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The Society produces a newsletter, *The Southern Johnsonian*, which is sent to members four times a year. It is also available on the Society's website.

The Johnson Society of Australia

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Papers

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Introduction

The offerings in this latest collection of papers presented to the Johnson Society of Australia span four years, 2002 to 2005. I am grateful to the writers who have made their work available to us, and to some in particular who have endured my tinkering with their texts.

Even a modest publication of oral materials requires some uniformity of presentation to do the papers and presenters justice in print, and practical limitations sometimes also govern excisions. It is hoped that readers will find good reading in the texts supplied, and a satisfactory supplement to or substitute for the experience of hearing the original presentation.

As of Volume 7 of the *Papers* (2005), we are including the publication of texts of the annual Fleeman Lectures, rather than publishing them separately, as formerly. Two Fleeman Lectures have been published in this manner (2002: John Hardy – v.7; 2003: Bryan O’Connor – v.8). The next one due for publication would ordinarily have been Professor Richard Wendorf’s 2004 Fleeman Memorial Lecture, ‘Samuel Johnson Abandons the Capital’, but there were other publication plans for this paper and Professor Wendorf was unable to allow us to include the text in our series. Curious readers may wish to track down his essay ‘Abandoning the Capital in Eighteenth Century London’ in eds. Kevin Sharpe and Steven Zwicker, *Reading Society and Politics in early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2003). Professor Wendorf also gave a talk entitled ‘Abandoning the Capital: Changes in English Printing Conventions in the Eighteenth Century’ at the Editorial Institute at Boston University in November 2006. It sounds as if he is working on a larger project for which he ultimately intends his Johnson material.

The following are some talks at JSA Seminars of which texts have not appeared in our published papers and of which versions have been published elsewhere. I will be happy to be informed of and to advise of any others:

1994: Clive Probyn: Johnson and Disgust – see ‘Surfacing and Falling into Matter: Johnson, Swift, Disgust and Beyond’, *Mattoid*, 48: The Disgust Issue (n.d., 1994; 37-43)

2002: Paul Tankard: Johnson and Memory – see ‘Samuel Johnson’s History of Memory’, in *Studies in Philology*, 102: 1 (Winter, 2005), 110-42

2005: Nicholas Hudson: ‘Johnson and the Price of Things’ – see *Tirra Lirra*, v. 14 (Dec. 2005). 

2005: Paul Tankard: Reading the Dictionary (see ‘Contexts for Johnson’s *Dictionary*’, in *Genre*, 35:2 (Summer, 2002), 253-82.

In the next volume of *JSA Papers* I hope to include Alan Saunders’ 2006 Fleeman Memorial Lecture, ‘Doing Philosophy with Samuel Johnson’, as well as seminar papers by Kate Burrige, John Wiltshire and myself. Other presenters are encouraged to send texts to me – preferably electronically, to paul.tankard@stonebow.otago.ac.nz – to forestall my importing them.

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The Johnson Society of Australia

**The David Fleeman Memorial Lecture
2005**

'Human Wishes': Samuels Beckett and Johnson

CHRIS ACKERLEY

The David Fleeman Memorial Lecture

The David Fleeman Memorial Lecture is presented annually by the Johnson Society of Australia in memory of the distinguished British Johnsonian editor and bibliographer who was the Society's first Patron. Each lecture is given by a scholar of international reputation.

The twelfth Fleeman Memorial Lecture was delivered in Melbourne at the English Speaking Union on 17 September 2005 by Dr Chris Ackerley.

Chris Ackerley is Professor, and former Head of Department, of English at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. His office is some five hundred metres from where he was born (the maternity ward, now a university hostel), which occasionally gives rise to ironic thoughts about how far he has come in life. He teaches Modernism and Irish Literature, in particular. His major scholarly interest is annotation, especially that of the works of Malcolm Lowry and Samuel Beckett. His recent publications have included the Grove Press *Companion to Samuel Beckett* (2005; reprinted as the *Faber Companion*, 2006), and *Obscure Locks; Simple Keys: The Annotated 'Watt'* (2005). The present paper is the consequence of several recent visits to the University of Reading, where many of Beckett's manuscripts, including his Johnsoniana, await the unw[e]ary.

To Professor Ackerley's great satisfaction, the delivery of his Fleeman Lecture was accompanied by a rehearsed reading of Beckett's short play about Johnson, *Human Wishes*, which is discussed in the lecture. The performance starred Kate Burridge, Bronwen Hickman, Meg Probyn and Bryan Reid.

'Human Wishes': Samuels Beckett and Johnson

Chris Ackerley

I. 'Ein Felsenkind zu finden': Samuel Beckett and Samuel Johnson

My contact with Johnson arose in bygone student days, when courses were year-long, internal assessment was minimal, and there was time to chase pretty girls and to read things outside the course. Happily, I occasionally forsook the former for the latter, and, following up a casual reference in a lecture, on a topic long forgotten, I found myself in the library with a large tome entitled *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, which distracted me from lectures and pretty girls for the next three weeks. If education is defined as that which remains when the lectures (and girls) are long forgotten, then this for me was a formative moment. I regret immensely that today's students do not have that chance.

Until recently, that was my only full reading of the *Life*, but as I transmogrified into a Modernist I had occasion to refer to it. Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, for instance, alludes to the story (which Johnson 'poh-pohed') of the scorpion surrounded by a ring of fire stinging itself to death (*Life* II, 54-55);¹ but Lowry also picks up details from Johnson's discussions with Monboddo. Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, an otherwise irritating book, offers the unforgettable vignette of its eponymous hero[ine] standing outside Bolt Court and watching the shadows of Johnson, Boswell and Mrs Williams play upon the window. Ezra Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* visits Fleet Street, where the Johnsonian cultivation of Pierian roses, in excruciating rhyme, is replaced by the sale of 'half-hoses'. And Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, the most exquisite Modernist work of all, has for an epigraph the episode of the young man running around town, shooting cats, and Johnson's reflection: 'But Hodge shan't be shot, no, no, Hodge shall not be shot' (*Life* IV, 197).

Pale Fire is a curiosity, a novel in the guise of an old-fashioned edition of a poem in five hundred couplets by one John Shade, who indeed is shot, but who is said to resemble (among others) his neighbour, Judge Goldsworth, a recently-excavated ancestor of mankind, the dishevelled hag who slaps out the slop in the student cafeteria – and Samuel Johnson. His poem is followed by a commentary by one Charles Kinbote, a madman who fancies himself the ex-king of Zembla and whose obsession with his literary neighbour makes Boswell seem reticent by comparison. *Pale Fire*, Nabokov's most complex treatment of the interpenetration of life and art, illustrates the cliché, that without Boswell – no Johnson, as Nabokov reflects the radiant moonlight of the Commentary (its pale fire) back

onto the poem to illustrate the deeper truth that the writer and not the biographer or critic is the imaginative centre of the work (both works).

Of all the Modernists, the one most deeply influenced by Johnson shares his Christian name. (For the triskaidekaphiliac, the names 'Samuel Beckett' and 'Samuel Johnson' each comprise thirteen letters; and while it may be merely serendipitous that Beckett was born and Johnson's wife Tetty died on Good Friday [in Beckett's case Friday the 13th], it is also a fact that Johnson died [naturally] on the 13th, of December 1784.) Beckett had studied *Rasselas* at Trinity College, Dublin, and entered details from it and the *Lives of the Poets* (Ascham, Dryden) into an early notebook and thence into his first novel, *Murphy*. In July 1935 he made a pilgrimage to Johnson's house in Lichfield, but did not sign the visitors' book.² He continued reading Johnson into his later years; as his friend, Anne Atik, has testified, Johnson was 'the one subject most certain to animate Sam'.³

For Beckett, according to his first biographer, Deirdre Bair, this was a simple truth: 'They can put me wherever they want, but it's Johnson, always Johnson, who is with me. And if I follow any tradition, it is his.'⁴ Despite the huge and very real differences between them, in such matters as politics, alcohol and religion, Johnson was a soul-mate, another Sam, one with whom he might stay up late and not arise early, unless to read their shared love, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. After finishing *Murphy* in early 1936, and before he went to Germany that September, Beckett immersed himself in a serious study of Johnson, reading both primary and secondary materials and taking extensive notes. He continued with this on his return to Dublin early in 1937, filling three notebooks with Johnsoniana; and in early 1940 drafted the dramatic fragment, *Human Wishes*, half of one act of a projected four-act piece. Beckett gave these materials to the American scholar, Ruby Cohn, who published the fragment and in turn generously donated the manuscripts to the Beckett International Foundation, Reading University.

Beckett's reading included: Boswell's *Life*, in the six-volume set edited by George Birkbeck Hill; the *Miscellanies* and *Annals*; the *Prayers and Meditations*; Hester Thrale's *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson* (1786); John Hawkins's *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D* (1787); Leslie Stephen's biography (1878); Thomas Seacombe's 'Essay Introductory' to A. M. Broadley's *Doctor Johnson and Mrs Thrale* (1910); *The Dictionary of National Biography*; C. E. Vulliamy's *Mrs Thrale of Streatham* (1936), still in Beckett's possession at his death; and A. Hayward's *Autobiography Letters and Literary Remains of Mrs Piozzi* (1861).⁵ Frederik Smith notes (114, 124-27) the 1937 discovery of Johnson's diary (his 'Sick Man's Journal'), recording

his final illness, and details Beckett's fascination with this and Johnson's medical condition. The notebooks reveal an anomaly: the first two, and part of the third, focus on the years 1781-84, with emphasis on (a) Johnson and Mrs Thrale and (b) Johnson's physical deterioration. But only late in the third notebook, and in the supplementary sheets on the individual characters, does anything remotely resemble the dramatic fragment. To interpret this anomaly I turn to what Beckett called his 'Johnson fantasy', a phrase that ironically critiques the vanity of his all-too-human wish to portray Johnson on stage.

II. Beckett's 'Johnson fantasy'

As was his wont, Beckett read for the sake of his writing, and he clearly intended his first play to have Samuel Johnson as its central character. This did not happen, and instead of a four-act drama written in 1937 there is only a short fragment dating from 1940, very different from the earlier declared intentions. The play was to have centred on the relationship between Johnson and Hester Thrale, thirty-one years his younger, from Henry Thrale's death in 1781 until Mrs Thrale's remarriage, to Johnson's fury ('Madame ... you are ignominiously married') to an Italian music teacher, Gabriel Piozzi, in 1784, with one act allocated to each of the four years. Beckett's first theory was that Johnson, for the fifteen years he frequented the family, had been 'enthralled' by the young wife, now a widow, who had not much loved her husband while he lived, but had borne him thirteen children, of whom only four daughters survived. His major source was Vulliamy's *Mrs Thrale of Streatham* (especially chapter 14: 'Mr. Johnson in Love') – an erratic account, but one that gave Beckett an argument for the supposed infatuation, a sympathetic picture of Johnson, and the curious psychology of an old man's love for a younger woman. This infatuation accounted, Beckett believed, not only for Johnson's explosive indignation on her re-marriage ('I who have loved you, esteemed you, revered you, and served you'), and for his sufferance of 'the imbecile Mr Thrale'.⁶

Beckett's second and more original theory was that Johnson had been 'absurdly' in love for fifteen years while it was impossible, but a complication arose, as it were, when he proved to be impotent after Henry Thrale died and it might have been possible. This theory perhaps derives, not from Vulliamy (although it is mentioned in his 1946 *Ursa Major*),⁷ but from a 1929 article by R. M. Ladell, entitled 'The Neurosis of Dr Samuel Johnson'.⁸ Initially, Beckett found his position 'more strikingly confirmed' than he had dared hope. To Tom MacGreevy he noted (20 April 1937): 'It seems now quite certain that he was rather absurdly in love with her all the fifteen years he was at

Streatham, though there is no text for the impotence.’ (Bair, 253). This latter admission, potentially fatal, was at first no deterrent. To George Reavey he added (22 July 1937): ‘My efforts to document my Johnson fantasy have not ceased. The evidence for it is overwhelming. It explains what has never been explained, i.e. his grotesque attitude towards his life and Mrs Thrale’ (Bair, 254). To Mary Manning he noted (13 December 1936) that his ‘impotence theory’ arose from the domestic impasse, ‘the breakdown of Johnson as soon as Thrale disappeared’ (Smith, 114). Another letter to her (4 August 1937) reveals his first theory evolving into the second: ‘His horror at loving her I take it was a mode or paradigm of his horror at ultimate annihilation, to which he declared in the fear of his death that he would prefer an eternity of torment’ (Knowlson, 270).

The ‘impotence theory’ reflects Beckett’s wider acceptance, in opposition to the verbal puissance of James Joyce, of the ‘fundament unheroic’, an aesthetic of impotence and ignorance. Yet as his confidence in the theory weakened, Beckett lost his enthusiasm for the Johnson project. What took its place (but may have been less suitable for dramatic expression) was the image of the melancholy hypochondriac in physical decline, with the horror of annihilation and fear of going mad; a condition matching Beckett’s own sense of the necessity of suffering. As Smith notes (111), Beckett saw the comic possibilities as well as the tragic in the figure of Johnson as a ‘metaphor of Western man, academic and witty, alone, afraid of dying and yet intrigued by his own physical deterioration’. This, more than anything, defines his affinity with Johnson.

For whatever reason, the details so meticulously recorded in the notebooks did not mesh into a coherent dramatic form, and in May 1940, when Beckett returned to the subject, his focus was no longer directly Johnson but rather his ‘seraglio’, the group of Beckett-like destitutes gathered at his final residence in Bolt Court. Many suggestions have been advanced as to why Beckett could not write the play he had originally intended, nor what it became as the love interest died away. Beckett told Ruby Cohn that he had been fascinated for years by the idea of a play on Johnson and Mrs Thrale, and had accumulated a mass of notes: ‘Actually started first act. Then gave up – chiefly but not only because of language difficulty.’⁹ This is a little misleading, as it glosses over the hiatus in composition between 1938 and 1940. Deirdre Bair quoted Beckett to the effect that he could not put it into ‘the Irish accent’ as well as ‘the proper language of the period’ (255); naïve as this seems (for the fragment has no Irish accent whatsoever), *Human Wishes* refers to three Irish playwrights known to Johnson (Arthur Murphy, Hugh Kelly, Oliver Goldsmith) as if to hint at this intention (in 1960 Beckett

would translate Robert Pinget's *La Manivelle* as 'The Old Tune', giving it a Dublin setting and Irish voices). Cohn comments (*Just Play*, 162) that Beckett 'could not resolve the conflict between the realistic biographical drama he had prepared himself to write and the verbal ballet he actually found himself writing'. Knowlson suggests (270) that as the deteriorating figure of Johnson increasingly took hold of Beckett's imagination the original love drama became less compelling. Lionel Kelly argues that Beckett abandoned the play because the severed friendship would not lend itself to the tragi-comic; the possibilities for irony were too considerable, and Beckett did not wish to impose them on a figure for whom he had so much regard.¹⁰ I find this unpersuasive, but after the piece had 'gone obscure'¹¹ what remained to haunt Beckett's imagination was the terrible awareness of the solitary Johnson, charting his own physical decline and lost in loneliness and dread. Smith accepts (116) that the image of the deteriorating Johnson took over from the love affair with Hester Thrale, with Beckett both intrigued and confounded by the amount of material he had gathered. Rehearsing these possibilities, N. F. Löwe concludes that the Johnson-Thrale project effectively died in 1937, but Beckett, unable to leave it alone, started in 1940 on a substantially new work, taking as its theme the peevishness of decay and centring not on Johnson but rather on Mrs Williams as the despotic figure imposing a funeral atmosphere upon the unhappy company assembled at Bolt Court.¹² Löwe shows that the loose sheets (MS 3460) were written after the first two notebooks, and that Beckett when making these notes turned to Powell's revision of Hill's edition of Boswell's *Life*, which offered more detail about the Bolt Court circle. This is persuasive, much as I like Ruby Cohn's pragmatic suggestion that the scene was broken off because Paris was in imminent danger of the Nazi invasion¹³ (Johnson's world might have seemed less relevant after Beckett's work with the Resistance and the horrors of World War II), and my own anxiety of impotence theory that the incompleteness reflects the intractable problem of staging a real-life giant.

III. *Human Wishes.*

At the end of 1937, Beckett told Mary Manning that he had not written a word of 'the Johnson blasphemy' but trusted that 'acts of intellection' were going on about it somewhere (Knowlson, 271; Pilling, 164). Such acts went on for many years, but their direct consequence was an attempt in early 1940 to shape the amorphous material. The outcome was *Human Wishes*. Although Beckett disparaged *Human Wishes*, and long refused to let it be published, the fragment reveals his potential gifts as a playwright, and is more 'finished' than might appear. The play is set at Bolt Court on 4 April 1781, the evening of Henry Thrale's death (a crucial point not once mentioned), and haunted by the

presence of Johnson, who (like Godot) never appears.¹⁴ As the play intimates (169), April 4 is also the seventh anniversary of the repayment of Goldsmith's debt to nature (1774).

