PART I

Life and works

CHAPTER 1

Life

Lisa Berglund

> LIFE. *n.s.* plural *lives*. [lifian, to live, Saxon.]
> 13. Narrative of a life past.
>
> Plutarch, that writes his *life*,
> Tells us, that Cato dearly lov'd his wife. *Pope*.

Samuel Johnson lived one of the most thoroughly documented lives of the eighteenth century, and he was the subject of what many consider the greatest biography ever written, James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* To understand that life, however, we need to pay attention to a wide range of biographical materials, including not only the biographical works of Johnson's contemporaries – Sir John Hawkins and Hester Lynch Piozzi above all – but also the more scholarly tradition of Johnsonian biography that has run through the twentieth century and continues to thrive in the twenty-first.

EARLY LIFE

Samuel Johnson was born in the cathedral town of Lichfield, in the West Midlands of England, on September 7, 1709. (After England changed its calendar in 1752, Johnson observed his birthday on September 18.) His father, Michael, owned a bookshop, and his mother, Sarah, was of a prominent local family. From his wet nurse the infant Samuel contracted scrofula, a tubercular infection that affected his eyesight and his hearing and left his face badly scarred (see chapter 29, "Medicine"). It was to be the first in a long catalogue of physical and mental maladies that would torment Johnson throughout his seventy-five years. When Samuel was two years old, Sarah Johnson took her son to London to be "touched for the King's evil," a folk remedy for scrofula. Queen Anne was the last British monarch to "touch" her subjects and, though the ritual did nothing to improve his health, Johnson wore the amulet he received from her for the rest of his life.

Johnson attended Lichfield Grammar School, but much of his education came from the shelves of his father's bookshop, where he read omnivorously. A small inheritance enabled his family to send him to Pembroke College, Oxford, but after thirteen months financial pressures obliged him to withdraw. (He never graduated from university; his title "Doctor" comes from an honorary degree, awarded by the University of Dublin in 1765.) After working unsuccessfully as a schoolmaster in Lichfield, Johnson moved to Birmingham to live with a schoolfriend, Edmund Hector. In 1735, the twenty-six-year-old Johnson married Elizabeth ("Tetty") Porter, a well-off widow twenty years his senior, with a daughter nearly Johnson's age.

Hawkins and Boswell treat his marriage gingerly, with embarrassment tinged by contempt. Yet Elizabeth Porter must surely have been a perceptive woman: even Boswell notes that she recognized in the ugly and peculiar Johnson "the most sensible man that I ever saw in my life" (Boswell, *Life*, 1:95). A more balanced portrait is offered by Hester Thrale (later Piozzi). Thrale did not meet Johnson until long after Elizabeth's death, but she certainly understood the emotional demands that Johnson could make on his female friends. One of her anecdotes records Mrs. Johnson's riposte when her husband repeatedly "huffed his wife about his dinner." Johnson told Thrale, "at last she called to me, and said, Nay, hold Mr. Johnson, and do not make a farce of thanking God for a dinner which in a few minutes you will protest not eatable" (*Miscellanies*, 1:249–50).

The money that Elizabeth Johnson brought to the marriage was invested in setting up a school at Edial, near Lichfield – and once again Johnson failed as a schoolmaster (see chapter 20, "Education"). Without other prospects he was "obliged," as he would write of his friend Richard Savage, "to seek some other means of support; and, having no profession, became by necessity an author" (*Lives*, 3:124). While Tetty remained unhappily in Lichfield with her mother-in-law, Johnson, joined by one of his few remaining pupils, David Garrick, walked to London.

ARRIVAL IN LONDON

Penniless and occasionally homeless, struggling to find employment in the metropolis, Johnson contracted an important friendship. Richard Savage was a talented, irresponsible poet famous for both his conversation and a tendency to stick his friends with the bar bill. Hawkins, who knew Johnson in these early London years, records that the friendship was

cemented by the fact that Savage and Johnson "had both felt the pangs of poverty and the want of patronage" (Hawkins, *Life*, p. 33). The nights spent roaming the streets with Savage indelibly shaped Johnson's thinking about both poverty and patronage. Piozzi observed that he refused to take seriously any distress less acute than "*want of necessaries*," as Johnson put it (*Works*, 17:406). Witnessing Savage's disappointments, Johnson also became acutely conscious of the difficulty of carving an independent way as a writer (see chapter 13, "Authorship").

