagstrum, Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1952), Ch. I, "Experience and Reason," for a full treatment of this quality of Johnson's mind.

He was forever urging his friends to observe and to record what they saw. To a Dr. George Staunton, who was embarking for America, he wrote advising the traveller to study "natural curiosities" and to "trust as little as you can to report; examine all you can by your own senses" (Life, I, 367-68).

Men and women, however, rather than natural curiosities occupied most of his attention, and he noticed the minutiae of character and manners with the precision of a naturalist. He was even a nice critic of the refinements of feminine attire. In conversation, he entertained his friends with endless anecdotes about acquaintances, who ranged from Bet Flint ("generally slut and drunkard;--occasionally whore and thief " [Life, IV, 103]) to the King himself ("the finest gentleman I have ever seen" [Life, II, 40]). He had no use, however, for stories which were not strictly true. According to Mrs. Piozzi, he said, "A story . . . is a specimen of human manners and derives its sole value from its truth."[18] All of Johnson's friends who have left memoirs of his character testify to the accuracy of narration which he required of himself and of others even in common conversation. Nor did Johnson allow friendship to distort or soften his delineations of character. He thought

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[18]Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson . . ., in Johnsonian Miscellanies, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1897), I, 225.

Bennett Langton to be the worthiest man alive, yet the Life is full of references (which Boswell has rendered anonymous) to Langton's poor household economy and his habit of having his children too much about him. Boswell quotes Sir Joshua Reynolds explaining this practice of Johnson's: "He was fond of discrimination, which he could not shew without pointing out the bad as well as the good in every character; and as his friends were those whose characters he knew best, they afforded him the best opportunity for showing the acuteness of his judgment" (Life, II, 306).

This relish for the minute particulars of human life led him to recommend the keeping of detailed journals. He also advised bereaved friends to comfort themselves by recording their memories of the dead before the evanescent traits and peculiarities which mark the individual character are forgotten. In recommending to Bennett Langton that he record the life of his uncle Peregrine Langton, who was remarkable for living in "plenty and elegance" upon a small income, Johnson wrote, "The little things which distinguish domestick characters are soon forgotten: if you delay to enquire, you will have no information; if you neglect to write, information will be vain" (Life, II, 17). Johnson never succeeded in keeping an extensive journal nor in recording his penetrating observations about his own acquaintance, but the surviving personal

records,[19] preserve even such particulars as whether he took milk in his tea on Good Friday. Unfortunately, a "full, fair, and most particular account of his own life," to quote Boswell's description, (Life, IV, 405) perished in the flames to which the dying Johnson consigned his papers.

Within limits, indeed, Johnson regarded the accumulation of information for its own sake as a worthy pursuit. "Curiosity," he says in Rambler No. 103, "is one of the permanent and certain characteristicks of a vigorous intellect." He encouraged Boswell to continue his collection of Scottish antiquities. "But of what use will it be, Sir?" Boswell asked. "Never mind the use; do it," replied Johnson (Life, II, 92). On another occasion he remarked, "All knowledge is of itself of some value. There is nothing so minute or inconsiderable that I would not rather know it than not" (Life, II, 357). Johnson was very much the scholar, always taking a lively interest in scholarly matters, especially philological matters. When Reynolds laughed at the universities for sending forth collections of verses in dead languages, Johnson defended the practice, saying "I would have verses in every language that there are the means of acquiring. . . . I would have the world to be thus told, 'Here is a school where every thing may be learnt'" (Life, II, 371).

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[19] See Vol. I of the Yale Edition, Diaries, Prayers, and Annals, ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr. with Donald and Mary Hyde (1958).

In addition to the philological pursuits so congenial to the author of the great Dictionary, Johnson took a lifelong pleasure in literary history and literary biography; "the biographical part of literature . . . is what I love best," Johnson once said to Boswell (Life, I, 425). He was dissatisfied with the state of English literary biography. "Talking of biography," Boswell writes in the Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, "he [Johnson] said he did not know any literary man's life in England well-written. It should tell us his studies, his manner of life, the means by which he attained to excellence, his opinion of his own works, and such particulars."[20]

Highly as he valued knowledge for its own sake, however, he valued even more highly knowledge which could be used by ordinary human beings to improve the quality of their daily lives. Rambler No. 103, which opens with praise of curiosity as "one of the permanent and certain characteristicks of a vigorous intellect," continues with the story of Nugaculus whose investigations into human nature are not steadily controlled by a worthy ethical purpose. From a

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[20]Edited by Frederick A. Pottle and Charles H. Bennett (1961), p. 204. Hereafter called Hebrides. This is one of the ten volumes of The Yale Editions of the Private Papers of James Boswell, all published by the McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., New York. First references to each volume of this series are footnoted, giving editors' names, title of volume, date, and a cue title. Subsequent references are parenthetical, giving cue title and page.

philosopher intent upon guiding his own life by his knowledge of "the various motives of human actions, the complicated influence of mingled affections, the different modifications of interest and ambition, and the various causes of miscarriage and success both in publick and private affairs," he degenerates into "a general master of secret history," hated and feared by those whose secrets he has ferreted out. A man of great ability, Nugaculus wastes a life in which his knowledge was never put to use in "publick services or domestick virtues." Johnson shows himself to be the humanistic moralist who would have men ask to what extent their pursuits promote their own genuine welfare and that of others.

Johnson, then, valued detailed, factual knowledge chiefly as it is of use in cultivating the most important of all arts, the art of living. This minute knowledge is essential to the best biography according to Johnson's canons, which fuse the philosophical and moral concerns which accompanied the rise of biography in the eighteenth century. Empiricism combined in Johnson's theory with the belief that the record of private lives inspires virtue or warns against vice. For Johnson, however, the most useful lives were not those of great men. He was not inclined even to credit the existence of heroic virtue, much less to engage in hero-worship. According to Mrs. Piozzi:

> Nothing indeed more surely disgusted Dr. Johnson than hyperbole; he loved not to be told of sallies of excellence, which he said were seldom valuable, and seldom true. 'Heroic virtues (said he) are the bons mots of life; they do not appear often, and when they appear are too much prized I think . . . . But life is made up of little things; and that character is the best which does little but repeated acts of beneficence.'[21]

The most useful lessons may be learned from accounts of private life. Few can aspire to greatness, but all can aspire to be virtuous and contented. "To be happy at home," Johnson says in Rambler No. 68, "is the ultimate result of all ambition." Thus biography should not confine itself to lives which are "distinguished by . . . striking or wonderful vicissitudes" but should take note of "the minute details of daily life, where exterior appendages are cast aside, and men excel each other only by prudence and by virtue" (Rambler No. 60). Perhaps the key passage of Rambler No. 60 is this, which must be quoted in full:

> I have often thought that there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful. For, not only every man has, in the mighty mass of the world, great numbers in the same condition with himself, to whom his mistakes and miscarriages, escapes and expedients, would be of immediate and apparent use; but there is such an uniformity in the state of man, considered apart from adventitious and separable decorations and

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[21] Johnsonian Miscellanies, I, 208.

> disguises, that there is scarce any possibility of good or ill, but is common to human kind. A great part of the time of those who are placed at the greatest distance by fortune, or by temper, must unavoidably pass in the same manner; and though, when the claims of nature are satisfied, caprice, and vanity, and accident, begin to produce discriminations and peculiarities, yet the eye is not very heedful, or quick, which cannot discover the same causes still terminating their influence in the same effects, though sometimes accelerated, sometimes retarded, or perplexed by multiplied combinations. We are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure.

Johnson appears to see no contradiction between his insistence on minute particularity in biography and his belief that "there is such an uniformity in the state of man . . . that there is scarce any possibility of good or ill, but is common to human kind." Johnson saw human life, perhaps paradoxically, as at once uniform and exceedingly various and complex, and to portray it truthfully, the biographer must take account of the "discriminations and peculiarities" which distinguish one individual from another (as Johnson himself was attentive to the perfect accuracy of his own anecdotes). The reader, according to Johnson, will quickly enough perceive the general truth which applies to his own circumstances and discern causes and effects operating in similar fashion in the lives of those "placed at the greatest distance by fortune, or by temper." For according to Idler No. 84, "The sensations are

the same in all, tho' produced by very different occasions. The prince feels the same pain when an invader seizes a province, as the farmer when a thief drives away his cow." Johnson would have the biographer accurately describe the "very different occasions."

The detail chosen by the biographer must, however, be significant. In Rambler No. 60, Johnson gives as examples of significant detail the irregularity of Catiline's gait which indicated the commotion of his mind, Melancthon's insistence on fixing appointments to the minute as a "striking lecture on the value of time," and De Witt's being "careful of his health and negligent of his life." The irregularity of Addison's pulse, and Malherb's more trivial opinions did not seem to Johnson of any interest to posterity.

Yet even significant detail is quickly forgotten, as Johnson warned Bennett Langton when he advised him to make notes on Peregrine Langton's life. He says in Rambler No. 60:

> If a life be delayed till interest and envy are at an end, we may hope for impartiality, but must expect little intelligence; for the incidents which give excellence to biography are of a volatile and evanescent kind, such as soon escape the memory, and are rarely transmitted by tradition. We know how few can portray a living acquaintance, except by his most prominent and observable particularities, and the grosser features of his mind; and it may be easily imagined how much of this little knowledge may be lost in imparting it, and how soon a succession of copies

> will lose all resemblance of the original.

Perhaps a man should write his own life, as Johnson suggests in Idler No. 84. He at least knows his own pains and pleasures, to use Johnson's words, "how he was made happy" or "how he became discontented with himself" (Idler No. 84). In 1777, Johnson wrote to Edmund Allen about Dr. Dodd, the clergyman who was condemned for forgery:

> If his remissions of anguish and intervals of devotion leave him any time, he may perhaps spend it profitably in writing the history of his own depravation, and marking the gradual declination from innocence and quiet, to that state in which the law has found him. . . . the history of his own mind, if not written by himself, cannot be written, and the instruction that might be derived from it must be lost.[22]

For Johnson, excellent biography or autobiography was not a narrative of public action but a history of the mind, and private and apparently trivial circumstances were more revealing of the state of a man's mind than the "stratagems of war, and the intrigues of courts" (Idler No. 84). Public affairs and general history did not much interest him, although he wrote political pamphlets occasionally. As a result, unlike most of his contemporaries, he does not praise biography for the purely historical information it provides.

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[22] Letters of Samuel Johnson, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), II, 175-76.

Johnson was, of course, too astute not to be aware of the various impediments to achieving in biography and autobiography the truth he so highly prized. The greatest danger is that the writer simply does not know enough to present the minute particulars of private life which are essential to a living portrait: he draws his information only from public papers, writes a "formal and studied narrative, begun with his [the subject's] pedigree, and ended with his funeral" (Rambler No. 60), and so fails to achieve genuine biography. Next, it may be that the biographer is biased for or against his subject. Johnson feels that the most impartial narrator is the man who writes his own life, but who does not publish it during his own lifetime:

> But he that speaks of himself has no motive to falshood [sic] or partiality except self-love, by which all have so often been betrayed, that all are on the watch against its artifices. He that writes an apology for a single action, to confute an accusation, or recommend himself to favour, is indeed always to be suspected of favouring his own cause; but he that sits down calmly and voluntarily to review his life for the admonition of posterity, or to amuse himself, and leaves this account unpublished, may be commonly presumed to tell truth, since falshood cannot appease his own mind, and fame will not be heard beneath the tomb. (Idler No. 84)

Johnson has little to say about the biographer who seeks to discredit his subject; the most common offense against impartiality is the temptation to write a panegyric. Johnson's passion for useful truth dictated that a dead

man's failings should not be covered up. He deplores those who regard it as an act of piety to hide the frailties of their friends when the deceased can no longer suffer by the detection, and energetically continues:

> We therefore see whole ranks of characters adorned with uniform panegyrick, and not to be known from one another, but by extrinsick and casual circumstances. "Let me remember," says Hale, "when I find myself inclined to pity a criminal, that there is likewise a pity due to the country." If we owe regard to the memory of the dead, there is yet more respect to be paid to knowledge, to virtue, and to truth. (Rambler No. 60)

Biography, to Johnson, existed for the benefit of the living and not for the honor of the dead. The commemorative impulse, so prominent in much serious eighteenth-century biography, is little evident in Johnson's theory or practice. The frankness of his Lives of the Poets and his reluctance to confer unqualified praise on even the greatest British writers caused many tender-minded persons to accuse him of malignant envy and of slandering the departed. But Johnson was never alive to what he considered fanciful woes, the less so when so high a value as truth was at stake. Solid instruction was more important than avoiding ruffled feelings. He once wrote to Bennett Langton: "Whether to see life as it is will give us much consolation, I know not; but the consolation which is drawn from truth, if any there be, is solid and durable; that which may be derived from errour

must be, like its original, fallacious and fugitive " (Life, I, 339).

Johnson was not, however, totally indifferent to the problem of how much a biographer should tell. He remarks in the "Life of Addison":

> The necessity of complying with times, and of sparing persons, is the great impediment of biography. History may be formed from permanent monuments and records; but Lives can only be written from personal knowledge, which is growing every day less, and in a short time is lost for ever. What is known can seldom be immediately told; and when it might be told, it is no longer known. The delicate features of the mind, the nice discriminations of character, and the minute peculiarities of conduct, are soon obliterated; and it is surely better that caprice, obstinacy, frolick, and folly, however they might delight in the description, should be silently forgotten, than that, by wanton merriment and unseasonable detection, a pang should be given to a widow, a daughter, a brother, or a friend. As the process of these narratives is now bringing me among my contemporaries, I begin to feel myself walking upon ashes under which the fire is not extinguished, and coming to the time of which it will be proper rather to say nothing that is false than all that is true.[23]

This passage seems to be an argument for discreet biography, but the very life in which it appears shows Addison reclaiming his loan to Steele by an execution, adjusting, for party reasons, to an association with the depraved Marquis of Wharton, and drinking too much wine. Under the circumstances,

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[23] Lives of the English Poets, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 3 vols. (1905, rpt. New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1967), II, 116. [My italics.]

it is somewhat difficult to ascertain exactly what Johnson believed might give a pang to widows, daughters, brothers or friends. Perhaps the phrase "wanton merriment and unseasonable detection" may be interpreted to mean that the biographer's motives should be honorable and that he should not reveal his subject's "caprice, obstinacy, frolick, and folly" merely to amuse the reader when such revelations do not serve any larger end of useful instruction. Perhaps a man's petty follies and vanities may be passed over in silence, but if biographers portray their subjects as perfect, Johnson believed, the moral effect of biography would be lessened. Men would despair of being able to imitate examples of virtue too radiant in their perfection. In a conversation with Edmond Malone, he earnestly argued:

> If nothing but the bright side of characters should be shewn, we should sit down in despondency, and think it utterly impossible to imitate them in <u>any thing</u>. The sacred writers . . . related the vicious as well as the virtuous actions of men; which had this moral effect, that it kept mankind from <u>despair</u>, into which otherwise they would naturally fall, were they not supported by the recollection that others had offended like themselves, and by penitence and amendment of life had been restored to the favour of Heaven. (<u>Life</u>, IV, 53)

In the end we are left with the sense that Johnson had not fully settled his mind upon the question of exactly how discreet a biographer should be but that he was, on the whole, convinced that excessive discretion violated the primary obligation of biography--to tell useful truth.

Truth cannot be useful, however, unless it is conveyed in a manner which gives pleasure to a wide reading public. Johnson is so much the moralist that we are prone to forget the high place he assigns to entertainment as a literary value and the respect he expresses for the tastes of the common reader. And truth, he feels, gives in the end more pleasure to more people than fiction. "Biography," he says in the opening sentence of Idler No. 84, "is, of the various kinds of narrative writing, that which is most eagerly read, and most easily applied to the purposes of life." He goes on to say that only the immature, or those seeking escape in a "pleasing dream" prefer romances full of wonders, while the great events of history are too remote from common experience to speak to the common condition. Being a philosopher, Johnson seeks to ascertain the source of the pleasure we take in reading lives and finds it in the operation of the sympathetic imagination, which for a time allows us to feel "joy or sorrow for the happiness or calamities of others . . . by placing us . . . in the condition of him whose fortune we contemplate; so that we feel, while the deception lasts, whatever motions would be excited by the same good or evil happening to ourselves" (Rambler No. 60). Biography has the power to "enchain the heart by irresistible interest" (Rambler No. 60), and for Johnson the literary critic, this power to engage the interest and the emotions

of a wide range of readers is an important criterion of literary value. For all its magnificence, Paradise Lost lacks human interest; Shakespeare abounds with it, for all his faults. In his critique of Gray's "Elegy," Johnson rejoices "to concur with the common reader" by whom "after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning" all claims to poetical honors must be decided. "The Churchyard abounds with images which find a mirrour in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo."[24]

It was on the grounds that the common reader will be entertained that Johnson issued his amusing appeal to authors to write literary biography and autobiography (Idler No. 102). A literary life is as full of incident as any other, and ought to furnish materials for an absorbing narrative:

> An author partakes of the common condition of humanity; he is born and married like another man; he has hopes and fears, expectations and disappointments, griefs and joys, and friends and enemies, like a courtier or a statesman; nor can I conceive why his affairs should not excite curiosity as much as the whisper of a drawing-room, or the factions of a camp.

Johnson goes on in a bantering tone to suggest that the "deep involutions of distress" and "sudden vicissitudes of fortune" which command a reader's attention abound in the

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[24] Lives of the English Poets, III, 441.

lives of authors, who generally are "intangled by contracts which they know not how to fulfill, and obliged to write on subjects which they do not understand." Their successes and failures, their misadventures with patrons "would form very amusing scenes of biography" which might well provide a novel pleasure for those weary of conspiracies, battles, courts, or parliaments. "I hope," Johnson concludes, "the learned will be taught to know their own strength and their value, and instead of devoting their lives to the honour of those who seldom thank them for their labours, resolve at last to do justice to themselves."

Johnson was so far from being elitest or snobbish in his critical predilections that he was very much in harmony with the bourgeois reading public of the day which preferred literature to reflect its own experience as circumstantially as possible and which cared little for artificial forms.[25] Johnson demanded minute particulars in narrative (he had nothing but praise for Richardson), and he disliked pastorals and metaphysical love ditties. In his criticism, except for his dicta on versification, he is more concerned with content than with form; his pronouncements on biography never take up the question of formal structure.[26] His knowledge of the

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[25] Watt, Ch. 2.

[26] Altick, p. 56.

classics was profound, and his respect for them immense, but, characteristically, he preferred the story of the Odyssey to that of the Aeneid--not, of course, because of the wonders it contains but because "a great part of it is domestick" (Life, IV, 219). We note how far he departs from earlier critics of the epic for whom the function of that highest of genres was to rouse wonder and admiration in the reader. Johnson's preference for "domestick" biography over narratives of heroic virtue is of a piece with his general critical outlook, which is that of a bourgeois rather than of an aristocratic society.

Johnson's biographical practice does not perfectly embody his theory, but we must remember that his early biographical writing antedated Rambler No. 60, Idler No. 84, and the conversations reported in the Life. Such brief lives as those of Boerhaave (1739), Admiral Blake (1740), and Sir Francis Drake (1740) are almost entirely adulatory; their great subjects are quite frankly to be emulated. But even so, Johnson explicitly avoids using incredible and unsubstantiated reports, and he displays his accustomed power of generalization about human nature. The best and most-read of the early lives is that of Richard Savage (1744), whom Johnson knew intimately. Savage, obviously, was hardly a pattern for emulation. The reader is cautioned rather to pity his misfortune and to avoid his faults than to imitate his virtues. Even in this life of a close friend, as

Professor Clarence Tracy has observed,[27] Johnson gives few vivid particulars and almost no conversation. Instead, argues Professor Tracy, Johnson's great strength is his shrewd psychological penetration into Savage's gift for self-deception. Himself Savage's biographer, Professor Tracy says that he keeps "coming back to Johnson for a fairer and clearer view of the man than I can get elsewhere."[28] But this penetration is expressed in general terms. The Lives of the Poets, written forty years later, are much richer in anecdote and come closer to Johnson's theory, but even so, such a brilliant passage as the disquisition on Pope's ardor of mind does not depend for its effect upon an accumulation of particulars.[29] The art of intimate biography, rich in living particulars which display the man as he sat at dinner or conversed with his friends or occupied his solitary hours, the art of biography which Johnson advocated in theory, was mastered not by Johnson but by Boswell. Let us now examine Boswell's own statements of

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[27] In "Johnson and the Art of Anecdote."

[28] "Johnson and the Art of Anecdote," p. 92.

[29] Lives of the English Poets, III, 217. "Pope had likewise genius; a mind active, ambitious, and adventurous, always investigating, always aspiring; in its widest searches still longing to go forward, in its highest flights still wishing to be higher; always imagining something greater than it knows, always endeavouring more than it can do."

intention, and some of the external influences which shaped the Life of Johnson.

Boswell's Theory of Biography

Love of truth also governed Boswell's theory of biography. Frank by nature, he also was consciously a disciple of Johnson in training himself to observe and record as accurately as possible. He wrote to Johnson in 1776: "For the honour of Count Manucci, as well as to observe that exactness of truth which you have taught me, I must correct what I said in a former letter. He did not fall from his horse . . . ; his horse fell with him" (Life, III, 91). Boswell's account of the trouble he took to "ascertain with a scrupulous authenticity" the "innumerable detached particulars" of which the Life consists is familiar to readers of the Advertisement to the First Edition. Boswell goes on: "Were I to detail the books which I have consulted, and the inquiries which I have found it necessary to make by various channels, I should probably be thought ridiculously ostentatious. Let me only observe, as a specimen of my trouble, that I have sometimes been obliged to run half over London in order to fix a date correctly" (Life, I, 6-7). Modern scholarship has, indeed, unearthed information not available to Boswell or, for some reason, not used in the Life, but on

the whole, Boswell's sheer accuracy has been established.[30] With its apparatus of footnotes, its careful examination of evidence, and its inclusion of information from a variety of well-authenticated sources, the Life is, among its other qualities, scholarly in the best sense. We recall that Edmond Malone, one of the most learned and painstaking of eighteenth-century scholars, was Boswell's helper and intimate.

Boswell's ideal of biographical truth, however, transcended factual, historical accuracy. The portrait must also have vitality. Over the years, his aim both as journalist and biographer was to recreate in words the actual scene as he observed it. The difficulty of achieving his aim made him impatient with the limitations of language. As he said of his uncle, Basil Cochrane, Commissioner of Customs:

> The great lines of characters may be put down. But I doubt much if it be possible to preserve in words the peculiar features of mind which distinguish individuals as certainly as the features of different countenances . . . . Perhaps language may be improved to such a degree as to picture the varieties of mind . . . minutely . . . . I cannot portray Commissioner Cochrane as he exists in my mind.[31]

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[30] See Marshall Waingrow's Introduction to his edition of The Correspondence and Other Papers of James Boswell Relating to the Making of the LIFE OF JOHNSON (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., [1966]). This book will be cited as Waingrow. Also see Louis Baldwin, "The Conversation in Boswell's Life of Johnson," JEGP, 51 (1952), 492-506. For a contrary view see Donald J. Greene, "The Making of Boswell's Life of Johnson," Studies in Burke and His Time, 12 (1970-71), 1812-20.

[31] Charles Ryskamp and Frederick A. Pottle, ed., Boswell: The Ominous Years, 1774-1776, (1963), p. 168. Hereafter cited as Ominous.