Johnson's absence is explained by his being at the Thrale residence, where he had attended the deathbed of Henry Thrale, who had died at 6am that morning. The 'germ' of the fragment appears to be Johnson's letter to Mrs Thrale of March 1778, in which he laments the situation at Bolt Court: 'Williams hates everybody; Levett hates Desmoulins, and does not love Williams; Desmoulins hates them both; Poll loves none of them.'¹⁵ This letter effectively rehearses the company: the blind but despotic Mrs Anna Williams, a friend of Johnson's late wife, and now the taciturn official hostess; Mrs Elizabeth Desmoulins, daughter of Johnson's godfather and another of Tetty's companions, also inherited by Johnson;¹⁶ and Poll Carmichael, a prostitute whom Johnson had found lying in the street, and had brought home to nurse, to 'put her in a virtuous way of living' (*Life* IV, 322). There is a cameo appearance from Dr Robert Levett, a lay doctor who served those who could not afford trained help, but who was abrasive and inclined to drink; and finally there is Hodge, Johnson's cat, introduced with the splendid stage direction: '(sleeping – if possible).'¹⁷

Beckett's title, *Human Wishes*, echoes Johnson's 'The Vanity of Human Wishes' (1749), his imitation of Juvenal's tenth Satire, it remaining a moot point whether his accent falls on 'Human' or shares with Johnson the echo of Ecclesiastes. As Ruby Cohn says (*Canon*, 105), 'The dialogue exudes eighteenth century elegance': 'knotting'; 'relict'; 'my dear Madam'; 'pray tell me'; 'God grant'; 'upon my soul'; 'of little consequence'; 'it is idle to'; and so forth. Beckett intended the characters, and especially Mrs Williams (a figure of the Great Cham in Johnson's absence), to echo Johnson's manner and predilections: his 'vile melancholy'; his testiness; his fascination with lexicography and 'hard words'; his aversion to 'merriment'; and his cynicism. Beckett cultivates an authentic Johnsonian rhythm: 'You wish to provoke me, Madam, but I am not provoked. The peevishness of decay is not provoking' (*Human Wishes*, 156).

A comparison of the holograph with the typescript reveals that this authenticity is very much the product of careful revision, and, in particular, of a deliberate attempt to imbue the dialogue with subtle echoes of Johnsoniana. Hodge, for example, was first described as 'an ~~exceptional~~ cat', but 'exceptional' was crossed out and replaced with 'uncommonly fine', echoing Johnson's words as reported by Boswell: 'But he is a very fine cat, a very fine cat indeed.' (*Life* IV, 197) Miss Carmichael's tetchy reply, '~~We have heard that before~~', was replaced with a more Beckettian '*Silence*'.¹⁸ Mrs Williams's 'pituitous defluxion' echoes a letter from Johnson

to Boswell in which she is described as ‘very ill of a pituitous defluxion, which wastes her gradually away’;¹⁹ but a later phrase, with its delicate ambiguity, was added later: ‘but it is idle to continue.’ The sentiment, ‘In what will not dry black and what was never white’, was added to the typescript; but other cuts (‘I write very quiet. ~~Your cries drown the soul.~~’) were made, for the sake of silence and the greater viciousness of that left unsaid.

The consequence of such revision is that the final text of *Human Wishes* carefully integrates eighteenth-century elegance with qualities characteristic of Beckett’s other writing, which create a rhythmic and disjunctive dialogue punctuated by frequent pauses and silences. This double articulation constitutes a meta-commentary on syntax and dramatic form, with words counterpointed against silence, vile melancholy against a comic surface, and the propensity towards mirth against a pervasive awareness of death. The final marriage of the two idioms, unlike celibacy or fidelity to but one author, offers many intertextual pleasures. Let me note a few of these:

- Johnson’s absence, and the comment, ‘He is late’ (*Human Wishes*, 155), anticipates the vigil of Vladimir and Estragon in the as-yet-unwritten *Waiting for Godot*.
- Mrs Williams’s request that her quatrain be taken down and Miss Carmichael’s tendering to her a blank page (157) anticipate a like scene in *Endgame*, where Clov tells the blind Hamm that his dog (a stuffed, three-legged black toy) is white.
- Mrs Williams’s insistence that ‘The cat *cannot* be merry’ (159) links the Cartesian contention that animals are merely machines with the common cliché, *enough to make a cat laugh*. Löwe (190) neatly invokes the scene described by Boswell where those present ‘all sat composed as at a funeral’, while Johnson corrected his unfortunate comment, about a woman with ‘a bottom of good sense’, with the stern rebuke: ‘Where’s the merriment?’ and the further remark, as if daring anyone to laugh: ‘I say the woman was fundamentally sensible.’ (*Life IV*, 99) This exchange took place on 20 April 1781, just sixteen days after the death of Henry Thrale.
- Levett’s greatcoat and hat (*Human Wishes*, 160) are the unmistakable insignia of Beckett’s derelicts, before and after this fragment. Levett should be played accordingly.
- The dialogue that might have been created by ‘a writer for the stage’ (160-61) has the uncanny rhythm of a passage in Act II of *Waiting for Godot*. Compare:

Mrs D. To the public.

Mrs W. The ignorant public.

Mrs D. To the gallery.
 Mrs W. To the pit.
 Miss C. To the boxes.
 Mrs W. Mr Murphy.
 Mrs D. Mr Kelly.
 Miss C. Mr Goldsmith.
 And:
 Estragon: All the dead voices.
 Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.
 Estragon: Like leaves.
 Vladimir: Like sand.
 Estragon: Like leaves.
Silence.
 Vladimir: They all speak at once.
 Estragon: Each one to itself.
Silence.
 Vladimir: Rather they whisper.
 Estragon: They rustle.
 Vladimir: They murmur.
 Estragon: They rustle.

Note, too, the echo of Mrs Desmoulins' 'let us not speak unkindly of the departed' and Vladimir's 'Let us not waste our time in idle discourse!' It is difficult not to conclude that Beckett, when creating his later play, drew deliberately upon this fragment.

- The characters 'Murphy' and 'Kelly' (*Human Wishes*, 161) feature in Beckett's earlier novel, *Murphy*; moreover, the anti-hero of that novel is marked, as was Johnson, by a large inflammation (a naevus) on his buttock. *Murphy* also offers a smattering of familiar Johnson anecdotes (the prospect of the highway to England, the cells of Bedlam as mansions, the refutation of Berkeley), but these do not reflect special reading.
- The dear doctor's 'debt to nature': Beckett's works, both before and after this fragment, are strewn with ambiguous references to dying 'naturally'; but the play upon the 'considerable' or 'great' debt to nature may echo Johnson's comment on the death of Anna Williams, when she at long last 'paid the great debt to nature'.²⁰
- While the reference to 'the late Queen Anne' (161) plays on the cliché, 'Queen Anne is dead', the jest implicit in 'the Rev. Edward – is more recondite; this may refer to the Reverend Edward John Hardy, author of *How to be Happy though Married* (1885), a title which tess–, I beg your pardon, teased Beckett's susceptibilities.
- Mrs Williams's recollection of her father, whose work on ascertaining the Longitude Johnson had loyally if unavailingly promoted, died, according to Boswell on 12 July 1755, whereas Beckett's text (*Human Wishes*, 164) says 'the 12th of June'. Curiously, the holograph (MS 3458, 17) adds an insert: 'on the 12th of July, 1755'. The error is Beckett's, and

entered the typescript as the phrase ‘(old time)’ was added.²¹ Mrs Williams’s words otherwise faithfully reflect Boswell’s (*Life* I, 301-02).

- Mrs Williams’s ‘one weeps, when one’s father dies’ obliquely aligns Beckett’s feelings about the recent death of his father (1933) with Johnson’s curious sentiment:²²

If the man who turnip cries
Cry not when his father dies
'Tis a proof that he had rather
Have a turnip than his father

Human Wishes ends curiously, the more so, indeed, in the typescript, which concludes with Miss C’s ‘by a hair or a raisin –’, whereas the holograph continues for some thirty lines to identify the book she is reading as ‘Taylor’. This is the *Rules and Exercises of Holy Living* and ditto of *Holy Dying* (1650, 1651) of Jeremy Taylor (1613-67), Christian apologist and erstwhile Chaplain to Charles I. Beckett read these volumes in 1933 and had commented to Tom MacGreevy (6 December 1933): ‘Why two books, Holy Living and Holy Dying, when one would have done the trick. Surely the classical example of literary tautology.’ (Pilling, 165)

He had earlier drawn on Taylor for sundry details in *Murphy* and in an unpublished short story called ‘Echo’s Bones’ (which includes the curious account of Aeschylus being killed by an eagle that dropped an *oyster* on his head); and he later entitled a grouping of short fictions as ‘Fancy Dying’. The sentiments quoted by Miss Carmichael are from chapter 1 section 1 of *Holy Dying*, entitled ‘Reflections on the Vanity and Shortness of Man’s Life.’ The burden of this passage is that there is no hiding from death, and Taylor’s *Holy Dying* underlines the theme that might have been, that of the shadow of death, and the note upon which the entire play, had it been written, almost certainly would have ended.²³

There was to have been nothing ‘snappy or wise- cracky’ about the play, and it would have drawn not on Boswell’s ‘wit and wisdom machine’ but rather on the miseries that Boswell rarely talked of, those revealed in the *Prayers and Meditations*: Johnson’s fear of death, his terror lest his soul be caught unprepared, and his sense that an eternity of torment was preferable to ‘The horror of annihilation, the horror of madness, the horrified love of Mrs Thrale, the whole mental monster-ridden swamp that after hours of silence could only give some ghastly bubble like “Lord have mercy upon us” ’ (letter to Mary Manning [11 July 1937]; Knowlson, 270).

For better or worse, this complex creation did not come into being; we must be satisfied with what little we have, and be truly grateful for that. Amen.

IV. 'Casting long shadows': the impact of Johnson on Beckett's later writings

Beckett scholars generally agree that while *Human Wishes* remained unfinished, its ethos was sublimated into Beckett's later work. There is considerable disagreement, however, as to how this influence actually manifests itself,²⁴ although some things are clear, particularly with respect to the drama, where the various anticipations of *Waiting for Godot* – the meta-theatrical dialogue, the rhythms, the pointless pointed exchanges, Johnson as a Godot (less *ex machina* than *absconditus*), Mrs Williams invested with the qualities of the absent Johnson – have been pointed out.

Likewise, the anticipations of *Endgame* are reasonably self-evident – Mrs Williams as the despotic Hamm, and the cruel jest played upon her. Ruby Cohn has neatly identified *Human Wishes* with the later but equally elegant *Come and Go* (1965), where three women, dressed in black (Fates, or the witches of *Macbeth*) resolve, as the earlier fragment could not, the conflict between realistic biographical drama and verbal ballet. Like her, I would love to see *Human Wishes* on a double bill with *Come and Go* (*Just Play*, 162).

For all its innovative qualities, Beckett's drama is conservative with respect to his fiction, where new ideas were tested before being entrusted to a less familiar medium. Thus, despite significant echoes of Johnson in the later drama,²⁵ his sublimation into the fiction is more important. Frederik Smith offers the fullest treatment of this theme, arguing that Beckett's pre-occupation with the dying Johnson is manifest in the derelicts who haunt the later work, and, above all, in the composite protagonist of the *Three Novels* (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*). Smith offers the thesis, with which I have no basic quarrel, that not only does the figure of Johnson, conscious of his inevitable decay and terrified by the thought of annihilation, underpin the seedy characters of the fiction, but that Beckett's notes for his Johnson fantasy helped him move from external description to internal monologue, in that the extended soliloquies of the *Three Novels* and of the dramatic personae such as Krapp (*Krapp's Last Tape*) and Winnie (*Happy Days*) draw on his sense of Johnson's mind.

My only quarrel with Smith is that he excludes from his account the work written, in English, immediately after Beckett discontinued his Johnson drama; that is, the novel *Watt*.²⁶ Let me briefly outline the narrative and summarise the Johnsonian qualities that might inform another article. *Watt* is the ugly duckling of Beckett's frogpond, a novel that tells the tale of a servant, Watt, who comes to the house of the master, Knott, serves his time, and goes. The novel is a satire on the mystical

quest (the attempt to eff the ineffable), and on Cartesian rationalism: Watt's attempts to apply the Cartesian *Method* lead finally to the mansions of the madhouse, where his words, imperfectly articulated and inaccurately apprehended, are inadequately accounted by a fellow inmate, Sam, in his little notebook. The (reversed) Boswell-Johnson symbiosis is self-evident.

Smith states that *Watt* does *not* contain a character who clearly recalls Johnson. Instead, he suggests, *Watt* is 'a sort of transition' from the aborted *Human Wishes* to the later work. He acknowledges that Watt could be said 'to reflect the intellectually curious Johnson'; but feels that Beckett was unable to grasp that character; and so Watt's frustrated quest for Mr Knott reflects Beckett's aborted quest for an understanding of his literary predecessor. Further than this he does not go, yet there are quite literally dozens of echoes of Johnson in this novel. Smith's neglect of *Watt* is the odder, given that he notes (127) a letter to MacGreevy (7 July 1936), in which Beckett asks about the 'dark portrait' of Johnson by James Barry: 'looked at in reproduction, it is very impressive, the mad terrified face that I feel was the truth a very little below the adipose.' Moreover, Smith records in a footnote (201) a detail finally excised from the published text of *Watt*: 'Sneaking out of the National Portrait Gallery, where we had sought in vain the portrait by Barry of Johnson'; this is, surely, the terrifying 'oil black with age' referred to in Beckett's short prose-drama, 'That Time' (1975). I believe that the obvious conclusion is the correct one: Barry's portrait of Johnson acted, at least in part, for that of Watt.

Watt, once a university man, has a shambling gait (likened to that of a bear), a way of walking, of throwing out his feet in defiance of his body, not unlike that of Johnson, as described by Miss Hawkins in Hill's *Johnson Miscellanies* (II, 139): 'His walk was heavy, but he got on at a great rate, his left arm always fixed across his breast, so as to bring the hand under the chin; and he walked wide, as if to support his weight. He made his way up Bolt Court in the zig-zag direction of a flash of lightning; submitting his course only to the deflections imposed by the impossibility of going further to right or left.' Boswell recorded (*Life* IV, 425): 'When he walked, it was like struggling gait of one in fetters.' Watt, moreover, has a disconcerting smile; on the last page of his third Johnson notebook Beckett wrote in large letters: 'Johnson's "ghastly smile" Hill's B V. 48 N. 1.' This refers to Hill's annotation (*Life*, V, 48, n1): 'the sneer of Johnson's ghastly smile', which, Hill adds, is 'borrowed from *Paradise Lost*' (II.845-46). Milton reads: 'And Death/Grinned horrible a ghastly smile.' Two of Johnson's characteristic features are thus given to Watt.

Incidental Johnsonian details in *Watt* include:

- Mrs Nixon, a minor character, is named ‘Tetty’, Johnson’s ‘familiar contraction’ for his wife, unkindly described by Garrick (*Life* I, 99) as ‘very fat, with a bosom of more than ordinary protuberance.’ The hunchbacked Mr Hackett replies to a tactless remark by Tetty Nixon: ‘There are protuberances and protuberances’ (*Watt* 15).
- The phrase, ‘native of the rocks’, from Johnson’s famous letter to Chesterfield (7 February 1755) appears in *Watt* (21) but only as a later revision; Beckett in preparation for his trip to Germany had translated the letter into German in his ‘Black’ notebook (MS 5003, 47), the phrase in question reading: ‘ein Felsenkind zu finden’ (that is, ‘to find a child of the cliffs’).
- En route to the house of Mr Knott, Watt has a run-in with a porter on the station platform; this is watched by a Mr Evans, the newsagent (*Watt* 26), the name being added late to the text. My ear detects an echo of the incident that Boswell mentions (*Life* II, 209 [3 April 1773]), Goldsmith’s ‘apology to the publick for beating Evans, a bookseller.’
- Mr Knott’s other servant, Arsene, explicitly mentions ‘the vanity of human wishes’ (*Watt* 60), echoing Johnson’s poem of that title.
- Beckett satirises the notion of pre-established harmony by inventing a creature called the famished dog, whose existence in turn generates the need for a family to look after it; the name of this family is Lynch (*Watt* 100), echoing that of Hester Lynch Thrale (‘Lynch’ was the name of her maternal grandmother).²⁷
- The asylum cells are termed ‘mansions’ (*Watt* 151), with reference to the cells of Bedlam, visited on 8 May 1775 by Boswell and Johnson, in the company of Arthur Murphy. This is from John 14:2: ‘In my father’s house are many mansions’; the jest was an 18th-century commonplace. Beckett cited Boswell in his first Johnson notebook: ‘He calls the cells in Bedlam the “mansions” (& the corridors the galleries).’²⁸
- Beckett refers to ‘many touching prospects’ in proximity to ‘highway’ (*Watt* 224), echoing Johnson’s comment to Boswell (*Life* II, 425), that the noblest prospect a Scotchman ever sees is the high road that leads him to England. This allusion was earlier made in *Murphy* (17).
- Mr Knott expresses himself by means of curious ‘dactylic ejaculations’ (*Watt* 209), which suggest Miss Reynolds’s recollection of Johnson (Hill, *Miscellanies* II, 257): ‘Indeed, he seemed to struggle almost incessantly with some mutual evil, and often, by the expression of his countenance and the motion of his lips, appeared to be offering up some ejaculation to Heaven to remove it.’

