Introduction: Johnson and Milton

“Milton, Madam, was a genius that could cut a Colossus from a rock; but could not carve heads upon cherry-stones” (Life IV, p. 305). Johnson’s metaphor might apply to the range of his own creative engagement with Milton’s work over his career, from the cherry-stones of scattered allusion, comment, and quotation, to the Colossi: the Dictionary, the criticism, the biography. Whatever the scale, he brings the shaping tools of intellect and imagination to a body of material that continues to resist and challenge him. It is impossible for him to ignore an English poet who not only justifies himself to posterity, and before the tribunal of the ancients, but who also claims to justify the ways of God to men.

It should also be impossible for readers of either Milton or Johnson (or both) to ignore the confrontation of two of the most important claimants to cultural and literary dominance in their respective centuries. The central issue is one of authority: whether it affects religious or political ideology, the requirements of literary form and genre, the control of the English language, or, possibly most basic of all, the authority over, and responsibility to, the reader. In the grand narrative of literary history in English, Milton and Johnson represent rival paradigms of the literary career, almost exactly a century apart. It was not by accident that each of them became a focus of early modern literary biography. As well as having certain striking biographical parallels in common, and sharing the same foundation of the classical and Judaeo-Christian tradition, they both pose the question of the writer’s claim on his readership – a claim that Johnson has to address in his own reading and assimilation of Milton’s texts.

As the anecdotal as well as literary evidence suggests, Johnson is not only deeply familiar with Milton’s life and work – which we might expect – but his respect for Milton grows over his lifetime, even as his reservations about certain aspects of that life and work become more entrenched. Mrs Thrale’s recollection of his Latin conversation with Abbé
Roffette in 1775 may owe something to English patriotism (and her own enthusiasm) but it also records a level of engagement that should not be underestimated: ‘Mr. Johnson pronounced a long eulogium upon Milton with so much ardour, eloquence, and ingenuity, that the Abbé rose from his seat and embraced him’ (JM I. p. 216). While not expecting that all modern Miltonists can be induced to embrace Johnson, I hope in this study to reassess sympathetically a very considerable volume of evidence concerning Johnson’s lengthy, and complicated, relationship with his predecessor – a relationship that involves the interaction of one particularly strong-minded and influential literary genius with another equally powerful. On the whole, though far from exclusively, critics and scholars have tended to define themselves as either Miltonists or Johnsonians: it is a privilege to have a foot in both camps (‘Both them I serve, and of their train am I’).

The first part of the book concentrates on Johnson as a reader of Milton, who, like most readers who are also writers, appropriates what he reads in the form of allusion and quotation. The theory of the ways in which literary allusion functions is a complex and sophisticated area of literary criticism. My contention is simply that Miltonic allusion (sometimes mediated through another powerful predecessor, Dryden) is more prevalent in Johnson’s writing than has often been recognised: increased awareness of its presence contributes to an understanding of how Johnson reads, interprets, and recreates Milton’s poetry – even, occasionally, his prose – in different contexts. This practice enhances not only his style, but also his arguments on a range of subjects, many of which both writers consider vitally important. In pursuing this aim, I am conscious of, and indebted to, a number of previous critics, who have likewise discovered that remembering Paradise Lost in particular enriches their understanding of Johnson’s poetry or Rasselas. But before considering the poetry and Rasselas, I begin with the periodical essays, which have received less attention from this perspective, and which, I argue, can in some respects modify our view of Johnson’s critical reactions to Milton. Part I ends with a chapter on the 1770s tracts, which show Johnson paradoxically applying Miltonic allusion for political ends. The Dictionary, in the first edition of 1755 and especially the fourth edition of 1773, is clearly a massive resource for Johnson’s appropriation of Milton’s texts; however, I have chosen not to allocate an independent section to it, partly because the sheer quantity of material is overwhelming for a study of this kind – it deserves separate treatment in itself, as the ground-breaking research of Allen Reddick and Anne McDermott testifies – and partly because it seemed more
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appropriate to use it primarily as an aid to interpreting Johnson’s critical responses to Milton.

