SAMUEL JOHNSON AND THE CULTURE OF PROPERTY

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CHAPTER I

The monument

One day, so the story goes, Samuel Johnson and Oliver Goldsmith visited Westminster Abbey together. As they passed through the south transept and came upon Poets' Corner they viewed the tombs and memorials there – Chaucer's, Spenser's, Shakespeare's, Milton's, and all the others – and Johnson quoted an apt line from Ovid: *Forsitan et nostrum nomen miscebitur istis*, 'It may be that our name too will mingle with those' (*Life*, II, 238). Later in the day, they passed Temple-bar where the impaled heads of the rebel Scotch Lords were a grisly reminder of the Forty-Five, and Goldsmith slyly whispered the line back to Johnson with a different emphasis, *Forsitan et nostrum nomen miscebitur* ISTIS, 'It may be that our name too will mingle with THOSE'. Part of the pleasure in reading this little story lies in knowing that Johnson, not Goldsmith, was proved right, that whatever real or imagined Jacobite sympathies they may have had both writers kept their heads. After Goldsmith died in 1774 and was buried in the Abbey, Johnson wrote his epitaph – in Latin, because 'he would never consent to disgrace the walls of Westminster Abbey with an English inscription' (*Life*, III, 85). And on his deathbed, ten years later, he asked Sir John Hawkins 'where he should be buried; and on being answered, "Doubtless, in Westminster-Abbey", seemed to feel a satisfaction, very natural to a Poet' (*Life*, IV, 419).

In this story we see Samuel Johnson, the monumental man of letters, wishing to be a monument. We catch him on an unspecified day, though certainly after 1759 or so when he met Goldsmith who was then a Grub Street hack just emerging from obscurity. Johnson is in his early fifties. It is a day long after the Drury Lane performance of his tragedy *Irene*, years after the publication of his poems 'London' and 'The Vanity of Human Wishes', after the appearance in various forms of his periodical essays the *Rambler* and the *Idler*, and, most recently, after the release of his oriental tale *Rasselas* (1759). For various ordinary reasons of the day none

of these works bears Johnson's name on its title page, and gathered together they do not represent anything like all that he has published.[1] He does not always sign, and does not always sign 'Samuel Johnson'. None of his writing has made him wealthy or even financially secure. If the visit to the Abbey is set later than 1762, though, he has accepted a pension of £300 a year from George III, which for the first time in his life frees him from toiling for the booksellers but which also brings him a considerable amount of censure from the press.[2] Certainly the walk to Poets' Corner occurs after the publication of his *Dictionary* (1755). The dense papers of the *Rambler*, completed in 1752, have mostly earned him deep respect from those who have discovered their author but it is the *Dictionary* that has made him famous at home and abroad. There he does sign, famously, 'Samuel Johnson, A.M.' Here is a man who, as his admirers boast, has done for English in nine years what it took forty members of the Académie Française forty years to do for French. His literary fame is set firmly on national pride and has some of the lustres of heroism.

With the benefit of hindsight, literary historians with a taste for periodisation will place this day firmly within 'the Age of Johnson', an expression which tempts the lips but which conceals a world of competing literary, social and political values. Yet the ground for this name and age was already being laid during Johnson's lifetime. In 1755, the year of the *Dictionary* and amidst strong feeling against the French, David Garrick was quick to see his former teacher as a national hero. In a poem he exclaims, 'And Johnson, well arm'd, like a hero of yore, / Has beat forty French, and will beat forty more'.[3] Just before the *Dictionary* was published, Lord Chesterfield, Johnson's cool patron, was entreated by Robert Dodsley to warm to his role. His lines in *The World* are all elegance:

> Toleration, adoption, and naturalization have run their lengths. Good order and authority are now necessary. But where shall we find them, and at the same time the obedience due to them? We must have recourse to the old Roman expedient in times of confusion, and choose a dictator. Upon this principle, I give my vote for Mr Johnson to fill that great and arduous post. And I hereby declare that I make a total surrender of all my rights and privileges in the English language, as a free-born British subject, to the said Mr Johnson during the term of his dictatorship.[4]

Johnson as *dictator*? Chesterfield was writing with tongue almost in cheek, thinking of the *Dictionary* (both words derive from the Latin verb *dicare*), yet Johnson had already made a bid for the authority of Mr

Rambler who calls himself 'dictatorial' (Yale, v, 319).[5] In a letter of 1759 Tobias Smollett referred grudgingly to 'that great CHAM of literature, Samuel Johnson' (*Life*, I, 348).[6] And that same year Goldsmith, writing in *The Bee*, drew a flattering portrait of Johnson being praised by the old coachman of 'The Fame Machine'. After admitting several notables to his carriage, the coachman sees 'a very grave personage' who, on closer inspection, turns out to have 'one of the most good-natured countenances that could be imagined'. 'The Rambler!', the coachman cries, 'I beg, sir, you'll take your place; I have heard our ladies in the court of Apollo frequently mention it [the periodical] with rapture . . .'.[7] Several years later, in 1767, James Boswell, writing to Giuseppe Baretti, fulsomely characterises their mutual friend as 'the illustrious Philosopher of this age Mr Samuel Johnson',[8] using 'philosopher' as Johnson had defined it, as 'a man deep in knowledge, either moral or natural'.[9] This high praise was publicly confirmed in 1775 by the University of Oxford when in the diploma declaring Johnson Doctor of Laws he is referred to as '*in Literarum Republicâ* PRINCEPS *jam et* PRIMARIUS *jure habeatur*' (*Life*, II, 332). When Bishop Percy said that Johnson's conversation 'may be compared to an antique statue, where every vein and muscle is distinct and bold', his simile perhaps went further than depicting the man's talk and hinted that he was a living classic (*Life*, III, 317). There is no need for a 'perhaps' with Boswell. In his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1785), an image of the classic was well and truly in place. There Johnson's living countenance is described as 'naturally of the cast of an ancient statue, but somewhat disfigured', an observation which quietly yet forcefully naturalises his friend's cultural authority (*Tour*, 18).[10]