Finally, there are many ‘hard words’ in *Watt* that derive directly from Johnson’s *Dictionary*. Most were added to the drafts of the novel after Beckett had returned to Paris and Dublin after the war, and once more had access to his Johnson materials:

- accoutrement (21): suggested by its presence in the entry (‘equipment’) immediately following ‘equipendency’, which he had clearly made use of (below).
- promiscuities (28): ‘indiscriminations’.
- tardigrade (30): *tardigradous*, ‘slow-moving’.
- equipendency (31): ‘the act of hanging in equipoise’.
- intenerating (41): ‘softening, or making tender’.
- assiduities (74): ‘Diligence, closeness of attention’.
- keck (85): ‘to heave the stomach, to reach at vomiting’ (a hawk does not cough, but rather kecks).
- interversion (141): ‘to turn to another course’.
- conglutination (142): ‘The act of healing wounded bodies; reunion; healing’.
- obnubilate(d) (169): ‘to cloud, to obscure’; see Burton’s *Anatomy* (I.iii.2.ii): ‘So doth the melancholy vapour obnubilate the mind’; and Dr Rutt’s ‘An hypo-chondriack obnubilation from wind and indigestion’. (*Life* II, 171)
- exiguity (191): ‘Smallness; diminutiveness; slenderness’.
- obturation (212): ‘stopping up anything with something smeared over it’.
- (xiii) contabulated (234): *contabulation*, ‘a joining of boards together’.
- (xiv) snite (248): ‘To blow the nose’.

There is a story behind each of these words,²⁹ but let me conclude with the jest engendered by the penultimate cited here, ‘contabulation’. Towards the end of the novel, Watt’s inner self is so alienated from his body that he is unaware of any intermingling of the Cartesian vital spirits. Thus, locked at night inside a small room at the railway station, he experiences a strange, strong smell he attributes it to the floorboards being *contabulated*, that is, to the cracks at the joints wherein small smelly objects, or tiny dead creatures, might be lodged. I explained this to one of my brighter students, who looked at me pityingly, and suggested that I might have missed the cruder joke: that is, that Watt, by now totally unaware of his body, and by means of a hard word taken from Johnson’s *Dictionary*, has Othered his farts. It is not a jest that Johnson would have approved of, too much merriment for too little serious effect, and not, you might think, fundamentally sensible; but with it Beckett affirms an all-too-human bond with his predecessor, who equally treasured the tiny demented particulars trapped between the contabulations of life and art.

The Samuel Beckett/Samuel Johnson manuscripts: Beckett International Foundation, University of Reading

Mary Bryden, Julian Garforth, Peter Mills, *Beckett at Reading: Catalogue of the Beckett Manuscript Collection at The University of Reading*. Reading: Whiteknights Press and the Beckett International Foundation, 1998 [54-58]

MS 3458: Untitled original holograph of *Human Wishes* (15 pages), with corrections and additions (some extensive). Doodles throughout. Headed 'Act I / Bolt Court. Wed. April 4th 1781. Evening.' Finishes (f.14) with the word 'Taylor', read by Miss C[armichael].

MS 3459: untitled carbon of *Human Wishes*, 9 leaves, with corrections and additions (words or short phrases only). No pagination. Concludes (f.9) with the line by Mrs W[illiams]: 'A hair or a raisin?'; some lines short of the holograph and published text.

MS 3460: five separate sets of notes towards *Human Wishes*, with minor corrections and additions, typed (f.1 to f.4) and manuscript (lower f.4 to end). A selection of biographical details and anecdotes from various journals, memoirs and letters:

BARBER: four pages about Francis Barber (mentioned but no appearance in the text).

CARMICHAEL: one leaf, marked 1778, dealing with Poll Carmichael's entry into the Johnson household.

DESMOULINS: four leaves, biographical information and quotations (sources noted), from journals and memoirs, including much from Boswell, covering the period 1778-83.

LEVETT: nine leaves of biographical and contextual detail (sources noted) about Robert Levett, covering 1752-83 (Levett makes one entrance only, silent save a loud hiccup.)

WILLIAMS: 18 leaves, substantial notes (sources cited) on the character of Mrs Anna Williams, covering the period 1751-83.

MS 3461/1: [first] original ms notebook, undated [early 1940??], 94 broad-lined leaves; written on rectos, with occasional additions and corrections on opposite versos; no drafts of the play-text, but extensive notes relating to Johnson and his circle: quotations from contemporary journals, diaries and records; a selection headed by Beckett 'Anecdotes (Mrs Piozzi)'; a set of draft plans, a three-act structure superseded by a four-act plan, both intimating a focus on the years 1781-84 (although notes on individuals go back further); on the inside front cover, a listing of events in the last four years of

Johnson's life, from Mrs Thrale meeting Piozzi in 1780 to the death of Johnson in 1784.

MS 3461/2: [second] original ms notebook, numbered '2' on front cover by Beckett. 104 leaves; a continuation of 3461/1, all recto pages filled, the facing versos with corrections and additions, plus Beckett's critical commentary on his sources. Diary quotations from Boswell (from Jan. 1782); biographical notes on the various ailments of Johnson; notes on letters and explanatory texts re the Johnson circle and contemporaries (an extensive section on Johnson and Cowper); quotations from Birkbeck Hill (*Wit and Wisdom*, and *Johnsonian Miscellanies* vol 1 [*Prayers and Meditations*]); on the last page (104) a section called 'ANNALS' which continues into the next notebook.

MS 3461/3: [third] original ms notebook, numbered '3' on front cover by Beckett. 98 leaves, the first eight used to continue the 'ANNALS', plus notes from Leslie Stephen's *Johnson* (ch. 5) and sets of notes on each of the characters featured in *Human Wishes*. Then many blank pages, until in the second half of the notebook some draft notes headed 'Act I', set in 1781; plans concentrating on events in Johnson's life, succeeding sections headed 1782, 1783 and 1784; then textual notes fading into further voluminous biographical notes; and the Latin poem, 'Ad Torquatum' with Beckett's translation.

In addition, a small black notebook (BIF MS 5003) full of notes on German literature, but including (p. 47) Beckett's translation into German (Aug. 1936) of Johnson's letter to Chesterfield (7 Feb. 1755), rejecting the belated offer of patronage.

Samuels Beckett and Johnson: a short bibliography

Beckett for a long time did not want *Human Wishes* to be published, but he permitted Ruby Cohn to discuss and print the text for the first time in her *Just Play* (1980, 143-62; text 295-305), and to include it in her edition of *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment by Samuel Beckett* (London: John Calder, 1983, 153-66). This, the most readily available text, mis-dates the dramatic action as 'April 14, 1781'.

Ackerley, C. J., *Obscure Locks, Simple Keys: The Annotated Watt*. Tallahassee: Journal of Beckett Studies Books, 2005. Documents the specific echoes of Johnson within *Watt*.

Ackerley, C. J., and Gontarski, S.E., *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*. New York: Grove Press, 2004. Entries on Boswell, Chesterfield, *Human Wishes* and Johnson.

Bair, Deirdre, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography*. New York & London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978. A flawed biography which nevertheless identifies [253-57] Beckett's lasting debt to Johnson.

Ben-Zvi, Linda, 'Biographical, Textual, and Historical Origins.' In *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies*, ed. Lois Oppenheim. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 133-53. A detailed account of how Beckett's intentions re Johnson changed. Her earlier study, *Samuel Beckett* (New York: Twayne, 1986 [51-55]) is more perfunctory.

Cohn, Ruby, *Just Play: Beckett's Theater*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980. A detailed account of the manuscripts and background to the play [143-62], with the first published version of the text [299-305].

—————, *A Beckett Canon*. Ann Arbor; U of Michigan P, 2001 [104-07]. Essentials of the text and its publishing history. Cohn notes [394] how Beckett gave her the manuscripts and fragment, and later permitted *Human Wishes* to be included in *Just Play* and *Disjecta*: 'You may refer to existence of Johnson notes and Human Wishes fragment, though the less said the better in my opinion. I don't want them made available for inspection.' (Beckett to Ruby Cohn, 2 July 1966) With equal generosity she later gave the material to the BIF.

Kelly, Lionel, 'Beckett's *Human Wishes*'. In *The Ideal Core of the Onion: Reading Beckett Archives*, ed. John Pilling & Mary Bryden. Reading: Beckett International Foundation, 1992, 21-44. Excellent discussion of the Johnson/Thrale circumstances and the 'ignominious' marriage; but loses its way trying to find Johnson echoes in *Krapp's Last Tape*.

Knowlson, James, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*. London: Bloomsbury, 1996. The definitive life, its treatment of the Johnson connection brief but reliable.

Löwe, F. N., 'Sam's Love for Sam: Beckett, Dr. Johnson and *Human Wishes*.' *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui* 8 (1999): 189-203. An excellent article that documents the change in Beckett's intentions from the Thrale episode to the spectacle of deterioration and traces the impact of Taylor's *Holy Dying* on the fragment and on Beckett's sensibility.

Pilling, John, *Beckett Before Godot*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. A study of the early Beckett, offering precise details from letters and drafts, but disappointing in its sense of the impact of Johnson on Beckett, 1936-40, and in the later work.

Smith, Frederik, *Beckett's Eighteenth Century*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002 [ch. 6: "My Johnson Fantasy", 110-31]. A good account, recapitulating many of the earlier studies, revealing the exact details of Beckett's life with the Thrales, and indicating the impact Johnson had on Beckett's later work, particularly, the major fiction.

Notes

- ¹ References to Boswell's *Life of Johnson* are to the six-volume edition of George Birkbeck Hill, revised and enlarged by L. F. Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934-1964).
- ² James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 203.
- ³ Anne Atik, *How It Was: A Memoir of Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 76.
- ⁴ Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York & London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 257; from a letter of [when else?] 13 April 1972.
- ⁵ Details from Ruby Cohn, *Just Play: Beckett's Theater* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 151-57; and Frederik Smith, *Beckett's Eighteenth Century* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 112.
- ⁶ Beckett, letter to Tom MacGreevy (20 April 1937); Smith, 113.
- ⁷ C. E. Vulliamy, *Ursa Major: A Study of Dr. Johnson and His Friends* (London: Michael Joseph), 147.
- ⁸ R. M. Ladell, 'The Neurosis of Dr Samuel Johnson' (*British Journal of Medical Psychology* IX, 1929): 314-23.
- ⁹ Beckett, letter to Ruby Cohn (27 June 1965); correspondence at the BIF, Reading.
- ¹⁰ Lionel Kelly, 'Beckett's *Human Wishes*', in *The Ideal Core of the Onion*, ed. John Pilling & Mary Bryden (Reading: Beckett International Foundation, 1999), 25.
- ¹¹ Beckett to MacGreevy (14 October 1937); John Pilling, *Beckett Before Godot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 163.
- ¹² N. F. Löwe, 'Sam's Love for Sam: Dr. Johnson and *Human Wishes*' (*Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui* 8, 1999), 192.
- ¹³ Ruby Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 107.
- ¹⁴ References to *Human Wishes* are to *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment by Samuel Beckett*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983), 153-66. This erroneously records the date as 'April 14, 1781' (that in Cohn's earlier *Just Play* is correct).
- ¹⁵ Beckett copied this into his third Johnson notebook (MS 3461/3, 4) not from Boswell's *Life* (III, 368), but from chapter 5 of Leslie Stephen's *Samuel Johnson* (1878).
- ¹⁶ 'Daughter of Dr. Swinfen, Johnson's godfather, and widow of Mr. Desmoulins, a writing-master' (Boswell, *Life* III, 222); this becomes 'the relict of a writing-master' (*Human Wishes*, 156). The word 'relict' is used frequently in Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Dying*.
- ¹⁷ The phrase, 'if possible', was added to the typescript, but is not present in the holograph.
- ¹⁸ The one citation of Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Dying* (1.1) in Boswell's *Life* (III, 34) is very Beckettian: 'We form our words with the breath of our nostrils, we have less to live for every word we speak.'
- ¹⁹ Beckett noted the phrase twice: in his third Johnson notebook (MS 3461/3, n.p.), from Boswell's (*Life* III, 132 [1 Sept. 1777]); but earlier in the second (MS 3461/2, 60), from the 'Queeney *Letters*, ed. Marquis of Landsdowne' [1932].

- ²⁰ From one of Johnson's letters to Susannah Thrale, as cited not in the Birkbeck Hill edition of Boswell's *Life*, but rather in John Wilson Croker's edition (London, 1848), 737. Compare, too, Mrs Desmoulins' refusal to believe that Kelly is dead with an episode in the 'Cyclops' episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*, where Alf Bergan cannot believe that Paddy Dignam has died until Joe Hynes insists: 'He paid the debt of nature.'
- ²¹ My thanks to Julian Garforth at the BIF, Reading University, for confirming this detail.
- ²² George Birkbeck Hill, *Johnson Miscellanies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897), I. 193; cited by Beckett in his second Johnson notebook (MS 3461/2, 92).
- ²³ Linda Ben-Zvi suggests in 'Biographical, Textual, and Historical Origins' (*Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies*, ed. Lois Oppenheim [Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004], 144) from notebook evidence that the play was intended to end 'with J panting in silence after "Sent to hell, Sir, etc", curtain falls.' This refers to Johnson's definition of damnation (*Life* IV, 299, to Dr William Adams, 12 June 1784): 'Sent to Hell, Sir, and punished everlastingly.'
- ²⁴ I cannot agree with Lionel Kelly that *Krapp's Last Tape* is heavily indebted to *Human Wishes*, but I note, as he does not, that Beckett in an early draft had Krapp look up 'viduity' in an enormous dictionary, specifying Johnson's until presumably assailed by scruples arising from the fact that the definition he wanted was not to be found there but rather in the *Shorter Oxford*.
- ²⁵ For instance, the report of the death of one 'Hunter' in *Happy Days* (London: Faber, 1963), 14, the surname that of Johnson's Lichfield schoolmaster, is followed by a confused memory of 'A Mr. Johnson, or Johnston, or perhaps I should say Johnstone' (15), echoing the distinction between the English 'son' and Scots 'ston'; as in Johnson's hope that Boswell's daughter, Veronica, would not call him Johnston (*Life* III, 106).
- ²⁶ References to *Watt* are to the American edition (New York: Grove Press, 1958). Smith also neglects 'The Expelled', one of Beckett's early ventures into French, which begins with the unnamed narrator ejected from the asylum (as from the womb), but is less immediately concerned with the trauma of rejection or the 'fall' than the difficulty of counting the stairs down which he has been dispatched. Thus did Johnson find arithmetic a consolation in times of stress, and on at least one occasion (*Life* II, 484) attempted to count the steps he had just descended.
- ²⁷ Beckett records in his first Johnson notebook from Vulliamy's *Mrs Thrale of Streatham* (MS 3461/1, 71), erroneously or in bad jest: 'Lady Bottom of East Hyde' (it should be 'Cotton').
- ²⁸ Beckett's first Johnson notebook (MS 3461/1), citing Boswell, *Life* II, 374 (8 May 1775). Beckett had earlier used the term of the asylum cells in *Murphy* (167), and would do so again of those in *Malone Dies* (182).
- ²⁹ See the various entries in my *Obscure Locks, Simple Keys* (Tallahassee: Journal of Beckett Studies Books, 2005). For the jest that follows, my thanks (I think) to Damian Love.

Seminar Papers

About the Contributors

Philip Harvey

is a Melbourne poet and reviewer. He is a Senior Librarian at the Carmelite Library in Middle Park and Library Manager at the Melba Conservatorium of Music in Richmond. He is also the poetry editor for the magazine *Eureka Street*. This is the third paper Philip has presented at a seminar of the JSA.

Wallace McDougall

taught Dentistry at the University of Queensland for twenty years, rising to the rank of Reader, and then took up the same position at the University of Melbourne, for twenty-five years. He is now retired. He developed a taste for literary reading at secondary school and enjoys the eighteenth century in particular, as the last period in which it was possible to know all the main characters – after that, there are ‘too many Englishmen’.

Basil Stafford Jnr

is a Melbourne lawyer and a former Treasurer of the JSA.

Three Writers of 18th Century Lichfield

Johnson, Erasmus Darwin and Anna Seward

Wallace McDougall

As this talk makes no pretence at scholarship, let's begin with a digression. Could these three writers, all highly regarded as poets in the eighteenth century, be in any way associated with what was to become known as Australia? Of course, the logo of our Society depicts the Great Cham trying to skip like a kangaroo. But what of our other two?

First, Anna Seward – the Swan of Lichfield. Well, like many in Britain, she was much taken with Cook's exploits and when in 1780 the news of his death reached England, she was moved to write an *Elegy on Captain Cook*.¹ In it she refers to his exploits and, as was usual in the eighteenth century, we have the personification of abstractions, such as Fauna, in these lines:

Next Fauna treads, in youthful beauty's pride,
A playful kangaroo bounding at her side.

Anna's notes tell us, 'the kangaroo is an animal peculiar to those climates. It is perpetually jumping along on its hind legs, its fore legs being too short to be used in the manner of other quadrupeds.' Fauna also had other company:

A giant bat, with leathern wings outspread,
Umbrella light, hangs quivering o'er her head.