The criticism is the focus of the second part of the book. It begins with an investigation of the notorious Lauder affair, and what it reveals about Johnson’s attitude to *Paradise Lost* and its creator at this stage of his career: his role is marked by an ambivalence that characterises his criticism of the epic throughout his life. Central to Part II (and to the whole project) is the following chapter on Johnson’s literary assessment of *Paradise Lost*, from the *Rambler* essays on prosody to the extended general analysis of its beauties and defects in the ‘Life of Milton’. In the *Rambler* essays, he exercises the method of close reading; in the ‘Life’, he addresses fundamental critical questions regarding how, and by what criteria, to judge Milton’s ‘wonderful poem’, questions that have been integral to its reception from the late seventeenth century to the present. This chapter not only enquires into possible reasons for Johnson’s responses, both positive and negative, but also contextualises his commentary in relation to the abundant evidence from other eighteenth-century readers, editors, and commentators, and considers its effect on modern Milton criticism. The next chapter, on his criticism of the shorter poems, follows a similar strategy. Both are based on the principle that Milton is essential to Johnson’s critical thinking, putting his theory and practice to the most rigorous of tests. In turn, Johnson’s assessments have profoundly influenced the subsequent critical history of Milton’s poetry, even or especially when they have provoked violent contradiction (or incredulity). As student, teacher, and indeed examiner, I have long been familiar with the academic practice of using Johnson quotations to stimulate counter-arguments; and it is noticeable that Milton critics are still citing him, if too often in easy dismissal. But Johnson’s emphasis on the importance of the reader, his concern with language and genre, his struggle with the subject of *Paradise Lost*, and above all his enthrallment by the Miltonic imagination, deserve to be taken seriously by serious readers, all the more so because his is a mind which is not easily subjugated. His criticism raises questions about our current interpretative strategies, and continues to challenge our assumptions.

The final part of the book, on Johnson’s biographical construction of Milton as political, private, and literary subject, goes to the heart of his attempt to understand the relation between a great writer and his work. He is a brilliant theorist as well as practitioner of literary biography: his scrutiny of the evidence available to him from earlier lives of Milton is illuminating, and again the nuances of his interpretation can be more exactly defined in the context of other Milton biographies, from the first-hand
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accounts, through his eighteenth-century predecessors, to the moderns. Johnson’s well-documented political divergence from his subject complicates but also intensifies his effort to comprehend both the genius and the fallible human being, and he shows himself capable of empathy towards both.

At the present time, approximately four centuries after the birth of Milton and three centuries after the birth of Johnson, it seems timely to reconsider a relationship between two classic writers which still has much to say about British literary and political culture, and literary history. From one viewpoint, the relation can be described as an agon, a struggle for authority between two giants of the early modern canon. From another viewpoint, it is a collaboration, establishing the enduring value of that canon, and of their shared tradition of Christian humanism, which – whether it is accepted or rejected – continues to be essential to our historical understanding. Moreover, the subject remains relevant to past, present, and future academic research. Among the distinguished modern scholars whose work has laid the foundations of knowledge about the reception of Milton’s work in the eighteenth century, and Johnson’s view of Milton in particular, are John T. Shawcross, for his Critical Heritage volumes on Milton; Roger Lonsdale, for his edition of Lives of the Poets; Allen Reddick, for his work on Milton in the Dictionary; Bruce Redford, for his study of Milton in the Political Tracts; and Dustin Griffin and Stephen Fix for their seminal critical studies of Johnson and Milton. In conjunction with the magisterial editions of the works of both authors, they have made Johnson’s Milton possible.
PART I

Johnson the reader/writer: appropriating Milton’s texts
When Johnson was writing the *Rambler* essays between 1750 and 1752, he had reached that stage of middle life at which Milton, a century previously, was writing in defence of regicide. The gulf between their literary careers and commitments could scarcely seem wider than at this point. Yet for each of them the flexing of their rhetorical muscles in prose marks very powerfully a shared humanism, a sense of the writer’s responsibility in the public domain. The ‘three problems’ which Milton claimed to have addressed in his earlier pamphlets on ‘domestic liberty’ – marriage, education, and ‘the existence of freedom to express oneself’ – are ones that also preoccupy Johnson in the work of his maturity. Both are trained to argue, believing that argument in print is fundamental to public discourse. However greatly they diverge in their political principles, they agree on the moral seriousness of what they are doing, and on the writer’s duty to communicate truth as he perceives it. Even if Milton’s prose might be rejected as a model (though not entirely, as we shall see), for Johnson, whether he likes it or not, the fact that Milton’s poetry is so deeply embedded in his own reading experience and in that of his contemporaries turns Milton himself into an inescapable author/authority figure. In addition, his work on the *Dictionary* during the same period saturates his verbal memory with Milton’s poetic language.