That memoir and the later *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) are nowadays held responsible for fixing a popular and inadequate conception of Johnson, which they surely have done and still do, despite the many pleasures they offer. An uncritical reading of Boswell will yield a Johnson who is indeed a monument, frozen in old age, well-known and honoured, the centre of an adoring circle. Yet Boswell begins his *Tour* by giving us a glimpse of Johnson's fame as it stood then, before the biographer's books had started to shape it. He remarks that 'Dr Samuel Johnson's character – religious, moral, political and literary – nay his figure and manner, are, I believe, more generally known than those of almost any man' (*Tour*, 16). Needless to say, it is a deft rhetorical justification for what is to follow, but it is not empty rhetoric. It is worth noting how Boswell teases out the elements in his expression 'the illustrious Philosopher of this age'. Johnson's mind, he suggests, powerfully

encompasses a wide range of human concerns – religious, moral, political, and literary – so wide in fact that he might be said to embody a general sense of his times. But Boswell's implicit claim goes further than this. It is not only that Johnson is an intellectual representative of the age but also that his 'figure and manner' are familiar idiosyncracies, of interest with such a man, that can and should be recorded in detail.

We see here how Boswell begins to separate Johnson's work from his life: on the one hand we have his writings, and on the other his personal oddities. There is some point in the distinction, but before dwelling on it I would look elsewhere. Boswell is captivated by Johnson's character and genius, his scope as well as his strength, and these can be grasped partly from his writings and partly from his actions and conversations. In the *Dictionary* Johnson defines 'character' (in the relevant sense) as 'personal qualities; particular constitution of the mind', and 'genius' (again, in the relevant sense) as 'a man endowed with superior faculties'. Writing, for Johnson, was not a natural consequence of his character or his genius. The idea would have struck him as cant. 'The true Genius', he wrote in later life, 'is a mind of large general powers, accidentally determined to some particular direction'.[11] For Johnson, being a writer was a result of having to make a choice of life that best suited his abilities and situation. He may have written on political, moral and religious themes, and some of these compositions may have been of immense value (as Boswell thought they were), but his writings about these themes do not exhaust his literary character. His acts and conversation are eloquent testimony to that, as his friends and admirers well knew.

Boswell was not the only one to prize Johnson's character but thanks to the success of his biographies he has become the most important to do so. Then as now others placed a stronger stress on his writings. Thus Richard Brocklesby, one of the doctors who attended Johnson during his last illness, offered 'to take a share to the amount of 4 or 500£ to build him up the noblest and handsomest monument in a handsome and intire edition of his own works, for we thought they were better and more lasting materials than any monument of brass or Stone in Westminster Abbey'.[12] It is the old Horatian boast, *exegi monumentum aere perennius*, neatly turned as a compliment to a dying friend. Certainly in the past this patient had obliquely cast a cold eye on funereal pomp. In *Rasselas* Imlac surveys the Great Pyramid of Cheops and says, 'I consider this mighty structure as a monument of the insufficiency of human enjoyments. A king, whose power is unlimited, and whose treasures surmount all real and imaginary wants, is compelled to solace, by the erection of a pyramid, the satiety of dominion and tastelessness of

pleasures, and to amuse the tediousness of declining life, by seeing thousands labouring without end, and one stone, for no purpose, laid upon another.'[13] Imlac is not Johnson, nor is the Great Pyramid a monument in the Abbey, yet Johnson's desire to be remembered there does not exclude an awareness of the vanity attending that desire. Even more to the point, that patient knew well enough how delusive literary fame could be. It is a theme that runs throughout his writings, especially the *Lives of the Poets* and the *Rambler*. 'To raise "monuments more durable than brass, and more conspicuous than pyramids", has been long the common boast of literature; but among the innumerable architects that erect columns to themselves, far the greatest part, either for want of durable materials, or of art to dispose them, see their edifices perish as they are towering to completion, and those few that for a while attract the eye of mankind, are generally weak in the foundation, and soon sink by the saps of time' (Yale, IV, 200).[14]

In the end, Johnson was memorialised both by statues and by an edition of his writings. In 1796, with money raised by the Friends to the Memory of Dr Johnson, an imposing monument by John Bacon with an inscription by Samuel Parr was erected in St Paul's. The choice of the Cathedral rather than the Abbey where Johnson was buried was urged by Sir Joshua Reynolds with the support of Edmund Burke. A contrast between the two places had been on Reynolds's mind at least since 1781 when he was visiting Flanders and Holland. New sculptures erected in the Abbey, he wrote then, 'are so stuck up in odd holes and corners, that it begins to appear truly ridiculous: the principal places have been long occupied, and the difficulty of finding a new nook or corner every year increases. While this Gothic structure is encumbered and overloaded with ornaments which have no agreement or correspondence with the taste and style of the building, St Paul's looks forlorn and desolate, or at least destitute of ornaments suited to the magnificence of the fabric.'[15] Other statues of Johnson were later raised in Lichfield and London.[16] Meanwhile, Sir John Hawkins had been employed by the London booksellers to prepare an edition of the *Works*, which was duly published in 1787, in eleven volumes octavo, to be supplemented by four more volumes from 1787 to 1798.[17] From the very beginning, Johnson has been remembered by two kinds of monuments: statues of the man to admire in public places, and thick volumes to contemplate in libraries. This is not merely a consequence of his literary abilities receiving due recognition; it is part and parcel of conceiving Johnson as a national hero, of almost mythic proportions. It is important to recognise, right at the start, that while Johnson is a canonical figure of English literature

this is not the sole ground and origin of his cultural standing. He is one of those writers – like Dante, Goethe and Shakespeare – whose monumentality exceeds his canonicity.