When Cook was attempting to find a passage through icebergs and polar storms, he noted in his journals, 'Our sails and rigging were so frozen, that they seemed like plates of iron.' Anna Seward writes:

Barb'd with sleeted snow, the driving hail
Rush the fierce arrows of the polar gale; ...
While o'er the deep, in many a dreadful form,
The giant Danger howls along the storm.
Furling iron sheet with numbed hands,
Firm on the deck the great Adventurer stands ...
...nor pain, nor fear,
Nor death's dread darts, impede the great design,
Till nature draws the circumscribing line.
Huge rocks of ice the arrested ship embay,
And bar the gallant Wanderer's way

I quote these excerpts of Anna's description of the polar seas because Boswell tells us that Johnson said to her 'when she mentioned to him "The Colombiade", an epick poem, by Madame du Boccage: – "Madam, there is not in it any thing equal to your description of the sea around the North Pole, in your Ode on the death of Captain Cook" ' (27 June 1784)². *The Elegy on Captain Cook* was written when Anna was 38 and was her first poem to be widely published. It stood high in the public's esteem.

Now, to Erasmus Darwin: what connection could he have with early Australia? Well, when the First Fleet supply ship, HMS *Fishburn*, returned to England she carried a sample of Sydney Cove clay, addressed to Sir Joseph Banks, the gentleman botanist on the *Endeavour*, and now President of the Royal Society. He sent it to his friend, the potter Josiah Wedgwood, who experimented with it and judged it ‘an excellent material for pottery’. He produced a commemorative medallion showing the figure of Hope arriving on the shore of Sydney Cove and being welcomed by the figures of Peace, Art and Labour. Wedgwood sent an engraving of the proposed medallion to his old friend, Erasmus Darwin, who responded with a twenty-eight-line poem, *Visit of Hope to Sydney Cove near Botany Bay*. It begins:

WHERE Sydney Cove her lucid bosom swells,
And with wide arms the indignant storm repels;
High on a rock, amid the troubled air
Hope stood sublime, and waved her golden hair;

Erasmus goes on to foretell Sydney’s future:

There shall broad streets their stately walls extend,
The circus widen, and the crescent bend;
There the proud arch colossus-like, bestride
Yon glittering streams, and bound the chasing tide;
There shall tall spires, and dome-capped towers ascend,
And piers and quays their massy structures blend;

Could he have foreseen the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House? This poem could be the first piece of literature to be published about Australia. It was probably written mid-1789 and was published as part of a longer poem, *The Economy of Vegetation* in 1792, later incorporated into his two-part epic, *The Botanic Garden*.³ And we have a wonderful reminder of Erasmus Darwin in the members of the genus *Darwinia* – that group of largely West Australian and mostly bell-shaped wildflowers. These were named after him by the English botanist, Edward Rudge, in 1815 – some thirteen years after Darwin’s death, in recognition of his contributions to botany and especially for the success of his writings in making the British more botanically aware and knowledgeable.

So much for the digression. To place our three Lichfield authors into their historical relationship:

- Johnson was born in 1709 and died in 1784, aged 75.
- Darwin, born 22 years after Johnson in 1731, died in 1802 aged 71.
- Anna Seward was born in 1742. She died in 1809, aged 66.

They all knew one another and mingled in Lichfield society. However, Darwin didn’t arrive in Lichfield till 1756, and Johnson left Lichfield for London in 1737, so the two men met only when Johnson visited Lichfield or Derby. Johnson is familiar

to you all, so I won't say anything about his appearance, his habits or his life. Anna Seward and Erasmus Darwin may be less familiar and they will be the main subjects of this talk.

Anna was the daughter of the Canon Residentiary of Lichfield Cathedral, Thomas Seward. The Canon and his family lived very well in the Bishop's Palace. The Bishop himself lived twenty-five miles away in Eccleshall Castle, safe from the day-to-day worries of the Cathedral. Seward, a graduate of St John's College, Cambridge, had literary aspirations and held literary meetings in the Palace.

Johnson had pleasant memories of Lichfield Cathedral. As a youth, he frequently visited his friend and benefactor, Gilbert Walmsley, who lived in a beautiful house in the Cathedral Close. When he visited Lichfield in 1761, Johnson was not pleased to find Canon Seward in residence in the Bishop's Palace. Johnson despised Seward, regarding him as a provincial writer of little merit. He told Boswell (16 Sept. 1777; III, 151-52), 'Sir, his ambition is to be a fine talker, so he goes to Buxton and such places, where he may find companies to listen to him.'

By the time Erasmus Darwin arrived in Lichfield in 1756, the thirteen-year-old Anna Seward had already shown promise in poetry. Her father encouraged her poetic endeavours although her mother was opposed. Soon she developed into a beauty. Robert Southey noted: 'More beautiful eyes I never saw in any human countenance.' In 1766, Edgeworth described her as of enthusiastic temper, a votary of the muses and of the most eloquent and brilliant conversation. Sir Walter Scott, who knew Anna in her fifties, said, 'Miss Seward, when young must have been exquisitely beautiful.'⁴ Unfortunately she was involved in a coaching accident in 1768 that left her with a fractured patella and afterwards she limped. In her later years she became fat.

Sadly, her father withdrew his encouragement of Anna's literary aspirations. It was not until 1780, when her mother died and her father suffered a stroke, that she felt free to publish any poetry. *Elegy on Captain Cook* was her first published poem. Anna continued to write poetry during the remainder of her life. Much of her output was of descriptions of landscapes and places. Others dealt with the sorrows and yearnings of humankind. Anna certainly was a competent poet. I find many of her poems very pleasing, and others poignant. I will quote a few lines from two poems, both from her 1796 collection, *Llangallan Vale and other poems*. The first is from a sonnet, 'Invitation to a Friend':

Since dark December shrouds the transient day,
And stormy winds are howling in their ire,
Why coms't not THOU, who always cans't inspire
The soul of cheerfulness, and best array
A sullen hour in smiles ...

The second is from a sonnet, 'Written on Rising Ground near Lichfield':

The evening shines in May's luxuriant pride,
And all the sunny hills at distance glow
And all the brooks that through the Valley flow,
Seem liquid gold ...

Such was her reputation that in the year following her death in 1809, Scott edited the Edinburgh edition of her *Poetical Works* in three volumes.

Now for a quick glance at Erasmus Darwin, before considering him in greater detail. Erasmus, a physician, was a polymath, which is why I must spend a disproportionate amount of time on him. His modern biographer, Desmond King-Hele, summarises Erasmus Darwin's life in this way:

Endowed with supreme talents in many branches of human culture, Darwin succeeded in using his gifts effectively for the benefit of patients, family and friends, and, via his books, of society at large. He achieved more in a wider range of subjects than anyone in his own time or in succeeding generations. Such diversity of genius may never be seen again.⁵

He was a political radical, and stammered; he was well-educated and well-versed in all the then existing branches of science and technology. Coleridge, who had stayed with him, wrote, 'Dr Darwin possesses, perhaps, a greater range of knowledge than any other man in Europe and is the most inventive of philosophical men.' He was a Deist rather than an orthodox Christian, and was an entrepreneur and a keen advocate of progress. His views made many suspicious, and others, including Johnson, hostile towards him.

How did Johnson, Darwin and Canon Seward get along with one another? Erasmus became increasingly irritated with Canon Seward's literary pretensions and his double standards in discouraging Anna from writing poetry. In 1765, by which time Seward's edition of Beaumont and Fletcher and Johnson's edition of Shakespeare were published, Darwin wrote,

From Lichfield famed two giant critics come.
Tremble, ye Poets! hear them 'Fe, Fo, Fum!'
By Seward's arm the mangled Beaumont bled.
And Johnson grinds poor Shakespeare's bones for bread.⁶

Johnson looked on his birthplace with affection. Its inhabitants were, he told Boswell, 'the most sober, decent people in England, the genteest in proportion to their wealth, and spoke the purest English.' (23 March 1776; II, 463) If meeting the Swards was bad enough for Johnson, meeting Darwin, probably in 1767, was worse. Anna wrote, in her *Memoirs of the Life of*

Dr. Darwin, that Johnson and Darwin ‘had one or two interviews, but never afterwards sought each other. Mutual and strong dislike subsisted between them.’⁷ Anna, who probably crossed tongues with Johnson herself, continued, ‘Johnson liked only *worshippers*.’ Neither Darwin nor the Swards were in the herd that ‘paged his heels’ and sunk, in servile silence, under the force of his dogmas, when their hearts and their judgements bore *contrary* testimonies ... it was an arduous hazard to oppose in the slightest degree Dr Johnson’s opinions. His stentor lungs, that combination of wit, humour and eloquence which ‘could make the worse appear the *better* reason’; that sarcastic contempt for his antagonist, never suppressed or even softened by the due restraints of good breeding, were sufficient to close the lips, in his presence, of men, who could have met him in fair argument on *any* ground, literary or poetical, moral or characteristic.

Where Dr Johnson was, Dr Darwin had no chance of being heard, though at least his equal in genius, his superior in science; nor indeed, from his impeded utterance, in the company of *any* overbearing declaimer; and he was too intellectually great to be a humble listener to Johnson, therefore he shunned him, on having experienced what manner of man he was. The surly dictator felt the mortification, and revenged it by *affecting* to avow his disdain of powers too distinguished to be an object of genuine scorn. (Seward, *Memoirs*, 75-77)

Erasmus was born in Elston Hall in the village of Elston in Nottinghamshire. His father had been a barrister at Lincoln’s Inn Fields, but returned to take over the property on his father’s death. Erasmus was the last of seven children. After seven happy years at Mr Burrow’s Chesterfield School, Erasmus went to St John’s College, Cambridge, where, despite Cambridge being in the academic doldrums, he was lucky enough to have ‘a sensible man’ – the Rev’d William Powell – as tutor. He achieved a good knowledge of the Classics. In his second year he began his medical studies. He took a term off to attend William Hunter’s lectures at his anatomy school in London. In 1753, he went, for three years, to Edinburgh University, the then centre of medicine and science, to complete his medical studies. In Edinburgh he met James Keir and James Hutton, both of whom became his lifelong friends. Keir eventually settled in the Midlands and did much to develop the embryonic industrial chemistry industry. You could say that he was responsible for cleaning the face of Britain – or at least the British – because his developments led to the availability of cheap soap. Hutton was a pioneer of geology.

After an unsuccessful start to medical practice in Nottingham in 1756, Darwin arrived in Lichfield in November of that year. He was armed with two letters of introduction, one to Lady Gresley and the other to the Rev’d Canon Seward. These intro-

duced him to the higher levels of Lichfield society. The almost fourteen-year-old Anna Seward was a keen observer of the new doctor and this continued throughout Darwin's life.

She kept a diary and in 1804, two years after Darwin's death, published her *Memoirs* of him; unfortunately some parts are known to be inaccurate and others probably fictional. This, together with some 446 letters written by Erasmus and now held in Cambridge University Library, are the main sources of biographical material on him.

In the *Memoirs* Anna pays tribute to Darwin as her 'poetic preceptor'. Darwin's appearance was described by Anna Seward:

He was somewhat above middle size, his form athletic, and inclined to corpulence, his limbs too heavy for exact proportion. The traces of a severe smallpox; features, and countenance, which when they were not animated by social pleasure, were saturnine rather than sprightly; a stoop to the shoulders, and the then professional appendage, a large full-bottomed wig, gave, at that early period of life, an appearance of nearly twice the years he bore. Florid health, the earnest of good humour, and a sunny smile on entering a room, and on first accosting friends, rendered, in his youth, that exterior agreeable, to which beauty and symmetry had not been propitious. (*Memoirs*, 1-2.)

After his death, his character was assessed by his old Edinburgh friend, James Keir:

I think all those who knew him well, allow that sympathy and benevolence were the most striking features. He felt very sensibly for others, and, from his knowledge of human nature, he entered into their feelings and sufferings in the different circumstances of their constitution, character, health, sickness, and prejudice. In benevolence, he thought that almost all virtue consisted. He despised the monkish abstinences and the hypocritical pretensions which so often impose on the world. The communication of happiness and the relief of misery were by him held as the only standard of moral merit.⁸

Of his professional charity, Anna wrote,

Professional generosity distinguished Dr Darwin's medical practice. While resident in Lichfield, to the priests and lay vicars of its cathedral, and their families, he always cheerfully gave his advice, but never took fees from any of them. Diligently, also, did he attend to the health of the poor of that city, and afterwards at Derby, and supplied their necessities by food, and all sort of charitable assistance. In each of those towns *his* was the cheerful board of almost open-housed hospitality, without extravagance or parade; deeming ever the first unjust, the latter unmanly. (*Memoirs*, 5-6)

Darwin as Medical Practitioner

Darwin was successful as a doctor, both professionally and financially. Soon after he arrived in Lichfield, Anna wrote that he was called upon to treat a Mr Inge – ‘a young gentleman of family who lay sick of a dangerous fever and whose previous doctor had treated him without success and who, “pronounced it hopeless; that speedy death must ensue”... and took his leave.’ (*Memoirs*, 8-9). Under Darwin’s treatment Inge recovered. This was the start of his quite successful practice. For the well-off, his fees were robust and supported his charity work. He was fairly quickly in a sound financial position, and remained generally so for the rest of his life. His reputation in England as a successful doctor increased, and George III offered him the position of Royal Physician. He declined this as he did not want to leave Derby. He wrote papers for the medical press and made worthwhile advances in the treatment of diseases. One consequence of Darwin’s awareness that he had to remain in a sound financial position was that he did not publish poetry under his own name until well on in life. In 1784, aged 53, when a draft of his poem *The Loves of Plants* was ready, Darwin wrote to the publisher, ‘I would not have my name affix’d to this work on my account, as I think it would be injurious to my medical practice, as it has been to all other physicians who have published poetry.’⁹ Erasmus, like his grandson Charles, seemed indifferent to fame.

Darwin as Scientist and Technologist

Darwin had an enquiring mind and was a creative thinker. He made contributions to many fields of science and technology. King-Hele lists about ninety.¹⁰ These range from adiabatic expansion of gases, aesthetics, afforestation, air travel, artesian wells and animal camouflage through the alphabet to oxygen and hydrogen as the constituents of water, water machines, weather maps, water closets, winds and windmills. Like Johnson, Darwin liked experimenting, but his research was more productive. He was made a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1761. (For those of you who are interested in genetics, since 1761 there has not been a year when the Royal Society did not have Darwin or at least one of his descendants as a Fellow. An unsurpassed record!). He was also largely responsible for bringing together many of the leading manufacturers and scientists of the Midlands to form the ‘think tank’ called the Lunar Society. Its members included Matthew Boulton, who was renowned for iron and other metal works, manufacturing innovations including the use of steam power, eventually the ‘first manufacturer of England’; Josiah Wedgwood, the potter and founder of the dynasty of Wedgwood potters; Joseph Priestly, the famous scientist; James Keir, industrial chemist; and James Watt, the inventor of the steam

engine. Members of the Lunar Society were responsible largely for providing the know-how for the industrial revolution. They also made substantial contributions to physics, chemistry, agriculture, geology, botany, zoology, education and other fields.¹¹

Darwin as a Family Man

Darwin fathered fourteen children. His first wife, Polly, gave birth to five before she died in 1770 from biliary obstruction. Next he had a mistress, Mary Parker, who gave birth to two of his daughters. Then in 1781 he married a widow, Mrs Elizabeth Pole, who already had three children. She rejected living in Lichfield and they moved to Derby. She had eight children by Erasmus and outlived him.

Darwin as a Literary Figure

Although Darwin wrote poetry from an early age, his first large publications were in prose. *A System of Vegetables* (1783), and *The Family of Plants* (1787), were translations of Linnaeus's *Systema Vegetabilium* and his *Genera Plantarum*. Both were ascribed to the Botanical Society of Lichfield, Darwin avoiding acknowledging authorship. Doubtless it appears peculiar that I should be referring to these translations. One reason is that in 1778, when Darwin first conceived of the idea of translating the works of Linnaeus into English, he told Anna that, 'The Linnaean system is unexplored poetic ground, and a happy subject for the muse. It affords fine scope for poetic landscape; it suggests metamorphoses of the Ovidian kind, though reversed. Ovid made men and women into flowers, plants, and trees. You should make flowers, plants, and trees into men and women ... I will,' he continued, 'write the notes, which must be scientific; and you shall write the verse' (Seward, *Memoirs*, 130-31). Another was that he wished to make sure that his translations of Latin botanical terms should be as comprehensible as possible. To this end he consulted Johnson, and in the preface to the *System of Vegetables* he thanked 'that great master of the English tongue Dr Samuel Johnson for his advice in the formation of the botanic language.' Both books were successes.

