

Johnson as a Journalist-Critic

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In his diverse roles—as a poet, dramatist, novelist (if we regard *Rasselas* as a novel), critic, biographer, lexicographer, periodical essayist, political pamphleteer and travelogue-writer—Samuel Johnson was fundamentally a literary man. Since for him literature was directly related to life, his writings depend on actual human experiences rather than on theories and abstractions. As a result, both for the creation and judgement of literature he made extensive use of his impressive wisdom and sound commonsense which the cumulative experiences of life had brought to him. As any reader of Boswell's *Johnson* knows, even the most casual of Johnson's utterances had behind them the weight and profundity of the mind that had been greatly enriched by a close observation of life as well as a sustained and serious contemplation about it. This of course is more true of his literary compositions which have a certain life-enhancing quality about them so that, for example, a proper appreciation of a work like *Rasselas* enables us to understand and live life better. Hardly surprising, because for Johnson literature should have the power to "enable the reader better to enjoy life, or better to endure it."¹

His critical writings also embody such a conviction: instead of being cold, abstract analyses they appeal to our human instincts and experiences. However, for this very reason their real merit might be eluded from the student of modernist criticism which, as D H Lawrence noted early in this century, has tended to become scientific and mechanical, and hence divorced from life:

All this critical twiddle-twaddle about style and form, all this pseudo-scientific classifying and analysing of books in an imitation-botanical fashion, is mere impertinence and mostly dull jargon.

A critic must be able to *feel* the impact of a work in all its complexity and its force. To do so, he must be a man of force and complexity himself, which few critics are. A man with a paltry, impudent nature will never write anything but paltry, impudent criticism. And a man who is *emotionally* educated is as rare as a phoenix. The more scholastically educated a man is generally, the more he is an emotional boor.²

I think it is because much of the English criticism of our times has developed on the lines which Lawrence had deplored that Dr Johnson's critical opinions have come to be regarded as having only historical significance rather than any meaningful relevance for the modern reader. This is not only unfair to Johnson but also unfortunate for such a reader who, by his refusal to recognize the real value in Johnson's critical approach, might fail to see literature as a deeply human experience which it is.

Only two of Johnson's books, *Preface* (1765) to Shakespeare and *Lives of the English Poets*

(1779-81) can be described as 'critical works' in the strictly academic sense of that phrase. But his critical ideas and remarks are to be found in many of those of his writings which do not purport to be specifically critical, e. g. *Rasselas* which contains ideas about poet, poetry and poetic imagination, his *Dictionary* which contains definitions of critical terms like Comedy, Tragedy, Style, Irony and Wit, and his letters. And of course some of his most scintillating critical observations were made in the course of his informal conversations which were happily preserved for posterity by Boswell in his *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. All such details suggest that for Johnson literary criticism was not an esoteric and elitist activity which could be practised, understood and appreciated by only the initiated few. Rather, it was a collective enterprise on the part of the reader as well as the critic, both of whom examine, judge and learn from literature as they would from life itself. Clearly, Johnson believed that the act of criticism was analogous to the act of living which involves selection, rejection, discrimination between good and bad, judgement and preferences. "Judgement" according to Johnson "is forced upon us by experience,"³ and it is not the result of the application of some predetermined theories or abstract philosophies. The 'judgement' involved in literary criticism also had similar origins for him: the wisdom that he had acquired from actual human experience enabled him to make profound comments not only on life but also on literature.

Thus he found it most congenial to write weekly papers for *The Rambler* (1750-52) and *The Idler* (1758-60) journals. (He was also to contribute a few papers to his friend John Hawkesworth's *The Adventurer* between 1753-54.) When three publishers John Payne, Joseph Bouquet and Edward Cave came up to Johnson with the joint proposal that he might write for a weekly periodical that they were starting—the periodical paper was a popular eighteenth-century genre—he accepted it not only for the financial rewards that it promised to bring (two guineas for each paper) but also because, as Boswell noted, it provided him with an ideal medium for expressing his wide-ranging ideas about life in its various facets:

In 1750 he [Johnson] came forth in the character for which he was eminently qualified, a majestick teacher of moral and religious wisdom. The vehicle he chose was that of a periodical paper, which he knew had been, upon former occasions, employed with great success. The Tatler, Spectator and Guardian were the last of the kind published in England, which had stood the test of a long trial; such an interval had now elapsed since their publication, as made him justly think that, to many of his readers, this form of instruction would in some degree, have the advantage of novelty.⁴