Savage was a paradoxical catalyst for Johnson's successful literary career. Savage may have inspired Johnson's first important poem, *London*, and *The Life of Mr. Richard Savage* established Johnson's reputation as a perceptive and compelling biographer. In the meantime, Johnson had secured regular work with Edward Cave, founder and editor of the *Gentleman's Magazine*. This employment enabled Johnson to bring his wife to London, and during the next few years he published poems, book reviews, biographies, translations, and occasional journalism (see chapter 2, "Publication history").

DICTIONARY JOHNSON AND BEREAVEMENT

Johnson's definitive work, and the turning point of his career, was the *Dictionary of the English Language*. In 1746, bookseller Robert Dodsley encouraged him to prepare *A Plan of a Dictionary*, and shortly thereafter Johnson signed the contract. Nine years later, the *Dictionary* appeared. The first really comprehensive dictionary in English, and the first to make extensive use of illustrative quotations, Johnson's *Dictionary* is arguably the single most astonishing achievement in the history of lexicography – and it had been completed virtually single-handed, save for the help of six amanuenses (see chapter 18, "Dictionaries"). Even more remarkably, during this period Johnson also published an important essay series, the *Rambler*, his play *Irene*, and many other literary projects.

The success of the *Dictionary* was overshadowed, though, by the financial difficulties and frequent separations that strained Johnson's marriage. Elizabeth Johnson's later years, Dr. Robert Levet said, were marked by "perpetual illness and perpetual opium" (*Miscellanies*, 1:248). Her death in 1752 hit Johnson hard, as he must have been aware that he had contributed to her loneliness and despair. He wrote bitterly in the preface to the *Dictionary* that "I have protracted my work till most of those whom I wished to please, have sunk into the grave" (*Works*, 18:113). He thereafter observed the anniversary of his wife's death by composing a prayer each

year: in 1770, for instance, he wrote, "This is the day on which in –52 I was deprived of poor dear Tetty … when I recollect the time in which we lived together, my grief for her departure is not abated, and I have less pleasure in any good that befals me, because she does not partake it" (*Works*, 1:127). Despite emotional and physical attraction to several other women over the course of his life, he never remarried.

Four years later, Johnson's mother died at the age of ninety-one. As with the death of his wife, Johnson's mourning seems tinged with guilt: he was aware of his mother's declining health, yet forbore to visit her on her deathbed. Johnson reflects on her loss in *Idler* 41:

> such is the course of nature, that whoever lives long must outlive those whom he loves and honours. Such is the condition of our present existence, that life must one time lose its associations, and every inhabitant of the earth must walk downward to the grave alone and unregarded, without any partner of his joy or grief, without any interested witness of his misfortunes or success. (*Works*, 2:130)

In that same year, 1759, he also wrote his philosophical tale *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*. According to the publisher William Strahan, Johnson wrote the book "in the evenings of one week, and sent it to the press in portions as it was written … that with the profits he might defray the expense of his mother's funeral" (Boswell, *Life*, 1:341).

THE 1760S AND 1770S

In the 1760s Johnson contracted two enduring friendships with his future biographers, James Boswell and Hester Lynch Thrale (later Piozzi).

Bozzy and Piozzi, as they were dubbed by satirists, were both diligent diarists who developed a cordial competition with one another, which became a vicious rivalry after Johnson's death. Their relationships with Johnson were very different. With Boswell, who practiced law in Edinburgh and visited London occasionally, Johnson spent intense periods of time – hours, days, even weeks during their 1773 trip to the Hebrides. Boswell could be amazingly charming but also irritating, and his inquisitive scrutiny was sometimes infuriating: "Sir," an exasperated Johnson once snapped, "you have but two topicks, yourself and me. I am sick of both" (Boswell, *Life*, 3:57). But his steadfast attention could also be rewarding.

Hester Thrale, by contrast, was the wife of a prosperous brewer and the mother of a large, sickly family. Concerned for Johnson's health and impressed by his conversation, Henry and Hester Thrale invited him to stay with them at their country house in Streatham, south of London.