Although Boswell doubts the possibility of capturing character in words, he persists in his attempts to do so. Of one thing he is sure: that the recording of minute particulars is essential. "With how small a speck does a painter give life to an eye!" he exclaimed in his journal.[32] Dress, for example, is extremely important. He notes in his sketchy journal for December, 1778, "Considered the TOTALITY of a Man depends on his wig, dress, etc. If one of Webster's Elders had tied hair, he'd be quite different. Biography therefore should give dress minutely" [partial words expanded in italics by editors].[33]

Boswell, like Johnson, knew that the only way to preserve the ephemeral small features of character and appearance was to write them down immediately. He says of one of Johnson's dicta, "As it was not taken down recently, it has not his rich flavour of language. To write down his sayings at a distant period after hearing them is pickling or preserving long-kept and faded fruits or other vegetables."[34] Having kept a detailed journal even before he met

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[32]Frank Brady and Frederick A. Pottle, eds., Boswell in Search of a Wife, 1766-1769 (1956), p. 292. Hereafter cited as Wife.

[33]Geoffrey Scott and Frederick A. Pottle, eds. The Private Papers of James Boswell from Malahide Castle in the Collection of Lt.-Colonel Ralph Heyward Isham, 18 vols. (Privately printed, 1928-32), XIII, 188. Hereafter cited as PP, with volume number in Arabic numerals, followed by page numbers, as (PP, 13, 188). Boswell's papers before November, 1762, and after 1778 appear in print only in this edition, restricted to 570 numbered copies. The journals for 1762-1778 appear in the Yale Editions.

[34]Charles McC. Weis and Frederick A. Pottle, eds.,

Johnson, Boswell was delighted and reassured when Johnson urged him to do what Boswell was already doing. "O my journal! art thou not highly dignified? Shalt thou not flourish tenfold?" he apostrophized.[35] How scrupulous he was to preserve exactly what he saw and heard is evident in such passages as this:

> I half persuaded him to go with me to Beauclerk's. But he suddenly took a resolution to go home, saying, "But I don't love Beauclerk the less"; or something quite to that effect, for I am so nice in recording him that every trifle must be authentic. I draw him in the style of a Flemish painter. I am not satisfied with hitting the large features. I must be exact as to every hair, or even every spot on his countenance. (Ominous, 103)

Achieving this authenticity in recording Johnson's conversation was a matter of no little difficulty for Boswell, and looking back from the time the Life was published, he marvels at "the stretch of mind and prompt assiduity by which so many conversations were preserved" (Life, I, 6). It took him some time after their first meeting to accustom himself to what he calls Johnson's "peculiar mode of expression," and his very admiration for the great man's "extraordinary colloquial talents" hindered his recollection (Life, I, 420-21).

Boswell in Extremes, 1776-1778 (1970), p. 171, n. 3. Hereafter cited as Extremes.

[35] Frederick A. Pottle, ed., Boswell's London Journal, 1762-1763 (1950), p. 305. Hereafter cited as London.

We remember that Boswell was so dazzled by Johnson's flow of eloquent advice during their memorable excursion to Greenwich that he could remember very little of what Johnson actually said (Life, I, 460). But as time went on, he says, his mind was "strongly impregnated with the Johnsonian aether" and he could remember and write down "the exuberant variety of his wisdom and wit" (Life, I, 421).

Geoffrey Scott has decisively scouted the notion that Boswell was a mere stenographer who wrote down Johnson's conversations on the spot (see his introduction to Vol. 6 of PP). Boswell may on occasion have pulled out a notebook to record something particularly good, but his normal method was to take brief notes as soon as possible, not in shorthand, but using half-words and short phrases. Then, at his leisure, he expanded these notes into the fully written journals. The record of the jaunt to Ashbourne in the autumn of 1777 (Extremes, 143-86; Life, III, 135-208) runs from one to four weeks behind. The events of September 10 were fully written up at Ashbourne on September 17, but the events of September 25 waited until October 24 to be set down at large.

Boswell's method insures that the Life conforms to the strict Johnsonian standards of immediacy and accuracy, standards which Boswell was temperamentally predisposed to accept, and which were hallowed for him by Johnson's insistence upon them. He did, however, depend to some extent upon

his remarkable memory when he was writing the Life. As a very young man, he said of himself, "I have the best memory in the world for minutiae."[36] Many vivid particulars found in the Life are not found in the journal: for example, the famous description of Johnson in 1763 in his chambers in the Temple, with his rusty brown suit, his "shrivelled unpowdered wig," his unfastened shirt, loose stockings and unbuckled shoes (Life, I, 396). On the whole, the conversation in the Life essentially repeats the journal record although indirect discourse becomes direct, and a good many "Sirs" are added. The stage directions, however, which add so much life to the dialogue, are often found only in the Life. Reporting the conversation with Oliver Edwards on April 17, 1778, Boswell wrote in his journal that Johnson spoke of his loss of Tetty "with grave feeling" (Extremes, p. 295), while in the Life, "with grave feeling" is changed to the more vivid "in a solemn, tender, faultering tone" (Life, III, 305).

Boswell, as we have seen, shared Johnson's view that biography should be minutely accurate and that it should be immediate and alive. With all his regard for the truth, however, Boswell faced the perennial question of how much truth to tell. He does not theorize about this question, but

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[36] Frederick A. Pottle, ed., Boswell in Holland, 1763-1764 (1952), p. 343. Hereafter cited as Holland.

his practice is revealing. In the dedication to Sir Joshua Reynolds, alluding to the ridicule occasioned by the Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, he says that in the Life "though I tell nothing but the truth, I have still kept in my mind that the whole truth is not always to be exposed" (Life, I, 4). Pertinacious as he was in questioning, for example, there were some questions which could not be asked. The subject of how Johnson paid for his stay at Oxford "was too delicate," says Boswell, "to question Johnson upon" (Life, I, 58). In addition, he occasionally polished Johnson's language. At Ashbourne in 1777, Johnson spoke with contempt of a valetudinarian "who thinks he may do anything that is for his ease, may belch or f__t or desire you to leave the room" (Extremes, p. 154). In the Life, this becomes, "I do not know a more disagreeable character than a valetudinarian, who thinks he may do any thing that is for his ease, and indulges himself in the grossest freedoms" (Life, III, 152). We suspect that Johnson's language was sometimes racier than Boswell reports it. However, Johnson was noted for discouraging bawdy talk in his presence, a presence more awesome than that of many bishops, and it seems unlikely that his conversation at any time was persistently gross.

Whatever freedom of vocabulary he may have employed in male company, Johnson seems to have had little to say, to Boswell at least, on the subject of sex, and Boswell suppresses that little. In the Life for May 9, 1778, (III, 341),

Boswell remarks that for the first time during their long acquaintance they discussed at some length "the sensual intercourse between the sexes," but after quoting Johnson's observation that if it were not for the imagination, a man would be as happy in the arms of a chambermaid as in the arms of a duchess, he primly continues:

> It would not be proper to record the particulars of such a conversation in moments of unreserved frankness, when nobody was present on whom it could have any hurtful effect. That subject, when philosophically treated, may surely employ the mind in as curious discussion, and as innocently as anatomy; provided that those who do treat it keep clear of inflammatory incentives. (Life, III, 341-42)

Boswell also suppressed a record of a conversation between himself and Anna Desmoulins, one of Johnson's household, which revealed that Johnson used to kiss and fondle her during Mrs. Johnson's last years, and he omits Johnson's expressed intention to seek another wife after Tetty's death.[37] But we must remember that, with great reluctance to be sure, he suggests that Johnson's terrible fear of death and his conviction of his own sinfulness were related to sexual irregularities in Johnson's youth, and not to superstitious scruples. Of this passage (Life, IV, 395-98), he remarks, "I trust I have got through it, preserving at once my regard to

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[37]For more about Johnson's sexual life, see James L. Clifford, Young Sam Johnson, Hesperides Books (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 313-17.

truth,--to my friend,--and to the interests of virtue and religion." Boswell was well aware of the delicacy of the biographer's task; he, too, was walking upon warm ashes.[38] On the whole, however, Boswell, regarding Johnson as his authority, was committed to the utmost possible frankness consistent with his own rather free interpretation of the standards of decorum which prevailed at the time. When Johnson contradicted himself as to whether a biographer should reveal Addison's drinking habits, Boswell argues that Johnson's real opinion was that the vices of the biographical subject ought not to be silently passed over. On September 17, 1777, Johnson expressed a fear that exposing a great man's vices might cause the reader to imitate them, but Boswell counters with two instances in which Johnson maintained the opposite point of view, saying that a life as opposed to a panegyric must be frank (Life, III, 154-155).

Boswell, with all his reverence for Johnson and for Johnson's opinions, did not completely adhere to Johnson's theories. For example, he was too much an admirer of great men to consider writing the lives of the humble and obscure. (Of course, Johnson himself wrote no such lives.) Besides the Life of Johnson he contemplated a good many other

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[38]Boswell also minimizes fears for his sanity. As we shall see in the last chapter, his conception of the essential truth about Johnson's character governs his treatment of this matter.

biographical projects, but all of them were to be lives of men of some distinction.[39] Boswell also is much less preoccupied than Johnson with the moral function of biography as a guide to private life, nor does he, in the traditional manner, show Johnson as a pattern for emulation. While it is true that he hoped that Johnson's "strong, clear, and animated enforcement of religion, morality, loyalty, and subordination" would serve as an antidote to the "detestable sophistry" then coming from France (Life, I, 11-12) and that his reverence for Johnson arose from his sense of the sage's power to instruct and improve his readers and auditors, still he regarded Johnson as a uniquely gifted individual, to be reverenced and wondered at rather than imitated. Near the end of the Life, Boswell quotes William Gerard Hamilton's comment on the death of Johnson: "He has made a chasm, which not only nothing can fill up, but which nothing has a tendency to fill up. Johnson is dead. Let us go to the next best:--there is nobody; no man can be said to put you in mind of Johnson" (Life, IV, 420-21).

The Life, with all its frankness about Johnson's failings, is a monument to a great and singular individual.

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[39]General Oglethorpe, Alexander Lockhart (Lord Covington), Sir Alexander Dick, Lord Kames, Sir John Pringle, Thomas Ruddiman, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and others. In 1792, Sir William Chambers of the Royal Academy proposed that Boswell write brief Lives of deceased members. Notes for the life of Kames are printed in vol. 15 of PP.

Boswell in a sense follows in the biographical tradition of the Temple of Honour. To Anna Seward he wrote in 1785, calling the Life "my Great Biographical Monument. I tell every body it will be an Egyptian Pyramid in which there will be a compleat mummy of Johnson that Literary Monarch" (Waingrow, p. 96). Hannah More heard him use this phrase in conversation, and thought it a piece of vanity in Boswell.[40] He perpetuates this idea of the Life as a monument in the Advertisement to the first edition, comparing those who provided him with materials to "the grateful tribes of ancient nations, of which every individual was eager to throw a stone upon the grave of a departed Hero, and thus to share in the pious office of erecting an honourable monument to his memory" (Life, I, 5).

Despite the differences of temperament and outlook between the two men, especially Boswell's hero-worship and Johnson's skepticism about heroic virtue, there seems little doubt that Johnson's theory of biography, with its insistence on frankness and immediacy and on the use of minute particulars, was the most important influence on Boswell's practice in the Life. Besides reading Johnson's works and listening to his conversation, however, Boswell read, rather desultorily it must be admitted, in biography generally. Boswell

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[40] Johnsonian Miscellanies, II, 206.

was not an avid reader, although he had a good education and was familiar with the standard ancient and modern classics. As a young man with ambitions for self-improvement he read more than he did in later years. In January, 1784, at home in Scotland working only moderately hard at his legal profession, he was reading nothing except a little of the Bible and Thomas à Kempis in the mornings and Carre's sermons on Sunday (PP, 16, 22).

But judging from the entries in his journal, he did enjoy reading biography. Plutarch was a favorite, and he talked of issuing a new edition of Walton's Lives. Biographical compilations were particular favorites. He often mentions the Biographia Britannica in both the journals and the Life. "Read some of the 2nd volume of the Biographia Britannica," he wrote in April, 1780. "My agreable [sic] ideas and wishes for distinction and relishes of life revived" (PP, 14, 61). During the summer of 1776, his reading consisted of the four octavo volumes of James Granger's A Biographical History of England, the manuscript Memoirs of Dr. Robert Sibbald, and William Mason's Life of Gray. In a Hypochondriack essay, No. 6, he remarked, "I have generally found the reading of lives do [sic] me most good [when in a state of irritable hypochondria], by withdrawing my attention from myself to others, and entertaining me in the most satisfactory manner with real incidents in the varied course of

human existence" (Extremes, p. 7, note 4). In short he often read biography for pure entertainment and escape, but recognized also its power to arouse emulation, "wishes for distinction." He also mentions looking into a Peerage and a Baronage, John Nichol's Anecdotes of the learned printer, William Bowyer, John Campbell's Lives of the British Admirals, sets of poets' lives, and Pierre Bayle's Dictionary.

Of individual lives, the ones which most interested him as a biographer were three: Richard Ward's The Life of the Learned and Pious Dr. Henry More,[41] the then unpublished Memoirs of Sir Robert Sibbald,[42] and, of course, William Mason's Life of Gray.

Ward's More was no model of form. Organized chaotically by topic, it mentions only two dates, those of More's birth and his death. But what appealed to Boswell was Ward's manner, and he remarks in his journal that it was written "in the way in which I would write Dr. Johnson's [life]" (Extremes, p. 325). It is true, that panegyrical as Ward's book is, it includes homely particulars and defends using them: "It may be thought by some that I am too minute and officious in taking notice of so many little Sayings, or Passages of the Doctor . . . . but not a scrip of the

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[41](London: J. Downing, 1710).

[42]The most accessible edition is that of Francis Paget Hett (London: Oxford Univ. Press, Humphrey Milford, 1932).

Doctor's should be lost" (Preface). One of the "scrips" Ward preserves is More's recollection from infancy "that lying one Moonshining Night in the Cradle awake, he was taken up thence by a Matron-like Person with a large Roman Nose, saluted and deposited there again" (p. 34).

Boswell owned the manuscript of Sibbald's Memoirs,[43] but his plan to publish it with notes came to naught. He re-read it in August, 1776, reporting that it "entertained me calmly" (Extremes, p. 24), and he discussed it with Johnson and Mrs. Thrale on March 20, 1778, saying that he believed that it was "the most natural and candid account of himself that ever was given by any man." Boswell singled out for comment Sibbald's narrative of his conversion to Roman Catholicism and the later change of heart which Boswell says Sibbald attributed to the rigors of severe fasting. Mrs. Thrale felt that Boswell should not publish the manuscript. "To discover such weakness," she said, "exposes a man when he is gone." Johnson, on the contrary, approved Boswell's intention. "Nay, it is an honest picture of human nature. How often are the primary motives of our greatest actions as small as Sibbald's, for his re-conversion" (Life, III, 227-28).

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[43]Sibbald (1641-1722) was a prominent Edinburgh physician and savant who had won the favor of Charles II. His conversion to the Roman Catholic religion and his re-conversion to Anglicanism made him notorious.

William Mason's Life of Gray, however, was the most significant influence on the form of the Life of Johnson. As I have already observed, Johnson apparently had nothing to say about the structure of biography. Boswell did not see fit to imitate the arrangement of the Lives of the Poets, with their customary division into a brief biographical narrative, an assessment of moral and intellectual character, and critical remarks on the works of the poet in question. Instead, he admired the practice of Mason, who had interspersed passages from Gray's letters in chronological order with narrative bridges in such a way that Gray becomes "his own biographer."[44] Boswell gives extended credit to Mason in the opening pages of the Life:

> Instead of melting down my materials into one mass, and constantly speaking in my own person . . . I have resolved to adopt and enlarge upon the excellent plan of Mr. Mason. . . . Wherever narrative is necessary to explain, connect, and supply, I furnish it . . . but in the chronological series of Johnson's life . . . I produce, wherever it is in my power, his own minutes, letters or conversation, being convinced that this mode is more lively, and will make my readers better acquainted with him than even most of those were who actually knew him, but could know him only partially; whereas there is here an accumulation of intelligence from various points, by which his character is more fully understood and illustrated. (I, 28-29)

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[44] Mason, p. 5.

By this method, Boswell continues, "mankind are enabled as it were to see him live, and 'live o'er each scene' with him, as he actually advanced through the several stages of his life," and Johnson will be seen in the Life "more completely than any man who has ever yet lived" (Life, I, 29-30). It is evident that Boswell had perfect confidence that, as he wrote to Temple, this method of biography was "the most perfect that can be conceived" and that the Life would be "more of a Life than any work that has yet appeared."[45]

The Life in its final form was shaped not only by the theory of biography which Boswell had formulated over the years, but also by the impulse which made him a compulsive journalizer, indeed, almost an autobiographer, and more immediately, by the controversy about Johnson's character which raged after Johnson's death. Whenever we consider Boswell the biographer, we must remember that Boswell the keeper of a journal came first. On March 17, 1776, he lamented, "I am fallen sadly behind in my journal. I should live no more than I can record, as one should not have more corn growing than one can get in. There is a waste of good if it be not preserved" (Ominous, p. 265). Boswell had an

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[45]February 24, 1788. In Letters of James Boswell, ed. by Chauncey Brewster Tinker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), II, 344. Hereafter referred to as Letters. Boswell recorded some extracts from Mason's work in an commonplace book now preserved in the unpublished Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library at Yale University, M 225.2.

immense gusto for immediate experience, but he once remarked to Johnson that recollected experience was even more pleasurable, and he promised himself that his journals would be a treasure for his old age. Thus the records of Johnson's conversation which he began to keep from the day of their first meeting (during that summer he sat up four nights in one crowded week writing his journal) were part of the ongoing record of his own tumultuous existence. (The reader of the many-volumed journals realizes the art with which Boswell in the Life has selected his material in such a way that Johnson is always the center of attention.) It is impossible to document the moment when Boswell conceived the intention of writing the Life of Johnson, using the materials he had been accumulating in his journals. On March 31, 1772, Boswell and Johnson discussed biography; Johnson censured Goldsmith's Life of Parnell because Goldsmith lacked the proper materials. "Nobody," Johnson said, "can write the life of a man, but those who have eat and drunk and lived in social intercourse with him" (Life, II, 166). On that date, Boswell confided in his journal, "I have a constant plan to write the life of Mr. Johnson. I have not told him of it yet, nor do I know if I should tell him."[46] However, on that

[46]William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Frederick A. Pottle, eds., Boswell for the Defence, 1769-1774 (1959), p. 83. Hereafter cited as Defence.

same day, Boswell had asked Johnson for particulars of Johnson's early life, and by April, 1773, Johnson was aware of Boswell's biographical project. Upon Boswell's request for more information, Johnson remarked, "I hope you shall know a great deal more of me, before you write my Life" (Life, II, 217).[47] Boswell did know a great deal more of Johnson by 1786 when he began the Life, and he had, as we have seen, articulated a theory of biography and settled on a form for his magnum opus. But in its immediacy and in the manner in which, wherever possible, it records Johnson's day-to-day words and actions, it very much resembles a journal.

And finally, when Boswell actually began writing, he had a flood of Johnsoniana to contend with. Johnson was good copy, and the Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides (1786) had been a popular and controversial book, so that the periodicals were full of references to Boswell and Johnson. In addition, according to Robert E. Kelley and O M [sic] Brack, there were seventeen biographies of Johnson extant: some full-length, others mere sketches.[48] The particularity of A Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides was ridiculed, and Johnson's character came under attack. Readers of the Life

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[47] Waingrow gives a complete chronology of the evolution of the Life, pp. li-lxxviii.

[48] Samuel Johnson's Early Biographers (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1971).

will recall Boswell's frequent defenses of his biographical method, but Boswell's intention to defend Johnson's character is not always so apparent. He felt that even Johnson's friends--Mrs. Piozzi, whose Anecdotes of Johnson appeared in 1786, and Sir John Hawkins, whose Life appeared in 1787--presented him as arrogant and malevolent.

I shall consider these works and Boswell's defense of Johnson at some length in my final chapter, but in this introduction I should like to mention a book which provides a convenient summary of the controversy about Johnson's character, William Hayley's Two Dialogues: Containing a Comparative View of the Lives, Characters, and Writings of Philip, the Late Earl of Chesterfield and Dr. Samuel Johnson (1787).[49] The setting is a country house and the participants are the Archdeacon, an admirer of Johnson, the Colonel, an admirer of Chesterfield, and Lady Caroline, who acts as interlocutor and moderator. The Archdeacon defends Johnson's essential benevolence, the power of his moral writings, his ability to transcend his obscure origin and his physical disabilities, and his piety and acts of charity. The colonel accuses Johnson of spleen, pride, envy of all other authors, coarseness, bigotry, and tyranny, and he particularly deplores

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[49]Facsimile Reproduction, intro. by Robert E. Kelley (Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars Facsimiles & Reprints, 1970).

Johnson's gloomy religion. Both men then debate Chesterfield's merits, and Lady Caroline, presented as a woman of the nicest delicacy and perception, concludes that she would not care to have known either Johnson or Chesterfield personally: "I own myself as much an enemy to the splenetic malevolence [my italics] of Johnson, as to the licentious vanity of Chesterfield" (p. 237). She quotes Pope's line, applying it to Johnson: "A Being darkly wise, and rudely great." If this book represents a candid examination of Johnson's character, it is no wonder that Boswell insists again and again in the Life on Johnson's essential goodness of heart. In an age during which writer after writer insists that general benevolence is the supreme virtue, Boswell could not allow the notorious asperities of Johnson's manner to overshadow his hero's tenderness, kindness, and innumerable acts of charity.

The Life of Johnson reflects the intellectual and social climate of the age in which it was written, embodies the best biographical theory of the day, and is in some degree a response to the contemporary controversy about Johnson's character. My main purpose in this dissertation, however, is to study the Life in relation to Boswell's mind and imagination. When I first came to read Boswell's letters and journals attentively, I was struck by how frequently he describes the operations of his own mind and by the Lockean

vocabulary he uses in doing so. I began to wonder if it were possible to show a relation between the way Boswell observed his mind working and his artistic intentions in the Life of Johnson. During the course of my reading and thinking, I came across Ralph W. Rader's essay, "Literary Form in Factual Narrative: The Example of Boswell's Johnson,"[50] whose thesis, that the unifying principle of the Life is Boswell's imaginative conception of the character of Johnson, is also put forward by Marshall Waingrow.

I also read Frederick A. Pottle's eloquent defense of the Life as a work of the literary imagination, a defense intended to refute the Macaulayan view which paradoxically regards the Life as a great book without regarding Boswell as a great writer:

> When a man creates a great fiction, a fiction in which his characters say wise and witty things, we properly give him credit not only for the power of expression that makes the whole vivid and absorbing but also for personal powers of wit and wisdom. When a man by similar exercise of the imagination presents us with dramatic dialogues filled with wit and wisdom which we know he was constructing with the aid of memory, wit and wisdom which we know he could not have invented, we feel that he deserves a more qualified kind of praise. And, other things being equal, he does. In imaginative power Boswell is the peer of Scott and Dickens; in inventive power he is nowhere with them. But it is wise to remember that outside the realm of theory other things are never equal. A

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[50] In Essays in Eighteenth Century Biography, pp. 3-42.

> great work of literature need not have in a high degree all the values which we demand in the very highest. There is only one quality which a work of literature must have in a high degree, and that is the power to heighten consciousness . . . . Our academic identification of literature with fiction is narrow . . . . The intuition which has placed the "Life of Johnson" among the greatest of English prose works is sounder than the critical theory which finds no place of honor for its author.[51]

I began to hope that there might be a place for a study of the nature of James Boswell's mind and imagination that would begin to investigate the process by which he formed his conception of Johnson's character. I hoped in addition that this study might shed some light on the artistic achievement of the Life.