The line between canonicity and monumentality is neither simple nor singular and sometimes cannot be traced at all. But usually it can be followed for a while. To begin with, despite my invocation of Dante, Goethe and Shakespeare, the category I have in mind is not restricted to the highest figures of a national canon: Robert Burns is a wonderful poet but his wider significance rests on his monumentality. Poems like 'Holy Willie's Prayer', 'To a Louse' and 'A Red, Red Rose' may rightly appear in all kinds of anthologies but the statues of the poet and the clubs dedicated to his name concentrate social forces which the poetry conducts. Monumentality and canonicity sometimes converge and sometimes diverge, even in the one reputation over a long enough period. There are writers who attain both and then substantially lose one: Alexander Pope has become more and more entrenched in the canon yet his monumentality has all but faded, while Ossian is now a grim monument mouldering outside the canon. And there are writers who become canonical without ever having gained a sense of the monumental in their lifetimes or after their deaths: Gerard Manley Hopkins is an example. This last group is made of minor figures, one might say, and that is often the case. Yet canons can and do respond to the pressures of revisionary readings, and when that happens a minor writer can be declared major, like Frances Burney, whose novels now enjoy a higher place in English literary history than ever before. Monumentality, as I am using the word, has traditionally functioned within a patriarchal culture and required a popularity (though not necessarily one with a popular base), as my examples suggest. But it also needs something else. A monument is a rallying point for a community; it must be the focus of a large and usually diffuse cultural will, the centre of a network of imaginary relationships and real desires.

Like most monuments, Johnson is usually regarded from a distance. One has to stand a good way off to take in the extent and weight of the work, to appreciate its gravity and achievement; while, for its part, the monument seems designed to be approached like that. Squarely built, it objectifies public virtues which we should admire and to which we should aspire. We look around it with the awe that is asked of us, always aware that this is a public property, a national heritage, an official face of British culture. Or, just as often, we glance dutifully at it and then look elsewhere. People visiting Lichfield, for instance, can view the brooding

memorial statue in Market Place but are likely to spend more time in the nearby Johnson Birthplace Museum. They move with visible relief from the grand to the tiny, from the public to the private. Inside the museum one can see Johnson's knife and fork, his tea-pot and punch bowl, even his bib-holder and walking stick; and the curious can inspect his arm-chair from Bolt Court, perhaps hoping to find a trace of fur from Hodge, the fine cat that Boswell immortalised in the *Life*. If an identification with Johnson is to take place it is more likely to be inside than outside. And if it has just happened, even very slightly, one might select something on the way out from the wide range of Johnson badges and teaspoons, Johnson pens and pencils, not to mention the collection of postcards and posters.

A similar situation can beset the person approaching that other monument, the *Works*. New and old versions can always be found in libraries, and even in a few second-hand and specialist bookshops. Even here, though, there is much that has been built around the monument, not least of all biography and criticism, some of which attracts by its own lights. Then there are sumptuous or rare editions of texts to admire and linger over, paperbacks presenting Johnson's views – or purported views – on everything and nothing, and of course those tantalising if not always reliable compendia, the *Johnsonian Miscellanies* and the *Johnsoniana*, offering diary entries and anecdotes, right down to wise or feisty remarks utterly detached from their original Johnsonian contexts, if they ever had them in the first place ('Whoever thinks of going to bed before twelve o'clock … is a scoundrel').[18] There is an air of the excessive and a whiff of the eccentric. By and large, the monument itself is left to be admired and caressed by the overlapping communities of the academy and the Johnson societies, and most people with a mind to take home a book will settle for an apparently less imposing volume, a copy of *Rasselas*, say, or a modern omnibus collection like John Wain's *Johnson on Johnson*.[19]

More often than not, though, people look for a guide to the monument, usually a biography of Johnson, and usually the best known, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* For it is Boswell who is taken, time and again, to offer a natural and inevitable introduction to Johnson. More than anyone else, Boswell liked to see himself as the special recipient of everything to do with the man. It would be wrong to say that he truly finds himself only as he crosses Johnson's path; for Boswell is always Mr James Boswell of Auchinleck, a proud Scottish baron of ancient family, and it is in the web of family relations and political responsibilities, both

acutely real and romantically imagined, that he lives and moves. Even so, Boswell chooses to become not merely Johnsonian but *Johnsonianissimus*; he is not content to have read and benefited from his mentor's writings and example, he longs to have '*Johnsonised* the land' (*Life*, I, 13). When seen clearly, Boswell's project is nothing less than the monumentalisation of Johnson's name. But this act has an inevitable side effect: to present Samuel Johnson as he wishes, as a living man in conversation with himself and others, he must also create and maintain another literary figure, one James Boswell, Esq. As biographer, Boswell gives us a certain 'Dr Johnson', a powerful and seductive character who derives as much from Boswell's mastery of realism as from reality. That folk who know little or nothing of the *Rambler* or 'The Vanity of Human Wishes' still visit Gough Square in London and Market Place in Lichfield testifies to the success with which Boswell has Johnsonised the land. But of a piece with this success is the fact that, like it or not, he has Boswellised Johnson.