Boswell felt that the title *The Rambler* was "not suited to a series of grave and moral discourses,"⁵ and went on to explain that Johnson was forced to make this inappropriate choice because he could not think of a better title:

He [Johnson] gave Sir Joshua Reynolds the following account of its getting this name: "What *must* be done, Sir, *will* be done. When I was to begin publishing that paper, I was at a loss how to name it. I sat down by my bedside, and resolved that I would not go to sleep till I had fixed its title. The Rambler seemed the best that occurred, and I took it."⁶

I do not agree with Boswell's objections not indeed with his suggestion that Johnson chose the ti-

tle rather cavalierly. On the contrary, from what Johnson is reported to have told Reynolds on this matter, one should be in no doubt that the man who had "*resolved*" that he would not go to bed until he "*fixed*" (my italics) its title, made the choice thoughtfully and deliberately. According to Johnson's own definition in his *Dictionary*, 'rambler' is a "rover, a wanderer." This accurately describes his role in the *Rambler* papers. He does not "wander" in the sense of being incoherent in his thoughts but he does wander from subject to subject in different papers as he surveys mankind. Instead of devoting his papers to closely marked-out subjects or themes, he deals with anything which he might be inspired to discuss on any given occasion. Such a desire for freedom in the choice of subjects should not be taken to mean any lack of seriousness on Johnson's part in the this undertaking. In fact, one of the paradoxical things about the *Rambler* papers is that Dr Johnson's attitude towards them was at once serious and casual. That he took this undertaking with great seriousness is obvious from the following incident noted by Boswell:

With what devout and conscientious sentiments this paper was undertaken is evidenced by the following prayer which he had composed and offered up on the occasion: "Almighty God, the giver of all good things, without whose help all labour is ineffectual, and without whose grace all wisdom is folly: grant, I beseech Thee, that in this undertaking thy Holy Spirit may not be with-held from me, but that I may promote thy glory, and the salvation of myself and others: grant this, O Lord, for the sake of thy son JESUS CHRIST. Amen."⁷

And of course the papers are weighty because they are saturated with the accumulated wisdom of the personality, the learning and the varied experiences of the author. On the other hand, it is also true that many of these papers were composed in great haste: for example, Mrs Thrale noted that the *Rambler* (No. 134) which (ironically, it seems in retrospect!) dealt with the themes of idleness and procrastination was composed in "Sir Joshua Reynold's parlour while the Man waited to carry it to press."⁸ But the remarkable thing about Johnson was that such a casual approach did not in any way diminish his achievement. How did he manage to do it? Boswell offers an explanation which seems convincing because it also seizes on the author's characteristic bent of mind, apparent only to an observant friend like Boswell:

It can be accounted for only this way: that by reading and meditation, and a very close inspection of life, he had accumulated a great fund of miscellaneous knowledge, which, by a peculiar promptitude of mind, was ever ready at his call, and which he had constantly accustomed himself to clothe in the most apt and energetick expression.⁹

The *Rambler* papers were a great success right from the very beginning. They began to be reprinted, while the series was still in progress in London, in Edinburgh by a man name Elphinston. What is more, they were collectively reprinted at least eleven times in the next thirty-six years after the whole enterprise ceased in 1752.

The *Rambler* first appeared on Tuesday March 20, 1750 and it was published every Tuesday and Saturday thereafter until it ceased publication after the issue dated March 14, 1752. With the exception of five, Johnson wrote all (in fact, more than two hundred) papers. As might be expected from periodical papers meant for the general public, they deal with a wide variety of topics and subjects, and it is clear that Johnson was eminently qualified to write them. It is

sobering to remind ourselves that he had authored not only what might be described as strictly 'literary' works but also

...numerous dedications and prefaces (including one for the catalogue of the vast Harleian library, which the bookseller, Thomas Osborne, purchased after the death of the second Earl of Oxford), contributed substantially both to Robert James's *Medicinal Dictionary* and to the Vinerian lectures on English law delivered at Oxford by his friend Robert Chambers, and reviewed works on a wide variety of topics—among them, ...James Hanway's 'Essay' condemning tea (which Johnson as 'a hardened and shameless tea-drinker' vigorously defended), William Tytler's *Historical and Critical Enquiry*, with its discussion of the famous 'casket letters' attributed to Mary Queen of Scots, and Soam Jenyns's *Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil*, the moral complacency of which provoked Johnson to monumental indignation.¹⁰