The great difficulty is that Boswell is not a consistent thinker. As he said of himself, "I am a being very much consisting of feelings. I have some fixed principles. But my existence is chiefly conducted by the powers of fancy and sensation" (Ominous, p. 97). But certain preoccupations recur in the journals, and perhaps it is possible to arrive at some conclusions by trying to find a pattern in Boswell's flashes of insight into his own mental processes.

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[51]"The Life of Boswell," Yale Review, 35 (1946), 448-9.

CHAPTER II

A FULL RELISH OF THIS GRAND SCENE: BOSWELL'S COMPLEX AWARENESS

The journals reveal many Boswells: the lawyer, the Scots laird, the family man, the man of pleasure, the blackguard, the citizen of the world, the newspaper writer, the public-relations expert, the journalizer, the biographer. We see Boswell consoling a condemned sheep-stealer, pruning trees at the family estate of Auchinleck, teaching his little daugher Veronica about heaven, laying plans for the seduction of a pretty actress, drunk and cruising the dark streets of Edinburgh, debating the truth of Christianity with Voltaire, sending off Hypochondriack essays to the London Chronicle, puffing his Corsican adventures, hovering over Lord Kames's deathbed collecting material for an abortive life of the learned judge. Another Boswell emerges somewhat unexpectedly: Boswell the metaphysician, preoccupied with those very eighteenth-century preoccupations, the study of human nature and the powers of the human mind. In this chapter I propose to examine the mind of James Boswell as it reflects, in his journals and letters, upon its own operations. In doing so, I intend to construct Boswell's

theory of the imagination and to lay the groundwork for articulating the theory of composition which underlies the Life of Johnson.

Observation and Reflection

"You know," Boswell wrote to his friend John Johnstone, "I am a Metaphysician in my own way, allways [sic] reflecting, allways endeavouring to get a more perfect notion of the human mind."[1] In using the word reflecting, Boswell was a good Lockean; for Locke there were two reliable sources of knowledge, sense-impressions and reflection:

> Our observation employed either about external sensible objects or about the internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking. These two are the fountains of knowledge, from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring.[2]

Certainly Boswell trusted the knowledge he gained from reflection, because upon it he founded his notions of human nature, notions which remained essentially unchanged throughout his life. He observed his own variousness and contradictoriness and came to the conclusion that each man is a

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[1] Ralph S. Walker, ed., The Correspondence of James Boswell and John Johnston of Grange (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., [1966]), p. 196.

[2] An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Book II, Ch. 1, Sec. 2.

various and contradictory creature, differing from himself as well as from others. Such remarks as these frequently occur in his journals: "What a curious, inconsistent thing is the mind of man! In the midst of divine service I was laying plans for having women, and yet I had the most sincere feelings of religion" (London, p. 54) and "As I have experienced such variety of states of mind, I can fully conceive the multiplicity of characters amongst mankind" (PP 13, 169). Even the massive character of Johnson is composed of disparate traits, held together, it is true, by the discipline of Johnson's powerful mind. In the character sketch which concludes the Life, Boswell observes that "Man is, in general, made up of contradictory qualities; and these will ever shew themselves in strange succession, where a consistency in appearance at least, if not in reality, has not been attained by long habits of philosophical discipline" (Life, IV, 426). Yet, as we shall see later, Boswell strove mightily to maintain a belief in the rationality of this contradictory creature, man, and in his power to dominate circumstances and form his own character.

Trusting as he did that what he learned from reflection upon his own states of mind could be applied to human beings in general, Boswell, even in his fits of vanity, thought himself a singular but not a unique being. He is egotistical and boastful, but he does not boast that his nobility of soul unfits him for society. On the contrary,

he is especially proud of his ability to attune himself to the minds of other men. Here is Boswell in one of his swelling moods, after a visit to Voltaire:

> Well, I must here pause, and as an impartial philosopher decide concerning myself. What a singular being do I find myself! Let this my journal show what variety my mind is capable of. But am I not well received everywhere? Am I not particularly taken notice of by men of the most distinguished genius? And why? I have neither profound knowledge, strong judgement, nor constant gaiety. But I have a noble soul, which still shines forth, a certain degree of knowledge, a multiplicity of ideas of all kinds, an original humour and turn of expression, and, I really believe, a remarkable knowledge of human nature . . . . With this, I have a pliant ease of manners which must please. I can tune myself so to the tone of any bearable man I am with that he is as much at freedom as with another self, and till I am gone, cannot imagine me a stranger.[3]

To say that a man is various, then, is not to say that the individual is a solitude cut off from other solitudes and unable to communicate across a gulf of separation. Boswell appears to reject the notion of the uniformity of human nature, but he is enough a child of his century to regard man, with all his diversities, as a truly social being, capable of being attuned to his fellows. Some men (especially Boswell himself) are more social than others, but a bond of sympathy unites the race.

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[3]Frederick A. Pottle, James Boswell: The Earlier Years, 1740-1769 (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1966), p. 191. The standard biography.

Of course, Boswell did not depend for his knowledge of human nature entirely upon reflection. Wherever he went and whatever he did, he studied men and manners attentively. While in Italy he dutifully admired pictures and antiquities, but normally it was not the works of man which interested him but the creature himself--how he looked, how he behaved in the drawing room or on the gallows, above all, what he said. Boswell does not go in for elaborate descriptions, but his brief sketches are revealing: "Called on old [John] Cleland. Found him in an old house in the Savoy, just by the waterside. A coarse, ugly old woman for his servant. His room filled with books in confusion and dust . . . . He was drinking tea and eating biscuits. I joined him. He had a rough cap like Rousseau and his eyes were black and piercing" (Extremes, p. 316). In thus observing the ways of man, he was being as much a philosopher as when he reflected on the operations of his own mind. To the young man who wishes to understand human nature his advice is: "Let him first study human nature in speculation, and form to himself a habit of examining it as exerted in active life, and then every scene he sees will be an experiment, and he will in time acquire much knowledge of the world" (Wife, p. 268). Studying human nature in speculation, of course, demands reflection; examining it as it is exerted in active life depends on sense-impressions. Both ways of knowing are valid. Boswell accepts without question Locke's position.

Detachment

This philosophical spirit, amateur though Boswell was, perhaps contributed to the detachment with which he is able to write about the states of his own mind and ultimately to the detachment with which he observes the behavior of Samuel Johnson, enduring with perfect good humor even insult and ridicule. The state of his own mind occupies him, yet so continually does he watch himself as if he were someone else and so fascinated is he by the men and events he encounters that the effect of the journals is not one of inwardness. Instead, his moods take their place among the external phenomena which he records with such relish.

He is able to show himself in action while at the same time revealing his state of mind. He tells of an evening when he went drunk to The Club:

> However, go I would, and having either been told or fancied that Mr. Johnson was not to be there, I was forsooth so full of wisdom and abilities that I would, as I thought, supply his place. But I found him sitting there, and intoxication could not keep off awe. I made a foolish attempt to combat with him. Went and stood leaning over his chair. "Why, Sir, did you go to Mrs. Abington's benefit? Did you see?" JOHNSON. "No." BOSWELL. "Did you hear?" JOHNSON. "No." BOSWELL. "Why, then, did you go?" (roaring boisterously). JOHNSON. "Because she is a favourite of the public; and when the public cares the thousandth" (I think)"part about you that it does about her, I'll go to your benefit too." This was a good lick. I cried "Well, I'm satisfied, and shall now go and eat my pigeon in peace." (Ominous, p. 111)

Here is Boswell in his avatar as blackguard being described by Boswell the philosophical observer of human nature. Words like foolish imply some degree of unfavorable judgment, but there is no breast-beating or self-abasement, nor is there any self-vindication. Boswell takes an Olympian view of his own follies, even casting himself in a little drama, complete with stage directions: "(roaring boisterously)."

His genuine desire to make an experimental study of human nature by means of reflection and observation certainly contributes to the detachment with which Boswell is able to observe his own behavior. Contributing also, oddly enough, is his desire to become a good man and a gentleman, an English gentleman, Christian, classically educated, who has profited from reading the Rambler and the Spectator, who is at ease in all companies, yet who is virtuous, upright, successful in his profession. Painfully aware, despite his great vanity, that he could be bumptious and boisterous when in high spirits, rude and offensive when in low, he got into the habit of writing notes to himself, advice from the gentleman to the raw youth:

> Think before you enter The Hague. Learn the usage of life. Be prudent and retenu. Never aim at being too brilliant. Be rather an amiable, pretty man. Have no affectation. Cure vanity. Be quite temperate and have self command amid all the pleasures. Would Epictetus or Johnson be overturned by human beings gay, thoughtless, corrupted? No; they would make the

> best of them and be superior. Have real principles. (Holland, p. 95)

An "amiable, pretty man" with "real principles." "Be Addison!" the young Boswell continually admonishes himself, and he is Addisonian not in his actual behavior but in his standards of behavior. As he grew older, he was less likely to give himself this kind of advice, but the split between the observer and the observed continued as a widening gap between aspiration and performance. His aspiration was to be an Addison or a Johnson in their London setting.[4] He wanted with all his heart to be a Londoner, and to participate fully in English culture, to be an English gentleman or, in some moods, an English rake. As we shall see later, his conception of Johnson's character depends to some extent upon his imaginative response to London life. For the moment, it is sufficient to point out that the Londoner in him tended to assume fictional form. As Paul Fussell has very perceptively observed, Boswell assumes a variety of roles, ranging from Macheath to the Spectator himself, and then he watches himself enacting them.[5] Of a tavern

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[4]The London setting is important, for Boswell was a Scot who hated being a Scot. While he could occasionally work himself up into a state of romantic enthusiasm for the paternal acres of Auchinleck and while he was a man of genuine family pride and affection, he detested the manners of Edinburgh society and the Calvinist gloom of the Kirk of Scotland. He worked hard to rid himself of his Scotch accent, and was deeply disappointed when his daughters retained theirs.

[5]"The Force of Literary Memory in Boswell's London Journal," SEL, 2(1962), 351-57.

adventure he writes in the London Journal: "I toyed with them [two prostitutes] and drank about and sung Youth's the Season and thought myself Captain Macheath. . . . I was quite raised, as the phrase is: thought I was in a London tavern . . . enjoying high debauchery after my sober winter" (London, p. 264).

In another mood he says, "The Spectator mentions his being seen at Child's, which makes me have an affection for it. I think myself like him, and am serenely happy there" (London, p. 76). Thus, the detachment of the philosophical observer is combined with the detachment which results from this ability to be the audience for the drama of his own life. States of mind take on their own life as fictional characters, adding to the objectivity of the journal record, in which his inner life figures in a bustling panorama of characters, real and imaginary. No wonder, then, that reflection on the operations of his own mind led Boswell to regard human nature as various and contradictory.

Memory and Imagination

The principle of order which connects these various states of mind is merely succession in the same consciousness. Although Boswell explicitly rejects Hume's extreme explanation of personal identity--that the self is merely a bundle of

perceptions with no underlying substance--still the journals (and indeed the Life) fall into discrete scenes, much as in the atomistic account of perception formulated by the empiricists, separate ideas rapidly succeed each other. For Boswell, as for Locke, the word ideas means the object of the understanding when a man thinks, the contents of the mind. Both use imagery which likens the mind to a physical substance upon which the ideas derived from experience are impressed.[6] To Locke, the mind is like white paper or like a brass or marble monument upon which an inscription is graven. This last image he develops at length in his discussion of memory, likening the fading of memory to the gradual obliteration of these inscriptions.[7] Boswell uses a similar metaphor: "It is impossible to put down an exact transcript of conversation with all its little particulars. It is impossible to clap the mind upon paper as one does an engraved plate, and to leave the full vivid impression" (Ominous, p. 133). Nevertheless, he possessed an extraordinary memory which preserved impressions in all their distinctness, as if each moment were engraved upon a separate plate--later impressions did not render earlier ones indistinct. In April, 1784,

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[6]"I kept my mind unruffled and found it not so soft and spungy as formerly so as to suck in all ideas that come near it. Ideas must now for the most part have a good deal of spirit in them to penetrate into my mind, to such firmness hath it attained" (PP, 13, 172).

[7]Essay, Book II, Ch. 10, Sec. 5.

he records a meeting with Edmund Burke who was in Glasgow as the newly-installed Rector of the University:

> I had a curious feeling while I recollected that the first time I had contemplated the character of Mr. Burke was at Glasgow, four and twenty years ago, when I was a Student of law there, and viewed him like a Planet in the heavens. And now here he was actually Lord Rector of that University, and sitting in the town, a Reality almost as wonderful to my mind as if some eminent Man of a distant age had been before my eyes. The feeling was heightened by reviving the thoughts which I had THEN in company with Adam Smith, and those I had NOW. I beleive [sic] it is exceedingly rare to have the power of thus bringing together the impressions of periods of time widely separated; for in general those of an early period are obliterated when those of a period present but long posterior to it are lively. I exulted in the soundness and (comparatively) strength of mind of which I now was conscious. (PP 16, 49-50)

It must be emphasized that what Boswell is conscious here of remembering is not things-in-themselves but the ideas of things in his own mind, "the thoughts which I had THEN . . . and those I had NOW." Yet like Locke, Boswell had the common-sense conviction that what was in his mind closely resembled what was "out there"; certainly his comparison of the mind to an engraved plate implies that there is an external world which impresses itself directly on the mind without being distorted by it. One cannot, of course, get onto paper exactly what is in the mind, but the closer one comes to doing so, the better. "I should live no more than I can record, as one should not have more corn growing than one can get

in" (Ominous, p. 265). Despite the fact that so august an authority as Samuel Johnson advised him to record the states of his own mind and despite the fact that he cannot seem to help doing so, Boswell is not always sure that he should continue to be so subjective. "I wish I could learn to keep my journal," he says, "in a neat, short manner. . . . I think too closely. I am too concave a being. My thoughts go inward too much instead of being carried out to external objects. I wish I had a more convex mind" (Extremes, p. 212). Partly, he simply wishes to avoid continually falling behind in his journal. He knows that his remarkable memory will be able to recall states of mind when it is jogged by a record of circumstances however trivial. As we shall see later, he also fears to lose his bearings in fogs of speculation and therefore he clings tenaciously to the external world.

Boswell's memory was indeed a remarkable faculty. By recalling "little circumstances" connected with a person or a scene, he was able to recall the whole. Of his brother David he wrote: "Little circumstances present him to my mind in the most lively manner, as I beleive [sic] is the case with every thing. I mark then my sitting in his room with him, he intense upon some calculation, I reading his Spanish Almanack or Calendar and having foreign ideas" (PP 14, 117). Most of the entries in his journal, including the liveliest

and most circumstantial accounts of conversations with Johnson, were not made immediately; Boswell is forever lamenting how far behind he is in his journalizing. Rather, he was in the habit of making rough cryptic notes that he expands at his leisure. "All the morning I wrote. My method is to make a memorandum every night of what I have seen during the day. By this means I have my materials always secured. Sometimes I am three, four, five days without journalizing. When I have time and spirits I bring up this my journal as well as I can in the hasty manner in which I write it."[8]

This power of recall is for Boswell, however, not memory but imagination. After a meeting with an old flame, he writes, "Was fond of her as Jeanie Maxwell. My imagination preserves beauty and every amiable quality, so that if it has once existed in an object, and touched my senses, it is embalmed for ever" (Extremes, p. 101). In this use of words, Boswell agrees with both Hobbes and Locke. In Chapter II of Leviathan, Hobbes says, "So that Imagination and Memory are but one thing, which for divers considerations hath divers names." For Locke, imagination seems to be memory working very rapidly. Memory is normally active, but in the man of parts, this activity is so great as almost to

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[8]Frederick A. Pottle, ed., Boswell on the Grand Tour: Germany and Switzerland, 1764 (1953), p. 156. Henceforth cited as Germany.

constitute a separate power of the mind:

> It is the business therefore of the memory to furnish to the mind those dormant ideas which it has present occasion for; in the having them ready at hand on all occasions, consists that which we call invention, fancy, and quickness of parts.[9]

In the journals, Boswell speaks again and again of remembering ideas which remain clear and lively even after the passage of time. He was able to live simultaneously in the past and in the present, able to cherish each separate idea in one complex moment of consciousness. He is at table with Burke and Adam Smith simultaneously in 1760 and in 1784. His former love is simultaneously a young girl and a matron. For Boswell, therefore, the work of the imagination is not to invent fictional characters and situations but to make the most of every moment by investing it with the association of as many ideas as possible, whether present or past.

While in Germany, for instance, Boswell danced with Augusta, Hereditary Princess of Brunswick:

> What a group of fine ideas had I! I was dancing with a princess; with the granddaughter of King George whose birthday I have so often helped to celebrate at Old Edinburgh; with the daughter of the Prince of Wales, who patronized Thomson and other votaries of science and the muse; with the sister of George the Third, my sovereign. I mark this variety to show how my imagination can enrich an object, so that I have

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[9] Essay, Book II, Ch. 10, Sec. 8.

> double pleasure when I am well. It was noble to be in such a frame. (Germany, p. 61)[10]

The lady is not simply a princess--she is four times a princess, wife of a German prince and granddaughter, daughter, and sister of members of the British ruling house. Furthermore, her Hanoverian connections recall Boswell's own preoccupations with English literature and with his Tory reverence for kingship and the principle of subordination. The ideas to which he attaches the highest value are present in his mind at the same time, and these ideas represent impressions of authors and kings--no wonder he describes his frame of mind as "noble." He exults in the full exercise of his faculty of imagination as he later believed Johnson to exult in the exercise of his powerful intellect. Only a finely organized being of "quick parts" is capable of such moments of complex consciousness; Boswell was quite sure that his soul was noble, as he told himself after that visit to Voltaire. Longinus and Rousseau had had their effect on him. He felt himself capable of great things, and it is one of the curious paradoxes of his journals that he combined this sort of elevation with scrupulous and respectful attention to minute particulars.

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[10] See Bertrand H. Bronson, "Boswell's Boswell" in Johnson Agonistes and Other Essays (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1965), pp. 78-82 for an analysis of this passage.

Yet we should not be surprised when so thoroughgoing a Lockean as Boswell values ideas derived from sense impressions as the elements which combine into "noble" states of mind. By recording "little circumstances," Boswell is able to recollect his thoughts and feelings by the familiar process of association of ideas. He writes, "The state of my mind must be gathered from the little circumstances inserted in my Journal" (Defence, p. 222). Then around such a figure as Princess Augusta a complex of ideas crystallizes resulting in an exalted state of mind. Imagination, as Ernest Tuveson has demonstrated, becomes a "means of grace," leading to spiritual enrichment.[11]

For an earlier generation of writers represented by Hume and Johnson, things had not gone so far. Hume writes as if the imagination were simply a creator of fictions and fantasies, the mind at play, to be regarded indulgently, but not to be taken very seriously. "Nothing" says Hume,"is more free than the imagination of man; and though it cannot exceed that original stock of ideas furnished by the internal and external senses, it has unlimited power of mixing, compounding, separating, and dividing these ideas, in all the varieties of fiction and vision."[12] Johnson is more earnest.

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[11]Ernest Lee Tuveson, The Imagination As a Means of Grace: Locke and the Aesthetics of Romanticism (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1960).

[12]"An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding," in Essays Moral, Political, and Literary, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (London: Longmans, Green, 1898), II, 40.

In Chapter X of Rasselas, Imlac accumulates his stock of ideas, ranging over every country and climate, observing tree and flower, rock and palace, brooks and clouds, animals, minerals, meteors, as well as men and manners for the purpose of finding images which will enforce or decorate "moral and religious truth." It is true Imlac passes the time in the Happy Valley combining and recombining his ideas; his full mind is a pleasure to its possessor and a resource in time of trouble, but personal pleasure was not his primary motive in filling it. Johnson attributes to Imlac no transports, no exaltations.

Boswell, however, values highly the immediate enjoyment of an exalted state of mind, the "full relish of this grand scene" (Germany, p. 24). The exercise of his imagination demonstrates to him the nobility of his soul. Without articulating very fully any doctrine as to their significance, Boswell experienced moments of heightened consciousness, "spots of time" as it were. This desire for an intense relish of every experience was incompatible with his duties as husband, father, lawyer, and laird. When he came at last into the estate of Auchinleck, he wrote, "I must submit to life losing its vividness" (PP 16, 13), but he never did. From Johnson's point of view, that of the moralist who deplores in Rasselas "the dangerous prevalence of the imagination," this appetite for imaginative experience was unfortunate, even culpable.

In 1779 Boswell wrote to Johnson:

> I was quite enchanted at Chester, so that I could with difficulty quit it. But the enchantment was the reverse of that of Circé; for so far was there from being any thing sensual in it, that I was all mind. I do not mean all reason only; for my fancy was kept finely in play. And why not?--If you please, I will send you a copy, or an abridgement of my Chester journal, which is truly a logbook of felicity.

And Johnson replied:

> Your last letter was not only kind but fond. But I wish you to get rid of all intellectual excesses, and neither to exalt your pleasures, nor aggravate your vexations, beyond their real and natural state. Why should you not be as happy at Edinburgh as at Chester. . . ? Please yourself with your wife and children, and studies, and practice. (Life, III, 415-17)

If Boswell had been able to follow Johnson's advice he would probably never have written the Life, which like the Chester journal (regrettably lost) is a "log-book of felicity." When Boswell's fancy is kept "finely in play," the present moment is so rich in perceptions and associations as to fill his consciousness with a joy from which nothing is lacking. These moments seldom occur at home in Scotland, but his visits to London are rich in them. Of a meeting of the partners in the London Magazine, he wrote, "The place of our meeting, St. Paul's Churchyard, the sound of St. Paul's clock striking the hours, the busy and bustling countenances of the partners around me, all contributed to give me a complete sensation of the kind. I hugged myself

in it" (Defence, p. 100). And later that week, at dinner with Oglethorpe, Johnson, and Goldsmith, "I felt a completion of happiness. I just sat and hugged myself in my own mind. . . . Words cannot describe our feelings. The finer parts are lost, as the down upon a plum; the radiance of light cannot be painted" (Defence, p. 104). And again, "I had a full relish of life today. It was somehow like being in London in the last age" (Defence, p. 107).

Unfortunately for his wife and children, studies, and practice, Boswell had come to expect too high a relish of life. He had to be in London, had to travel, had to see Johnson and other notables, or endure dreary low spirits, which he complained of so much that Johnson accused him of enjoying them. (He did in truth enjoy the spectacle of his own moods.) But the moments of felicity were not merely vagrant moods; they signalled imaginative activity, the association of ideas present and past. If I may anticipate the argument of a later chapter, I should like to observe that at almost every meeting with Johnson, Boswell seemed to be able to sustain a state of awareness in which he saw Johnson in all his "complex magnitude," combining with his experience of the present moment all his past experiences with every aspect of Johnson's character.