Even more successful was his *The Botanic Garden; a Poem, in Two Parts*, Part I, *The Economy of Vegetation* (1791), from which I quoted earlier, and Part II, *The Loves of the Plants* (1789). Part I ran to six editions and Part II to seven. Translations into Portuguese, French and Italian appeared. *The Loves of the Plants* was very popular. The title derived from Linnaeus's classification of plants based on the sexual characteristics of their flowers. It was a long poem and had numerous notes; *The Economy of Vegetation* was even longer. Both were published anonymously. However, Darwin's authorship soon became

widely known and for the next half decade he was considered to be the leading contemporary English poet. Darwin was not an uncritical admirer of everything in the vegetable kingdom. As a doctor working at a time when the only agents that relieved pain, or even made it bearable, were alcohol and opium, and who prescribed opium rather freely, Darwin knew only too well the dangers and effects of addiction. In *The Loves of the Plants* we have Papaver (poppy) whose flowers have many stamens (males) and many pistils (females):

Sofa'd on silk, amid her charm-built towers,
Her meads of asphodel, and amaranth bowers,
Where sleep and silence guard the soft abodes,
In sullen apathy PAPAVER nods.
Faint o'er her couch in scintillating streams
Pass the thin forms of Fancy and of Dreams;
Froze by enchantment on the velvet ground
Fair youths and beauteous ladies glitter round;
On crystal pedestals they seem to sigh,
Bend the meek knee, and lift the imploring eye.
– And now the Sorceress bares her shrivel'd hand,
And circles thrice in air her ebon wand,
Flush'd with new life the descending statues talk,
The pliant marble softening as they walk;
With deeper sobs reviving lovers breathe,
Fair bosoms rise, and soft hearts pant beneath
With warmer lips relenting damsels speak, ...
And hovering Loves are heard on rustling wings.
– She waves her wand again! – fresh horrors seize
Their stiffening limbs, their vital currents freeze;
By each cold nymph her marble lover lies,
And iron slumbers seal their glassy eyes. (II.267-290)

Now on to the grape whose flower has five stamens (males), and one pistil (female):

'Drink deep, sweet youths,' seductive VITIS cries,
The maudlin tear-drop glittering in her eyes; ...
Five hapless swains with soft assuasive smiles
The harlot meshes in her deathful toils;
'Drink deep,' she carols, as she waves in air
The mantling goblet, 'and forget your care.'
O'er the dread feast malignant Chemia scowls,
And mingles poison in the nectar'd bowls;
Fell Gout peeps grinning through the flimsy scene,
And bloated Dropsy pants behind unseen. (III.357-68)

(In the eighteenth century, the froth on a glass of alcoholic drink was often called a mantle.)

Darwin's next publication was in prose, *Zoonomia: or, the Laws of Organic Life*, in two volumes (1794-96). Darwin attempted to classify animals into some sort of Linnaean system and, through this, establish a theory of disease. Of course, given the state of zoological and medical ignorance of the time, it was

doomed to fail. Nevertheless, *Zoonomia* was one of the better general reference books on medical matters of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Three editions were published in England, three in Ireland and five in America. There were Portuguese, French, Italian and German translations.

His next major publication, in 1800, was *Phytologia; or the Philosophy of Agriculture and Gardening*. The President of the Board of Trade had asked Darwin to write it as part of the President's response to the near-famine conditions prevalent in England. In addition to practical advice, Darwin, in the poem, gives the most satisfactory account of photosynthesis up to that time. Like his previous works it was encyclopaedic in its coverage.

By 1797, Darwin was 66 and was beginning to feel his years. He decided to attempt one last major work and in it to gather together his knowledge and wisdom about life. He achieved this, but died in 1802, the year prior to the publication of *The Temple of Nature; or, The Origin of Society*. This was probably Darwin's best poem. It was also his least successful in the short term. Darwin had, over the years, come to a theory of the origin of living things. God was the first cause. Organic life began as microscopic filaments in the primeval ocean. Then, by a process of evolution, diversity of types began:

ORGANIC LIFE beneath the shoreless waves
Was born and nurs'd in Ocean's pearly caves;
First forms minute, unseen by spheric glass,
Move on the mud, or pierce the watery mass;
These, as successive generations bloom,
New powers acquire, and larger limbs assume;
Whence countless groups of vegetation spring
And breathing realms of fin, and feet, and wing.
(I.295-302)

As well as the common origin of all organic life, Darwin was aware of the recycling of the elements as animal fed on animal, animal on plant, plant on plant, or plant on animal. This led Darwin in *The Temple of Nature* to credit the Sage (Pythagorus) with:

So erst the Sage, with scientific truth,
In Grecian temples taught the attentive youth;
With ceaseless change, how restless atoms pass,
From life to life, a transmigrating mass;
How the same organs, which to-day compose
The poisonous henbane, or the fragrant rose
May with to-morrow's sun, new forms compile,
Frown in the Hero, and in Beauty smile.
Whence drew the enlighten'd Sage the moral plan,
That man should ever be the friend of man;
Should eye with tenderness all living forms
His brother-emmetts and his sister-worms. (IV.417-28)

Darwin considered also a host of problems: good and evil, cruelty, disease and torture, the pleasures and delights of existence, and concludes with a triumphant cry:

Shout round the globe, how Reproduction strives
With vanquish'd Death – and Happiness survives;
How Life, increasing, peoples every clime,
And young renascent Nature conquers Time;
– And high in golden characters record,
The immense munificence of NATURE'S LORD!
(IV.451-56)

Like his other long poems, *The Temple of Nature* has copious notes, many being scientific explanations of points in the poem. Why did the poem fall flat? A possible factor is its clear exposition of a theory of evolution. This was a point made in many of the hostile reviews. The clerics of the day and the general population were bitterly opposed to such heresy. They, especially the bishops and aristocrats, also felt hurt pride at the notion that ants were their brothers and worms their sisters.

Also, in 1798, with the war against France going badly, the future Prime Minister, George Canning, set up *The Anti-Jacobin* to destroy the reputation of Darwin and other radicals by ridicule and parody. It had some success. Then there were the effects of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* published in 1798 by Wordsworth and Coleridge, with further editions in 1800 and 1802. The prefaces, especially the third, presented a new theory of poetry that was completely different from those of the eighteenth century.

The Age of Reason was replaced by the Age of the Romantics. Wordsworth claimed that 'all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling' and that the diction of poetry should be the 'language really used by men'. Coleridge later asserted that 'gaudiness and inane phraseology' were at an end. The acceptance of these ideas, coupled with the great popularity of the Romantic poets, sounded the death knell of eighteenth-century versification. Darwin's use of such devices as the Goddess of Botany to expound botanical science, together with her accompanying nymphs, sylphs, naiads, gnomes, and so on, damned his poems as unfashionable.

It could well be, though, that the Romantic poets owed a great deal to Darwin's imagery and notions – particularly those in *The Botanic Garden*. Darwin's idea that plants have something like a nervous system and therefore a sort of 'feelings' may well be the genesis of some of Wordsworth's and Shelley's notions about plants. King-Hele has given many instances of such possible relationships in his books *Erasmus Darwin and the Romantic Poets* (1986), and *Shelley: His Thought and Work* (1960).

One example. If you rewrote Darwin's 'evolutionary' lines,

Whence drew the enlighten'd Sage, the moral plan,
That man should ever be the friend of man;
Should eye with tenderness all living forms
His brother-emmetts and his sister-worms.

in 'creationist' mode, you might end up, as Coleridge did in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, with,

He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.
He prayeth best who loveth best
All things both great and small:
For the dear God, who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.

Darwin's eclipse was not complete. New editions of *The Botanic Garden*, *Zoonomia* and *The Temple of Nature* were published up to the mid-1820s. After the 1830s, interest in Darwin faded until, by the end of the nineteenth century, you find critics such as George Saintsbury, while writing unflattering things in general about eighteenth-century poetry, stating, 'in serious poetry' of the latter part of the century, 'the standard names – names, alas! standing rather as marks for scorn than as objects of veneration – are those of Erasmus Darwin (1731-1892) and William Hayley (1745-1820).' Darwin, he says, is 'in his *Botanic Garden* (1789-1820), the last and one of the most polished, but also one of the most frigid and unpoetic, of the descriptive couplet writers'.¹²

There has been a revival of interest in Erasmus Darwin in the last half-century, and facsimile reprints of *The Botanic Garden*, *Zoonomia*, *The Temple of Nature* and *A Plan for the Conduct of Female Education in Boarding Schools* have appeared. At least three factors have contributed to the modest increase of interest in Erasmus. First, the awareness by scientists that many of the eighteenth-century scientists had very good heads on their shoulders and that modern scientists have much to learn from their modes of thought. Second, the establishing in universities of departments of the History and Philosophy of Science. Third, the growing number of good scientists who are writing 'popular' science books; for example, King-Hele, from whose biography of Erasmus Darwin I have quoted, is a Fellow of the Royal Society. He started his professional life as a space scientist at the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough and has written books such as *Satellites and Scientific Research* (1960).

As a result of the growing realisation that Erasmus was a citizen of whom the British could be proud, his home at Lichfield has been restored very recently, and is now the Erasmus Darwin Museum. Some of you may have visited it.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Anna Seward faded from the literary scene even more completely than Darwin. During the first half of the twentieth century, articles about her appeared spasmodically in literary journals such as *The Bookman*. In the latter half, interest in her has increased, partly, one suspects, because of her being an early female poet and worthy of inclusion in various Women's Studies courses.

Johnson, of course, has suffered the least. The scholarship evident in his *Dictionary*, and *Lives of the English Poets*, the poetical strength of his best poems, such as *The Vanity of Human Wishes* and *On the Death of Dr Robert Levet*, ensured that he received recognition – even during those periods when critics were most strident in criticising him for his latinate ‘great whale’ style, the ponderous swing of balanced phrase, his too-mechanical antitheses, and/or his pompous and rhetorical style. In addition, the continued popularity of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* has kept the human face of Johnson clearly before readers. At present, Johnson's popularity seems to be increasing – attested to not only by the genesis of societies such as ours, but also by the great depth and range of research on Johnson and the escalating volume of the first-rate publications with him as subject.

Notes

- ¹ Anna Seward, *Elegy on Captain Cook to which is added an Ode to the Sun* (London, 1780).
- ² James Boswell, *The Life of Johnson* (1791), ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. L.F. Powell, 6 v. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935-65); IV, 331). Hereafter quoted by date, and vol. and page, in the text.
- ³ [Erasmus Darwin], *The Botanic Garden: A Poem in Two Parts*. [quarto]. Part I, *The Economy of Vegetation* (London, 1791). Part II, *The Loves of the Plants* (Lichfield, 1789).
- ⁴ *Poetical Works of Anna Seward*, ed. Walter Scott, 3 v. (Edinburgh, 1810), v. 1, xxii.
- ⁵ Desmond King-Hele, *Erasmus Darwin* (London: Giles de la Mare, 1999), 373.
- ⁶ Quoted in Charles Darwin, *The Life of Erasmus Darwin*, ed. Desmond King-Hele (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 58.
- ⁷ Anna Seward, *Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Darwin* (London, 1804), 68.
- ⁸ Quoted in C. Darwin, *Life of Erasmus Darwin*, 79.
- ⁹ *Letters of Erasmus Darwin*, ed. Desmond King-Hele (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), 139.
- ¹⁰ Desmond King-Hele, *Erasmus Darwin* (London: Giles de la Mare, 1999), 399.
- ¹¹ Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).
- ¹² George Saintsbury, *A Short History of English Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1898).

'Good Living': The Poetry of Samuel Johnson

Philip Harvey

Here are two lines of Horace, translated by Johnson as mottoes for *The Rambler*.¹

Sit quod vis simplex duntaxat et unum.
Let ev'ry piece be simple and be one.
(No. 139. Tuesday, 16 July 1751.)

Quo Virtus, quo ferat Error.
Now say, where virtue stops and vice begins?
(No. 173. Tuesday, 12 November 1751.)

Poetry

We have all written poetry in youth and most of us are glad our efforts remain hidden in old school magazines. By the time Samuel Johnson left Stourbridge School at the age of seventeen he had already done presentable imitations of Homer, Horace, and Virgil, as well as a quizzical translation of Addison's 'The Battle of the Pygmies and Cranes', a work Addison himself had been at pains to compose solely in Latin. The teenage Johnson wrote poems in original English too, including this one, called *Festina Lentè*, ('Make haste slowly'; *Poems*, 47):

Whatever course of Life great Jove allots,
Whether you sit on thrones, or dwell in cots,
Observe your steps; be careful to command
Your passions; guide the reins with steady hand,
Nor down steep cliffs precipitately move
Urg'd headlong on by hatred or by love:
Let Reason with superior force controul
The floods of rage, and calm thy ruffled soul.
Rashness! thou spring from whence misfortunes flow!
Parent of ills! and source of all our woe!
Thou to a scene of bloodshed turn'st the Ball,
By thee wholl citys burn, wholl nations fall!
By thee Orestes plung'd his vengeful dart
Into his supplicating mothers heart.
Hurry'd to death by thee, Flaminius fell,
And crowds of godlike Romans sunk to hell.
But cautious Fabius from impending fate
Preserv'd the reliques of the Latian state
From bold invaders clear'd th'Italian lands
And drove the swarthy troops to their own barren sands.

This work not only shows an advanced ability with the rhyming couplet – dominant form of the age – it shows a developed skill with techniques that make couplets work: enjambment, caesura, subordinate clause and metrical flow. The

rhymes are not dull, they play with one another. The pupil knows how to construct an argument, and how to arrange sentences to enhance that argument. The poem has drive. The poem can be performed to effect; it invites reflection.

Although a class exercise, the intention is nothing less than a warning to the world in general of what happens if we allow emotions to rule our head. ‘Whether we sit on thrones, or dwell in cots’ is simply a different way of surveying ‘Mankind from *China* to *Peru*’. Then follow examples of what happens if rashness, rather than Reason, controls ‘the ruffled soul’. It is not a pleasant sight, only rounded off by the active presence of ‘cautious Fabius’. Cause and effect are neatly linked, capped off with a moral conclusion. Persuasive argument concludes in undeniable certitude; it would be mistaken to haggle with Reason. The voice itself, using a measured and definitive language, draws us into acceptance of the proposal. Verbal command is the means to readerly conviction.

Festina Lentè derives its conclusiveness in part through the use of classical reference. Indeed, by using the context of antiquity, the young poet asserts authority. Historical example pushes moral rightness into a space of irrefutable finality. Relative or contrary argument is missing. Interesting in Johnson, here as later, is his *avoidance* of bombast or pompousness. He supplies just enough examples of ‘godlike Romans sunk to death’ to make the point, without overdoing it. By setting his poem in the classical world, Johnson is already playing an established literary game in English writing: a model, a source. In his case, it remains his main mode of operating within verse creation.

One other feature of *Festina Lentè* is its basis in fear and uncertainty. This person sees the world as easily capable of falling into chaos and collapse, a state brought about when you fail to ‘be carefull to command / your passions’. Control of self and control of state are bound together. Preservation of ‘the reliques of the Latian state’ is a virtue on par with, even the reward of, avoidance of ‘rashness’. The argument for a moral imperative is already visible, the personal need to define good living over and against its opposite, seems to be intrinsic to young Johnson’s world view.

All the characteristics identified here carry over into Johnson’s mature poetry. The force and determination, the originality of the mature work, show that from very early in his life Johnson saw poetry as a good in itself; it is quite apparent too that Johnson was animated by a wish, a wish for poetic achievement, poetic expression of the world.

London is the first of Samuel Johnson’s two accomplished long poems. Its appearance in his collected poems is as much a surprise today as when Alexander Pope read it at publication in

1738. Pope inquired after the anonymous author and was told that his name was Johnson and that he was some obscure man; Pope said, 'he will soon be *déterré*.' Its effect is one of chastisement, almost like a hard sermon. Its intentions are apparent when compared with the Latin poem it imitates. The language is economical, direct, confident:

Here Malice, Rapine, Accident, conspire,
And now a Rabble rages, now a Fire;
Their Ambush here relentless Ruffians lay,
And here the fell Attorney prowls for prey;
Here falling Houses thunder on your Head,
And here a female Atheist talks you dead. (*Poems*, 61)

The poem's tenor is something new in English poetry, a kind of emphatic foregrounding of social division and in a manner that assumes a common mind in its readership. The conclusion of *London* names the poem as 'satire' and we are meant to understand that from its model, the Roman Juvenal. Yet whatever satire we find is loaded with deeper judgements of the city's inhabitants, a place in which any kind of power corrupts implicitly. Furthermore, the central concern, or defence, of the poem is with the poor, not typically the message we would expect, let alone expect so explicitly.

Another aspect of *London* is the strong commanding presence of the speaker. In poetry we are used to some element of performance or intimacy: the speaker travels from one place to another, opens a dialogue, or acts out different positions through voices or personae. Johnson is someone we find grounded in his dwelling place, who speaks to us from an acquired position of experienced authority. We are entertained and involved, but we know from the start that the speaker is secured hard and fast. Carrying the City of London in his head, with freely moving images of human interaction, Johnson sits in his chair. He has dug in, he is where the action is. We are used to this Johnsonian fixedness, its mode of decent conviction, so used that we forget how unusual it probably was for those who first heard *London*.

Readers would also have been more accustomed to *faithful* translations of classical poetry. Johnson imitates rather than translates. He takes liberties with the original so as to force upon his readers the currency of the text, a strategy most fully achieved in his other great poem. *The Vanity of Human Wishes* is open to a number of readings. The title itself reverberates with the Preacher in *Ecclesiastes*, 'Vanity of Vanities, All is Vanity.' Johnson transforms Juvenal's angry revenge into a knowing litany of fallibility. Formed out of classical and condemnatory satirical attack, it becomes reflection on self and world as taught through Anglican spirituality. The poem is a relentless exposé of the waste of history, where power leads to one end.