Besides these, his knowledgeable interest in business and trade led him to write a preface to Richard Rolt's *Dictionary of Trade and Commerce*, and his political and social consciousness prompted him to write such pamphlets as *Thoughts on the Late Transactions Respecting Falkland's Islands*, *The Patriot* and *Taxation No Tyranny*. In all these diverse roles Johnson's fundamental concern was with human life and to make tireless attempts to improve the quality of the lives of the people. Since such a concern naturally included, for him at any rate, a consideration of literature, many of the *Rambler* papers also discuss, investigate and analyse critical problems, authors and literary works. When one reads them one is struck by the sanity of mind and the critical acumen that the writer displays there. Taken together, they would seem to suggest that what Dr Johnson was doing in these papers was to correct the 'unjust' literary tendencies of his time, and also offering some sound critical principles for the evaluation of works of art. Here, as elsewhere, Johnson appears as a critic, mainly of contemporary literature, with the prominent exception of Shakespeare and Milton both of whom he discusses at some length, and a few classical authors.

To the man who genially presided over a table surrounded by eminent men like Edmund Burke, Sir Joshua Reynolds and Oliver Goldsmith, the role of a teacher came naturally. So, in an age when literary criticism was in a bad state he set out, especially in his role as a periodical essayist, to improve the standards of criticism. In his *An Essay On Criticism* (1711), Pope had deplored weaknesses and deficiencies among the critics not only of his own time but also of the immediate past: thus Dryden was fatuously attacked not only by "Parsons" and "Beaux" but also by the "Critics" who should have known better:

Pride, Malice, Folly against Dryden rose,
In various shapes of Parsons, Critics, Beaux.

(ll. 458-59)

Johnson was also gravely dissatisfied with the low standards among the critics of his time: he bewailed the fact that while some critics concentrated "with the microscope of criticism" on "petty inaccuracies," thereby missing the general excellence of works of art, others "equipped with a telescope" saw things which were hardly accessible to the ordinary readers (*Rambler*, 176). Or again, in one of the earlier papers, *Rembler*, 3, he described in the form of a minor allegory how

Criticism, originally an offspring of Truth and Labour, had fallen from its high pedestal by surrendering to Malevolence and Flattery. However, despite Johnson's protestations, and championship of rigorous critical standards, things did not improve. Thus, several years later he again took up the subject of false critical standards. In two *Idler* papers, 60 and 61, he traced the career of the imaginary Dick Minim who is exposed as a man of false pretensions with neither ability nor talent. Dick, after an unsuccessful school life was apprenticed to a brewer until his uncle died, leaving him a vast fortune. He at once resolved to be a man of wit, and started to frequent coffee-houses which were the meeting places for literary men, and in due course he became familiar with literary terms like 'unities' and 'nature.' He soon started to discuss and evaluate works by eminent authors like Shakespeare, Dryden, Congreve and Addison, gained recognition and distinction as a critic, and eventually "had his own seat in the coffee-house." By presenting such a sketch, Dr Johnson satirized all those writers of his age who aspired to be regarded as 'critics' without having any requisite talent or training.

But even the established and celebrated critics, if Johnson found them not measuring up to his high standards, became objects of his attack and derision. Thus when in *Rambler* 92 and 93 he drew attention to some specific weaknesses in the prevailing methods of criticism, he picked up Dryden and Addison as examples of those critics who were motivated by self-interest in making critical pronouncements:

Dryden was known to have written most of his critical dissertations only to recommend the work upon which he then happened to be employed; and Addison is suspected to have denied the expediency of poetical justice because his own *Cato* was condemned to perish in a good cause (*Rambler*, 93).

Similarly, he attacked those critics who, relying on their own subjective notion of aesthetic beauty, pronounced judgements on works of art. He started by saying that 'beauty' was a vague and unreliable critical term, that "it is indeed so little subject to the examination of reason, that *Pascal* supposes it to end where demonstration begins." He said that it was critical fallacy to speak of pleasure arising out of the perception of beauty unless that beauty was clearly defined and explained. He went on to point out, by giving illustrative examples from Homer, that "it is the critic's duty to distinguish those means of pleasing which depend on known causes and rational deductions, from the nameless and inexplicable elegancies which appeal wholly to the fancy, from which we feel delight but know not how they produce it, and which may well be termed the enchantress of the soul" (*Rambler*, 92). What he obviously wanted to emphasise was his belief that 'beauty' in itself was not a helpful critical criterion unless it was approved by reason.