'A marble monument might be erected for the answer; but who would think of building one for the question?'[20] So asks Edmond Jabès, a writer as distant from Johnson in stance and style as one could readily imagine, and yet his remark helps to bring his apparent anti-type into sharper focus. Johnson is commonly regarded as someone with ready and Bullish answers to all manner of questions. Some of Boswell's images of his friend stick in the popular imagination so firmly that nothing can dislodge them. There is the story – perhaps apocryphal – of Boswell trying to defend Lady Diana Beauclerk, who had been divorced and remarried. 'Seduced, perhaps, by the charms of the lady in question, I thus attempted to palliate what I was sensible could not be justified; for, when I had finished my harangue, my venerable friend gave me a proper check: "My dear Sir, never accustom your mind to mingle virtue and vice. The woman's a whore, and there's an end on't"' (*Life*, II, 247). And there is the even better-known story of Johnson answering Boswell on the truth of Bishop Berkeley's theory of the non-existence of matter. 'I observed, that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, "I refute it *thus*"' (*Life*, I, 471). The longer we stay with the *Works*, though, the more often Johnson appears as a thinker of the question than as someone with a quick answer.

Not that he is shy of delivering judgements in his writings, but in the

best work they are offered only after he has taken responsibility for a question. In practice that often means uncovering a question behind the question, showing the issue to be moral before it is anything else. And when an answer is given it tends not to be in the spirit of a full and complete solution. At their most compelling, Johnson's views of conduct and writing are the results of thinking through a matter, of working at it from the ground up. True, this thinking takes place within the broad frameworks of Anglican Christianity and monarchism, but he does not use these as abstract systems to generate neat solutions. Neatness and uniformity are not features of his moral thinking, even in the *Rambler*, so often mistaken as a storehouse of settled Johnsonian morality, even moralism. His aphorisms are knots of thinking and as often as not they are partly unravelled by the essays in which they occur.[21] What one actually finds there is an interlacing of first- and second-order moral judgements, the latter frequently mitigating the former. The *Rambler* teems with examples of follies that call out for moral censure but it is also informed by a nagging second-order concern, 'Since life itself is uncertain, nothing which has life for its basis, can boast much stability' (Yale, v, 204). His two papers on prostitution, 171 and 172, for example, are not short apologues or treatises on the subject. It never becomes a 'subject'. We read the story of a prostitute, Misella, told from her perspective; and her imagined response to her situation, banishment to a colony, seems to her the only feasible way of escaping perpetual misery, living, as she does, amidst people 'crowded together, mad with intemperance, ghastly with famine, nauseous with filth, and noisesome with disease'. Prostitution is condemned as a social evil while Misella herself is treated with compassion.[22]

There is no uninterrupted border between Johnson the moralist and Johnson the literary critic. Yet there is certainly a common image of him as a magisterial even tyrannical critic, delivering unreasonably harsh judgement on Milton's 'Lycidas', Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* or Gray's odes. He can be unreasonable, he can be one-sided, he can confuse art and reality. (That said – and it can weigh heavily on some passages – he is one of those very rare critics whose views, even when rejected, are none the less taken as touchstones for later criticism.) In principle, though, Johnson maintains the importance of the writer's powers of invention over the critic's rules and regulations. '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 dictactor had authority to enact' (Yale, v, 60). The monumentalisation of Johnson has tended to hide this aspect of him from sight. To think of anyone as a monument, even for a second or two, is to realise that a doubling has taken place. A monument tells us that an individual has been made into more than himself, made sublime or into a spectacle. Once that is realised there begins a slow and usually incomplete process of de-monumentalisation: a quest for the individual, the idiom, the question. At the very least, it is a search for what he wrote and for the overlaid contexts in which that writing was done: how he embodied them, cut through them, contended with them, or acceded to them.

The monumentalisation of Johnson takes many forms. Boswell's biographies are no doubt a large part of it, along with all the others, but the funereal process touches the works as well as the person. Take the *Dictionary* for example. Christopher Smart commended it to the world as 'a work I look upon with equal pleasure and amazement, as I do upon St Paul's cathedral'. That image of the monumental persists through generation after generation, from John Walker's praise of the work as 'the monument of English philology erected by Johnson' to W. K. Wimsatt's view of the *Dictionary* as a 'public monument' and a 'monumental English Dictionary'.[23] Before going any further there is a difficulty that needs to be eliminated, namely a possible confusion of first- and second-order concerns. Someone can offer a sane account of insanity, or a sober report on drunkenness; and in the same way people can rightly acclaim as monumental a work that views the monumental with suspicion. This is the case generally with Johnson, I think, and the *Dictionary* bears it out as well as any of his other works. The Preface tells a story of overcoming a temptation to fix English, to make it a language of stone. It begins with the lexicographer at the start of his labours gazing at the chaos of the English language – 'I found our speech copious without order, and energetick without rules' (para. 4) – and in due time we learn that 'Those who have been persuaded to think well of my design, require that it should fix our language, and put a stop to those alterations which time and chance have hitherto been suffered to make in it without opposition' (para. 84).