Boswell remembered and recorded what he could of his encounters with Johnson in his journal. He laments the impossibility of remembering and recording everything--"One

should not live more than one can record." By and large, his concern was the present moment; he was not much given to analysis of Johnson's motives or to tracing the growth of his opinions. Critics like Donald Greene complain that the Life does not do what a biography should do--it does not show how Johnson came to be the man he was.[13] Sir John Hawkins, for instance, discusses at some length the evolution of Johnson's Toryism, while Boswell is content to present it in an eternal present as one aspect of Johnson's rich character. He is detached enough to suggest that Johnson had perhaps narrowed his mind too much both as to religion and politics, but he is not prepared to explain why the narrowing took place. Boswell's attitude is very often one of wonder, admiration, and reverence. Greene would agree with Johnson that "Wonder is a pause of reason, a sudden cessation of the mental progress, which lasts only while the understanding is fixed upon some single idea, and is at an end when it recovers force enough to divide the object into its parts, or mark the intermediate gradations from the first agent to the last consequence" (Rambler, No. 137). Boswell did not write the kind of biography which marks "the immediate gradations from the first agent to the last consequence" as Greene would have

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[13]See Greene's "Reflections on a Literary Anniversary," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Boswell's Life of Johnson, ed. James L. Clifford (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), pp. 97-98.

him do. He continued to contemplate Johnson with wonder, even after twenty years.

Johnson would not have had it so, but it is interesting to note how independent of Johnson Boswell can be in his obstinate refusal to starve his imagination. Boswell regarded Johnson as a sage ("I wrote to him as a confessor," he confided when he asked for his own letters back after Johnson's death) yet in the most serious matters he ignores Johnson's advice. The Chester exchange is typical. Johnson also dismissed contemptuously Boswell's Corsican enthusiasm and generally counselled restraint and good sense. "As to your History of Corsica, you have no materials which others have not, or may not have. You have, somehow or other, warmed your imagination. I wish there were some cure, like the lover's leap, for all heads of which some single idea has obtained an unreasonable and irregular possession. Mind your own affairs, and leave the Corsicans to theirs."[14] Johnson himself literally did not believe in the possibility of such moments as Boswell exults in. For all his gifts, Johnson had little capacity for delight, and he suspected that most expressions of delight were a sham. "The world, in its best state, is nothing more than a larger assembly of beings, combining to counterfeit happiness which they do not feel,

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[14] The Letters of Samuel Johnson, I, 191.

employing every art and contrivance to embellish life, and to hide their real condition from the eyes of one another" (Adventurer, No. 120). In another essay, he said, "The ambition of superior sensibility and superior eloquence disposes the lovers of arts to receive rapture at one time, and communicate it at another; and each labours first to impose upon himself, and then to propagate the imposture" (Idler, No. 50).

This difference of outlook shows itself in different conceptions of the value of imaginative activity. Both men accept the most basic sense of the word imagination as it is defined in Johnson's Dictionary: "the power of forming ideal pictures; the power of representing things absent to one's self or others." It is also the faculty which creates literary imagery. Boswell was particularly fond of begetting elaborate similes and metaphors and congratulating himself on their happiness. The most famous one, of course, is the comparison of Johnson's mind to a gladiator (Life, I, 106). But when he remarks (London, p. 202) that his journals and letters are works of the imagination, he is using the word in the larger sense I have been exploring in this chapter; they are works which record states of complex awareness. The imaginative man is more aware than is the man of limited quickness of parts. He is not merely "fanciful," one who embroiders and decorates the truth;

rather he invests the moment with all its possibilities, with every association. Princess Augusta is more fully alive, more intensely real for Boswell than for a duller observer.

Johnson on the other hand distrusts the imagination as a vagrant faculty, very apt to make its victims wander away from the high road of truth and good sense. When it keeps its place--in poetry--he respects it highly. Nothing could exceed his praise of the imaginative powers of Milton or Pope. He defines it at one point as the capacity for seeing things in a fresh light, but the general tendency of his criticism is to regard image-making as the ornamental part of poetry which arrests the attention in order to render truth more attractive and interesting. There is a sharp distinction between the truth and the costume in which the author chooses to clothe it, just as in the philosophy of Locke there is a distinction between the primary qualities inherent in matter, and the secondary qualities, particularly color, which are only in the eye of the spectator. Secondary qualities seem illusory and fleeting, like sunset colors. Thus, Johnson distrusted the operation of imagination in human affairs; it was too easy to shed a rosy glow over the future and to conjure up scenes of impossible felicity. Johnson always advises Boswell to see the world as it is. Analysis, not wonder, reveals the truth.

Boswell reverenced Johnson the moralist and in matters of conduct was inclined to defer to Johnson's belief that

the prevalence of imagination is dangerous. At the period of his life during which he most earnestly tried to make himself into a man of principle, his stay in Holland in 1763, he condemns the imagination and takes Zélide to task for indulging hers. The spectacle of Boswell playing the Rambler with that lovely bluestocking is more amusing than edifying: "Let Prudence be thy counsellor. Learn to be mistress of thyself. . . . They who seek for exquisite joy were always deceived. . . . Pray write soon and continue to show me all your heart. I fear all your fancy. I fear that the heart of Zélide is not to be found. It has been consumed by the fire of an excessive imagination" (Holland, pp. 310-17). This Johnsonian distrust of the imagination crops up now and then in the later journals as well.

But when he was not playing the moralist, all the evidence points to the conclusion that, without having consciously elaborated a theory of the nature of his imagination and of the nature of the truth revealed in moments in which his imagination is active, Boswell believed that his imaginative powers enabled him to realize all the possibilities of experience. Johnson once remarked during the course of the only conversation in which Boswell remembered their discussing sexual matters that sleeping with a duchess was the same as

sleeping with an ordinary woman--all the difference was in the imagination (Extremes, p. 331). For Johnson, all the complex associations with which Boswell endowed the German princess would have been fanciful in the modern sense of illusory or unreal. For Boswell, "It was noble to be in such a frame." He was not deceiving himself with airy fancies; he was, on the contrary, capable of a more intense, more "real" experience than the literal-minded man for whom the princess was only another woman.

Melancholy and Scepticism

Although Boswell proudly declared himself to be a student of human nature--that is, of metaphysics defined as the inquiry into the nature and powers of the human mind--continued speculation rendered him deeply uneasy. In mysteriously recurring fits of melancholy, he lost his sense of the vividness of experience and became incapable of moments of heightened consciousness. What he saw seemed to lose reality and to become insignificant. Boswell constantly laments the wavering of his mind; he cannot settle his principles. For when he is melancholy he not only sees his own life as dreary and pointless, but he sees all men as impotent and predetermined beings doomed to annihilation. He wrote to his friend Temple:

> While afflicted with melancholy, all the doubts which have ever disturbed thinking

> men come upon me. I awake in the night dreading annihilation or being thrown into some horrible state of being. We must own, my friend, that moral and religious truths are not such as that we can contemplate them by reason with a constant certainty.[15]

The skepticism of David Hume and the determinism of such thinkers as Joseph Priestley, Lord Kames, and Lord Monboddo oppress him, and he desperately wishes to persist in the Christian view of man as free, potent, rational, and immortal.

His long friendship with Hume which ended only with the philosopher's death in 1776 did not prevent Boswell from deploring Hume's system of thought. In "Boswell and the Infidels," Mary Margaret Stewart has shown that Boswell thought it was his duty to regard "infidels" like Hume and Gibbon as enemies to the well-being of society.[16] It is quite true that one aspect of Boswell's complex personality was the family man who catechized his children on Sunday evenings, faithfully read the Bible and Thomas à Kempis, seldom missed divine service, and feared the influence of Scotch professors like Adam Smith on the religious principles of the young. His earnest cultivation of habits of piety, however, frequently lapsed into skepticism.

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[15] Letters of JB, I, 239.

[16] SEL, 4(1964), 475-83.

What form did this skepticism assume? To the pious man of the day, Hume was the arch-skeptic. His philosophical purpose was to found a science of human nature firmly upon data gathered from human experience. In rejecting a priori reasoning and carrying Locke's sensationalism to its logical extreme, he assumed an extreme skeptical position, which can be summarized as follows: All we can know for certain is our perceptions. What is the self but a "bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity?"[17] Death brings an end to these perceptions and hence annihilation. What necessary connection exists between cause and effect? We experience only the constant conjunction between two objects or events. Since only that which can actually be perceived can be known, there is no place in a truly empirical philosophy for such entities as "substance," "soul," "spirit"; philosophizing about such matters is a waste of time. Suavely, Hume assured his readers that such extreme skepticism is of use in clearing away useless metaphysical lumber but that it is powerless to shake the habits of mind forced upon us by daily experience, habits which determine our conduct. "Nature will always maintain her rights," Hume believed, "and prevail in the end over any abstract reasoning

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[17] A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1888, rpt. 1964), Book I, Part 4, Sec. 6, p. 252.

whatsoever."[18] Regarding his own thought, Hume writes, "I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find it in my heart to enter into them any farther."[19]

A dinner and a game of backgammon had less effect on Hume's critics, who ignored Hume's philosophical purpose and energetically attacked his skepticism as a serious attempt to deny the reality of the external world, and thus to throw mankind into inactivity and despair. James Beattie, praised by no less a one than Samuel Johnson himself, burst forth:

> Alas! what is become of the magnificence of external nature, and the wonders of intellectual energy, the immortal beauties of truth and virtue, and the triumphs of a good conscience! Where now the warmth of benevolence, the fire of generosity, the exultations of hope, the tranquil ecstasy of devotion, and the pang of sympathetic delight. All around, above, and beneath, is one vast vacuity, or rather an enormous chaos, encompassed with darkness universally and eternally impenetrable.[20]

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[18] "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding," Green and Grose, II, 36.

[19] A Treatise of Human Nature, Book I, Part 4, Sec. 7, p. 269.

[20] An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism, 7th Ed. (London: J. Mawman, 1807), pp. 227-228.

A better philosopher than Beattie, Thomas Reid, founder of the Common Sense School also accuses Hume of annihilating all that is made. Hume is "an author who neither believes in his own existence nor that of his reader," and his skepticism is "surely the forbidden tree of knowledge; I no sooner taste of it, than I perceive myself naked, and stript of all things--yea, even of my very self. I see myself, and the whole frame of nature, shrink into fleeting ideas, which like Epicurus's atoms, dance about in emptiness."[21]

Emptiness terrified Boswell. To him, Hume's skepticism was an dangerous as Beattie and Reid said it was, and the more dangerous because of the serenity with which le bon David, ever affable and obliging, accepted his own mortality. As Hume lay dying, Boswell visited him:

> I . . . felt a degree of horror [while discussing a future state, calmly denied by Hume] mixed with a sort of wild, strange, hurrying recollection of my excellent mother's pious instructions, of Dr. Johnson's noble lessons, of my religious sentiments and affections during the course of my life. I was like a man in sudden danger eagerly seeking his defensive arms; and I could not but be assailed by momentary doubts while I had actually before me a man of such strong abilities and extensive inquiry dying in the persuasion of being annihilated. (Extremes, p. 12)

We remember that Boswell continually brings up the subject of

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[21]The Philosophy of Reid as Contained in the Inquiry Into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense, ed. E. Hershey Sneath (New York: Henry Holt, 1892), Ch. 1, Sec. 5, p. 82; Sec. 6, p. 86.

a future state in his conversations with Johnson, a subject which is extremely painful to Johnson, whose horror of death was even greater than Boswell's own. Boswell, unlike Johnson, did not seek to avoid the thought of death, but on the contrary allowed himself to be preoccupied with it. He watched hangings; he closely questioned his client John Reid, condemned as a sheep-stealer; he attended the deathbed of Lord Kames; he tried and failed to get his own ailing father to talk about death. How men die was a central theme in his study of human nature. It seems likely that he was seeking experimental evidence for a future state, for he was strengthened and comforted by a Christian death, such as that of his cousin, James Campbell of Treesbank. He records in his journal:

> I asked him if he felt any uneasiness at the thoughts of death. He said nature could not but shrink, but he appeared quite submissive to the will of GOD, and in full hope of happiness in a future state. . . . While I sat by him and was sincerely serious, I could not, however, prevent imaginations of skepticism from springing out in my mind at times. But I checked them, and considered that there is a rational preponderation for a future state and for Christianity. (Extremes, p. 41)

The thought that men might be determined in their actions was almost as distressing to Boswell as the thought of annihilation of consciousness. Joseph Priestley was his particular bête noire, for Priestley persistently likened the universe to a machine, and denied the existence of free

will. As Priestley puts it, "The will cannot properly determine itself, but is always determined by motives, that is by the present disposition of the mind, and the views of things presented to it."[22] Boswell violently rejected the notion that he was a superior kind of machine. Of one conversation he reports, "Said I disdained being the finest Machine--not a gilded clock with diamond wheels" (PP 14, 236). Upon reading Lord Kames's Sketches of the History of Man, which deny human freedom, he wrote in despair: "I was shocked by such a notion and sunk into dreadful Melancholy, so that I went out to the wood and groaned. . . . I saw a dreary nature of things, an unconscious, uncontroulable [sic] power by which all things are driven on, and I could not get rid of the irresistible influence of motives" (PP 14, 156). Occasionally, his wavering mind came to rest, and untroubled even by fleeting "imaginations of skepticism" took comfort in present consciousness:

> My mind was quite sweet and pure, without fretfulness, and without trouble of any kind. . . . The experience of such a state of mind should quiet me on other occasions, since I find that a man may, after the severest perturbations, be quite easy. . . . Let me look up to that blessed state of being in a future life. Those who remark their religious experiences are generally looked on with ridicule; but very unreasonably, for they are experimental philosophers

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[22] Priestley's Writings on Philosophy, Science, and Politics, ed. John A. Passmore (New York: Collier Books, 1965), p. 87.

> upon the most important subject. (Extremes, p. 99)

Since Boswell is not a systematic thinker and since he records his states of mind carefully without analyzing them very carefully, the question of how much truth-value he accords to present states of consciousness is perplexing. I pointed out earlier that he is most intensely alive during moments of complex imaginative awareness, such as he experienced when dancing with the Princess Augusta, but he shows no inclination to suggest that such experiences are evidence of the presence of "something far more deeply interfus'd"; that is, they are not mystical experiences which testify to the existence of a spirit which gives life to and unifies all beings, perceiver and perceived alike. Rather, it appears that they testify to the power of the individual consciousness to give vitality and meaning to what it experiences. One of the dangers of Hume's skepticism is that it deprives human life of meaning. Boswell took quite seriously the essay in which Hume assumes the persona of the skeptic as in other essays he had played the part of the Stoic, the Epicurean, and the Platonist. Hume writes:

> When we reflect on the shortness and uncertainty of life, how despicable seem all our pursuits of happiness? And even if we would extend our concern beyond our own life, how frivolous appear our most enlarged and most generous projects; when we consider the incessant changes and revolutions of human affairs, by which laws and learning, books and governments are hurried away by time, as by a

> rapid stream, and are lost in the immense ocean of matter? Such a reflection certainly tends to mortify all our passions: But does it not thereby counter-work the artifice of nature, who has happily deceived us into an opinion, that human life is of some importance?[23]

For Boswell this conviction of the brevity and insignificance of human life was the most terrifying aspect of Hume's skepticism, but when he was melancholic, it was the most persuasive; a dejected Boswell, therefore, is almost always a skeptical Boswell:

> Had been for some time much afflicted with what I find it is difficult to express so as to give the idea with any force at all like the original feeling. . . . My affliction was a kind of faintness of mind, a total indifference as to all objects of whatever kind, united with a melancholy dejection. I saw death so staringly waiting for all the human race . . . that I was miserable as far as I had animation. (Extremes, p. 80)

Boswell's melancholy is a mystery. To this day, psychiatrists cannot agree on the causes of depression, nor could the medical men of his own time account satisfactorily to Boswell for his affliction, which he regarded as an inexplicable visitation. He knew that he could combat it by means of activity and variety--hence his reluctance to remain long in Scotland--and he knew also that the speculation to which he was irresistibly drawn endangered the high spirits which permitted his imagination to invest experience with meaning.

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[23]"The Skeptic," Green and Grose, I, 228.

He struggled to convince himself that his melancholy lied; he refused to accept meaninglessness, which he associated with death and a universe ruled by mechanical necessity. When he was in good spirits, he rejected the testimony of dejection. At one point he reports that he is "quite free from the melancholy clouds which used to hang upon my mind. . . . They appeared to me dreary realities. I was now convinced that they were mere shadows. I am lost when I think intensely of the course of things, and especially of the operations of my own mind" (PP 15, 130). He prefers to believe the testimony of good spirits, even going so far as to call that time when his mind was quite sweet and pure, a "religious experience." Surely he was looking to experience for proof of the dignity, freedom, and immortality of man, since even Revelation and reasoning were not adequate to convince him for very long, whatever he told himself at Treesbank's bedside. Upon his arrival in London in 1778 he wrote:

> I was struck with agreeable wonder and admiration by contemplating the immensity of the metropolis and the multitude of objects; above all, by the number and variety of people; and all melancholy was as clearly dissipated as if it had never existed in my mind. Could I but fix this state of mind, I should value immediate existence as a good, independent of future hopes. But that I suppose is not intended by Providence. We are to be in general uneasy in this state of being, that we may look forwards to a better. . . . But this night I was fully happy in immediate

> sensation and hope. And if hope makes me happy at the time, I am then blest. Of this I am sure; and let me remember it. (Extremes, p. 220)

Of course such moments cannot be fixed, least of all by so mercurial a being as Boswell. With all his efforts to believe these moments rather than the melancholy ones, he often remained at the mercy of the despondent skepticism which deprived "immediate existence" of all meaning and which destroyed all "future hopes."

It may be that his desperate effort to regard man as a rational being derived force from his struggles to overcome melancholy. As a very young man, he addressed himself melodramatically, "You went out to fields, and in view of the tower, drew your sword glittering in the sun, and on your knee swore that if there is a Fatality, then that was also ordained; but if you had free will, as you believed, you swore and called the Great G__ to witness that, although you're melancholy, you'll stand it. . . ." (Holland, p. 201). The freedom, power, immortality, and rationality of man are bound up together. Man's reason is the assurance that he is not the plaything of an "unconscious, uncontroulable power," not a mere "bundle of perceptions," but a thinking being who has the power to live as he chooses. As we shall see later, Boswell read with the utmost earnestness the Rambler papers, with their insistence on man's governing his life according to rational principles.

In believing, or trying to believe, that man's moral life can be governed by reason, Boswell completely rejected Scotch philosophy and Scotch philosophers. Beginning with Francis Hutcheson (who was influenced by Shaftesbury), this group of philosophers which included Adam Smith, Thomas Reid, Adam Ferguson, Dugald Stewart, Lord Monboddo, Lord Kames, and Hume himself asserted that our ethical judgments are not the product of ratiocination, but of the operation of sympathy or the moral sense or common sense--the phraseology varies. These philosophers, however much some of them may have deplored Hume's skepticism, shared Hume's purpose--to study human nature by means of observation and experience. The Reverend William Leechman, Professor of Divinity at Glasgow University, observed of his friend, Hutcheson, that he set aside all researches into "abstract relations and eternal fitness and unfitness of things [we recognize the language of Samuel Clarke]" and preferred to determine the "present constitution of human nature" by empirical means.[24] As I have shown, Boswell purports to be doing exactly that in his role as philosopher. It seems that he is contradicting himself--not that self-contradiction would be surprising in a man so various as Boswell. But perhaps this paradox can be resolved. Boswell, like any good empiricist, depended on

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[24]Francis Hutcheson, A System of Moral Philosophy, 1755, 2 vols. in 1 (rpt. New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1968), p. xiii.

reflection and on sense impression for his knowledge of human nature. Reflection on the operations of his own mind led him to see human nature as inexplicably changeable, a conclusion not exactly compatible with a view of man as regulated by reason. But observation proved to Boswell that men in fact existed who were free, potent, and rational, the most notable of them being Samuel Johnson who had attained "consistency" by "long habits of philosophical discipline." General Paoli, Edmund Burke, Sir Joshua Reynolds and other less famous friends belonged to this select company.

These were all men whose personal identity was clear and strong. With all his doubts and waverings, Boswell clung to a belief in the persistence of the individual self through many vicissitudes. With Locke, he believed that "consciousness can unite remote existences into the same person."[25] He wrote in his journal:

> I thought that at any period of time a Man may disencumber himself of all the Accessories of his identity, of all his Books and all his connections with a particular place or a particular sphere of life; and retaining only his consciousness and reminiscence, start into a state of existing quite new. That therefore I should be more myself and have more of the mihi res non me rebus submittere. (PP 15, 49)

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[25] Essay, Book I, Ch. 27, Sec. 23.

He would be the more himself as he was the less under the domination of circumstances. Yet the nature of this identity is problematical; it certainly did not preclude change:

> Man's continuation of existence is a flux of ideas in the same body, like the flux of a river in the same channel. . . . there must be something, which we understand by a spirit or a soul which is permanent. And yet I must own that except the sense or perception of identity, I cannot say that there is any sameness in my soul now and my soul twenty years ago. (Ominous, p. 212)

Hume's philosophy called into question the existence of this "something," but Boswell, despite some difficulties, accepts it and is satisfied with it. Toward the end of his life, looking back over the long series of letters he had exchanged with William Johnson Temple, he concluded that "amidst all the changes and varieties, and those pretty strong ones too, I could still trace enough of personal identity: warmth of heart and imagination, vanity and piety" (PP 18, 144).

Thus the self represented to Boswell a reality about which he was not tortured with skeptical doubts. That the self might not be free or that it might be annihilated frightened him, but that it existed he was sure. The certain existence of selves soothed his uneasy mind. Whatever else he may have doubted, he did not doubt the massive presence of Johnson who proved in his own person that man is capable of "long habits of philosophical discipline," of controlling his behavior by means of reason.

Dr. Johnson was not the only reality who had the power to calm Boswell's mind. In one characteristic episode, he was appalled when an elderly friend, Lord Covington, looking back over a long life, pronounced it "just a chaos of nothing" (PP 15, 36). But being in company with the forceful Lord Advocate, Henry Dundas, restored him:

> He appeared all life and activity. I told him Lord Covington's reflection on life. It struck him at first. He seemed to shudder. It was like throwing cold water on hot iron to give Lord Advocate in all the glow of his prosperity a glimpse of the sad indifference of old age. . . . He said, "I shall take care that my life shall not be a chaos of nothing," (dashing high-flavoured claret into his glass). (PP 15, 36)

Over and over again Boswell testifies to being strengthened by contact with vigorous minds. He writes in his journal: "Having been for so many weeks the intimate companion of Colonel Stuart, I had insensibly become so far assimilated to him as to have high manly notions; for Mental qualities are communicated by contagion as certainly as material qualities" (PP 14, 5), And again, "The good practical sense and cheerful vivacity of the Commissioner [his kinsman Basil Cochrane, Commissioner of Customs] at seventy-five was pleasingly wonderful to me. If I speculated on human life, I felt melancholy. But if I looked at him, there was no such thing" (Extremes, p. 42).

Books did him some service, it is true. When troubled with the question of freedom versus necessity, he turned to

Montesquieu, who in the sixty-ninth Persian Letter argues that the "infinite prescience of God . . . is incompatible with his justice." Thomas Reid, who assured his readers that their senses are reliable and that Hume's skepticism is a form of lunacy was an antidote to that skepticism (Germany, p. 28). James Beattie's An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth served the same function. Boswell also read some of the opponents of Priestley. But, as he says in his Corsican Journal:

> The contemplation of such a character as Paoli really existing was of more service to me than all I had been able to draw from books, from conversation, or from the exertions of my own mind. I had often enough formed the idea of a man continually such, as I could conceive in my best moments. But this idea appeared like the idea we are taught in the schools to form of things which may exist, but do not; of seas of milk and ships of amber. But I saw my highest idea realized in Paoli. It was impossible for me, speculate as I pleased, to have a little opinion of human nature in him.[26]

Boswell indeed aspired to be an experimental philosopher studying the nature of man, but it is as an artist that he is great, an artist whose re-creation of the character of Samuel Johnson is convincing evidence of the belief that individual identity is a solid reality which skepticism and melancholy cannot dissolve.