In full-blown Dignity, see *Wolsey* stand,
Law in his Voice, and Fortune in his Hand:
To him the Church, the Realm, their Pow'rs consign,
Thro' him the Rays of regal Bounty shine,
Turn'd by his Nod the Stream of Honour flows,
His Smile alone Security bestows. (*Poems*, 85)

This stern eruption is a portrait raging with judgement. We wait for his conclusion to *Wolsey's* ambitions, declaimed in the same heavy terms:

With Age, with Cares, with Maladies oppress'd,
He seeks the Refuge of Monastic Rest.
Grief aids Disease, remember'd Folly stings,
And his last Sighs reproach the Faith of Kings. (*Poems*, 86)

At the centre of the poem live tough questions about the uses of power and the purposes of history, the results of Johnson's own reading – and subsequent depression – about time and the follies of the powerful. *The Vanity of Human Wishes* can also be read as a warning against entering the public service. Rulers, politicians, bureaucrats, all get a serve, such that we wonder if a just society or a safe future are even possible. Good living, the thing done by the rest of us, is somewhere at the edges of this satire. Or even outside, keeping a wise distance.

There is another reading of *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, crucial to our understanding of Johnson and his career. By implication, the poem argues strongly against the vanity of poetry. English poetry is particularly sensitive to the question of whether poetry is born in sin. Johnson, a practising Christian, would have paid much attention to how poetry may prolong, or even encourage, sin. He would have cast a wary look at the Horatian boast that his words will be more lasting than bronze, simply because of its potential idolatrousness; and he runs a counter-argument:

Yet Reason frowns on War's unequal Game,
Where wasted Nations raise a single Name,
And mortgag'd States their Grandsires Wreaths regret
From Age to Age in everlasting Debt;
Wreaths which at last the dear-bought Right convey
To rust on medals, or on Stones decay. (*Poems*, 87)

Johnson is in a bind, placing a high value on poetry: only how high? One of his solutions was to become an apologist for literature. The main stream of Johnson's poetry reacts to and is preoccupied with moral crisis. To say it is preoccupied with sin is a simplification, but the manifestations of sin trouble Johnson. His poetry serves the remarkable duty of being a diagnostic of human wilfulness and the damage that follows.

Anyone studying Johnson's life notices that he virtually ceased writing poetry around the age of forty. If his work is seen

as a series of singular triumphs in different modes, *The Vanity of Human Wishes* is the culminating, masterly and most complete expression of his consciousness in verse. His ill-fated heroic verse drama *Irene* was probably decisive in his never again trying that form. The opening season lasted nine nights, the audience especially unhappy with the heroine being killed in the last act, a not-unexpected conclusion for an early Christian martyr.

We need to be wary of seeing Johnson's life in two halves, however. Thomas Hardy, who dropped fiction for poetry after the ironic calamity of *Jude the Obscure*, adopting poetry exclusively for the rest of his life, is a good example of such a creative change in direction. But for Johnson the story is different; no such decisive leap, even if it happens in middle age and could be theorised as part of the ubiquitous midlife crisis. We need to be wary too, of resting our case on such easy explanations as 'he ran out of inspiration', or 'was abandoned by the muse'. But at some stage in mid-life something happened to Johnson. Either what he wished to say could not be said within the range of his poetic skill, or poetry in his own understanding of the art could not handle what he wished to say or how he wished to say it. Or both of these positions pertained.

The poet operates with an unpredictable inspiration, where the creative act is waited upon with care. This dynamic is coupled with the critical faculty to produce a work. A poet without a critical faculty may provide prodigies, but cannot expect longevity. On the other hand, a poet with an overdeveloped critical faculty may cease creating altogether. Creation is possible, inspiration abounds, but the poet may be paralysed by critical demands. If Johnson found himself captive to this state, it would explain the closing off of the poetry project and its transformation into other modes of poetic outlet. It would also explain Johnson's amazing critical outpouring throughout the rest of his life. Rather than Hardy, Johnson parallels in this regard the French poet Paul Valéry, who wrote great poems but spent more of his life writing *about* poetry: what it is, how it works, who makes it and to what ends. Like Valéry, Johnson today is as well known for what he said about poetry as for his own poems.

Making poetry is an inexplicable activity, its sources often a mystery to the person involved. Discussion will always rage about where it comes from: childhood scenes, a psychic wound, the unknown. It is found deep in the unconscious, in suppressed and unexpressed layers of a culture, in the very turbulence of creation as described in *Genesis*. Johnson was cognisant of these realities and lived in respect for them.

The Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard has said, ‘What prompts a beginning is wonder. What one begins with is a resolution.’² It is the resolution to write that binds Johnson, as it does any serious poet. The resolution implies a wish, a human wish that, as if by definition, leads to vanity. Which is why it may be argued that *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, this tempering ultimatum to a naughty world, is also an ultimatum to the poet himself. The poem internally questions the motives for its own existence, its own destiny. Someone who has reached this stage in his thinking has more or less to concede the futility of continuing in this fashion. *The Vanity of Human Wishes* questions the purpose of its own being, as many great poems do. English poetry has a long tradition of the self-doubting, self-questioning poem. Shakespeare and Donne are full of this manner of comic defusion; Eliot and Auden almost make it a creed. Unlike these people, who keep making poetry out of wonder, Johnson is fixed on the meaning of his youthful resolution to make poetry. He rethinks the resolution and comes up with incredible solutions, solutions that utilise his own expanding gifts in other language endeavours.

Put another way, making poetry is a process of learning and experiment. It is not just that the person must have the facility, the talent, the gift. He must develop his aptitude, ready to use his ability when inspiration occurs. The poet must be attentive, he requires perseverance. Very importantly, there has to be that beautiful and dangerous unknown at work, desire. The desire to make something with words is vital. The love of words for their own sake animates poetic behaviour. With all of this, having something to say can be a not unimportant factor. Johnson understood all of this, as is witnessed throughout his criticism. That he learnt it through training in the making of poetry is indisputable. And what needs to be considered is that he reached a level of creative maturity with *The Vanity of Human Wishes* that set Johnson in good stead to launch a series of poetic enterprises that took up the rest of his life. Johnson’s discoveries served as an apprenticeship for everything that followed in the fruitful second half of his life.

Essays

Johnson’s entrance into the ruly universe of the essay brought with it a manner of discourse practised from intensive poetic composition. His first great transformation of poetic desire, or wish, was through the essays. In his *Rambler* essay on biography we listen to this:

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 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.³

Many of the features we have met in the poetry show up in this passage: the intention to influence, the certainty of position, and the move to universalise. We hear his unmistakable measure, the pacing of phrases, the balancing of one element against another, the range of his examples. Latinate formality meets restless English to constitute a forceful diction. The beat of the syllables is part of the act of persuasion and, interestingly, once the constraint of rhymed endings is dropped, Johnson's language is freed up to exact any number of dovetailing effects. The very construction of each paragraph in this and many other essays is an emulation of the poetic verse. It is a skill learnt from verse-making, with its existent need to move one thought toward another, to correct the first line with the last sequentially and in compound form.

At another level, the essays contain what some would regard as Johnson's best poetry, unaffected, perfectly contrived, expressive, spontaneous, memorable. It can be heard in the superb consistency of tone he achieves throughout a single piece. And we can see it in single lines, often where he speeds into epigram.

Here dispute *can* arise. Prose is prose, verse is verse, never the twain shall meet, is the hardline view. What is not being argued here is the idea that Johnson broke poetry into prose, or confected the sort of prose poetry given such a bad name by the Pre-Raphaelites. Johnson's move into the essay is one that necessarily entailed the shifting of his poetic operations, his learnt behaviour, into a new and freer means of expression. The liberties of prose gave him licence to turn his best prosodic tricks into a more extensive and versatile set of literary achievements. Rhythm, diction and gravity are ploughed into prose. (It is only later, when Johnson is living on the essay, that we notice a toning down of his Latinisms and his cadenced expression. This

coincides with a smoothing out of the poetic rhythm, even the metrical merry-go-round, we hear in his earlier essays).

One view of literature is that poetry precedes prose in the life of a language. Prose expansions of ideas and beliefs have their antecedents in the essence of the poetic line. Simultaneously, prose amplifies, extends and dramatises what poetry has activated in concise, even gnomic, form. Hence Italians trace their literary roots to Dante and Petrarch, Russians to Pushkin. This idea can be seen happening at the micro level in the lives of individual writers like Johnson. A poetic kernel breaks forth into a remarkable form of prose. Johnson grew from poetic-centredness into a user of language that is multi-functional, driven with purpose. So on the one hand his poetic desire reaches out to flowing form. Around the same time, he concentrates also on the single unit of verse composition: the individual word.

Dictionary

Many of our ideas today go well beyond Johnson's own two definitions of

POETRY

1. Metrical composition; the art or practice of writing poems
2. Poems; poetical pieces

How spare, limited, plain prosaic are these two definitions, gazed at from the other end of the romantic, modernist, and experimental projects. Then there is his single line definition of

POET

1. An inventor; an author of fiction; a writer of poems; one who writes in measure.⁴

Yet Johnson's launch into definitions for all English words fits our own understanding of poetic temperament and wish better than his own. The *Dictionary* is a second great transformation of his poetic desire.

One view of a poem is that it is no less than the most elaborate or concise way of defining a word. Poems reach out beyond the prescriptive, scientific definition into the clusterings and concatenations of meaning that we associate with a word, either awake or asleep. *The Vanity of Human Wishes* itself is an extended definition of the words 'vanity' and 'wish'. It illustrates and magnifies the meanings of these two words in ways outside the range of their use in his Dictionary. The poetic instinct to turn a word into a succession of possibilities is a familiar notion to us. (The poetic nature of word definition was obscured in the nineteenth century by James Murray and the other compilers of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Accuracy and exactness, the general and the specific, were essentials for their dictionary, based on historical and scientific principles. The inventive and the

personal were carefully watched in the cause of the objective. Johnson's *Dictionary* was a founding document of what became the OED, but many of its ingenuities and originalities were examples of how *not* to make a dictionary).

Likewise, the need to turn over the many meanings of a word, the love of such subtle play – these are manifestations of daily poetic activity. When we read Johnson's range of meanings for, say, *air*, we can hear the poet at work getting at every sense that he knows.

AIR

1. The element encompassing the terraqueous globe
2. The state of the air, or the air as related to health
3. Air in motion; a small gentle wind
4. Scent; vapour
5. Blast; pestilential vapour
6. Any thing light or uncertain; that is as light as air
7. The open weather; air unconfined
8. Vent; utterance; emission into the air
9. Publication; exposure to the publick view
10. Intelligence; information.
11. Musick, whether light or serious; sound; air modulated
12. Poetry; a song
13. The mien, or manner, of the person; the look
14. An affected or laboured manner or gesture; as, a lofty air, a gay air
15. Appearance
16. The artificial or practised motions of a managed horse.

This openness to the breath, the inhalation and exhalation of sounds, floating directly or who knows where, is an expression of Johnson's love of the language for its own sake, a meeting of body and mind in rhythmic exercise.

What is still more amazing is that this poetic consideration works in tandem with quotation. His *Dictionary* is the most extraordinary commonplace anthology of English poetry in existence. Any captivated reader is aware that word and verse in the *Dictionary* play a continuous harmony. Some would even read the *Dictionary* as a commentary on English poetry, rather than the poem being simply a descriptive example for the entry. This is given further weight when, as often happens in this book, the individual definition of a word seems to be there because of its use in that poem: it is the poem that provides the definition. This lends further credence to Johnson's saying to Boswell, that the poets *make* the language.

To clarify, here are the pieces of verse he uses for some of the variations on *air* we have just heard:

AIR

- 3 . Air in motion; a small gentle wind
Fresh gales, and gentle airs,
Whisper,d it to the woods, and from their wings
Flung rose, flung odours from the spicy shrub
Disporting! *Milton*
- 6 . Any thing light or uncertain; that is as light as air
O momentary grace of mortal men,
Which we more hunt for than the grace of God!
Who builds his hope in air of your fair looks,
Lives like a drunken sailor on a mast,
Ready with every nod to tumble down.
Shakespeare, Richard III
8. Vent; utterance; emission into the air
I would have ask,d you, if I durst for shame,
If still you lov'd? you gave it air before me.
But ah! why were we not both of a sex?
For then we might have lov'd without a crime.
Dryden
11. Musick, whether light or serious; sound; air modulated
This musick crept by me upon the waters,
Allaying both their fury and my passion,
With its sweet air.
Shakespeare, The Tempest
14. An affected or laboured manner or gesture; as, a lofty
air, a gay air
To curl their waving hairs,
Assist their blushes, and inspire their airs.
Pope

This connection between word and poem is further justified in Johnson's *Plan*, thus:

Of those [words] which yet continue in the state of aliens [i.e. foreign imports], and have made no approaches toward assimilation, some seem necessary to be retained, because the purchasers of the dictionary will expect to find them. Such are ... in general all terms which can be found in books not written professedly upon particular arts, or can be supposed necessary to those who do regularly study them. Thus when a reader not skilled in physick happens in Milton upon this line,

- - - - pining atrophy,

Marasmus, and wide-wasting pestilence,

he will with equal expectation look into his dictionary for the word *marasmus*, as for *atrophy*, or *pestilence*, and will have reason to complain if he does not find it.⁵

This etymological devotion reaches fanatical extremes with such words as *quaid*:

Of this participle I know not the verb, and believe it only put by Spenser, who often took great liberties, for quailed, for the poor convenience of his rhyme. Crushed; dejected; depressed.

Therewith his sturdy courage soon was quaid,
And all his senses were with sudden dread dismayd.

Fairy Queen (Dictionary)

Another weakness of poets is their wish to have used every word ever invented, they want all the words, the plain, the pearls, the peaches, the pips. And certainly no other English poet competes with Johnson when it comes to trying to write down the entire components of the language, every one with its own set of core meanings and peripheral visions. This mania for the words, for the words to say everything, is Johnson's thrill, his delight, his repeated challenge. This is not a drudge, this is poetic play of the highest order, and Johnson gave himself permission to play the game just the way he wanted. The *Dictionary* is his poem with his set of rules. Quite simply, the man wished to name everything and he had centuries of change and tradition to draw on.

This sits at odds with what I regard as the false modesty of his *Plan of a Dictionary*. Given the speed and brilliance with which that book was produced, what do we make of the opening paragraph?

I knew, that the work in which I engaged is generally considered as drudgery for the blind, as the proper toil of artless industry, a task that requires neither the light of learning, nor the activity of genius, but may be successfully performed without any higher quality than that of bearing burthens with dull patience, and beating the track of the alphabet with sluggish resolution. (*Plan*, 121)

It might be 'generally considered' this way by someone but not, I suspect, Johnson. He knows full well that dictionaries are not the work of the blind, that this is artful industry requiring high learning and perhaps even genius, whatever that is. He continues:

Whether this opinion, so long transmitted and so widely propagated, had its beginning from truth and nature, or from accident and prejudice, whether it be decreed by the authority of reason, or the tyranny of ignorance, that of all the candidates for literary praise, the unhappy lexicographer holds the lowest place, neither vanity nor interest incited me to enquire. [There's that word *vanity* again.] It appeared that the province allotted me was of all the regions of learning generally confessed to be the least delightful, that it produced neither fruits nor flowers, and that after a long and laborious cultivation, not even the barren laurel had been found upon it.

This *Plan*, published in 1747, precisely at the time he is completing *Irene* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, epitomises the unstated dilemma he faced as a poet. Here is a classical scholar theatrically placing himself in the most backward province of the literary empire: lexicography. He denies he questioned this role either by vanity or interest, and yet wishes to believe he has chosen a lesser part. While averring that he disowns poetic ambition, he all the time has his eye on 'the laurel'. Money and good service to society are not denied in the

Plan, it is after all addressed to the Earl of Chesterfield, and yet there are recurrent wishes for acceptance and recognition both by present day readers and posterity.

The *Plan* contains what for its time is an awesome dissection of English grammar. We find many of the linguistic niceties and irregularities that still start debates about usage. It is as though he came face-to-face with the very matter of his creative means: the wildly various stream of language called English. His wish to control this impossible river of sound and sense lives in contrast with the opposite and very poetic wish to invent and make new, with words. Perhaps this section of the last paragraph of the *Plan* gives a sense of how a man wanting order feels, when faced with the turbulence of the subject itself:

I expect that sometimes the desire of accuracy, will urge me to superfluities, and sometimes the fear of prolixity betray me to omissions; that in the extent of such variety I shall be often bewildered, and in the mazes of such intricacy, be frequently entangled; that in one past refinement will be subtilised beyond exactness, and evidence dilated in another beyond perspicuity. (*Plan*, 139)

In short, Johnson leaves off writing poetry as a year-round practice, only in fact to plunge full-length into the categorisation of everything he heard, read and spoke, everything he knew about and that expressed his broadest, and minutest, understanding of the world. This encyclopaedic enterprise of making entirety poetic, subsumes the modes he had used until that time. It is universalising by another means, a poem in which China *and* Peru are included amidst everything else that Johnson believes to be the case.