This desire to set the language had been in the air for several generations. How could there be English classics when the language was in such disarray? The question niggled Edmund Waller in his lyric 'Of English Verse':

> Poets that lasting marble seek,
> Must carve in Latin, or in Greek;
> We write in sand, our language grows,
> And like the tide, our work o'erflows.[24]

The response to this o'erflowing took two related forms. Notables from the mid-seventeenth century on had mooted the idea of an English academy, roughly modelled on the Accademie della Crusca or the Académie Française. The basic tune is set in Sprat's *History of the Royal Society* (1667), though Matthew Prior hits upon more memorable phrases in his celebration of William's reign, *Carmen Seculare* (1699). Perhaps one of the glories of the king's future years will be an academy:

> Some that with Care true Eloquence shall teach,
> And to just Idioms fix our doubtful Speech:
> That from our Writers distant Realms may know,
> The Thanks We to our Monarch owe;
> And Schools profess our Tongue through ev'ry Land,
> That has invok'd His Aid, or blest his Hand.[25]

One aspect of this wish to 'fix our doubtful speech' was a deeply felt need for a dictionary of the English language. Addison and Pope had collected materials, and with their work at hand Ambrose Philips went so far as to publish proposals for a dictionary in two folios, but in the end he made nothing of it.[26]

More forceful than Philips's outline was Jonathan Swift's *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712), cast as a letter to Robert, Earl of Oxford. Like others before him, Swift suggests that a society be formed to establish and supervise proper linguistic usage. 'But what I have most at Heart, is, that some Method should be thought on for *Ascertaining* and *Fixing* our Language for ever, after such Alterations are made in it as shall be thought requisite. For I am of Opinion, that it is better a Language should not be wholly perfect, than that it should be perpetually changing . . .'[27] There is a sense in which Johnson's *Dictionary* comes as an unwelcome answer to Swift's proposal, unwelcome not because it is superfluous (English dictionaries published between 1712 and 1755, like Bailey's and Chambers's, could not compare with his in scope or strength), but because it partly fulfils the need for a standard that Swift outlined while strongly resisting a temptation to embalm the language.

Towards the end of the Preface, Johnson slights Swift's *Proposal* as a 'petty treatise' (para. 88). All the same, it is worthwhile to examine in

more detail how Swift and Johnson vary over language. That Swift's proposal was a factional work, one that would perhaps raise him in the eyes of Harley, and that in any case he believed language and government to be interlaced, has been noticed before.[28] For Swift, linguistic changes can be traced to political causes: Latin started to degenerate when Rome became a tyranny, and English has fallen into decline since the Glorious Revolution. Yet Swift's main quarry is not the political absolutism of the past so much as contemporary political and religious dissent. Language is under threat here and now, and so an academy is needed to regulate it. The political implication is clear: proper use occurs in a Tory tradition that is grounded in property, and not in the Whig alternative of money and trade. A language should be able to preserve great writing and great deeds. The case is first made for literature. 'What *Horace* says of *Words going off, and perishing like Leaves, and new ones coming in their Place*, is a Misfortune he laments, rather than a Thing he approves: But I cannot see why this should be absolutely necessary, or if it were, what would have become of his *Monumentum aere perennius*' (*Proposal*, 16). And then Swift applies the Horatian boast to regnal history:

> Your Lordship must allow, that such a Work as this, brought to Perfection, would much contribute to the Glory of Her Majesty's Reign; which ought to be recorded in Words more durable than Brass, and such as our Posterity may read a thousand Years hence, with Pleasure as well as Admiration. I have always disapproved that false Compliment to Princes: That the most lasting Monument they can have, is the Hearts of their Subjects. It is indeed their greatest present Felicity to reign in their Subjects Hearts; but these are too perishable to preserve their Memories, which can only be done by the Pens of able and faithful Historians. (17)

A monumental history, of letters or deeds, can be recorded only in stone. No writer will trust a medium that itself has no chance of survival: 'This is like employing an excellent Statuary to work upon mouldering Stone' (*Proposal*, 18).

That Johnson at first thought, like Swift, that the language can and should be fixed is evident in *The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language* (1747) and the Preface itself.[29] 'With this consequence I will confess that I flattered myself for a while; but now begin to fear that I have indulged expectation which neither reason nor experience can justify' (para. 84). To determine a language once and for all is a vain wish:

> When we see men grow old and die at a certain time one after another, from century to century, we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a

thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay, that it is in his power to change sublunary nature, or clear the world at once from folly, vanity, and affectation. (para. 84)

This is in no sense a case against establishing proper use. Negatively, it is one of Johnson's duties as lexicographer to proscribe 'improprieties and absurdities' in orthography (para. 6). And positively, he prefers to draw his illustrative quotations from 'masters of elegance or models of stile', and when he does not it is for a very good reason, since 'in what pages, eminent for purity, can terms of manufacture or agriculture be found?' (para. 59). His original intention, before he realised just how much material he had gathered, was that the quotations do more than illustrate meaning but be in themselves an 'accumulation of elegance and wisdom' (para. 57).[30] The intention of establishing a fund of propriety still informs the whole work, truncated though it is. One reason why Johnson sought to build up that fund is because he half agrees with the slighted author of the *Proposal*. He finds, as Swift does, that the Elizabethan age shows English at its apex, for in those days 'a speech might be formed adequate to all the purposes of use and elegance' (para. 62). And he is Swiftian also in seeing 'in constancy and stability a general and lasting advantage' (para. 16) and even in wishing, in the very teeth of what his labours have taught him, that words 'might be less apt to decay, and that signs might be permanent, like the things which they denote' (para. 17).