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26 The Journal of a Tour to Corsica; and Memoirs of Pascal Paoli, ed. Morchard Bishop (London: William & Norgate, 1951), p. 92.

CHAPTER III

THE ORIGINS OF BOSWELL'S CONCEPTION OF THE CHARACTER OF JOHNSON

In his long study of the character of Samuel Johnson, Boswell showed a detached and philosophical interest in the variety of human nature as well as an eager appetite for every kind of experience and the imaginative capacity to make that experience count. His tendency to melancholy and skepticism led him to look to solid men of character rather than to books and creeds for the foundation of a faith that man is free and rational, that he has the power to determine his own actions by the exercise of a disciplined will. In this chapter, I shall consider some of the associations of ideas Boswell brought to his first meeting with Johnson and explore how his conception of Johnson's character began to be formed.

It is paradoxical that one so changeable as Boswell should put so much faith in the fixed identity of Johnson; but, as we have seen, even through the remarkable vicissitudes of his own life, Boswell could "still trace enough of personal identity" (see p. 92). The vagaries of his conduct should not blind us to the fact that Boswell was one of the most loyal of men and one of the most steady

in his appreciation of the virtues of his friends. His regard for General Paoli continued long after Paoli had left Corsica and settled in London; Paoli's house was Boswell's London headquarters. He married his cousin, his childhood playmate and the confidante of his early love affairs, and he never gave real love to any other woman, with all his deviations from physical fidelity. He regarded the friend of his school days, William Johnson Temple, with the same enthusiastic affection throughout their lives and wrote to him with the same confidence. He might almost have said with Keats, "I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of imagination." With this same persevering loyalty he formed very early a conception of Samuel Johnson's essential character which informs the Life of Johnson.

Before 1763

In fact, he began to form this conception before he met Johnson. With his usual ability to recall past states of mind and to mark real feelings, he wrote in the Life just before describing the first meeting:

> Though then but two-and-twenty, I had for several years read his works with delight and instruction, and had the highest reverence for their authour, which had grown up in my fancy into a kind of mysterious veneration, by figuring to myself a state of solemn elevated abstraction, in which

> I supposed him to live in the immense metropolis of London. (Life, I, 383-84)

An early character sketch of Johnson can be found in Boswell's first extant journal:

> I cannot help differing from My Lord Kames, Mr. Smith, Doctor Blair and some others whom I have the honour to call my learned friends, with regard to the Authour of The Rambler. They will allow him nothing but Heaviness, weakness and affected Pedantry. Whereas in my Opinion, Mr. Johnson is a man of much Philosophy, extensive reading, and real knowledge of human life. I can produce numberless papers in the very Work which has led me to examine his character, in proof of what I have asserted. He has indeed sometimes a gloominess of thought and a Cynical Austerity, and as he was long immured in a College at Oxford and for some time after that was employed in teaching a School, he was so much accustomed to the Roman language as almost to think in it, which is the occasion of his being sometimes faulty on account of an inflated Rotundity and tumified Latinity of Diction. At the same time I have oftener admired him for a fluency and propriety of Expression (PP, 1, 70).

Not many boys of twenty-two would have had the independence of mind to disagree with Lord Kames, Hugh Blair, and Adam Smith on the merits of a prose style. Yet Boswell had apparently read with care essays by Johnson which were by no means popular among the Edinburgh intelligentsia. This character sketch identifies Johnson with his writings as "a man of much philosophy, extensive reading, and real knowledge of human life." That "solemn elevated abstraction" in which Boswell supposed Johnson to live is paralleled by the "gloominess of

thought and Cynical Austerity" he sees manifested in The Rambler. Time and friendship corrected Boswell's fanciful notions that Johnson was as ascetic as Diogenes and that he had been "long immured" in an Oxford college, but Boswell preserved his reverence for the Rambler's wisdom, learning, and knowledge of the world as his discussion of those papers in the Life evidences (Life, I, 212-228).

The Life testifies that he also had reports of Johnson's character from other persons, notably Thomas Sheridan and Francis Gentleman, but it does not mention a conversation with David Hume that took place on November 4, 1762, and which Boswell recorded in his journal. Hume tells of Johnson's pension, calls his Dictionary a "national work," brands his style as "particular and pedantic," stresses Johnson's supposed Jacobitism and high-church principles ("He would stand before a battery of cannon to have the Convocation restored to its full powers," said Hume).[1]

Boswell does not mention in this early journal "the immense metropolis of London" but the fact that Johnson was a London author played an important part in the "mysterious veneration" which grew up in Boswell's fancy. Edinburgh

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[1]Hume also gave Boswell the unexpurgated version of the famous anecdote about Johnson in the Green Room of the Drury Lane Theater: "No, David," Hume reported Johnson as saying to Garrick, "I will never come back. For the white bubbies and the silk stockings of your actresses excite my genitals." (PP, 1, 128)

authors Boswell knew in abundance, and never a trace of "mysterious veneration" did he feel for any of them. He had a good deal of respect for the affable David Hume, whose reputation at this time was international, approving him as a very fit acquaintance for a young man. (He changed his mind later, but he always liked Hume, even when he most deplored Hume's skepticism.) Lord Kames and Lord Hailes (Sir David Dalrymple) took a fatherly interest in him--he wrote frequently to Hailes from London in 1762-63. In 1763, he showed the famous Hugh Blair around London and delighted in passing under the window of his first London lady of the town in company with an Edinburgh minister (London, p. 236). Hardly veneration.

Edinburgh, in fact, was just home, while London was a sacred city. True, Boswell had a certain romantic enthusiasm for the Scottish past, for Holyroodhouse and Mary Queen of Scots and, above all, for the distinguished family of Boswell; but on the whole, Scottish manners and the Scottish Kirk were distasteful to him. In his conversation with Rousseau, he mimicked the "hamely" familiarity for which he repeatedly expressed detestation, "Howt Johnie Rousseau man, what for hae ye sae mony figmagairies? Ye're a bony Man indeed to mauk sicana wark; set ye up. Canna ye just live like ither fowk?" (PP, 4, 105). Boswell felt that the Poker Club, "all that set who associate with David Hume and [Principal] Robertson . . . are doing all that they can to

destroy politeness" (London, p. 300). Since the Poker Club was composed of the leading lawyers and intellectuals of the Scottish capital, this indictment is sweeping. The Edinburgh journals indicate that loud jocularity, drunkenness, and bawdry graced many Scottish gatherings. Of the behavior of two Lords of Session--the Scottish equivalent of Supreme Court Justices--at his own table at Auchinleck, Boswell wrote "Lord Kames raved and Lord Braxfield roared--both bawdy" (PP, 14, 110). No such behavior marred the London gatherings recorded in the Life.

Scottish religion was as disagreeable as Scottish manners. The gloom of the extreme Calvinism, impressed upon Boswell by his pious mother, burdened him in his melancholy hours, and it was not lightened by a dignified form of worship. In 1763, Hugh Blair was preaching in London; Boswell went to hear him and regretted doing so. "Blair's New Kirk delivery," he wrote in his journal, "and the Dissenters roaring out the Psalms sitting on their backsides together with the extempore prayers, and in short the whole vulgar idea of the Presbyterian worship, made me very gloomy. I therefore hastened from this place to St. Paul's, where I heard the conclusion of service and had my mind set right again" (London, p. 259).

Boswell loved worship. The Roman Catholic liturgy appealed to him greatly--he became a Catholic briefly in 1760--

but his real allegiance was to the Church of England, whose services always elevated his mind. During the Sundays recorded in the London Journal (November 1762 to July 1763) he attended services at no fewer than twenty-two London churches. His favorite was St. Paul's, for which he felt such reverence that once upon leaving he bowed down to each of its four quarters.

Thus, Boswell's feeling for London was more than the usual provincial awe of the metropolis. It was a place of pilgrimage. There he felt immortal. Upon entering the city in 1763, he recited lines from Addison's Cato on the immortality of the soul, and his own soul "bounded forth to a certain prospect [my italics] of happy futurity" (London, p. 44). London gave him a conviction which religion and philosophy could not give--that man is not annihilated.[2]

Subsequent arrivals in London were marked with similar feelings, if not with similar demonstrations. It was upon reaching London in 1778 that he wrote, "I was fully happy in immediate sensation and hope. And if hope makes me happy at the time, I am then blest" (Extremes, p. 220). Boswell

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[2] It must be admitted that he next sang a ditty about an amorous meeting with a pretty girl. The fascination of Boswell the man and the writer lies in his entertaining the "jostling opposites," to use W. K. Wimsatt's phrase (Defence, p. xviii). His intimations of immortality are moments, to be succeeded the next moment by very mortal thoughts indeed.

always tended to regard such states of mind as sacred and as conferring sacredness on the objects which occasioned them. With typical detachment, he observed himself to be superstitious and enthusiastic, but he believed superstition and enthusiasm to be evidence of a fine imagination. Upon leaving Edinburgh in 1762, he bowed down to Holyroodhouse and to Arthur Seat, the mountain that looms over Edinburgh, and he wrote "I am surely much happier in this way than if I just considered Holyroodhouse as so much stone and lime which has been put together in a certain way, and Arthur Seat as so much earth and rock raised above the neighboring plains" (London, p. 42). Places were literally hallowed for him by the ideas associated with them in his imagination. He could not maintain a steady belief in the Christian revelation, but as if to compensate for his lapses into infidelity, he conferred on visible and tangible persons and places divine qualities; there is in him a strain of animism. His odd combination of conventional piety and the sanctification of the ideas in his imagination is displayed in this journal entry for Easter Day, 1779: "At altar [of St. Paul's Cathedral] thanked GOD for uniting Auchi[n]leck and St. Paul's --- the romantic seat of my ancestors and the grand Cathedral--'in the imagination which thou hast given me'" (PP, 13, 215).

Such acts of imaginative synthesis were more frequent in London than anywhere else, for everything existed there more

fully and with more than the usual power to animate the observer. As Boswell wrote, "Then the immense crowd and hurry and bustle of business and diversion, the great number of public places of entertainment, the noble churches and the superb buildings of different kinds, agitate, amuse, and elevate the mind" (London, pp. 68-69). This life and power were functions of the city's very immensity, yet thronged as it was, London did not render the individual faceless or insignificant--quite the contrary. Each person was more of an individual because he resided there. According to Boswell, "The liberty and whim that reigns there occasions a variety of perfect and curious characters" (London, p. 68). Boswell throughout his life was powerfully stimulated by diversity, by mere succession of different objects, feeling little need to subject them to the operations of the intellect by reducing them to some orderly system or to inquire about causes and consequences. Of a visit to the town of Derby, he wrote, "I had a pleasure in walking around Derby such as I always have in walking about any town to which I am not accustomed. There is an immediate sensation of novelty; and one speculates on the way in which life is passed in it, which, although there is a sameness everywhere upon the whole, is yet minutely diversified. The minute diversities in everything are wonderful" (Extremes, p. 163).

The associations of London with the age of Queen Anne stimulated Boswell as much as did the diversity of the city.

As a boy of twelve he had read The Spectator papers for the first time, and they opened his mind to the possibility of civilized, easy, yet significant discourse--unlike anything he heard in Scotland--and to a study of "the variety of human nature."[3] The London Journal is full of references to The Spectator. "In reality," Boswell writes, "a person of small fortune who has only the common view of life and would just be as well as anybody else, cannot like London. But a person of imagination and feeling, such as the Spectator finely describes, can have the most lively enjoyment from the sight of external objects without regard to property at all" (London, p. 68). Here Boswell is thinking of Spectator 411:

> A Man of a Polite Imagination is let into a great many Pleasures that the Vulgar are not capable of receiving. He can converse with a Picture, and find an agreeable Companion in a Statue. He meets with a secret Refreshment in a Description, and often feels a greater Satisfaction in the Prospect of Fields and Meadows, than another does in the Possession.

Driving along with some English friends, he "was full of rich imagination of London, ideas suggested by the Spectator, and such as I could not explain to most people, but which I strongly feel and am ravished with. My blood glows and my mind is agitated with felicity" (London, p. 130). Nor did

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[3] James Boswell: The Earlier Years, p. 2.

this merging of London now and London then cease as Boswell's familiarity with London grew. On his spring visit in 1772, he remarked in his journal, "I had a full relish of life today. It was somehow like being in London in the last age" (Defence, p. 107).

London authors, especially Johnson, participated in the mysterious and sacred life of the city. Of meeting Goldsmith in February, 1763, Boswell remarks, "His conversation revived in my mind the true ideas of London authors, which are to me something curious, and, as it were, mystical" (London, p. 176). How well he could recreate his early feelings as he grew older is illustrated by his comment upon meeting Capel Lofft in 1778: "He . . . upon the whole struck me more with the idea of a mysterious London Authour, such as I used formerly to have, than anybody I have seen of a long time" (Waingrow, note, p. 407).

It is interesting to speculate to what extent Boswell's notions of London authors are influenced by Addison's portrait of the Spectator in the first paper of the series. The Spectator's grave demeanor, his silence, his learning, his habit of observing the affairs of mankind without participating in them--all these qualities combine to give the impression that he is living in "a state of solemn elevated abstraction." In The Rambler, Johnson does not so dramatically establish a fictional personality, but his sombre tone, and his insistence upon the value of retirement and self-examination might

well lead Boswell to infer that the author took his own advice.

Before their first meeting, then, Boswell pictured Johnson as the Rambler, one of the august fraternity of London authors upon whom still shone the luster of the age of Queen Anne. This mystical sense of the vastness and variety of London and of literature as a calling which enriches and heightens human life enlarges Boswell's conception of Johnson's character. He expected to meet a great man, and he was not disappointed. Close study of two accounts of that first meeting on May 16, 1763--in the Life and in the London Journal--reveals how Boswell the literary craftsman conveys his large conception of Johnson without sacrificing the circumstantial accuracy of his portrait. His creative imagination surrounds Johnson with the aura which for the youthful Boswell had surrounded the Rambler in his London setting.

The First Meeting

Although in his journal Boswell recorded almost all the conversation which many years later appeared in the Life, with the exception of the remarks on Garrick, his notes on the meeting itself are blunt and unadorned, except for a snatch of dialogue:

> I drank tea at Davies's in Russell Street,
> and about seven came in the great Mr. Samuel

> Johnson, whom I have so long wished to see. Mr. Davies introduced me to him. As I knew his mortal antipathy at the Scotch, I cried to Davies, "Don't tell where I come from." However, he said, "From Scotland." "Mr. Johnson," said I, "indeed I come from Scotland, but I cannot help it." "Sir," replied he," that, I find, is what a great many of your countrymen cannot help." Mr. Johnson is a man of a most dreadful appearance. He is a very big man, is troubled with sore eyes, the palsy, and the king's evil. He is very slovenly in his dress and speaks with a most uncouth voice. Yet his great knowledge and strength of expression command vast respect and render him very excellent company. He has great humour and is a worthy man. But his dogmatical roughness of manners is disagreeable. I shall mark what I remember of his conversation. (London, p. 260)

In the Life (I, 383-395) the account of the actual meeting follows an elaborate prologue, in which Boswell tells how his longing to meet the author of The Rambler was whetted by Francis Gentleman and Thomas Sheridan and how it was several times frustrated by circumstances. Boswell here uses the dramatic device of creating suspense by delaying the entrance of the main character. When Johnson appears, his dignity as a man of letters pervades the scene, not his physical grotesqueness. He is not a man "of a most dreadful appearance"; he is Dictionary Johnson. In the London Journal, Boswell records his spontaneous first impression; in the Life he records what is actually an earlier impression derived from a portrait first seen a decade before. He says: "I had a very perfect idea of Johnson's figure from the portrait of him painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds soon after he had published

his Dictionary in the attitude of sitting in his easy chair in deep meditation. . . ." It is likely that this Reynolds portrait, which he chose as the frontispiece to the first edition of the Life, played its part in the formation of his early conception of Johnson's character--"deep meditation" and "solemn elevated abstraction" are not incompatible, despite the mixed metaphors.

Boswell expresses his sense of Johnson's "aweful" dignity fully but with smiling detachment when he alludes to the appearance of the ghost of Hamlet's father:

> Mr. Davies having perceived him through the glass-door in the room in which we were sitting, advancing towards us,--he announced his aweful approach to me, somewhat in the manner of an actor in the part of Horatio, when he addresses Hamlet on the appearance of his father's ghost, 'Look, my Lord, it comes.' (Life, I, 392)

The allusion is a happy one, for this meeting was as fateful for Boswell as the encounter with the apparition was for Hamlet. Yet Boswell's sense of the importance of the meeting does not preclude him from showing Davies's exaggerated and theatrical response to Johnson's arrival. The Attic salt blends so well with Boswell's general attitude of reverence for Johnson that Johnson in being likened, for example, to the ghost of Hamlet's father is enlarged and dignified yet seen also as an actor in a moment of mock-heroics. The joke is on Davies as well, whom Boswell has characterized in the preceding paragraph as "somewhat pompous." The flash of

comedy is succeeded by the perfectly serious picture of Johnson as resembling the Reynolds portrait.[4] Boswell's delicate touch in shifting between comedy and seriousness and his keen eye for human foibles ought to be kept in mind as we trace the forming of Boswell's conception of Johnson's character, since hero-worship and vanity dominate in the contemporary records of the early days of the friendship, the London Journal and Boswell's letters.

The Beginning of a Friendship

Boswell met Johnson at Tom Davies's on May 16, 1763, and the acquaintance, after a slow start, ripened into intimacy. They met but once in May, twice in June, twelve times in July, and five times in August--a total of twenty days--before Boswell embarked on August 6 for study in Utrecht and a continental grand tour. By July 16, Boswell was writing to Sir David Dalrymple, "I look upon my obtaining the friendship of this great and good man as one of the most important events of my life" (Letters, I, 24).

Looking at the surface of Boswell's London life as recorded in the London Journal, we are puzzled by such a declaration. What can be the attraction of the Rambler for a lusty young blade who aspires to a commission in the Guards

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[4]I treat Boswell's comedy at some length in my final chapter.

and who rattles around the town roistering with other young Scots, seducing pretty actresses, and consorting with prostitutes? But the surface view is deceptive. Despite all the frantic activity, Boswell is in the process of making the "choice of life," as Johnson put it in Rasselas. As the Guards scheme fades--no one will exert the interest necessary to obtain his commission--Boswell concludes that he must please his father by studying law and by taking his place as future Laird of Auchinleck. He does manage to get Lord Auchinleck's permission to study in Holland and to travel in Europe. In addition to making his choice of a career, he is also in the process of learning to become a gentleman on the English model. In order to be the man he wishes to become, he must form his character. As I observed in the previous chapter, reading The Spectator and The Rambler had inspired him with ideals of conduct; meeting the Rambler in person confirmed his desire to mold himself into a man worthy of respect. In addition, he was troubled with the religious perplexities I have already discussed, so much so that religion is a very prominent topic in his early conversations with Johnson.

As we have seen from the account of the first meeting with Johnson in the London Journal, his first reaction to the great man was revulsion almost as much as attraction. "Dreadful appearance" and an "uncouth voice" balance "great knowledge" and "strength of expression." His judgment about

Johnson's "dogmatical roughness of manners" balances his perception of Johnson's "great humour" and of the fact that Johnson is "a worthy man." But curiously enough, Johnson's repellent qualities are scarcely mentioned in the London Journal after that first meeting; for reasons which I shall suggest in the next chapter, Johnson's asperities receive more attention in the corresponding sections of the Life. For example, the one quarrel reported in the Life account of the summer of 1763 (I, 464) (in which Johnson thunders forth his esteem for the Convocation of the Church of England) is scarcely mentioned in the journal--Boswell only says that Johnson "talked much" of restoring the Convocation. This absence of the usual Johnsonian thunder is remarkable. While his conversation is as energetic as it will ever be, there are no recorded outbursts of sheer ill-temper. Nor does Boswell say much of Johnson's tics and slovenliness. Most significant, we hear very little of his melancholy.

Only one time does the subject arise. On July 22, Boswell confessed his own melancholy to Johnson, and in response Johnson confided that he was a fellow-sufferer. This confidence comforted Boswell, who wrote in his journal, "I felt that strange satisfaction which human nature feels at the idea of participating distress with others; and the greater person our fellow sufferer is, so much the more good does it do us" (London, p. 319). Boswell's vanity was tickled, and he did not inquire further into the severity of

Johnson's affliction. Certainly, Johnson's behavior when they were together was not that of a man hopelessly despondent. As a cure for melancholy, Johnson recommended activity, exercise, and temperate living--advice which Boswell seemed to believe that Johnson, the Rambler, was capable of following. A philosopher, he must possess habits of "philosophical discipline" which give him power over his own mind (Life, IV, 426). Even after Boswell came to know the Johnson of Prayers and Meditations, the Johnson whom Dr. Adams found "sighing, groaning, talking to himself, and restlessly walking from room to room" (Life, I, 483), Boswell's conception is controlled by his early impression of Johnson as master of himself.

The dominant theme of the London Journal record, as we shall see, is Johnson's great power for good: intellectual, moral, and spiritual. Johnson is rational, powerful, free, benevolent, and he holds out to Boswell the prospect that the younger man will be able freely to make himself into the man he wishes to be, a prospect exhilarating to one so much afflicted, as Boswell was, with doubts concerning the freedom of the human will.

Johnson's intellectual vigor was, of course, the most evident of all his qualities, shining forth both in his writings and in his conversation. By means of rational argument, Johnson was able to allay (at least for a time)

Boswell's perpetually recurring skepticism. Of the conversation on July 20, 1763, Boswell reports in a letter to his confidant William Johnson Temple, "I had prodigious satisfaction to find Dempster's sophistry[5] (which he has learned frome Hume and Rousseau) vanquished by the sollid [sic] sense and vigourous reasoning of Johnson" (Letters, I, 27). Every conversation in which Boswell and Johnson discuss religion strengthens Boswell's belief in Christianity.

This intellectual power displayed itself in every field of learning and even in the most apparently trivial matters. To Samuel Johnson the philosopher, who was ever fascinated with human performance as evidence of the extent of human powers, even the ability of another Johnson, a noted equestrian, to ride three horses at a time "tended to raise our opinion of the nature of man" and to show "the great effects of industry and application" (London, p. 279). Boswell was greatly impressed by this ability of Johnson to comment philosophically on every topic.

Inseparable from Johnson's wisdom and penetration was his wit. Much of the power of his conversation lay in the fact that his talk was at once entertaining and instructive. In his first journal description of Johnson, Boswell noted his "great humour," and later he was delighted by Johnson's

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[5]George Dempster was one of the young Scots with whom Boswell explored the pleasures of London. He had become a Member of Parliament in 1761.

suggestions as to how he, Boswell, could harrass a surly landlord: "Such ludicrous fertility can this great man throw out!" (London, p. 291). This passage precedes and apparently occasions a long encomium of Johnson's "amazing universality of genius," which catalogs his writings and finds in them evidence of the highest degree of labor, knowledge, morality, imagination, perspicuity, vivacity, and satirical keenness. His conversation, as great as his writings, mixes "inimitable strokes of vivacity" with "solid good-sense and knowledge" (London, pp. 291-292).