The Thrales surrounded Johnson with physical and social comforts, and included him on their trips to Paris and Wales. For Johnson, Hester Thrale seems to have combined the attractions of a nurse, a mother, and a courtly love object; when they were apart he bombarded her with letters, and when they were together he confided in her, monopolized her, and teased her. Her kindness, Johnson acknowledged in his last letter to her, had "soothed twenty years of a life radically wretched" (*Letters*, 4:343).

In 1762, the government awarded Johnson a pension of £300, which ensured financial security if not affluence. Johnson was able to retire from constant literary labors, and he founded the famous Literary Club (see chapter 16, "Clubs"). Still, his prominence created a certain pressure, most famously articulated by King George III, who sought out Johnson when the latter was visiting the royal library in 1767. The king encouraged Johnson to continue writing, but Johnson demurred, saying that "he had already done his part as a writer. 'I should have thought so too, (said the King,) if you had not written so well'" (Boswell, *Life*, 2:35). In the 1770s, Johnson completed a few projects: a series of political pamphlets and a major revision of the *Dictionary*. The climax to his literary career, however, was the monumental *Lives of the English Poets*, a large collection of biographical and critical prefaces ranging from a few pages to book-length. These biographies, together with the *Dictionary* and the edition of Shakespeare, completed Johnson's reputation as the authority on English literature and language, a reputation he retains today.

HEALTH

Johnson's childhood illness had left him significantly nearsighted, so much so that he recalled having to kneel down to feel the curb in order to find his way safely home from school:

> he was then so near-sighted, that he was obliged to stoop down on his hands and knees to take a view of the kennel before he ventured to step over it. His school-mistress, afraid that he might miss his way, or fall into the kennel, or be run over by a cart, followed him at some distance. He happened to turn about and perceive her. Feeling her careful attention as an insult to his manliness, he ran back to her in a rage, and beat her, as well as his strength would permit. (Boswell, *Life*, 1:39)

Johnson's critical thinking also was shaped by his poor eyesight, as in his famous observation in his preface to Shakespeare that "a play read, affects the mind like a play acted" (*Works*, 7:79), or in his dismissive comments on landscape and painting. He "was almost as deaf as he

was blind: travelling with Dr. Johnson was for these reasons tiresome enough," Piozzi reports. "Mr. Thrale loved prospects … But when he wished to point them out to his companion: 'Never heed such nonsense,' would be [Johnson's] 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 enquiry" (*Miscellanies*, 1:215). Johnson's need to hold books close to his eyes also shaped his social behavior: "he would be quite lost to the company, and withdraw all his attention to what he was reading, without the smallest knowledge or care about the noise made round him. His deafness made such conduct less odd and less difficult to him than it would have been to another man" (*Miscellanies*, 1:319).

More dramatically, Johnson suffered from convulsive tics and other peculiar habits – he muttered to himself, rolled his body from side to side, and ritualistically touched every fence post he passed. Boswell observed that "he never knew the natural joy of a free and vigorous use of his limbs: when he walked, it was like the struggling gait of one in fetters; when he rode, he had no command or direction of his horse, but was carried as if in a balloon" (Boswell, *Life*, 4:425). Modern biographers theorize that Johnson suffered from Tourette's syndrome, but in the eighteenth century no diagnosis was available.

Suffering from inexplicable compulsions, Johnson not surprisingly was anxious about his mental as well as his physical health, and his life is marked by episodes of lethargic depression or "melancholy" (see chapter 30, "Mental health"). Boswell records that Johnson "felt himself overwhelmed with an horrible hypochondria, with perpetual irritation, fretfulness, and impatience; and with a dejection, gloom, and despair, which made existence misery"; he often "strove to overcome it by forcible exertions. He frequently walked to Birmingham and back again [a thirty-two-mile round-trip], and tried many other expedients, but all in vain" (Boswell, *Life*, 1:63–4). While at Oxford he had undergone a serious deepening of his Christian faith, but his beliefs also contributed to his worries about his sanity and his future state.

Fortunately Johnson also had a gift for making and keeping friends, who were attracted by his brilliance, his impressive moral force, even his neediness. Those friends sustained Johnson through his episodes of melancholy. In 1734, for example, Edmund Hector found Johnson too depressed to get out of bed; the result was Johnson's first publication, a translation of Father Jerome Lobo's *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, which Hector genially bullied him into dictating. In 1765 the Thrales called on Johnson, found him

sunk in misery, and insisted he come home with them; Johnson lived with them, off and on, until Henry Thrale's death in 1781.