Inevitable and melancholy as linguistic change is, English people must none the less resist the imposition of an academy to arrest it. In the paragraph immediately after the reference to Swift's *Proposal* we hear Johnson hope that 'if an academy should be established for the cultivation of our stile . . . the spirit of *English* liberty will hinder or destroy' it (para. 90). It is a view to which he held firm, right up to his lives of Roscommon and Swift.[31] Johnson is as zealous as Swift for the proper use of language, but his lights lead him far from the Dean. Swift's politics of language add up to a radical conservativism; his enemy is change in whatever shape or form it comes. Johnson implicitly agrees with him that 'tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration' (para. 91), but his politics of language is a linguistic nationalism. The very publication of the *Dictionary* is a sufficient sign that no academy is needed, for he has already done much of what continental academies

are required to do. The language does not need to be regulated from within its national boundaries; it is those limits themselves that need to be exposed and patrolled. The guilty ones are those translators 'whose idleness and ignorance, if it be suffered to proceed, will reduce us to babble a dialect of *France*' (para. 90), and the lesson is finally political: 'we have long preserved our constitution, let us make some struggles for our language' (para. 91).

Although Johnson trusts that his *Dictionary* will 'add celebrity to *Bacon*, to *Hooker*, to *Milton*, and to *Boyle*' (para. 92), this hope stems more from motives of national pride than from a monumental conception of history and writing. Where Swift wishes to see the English language as a hard stone, Johnson conceives it as a complex organism, both living and dying. The *Proposal* argues that while new words can be introduced old words should never be abandoned. Yet Johnson is reconciled to the fact that words die: 'But what makes a word obsolete, more than general agreement to forbear it? and how shall it be continued, when it conveys an offensive idea, or recalled again into the mouths of mankind, when it has once by disuse become unfamiliar, and by unfamiliarity unpleasing' (para. 88). In the same spirit, he realises that he cannot define all verbal forms because 'it must be remembered, that while our language is yet living, and variable by the caprice of every one that speaks it, these words are hourly shifting their relations, and can no more be ascertained in a dictionary, than a grove, in the agitation of a storm, can be accurately delineated from its picture in the water' (para. 46). In its conception of language, and of the *Dictionary*'s task, the image is as far from the monumental as one can get. What makes us choose a word like 'monumental' when talking about the *Dictionary* is not Johnson's conception of language and learning but his extraordinary labours in compiling it and the myths of a national hero that surround and partly conceal them.

I return to my opening story. Before anything else, it needs to be stressed that it is not related in a neutral or steady space. Although the visits to Poets' Corner and Temple-bar are told in Johnson's voice, they resonate in Boswell's *Life* and form part of his project. Compared with other stories about Johnson, this anecdote is not especially well-known. Many people know the tale of Johnson being tricked into dining with John Wilkes at Dilly's, or the one about his late night frisk through the streets of London with Beauclerk and Langton; and almost everyone can recognise, if not repeat exactly, those quips that make up his

popular image. The story of Johnson visiting Poets' Corner is not one of these – and yet it underpins all the others. For if Johnson had not desired literary fame and achieved a fair degree of it in life, none of those other stories would have been recorded.

Or made up, I have to add, since Johnson like all celebrities is often the subject of anecdotes that have little or no historical basis. Not all his *dicta philosophi* are authentic, nor are all the tales told about him. It is a sign of his monumentality. And it is a problem for anyone concerned to establish the historical facts about his life and opinions. Yet for those intrigued by narratives about Johnson not even historical truths can supply the bottom line. Take my opening story for instance. Even if it were Johnson reported word for word, once included by Boswell it is affected by the whole of his composition; it takes on new tasks, and we notice motifs and themes that have been in operation long before reaching this point. Thus, when placed in the *Life*, the story acts out a strange logic of 'already–not yet' that it catches from its surroundings. There has to be a sense in which the visit to Poets' Corner takes place in something that is already 'the Age of Johnson' but by the same token the story tells us that this age has not yet come except in desire.[32]

Whose desire? Well, Johnson's as we have seen, if the story has any basis in history. But there are other desires at work, his admirers', editors' and biographers' – most notably Boswell's. Perhaps no one lives more fully or more securely in 'the Age of Johnson' than the narrator of the *Life*. I will talk about this epoch in the next chapter and suggest why it needs those prim quotation marks around it. That age is not wholly Boswell's construction, but he has done more than anyone else to place his friend at the centre of an imaginary cultural unity, one that as the *Life*'s full title tells us, exhibits 'a view of literature and literary men in Great-Britain, for near half a century, during which he flourished'. For Boswell it is indeed an age of literary men. The women with whom he competed for Johnson's friendship and, later, for the right to transmit his memory to posterity, are seldom seen, and when they appear it is all too often to be criticised or slighted.

That said, let us return to the narrative space included, rather than excluded, by Boswell. I would like to mark several ways in which it is arranged.

The first polarity that organises Boswellian space is so general and so familiar that it can easily escape our attention. It is the distinction between life and death: Johnson's life and death, of course, but also

Boswell's life and Johnson's death, and Boswell's life and death. In any formulation it constitutes a major structural support of our opening story and, as I will argue, of the relationship between Johnson and Boswell. In the story to hand we see two living writers gazing first at dead poets and then at dead rebels. In Poets' Corner the monuments and the quotation from Ovid serve to mediate life and death, showing that even this distinction is far from absolute, that there is a life-in-death and a death-in-life. Literature offers a chance of surviving death, if at the cost of petrifying oneself in the midst of life. No such chance is possible for those who absolutely defy the State; the Jacobite Lords have no tombs, and when Goldsmith repeats the line from Ovid while facing their heads the altered context now presses us to recall the Roman poet's official disgrace for his *carmen et error* and his perpetual exile in Tomis on the Black Sea.