Indeed, 'reason' was the most reliable guide for a critic, according to Johnson. We have already noted his conviction that a critic should be fully aware of "those means of pleasing which depend on known causes and rational deduction." Reason for Johnson did not have metaphysical or philosophical connotations; it was synonymous with good sense, restraint, moderation and commonsense—qualities which people acquire from actual human experience. Possession of it also implies a certain objectivity and independence on the part of the critic. Thus when Johnson tried to judge a work of art with the help of reason, both its merits and demerits revealed themselves, and he was bold enough to acknowledge them irrespective of the fame and status of the writer concerned. That was why he strongly disagreed with Addison who had said

(in *Spectator*, 291) that the critic's business was to find merits rather than faults in literary works. In *Rambler* 93, he explained that the duty of criticism was neither to dignify nor depreciate a work of art by partial representation; it was rather "to hold out the light of reason, whatever it may discover." Once a critic is armed with reason he need not fear anybody or anything: he may, for instance, discover inadequacies and blemishes even in a supposedly great work of art by a reputed author. Johnson is aware of the risks involved in such a critical attitude as is apparent from his own predicament when he sets out to examine *Samson Agonistes*: "...he that attempts to show, however modestly, the failures of a celebrated writer, shall surely irritate his admirers, and incur the imputation of envy, captiousness and malignity. ...With this danger full in my view I shall proceed to examine Milton's tragedy..." (*Rambler*, 140). Obviously, he wishes to recommend such courage and independence to every reader and literary critic. In fact, Johnson takes every opportunity to emphasize his deep conviction that an "authority" should not be respected simply on grounds that he has been acclaimed as such by present and past readers and critics. In the same way, if one discovers points of excellence in the writings of a comparatively obscure and neglected writer, one need not be apologetic about it for, as he declared on so many occasions, a reader must be guided by his own judgement, helped by his own reason, commonsense and human experience.

On similar grounds of commonsense and reason Johnson denounced slavish imitation of classical 'rules.' Here he radically differed from Pope who in his *An Essay On Criticism* had exhorted critics to faithfully follow the ancient 'rules':

Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem;

To copy nature is to copy them.

(ll. 139-140)

One may add in parenthesis here that in the *Rambler* papers, as elsewhere, Johnson often echoed critical ideas derived from classical writers, particularly Horace, something that Pope had already done before him. But the significant point to note is, as has been explained above, that when he did not agree with the earlier critics on some points he had the courage of his conviction to say so, and say it forcefully. He devoted an entire paper, *Rambler* 158, to the question of the relationship between a critic and established classical rules. To start with, he maintained that the 'rules' as they had come down were "generally arbitrary edicts of critical legislators" authorised by themselves only, and went on to point out that the critics who had formulated the 'rules' were often so dazzled by the brilliance of their favourite ancient writers that they recommended to posterity both their "excellences and faults": indeed, as Johnson noted, "even the number of their books have been thought worthy of imitation." What is worse, sometimes the 'rules' were vitiated because of a complete misunderstanding of the aims and intentions of the original framers of those 'rules.' For instance, Addison was wrong in suggesting, on the supposed authority of Horace, that the opening lines of an epic should be devoid of glitter and embellishments. By quoting a few relevant passages from Homer, Johnson demonstrated that what Horace had actually meant was that Homer's *exposition* itself, not his *manner of expression*, was simple and unostentatious.

This is not to suggest, however, that Dr Johnson had no regard for the ancient classical writers and critics. He was well-read in classical literature, especially Latin, and his periodical