The *Rambler* and the other periodical essays, establishing as they do Johnson’s status as moralist and critic, are a valuable starting point for assessing how he appropriates Miltonic texts. Certainly in these essays Milton emerges as a presence to be reckoned with, visible or invisible. Johnson summons up Milton’s ghost partly as a critic through direct confrontation, as in his own wonderful analogy of Aeneas in the underworld drawing his sword against ‘phantoms which cannot be wounded’ (Yale IV. p. 134); partly through biographical reference; and partly through literary allusion, the most subtle haunting of all. Criticism and biography will be
Johnson's Milton

dealt with at a later stage. The immediate purpose of this chapter is to consider how Milton's texts infiltrate the periodical essays. It is perhaps not surprising that Johnson like so many others uses the Miltonic currency of quotation and allusion. What is more surprising is the impact and even the frequency of these allusions. In respect of Johnson's appropriation of texts, to quantify references is not necessarily to indicate their relative importance, but it is worth noting how the Yale editors' statistics for allusions to early modern authors in the periodicals break down individually. Even if we discount the sequence of essays devoted to Milton criticism, it is interesting, indeed startling, to see how prominent Milton is (in comparison, say, with Shakespeare). He and his work appear in a greater variety of contexts than most (possibly any?) of the post-classical authors to whom Johnson alludes. Although Dryden and Pope are quoted more frequently, these citations are bulked up by Johnson's use of their translations. Of course a number of factors might explain Milton's presence: his general cultural dominance in the eighteenth century, the precedent of Addison's Spectator criticism, Johnson's own immersion in seventeenth-century texts for lexicographical purposes. But added to these must be Johnson's personal long-standing involvement with reading Milton, and appropriating what he reads. At the very least, his use of allusion registers an intimate knowledge and recall of Milton's writing, and its transmission through other sources.

Like many early modern writers, when Johnson quotes, 'he frequently, perhaps habitually, quotes from memory'. And since he lays exceptional stress on memory as the fundamental intellectual faculty, the indispensable basis of thought itself, the workings of his own memory are particularly revealing. The periodical essay is not a genre that binds the writer to the academic injunction 'always verify your references', and, precisely because of this freedom, Johnson's illustrative borrowings allow glimpses of how he is assimilating Miltonic material into his own writing practice, his own mental habits. Misquotation may indicate even more clearly than absolute accuracy a text lived with, unconsciously adapted, however slightly, to the contours of a different individual literary consciousness. In order to reconstruct Johnson's Milton as a memory-text, fragmentary as such a construction must be, it is worth looking as closely as possible at these verbal traces where Johnson appropriates his writings either to point a moral or adorn a tale. Unsurprisingly, almost all the direct quotations are from Paradise Lost, although there are a scattering of allusions to the prose and shorter poems. As for so many eighteenth-century writers, it is Milton the epic
poet who sets the standard, occupies the generic high ground: he is the competition.

Indeed, in the very first number Johnson gestures in the direction of heroic precedents. He invokes epic proems almost enviously, because for the epic poet the problem of where to begin is already settled: confronted by the terror of the blank page or the listening audience, he has the support of convention. Although Johnson does not mention Milton (or any other post-classical poet) by name, he scarcely needs to, for in such a context the author of *Paradise Lost* – noted for his ‘spirit and intrepidity’ (Yale III. p. 5) – leaps to mind. In a much later number of *The Rambler* (158), Johnson will return to the subject of the epic proem, placing Milton in the exalted company of Homer and Virgil in order to contradict Addison’s close reading. The requirement of proems is not to be ‘plain, simple, and unadorned’ as Addison asserts, but, rather, to blaze in ‘grandeur of expression’ (Yale V. pp. 78–80). It is clear in retrospect that by linking the opening of *The Rambler* to epic poetry through allusion, Johnson is at the same time claiming and disclaiming a powerful literary precedent.

**Milton, Writing, and Truth**

The first group of allusions relate directly to Johnson’s consciousness of the writer’s – and the critic’s – responsibility to truth. If proof were needed that Milton’s epic is not far from Johnson’s mind in these early stages of his new literary project, it is provided by the fact that his first explicit quotation from *Paradise Lost* occurs in number 3, an essay that continues his preoccupation with the difficulties that the writer has to confront. Here he widens his remit to include the critic, a major creation in *The Rambler*, and one who is by no means always on the side of the angels. In his allegory of true Criticism, ‘the eldest daughter of Labour and of Truth’, who has departed from this earth, Johnson glances at the classic mythical paradigm of Astraea (Yale III. pp. 16, 18). But his sardonic description of the current state of criticism, embarrassingly for its practitioners, locates it in the company of Milton’s Satan and his fallen angels. Hell is other critics. At best, they practise Flattery like Belial, politicising and prostituting favourable judgements; at worst, they exercise Malevolence like Beelzebub, the motive force of hellish malignity. The original authority of true Criticism is divided and travestied. Instead of the impartial torch of Truth,
The companions of Malevolence were supplied by the Furies with a torch, which had this quality peculiar to infernal lustre, that its light fell only upon faults.