FINAL DAYS

With the death of Henry Thrale, Johnson's comfortable life at Streatham came to an end. Some in their circle thought Johnson should marry the brewer's rich widow (thirty-two years his junior). It was not to be: Hester Thrale fell in love with her daughter's Italian Catholic music teacher, Gabriel Piozzi; defying family opposition and social ostracism, she married him in 1784. Johnson felt betrayed, and lashed out with a cruel, insulting letter: "You are ignominiously married … If You have abandoned your children and your religion, God forgive your wickedness; if you have forfeited your Fame [reputation], and your country, may your folly do no further mischief" (*Letters*, 4:338). The newly married Mrs. Piozzi responded with a dignified request that their correspondence cease. They never met again.

Despite his long list of illnesses, Johnson was physically robust, a large, active man, whose recollections of a year at Oxford University dwelled as much upon "sliding in Christ-Church meadow" as on his studies. On his arrival in London, his muscular frame led one bookseller to recommend that the would-be author instead buy himself a "porter's knot" (*Miscellanies*, 1:380), the strip of cloth used to carry heavy loads. In his seventy-fifth year his health was inevitably in decline, but Johnson remained remarkably vigorous, visiting old friends at Lichfield and Oxford, renewing the stones on his family graves, and maintaining a wide correspondence. He expressed a firm confidence in his salvation, and wrote a codicil to his will leaving an annuity to his black adopted son, Frank Barber. He died in London, on December 13, 1784, and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

BIOGRAPHIES

In the six years after Johnson's death twelve biographies were published, and he has remained a fascinating subject for biographers ever since. A series of brief pieces appeared in the weeks and months after his death, including Thomas Tyers's *Biographical Sketch of Dr. Samuel Johnson* (1784), but the first book-length biographical account was Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (1785). Boswell had been planning a full-length biography for many years, and had been

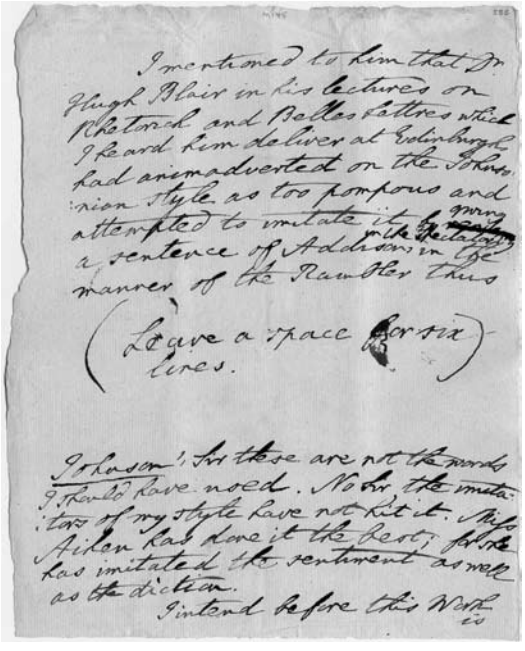

Figure 1 Boswell, manuscript of *The Life of Johnson*, "Papers Apart." Courtesy of the General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

assiduously collecting material; he delivered this account of the tour the two of them made in 1773 as a kind of down-payment on the *Life* he had begun writing.

Hester Lynch Piozzi followed Boswell's *Journal of a Tour* with her *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D., during the Last Twenty Years of His Life*, which appeared in 1786. Drawn from her diaries, it recounted many of Johnson's conversations and witty observations. The first full-dress biography to appear, though, was Sir John Hawkins's *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* Hawkins was well positioned to write Johnson's life: he had known him longer than anyone else, and he was the executor of Johnson's will, so it is only natural that the booksellers who commissioned a collected edition of Johnson's works in 1787 asked Hawkins to devote an entire volume to a biography. Hawkins's tendency to depict Johnson unfavorably and his occasionally awkward style, though, did little to promote the book's popularity, and only in 2009 was Hawkins's *Life* finally made available in a carefully edited and annotated edition.