papers in particular abound in classical allusions. Also, he had adopted the practice of prefixing mottoes to those papers, as Addison and Steele had previously done, and these mottoes had been taken from classical writers like Horace, Tasso and Cicero. In fact, he had a deep veneration for critics like Aristotle and Horace. But he believed that some of the 'rules' were "to be considered as fundamental and indispensable, others only as useful and convenient; some as dictated by reason and necessity, others as enacted by despotick antiquity; some as invincibly supported by their conformity to the order of nature and operations of the intellect; others formed by accident, or instituted by example, and therefore always liable to dispute and alteration" (*Rambler*, 156). As an example of the latter, he referred to the convention that only three personages should appear on the stage at a given time. He traced the origin of this 'rule' and pointed out that tragedy in the beginning was a single song in honour of Bacchus, and the ancients gradually introduced two more characters as the need arose and their courage permitted, but then Johnson went on to point out that they "restrained themselves by a critical edict from further exorbitance." But since in Johnson's own time the modern dramatists had realized that for writing a modern play with all its variety and intricacy more than the stipulated three characters were required to be put on the stage at the same time, they knowingly violated this 'rule' and, as experience has shown, "without any inconvenience." Similarly, Johnson found (in the same paper) no justification for confining a play to five acts—it could be, he asserted, more or less than that sacrosanct number in accordance with the dramatic needs of each individual play. Nor could he see why a dramatic action should be limited to twenty-four hours only. For, as he declared, "he who can multiply three hours into twelve or twenty-four, might image with equal ease a greater number." In other words, an intelligent reader or a spectator is always conscious of the fact that the dramatic representation is not the actual reality but only an illusion of that reality: it is therefore easy for him to imagine the swift passage of time on the stage. (It is interesting that Johnson used these ideas several years later in his defence of Shakespeare's violation of these rules in his *Preface*, first published in 1765.) Hence, according to Johnson there is no need to rigidly observe the unities of time and place either. But with his shrewd critical insight he realized, and accepted, the need for the unity of action in a play. He recognized the fact that if the aesthetic impact of a work of art was to be intense, it had to have a unified pattern, whereas if it contained a series of independent and unrelated characters and actions its effect would be "faint and languid." He summed up his ideas about the 'rules' in the following manner at the end of this paper:

It ought to be the first endeavour of a writer to distinguish nature from custom, or that which is established because it is right, from that which is right only because it is established; that he may neither violate essential principles by a desire of novelty, nor debar himself from the attainment of beauties within his view by a needless fear of breaking rules which no literary dictator had authority to enact.

Another tenet in Johnson's critical creed was an adherence to 'Nature' which was the watchword and controlling idea in the eighteenth-century critical thought. Under the influence of pragmatic philosophy which held its sway in the eighteenth-century England, the historian, the philosopher, the scientist, the literary critic—each in his own way acknowledged the undis-

puted sovereignty of 'Nature' (as well as 'Reason'). For Johnson the words 'Nature' 'Truth' and 'Realism' were interchangeable. In the *Dictionary* he defined 'Nature' as "Sentiments and images adapted to Nature, or conformable to truth and reality." His high praise for a work of art was that it adhered to truth and reality. He declared "he who has carefully studied human nature, and can well describe it, may with most reason flatter his ambition" (*Rambler*, 106). One of the *Idler* papers (20) begins with his well-known pronouncement: "There is no crime more infamous than the violation of truth" and elsewhere (*Idler*, 77) he affirmed that true poetry demanded that the sentiments be natural.

Not only should poetry deal with natural feelings and sentiments, it should be expressed too, as it were naturally. In the same paper (*Idler*, 77) he pleaded for perspicuity and simplicity of expression: "natural thoughts...expressed without violence to language." His belief was that a writer should write in such a way that he could be understood most easily: the more he tried to be artificially elegant the more unintelligible he was liable to become: such a tendency in a writer would produce the "terrifick" "the repulsive" or the "bugbear style." He used these derogatory epithets while discussing one John Petvin (1691-1745) who wrote *Letters Concerning Mind* which, according to Johnson, expressed plain ideas in a "strange manner" (*Idler*, 36). However, it is significant that while he deprecated the use of decorative words for their own sake, he strongly believed that diction should vary according to the sentiments expressed. For instance, he did not approve of the use of "low" words in a tragedy. He devoted one entire paper (*Rambler*, 168) to this subject and took up for discussion Macbeth's speech delivered on the night of Duncan's murder—"Come thick night..." He objected to Shakespeare's use of "mean" words like "dun" which is "seldom used but in the stable," "knife" which is "used by butchers and cooks in the meanest of employments," and Johnson could hardly check his "risibility" on encountering the expression "heav'n peep through the blanket of the dark" for "who, without some relaxation of his gravity, can hear of the avengers of guilt 'peep [ing] through the blanket'?"