My earlier assertion, that Johnson stopped writing poetry at forty, is of course utterly presumptuous. Johnson did write poetry, according to the strict definition, right up to his death. Parodies, light squibs, ripostes: it is like moving from a landscape of impressive mountains onto a rather featureless plain. There are pleasures, to be sure. His 'Parodies of Bishop Percy's *Hermit of Warkworth*' (*Poems*, 128) pre-date Edward Lear by a century:

I put my hat upon my head
And walk'd into the Strand;
And there I met another man
Whose hat was in his hand.

or again:

I therefore pray thee, Renny dear,
That thou wilt give to me,
With cream and sugar soften'd well,
Another dish of tea.

Nor fear that I, my gentle maid,
Shall long detain the cup,
When once unto the bottom
Have drunk the liquor up.

Yet hear, alas! this mournful truth,
Nor hear it with a frown; –
Thou canst not make the tea so fast
As I can gulp it down.

The important secondary stream in his poetry stems from a wish, a talent, for occasional verse. This relishing of the occasion produced some unforgettably compact and very special verse achievements, best exemplified by *A Short Song of Congratulation* and *On the Death of Dr Levet*.

Lives of the Poets

We always hear about Johnson's voluminous memory. *Lives of the Poets* is an enactment of the very attributes he extols in the 1750 essay on *Biography*. Not so much is made of the burden of this voluminousness. The effect of these biographies is one of sparkling display and erudition. But another way of reading the *Lives* is to see them as a poet recounting in great detail the weight of his literary inheritance.

The *Lives* are an act of praise and thanksgiving, albeit in the secular sphere. They reveal a man indebted to these men intellectually and emotionally. It is as if he must return to pay homage, to acknowledge all that they have meant to him. The *Lives* are also an act of identification.

The *Lives* are the third and final transformation of Johnson's poetic desire. They describe the vanities of others' ambitions, thereby obscuring (though somewhat ineffectively) Johnson's own ambitions. Two figures entrance Johnson in midlife. The first is Richard Savage, his friend from youth, to whom he evidently felt a great debt. Savage's life haunts Johnson, as they shared an ambition and a learning experience, but it was Johnson who survived to fulfil that ambition. The other figure is William Shakespeare. The scale of Shakespeare's achievement confronts Johnson with the sense of his own poetic purpose. His *Proposal on Shakespeare* is being reworked at the same time as he completes *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, his last main poem – a coincidence we cannot ignore. Savage and Shakespeare, twin figures about whom Johnson wrote at length, are the formative basis of his subsequent *Lives*.

Conclusion

Johnson lived in a world where everybody talked about everything all the time. Just like our world. Absent from Johnson's world were cinema, media, mobile phone, television. The novel was a novelty. Theatre, poetry and public discourse were the common means of educated communication. Therefore we accept that Johnson wrote poetry he knew would be circulated, read aloud, and discussed. All of his poetry, down to the briefest motto from the Greek, was put together with a shared sense of public performance. Behind this existed a usually

unstated virtue, namely that a poem was a contribution to the social good. Whether his poem was written for an intimate group or a larger readership, Johnson always seems to be motivated by the belief that it will do some good, that it might make a difference.

We live in an age typified by Auden's saying, 'Poetry makes nothing happen,' a saying widely misused and often misunderstood, but that expresses an uncertainty Johnson would probably have found puzzling.⁶ Because of the public voice in Johnson, and its relation to good, the poem had to be understood and remembered. The poem was an artificial construction, a heightened form of language with rules of engagement, but it could not afford to be obscure, difficult, or into playing games for their own sake. The manner by which the poet gained attention was very different from what we are used to at the start of the twenty-first century. A good poem, well-made and complete in its own terms, was a social benefit.

Good living was a motive, theme, and objective of Johnson's poetic career. *Good* living here does not mean how many carriages you have in the driveway or bottles of claret in your cellar, let alone referring to the predilections of lotus eaters. *Good* living is a prime motivation for all of Johnson's poetic acts. The poem must have an effect that is good and its intention is one of social good, be that improved awareness of moral certainty, betterment of the person, reflection on the virtues and achievements of the traditions. Johnson, a man of deep self-awareness, of his strengths and limitations as a writer, kept asking himself through life how he could use his strengths for *good* living. This question comes primarily out of two fundamental facts about his existence, his poetic wish (as I call it) and his religion. What, he would have asked, is the best way to use your gifts? The poetic solutions that he finds vary. There is the poetry itself, moral and celebratory of the individual life. There are the essays, a popular form that could cover any subject. The *Dictionary* is the servant of the language itself, just as poets are, and it serves the future users of that language. Lastly, there is *Lives of the Poets*, an act of generosity both to the makers and to posterity, that allowed Johnson to formulate how anyone might best understand how language, at its best, is organised and then appreciated.

Notes

- ¹ Samuel Johnson, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. J. D. Fleeman (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 103, 106.
- ² Soren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 1996).
- ³ *The Rambler*, ed. W.J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, 3 v. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), III, 320. Also as Samuel Johnson, 'The Dignity and Uses of Biography', *The Oxford Book of Essays* ed. John Gross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 69.
- ⁴ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* – 7th edn. (London: Rivington, et al, 1785).
- ⁵ Samuel Johnson, 'The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language', *Prose and Poetry*, ed. Mona Wilson (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1969), 124.
- ⁶ W. H. Auden, from 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1976), 197.

Johnson and Painting

Basil Stafford

The Ancient Conflict over Images

Man-made images have always caused controversy. The two traditional philosophical viewpoints are, to be brief, the Judeo-Platonic and the Aristotelian. The Bible warns in the Second Commandment against making 'graven images'. An image of an object displaces a real thing with a false, and tends to displace God, the creator of the real world. In the secular philosophy of ancient Greece, Plato says art is a form of play, and not to be taken seriously. The painter, he says, deals merely with appearances rather than with that which is behind the object, and the divine aspect of it – the *idea*. For Plato, painting is mime – or *mimesis* – and removed from the truth.

Islam has adopted the Judeo-Platonic opposition to images. Under the Islamist Taliban regime, the large ancient statues of Buddha were destroyed in Afghanistan. The West was appalled by this wanton destruction. But there is a religious and philosophical foundation to the destruction, which was required as an act of religious devotion. Under the Taliban, television, cinema and the theatre also suffered the same fate. This was seen in the West as an act of destruction because for two millennia the views of Aristotle prevailed in ancient Greece and in the Western tradition.

Aristotle's view was less concerned with transcending the visible world, than with giving an account of it. *Mimesis* was important in this process. In the arts – painting, sculpture, poetry, drama and music – *mimesis* was a way of understanding; just as a child plays with toys. For Aristotle the arts were a search for knowledge: for Plato a diversion from the truth.

Up to Johnson's time, the classic tradition of *mimesis* dominated thinking about painting, sculpture, poetry and drama, in accordance with the theory of Aristotle. The painter was seen as *imitating* nature. There are, therefore, two elements – *imitation* and *nature*. *Nature* is here a broader concept than simply the natural world. It embraces all of reality – just as the word did in Johnson's time. And *imitation* did not mean, in effect, photographing nature with oils. The artist was expected to select the best aspects and compose them in the painting. It was the artist's duty to elevate the beauty of nature.

This required a third element – *imaginatio*, or imagination. This is the artist's role in selecting the content and arrangement of the imitation. Coupled with this is *inventio* or the ability to create: originality. This concept derived from classical rhetoric and, being based on reason and intellect, elevated painting and sculpture above mere craft.

The final element is the *idea*. This is Plato's contribution. The *idea* is the divine dimension of the object – the inner beauty that God provides. Man has a God-given intelligence and, if guided by God, the divine can be apprehended if not comprehended. Thus through line (the act of drawing) form is revealed and hence also the *idea*. It is through form that the *idea* is realised. The sense of the inner divine quality of the depicted object is respected. Aristotle saw the soul as the living form of the object and not separate from it. We will return to this tension in the concept of *idea* later.

Thus in these four concepts, classic theory had reconciled Man with God, Plato with Aristotle, imagery with Judeo-Islamic doubts, emotion with intellect, desire with piety, order with chaos, and good with evil. All this was possible when underpinned by an acceptance of Aristotle. Here is beauty and harmony: so much so that it achieved perfection – the music of the spheres – in the paintings of the Italian master Raphael. Ironically, Raphael's achievement brought an enormous problem. Perfection cannot be improved upon. There was nowhere to go; at least nowhere to advance.

After Raphael, painters like Titian, Rubens, Velazquez and Rembrandt were not content merely to imitate but to express. That is, in their work the artist becomes the creative force in the painting and expresses how he sees and feels the subject. Suddenly what is being suggested is that the *imaginatio* is the *idea*. In other words, that which is divine is the artist's input.

As soon as this happens the four pillars of classical theory collapse. No longer can it be said painting is *imitatio*. The artist no longer imitates nature but interprets it; indeed, no longer is the representation of nature necessary – the artist is expressing himself. Thus *mimesis* fails. What is left is *imaginatio*, which supplants all else. Of course, the classical view retained many adherents and remained a powerful force in all the fine arts. Its bastions were the Academies and Schools.¹ They provided a traditional view from which the *avant-garde* could rebel. This enormous change was occurring before Johnson and was to accelerate during his lifetime. It was this change that led directly to the romantic movement in poetry, typified by Wordsworth.

So, what were Dr Johnson's views of these momentous changes?

Johnson and Art Criticism

It has to be said that Johnson's comments on paintings are remarkably sparse. Mrs Thrale makes these observations:

He delighted no more in music than in painting; he was almost as deaf as he was blind; travelling with Dr. Johnson was for these reasons tiresome enough. Mr. Thrale loved prospects, and was mortified that his friend could not enjoy

the sight of those different dispositions of wood and water, hill and valley, that travelling through England and France affords a man. But when he wished to point them out to his companion: 'Never heed such nonsense,' would be the reply; 'a blade of grass is always a blade of grass, whether in one country or another. Let us, if we DO talk, talk about something; men and women are my subjects of inquiry; let us see how these differ from those we have left behind.'²

Later, Mrs Thrale notes:

Indeed, Dr. Johnson's utter scorn of painting was such that I have heard him say that he should sit very quietly in a room hung round with the works of the greatest masters, and never feel the slightest disposition to turn them if their backs were outermost, unless it might be for the sake of telling Sir Joshua that he HAD turned them. Such speeches may appear offensive to many, but those who knew he was too blind to discern the perfections of an art which applies itself immediately to our eyesight must acknowledge he was not in the wrong (*Anecdotes*, 214-15.)

Lest these reports of anti-intellectualism in the field of painting be regarded as exaggeration on the part of Mrs Thrale, they are corroborated by Boswell (circa June 1784):

Though he had no taste for painting, he admired much the manner in which Sir Joshua Reynolds treated of his art, in his 'Discourses to the Royal Academy'. He observed one day of a passage in them, 'I think I might as well have said this myself': and once when Mr. Langton was sitting by him, he read one of them very eagerly, and expressed himself thus: 'Very well, Master Reynolds; very well, indeed. But it will not be understood.'³

It is true that Dr Johnson did not concern himself with painting or the great intellectual debates in art that were taking place during his lifetime, debates that directly related to literature – especially poetry and drama – and that were soon to overturn literature as Johnson knew it. Was he oblivious to all this? It seems hard to imagine. His great friend Sir Joshua Reynolds was the president of the Royal Academy and a leading painter of his time, mostly of portraits (a prodigious 764 are known). Johnson sat for a famous portrait by Sir Joshua in 1755. It is hard to imagine they never talked about painting during this time when it was the focus of their activity. We know from the above passage of Boswell that Johnson read Sir Joshua's *Discourses* and it would be strange indeed if he had not.⁴

I have not been able to identify the passage in Sir Joshua's *Discourses* of which Johnson said, 'I think I might as well have said this myself.' But it is hardly a surprising comment. Sir Joshua was expressing conservative aesthetic values in his *Discourses*, which his friend shared. Johnson's remarks that 'it will not be understood' I had initially read as mere intellectual snobbery – 'Yes, I understand your thesis, but others won't.' However, a

moment's reflection shows that this cannot be right. In all his *Discourses*, Sir Joshua was re-affirming traditional values in painting; what he was saying was very well understood by his audience.

Let us ask instead this question: *who* will not understand? Now, Johnson's comment becomes intriguing. There are five possibilities:

- Johnson was referring to the vulgar. But they are unlikely to be his concern.
- Johnson was, in fact, referring to Sir Joshua's audience of artists. Not only would this be an ignorant comment, it would be an attempt to cover ignorance with affected superiority. First, I do not think Johnson was here ignorant and second, I think it more to his character to declare his ignorance.
- Johnson was referring to a particular difficult passage in the *Discourses*. Context is against this interpretation.
- Johnson was referring to himself, declaring his own ignorance, a fascinating possibility that I don't dismiss outright. However, the brevity of Boswell's record does not allow anything but speculation.
- Johnson was in fact saying that, as good and worthy as the thesis is, it is insufficient to hold back the tide of change. This is my preferred reading although we suffer from the same problem of brevity. However, I believe it safe to conclude that this statement by Johnson shows an understanding of the artistic debate of the day.

I believe it is permissible to indulge in some speculation. This comment in the *Life* takes place in June 1784 – the year of Johnson's death. It would appear Johnson had been re-reading Sir Joshua's *Discourses* (after they had been delivered). Significantly, controversy had raged over 'The Death of General Wolfe' by Benjamin West. This was an historical painting in which West painted the figures in modern clothing. Reynolds led the criticism of this painting as departing from the traditions of historical painting. West's response was that no one wore togas in Canada. Historical truth should govern the painter. This of course fails to refute Reynolds and misses his point entirely. But by 1784 it was clear that Reynolds had lost the debate. It is ironic that Reynolds's view was to be the more modern, permitting as it does the expression of the abstract and not submitting the painter to the tyranny of historical accuracy to which West and his followers were to shackle historical painting.⁵ A hundred years later historical painting was a discredited genre.

Reynolds understood this and I am sure Johnson did. By 1784 it was apparent that those traditional values upheld by Johnson and Reynolds were changing. My speculation is that Johnson's comment is a rather mournful reflection, after re-reading Sir Joshua's *Discourses*, on that change. In other words, that Johnson is saying people do not understand the strength of the traditional values that they are abandoning.

There seems initially to be greater insight in Johnson's better known remark, 'Painting, Sir, can illustrate but cannot inform.' Here is the full context of that remark in the *Life* (undated, but recorded at June 1784; IV, 321):

When I observed to him that Painting was so far inferiour to Poetry, that the story or even emblem which it communicates must be previously known, and mentioned as a natural and laughable instance of this, that a little Miss on seeing a picture of Justice with the scales, had exclaimed to me, 'See, there's a woman selling sweetmeats;' he said, 'Painting, Sir, can illustrate, but cannot inform.'

In its context, the remark is a problem. Even if we accept Boswell's report as accurate (which I do not) the comment could be a riposte to the little Miss or a reply to Boswell's observation. I suspect that Boswell would like to see it as approval of his observation. He may have taken it as such and this would no doubt influence his report.

Boswell's contention is that painting is inferior to poetry because the story or even emblem which it communicates must be previously known. This is typical of classic historical painting. To understand the painting you need to know the story it portrays and any symbolism. It was common in, for example, a painting of the Madonna to include a vase of white lilies, to symbolise the Virgin's chastity: a painting of a massacre may have the victims being led by a female figure symbolising victory, by which we would understand they did or would overcome this tragedy. By inference poetry is not like this. Already you may sense Boswell's observation is in trouble and not likely to be approved by Johnson.

Boswell is referring to what would now be called *semiotics* – the study of signs – a sign being a mark that means something beyond itself.⁶ It also involves the concept of representation or *repraesentatio*, which was identified by the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes observed that painting was not purely *imitatio*.⁷ After all, there were many hundreds of Madonnas out there and they varied greatly in appearance. Something else other than *imitatio* was at work. He said that there was an agreement between painter and viewer, that a female model portrayed in a certain way was not an imitation of the Virgin, but a representation of her. If there is mutual consent

that the vase of lilies represents the Virgin's chastity, then it is so – and the painter is able to convey an abstract idea. On the other hand, if we do not consent, or are ignorant, then all we see is a vase of lilies. This is Boswell's point. However, words and language are in themselves symbols. Poetry operates exclusively in a representative environment, namely language. Within this environment poetry also has its stories, emblems and symbols that need to be understood. Johnson as a poet himself understood this. As a simple illustration we take these lines from *The Vanity of Human Wishes*:

Once more, Democritus, arise on earth
With cheerful wisdom and instructive mirth,
See motley life in modern trappings dressed,
And feed with varied fools th' eternal jest:

Unlike painting, the first requirement is that we understand English. Next, we really need to understand who Democritus was, and what he might symbolise. If we know or find out that he was known as the laughing philosopher we might come to a meaning like, 'If Democritus thought there was much to ridicule in Greece, he'd find a lot more in Johnson's England.' So why not simply say that? Why? For the same reasons that painting uses stories, emblems and symbols. Indeed, since Horace's time painting and poetry had been regarded as cognate – *ut pictura poesis* – as in painting, so in poetry. The two only began to diverge in Johnson's time.