Not only were Johnson's writings and conversation entertaining and instructive, but they were powerful for promoting good. After recording Johnson's remarks about the man who could ride three horses at once, Boswell added, "I am never with this great man without feeling myself bettered and rendered happier" (London, p. 279). To Sir David Dalrymple, he wrote on July 16, "I think better of myself when in his company than at any other time. His conversation rouses every generous principle and kindles every laudable desire" (Letters, I, 24). Perhaps the greatest power that one man can have over another is the power that Johnson exerted over Boswell from the very beginning. He gave the younger man a stronger sense of personal worth. Boswell desperately needed such reassurance. As Bertrand Bronson has pointed out in his acute analysis of Boswell's character,[6] Boswell's father, a

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[6]"Boswell's Boswell," in Johnson Agonistes and Other Essays (Univ. of California Press: Berkeley, 1965), pp. 53-99. See esp. pp. 53-54.

Scottish judge and a model of dour rectitude, rejected his remarkable but unstable son (to the point of trying to disinherit him) and, one might add, probably prevented Boswell from developing that rational self-esteem essential to a reasonably consistent character.

Thus Johnson's power was as much a result of his benevolence as of his knowledge and the wisdom of his precepts. In the encomium on Johnson's works mentioned earlier, Boswell called Rasselas the work of a "humane preceptor," and in the Life he quotes with approval Sir David Dalrymple's contrast of Johnson with Swift. Johnson is a "tender-hearted operator, who probes the wound only to heal it," while Swift "mangles human nature" and "cuts and slashes, as if he took pleasure in the operation" (Life, I, 433). Johnson's tender-heartedness displayed itself in action as he gave Boswell the warm affection which Lord Auchinleck had always withheld. Cordial at all but the first meeting, by July 22 he was telling Boswell,"There are few people whom I take so much to as you," and he reduced Boswell almost to tears by saying,"My dear Boswell! I should be very unhappy at parting, did I think we were not to meet again" (London, p. 321). Johnson's benevolent power to animate Boswell persisted over the years. In 1772, Boswell wrote to him, "I fairly own that after an absence from you for any length of time, I feel that I require a renewal of that spirit which your presence allways [sic] gives me, and which makes me a better and a

happier man than I imagined I could be before I was introduced to your acquaintance" (Letters, I, 186).

The essential characteristics of the relationship between Johnson and Boswell are very clear by the time of their third meeting, the first at the Mitre Tavern, on June 25 (see London, pp. 282-285). After some literary conversation, Boswell felt so much at ease with Johnson that he poured out his religious history "which he [Johnson] listened to with attention." We do not often think of Johnson the tremendous talker as being also a good listener. Johnson confirmed Boswell's faith in Christianity with powerful arguments. Then the conversation turned to ghosts, and one is tempted to speculate that Boswell also confided his terror of supernatural apparitions. After this interlude, Boswell went on to tell Johnson about his difficulties with Lord Auchinleck, his father, and again Johnson was the patient listener. When he spoke, all his remarks revealed sympathy with Boswell and respect for his position. He thought Lord Auchinleck too demanding, and said: "Sir, a father and a son should part at a certain time of life. I never believed what my father said. I always thought that he spoke ex officio, as a priest does." He confirmed Boswell's enthusiastic notions of the importance of being future Laird of Auchinleck by extolling the dignity of Scottish landlords and praising the good effects on society of subordination; he approved the wisdom of a trip abroad and promised to put Boswell upon a plan of study. He

even suggested that Boswell could write a useful book about Spain. Boswell was overwhelmed and exclaimed, "Will you really take charge of me? . . . Had I but thought some years ago that I should pass an evening with the Author of The Rambler!"

In the Life, Boswell gives this meeting at the Mitre Tavern great importance. He adduces Johnson's "frankness, complacency, and kindness to a young man, a stranger, and a Scotchman" as a decisive refutation of the allegation that his "general demeanour" was harsh, an impression which he felt was given by Mrs. Piozzi's published anecdotes. (See Ch. I, p. 51.) These anecdotes were, after all, gathered over a long span of years in which Johnson's time "was chiefly spent in instructing and delighting mankind by his writings and conversation, in acts of piety to GOD, and good-will to men" (Life, I, 410). Boswell's conviction of Johnson's benevolent power was, as we have seen, established very early and never changed.

The account in the Life of this meeting assumes further importance by opening with a solemn introduction which we recognize as a description of a characteristic imaginative experience:

> The orthodox high-church sound of the MITRE, --the figure and manner of the celebrated SAMUEL JOHNSON,--the extraordinary power and precision of his conversation, and the pride arising from finding myself admitted as his

> companion, produced a variety of sensations, and a pleasing elevation of mind beyond what I had ever before experienced. (Life, I, 401)

Johnson's power lay not alone in his wit and wisdom nor in his benevolent concern for human welfare nor in his capacity to rouse the human spirit to a higher sense of its own dignity but in his being able to occasion such exalted feelings. Johnson is seen as embodying Boswell's most cherished values; Boswell's "pleasing elevation of mind" confirms by direct experience the existence of those values. A world which contains a Johnson is coherent; it is not a "chaos of nothing." It is very natural then that Boswell's ultimate response to Johnson should be reverence, a reverence which did not diminish as Boswell grew easy in Johnson's company. "You and I, Sir, are very good companions," he said to Johnson on July 14 (London, p. 301). But Boswell always felt some restraint in Johnson's presence, a welcome restraint. Even many years later he remarked of himself, "I really feel myself happier in the company of those of whom I stand in awe than in any other company . . . . To be with those of whom I stand in awe composes the uneasy tumult of my spirits, and gives me the pleasure of contemplating something at least comparatively great" (Extremes, p. 168).

The Rambler in Holland

Boswell repeatedly expressed his reverence for Johnson

over the years, and,if anything,his reverence increased when the two men were not together. When Boswell left Harwich for Utrecht on August 6, 1763, he carried in his luggage a set of The Rambler and in his imagination a conception of its author which absence abroad served only to confirm. Soon after arriving in Holland, Boswell suffered an attack of melancholy so severe that he wept in the streets and turned to The Rambler and to his idea of Johnson for relief. He obtained that relief. To Boswell, the dominating theme in The Rambler was the dignity of human nature, the power of man to control his own mind. In a letter to a Scottish friend, John Johnstone, he slightly misquotes Rambler No. 32, in which Johnson doubts whether "a soul well principled will not be separated sooner than subdued" (Holland, p. 18).[7] A summary[8] of this paper reveals the appeal to "philosophical discipline" which attracted Boswell. The topic is "the art of bearing calamities." Johnson dismisses the Stoic position as against nature and, admitting the reality of external evils, asks how we may best endure them. He recommends a manly patience, which is not to be confused with "cowardice and indolence," begs the reader to remember that even the severest pain has been borne with fortitude, and in closing expresses faith in the wisdom and goodness of God

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[7]Boswell writes "a mind well principled will not be separated before it is subdued."

[8]The summary is mine.

"whether he gives or takes away." In the letter to his friend quoted above, Boswell mentions several other papers of similar tenor and gives Johnson (and prayer) the credit for rousing him from his despondency. To Temple he wrote, "He [Johnson] is the ablest mental physician that I have ever applied to. He insists much on preserving a manly fortitude of mind, and maintains that every distress may be supported" (Holland, p. 28).

Principles and Practice

The great power of The Rambler is that Johnson establishes principles of thought and action, principles which if acted upon are capable of controlling the wayward impulses of human nature. Boswell, aware of his own changeableness and the changeableness of men generally, was drawn to a moralist who seemed to promise that "habits of philosophical discipline" (Life, IV, 426) could be established. That a man's principles must be sound is a central canon of Johnson's ethical thought that separates him, to Boswell's way of thinking, from the "moral sense" philosophers and the "men of feeling." Man is rational and is capable of rational control over his own behavior, The Rambler affirms again and again. Johnson had no use for mere good-heartedness. As he remarked of Boswell's infidel friend Dempster, "We can have no dependence upon that instinctive, that constitutional goodness which

is not founded upon principle" (Life, I, 443). Johnson is perfectly serious when he says of Dr. John Campbell: "Campbell is a good man, a pious man. I am afraid he has not been in the inside of a church for many years; but he never passes a church without pulling off his hat. This shews that he has good principles" (Life, I, 417-418). Johnson is, in short, willing to tolerate lapses in practice but not lapses in principle. Since Johnson was so effectual in fixing Boswell's principles, Boswell could sincerely attribute to him and to his writings immense moral power, despite his, Boswell's, continuing irregularities of conduct. Nevertheless, he felt that his conduct as well as his principles were improved by knowing Johnson. As he said of himself during his stay in Holland:

> No longer ago than last winter I was the ardent votary of pleasure, a gay sceptic who never looked beyond the present hour, a hero and philosopher in dissipation and vice. Now I am all devoted to prudence and to morality. I am full of the dignity of human nature. (Holland, p. 122)

Johnson himself was very much aware of the gap between his own principles and his practice. In a conversation with Lady Macleod of Dunvegan, Skye, he defended an author's right to teach what he does not perform: "I have,all my life long, been lying till noon; yet I tell all young men, and tell them with great sincerity, that nobody who does not rise early will ever do any good. . . . There is something noble in publishing truth, though it condemns one's self" (Life, V, 210-11).

But Boswell, aware as he is of the contradictoriness of human nature, never shows awareness of this kind of irony; he never chides, "Physician, heal thyself." His reverence for Johnson remains undisturbed by such considerations. Near the end of the Life, in fact, Boswell explicitly addresses himself to the relation between principle and practice in his attempt to explain Johnson's great fear of death by alluding to possible sexual irregularities in his youth. His conclusion is that a man may be perfectly sincere in his principles without always living up to them. The contradictions between Johnson's life and his precepts do not disturb him nor do they arouse his comic sense. Even in 1777, Boswell speaks of going to London as if he were going on a pilgrimage to some sacred place where his soul will be "elevated towards a better world" and his "understanding improved for this world" (Extremes, p.143). His imagination cherished a conception of Johnson "in the complex magnitude of his literary, moral, and religious character" (Extremes, p. 225), which he preserved in the Life of Johnson, despite the fact that as he grew to know Johnson more intimately, he perceived some contradictions in Johnson's character which had not been prominent to him in the summer of 1763. His artistic handling of these contradictions is the subject of the next chapter.

This conception of Johnson in the Life is a triumph of memory and imagination over time and sorrow. In his intro-

duction to Volume 17 of the Private Papers, Frederick A. Pottle has observed that the Life was written amidst melancholia, poverty, failure of worldly hopes, and in the shadow of the illness and death of Boswell's wife. Life for Boswell had lost much of its vividness, but even as a sick, irritable old man Johnson still had power to animate his friend. In the spring of 1783, sunk with melancholy, Boswell visited Johnson and "felt a return of animation of Manly Spirit" (PP, 15, 223); this power exerted itself beyond the grave.

CHAPTER IV

THE MEANS BY WHICH BOSWELL EXPRESSES HIS CONCEPTION OF JOHNSON'S CHARACTER

According to Professor Rader, "Boswell's image of Johnson is the selective, constructive, and controlling principle of the Life, the omnipresent element which vivifies and is made vivid in the whole."[1] With this thesis in mind, I have in the preceding chapters outlined the context of the Life of Johnson; studied the nature of Boswell's imagination, which made the most of every moment by investing it with the association of many ideas, present and past; and traced the formation of his image of Johnson in the early days of their friendship. We have seen that, from the first, Boswell regarded Johnson as essentially good-natured and benevolent, pious, and above all intellectually vigorous to an astonishing degree. As Boswell puts it early in the Life, "Johnson did not strut or stand on tip-toe: He only did not stoop. From his earliest years,his superiority was perceived and acknowledged. He was from the beginning . . . a king of men" (Life, I, 47). These remarkable qualities gave Johnson great and beneficial power--the power to make other men better

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[1]"Literary Form in Factual Narrative," p. 9.

and wiser. And we have also seen that Boswell's reverence for Johnson's "complex magnitude" remained steady over the years.

That the essential character of the Johnson whom he loved and reverenced was widely misunderstood became increasingly evident to Boswell as Johnsoniana continued to issue from the press, especially after Johnson's death in 1784. Boswell was particularly distressed by Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi's Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D. During the Last Twenty Years of His Life (1786)[2] and by Sir John Hawkins' The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D. (1787).[3] Both these authors were friends of Johnson; Hawkins had known him since Johnson's Grub Street days, and Mrs. Piozzi was truly an intimate--Johnson had been almost a member of the Thrale family for twenty years. Boswell found many inaccuracies in Hawkins' book, but what was more disturbing, he detected a "dark uncharitable cast, by which the most unfavourable construction is put upon almost every circumstance in the character and conduct of my illustrious friend" (Life, I, 28). Hawkins was, indeed, stiff, moralistic, and

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[2]In Johnsonian Miscellanies, I, 141-351. Henceforth cited as Piozzi.

[3]Edited and abridged by Bertram H. Davis (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1961). Hereafter cited as Hawkins. Davis has excised Hawkins' lengthy digressions. See also by Davis, Johnson Before Boswell (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960), a study of Hawkins' book.

given to preaching. He was outspokenly offended by Johnson's indolence, his irregular hours, his slovenly dress (which he calls "disgusting" [p. 72]), by his generally Bohemian life. More to the point, Hawkins disapproved of what he considered to be Johnson's weakminded charity to useless and ungrateful persons (p. xxiii) and he asserts that at the end of Johnson's life "the fabric of his mind was tottering" (p. 242). Since Boswell's conception of Johnson exalted Johnson's praiseworthy benevolence and his life-long intellectual vigor, such allegations were to him undoubtedly an evidence of Hawkins' malevolence.[4]

Mrs. Piozzi's book did not seem to him to be actively malevolent so much as hasty, careless, and misleading, for Boswell speaks of Hawkins' "injurious misrepresentations" but only of "the slighter aspersions of a lady who once lived in great intimacy" with Johnson (Life, I, 28). He felt very strongly, however, that Mrs. Piozzi's habitual inattention

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[4]Bertram Davis in the Introduction to his edition of Hawkins, and in Johnson Before Boswell has defended Hawkins' fairmindedness and has shown that Hawkins knew Johnson very well. My purpose is only to discuss the effect his book had on Boswell. A certain amount of personal pique may have entered in since Hawkins referred only once to Boswell; in an account of the tour to the Hebrides, he said, "He [Johnson] had long been solicited by Mr. James Boswell, a native of Scotland, and one that highly valued him, to accompany him in a journey to the Hebrides" (p. 213). Boswell wrote to his friend Temple on March 5, 1789, that Hawkins was no doubt malevolent in referring to him [Boswell] as if he were quite unknown (Letters, II, 361).

to the exact truth of her anecdotes and her habit of quoting Johnson's harsh remarks without describing the circumstances which gave rise to them made her narrations very suspect. In at least twelve places in the Life he corrects her or laments her inaccuracy; the most extended warning against the untrustworthiness of her anecdotes occupies several pages (Life, IV, 340-47). The book is inaccurate not only in detail, but in its very form, Boswell believes, since Mrs. Piozzi simply collected in a small volume, which might be read in a few hours, "occasional reproofs of folly, impudence, or impiety" and "sudden sallies of his constitutional irritability of temper," which were, in truth, scattered over twenty years, the chief part of which Johnson spent "instructing and delighting mankind by his writings and conversation, in acts of piety to GOD, and good-will to men" (all quoted from Life, I, 410). In his very reasonable Essay on the Life, Character, and Writings of Dr. Samuel Johnson, Joseph Towers gives an astute critique of Mrs. Piozzi's Anecdotes, saying that she praises Johnson's character very highly in general terms, yet her particulars, that is, her anecdotes, are "extremely unfavourable to his memory."[5]

The Life, then, was intended to "rescue his [Johnson's] memory from obloquy" (Life, IV, 344), as Boswell put it.

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[5](London: Charles Dilly, 1786), p. 20.

Boswell's advertisement for the Life which appeared in the Gentleman's Magazine as early as June, 1787, reads as follows:

> The Publick are respectfully informed, that Mr. Boswell's LIFE of Dr. Johnson is in great Forwardness. The Reason of its having been delayed is, that some other Publications on that Subject were promised, from which he expected to obtain much Information, in Addition to the large Store of Materials which he had already accumulated. These Works have now made their Appearance; and, though disappointed in that Expectation, he does not regret the Deliberation with which he has proceeded, as very few Circumstances relative to the History of Dr. Johnson's private Life, Writings, or Conversation, have been told with that authentic Precision which alone can render Biography valuable. To correct these erroneous Accounts will be one of his principal Objects; and on reviewing his Materials, he is happy to find that he has Documents in his Possession which will enable him to do Justice to the Character of his Illustrious Friend. He trusts that, in the mean Time, the Publick will not permit unfavourable Impressions to be made on their Minds, whether by the light Effusions of Carelessness and Pique, or the ponderous Labours of solemn Inaccuracy and dark uncharitable Conjecture.[6]

In seeking "to do Justice to the Character of his Illustrious Friend," Boswell faced a delicate task. As George Steevens said in the reminiscences of Johnson which he supplied to Boswell, "It is unfortunate for Johnson that his peculiarities and frailties can be more distinctly traced than his good and amiable exertions" (as quoted in Waingrow, p. 150).

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[6]Quoted in Chauncey Brewster Tinker's Introduction to the one-volume Oxford Standard Authors edition of the Life (New Edition, 1953, rptd. 1966; London: Oxford Univ. Press), p. ix.

Boswell, then, must, without suppressing Johnson's faults, display his virtues as the predominant aspect of his complex character. In the Life, we see the result of his efforts--a dynamic view of the character of Johnson in which Johnson's asperity, indolence, melancholy, physical disability, and fear of insanity and death perpetually threaten but never overcome his essential benevolence, piety, and vigor of mind. The conflict was lifelong, ending only in the last days of Johnson's life when, finding peace at the last, he died a holy death. For particular instances of the way Boswell embodies this conception of Johnson's character, let us examine some of the rhetorical and literary devices he uses in the Life.

Boswell's Ethos

Boswell's first task was to make clear to the reader that he, Boswell, was fit to undertake a truthful portrayal of the character of Johnson. He does so both explicitly and by indirection. I have already considered in my introductory chapter his description of the trouble he took to "ascertain with a scrupulous authenticity" the "innumerable detached particulars" of which the Life is composed (Advertisement to the First Edition, I, 6-7). In the front matter of the Life, the Dedication to Sir Joshua Reynolds, the Advertisements to the First and Second Editions, and the opening pages of the

text, he adopts various other strategies to gain the trust of the reader. First, he associates himself with the friendship and approval of Johnson's distinguished friends, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Warton, and Dr. William Adams, quoting their praise of his Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides as giving a lifelike picture of Johnson, and mentioning their own contributions to the Life. Second, Boswell demonstrates that he had the approval of Johnson himself. As he says in the first pages of the Life, he had "the honour and happiness of enjoying his [Johnson's] friendship for upwards of twenty years; he had "the scheme of writing his life constantly in view," he had "the incidents of his early years" from Johnson's own lips (Life, I,25-6). Furthermore, he quotes extensively from Rambler No. 60 to show his adherence to Johnson's theory of biography. Third, as we have seen, he tries to discredit Sir John Hawkins and Mrs. Piozzi. Finally, he cites authorities as various as Bishop Warburton, Plutarch, Archbishop Secker, and Julius Caesar to support his contention that the Boswell method is the most satisfactory of biographical methods. In these ways, he makes very explicit claims of competence.

In the Life itself, Boswell very subtly depicts his intimacy with and understanding of Johnson. For instance, in the account of Johnson's childhood, Boswell makes clear how much information he has acquired in private conversation with Johnson. He constantly quotes Johnson's own words and makes

it very clear to the reader that these words are not, as it were, in the public domain, but that only he, Boswell, would have had the opportunity to have heard them in his tête-à-têtes with Johnson. For example, he writes: "His next instructor in English was a master, whom, when he spoke of him to me [my italics], he familiarly called Tom Brown, who, said he, 'published a spelling-book, and dedicated it to the UNIVERSE . . .'" (Life, I, 43). Boswell himself was aware that the greatest merit of his work was the quantity of Johnson's conversation which it preserved, and, obviously, his record of page after page of Johnson's sayings is proof in itself of their friendship. And, of course, we must not forget that readers were already familiar with the Tour to the Hebrides.

We have already seen, in Chapter II, the rapid progress of their intimacy during the first summer of their acquaintance. While the Johnsonian is aware that, despite Boswell's strictures, Mrs. Piozzi, Sir John Hawkins, Fanny Burney, and many of Johnson's other friends knew some aspects of Johnson better than Boswell did, still the quality of the friendship portrayed in the Life certainly entitles Boswell to his claim that he understood the finer features of Johnson's character. One would have to quote from almost every page of the Life to compile a complete record of this friendship, but perhaps one example will suffice. A serious,

even touching, scene of confidential friendship is part of the record of the visit to Dr. Taylor's home at Ashbourne in September, 1777. Indeed, since Boswell and Johnson were much alone during that time, the entire episode is testimony to their affection for each other. Boswell writes:

> While Johnson and I stood in calm conference by ourselves in Dr. Taylor's garden, at a pretty late hour in a serene autumn night, looking up to the heavens, I directed the discourse to the subject of a future state. My friend was in a placid and most benignant frame . . . . He talked to me upon this awful and delicate question in a gentle tone, and as if afraid to be decisive. (Life, III, 199-200)

Throughout the Life, Boswell portrays Johnson in a variety of moods with a sure choice of detail which convinces us of their intimacy.

Aside from his intimacy with Johnson, Boswell as a biographer displays in his work certain personal qualities which win the confidence of the reader. Among the most important of these are candor,[7] circumstantial truthfulness, intelligence, and independence of judgment. All these virtues manifest themselves in that passage of the Life which prefaces the account of the first Boswell-Johnson meeting and which describes the quarrel between Johnson and the actor and elocutionist Thomas Sheridan (Life, I, 385-90). At the same time, Boswell shows Johnson's hasty irritability at war

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[7] In the eighteenth-century sense as defined in Johnson's Dictionary: "Sweetness of temper; purity of mind; openness; ingenuity; kindness."

with his essential good nature. Without denying Sheridan any praise which is rightfully due him nor withholding from Johnson any deserved blame, he manages to make the whole affair redound to the credit of Johnson's magnanimity, which prevails over his asperity.

When Sheridan visited Edinburgh in 1761 to give a series of lectures on the English language and public speaking, he added to Boswell's store of information about Johnson, praising his "extraordinary knowledge, talents, and virtue" and giving a taste of his conversation by repeating his "pointed sayings." Sheridan boasted of his intimacy with Johnson, of "being his guest sometimes till two or three in the morning" (Life, I, 385). But by the time Boswell arrived in London in 1762, Sheridan and Johnson were no longer friends. First, we hear Sheridan's side. Upon learning that Sheridan has been granted a pension, Johnson exclaimed: "What! have they given him a pension? Then it is time for me to give up mine" (Life, I, 386). Neither of the possible motives which Boswell suggests for this outburst does credit to Johnson, who is represented as being either arrogant or peevish. Boswell makes it clear that he in no way condones Johnson's words, and he goes on to praise Sheridan as deserving of a pension for three reasons: (1) his support of the government while he was manager of the Theatre Royal in Ireland in 1753; (2) his literary attainments and

his skill in "reading and speaking with distinctness and propriety"--as evidenced by the respectable audiences which attended his Edinburgh lectures, he is no mere player but a distinguished educator; (3) his connection with Alexander Wedderburn, Lord Loughborough, later Lord Chancellor, whom he helped to overcome his Scottish accent. By his praise of Wedderburn's oratory, Boswell transfers to Sheridan's teaching some of the credit which is probably due to Wedderburn's gifts. A man could not ask for more generous acknowledgment of his talents and deserts than Boswell gives Sheridan.