In general however he disliked ornamental devices of all kinds so much so that he dismissed even the widely accepted value of onomatopoeic effects as fanciful (*Rambler*, 92). In the matter of versification he believed that the heroic measure was the most "reasonable" and that it provided "the most harmony of which a single line is capable" (*Rambler*, 92). Heroic verse could be pure as well as mixed. It was pure when the accent rested on the second syllable throughout the whole line, and it was mixed when accents fell elsewhere in the line. And he granted the admissibility of mixed measure because it introduced variety in poetic rhythm.

On similar grounds of "Nature" and "Reason" Dr Johnson found that the ancient forms of pastoral poetry and the Pindaric lyric poetry were unsuited to the modern times. In two successive papers (*Rambler*, 36-37), he pointed out that pastoral poetry had validity in the distant past when nature could still be viewed in its elemental simplicity and innocence. The *Pollio* of Virgil was "a composition truly bucolic" because its pastoral atmosphere was created authentically by images taken "from the country or from the religion of the age common to all parts of the empire." But the pastoral poems of the more recent past as well as those written in Johnson's own time were, according to him, marked by artificiality and affectation. Thus while Spenser thought it necessary to degrade the language by using obsolete and rustic words which "no human being could have spoken," other pastoral writers, after making routine references to sheep

and shepherds, inveighed against "errors in the Church, and complaints against the government." Such authors failed to catch the essential spirit of pastoral poetry: they merely "filled their productions with mythological allusions, with incredible fictions and sentiments which neither passion nor reason could have dictated." In the like manner, he remarked, in *Rambler*, 158, that the ancient lyric was originally a product of the dazzling and rapid imagination of the authors who "loosed their genius to its own course, passed from one sentiment to another without expressing the intermediate ideas and roved at large over the ideal world with such lightness and agility that their footsteps are scarcely to be traced." But the subsequent critics failed to recognize the casual manner in which the genre was invented and practised by the ancients, and they blindly deduced "laws" about the form:

From this accidental peculiarity of the ancient writer the criticks deduce the rules of lyric poetry, which they have set free from all the laws by which other compositions are confined, and allow to neglect the niceties of transition, to start into remote digressions, and to wander without restraint from one scene or imagery to another.

As a result of this, their lyric compositions were often "without order, coherence or propriety."

In making such observations about diction, form and versification, Johnson was expressing his faith in the positive vitality of the culture of his time. The gulf between the poet and the public was not so large then as it is today, so that there was no need for the poet to invent new means of expression for communicating his own unique ideas and thoughts: in fact, the typical eighteenth-century writer did not claim to have any such extraordinary vision. On the other hand, a literary writer like Johnson himself had to speak like a cultivated man addressing cultivated men, the artist's job being to convey his natural and reasonable thoughts well in a unified, polished and harmonious manner. This particular aesthetic doctrine was perhaps best summarized in Pope's phrase "what oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed." In other words, the Augustan poet was always writing within the social context of his age and his chief aim was to speak of ideas and sentiments which the general reader would have thought of or felt. He had no desire to shock the reader into a new awareness by his peculiar or individualistic experience or expression. He was always pointing out what was common between his readers and himself.

In writing these periodical papers Johnson was confident that he had the support of the general ethos of the times; whatever he wrote was meant for the general reader though it went without saying that it was assumed that this reading public also valued good sense and sound judgement. Indeed, in the evaluation of a work of art his main concern was to find out its impact on the common reader—we frequently come across expressions like "every reader," "every man" in this context. He had the highest regard for the popular opinion which, for him, was the final test of literary merit: "the publick which is never corrupted, not often deceived, is to pass the last sentence upon literary claims" (*Rambler*, 23). It is against this background that we shall be able to understand his insistence on the generality of 'Nature' in literature. In the oft-quoted "the streaks of tulip" passage from *Rasselas* (1759) he had expressed his views on the subject very clearly. But he had conveyed the same idea in no uncertain terms in *Rambler*, 36, dated Saturday, 21 July 1750:

Poetry cannot dwell upon the minuter distinctions, by which one species dif-

fers from another, without departing from that simplicity of grandeur which fills the imagination; nor dissect the latent quality of things, without losing its power of gratifying every mind by recalling its conceptions.

Moreover, in *Idler*, 59, he went on to give reasons for his theory and affirmed that such generalizations were necessary if a work of art was to have universal appeal. He gave the example of *Hudibras* which, though once very popular, had lost its appeal because it dealt with topical themes, so that "the hypocrisy which it detected, and the folly which it ridiculed, have long vanished from the publick notice." And it is the universal appeal of a work of art that can stand the test of time, and securely establish its reputation for all time to come (*Rambler*, 92). In making these fundamental assertions about literature Johnson was merely following the Aristotelian principle of universality in art. Aristotle believed that poetry is more philosophical than history because while the former concerns itself with the universal the latter confines itself to the particular. He thus elaborated this fundamental difference in his *Poetics*:

By universal is meant what a man of certain sort will say or do, either probably or inevitably; and this is what poetry aims at, despite the particular names it employs. By particular is meant (some such thing as) what Alcibiades did or had done to him.¹¹

One might say that Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* ceased to have any universal significance for Johnson for the same reason for which Aristotle would banish the writings of the historian Alcibiades from the realm of art. What Johnson was trying to rule out, therefore, was the accidental, the eccentric and the factual while insisting at the same time that the greatest truths were universal and "unconnected with accidents and customs."

This emphasis on general human nature is important for another reason: it is only when the artistic representation of nature is general that art can be moral as well. It is worth emphasizing that Johnson was a moralist and that his moral concerns were deeply related to his age in general and to the existing literary traditions. In response to Puritan objections against poetry, the Augustan poetry insisted on its moral and social significance. A classicist that he was, Johnson believed that art should not only entertain, it should instruct also, and in his role as a literary critic he liked to see himself as a moral reformer as well. In writing the *Rambler* papers he was primarily motivated by moral considerations, his principal design being "to inculcate wisdom and piety" (*Rambler*, 208). In the world of art, as he saw it, 'Nature' and 'Morality' were inter-related. He believed that a work of art, describing human nature, was bound to be moral because, for him at any rate, universal reality was morally constituted. It was for this reason that he insisted that the artist should not attempt to produce a photographic copy of the reality, but should distinguish between the accidental and more enduring aspects of life:

It is justly considered as the greatest excellency of art, to imitate nature; but it is necessary to distinguish those parts of nature which are most proper for imitation: greater care is still required in representing life, which is often discoloured by passion, or deformed by wickedness. If the world be promiscuously described I cannot see of what use it can be to read the account; or why it may not be as safe to turn the eye immediately upon mankind, as upon a mirror which shows all that presents itself without discrimination (*Rambler*,

4).

Dr Johnson believed that the artist should select as well as reject with the help of his discriminating reason and judgement, and should finally aim at the eternal, unchanging reality of human existence. It is in this context that one can recognize the validity of Johnson's well-known dictum: "he who thinks reasonably must think morally." Jean Hagstrum's comments on this matter are highly pertinent:

In this, Johnson's central conception of the way in which art instructs, morality is neither a kind of didactic appendage, artificially attached to a work, nor any kind of direct homiletical appeal. Art is moral because it is a mirror of life, which in its variety and reality is always instructive; and because it is a representation of general nature, which is itself morally constituted...¹²

Once we recognize the relationship between 'Nature' and 'Morality' as Johnson saw it, we will acknowledge the fact that by his standards "Shakespeare must be, in spite of occasional and incidental lapses from the strictest morality, the most moral of poets precisely because he is most natural."¹³ However, it cannot be denied that Johnson did appear on occasions in his crudely didactic role when, for example, he attacked Swift, Fielding, Chesterfield and Bolingbroke on religious or false moral grounds. When he did so he was making a departure from his central position on this subject. Similarly, one may not be far from the truth in alleging that for "Dr Johnson moral judgement that isn't *stated* isn't there."¹⁴ That is to say that Johnson did not seem to realize that a moral lesson could be most effectively conveyed when it is presented implicitly in literary works. Though he had a clear understanding of how every good work of art is moral by virtue of the fact that it represents the reality, he betrayed a striking deficiency as a literary critic in demanding, more or less, that the moral lesson must be stated.

It was this desire on Johnson's part for direct statement that makes us aware of the limitations of the age as well as those of Johnson the critic. His inability to fully respond to the emotional impact of poetic drama was due to the fact that by training as well as temperament he could not adequately grasp the potentialities of a creative use of language in the hands of the masters. In the matter of versification we know what to expect from a critic who had claimed that the heroic measure was capable of the greatest melody and harmony. His incapacity to appreciate the grandeur of Miltonic blank-verse went with his insensitivity to the sublimity of Milton's poetry. Perhaps no further proof of under-developed sensibility is needed than a reminder that Johnson preferred Shakespeare's comedies to his tragedies.