Thus the premise for Boswell's assertion that poetry is superior to painting is false. Johnson surely would neither agree with such a proposition intellectually, nor be beguiled into affirming it through a prejudice for poetry over painting. To assign a literal meaning to the comment out of its context, 'Painting, Sir, can illustrate but cannot inform,' is to assign to Johnson an intellectual weakness or bias of which he shows no other signs. To me, Johnson seems to be saying '[to the ignorant] Painting, Sir, can illustrate but cannot inform.' In doing so he achieves two things – firstly, a witty response to the little Miss and, secondly, a veiled chastisement of Boswell for what would have been (to Johnson) a fairly obvious 'trick question'. To be able to come up in reply with a response that is at once witty, clever and pointed is a mark of the man.

Finally, the very purpose of so much religious art in churches and elsewhere, in a time of public illiteracy, was to inform where books could not. Much religious art of course pre-dates printing and was intended to inform in a then mostly bookless world. Johnson would have been well aware of religious art and its purpose.

Then we have this curious anecdote from Mrs Thrale:
Sir Joshua Reynolds mentioned some picture as excellent.
'It has often grieved me, Sir,' said Mr. Johnson, 'to see so

much mind as the science of painting requires laid out upon such perishable materials. Why do not you oftener make use of copper? I could wish your superiority in the art you profess to be preserved in stuff more durable than canvas.' Sir Joshua urged the difficulty of procuring a plate large enough for historical subjects, and was going to raise further objections: 'What foppish obstacles are these! (exclaims on a sudden Dr. Johnson:) Here Thrale has a thousand tun of copper; you may paint it all round if you will, I suppose; it will serve him to brew in afterwards. Will it not, Sir?' (to my husband, who sat by). (*Anecdotes*, 214).

Some have taken Johnson literally and used this passage to conclude that Johnson was ignorant when it came to painting. It is more likely, as Morris Brownell suggests, that Johnson was having a dig at Reynolds's grand style of history painting; though Brownell draws a longer bow by suggesting further that Johnson was refusing to admit the division of the arts into fine on one hand and manual, such as brewing, on the other.⁸ The absurdity of the concept of painting on copper is more suggestive of the humour that is acquired after several drinks with the boys, where even the idea of the nation's leading classical artist painting brewing vats becomes hilarious. Be that as it may, we cannot draw from this anecdote the inference that Johnson was ignorant of painting.

Beyond this we are left with snippets to discern that Johnson understood classical theory. For example, this passage from *The Rambler* (No. 199, 11 Feb., 1752):

The curiosity of the present race of philosophers, having been long exercised upon electricity, has been lately transformed to magnetism; the qualities of the loadstone have been investigated, if not with much advantage, yet with great applause; and as *the highest praise of art is to imitate nature*, I hope no man will think the makers of artificial magnets celebrated or revered above their deserts.
[emphasis added]

As we have seen, this shows a clear understanding of the classic theory. In my view it is safe to conclude that Johnson was also aware, at least to some extent, of the changes that were taking place in painting.

Johnson was friends with James Barry, and saw his exhibition. Barry was a capable painter in the Academic mould, who made a portrait of Johnson. Boswell tells us, 'We talked of Mr. Barry's exhibition of his pictures. JOHNSON. "Whatever the hand may have done, the mind has done its part. There is a grasp of mind there which you find nowhere else"' (26 May 1783; IV, 224). Clearly, Johnson critically appreciated the genre and the exhibition. We know he looked at Lord Scarsdale's collection, though Boswell records no comments that Johnson made (19 Sept. 1777; III, 161). Another painter, Mauritius Lowe,

was one of his executors. He was familiar with Hogarth's work, and composed an epitaph for him; his cousin Cornelius Ford appeared in Hogarth's 'Modern Midnight Conversation'. Sir John Hawkins reports that in the last year of his life, when he was not well, he attended the Royal Academy annual dinner. He clearly appreciated painters and valued their work. If we searched through the literature we would find more support for this, but we have seen enough to conclude that we are not dealing with an ignoramus.

The unanimous conclusion of Johnson's three contemporary biographers that Johnson was blind to painting does not stand up to scrutiny. Such evidence as there is, particularly Johnson's own words, contradicts it. Furthermore, a man of even moderate intellect who keeps the company of painters is unlikely to be ignorant of their art.

Johnson and Painting: An Assessment

Given the classical relationship between painting and poetry that was still prevailing in the eighteenth century; when Shelley's 'Defence of Poetry' (1821) was still a generation and a half away; the influence of painting on literature and vice versa; and Johnson's friendship with Sir Joshua Reynolds; the paucity of Johnson's writing on the subject of painting seems surprising. His disdain of painting reported by Boswell, Hawkins, and Mrs Thrale appears anti-intellectual and shocking. Somehow one expects Johnson to make a substantial contribution, a rich vein, in this area and it is not forthcoming. Mrs Thrale says Johnson was blind when it comes to painting. Boswell and Hawkins agree. I have rejected this but the fact remains Johnson said and wrote little about it. What are we to make of this?

When it comes to painting, there is a strong sense of Johnson deferring to Reynolds and it may be that Johnson chose not to trespass upon his friend's domain. It was unnecessary for him to do so. Both shared similar conservative values, and as Johnson said, he might have said it himself; and Reynolds had greater knowledge of painting. Johnson's generosity in anonymously helping his friends with their writing is well known. If he assisted Reynolds it gives a new spin to his comment, 'I think I might as well have said this myself.'

However, the deficits accumulate: deaf to music, blind to sculpture. Greg Veitch in his paper to this Society, 'Johnson and the Industrial Revolution', concluded, 'I could not, in the end, find evidence of incisive and compelling evidence by Johnson concerning the driving force of great social changes taking place around him. All the threads of a great story were available to the master weaver, but the tapestry appears not to have been woven.'⁹ These words could be applied *verbatim* to painting. And painting tends to be a leading indicator of intellectual change.

Perhaps he was simply a man of his time: a man who enjoyed a social position to which he had aspired, and which he attained. He was a poor country boy who through talent and hard work joined the establishment. His friends were the nobles and glitterati of the day; he enjoyed private audiences with the King. No wonder that he stopped to smell the roses; that he enjoyed fine food, fine company, and his own social position. Little wonder then, that he chose not to be a social critic: little wonder he did not care to observe or report on the heralds of change.

Sir Leslie Stephen said this:

Johnson's genius left no fit testimony of itself from his own hand. With all the greatness of his mind he had no talent in sufficient measure by which fully to express himself. He had no ear for music and no eye for painting, and the finest qualities in the creations of Goldsmith were lost upon him. But his genius found its talents in others, and through the talents of his personal friends expressed itself as it were by proxy. They rubbed their minds upon his, and he set in motion for them ideas which they might use ... He was Goldsmith's 'great master', Garrick feared his criticism, and one cannot but recognize the power of Johnson's personality in the increasing intelligence and consistency of Garrick's interpretations, in the growing vigour and firmness of Goldsmith's stroke, in the charm, finality, and exuberant life of Sir Joshua's portraits; and above all in the skill, truth, brilliance, and lifelike spontaneity of Boswell's art. It is in such works as these that we shall find the real Johnson, and through them that he will exert the force of his personality upon.¹⁰

Echoing this, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* says:

Johnson's literary output bears no proportion to his reputation. The latter is due in great measure to the fortunate accident by which the biographer was found in Boswell to record for us the humour, wit, and sturdy common sense of his conversation, and a kindness of heart sometimes concealed under a gruff exterior.¹¹

This is nothing more than damning with faint praise. One of the pleasures of preparing this paper is that it brings one close to Johnson's actual writings. What does one find? I suggest one finds a remarkable man of literature: a writer who has left a large body of work of great variety and outstanding quality; a poet, a biographer, diarist, essayist, and a writer on the law, theology, history, politics, travel, and science, not to mention letters, introductions and other writings – oh, and a dictionary.

Contrary to the *Oxford Companion*, Sir Leslie Stephen and others, my view is that had there not been substance to his writing, had he been merely an outstanding subject of an outstanding biography, then Johnson would not have an enduring reputation. It is the underlying strength of his literary output that secures his reputation. Johnson said, 'The best part of every

author is in general to be found in his book, I assure you.’ Applying his own standard to himself, Johnson more than meets it. The fact that he has stood the test of time for more than two hundred and fifty years of itself suggests substance, not froth.

So I think *The Oxford Companion*, Sir Leslie Stephen and others miss the point. Johnson is first and foremost an original writer. He is the primary source, not the secondary. He is a literary figure in his own right, not a commentator. Do we expect him therefore to be an art critic, a music critic, a social critic? I suggest not. This is not a shortcoming at all, but a reflection of his true position as an original writer. We do not expect Picasso to be a critic of the fine arts and less of literature, for he is a painter. So in answer to Chris Veitch: it is no surprise that Johnson did not pick up the threads, for he is the artist not the artisan.

We still have unresolved the curious fact that his three contemporary biographers declare him to be blind when it comes to painting. Morris Brownell suggests Hawkins wanted a scapegoat for the prejudice of the literary establishment against his *History of Music*; Mrs Thrale resented Johnson’s teasing of her fashionable tastes; and Boswell contrasted his conventional taste with Johnson’s independence and saw his motives as vanity, role-playing and sheer perversity. With respect, I do not find this explanation very convincing. These are my reasons.

First, I think it far too much of a coincidence that each of his biographers, independently of each other, should from a base motive choose to portray Johnson dishonestly in this way. And by a coincidence, with this base motive all three just happen to choose the arts with which to malign him. Or perhaps it was a conspiracy? Second, it presumes on all their parts a vindictiveness of which I am not convinced. Indeed the usual criticism of Boswell in particular is not that he is vindictive, but that he is too adoring, too full of admiration, too uncritical. Third, it would be too risky for them all to lie about Johnson in this way. At the time they were published there were too many people alive who knew Johnson and could discredit such dishonest practices. Fourth, I am hesitant to conclude that all are intellectually dishonest without clear and convincing evidence. It is an allegation not to be lightly made.

Brownell concludes by saying Johnson’s attitude was religious – the arts might divert and distract but in the eye of eternity the fine arts were unimportant. Basically, Johnson was Platonic rather than Aristotelian. Regrettably the Platonic explanation has some problems. First, his religion did not have a problem with images. Second, to be consistent, Johnson would also need to regard poetry and literature as unimportant – which he did not. Although the Platonic explanation is initially very attractive, for those reasons, I think the answer is not so simple.

Johnson was always fond of taking the opposing view. He was always sceptical and one for playing the Devil's advocate. So to Fanny Burney he said, 'When I was beginning in the world and was nothing and nobody, the joy of my life was to fire at all the established wits! And then everybody loved to halloo me on.'¹² And how like him. I have no doubt that in the company of his biographers he did, in fact, display disdain and ignorance of the arts and for the very reason he confided to Fanny Burney. The following is perfect gem of such behaviour. As Boswell reports, 'Our conversation turned on a variety of subjects. He thought portrait-painting an improper employment for a woman. Publick practice of any art, (he observed,) and staring in men's faces, is very indelicate in a female.' (18 April 1775; II, 362)

Angelica Kauffmann was a favourite of Reynolds and a member of the Academy. She was a talented artist and portrait painter, including one of Garrick. I cannot imagine Johnson suggesting seriously that she was acting improperly. I conclude that he was very convincing in this technique as three of his biographers have not seen through it. Johnson made no secret of his liking for taking up the other side of an argument simply to be on the other side, for example, in the *Life*, 'When I was a boy, I used always to choose the wrong side of a debate, because most ingenious things, that is to say, most new things, could be said upon it.'

There is no doubt he teased Mrs Thrale about her taste, but this did not cause her to falsely report Johnson as an artistic ignoramus. Rather, it caused her to wrongly and innocently conclude that he was. It is to be expected that anyone bombarded in the way Mrs Thrale was would so conclude. Boswell had given him a clear invitation to assert the superiority of poetry over painting and he declined to take it. It may be that the sensitivities of the others as indicated by Brownell caused a similar innocent error, or perhaps Johnson had them fooled because Johnson seems to have an inner revolt, perhaps as a result of his up-bringing, that prevented him from publicly admiring the arts. Such inhibitions are not uncommon.

Paul Tankard has suggested that Johnson publicly took this stand against painting to poke fun at the 'collecting classes' for whom art collecting had become a source of social prestige, if not appreciation.¹³ I think this is an insightful remark and is very much a motivating factor in Johnson's public disdain of painting.

By way of counterpoint, none of his artistic friends have had a problem with him in this regard.

We can add to the mix Johnson's preference for people: 'Let us, if we DO talk, talk about something; men and women are my subjects of inquiry; let us see how these differ from those we have left behind.' This preference puts him a hundred years

ahead of the prevailing painting at the time, to Manet, Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, Renoir, Matisse. I can imagine Johnson as an admirer of Manet in particular.

Conclusion

Sir Owen Dixon, former Justice and Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia, and one of the great minds of English common law, on his retirement on 13 April 1964, speaking of his predecessor, Sir Samuel Griffith, described him as having ‘a legal mind of the Augustan age, representing the thoughts and learning of a period which has gone, but was dominant and decisive. His mind clearly was of that calibre: he did not hesitate, he just felt that he knew; and that what he knew was right.’ I think we can add similar sentiments to the Johnsonian mix.

- We can say with confidence that Johnson was not ignorant of painting.
- We know Johnson did not talk or write prolifically on the subject.
- We can also say his biographers wrongly attributed to him a disdain for and ignorance of painting.

Samuel Johnson was a very complex individual. For him, simple and appealing solutions are going to be found wanting, as I have tried to show. His public disdain for painting is a complex mixture of many factors that are not logical but more as a result of his personality; but there is nevertheless an intellectual consistency. It is a wonderful thing that my views are just that; and further inquiry, supposition and deduction are still wide open. However, we can confidently conclude beyond a reasonable doubt, that Samuel Johnson was not a disdainful ignoramus when it comes to painting. Why many thought him to be so remains a fascinating question.

Notes

- ¹ And the great defender of the Academy was Sir Joshua Reynolds. In one of his *Discourses* he talked of Raphael. One problem was that the great master, Raphael, had never been within sight of an Academy. ‘Raffaello, it is true, had not the advantage of studying in an academy;’ said Sir Joshua, admitting this disadvantage; but the Academy could claim him yet because ‘all Rome, and the works of Michael Angelo in particular, were to him an academy.’
- ² Mrs Thrale’s “Anecdotes,” in *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, ed. G. B. Hill, 2 v. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897), 215.
- ³ *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, ed. G.B. Hill, rev. L.F. Powell, 6 v. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934-64), IV, 320.
- ⁴ The Johnson-Reynolds relationship is just one example of many literary-artistic relationships. Other examples include Cézanne and Balzac; Strindberg and Munch; Baudelaire and Manet; Ibsen, Maeterlick, Oscar Wilde and Toulouse Lautrec and the Nabis; William Blake as artist and poet – an internal relationship. Blake studied at the Academy under Reynolds and as one would expect held a low opinion of him.
- ⁵ I call this the *Ben Hur* Syndrome. Everyone seems to believe that an actor or two can be seen wearing a wristwatch in that film. Does this matter? And if so why? Why do some people care so much about this? Is the film any less because of it? It would seem to take considerable effort by any viewer to notice this inconsequential matter. After West, historical accuracy became more important than allegory – like a hi-fi buff who listens to his system rather than the music. The decline of the genre was inevitable.
- ⁶ It is also possible Boswell was making a direct reference to the book, *Iconologia or Moral Emblems*, by Cesare Ripa which was translated into English in 1779. It sought to codify and prescribe symbols and emblems for painting and the book contained 324 of them. While influential, it was far from universally applied. Many have survived to this day in various forms. Perhaps the most famous is ‘Justice’ – a blind-folded female figure holding a sword and scales. In the 18th century she was a much more aggressive person wielding an axe and attitude. It was ‘Equity’ that held the scales – in time it seems the symbols of law and equity were also merged. ‘Medicine’ represented by Hermes and the caduceus is another. ‘Old Father Time’ with a scythe and hourglass (but who seems to have lost his wings over time) and ‘Death’ with a black hooded robe and a skull are yet others. The entire book is scanned at <http://emblem.libraries.psu.edu/Ripa/Images/ripatoc.htm>
- ⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan*, Ch. XLV: “Of Demonology and Other Relics of the Religion of the Gentiles.”
- ⁸ Morris Brownell, “A Bull in the China Shop of Taste: Johnson’s Prejudice Against the Arts Illustrated,” *The New Rambler: The Journal of the Johnson Society of London*, D:6 (1990-91), 28-31.
- ⁹ Greg Veitch, “Johnson and the Industrial Revolution,” *The Johnson Society of Australia Papers*, v. 3 (1999), 69-77; vid. 77.
- ¹⁰ Leslie Stephen, *Samuel Johnson* (‘English Men of Letters’, London: Macmillan, 1878).

- 11 Sir Paul Harvey, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* – 4th Ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 434.
- 12 Quoted in James L. Clifford, *The Young Samuel Johnson* (London: Heinemann, 1955), 100.
- 13 A comment made after the presentation of this paper to the Johnson Society of Australia.

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