But after this tribute and a brief digression encouraging other Scots to try their wings in London, Boswell turns to Johnson's side of the story. It seems that after a pause Johnson had added, "However, I am glad that Mr. Sheridan has a pension, for he is a very good man" (Life, I, 387). Only the first half of his remark had been reported to Sheridan, complained Johnson, by a man who disliked him. Immediately after quoting Johnson's retraction, Boswell narrates at some length Sheridan's lasting resentment of Johnson's slur. The reader, having been made aware of Johnson's essential good nature, is shocked that Sheridan, whose gifts are such as Boswell has so carefully described, should be so petty as to be unable to forgive Johnson. Johnson's retraction came immediately; twenty years did not suffice to soften Sheridan's vindictiveness. Yet Boswell, the candid narrator, goes on to praise Sheridan's "well-informed, animated, and

bustling mind" (Life, I, 389) and Mrs. Sheridan's charm and talent, being careful to display Johnson's real benevolence by bringing in Johnson's praise of her novel. The reader trusts a narrator so well-informed and so fair to both parties. Boswell manages to order the anecdote in such a way as to show the dynamics of Johnson's character--his choler at war with his magnanimity--not in the manner of a lawyer for the defense who completely discredits Sheridan in order to defend Johnson, but in the manner of an impartial and well-nigh omniscient biographer.[8]

Other Rhetorical Devices

In his attempt to rescue Johnson's memory from obloquy and to establish his own conception of Johnson's character, Boswell shows himself to be a skillful advocate. First, he often engages in straightforward refutation of errors of fact

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[8]Boswell continued to be on good terms with Sheridan, whose conversation he frequently praises. Sheridan's "persevering resentment" is expressed at length in a conversation which Boswell records fully in his journal for April 7, 1775, which is not included in the Life. Sheridan tells Boswell that he was instrumental in obtaining a pension for Johnson, and that Johnson in his remark about Sheridan's pension "discovered a black heart." He accuses Johnson of vanity and pride, and of unwillingness to allow any other man to be praised; his attack on Swift arose from jealousy of the Dean's great fame. He goes so far as to call Johnson a bully. Boswell wishes to bring the two men together, but admits that he cannot defend Johnson's remark, which he calls a "splenetic explosion." Johnson was willing to meet Sheridan, but the reconciliation never took place (See Ominous, pp. 132-33).

or interpretation, such as his examination of the story--which he shows on Johnson's authority to be erroneous--that the three-year-old Johnson made a poem about a trodden duckling (Life, I, 40-41). A more significant piece of refutation is his defense of what he calls Johnson's "perceptive quickness" (Life, I, 41) against those who contended that the defects in Johnson's eyesight prevented him from perceiving external objects. Boswell does not mention Sir John Hawkins, but he no doubt has in mind Hawkins' conviction that the feebleness of Johnson's eyesight deprived him of the poetic faculty and rendered suspect his criticism of poetry. As Sir John said of Johnson in his biography, "His organs, imperfect as they were, could convey to his imagination but little of that intelligence which forms the poetic character, and produces that enthusiasm which distinguishes it" (p. 238). Boswell demonstrates that Johnson, although actually blind in one eye and extremely nearsighted in the other, was able, by the "force of his attention and perceptive quickness"--that is, by his intellectual superiority--to see with "a nicety that is rarely to be found" (Life, I, 41). Boswell writes:

> When he and I were travelling in the Highlands of Scotland, and I pointed out to him a mountain which I observed resembled a cone, he corrected my inaccuracy, by shewing me, that it was indeed pointed at the top, but that one side of it was larger than the other. And the ladies with whom he was acquainted agree, that no man was more nicely and minutely critical

> in the elegance of female dress. . . . How false and contemptible then are all the remarks which have been made to the prejudice either of his candour or of his philosophy, founded upon a supposition that he was almost blind. (Life, I, 41-2)

This passage not only answers Sir John, but it also is one of the repeated expressions of Boswell's theme, that Johnson's intellectual vigor, his "perceptive quickness," in this instance, compensates for his physical defects. In the character sketch of Johnson which concludes the Life, Boswell puts the matter quite explicitly, saying, "He had the use only of one eye; yet so much does mind govern and even supply the deficiency of organs [my italics], that his visual perceptions, as far as they extended, were uncommonly quick and accurate" (Life, IV, 425).

Another of Boswell's habitual devices is to describe Johnson's virtues more circumstantially than he describes his faults. This is not to say that he suppresses Johnson's faults, but he keeps them in proportion. Certainly, Boswell is very graphic when he describes the sage at table:

> When at table, he was totally absorbed in the business of the moment; his looks seemed rivetted to his plate; nor would he, unless when in very high company, say one word, or even pay the least attention to what was said by others, till he had satisfied his appetite, which was so fierce, and indulged with such intenseness, that while in the act of eating, the veins of his forehead swelled, and generally a strong perspiration was visible. (Life, I, 468)

But having said this, Boswell subsequently refers to Johnson's gluttony only in general terms, and even the passage above is by no means as censorious as Sir John Hawkins' description of Johnson's passion for tea, which reads:

> Moreover, he was a lover of tea to an excess hardly credible; whenever it appeared, he was almost raving, and by his impatience to be served, his incessant calls for those ingredients which make that liquor palatable, and the haste with which he swallowed it down, he seldom failed to make that a fatigue to everyone else, which was intended as a general refreshment. (Hawkins, p. 147)

When the matter is of graver import, Boswell is often very circumspect. He omits a most circumstantial anecdote by the trustworthy friend of Johnson's youth, Edmund Hector, describing the one time Hector saw Johnson drunk. According to Hector, a relative whom Johnson knew to be a hard drinker visited Johnson and Hector at Birmingham, and Johnson suggested that Hector and he take turns in drinking with the fellow. Hector went first, but when Johnson arrived, Hector perceived that he had been drinking already, and by the time the evening was over, and Johnson had come to the room they shared at the inn, Hector could tell that Johnson was very drunk indeed. Of all this, Boswell says only that Hector reported of the young Johnson "that though he loved to exhilarate himself with wine, he never knew him [Johnson] intoxicated but once" (Life, I, 94).[9]

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[9] The anecdote in Hector's words can be found in Waingrow, pp. xlii-xliii.

In addition, although Boswell does give us many of Johnson's harsh retorts, he does not quote his worst outbursts verbatim. One evening, Johnson became infuriated with Boswell, who persisted in questioning him about death and a future state, a topic which often distressed Johnson. Johnson attacked Boswell so savagely that all the harsh observations Boswell had ever heard about Johnson's character crowded into his mind and he felt as if he had had his head bitten off by the lion, but of Johnson's words he only reports a few. Boswell writes:

> He was so provoked, that he said, 'Give us no more of this;' and was thrown into such a state of agitation, that he expressed himself in a way that alarmed and distressed me [my italics]; shewed an impatience that I should leave him, and . . . called to me sternly, 'Don't let us meet to-morrow.' (Life, II, 107)

In contrast to this manner of handling Johnson's asperity, Boswell gives a most detailed and delightful account of what might seem rather a minor incident in Johnson's life, a meeting with a fellow collegian, the prosy Oliver Edwards (Life, III, 302-309). To Boswell, however, the incident is significant because it shows Johnson's complaisant kindness to a man very different from himself. Edwards is settled, staid, unimaginative, content to live in the country, tied to a routine of professional obligations and domestic habits ("I consider supper," says Edwards, "a turnpike through which one must pass, in order to get to bed" [Life, III, 306]).

Boswell reports the conversation in which the two old men recall college days and review and compare their lives much as any two college classmates might. Yet Johnson, with his usual shrewdness, has taken Edwards' measure, and after Edwards has gone on his way, Johnson remarks to Boswell, "Here is a man who has passed through life without experience," a remark which can be glossed by what Johnson once wrote to Mrs. Thrale:

> It is said and said truly that Experience is the best teacher, and it is supposed that as life is lengthened, experience is encreased. But a closer inspection of human life will discover that time often passes without any incident which can much enlarge knowledge or rectify judgment. . . . Daily business adds no more to wisdom, than daily lesson to the learning of the teacher.[10]

Johnson recognized Edwards' limitations, his lack of the intellectual enterprise and the eager appetite for experience which distinguished Johnson himself, but in his diary, which Boswell quotes, Johnson indicates that he intends to pursue the acquaintance. For all his stodginess, Edwards is pleasant and communicative and as Johnson remarks, "I would rather have him with me than a more sensible man who will not talk readily" (Life, III, 307). Boswell's conclusion is that this interview, reported in such loving detail, "confirmed my opinion of Johnson's most humane and benevolent heart. His cordial and placid behaviour . . . shewed a kindliness of

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[10] Johnson's Letters, II, 429.

disposition very rare at an advanced age" (Life, III, 306).

A third device which Boswell employs to express the dynamics of Johnson's character is careful use of subordination, balance, and climax in his sentence structure. This care is especially evident in the character sketch of Johnson which concludes the Life.

Although Boswell claims in a footnote that he has adopted for the Life the greatest part of the Character written for his Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, a comparison of the two shows that he revised and expanded that earlier version with great care. He further revised and expanded the manuscript version which differs considerably from the character sketch as it finally appeared in 1791. This painstaking revision is somewhat unusual, for in the other passages I have compared, the differences between the manuscript and the Life are not so considerable.

The original character sketch in the Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides (Life, V, 16-20) rambles along without being unified by a thesis. Boswell describes the main features of Johnson's character in language which is familiar to us from the Life, but the description is much more compressed, and lesser matters receive undue attention. In describing Johnson's impressive manner of speaking, for instance, Boswell finds it necessary to bring in what Lord Pembroke had to say about Johnson's "bow-wow-way" and he elaborates unnecessarily

a comparison of Johnson's voice with the Canterbury organ. He then describes Johnson's physical appearance, including the minutiae of his travelling dress, and engages in more name-dropping when he justifies the inclusion of "minute particulars" by quoting Adam Smith. He makes a facetious reference to Johnson's oak stick and expatiates on Johnson's prejudices, which he regards with the patronizing superiority of a self-appointed citizen of the world. Taken as a whole the sketch is digressive, uneven in tone, and deficient in dignity.

The character sketch in the Life (IV, 425-30) is none of these. After an introductory paragraph, Boswell chooses to open with a physical description of Johnson, which sets off his strengths against his weaknesses, showing the strengths to be threatened but dominant (IV, 425). In the first sentence, the deformities, being listed in a long clause in end position, overshadow the otherwise noble figure, but great dignity is still apparent:

> His figure was large and well formed, and his countenance of the cast of an ancient statue; yet his appearance was rendered strange and somewhat uncouth, by convulsive cramps, by the scars of that distemper which it was once imagined the royal touch could cure, and by a slovenly mode of dress.

In the second sentence, the situation is reversed; the weakness of sight briefly noted in the first clause is overcome by the governing mind:

> He had the use only of one eye; yet so much does mind govern and even supply the deficiency of organs, that his visual perceptions, as far as they extended, were uncommonly quick and accurate.

The Hebrides version is more circumstantial but also more diffuse and less heroic:

> His person was large, robust, I may say approaching to the gigantick, and grown unwieldy from corpulency. His countenance was naturally of the cast of an ancient statue, but somewhat disfigured by the scars of that evil, which, it was formerly imagined, the royal touch could cure. He was now in his sixty-fourth year, and was become a little dull of hearing. His sight had always been somewhat weak; yet, so much does mind govern, and even supply the deficiency of organs, that his perceptions were uncommonly quick and accurate. His head, and sometimes also his body, shook with a kind of motion like the effect of a palsy: he appeared to be frequently disturbed by cramps, or convulsive contractions, of the nature of that distemper called St. Vitus's dance. (Life, V, 18)

This description does not suggest a "well-formed" figure, and the last sentence emphasizes Johnson's strange motions, which are very much subordinated in the sentence in the Life. The two remaining sentences do not appear in the manuscript or in the earlier sketch:

> So morbid was his temperament, that he never knew the natural joy of a free and vigorous use of his limbs: when he walked, it was like the struggling gait of one in fetters; when he rode, he had no command or direction of his horse, but was carried as if in a balloon. That with his constitution and habits of life he should have lived seventy-five years, is a proof that an inherent vivida vis is a powerful preservative of the human frame.

Here Johnson's infirmities are evoked in vivid imagery which depicts a man deprived even of command over his own limbs, fastened, to vary Yeats, to a disobedient animal. But this man lived to old age preserved by a vigorous and active mind. The Latin phrase occurs in Book I, l. 72 of De Rerum Natura. In praise of Epicurus, Lucretius wrote:

> His vigorous and active mind was hurl'd
> Beyond the flaming limits of the world.
> (Creech translation, I, 96-97)

The phrase is a powerful one, and there is no reason to believe that Boswell was unaware of its force. But the victory of the "vigorous and active mind" over the rebellious flesh was an uneasy one.

Boswell now enunciates the generalizations, not found in the Hebrides Character, which he had in the manuscript placed before the physical description. They at once sum up the significance of what goes before and give point to what follows:

> Man is, in general, made up of contradictory qualities; and these will ever shew themselves in strange succession, where a consistency in appearance at least, if not in reality, has not been attained by long habits of philosophical discipline. In proportion to the native vigour of the mind, the contradictory qualities will be the more prominent, and more difficult to be adjusted; and, therefore, we are not to wonder, that Johnson exhibited an eminent example of this remark which I have made upon human nature. (IV, 426)

A man of Johnson's vigor of mind, then, finds it more than ordinarily difficult to cultivate the "long habits of

philosophical discipline" which bring some real or apparent consistency to the contradictions inherent in human nature. By observing further that Johnson at different times "seemed a different man" Boswell reveals how powerful the contradictions were, but they <u>are</u> reconciled, Boswell is careful to show, for in "great and essential" articles, Johnson had "fully employed his mind, and settled certain principles of duty." Then Boswell surveys the complexity of Johnson's traits: superstition and incredulity, imagination and reason, a faith jealously defended and an independent spirit, prejudice and playfulness, choleric sternness and humane benevolence, melancholy and resolution, consciousness of superiority and disquiet, gravity and merriment, sophistry and zeal for truth. Boswell's handling of these contrasts is subtle. Balanced sentences establish the theme, but there is no strict parison. Sentence length varies greatly, as does the length of clauses. Boswell does not force Johnson's contradictions into strict balance and antithesis. No two sentences fall into the same pattern. Boswell admits a failing yet, by making a careful distinction, almost turns it into a virtue, albeit a negative one:

> He was prone to superstition, but not to credulity.

Or Boswell opposes two faculties with the victory going to the higher faculty:

> Though his imagination might incline him to a belief of the marvellous and the mysterious,

> his vigorous reason examined the evidence with jealousy.

Or he palliates Johnson's most serious faults, his narrowness and prejudice, by linking them with his zeal for sound religious and political principles or with his less stern virtue, his great humor. We note how carefully Boswell qualifies this admission of the traits most often condemned by Johnson's detractors. Boswell writes:

> He was a sincere and zealous Christian, of high Church-of-England and monarchical principles, which he would not tamely suffer to be questioned; and had, perhaps, at an early period, narrowed his mind somewhat too much, both as to religion and politicks. His being impressed with the danger of extreme latitude in either, though he was of a very independent spirit, occasioned his appearing somewhat unfavourable to the prevalence of that noble freedom of sentiment which is the best possession of man. Nor can it be denied, that he had many prejudices; which, however, frequently suggested many of his pointed sayings, that rather shew a playfulness of fancy than any settled malignity [italics mine].

Or he places the defects of Johnson's temper between his outstanding virtues, his respect for order and his benevolence:

> He was steady and inflexible in maintaining the obligations of religion and morality; both from a regard for the order of society, and from a veneration for the GREAT SOURCE of all order; correct, nay stern in his taste; hard to please and easily offended; impetuous and irritable in his temper, but of a most humane and benevolent heart, which shewed itself not only in a most liberal charity, as far as his circumstances would allow, but in a thousand instances of active benevolence. (IV, 426-27)[11]

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[11]This ordering of material is characteristic of many

How carefully Boswell chose each word of the character sketch is apparent in the history of this sentence, whose final form is as follows:

> But his superiority over other learned men consisted chiefly in what may be called the art of thinking, the art of using his mind; a certain continual power of seizing the useful substance of all that he knew, and exhibiting it in a clear and forcible manner; so that knowledge, which we often see to be no better than lumber in men of dull understanding, was, in him, true, evident, and actual wisdom (IV, 427-28).

Boswell's mastery of climax is fully evident--the series of appositives increasing in length, precision, and force is capped by a periodic clause whose rising and falling rhythm culminates in "true, evident, and actual wisdom." The antithesis between knowledge and wisdom forms the basis of the sentence, although the sentence itself, for all its art, is not formally symmetrical.

The manuscript version of the sentence shows Boswell groping for the final form. Phrase after phrase is crossed out, some words remaining entirely illegible. A tentative reconstruction reads: "But his superiority over other men ~~was~~ consisted chiefly in a certain ~~power of and a intellect~~ continual power of ~~applying his all that he knew in a clear and forcible~~ seising the useful ~~parts~~ substance of all that

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episodes of the Life. For example, the episode discussed earlier in this chapter in which Johnson rages at Boswell begins with an account of Johnson's most witty and good-humored conversation and ends with instances of Johnson's constant practice of apologizing to those whom his outbursts had offended (Life, II, 99-109).

he knew, and exhibiting it in a clear and forcible manner, so that knowledge which we often see to be no better than lumber in men of dull understanding was in him/true evident & actual wisdom."[12]

Note that "learned" was added later, as were the two appositives, "the art of thinking, the art of using his mind." The second clause flowed more readily from his pen, but the words "true" and "evident" are inserted above the line. Thus we see Boswell at work consciously building to his climaxes; throughout the character he frequently ends the sentence with reference to Johnson's strengths, as in the following:

> And, surely, when it is considered, that, 'amidst sickness and sorrow,' he exerted his faculties in so many works for the benefit of mankind . . . we must be astonished at his resolution (IV, 427).

The climax of the very long sentence which begins, "Exulting in his intellectual strength and dexterity . . . " is, of course, "his piety being constant and the ruling principle of all his conduct." Allusions to Johnson's preoccupation with the duties of the Christian life as a preparation for a better world sound a solemn repeated note in the character sket: "He was a sincere and zealous Christian . . . steady and inflexible in maintaining the obligations of religion and morality . . . the solemn text, 'of him to whom much is given, much will be required,' seems to have been ever present to his mind . . . 'If in this life only he had hope, he was of all men most miserable.'"

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[12] MS of Life, M 144 in Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, pp. 1042-43.

In Boswell's view, Johnson's Christianity was central to what Boswell calls "long habits of philosophical discipline." After displaying all the contradictions of Johnson's character, Boswell shows them reconciled by his constant piety. The vocabulary of government and control is conspicuous throughout the character sketch: "so much does mind govern . . . long habits of philosophical discipline . . . settled certain principles of duty . . . steady and inflexible . . . resolution." Admiration and reverence are the due of such a man, in whom is made manifest the dignity of human nature, the triumph of will over matter, of sure identity over contradiction, of reason over the ills of body and mind, of hope over fear of death.

Literary Devices: The Heroic Mode

Johnson was indeed a hero to Boswell and in the Life Boswell often uses classical and Christian allusions to embody his sense of Johnson's nobility. We have already seen that in the character sketch Boswell tells us that Johnson's countenance was "of the cast of an ancient statue" and that "an inherent vivida vis" preserved him despite his physical defects. Two other passages are particularly striking both in their elevation and in the fact that they express Boswell's central conviction about Johnson's intellectual vigor--that it prevailed over great odds but that it

prevailed. The first passage is the climax of Boswell's extended discussion of Johnson's melancholy, in which Boswell attempts to demonstrate, even against the testimony of Johnson himself,that this melancholy was never madness (Life, I, 63-66). Boswell came to be fully aware of Johnson's lifelong distress,even going so far as to say that "all his labours, and all his enjoyments, were but temporary interruptions of its baleful influence." But, as Professor Waingrow says, "Boswell emphatically refused the allegation of insanity in Johnson and instead presented him as ever rising above his affliction" (Waingrow, p. xlviii). Boswell ingeniously argues that even when the melancholy was at its worst, Johnson was able to describe it in a Latin paper which he put into the hands of his godfather, Dr. Swinfen, a paper remarkable for what Boswell calls "extraordinary acuteness, research, and eloquence" (Life, I, 64). Boswell then quotes a Dutch physician's distinction between a disorder which affects only the imagination and spirits and one which clouds the judgment. Johnson's judgment was never clouded. To be sure, Boswell continues, those who suffer from melancholy often imagine that they are experiencing the evils which they most fear, and Johnson was no exception. Since his "supreme enjoyment was the exercise of his reason," Boswell explains, "the disturbance or obscuration of that faculty was the evil most to be dreaded" (Life, I, 66).

Johnson, according to Boswell, dreaded insanity and even fancied himself seized by it "when he was giving proofs of a more than ordinary soundness and vigour of judgment" (Life, I, 66). Boswell regrets that even Johnson's friends, not to speak of his enemies, gave credence to Johnson's unfounded apprehensions. For example, although Boswell generally regarded Edmund Hector's reminiscences of Johnson as accurate, he rejects Hector's intimations that Johnson was disordered in his mind during his time in Birmingham (Waingrow, p. xl, p. 91). He refuses to believe even Johnson's own suspicions.

In his defense of Johnson's essential sanity, Boswell candidly describes Johnson's sufferings, but he does not inquire very curiously into their origin, except to suggest that they arose from some defect in Johnson's nervous system, "that inexplicable part of our frame." For analysis he substitutes the exclamation: "How wonderful, how unsearchable are the ways of GOD!" (I, 64). Johnson's being blessed with powers almost superhuman but afflicted with so dire a malady is ultimately a mystery. "I have a wonderful superstitious love of mystery" (Extremes, p. 225), Boswell once said of himself, a trait of which he did not entirely approve, since it seems to originate in "the cloudy darkness of my own mind" (Extremes, p. 225). But with his usual ability to be aware of and to accept his own variety, he did not repress this love of mystery. It enters into his image of Johnson's

character. However sharply and dramatically he presents the "minute particulars" which combine to form a "Flemish picture" of his friend, he conveys not the assumption of contemporary philosophers that empiricism can explain human nature as clearly as it explains optics or celestial mechanics, but awareness that human personality is ultimately divine. At the end of this long passage (I, 66) on Johnson's melancholy, he says:

> Amidst the oppression and distraction of . . . disease . . . Johnson . . . never failed to display all the varieties of intellectual excellence. In his march through this world to a better,his mind still appeared grand and brilliant, and impressed all around him with the truth of Virgil's noble sentiment--
> Igneus est ollis vigor et coelestis origo [Aeneid, VI, 730].

In the passage from Virgil in which this line occurs, Anchises explains to Aeneas the doctrine that all created things partake of the divine fire. In Dryden's translation:

> Know, first, that heav'n, and earth's compacted frame,
> And flowing waters, and the starry flame,
> And both the radiant lights, one common soul
> Inspires and feeds, and animates the whole.
> This active mind, infus'd thro all the space,
> Unites and mingles with the mighty mass.
> Hence men and beasts the breath of life obtain
> And birds of air, and monsters of the main.
> Th' ethereal vigor is in all the same
> And every soul is fill'd with equal flame;
> (VI, 980-89).[13]

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[13] The Poetical Works of Dryden, ed. by George R. Noyes, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1950), pp. 606-07.