Overlaying this polarity is another much favoured by Boswell, one that is difficult to specify exactly because it functions in ideas and feelings, in the general cast of his mind, as much as in individual words and phrases. Perhaps the distinction between the proper and the improper best brings it into focus. Certainly it follows most of the senses that the adjective 'proper' had in the late eighteenth century. Johnson lists ten in his *Dictionary*: '1. peculiar; not belonging to more; not common; 2. Noting an individual; 3. One's own; 4. Natural; original; 5. Fit; accommodated; adapted; suitable; qualified; 6. Exact; accurate; just; 7. Not figurative; 8. It seems in *Shakespeare* to signify, mere; pure; 9. [*Propre*, Fr] Elegant, pretty; 10. Tall, lusty; handsome with bulk.' One of the main impulses of Boswell's biographical writing is to declare Johnson proper, an impulse that sometimes gains energy from the resistance it meets in his writings or his talk. So Boswell's Johnson is an individual, very much his own man (but his oddities are to be noted). He is natural, original (though also a cultural icon). He is eminently suited to his profession (yet gains little pleasure from writing). His talk and writing are exact (if not always just). He is an embodiment of common sense (albeit given to faction), and a man of imposing physical presence (but verging on monstrosity). Needless to say, Boswell's Johnson is not always everyone else's Johnson. Horace Walpole, that most unfriendly of contemporary witnesses, excepted, there is no one else who makes such high play about the man's supposed Jacobite sympathies.[33]

To return to the story. Not only do we see there the living meditating on the dead but also we respond to a system of value: while the nation's poets are hallowed by Church and State, the Jacobite Lords are publicly

reviled. The comedy of the story derives from the faint possibility that the categories of poet and rebel, proper and improper, will not stay in place. Johnson's and Goldsmith's improper sympathy for James, as imagined here, could upset their literary ambitions, suddenly exchanging literary honour for political disgrace. As I have suggested, a strong impulse of Boswell's writing is to represent Johnson as proper, that is, as marked by a tendency to appropriate a certain image of himself, one that might well differ from his own self-understandings. This story is an instance. Gazing at the funeral sculpture, Johnson acts out a rapid process of exappropriation, no sooner imagining himself dead than being restored to life. There is no reference to his fear of death and divine judgement: that belongs to another thematics of which we hear a lot in the *Life*. Rather, he is depicted in a civic and secular sublime, experiencing the life-in-death of a monument and the death-in-life of monumentality.

Another division is again likely to pass by unnoticed simply because it has become so pervasive in modern biography. It is the distinction between private and public. One of the most outrageous aspects of the *Life*, both in its morality and its modernity, is Boswell's generous use of ana and anecdote. In the *Dictionary* Johnson defines 'ana' as 'loose thoughts, or casual hints, dropped by eminent men, and collected by their friends'. Collections of ana had been in Europe since the fifteenth century, though they passed from private to public circulation only in the seventeenth century with the *Scaligerana* (1666), the first of many in a genre that was to become popular in the eighteenth century, especially on the continent.[34] Far from increasing the reputation of their subjects, ana often brought them into disrepute, making them seem more dogmatic or vain than their writings suggested. Anecdotes can have much the same effect. Johnson defined the word as 'something yet unpublished; secret history'. To some extent, as he tells us, Boswell modelled his *Life* on William Mason's *Memoirs of Gray* (1775), which made extensive though discrete use of letters.[35] But in publishing ana and anecdotes Boswell goes further than this, exceeding propriety and making his work disjunctive with the style and stance of the age it delineates.

In the *Life* Boswell draws the distinction beween private and public in different ways and to different ends. Knowing that a space between them is crucial for his depiction of Johnson, he never wholly turns the private into the public. At times in the *Tour* and *Life*, though, he seemed to his contemporaries to do just that. A sense of how close to the bone he gets can be gained by Lord Monboddo's exclamation, 'Before I read his

Book I thought he was a Gentleman who had the misfortune to be mad; I now think he is a mad man who has the misfortune not to be a Gentleman'.[36] With hindsight we can tell that Boswell's favoured area is between the private and the public, between his personal experience and the impersonal structures of institutions. That Hanoverian Britain is regulated by king and parliament, church and law, trade and school, is something anyone interested in eighteenth-century culture knows well. Yet what we encounter in Boswell is his lived experience of those codes, his attempts to appropriate what must finally exist outside him: in social interactions with court and parliament, with advocates and judges, professors and writers. This is the realm of the everyday, the sphere where society reproduces itself in the hum and buzz of ordinary exchanges: conversations, eating and drinking, gossip, playing games, cracking jokes, writing letters, paying visits, going for walks, and so on. Much of what we think we see in Boswell's biographical writing is this everyday life, apparently an escape from all that is monumental and proper, though, after a second look, often fuelled by his admiration for those he believed to be great.