No light, but rather darkness visible
Serv’d only to discover sights of woe.

*Paradise Lost*, I. lines 63–4

Yale III. p.18

Johnson is not prone to allude to hell frivolously. The phrase ‘darkness visible’ has haunted generations of readers and writers. Here Johnson applies it to the profession that unites reading and writing – literary criticism – to drive home the point that entirely destructive criticism is damning, and therefore damnable, in a more than colloquial sense.

He develops his analysis of the function of criticism in *The Rambler* the following year, and again in these later issues the shade of Milton seems not far distant. In the midst of his irregular sequence of critical essays on Milton's versification, he revisits in *Rambler 93* the subject of the critic's responsibility to both writer and reader, in what seems like a less dramatic reprise of *Rambler 3*. Whereas in his early allegory Johnson had deliberately demonised the critic's power, in *Rambler 93* he humanises it: ‘Criticks, like all the rest of mankind, are very frequently misled by interest’ (Yale IV. p. 132). If the critic is accountable to truth above all, with a responsibility to both writer and reader as a kind of honest broker between them, all too often in his modern incarnation he acts as a dishonest broker and betrays his trust. No-one is more conscious than Johnson of the fact that literary criticism is bedevilled – a verb he might take literally – by subjectivity, that the critic has many motives, and that the critic’s temptation is to exercise power without responsibility. He recognises that negative criticism provokes a backlash just because it ‘has so often given occasion to the envious and ill-natured of gratifying their malignity’ (Yale IV. p. 133). But the solution does not lie in the opposite extreme, undue deference to the writer's authority or sensibility. To write is to enter a potentially adversarial relationship with readers and critics, and, in the case of dead authors, 'the critic is, undoubtedly, at full liberty to exercise the strictest severity' (Yale IV. p. 134). Interestingly, at this point he displaces the evocation of Milton's biblical hell in *Rambler 3* with Virgil's classical underworld. The distinction between living and dead authors is the crux at which he introduces the Virgilian image, already alluded to, of 'phantoms which cannot be wounded' (contrast Milton's hell, where the pain of the fallen angels is integral to their intellectual being). However, it is at the conclusion of this essay that Johnson most emphatically rewrites his earlier rhetoric in
Miltonic allusion in the periodical essays

*Rambler* 3, substituting ‘the light of reason’ for ‘infernal lustre’, Milton’s ‘darkness visible’:
the duty of criticism is neither to depreciate, nor dignify by partial representations, but to hold out the light of reason, whatever it may discover; and to promulgate the determinations of truth, whatever she shall dictate. (Yale IV. p. 134)

Perhaps it is not coincidental that in the previous issue of *The Rambler* (92), where Johnson had also been reflecting on ‘the duty of criticism’, he seems to have remembered *Areopagitica*, since that is the text in which Milton expresses most eloquently the power of the printed word and the necessity ‘to promulgate the determinations of truth, whatever she shall dictate’. He does in any case make reference to Milton’s poetics in that issue, since this is one of the essays devoted to considering versification. But a particular allusion to *Areopagitica* has been identified in this passage:

It is, however, the task of criticism to establish principles; to improve opinion into knowledge; and to distinguish those means of pleasing which depend upon known causes and rational deduction, 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 enchantresses of the soul. (Yale IV. p. 122)

The phrase singled out is ‘to improve opinion into knowledge’ (Johnson originally used ‘exalt’); arguably the whole sentence has a Miltonic flavour, especially in the Circean metaphor ‘enchantresses of the soul’. Johnson is addressing a problem in aesthetics, much canvassed in the mid-eighteenth century, which also presents itself as a problem of epistemology. How can we know what is beautiful and true, and is it possible to progress beyond purely subjective criteria? He argues that criticism as a discipline can indeed liberate us from a pleasure that is irrational, and contingent upon what is ‘merely relative and comparative’; that it can attain to a rationally based truth, ‘under the dominion of science’ (Yale IV. pp. 121, 122). Although Milton in *Areopagitica* does not concern himself primarily with aesthetics, he too envisages literary activity as a quest for truth, discoverable through the processes of writing and reading: ‘to be still searching what we know not, by what we know, still closing up truth to truth as we find it (for all her body is *homogeneal*, and proportionall) this is the golden rule …’ (*CPW* II. p. 351). He imaginatively projects the London of 1644 as a hive of intellectual activity, crammed with ‘pens and heads … sitting by their studious lamps, musing, searching, revolving new notions and idea’s … others as fast reading, trying all things, assenting to the force of reason and convincement’. In short, ‘where there is much desire to learn,