Johnson's life is seen, not as of this world only, but as the "march through this world to a better" of a Christian hero, who must forever be on his guard to fight the good fight. He is, by the mysterious will of God, afflicted with maladies of mind and body. Like St. Paul, Boswell asserts, Johnson was "not free from propensities which were ever 'warring against the law of his mind'" (Life, IV, 396), and in another place, Boswell compares Johnson to a saint involved in "religious warfare" (Life, II, 360). The most famous expression, however, of the contradictions and conflicts of Johnson's nature is Boswell's epic simile comparing Johnson's judgment to a gladiator:

> His mind resembled the vast amphitheatre, the Colisaeum [sic] at Rome. In the centre stood his judgement, which, like a mighty gladiator, combated [sic] those apprehensions, that, like the wild beasts of the Arena, were all around in cells, ready to be let out upon him. After a conflict, he drove them back into their dens; but not killing them, they were still assailing him. (Life, II, 106)

The most terrible apprehensions which assailed Johnson were his fears of death and eternal judgment. As Boswell says, "He never had a moment in which death was not terrible to him" (Life, III, 153). In the Life, Boswell had to come to terms with Johnson's fears, which seemed to many of Johnson's critics to demonstrate a pusillanimity unworthy a moralist and Christian.[14] Boswell, however, succeeds in reconciling

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[14]Maurice J. Quinlan, "On the Reception of Prayers and Meditations," JEGP,52 (1953), 125-39.

Johnson's fears with his genuine heroism by showing his inner life as an epic struggle. By likening Johnson's judgment, his highest faculty, to a tireless and fearless combatant and Johnson's apprehensions, his failings, to lower beings--wild beasts--Boswell succeeds in defining Johnson's courage not as the absence of fear but as the struggle to dominate fear. With the simile of the gladiator, he accomplishes the further purpose of giving Johnson's notorious asperity an heroic dimension. This simile occurs in the scene, already alluded to earlier in this chapter, in which Johnson speaks so harshly to Boswell that Boswell is completely dismayed, and remembers, as he puts it, "all the harsh observations which I had ever heard made upon his [Johnson's] character" (Life, II, 107). Boswell describes the effect that Johnson's choler could have on the most loyal of admirers, yet he puts that choler in proportion by showing that it boiled up from the heroic mental struggle in which the victories of the judgment were never final, but in which fears were driven back but not slain.

Boswell makes the contrast between Johnson's lifelong fear of death and his final triumph over it very marked, by opening the last section of the Life with a powerful statement of Johnson's reluctance to face the end: "Death had always been to him an object of terrour; so that, by no means happy, he still clung to life with an eagerness at which many have wondered" (Life, IV, 394). He goes on to

summarize Johnson's view of the attitude a wise man should take toward the future life, an attitude defended as "truly rational" which "may, perhaps, impress the unthinking with seriousness"(Life, IV, 395). Johnson urges that confidence of salvation is not suitable to the character of "a brave, a wise, or a good man." Bravery can "avail nothing"; wisdom is acutely conscious of faults; goodness wishes always to be better and regards every fault as deliberate. If the good tremble, says Johnson, what must be the condition of :

> him whose heart will not suffer him to rank himself among the best, or among the good. Such must be his dread of the approaching trial, as will leave him little attention to the opinion of those whom he is leaving for ever; and the serenity that is not felt, it can be no virtue to feign [my italics]. (IV, 395)

By this quotation from Johnson, Boswell again enlarges the definition of courage. A brave man, a hero, may, without staining his virtue, fear God and His judgment.

The end of this heroic struggle was, however, a peaceful death. Boswell was not present at Johnson's deathbed, but he gives the testimony of many witnesses that, as Dr. Brocklesby put it, "All his fears were calmed and absorbed by the prevalence of his faith, and his trust in the merits and propitiation of JESUS CHRIST" (Life, IV, 416). In the end Johnson's virtues, especially his piety--which was "the ruling principle of all his conduct," as Boswell says in the

character sketch--prevailed in the long and heroic gladiatorial combat which was Johnson's inner life.

The Comic Mode

Reverence is, to be sure, the final word in the Life of Johnson. Boswell presents Johnson as a hero, and his avowed purpose in writing the Life was to erect a worthy monument to him. All this is true, and yet it is only part of the truth. The Life is also richly comic, and Boswell's comedy serves his end of presenting a well-proportioned delineation of Johnson's character by allowing the reader to regard him not only with awe, but with detached yet affectionate laughter.

I do not intend to discuss Johnson's own wit and humor. As Boswell himself recognized from the first and as all Johnson's intimates testify, Johnson was the most entertaining of companions, and it is difficult to resist the temptation to compile an anthology of his wit. Such examples as I might choose would no doubt be familiar to every reader of the Life. Indeed, so intense was Johnson's sense of the ludicrous that Boswell sometimes can scarcely appreciate the joke. When the notion of Langton the testator roused Johnson to vast, uncontrollable laughter which, as Boswell says, "seemed to resound from Temple-bar to Fleet-ditch" (Life, II, 262), Boswell was evidently puzzled. But while

Boswell's portrait of Johnson, of course, would not be complete without a record of Johnson's moments of hilarity and his sallies of wit, Boswell does not merely preserve Johnson's words; he presents Johnson himself in a comic light. In the second chapter I spoke of Boswell's detachment as he observed his own varying states of mind. The detachment everywhere pervades the Life of Johnson. As Paul Kent Alkon has pointed out, Boswell expertly manages the reader's aesthetic distance from the figure of Johnson by constructing many of his scenes in such a way that the reader is invited to pass judgment on Johnson's opinions and to smile at Johnson's vagaries.[15] Boswell has actually been accused of lacking humor,[16] but if humor includes the ability to stand back from one's most cherished persons and ideas and to see what is comic in them, then Boswell possessed humor in abundance. Yet Boswell's humor is not satirical. Full of wonder at the variety of human nature and of admiration for human excellence wherever he finds it, he is more likely to praise men for their virtues than to heap ridicule on their faults. Yet he relishes human particularities--"the minute

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[15]"Boswell's Control of Aesthetic Distance," Univ. of Toronto Quarterly, 38 (1969), 174-191.

[16]By A.S.F. Gow, for one. See "The Unknown Johnson," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Boswell's Life of Johnson, p. 84.

diversities in everything are wonderful." As a philosophical observer of human nature, he combines a warm heart with a cool head and a sharp eye. He notices everything, and he is an especially keen observer of the little incongruities which mark the presence of a figure as gigantic as Johnson in a social world attentive to graceful decorum. Johnson the hero was marching to a better world, but Johnson the social animal often found himself in the drawing rooms of this world. Boswell insisted that Johnson was "truly social," but he does not pretend that he was inconspicuous. Johnson was too big, too rough, too remarkable, too much like a natural force; Boswell likes to compare him to a thunderstorm: "The cloud was charged with sulphureous vapour, which was afterwards to burst in thunder" (Life, III, 315).

Johnson and Boswell both respected the conventions governing proper behavior in company; Johnson even considered himself a connoisseur of true politeness and plumed himself upon being "a good-humoured fellow." Many of the qualities prized in the drawing room were, however, as Johnson fully recognized, negative ones. In Rambler No. 72, he observes that "much of human life passes in little incidents, cursory conversation, slight business, and casual amusements." The good-humoured man in most social gatherings pleases without offending; even great gaiety is too exhausting for every day. It is better not to shine in any way for "we are most inclined

to love when we have nothing to fear" (Rambler No. 72).

Thus an amiable man is flexible, ready to please and be pleased, cheerful, and communicative without great wit, attentive to the sensibilities of the company. Such a man would follow the flow of the conversation, participating fully without permitting himself to insist on his own preoccupations. How unlike such a man Johnson could be is shown amusingly in the conversation for the night of April 7, 1775 (Life, II, 347-48). Someone, talking of Ossian's poetry, remarked that it could not be as old as it purported to be since it does not mention the wolf. Johnson, led to think of other wild animals, broke into an earnest discussion between Sir Joshua Reynolds and Bennett Langton with a remark about bears. They went on with their conversation while Johnson persisted, "and Bear ('like a word in a catch', as Beauclerk said,) was repeatedly heard at intervals, which coming from him who, by those who did not know him, had been so often assimilated to that ferocious animal, while we who were sitting around could hardly stifle laughter, produced a very ludicrous effect."

This scene and others like it minimize Johnson's faults, making them seem harmless and amusing foibles. Boswell's conception of Johnson's character emphasizes the power of his mind and of his moral precepts; Johnson by his writings and conversations makes men better and wiser. But Johnson's

faults have no real power to harm others, and, indeed, are sometimes laughable. Boswell is perfectly serious about the sufferings Johnson himself endured from his melancholy and his fear of death, but Johnson's harshness of manner, his bearlike quality, though it might sometimes be disturbing, can be regarded with indulgence. For instance, during a delightful evening at Mrs. Garrick's, Johnson's pride and anger are aroused, and Boswell describes the scene. Speaking of the wife of Dr. John Campbell, who had been a printer's devil, Johnson said earnestly, "The woman had a bottom of good sense" (Life, IV, 99). And Boswell goes on:

> The word bottom thus introduced, was so ludicrous when contrasted with his gravity, that most of us could not forbear tittering and laughing. . . . His pride could not bear that any expression of his should excite ridicule, when he did not intend it; he therefore resolved to assume and exercise despotick power, glanced sternly around, and called out in a strong tone, 'Where's the merriment?' Then collecting himself, and looking aweful, to make us feel how he could impose restraint, and as it were searching his mind for a still more ludicrous word, he slowly pronounced, 'I say the woman was fundamentally sensible;' as if he had said, hear this now, and laugh if you dare. We all sat composed as at a funeral (Life, IV, 99).

True, Johnson silenced the company, but Boswell, describing the scene with his characteristic detachment and sharp observation, displays only amusement at Johnson's desire to "exercise despotick control" and to "impose restraint." No one in the room is really afraid of Johnson or injured by him.

In fact, as Boswell triumphantly demonstrates in the episode of the dinner with Wilkes, Johnson is so far from being essentially malevolent and savage that, difficult as his temper was on occasion, he could be managed. In this scene, Boswell does not deny that Johnson can be unpleasantly choleric; all the suspense of the proceedings depends upon the reader's appreciation of the difficulty of Boswell's task in persuading Johnson to overcome his prejudices and not only to dine with Wilkes, but to be pleased with his company.

Sven Eric Molin has divided the scene into a Prologue and Epilogue and five acts, comparing it with a comedy of manners. I shall follow Molin's division in giving my own analysis.[17]

In the Prologue ("I am now to record. . . . see them both here" [Life, III, 64-65]), Boswell expresses his esteem for both men and his desire to bring them together. "How to manage it," he says, "was a nice and difficult matter." He obtains the permission of the Messieurs Dilly to invite Johnson to a dinner at which Wilkes is to be present. Act I, Scene i ("Notwithstanding the high veneration . . . on the day appointed" [Life, III, 65-66]) shows Boswell's penetration into Johnson's character, and his indirect way of taking advantage of what he calls Johnson's

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[17]"Boswell's Account of the Johnson-Wilkes Meeting," SEL, 3 (1963), 307-22, esp. p. 314.

"spirit of contradiction." Had he come to Johnson with a direct proposal, he knew Johnson would fly into a passion, and perhaps answer, "Dine with Jack Wilkes, Sir! I'd as soon dine with Jack Ketch." Boswell therefore subtly suggests that Johnson would not wish to accept the Dillys' invitation, knowing that the company might not be to his taste, and that, in fact, Jack Wilkes might be there. Johnson is offended and exclaims: "And if Jack Wilkes should be there, what is that to me, Sir? My dear friend, let us have no more of this. I am sorry to be angry with you; but really it is treating me strangely to talk to me as if I could not meet any company whatever occasionally." Boswell is successful. But in Act I, Scene ii ("Upon the much expected Wednesday. . . . set out for Gretna Green" [Life, III, 66-68]), a complication arises. Johnson has forgotten his invitation to dine and has promised to stay home with Mrs. Williams. Boswell must exert all his charm to persuade that peevish lady to release Johnson, ever so attentive to her wishes, from his promise. He succeeds, and bears Johnson off with as much exultation as if he had managed to induce an heiress to elope with him. Act II, Scene i ("When we entered . . . might chance to meet" [Life, III, 68]) brings another complication. Johnson, actually on the spot, was confounded by the sight of an American, Arthur Lee, and of Wilkes himself. He had difficulty restraining himself, and settled down upon a window seat with a book, either to read, or as Boswell suggests, to compose himself. But Boswell's

clever management had put Johnson in an awkward position. As Boswell says, Johnson "no doubt recollected his having rated me for supposing that he could be at all disconcerted by any company, and he, therefore, resolutely set himself to behave quite as an easy man of the world." In Act II, Scene ii ("The cheering sound . . . drink his small beer" [Life, III, 68-70]), Wilkes himself takes over, behaving so politely to Johnson that Johnson is won over. His expression changes from "surly virtue" to "complacency." Acts III, IV, and V[18] show the growing friendship of Johnson and Wilkes. The conversation ranges from subject to subject, always pleasant, always informative, and Wilkes and Johnson even join together to tease Boswell. Matters are out of Boswell's hands; he is chiefly an observer. In the Epilogue ("This record . . . agreeable day he had passed" [Life, III, 78-79]), Boswell congratulates himself on being able to reconcile political enemies who, nevertheless, had a great deal in common--" classical learning, modern literature, wit, and humour, and ready repartee," as Boswell phrases it.

Like many comedies, this one ends in joy and reconciliation. The conflict between Johnson's asperity and his benevolent good nature is expressed in the scene in which Boswell shows him reading--or pretending to read--as he tries to compose himself, but he does compose himself, and the

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[18] Act III, "Somebody observed. . . . member for Aylesbury" (Life, III, 70-73); Act IV, "Dr. Johnson and Mr. Wilkes . . . 'And we ashamed of him'" (Life, III, 73-77); Act V, "They were quite frank. . . . charms of the fair Quaker" (Life, III, 77-78).

little drama ends, not in loss, as in the breach with Sheridan, but in gain. The two men, Johnson and Wilkes, do not often meet, but Boswell records another cordial evening at Dilly's on May 8, 1781 (Life, IV, 101-07).

Johnson, whose power of mind and moral authority are so great, is shown in this scene to have been cleverly manipulated by Boswell. The question is whether Boswell goes too far and diminishes Johnson by placing him in this comic light. Donald Greene has suggested that Boswell was throughout the Life subtly attempting to undercut the master, to bring him down to size.[19] I would like to argue that Boswell succeeds in humanizing Johnson, not in diminishing him. In the first place, as I have already suggested, Boswell's comic scenes suggest the actual effect Johnson's gigantic presence sometimes created in the decorous social world of his day. Second, Boswell's humor is not satirical but kindly. As Stuart Tave has pointed out in The Amiable Humorist,[20] good-natured and benevolent men of the eighteenth century began to value kindly and sympathetic laughter as an expression of large-hearted humanity. They frowned on the ridicule of the satirist and the mere wit, which expresses some degree of contempt for its object. The follies of such a figure as Sterne's Uncle Toby are not to be ridiculed;

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[19]See "Reflections on a Literary Anniversary" in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Boswell's Life of Johnson, pp. 97-103, esp. pp. 100-101.

[20](Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960.)

they represent the universal human fondness for "hobby horses." Johnson is a more effectual figure than Uncle Toby, but as a human being he is subject to the little vanities and quirks which are inseparable from human nature. To laugh at these is to acknowledge a common humanity with Johnson. Johnson's great virtues are in no way lessened by his little particularities, and his more serious failings seem less grave when he is regarded as sometimes comic. Like the plays of Shakespeare, to use Johnson's well-known phrase, the Life exhibits "the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination."

The Dramatic Mode

In October, 1780, Boswell wrote in his journal, "I told Erskine I was to write Dr. Johnson's life in scenes. He approved" (PP 14, 131). It is a commonplace of Boswell criticism that the Life is dramatic. We have seen that Professor Molin argues persuasively that such a scene as the Wilkes episode can be divided into the parts of a comedy, the entrance, the working up of the plot, the height and full growth, and the unravelling, plus a prologue and an epilogue (pp. 312-314). The dialogue is brilliant, being no less than the talk of some of the best talkers of the

time. The stage directions are concise and sharply observed. Boswell as an artist is at his best in creating vivid scenes which stick in the memory and bring Johnson alive. Who will easily forget the frisk with Beauclerk and Langton, the conversation with the boy who would give what he had to know about Jason and the Argonauts, the meeting at Tom Davies'? While granting Boswell's art in constructing these small scenes, however, many critics have found the Life as a whole diffuse and disunified.[21] In response to this kind of criticism, Professor Rader, in the essay from which I have already quoted at the beginning of this chapter, has convincingly argued that it is the image of Johnson, Boswell's imaginative conception of Johnson's character, which unifies the Life. In this chapter, I have suggested that this conception is dynamic, that Boswell shows the struggle between Johnson's great strengths and his weaknesses by the use of devices both rhetorical and literary. In doing so, he gives the Life the drama of an inner conflict which is resolved only in Johnson's peaceful death. The progress of the Life is undeniably episodic. In his conflicts, Johnson, on the whole, seems neither to gain nor to lose ground until the very end, but Boswell's presentation of the drama of Johnson's inner life nevertheless helps to give the Life artistic wholeness.

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[21]See Altick, pp. 66-70.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In the Life of Johnson, Boswell presents an image of the "complex magnitude" of Samuel Johnson's character, an image which arouses in many readers the same wonder and reverence that contemplation of the living Johnson aroused in the biographer himself. As we have seen, Boswell's reverence for Johnson very probably welled up from the younger man's profound desire to conquer his inexplicable melancholy, often accompanied by religious skepticism, which continually threatened to deprive human life of meaning and human nature of dignity. The speculations in which Boswell in his role as philosophical observer of human nature loved to engage led him, in moods of dejection, to fear that man is a predestined creature, doomed to annihilation, unable to form his own character by making rational choices of the good. But his observations of men of great force of character, men like Samuel Johnson, nourished his hope that man can be free, rational, and powerful.

Long study of Johnson, however, revealed to Boswell that the massive solidity of the great man's character was an achievement, a victory wrested from heroic struggle with

faults, deformities, and contradictions.[1] To present these faults, deformities and contradictions truthfully while subordinating them to Johnson's overriding virtues, especially his intellectual vigor and his great power for good, was the task facing Johnson's biographer. This task was the more difficult because Johnson's professed friends, Mrs. Piozzi and Sir John Hawkins, had published biographical works which, Boswell was convinced, distorted and even defamed Johnson's character by allowing his faults to overshadow his essential benevolence and beneficence.

Fortunately, Boswell possessed not only a balanced and coherent conception of Johnson's character but the imaginative power to re-create that character as it displayed itself in the incidents of daily life. Boswell's lifelong concern with the quality of the moment, with realizing all the possibilities of the here and now and getting as much as he could onto paper, is evident in the form of the Life, in which he invests every scene with vitality and significance. He consciously chose in his great work to follow Johnson, insofar as materials permitted, day by day. As he tells the reader at the very beginning of the book,

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[1] I borrow the word achievement from Walter Jackson Bate, The Achievement of Samuel Johnson (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1955). In a new book, Form and Purpose in Boswell's Biographical Works (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972), William R. Siebenschuh shows Johnson's faults as being foils to his virtues, a somewhat less dynamic conception of Boswell's treatment than mine.

he decided not to melt the various materials of which the Life is composed into a mass, into a smooth and connected narrative, despite his belief that doing so would gain him "merit" from the critics. Rather, he deliberately chose to structure the Life as a largely chronological arrangement of narrative, authorial comment, conversation, and various documents and letters written both by Johnson and by those who knew him. Thus the reader would be enabled, as it were, to live over Johnson's life with him, to be present with the great man as he ate or conversed or sat musing in solitude (see Life, I, 28-30). The complexities and contradictions of such a character as Johnson's, Boswell thought, could be displayed in their rich reality only by a piling up of what, taken singly, appear to be minutiae but, taken together, form a realistic and lovingly detailed "Flemish picture."

Despite this inclusiveness, Boswell did choose and arrange his particulars in such a way as to bring out the larger consistency achieved by Johnson, a consistency which did not smooth out the complexities and contradictions but which transcended them. Using a variety of rhetorical and literary devices, Boswell conveys to the reader his perception of Johnson's ever-renewed struggle to keep at bay the forces which threatened him. Reason, faith, and benevolence prevail over melancholy, fear of death, and choler but final victory comes only in the last days of Johnson's

long life. The structure of the Life, admittedly episodic, nevertheless embodies a coherent view of Johnson's character as it appeared in his march through this world to a better. There is no need to claim that the Life has the shapely perfection of a well-wrought urn but neither is it a heap of unselected detail whose unity lies only in the fact that the "real" Samuel Johnson was a man of unusual integrity. As Professor Siebenschuh puts it, "The portrait of Johnson in the Life is a creation in every sense of the term that can properly be applied to a factual work."[2]

If the portrait of Johnson is a creation, a final, irresistible question arises. Does Boswell misrepresent Johnson? If Boswell's reverence for Johnson's power to master himself and to do good to others arose from Boswell's own psychological need to see cherished values and aspirations embodied in a living human being, then can his conception of Johnson's character be trusted? After bringing together letters and papers which show that Boswell knew more about Johnson than he told in the Life, Marshall Waingrow concludes inconclusively that "no matter how many new facts are brought to light, Samuel Johnson will always be somebody's hypothesis. And none has pleased so many, or is likely to please so long, as Boswell's" (p. 1). Not everyone is pleased, however. Boswell's most extreme critic,

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[2]Form and Purpose in Boswell's Biographical Works, p. 51.

Donald Greene, accuses Boswell of diminishing Johnson, of showing him as sentimental in his attachment to Tetty and uncritical and simple-minded in his political views; the "real" Johnson, Greene implies, was far more turbulent, yet more tough-minded, and intelligent than Boswell could understand.[3] And in his review of Waingrow's volume, Greene goes beyond his accusation that Boswell misunderstands and diminishes Johnson to claim that he is guilty of outright distortion and suppression of facts.[4] Unquestionably, as we have seen, Boswell omits some facts that a modern biographer, not bound even by Boswell's shaky sense of decorum, would have included. Again, Boswell unquestionably suppresses or denies any intimation that Johnson was at any time impaired in his judgment, for, to Boswell, it was necessary to show that Johnson's judgment always prevailed over his melancholy. And it is quite possible that Boswell, who was far from being a powerful and consistent thinker and who was a sentimental Tory and High Churchman, did not fully understand the evolution of Johnson's thought.

But to Boswell's defense we must bring our knowledge that Boswell was scrupulous in ascertaining the authenticity of the facts he did include--and he included a great many--

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[3]"Reflections on a Literary Anniversary."

[4]"The Making of Boswell's Life of Johnson."

and that he was, in spite of his reverence for Johnson, a detached and truthful observer and recorder. His abiding love of truth was the finest trait of his difficult, fragmented character. And he was an artist who can make us see Johnson. Far from diminishing Johnson, he presents in Johnson's conversation a lively portrayal of great intellectual vigor. In truth, the more deeply we immerse ourselves in the study of Johnson's life and of his writings, his moral writings in particular, the more we realize that Boswell, in spite of his own psychological difficulties, his somewhat limited vision, and his omission of certain facts, understands the essential Johnson and embodies it in his portrayal of Johnson's character. He shows us Johnson's moral force, his great power to transcend his own huge faults and to make men better and wiser by his writing and conversation. The Life delights and instructs its readers by bodying forth in rich circumstantial detail the character of a man who daily demonstrated the human potential for prevailing over the forces within man that threaten human freedom, dignity, and reason.

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