When we look at the list of Johnson's weaknesses as a critic it is immediately apparent that they are mainly due to his being a part of the main stream of the Augustan literary tradition—a fact which limited his vision especially when he was confronted with the literature of the past. But this drawback was offset by his instinctive feeling for greatness when he encountered it. Thus though he could not open himself to the full impact of Shakespearean or Miltonic verse, he was obviously intuitively aware of the genius of those writers. In that speech of Macbeth's to which reference was earlier made, though he condemned Shakespeare's use of "low" words, he could feel that in that speech "is exerted all the force of poetry, that force which calls new powers into being, which embodies sentiments, and animates matter" (*Rambler*, 168). Similarly, he devoted a number of *Rambler* papers to a detailed examination of Milton's versification which

was quite different (to say the least) from what he was used to. But he was fulsome in his praise of Milton on this count too:

If the poetry of Milton be examined, with regard to the pauses and flow of his verses into each other, it will appear, that he had performed all that our language would admit; and the comparison of his numbers with those who have cultivated the same manner of writing, will show that he excelled as much in the lower as the higher parts of his art, and that his skill in harmony was not less than his invention or his learning (*Rambler*, 90).

In these periodical papers where he appeared primarily as a critic of the literature of his own times, he displayed positive strengths of his original mind. He not only explained and discussed the literature that was actually written within the Augustan tradition but also suggested what literature was capable of achieving within that particular tradition. In this sense he was truly a neo-classicist. He was a neo-classicist by *practice* by which I mean that he displayed the virtues of a neo-classical critical mind. He *demonstrated* the validity of the essential neo-classical doctrines without presenting them as a set of 'rules' to be followed blindly. That is to say, he accepted the neo-classical principles after the presiding trinity, Reason, Nature and Truth had approved them. These attributes enabled him to judge the quality of life that the literary works represented for, after all, human life was his central concern. His greatest praise of Shakespeare was that his plays were "just representations of general nature,"¹⁵ and it was in this sense that they were "the mirrors of manners and of life."¹⁶ Since literature grows out of human experience, criticism must also, according to Johnson, be always alert to this fact. That was why when faced with a work of art Johnson consulted his human experience, and what was more he invited his readers to do likewise. This characteristic Johnsonian method of literary criticism is best in action in the *Rambler* and the *Idler* papers which provided the relative informality as well as direct access to the readers' experiences and responses that Johnson so evidently cherished. Dr Johnson himself had a very high opinion of his performance here: Samuel Rogers recorded, in his *Table-Talk*, Johnson's famous remark, "My other works are wine and water but my *Rambler* is pure wine." His wife was also greatly impressed by his achievement in the *Rambler* papers: she said to him, "I thought very well of you before; but I did not imagine you could have written anything equal to this."¹⁷ And the fact that Johnson's compatriots and contemporaries thought likewise was evidenced by the clay bust of Johnson which was executed by Joseph Nollenken in 1777: the sculptor put at its base a thick volume with *RAMBLER* carved on it.

NOTES

All quotations from *The Rambler* and *The Idler* have been cited from *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vols. ii-v, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963-1969.

1. Quoted by John Wain in his *Johnson as Critic*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, p. 6.
2. D H Lawrence, 'John Galsworthy' in *Phoenix* ed. Edward D McDonald, London: Heinemann, 1936, p. 539.
3. Samuel Johnson, 'Alexander Pope' in *Lives of English Poets*, ed. L Archer Hind, vol. ii, London: Dent, 1953, p. 148.

4. James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, New York: The Modern Library, n. d., p. 116.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 117.
7. Ibid.
8. Richard Ingram ed., *Dr Johnson by Mrs Thrale*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1984, p. 9.
9. James Boswell, p. 118.
10. J P Hardy, *Samuel Johnson: A Critical Study*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 6.
11. Philip Wheelright, *Aristotle*, New York: The Odyssey Press, 1951, p. 302.
12. Jean H Hagstrum, *Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952.
p. 72.
13. Ibid.
14. F R Leavis, *The Common Pursuit*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1952, p. 108.
15. Samuel Johnson, 'Preface' to 'The Plays of William Shakespeare' in *Samuel Johnson* ed. Donald Greene, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 420.
16. Ibid.
17. Quoted by John Wain in his *Samuel Johnson*, London: Macmillan, 1974, p. 163.

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