Indeed, this very tension between the everyday and the great orients so much of Boswell's writing that it merits attention on its own account. My opening story begins with the most quotidian of occasions, a walk around London, but turns on the possibility of transcending the everyday, in a positive way (as with the dead of Poets' Corner) or in a negative way (as with the Jacobite Lords), a chance that we know has been realised even as we read the story: in Boswell's pages Goldsmith and Johnson exist in the ordinary world while having already risen above it. Even as the story is being related it is an everyday occurence, a conversation over dinner, yet in Boswell's narrative it gains drama from the possibility that the narrator will that evening receive a clear sign of cultural acceptance by being admitted to the Club. To take it a step further, reading the story ourselves takes place in the everyday, whether at home or at work, while realising all the time that the text is very far from the everyday, being one of those books to look out for, a recognised classic of English literature.

Being inside and outside an 'Age of Johnson' is a game that Boswell plays with consummate skill, frequently dividing himself into narrator and character in order to do so. The passage in which Johnson tells his story about visiting Poets' Corner is a case in point. Notice that the story is told with no reference to Boswell. We see Johnson imaginatively sending himself through history with no aid from anyone, although it

takes only a moment's reflection to recognise Boswell behind the story, placing it where he wishes in his narrative. It is instructive to see the tale in the larger frame of the *Life*, a long passage artfully worked up from notes taken on Friday, 30 April 1773. This episode consists mainly of dinner conversation, mostly in direct speech, about Goldsmith's ignorance, the merits and demerits of contemporary historians and the possible establishment of monuments in St Paul's. (Johnson argues against Pope being the first, because of his Catholicism, and prefers Milton instead. As it happens, it was Johnson who was first commemorated there.) It is amusing that a passage devoted to eminent persons is framed as it is. It begins with Boswell telling us that later in the evening there was to be a ballot for him to be admitted to the Literary Club, which consisted of many of the most noteworthy persons in England. And it ends with Boswell being elected, attending the Club's meeting, and repeating some conversation heard there. The whole passage is marked by a drama as to whether Boswell has sufficient weight to belong to the Club. It is not enough that Johnson be a monument, we need to be discreetly assured that Boswell is a reputable mason.

> I am just returned from Westminster-abbey, the place of sepulture for the philosophers, heroes, and kings of England. What a gloom do monumental inscriptions and all the venerable remains of deceased merit inspire! Imagine a temple marked with the hand of antiquity, solemn as religious awe, adorned with all the magnificence of barbarous profusion, dim windows, fretted pillars, long colonades, and dark ceilings. Think then, what were my sensations at being introduced to such a scene. I stood in the midst of the temple, and threw my eyes round on the walls filled with the statues, the inscriptions, and the monuments of the dead.[37]

It is not Johnson who speaks but a Chinese visitor to London, Lien Chi Altangi, who is writing to Fum Hoam, first president of the Ceremonial Academy at Pekin, in China. His letter is published in the *Public Ledger* for Monday, 25 February 1760, as several others have been and as many more will be. They will be collected two years later and published as *The Citizen of the World*, which will be known in London by those who know these things to be the work of Oliver Goldsmith. It is pleasant to think that the experience of writing about Poets' Corner may have came from the day when Goldsmith and Johnson walked around London together. But the idea rests on charm, not fact. Certainly, though, when Johnson and Goldsmith gazed at the tombs and memorials in Poets' Corner that part of the Abbey had long been a site

of national pride, having become a prime manifestation of the cult of British Worthies. More recently, it had become a site where a new sensibility of melancholy could be indulged. It can be sensed in James Hervey's *Meditations Among the Tombs* (1746), much read in the eighteenth century (and much derided by Johnson),[38] but an early number of the *Spectator* in 1711 offers a sharper taste of the new feeling. Joseph Addison observes, 'When I am in a serious Humour, I very often walk by myself in *Westminster* Abbey; where the Gloominess of the Place, and the Use to which it is applied, with the Solemnity of the Building, and the Condition of the People who lye in it, are apt to fill the Mind with a kind of Melancholy, or rather Thoughtfulness, that is not disagreeable'.[39]

From mid-century on, in letters, poems and sermons, this traditional Christian reflecting on vanity yields more and more to a romantic feel for melancholy.[40] Fifty years after Addison, in 1763, the young Boswell (who admired Hervey's meditations) also visited the Abbey and confided to his journal, 'I heard service with much devotion in this magnificent and venerable temple. I recalled the ideas of it which I had from *The Spectator*.' The year before he had also gone there and recorded that 'among the tombs [he] was solemn and happy'.[41] The Abbey was not a free house: in 1697 the entrance fee was 3d; in 1723 it was raised to 6d; and in 1799 to 9d.[42] Goldsmith's Chinese visitor to London complains about having to pay to see the monuments and is insensed by a request for a gratuity by the 'tomb-shewer' (as they were called). '*What more money! still more money!* Every gentleman gives something, sir. I'll give thee nothing, returned I; the guardians of the temple should pay you your wages, friend, and not permit you to squeeze thus from every spectator'.[43] Neither cultural nationalism nor romantic melancholy comes cheap.

The image of Johnson standing before the poets' tombs and memorials functions in the *Life* as an enabling condition. I have suggested that this condition is divided by its context, yet that is not all that can be said on the matter. For the context is not all of a piece, and the moment this becomes important is worth examining. This is of course when the author encounters his subject, when Boswell meets Johnson. It is the moment when Boswell divides himself into narrator and character, and – at the same time – it is the moment that separates Johnson as man and character. I want to look solely at a detail which is not recorded in the journal but which is elaborated in the *Life*. Boswell has been angling for an introduction to Johnson, but the meeting, when it comes, is accidental: