Introduction: Johnson now and in time

> I have outstood my time, which is material to th' tender of our present
>
> Shakespeare, *Cymbeline* I.vi.206–7

> The "looking before and after" is … the opposite of a neglect of the present: it is an active rising from and through the present, and then a return back to it with an enlarged and nuanced sense of its dimensions and meaning.
>
> W. J. Bate, *The Achievement of Samuel Johnson*[1]

JOHNSON NOW

A tercentenary is a significant event in the afterlife of a writer, and invites certain reflections. Any writer for whom readers choose to commemorate such an occasion has obviously become a classic, as well, probably, as the subject of substantial scholarly activity – and in this case Samuel Johnson has long been part of the canon of English literary history. A glance at recent bibliographies of writing on Johnson indicates that publications about his life, writing, and historical moment have increased exponentially since *New Light on Dr. Johnson*,[2] which marked the 250th anniversary of his birth by publishing occasional papers by members of The Johnsonians, a club that has met annually in New York since 1946. While those papers have now become classics of their kind, it is also true that Johnson scholarship has become not only more plentiful but also more professional. There are still books to be written on important aspects of Johnson's life and writing – for instance, his relationship with Renaissance Humanism and the impact of jurisprudence on his thinking – but intense recent scrutiny has produced a certain completion (if not exhaustion) of our knowledge on the subject of Samuel Johnson. In discussing the nature of criticism in *Rambler* 92, Johnson distinguishes between "those means of pleasing which depend upon known causes and rational deduction" and "the nameless and inexplicable elegancies which appeal wholly to the fancy" (Works IV, p. 122), and

among the matters for discussion by scholars, there are always bound to be elements of both, even with regard to writers with fewer intellectual riches than Johnson. But the demands of critical judgment mean that, in the words of Christopher Ricks, "the critic must resist all the time the temptation to write as if the discussable things were the most important ones."[3] Certainly, a tercentenary commemoration implies a certain taking stock of the situation, retrospection as well as a looking forward in relation to where we find ourselves now, with the purpose of considering not only how Johnson has been read in the past, but also how he might matter in the future.

In one sense, a tercentenary is *more* about the future than about the past. When Johnson praises Dryden's "Essay on Dramatick Poetry" as establishing some of the foundational principles of English criticism, he notes that in looking back at the "Essay" (1668) the modern reader in 1778 "will not perhaps find much increase of knowledge, or much novelty of instruction" ("Life of Dryden" in *Lives*, Vol. IV, p. 119). This is because Dryden himself had articulated the principles by which the modern reader was judging Dryden – "A writer who obtains his full purpose loses himself in his own lustre" (*Lives*, Vol. II, p. 219). But this paradox is important only because Dryden's prose continues to engage, please, and exercise the force of creative writing, making a difference to both readers and writers in the present, and possibly in the future. A tercentenary could be seen as an investment in the future because it is, among other things, about possibilities. But as we know from Johnson's *Rambler* essays, both past and future, as well as the possibilities inherent therein, are products of the present, whence they acquire a special power: "almost all that we can be said to enjoy is past or future; the present is in perpetual motion, leaves us as soon as it arrives, ceases to be present before its presence is well perceived, and is only known to have existed by the effects which it leaves behind" (*Rambler* 41 in Works III, pp. 223–4).

At the same time, the "possibilities" of the present point to that aspect of Johnson's evolving historical and creative identity to which academic criticism and theory seem to be peculiarly blind. How are other writers stimulated by Johnson's work? How does it speak to students and general readers? What unexpected influences might it come to exercise on critical practices and priorities, if we were really open to its peculiar power? These are questions we Johnsonians do not usually ask. One explanation for this phenomenon is the tendency towards definitiveness and the categorical in most critical discussion of Johnson. His work belongs to a set of historical contexts and circumstances, however complex and interesting, and the

demands of both academic professionalism (we have to publish books that take note of other academic books) and our critical methodologies encourage us to define his writing in those terms, and in those terms he mostly exists for us. No doubt we half-recognize ways in which Johnson's thinking exceeds, escapes, and resists our critical categorization, just as we recognize how it turns its own sceptical gaze upon itself and its putative embrace of the Enlightenment imperative of comprehensive knowledge. For example, of his aims for the *Dictionary* he states:

> Those who have been persuaded to think well of my design, will require that it should fix our language, and to put a stop to those alterations which time and chance have hitherto been suffered to make in it without opposition. 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. (Preface to the *Dictionary*, Works XVIII, p. 104)

Yet rather than changing over time, Johnson's classic status – unlike that of other great English writers, such as Shakespeare and Byron – has remained remarkably constant over the last fifty years. It's as if the price for having acquired canonical status is uniformity, and unchangeableness. For while we have recent work on various linguistic, cultural, historiographical, and critical aspects of Johnson's writing, he continues to be widely known as the philosophically conservative, rigorous moral thinker whose learning and great command of the language are devoted to a rational understanding of human existence within formal Augustan and neoclassical forms. Generally speaking, this is the Johnson we were given by the great American scholars of the mid-to-late twentieth century (Jean Hagstrum, Donald Greene, W. J. Bate, Gwin Kolb, Paul Alkon, Howard Weinbrot, and the contributors to *New Light on Dr. Johnson*) as they retrieved and constructed a subject worthy of serious linguistic and historical attention. That this Johnson survives today is not surprising, because it is a noble vision and is undoubtedly partially true. But the advent of discourse, ideology, theory, cultural studies, and a sceptical cultural politics – in short, the intellectual life of the last twenty years – has changed critical priorities in ways that are everywhere visible in eighteenth-century studies, for both good and bad, and one does not need to be an advocate of new theories and methodologies to notice the discrepancy between the existing body of criticism on Johnson and the kind of work that characterizes the wider field of eighteenth-century scholarship.

The issue here is not one of popularizing Johnson or of sexing him up or dumbing him down so he may become a cultural icon, but of finding

legitimate and responsible ways of bringing him into conversation with issues – political, cultural, theoretical, and philosophical as well as literary – that engage modern readers, and that can contribute profoundly to the way in which modern readers think. Notwithstanding a significant body of very good recent work on Johnson that has opened Johnson's writing to a broader context of theoretical and cultural discussion in politics, philosophy, memory, and criticism, there are clearly other ways in which Johnson's thinking about life and literature can illuminate our current thinking about our work and the world in which we live. This new collection of essays aspires to supply some of this illumination.

THE UNFITTEDNESS OF JOHNSON: THE ESSAYS

In their organization and ordering, the essays that compose this collection move from the philosophical and moral-theoretical character of Johnson through aspects of his writings in general, and his individual works (separately and in various combinations), to his literary legacies and heirs. The essays are in virtue of their scope not offered as narrowly focussed specialist journal articles, but are conceived for the most part as wide-ranging speculations of an original kind on the large human issues that confront literary study and literary history beyond the strictly Johnsonian. The collection is not intended to offer comprehensive coverage of Johnson, and readers will note that some areas traditionally considered of central importance in the study of Johnson may sometimes be considered *en passant*. The essays are, moreover, complementary in their relationship one to another, and not meant to impose the expectation that they will be read through with exact sequential dependence.

The collection commences with a chapter by Fred Parker – "'We are perpetually moralists': Johnson and moral philosophy" – and immediately confronts the problem of categorization, which it does in ways suggesting that any answer to the question of where Johnson belongs as a philosophical thinker is likely to bring to mind the wrong question, or the wrong kind of question. Drawing for comparative purposes on the contemporary moral philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre, Parker proposes that while Johnson is the opponent of large systems of thought, he is not readily classifiable as a counter-Enlightenment thinker, sitting comfortably in none of the obviously available alternative categories (Christian dogmatism, skepticism, sentimentalism, etc.). As a model of Johnson's rational inconclusiveness as a moral thinker, Parker takes the example of Johnson's *Rambler* 2, the Preface to the *Dictionary*, and *Rambler* 92, and he shows how Johnson

belongs to a tradition in which the ethical is embedded in practice, and especially in the practice of the life of writing.

In "Johnson, ends, and the possibility of happiness," Greg Clingham then asks what Johnson was thinking when he declared, in his review of Soame Jenyns, that "The only end of writing is to enable readers better to enjoy life, or better to endure it." Clingham approaches this question on the understanding that Johnson's best writing escapes the parameters of critical categorization and conceptual definition, and often delivers more than it states, challenging readers into rethinking issues we assumed were long settled. For Johnson the essential association of literature with pleasure involves a series of narrative relationships between "ends," in their various moral and humane meanings, and endings, all enabled by his deep understanding of how much of human life is taken up with desire and fantasy, and thus with the unconscious. Clingham argues that while desire might be felt as dangerous in Johnson's moral thought, it is also energizing, and it provides opportunities – in the moral essays, the sermons, *Rasselas* – to bring literature to bear upon "consciousness of thought," Johnson's definition of "man" in the *Dictionary*. Connecting Johnson's writing about desire, "ends," and pleasure to other writers engaged in similar pursuits – Aristotle, Freud, Allon White, Julian Barnes, Jonathan Lear, Adam Phillips, and Ian McEwan – Clingham demonstrates how Johnson's literary awareness short-circuits the logic of teleology. Johnson thus effectively folds back into his commemorative narrative of human life, the "remainder" of life, that which exceeds teleology and seems to lie beyond life. But his writing thus creates a poignant form of fictional happiness, something he shares with some modern writers, like Ian McEwan, who also appreciate the power of creative language in relation to the ends of life.

In "Johnson and the modern: the forward face of Janus," Howard D. Weinbrot next re-orients attention to religion and to politics via the moral force of literature (in this case Johnson's reaction to the ethical phenomenon of drama), and he seeks to rescue Johnson from the disapprobation that originated amongst such irrepressible minor contemporaries as Percival Stockdale (later discussed in detail by Adam Rounce). Weinbrot emphasizes the complex reality of Johnson's achievements in terms of his modernity, and under this head his commitments to "experience," to the "secular," and to "progress." For such reasons Johnson could reject "rules merely positive" in his criticism of Shakespeare, while his relation to the politics of Whiggism was more complicated than is usually thought, and more accommodating to its principles, including a sympathy for the limits to be placed on the power of the monarch. Similarly, in his attitude to the church, Johnson was hostile

to violent sermonizing and to a secular approach to the Thirty-Nine Articles.

This focus on the political Johnson is sustained in somewhat different terms in the following chapter by Clement Hawes on "Samuel Johnson's politics of contingency," where "possible worlds theory" is employed to investigate persistent misunderstandings about Johnson's political outlook. Arguing for the role of Johnsonian thinking in evaluating histories of domination, Hawes discusses aspects of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* and *Rasselas* (amongst other texts) and seeks to avoid labeling or fixing Johnson in terms of his ideological commitments. Here again the problem is the very great difficulty we have in pinning down Johnson (witness the recently protracted debate about Johnson's alleged "Jacobitism"). By allusion to discussions of Johnson on imperialism, gender, on public memory and historiography, on nationhood, on the Enlightenment, and on the act of criticism, Hawes argues that Johnson lived a highly self-conscious political life, that he neither reduced politics to ethics nor compartmentalized the two, that his thought and speech are *ideological* (though not in the bad sense of "mystification"), and that Johnson's politics has negatively affected his often ambivalent reception.

In "Fideism, the antisublime, and the faithful imagination in *Rasselas*," David F. Venturo also seeks a rapprochement between the ideological and literary dimensions of Johnson, but he does so by devoting attention to a re-reading of a specific Johnsonian text that, while it is often considered "Augustan," on closer inspection appears to be written in protest against Augustan assumptions characteristic of the earlier eighteenth century. Venturo uses the term *fideistic* to describe Johnson's outlook whereby the world appears a bleak place in which human beings are merely sojourners on a pilgrimage to another realm that cannot be known and experienced until after death. In the central episode of *Rasselas*, the visit to the pyramids, Venturo argues that Johnson shows that it is the *failure* of the sublime Great Pyramid to sate the "hunger of imagination" that is its human significance. Likewise, *Rasselas*'s much misunderstood last chapter explores the conflicting and complicated uses of human wishing as a preparation and substitute for, and a postponement of, human action: the little band of travelers does *not* return to Abyssinia (or the "Happy Valley") as is sometimes claimed. Instead, they have only "*resolved* … to return."

The complex of general principle and the particularities of human life, as it must in actuality be lived, however intractable, is explored across the board, but in a more specialized context in the succeeding chapter by J. T. Scanlan. Although Johnson never became a lawyer, claims Scanlan in

"Samuel Johnson's legal thought," he actively cultivated his interests in law, lawyers, and legal writing. From roughly the 1750s on, Johnson's writing and thinking is marked, in many places, by his intellectual experiences derived from legal issues, and the crucially important, even fundamental, dimension of Johnson's legal thinking that has remained unexamined, but is addressed in this essay via Johnson's command of significant British and Continental legal writing. Johnson thought of himself and his work as in part related to the lives and works of European thinkers, and Scanlan shows that he makes contact with various portions of the works of such distinctly European legal thinkers as the German professor and jurist, Samuel Pufendorf; the Swiss theorist of natural law, Jean Jacques Burlamaqui; and the wide-ranging Dutch writer and lawyer, Hugo Grotius (one of Johnson's favourites). Only by giving these relations the weight that they deserve, Scanlan argues, can an adequate account of Johnson's life in the law – and his larger sense of the relation between principle and experience – be fully understood.

Such an interplay between the text of Johnson and the world outside the text is further explored in Jack Lynch's chapter, the next in the book, on "The life of Johnson, *The Life of Johnson*, the *Lives* of Johnson." Lynch reflects on the influence of biographies written *by* Johnson in the light of the prestige accorded to Boswell's *Life*, and he suggests that the *Lives* generally in recent years are more familiar for their critical remarks. By contrast, he argues, Johnson was known in the eighteenth century as much for his biography as for his criticism – even before the appearance of the *Lives* – especially on account of the "Life of Savage." But in exploring what the essential elements of this Johnsonian biography are, Lynch observes they do not produce so much a novelty of biographical form, but a refinement and improvement on what had gone before. He then identifies eight categories that link Johnson's sense of lives and works, and which in their combination are distinctive enough to warrant the adjective "Johnsonian." The distinctiveness of the genre in Johnson's hands has gone unremarked, argues Lynch, because we are ourselves heirs to Johnson's conception of what matters in an early life, and to the success of Johnson's capacity to organize life's "messy actuality."

It is a short step from this "messy actuality" to the theme of David Fairer's chapter on "The awkward Johnson." Fairer here considers Johnson as a man who was interested in *awkwardness* in its different manifestations, and he recovers the richness of nuance and association that the concept of the "awkward" had for the eighteenth century. Fairer argues for a Johnson who, as a poet, essayist, conversationalist, and moralist, on many occasions

exemplified, exploited, and redeemed the awkward, and valued its potential embarrassments. Eighteenth-century meanings of the word could still draw on the original sense of "awk" as "the wrong way round," "from the opposite direction"; and this notion of resisting the flow of things can be seen throughout Johnson's work in terms of blockings, counter-moves, and tactical realignments, whereby the word *awkward* offered a special challenge to discourses of politeness. Fairer notes the awkwardness of the topic itself, given that Johnson was ambivalent about the nature of awkwardness, and was awkward in manner and physique; but it is the implications of the concept for his mind and art that concern this essay. By examining a range of Johnson's work, including his conversation and critical writings, the *Rambler*, and especially his poetry, Fairer argues that Johnson exploits the disconcerting nature of awkwardness to resist ingratiating politeness. Johnson's mind and art are more responsive, tactical, and even playful, than is sometimes allowed.

One topic on which Johnsonian awkwardness, running even to the display of seeming philistine traits, has sometimes embarrassed his admirers, is addressed in the following chapter by Philip Smallwood. In "Johnson's criticism, the arts, and the idea of art," Smallwood provides new evidence of Johnson's appreciation of art, and analyzes the intimate relations between the arts that bear upon the practice of his literary criticism and the thought behind it. The chapter not only illuminates, and further refutes, the allegation that Johnson seems deaf and blind, aesthetically as well as clinically, in his reaction to the "sister arts." Smallwood also critiques at a deeper level the false premise, born of the positivistic language and concepts traditional within Johnsonian scholarship, that underlies critical and scholarly searching after a unified Johnsonian "attitude towards" the arts. The chapter is concerned with what Johnson had to say about a range of the arts beyond the literary, and touches on his various artistic friendships, associations, and debts. Smallwood shows how Johnson thought of literature as a mode of performance, obeying, in the Collingwoodian sense, and with certain provisos, "principles of art." But the emphasis of the chapter falls especially on Johnson's critical terminology as penetrated by the interconnections of artistic experience that affirm as they also challenge "principle." Such a "linguistic deposit" suggests the pervasive presence of an "idea of art" that distances Johnson as critic both from the contemporary community of eighteenth-century aesthetics and, in a productive sense, from theory today.

The concluding chapters engage both with the uncertain and incomplete knowledge we presently have of the Johnsonian canon, and with Johnson's relation to an audience of late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century

male and female readers, with Jane Austen, and with the world of the living poet, and these discussions serve further to emphasize the difficulty of allocating Johnson to any wholly secure resting place in the cultural past. As examples of those determined to resist or displace Johnson, Adam Rounce examines two determinedly aggrieved responses to Johnson's criticism of the English poets in the *Lives*, one female, one male. In "Toil and envy: unsuccessful responses to Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*," Rounce reflects on the tirade against Johnson's adverse judgments by Anna Seward and Percival Stockdale. He brings out a complexity and anxiety that lies behind their relationship with Johnson and evinces some of the provocative qualities in Johnson's work that helped to trigger such ire. Rounce explains how Johnson becomes a symbol of authorial authority for these figures, exposing competitive resentments of Johnson's cultural influence and power that at once are representative, and yet idiosyncratic and intimately personal. They contain, in both instances, an admixture of affection and admiration for Johnson's inescapable presence and force. Rounce suggests something of the destabilizing influence of Johnson upon his near contemporaries and successors, and his magnetism for the kinds of compulsive personalities that Seward and Stockdale reveal in their outspoken hostility to him.

With reference to a far more sympathetic body of response, Isobel Grundy asks, in "Early women reading Johnson," how Johnson's writings appeared to authors of succeeding generations when he was still a recent landmark. She suggests that early women readers did not so much revere Johnson as make use of him, and she shows how his ideas were a provocation to dialogue and debate, especially amongst female readers who marched under a banner of radicalism and Dissent. In the *Rambler*, especially, Grundy argues, Johnson's interest in the plight and position of women is taken up by his female readers, although many thoughts in the *Preface to Shakespeare* and the *Journey to the Western Islands* also attracted attention.

Attending specifically to Jane Austen's fictional work (and thus balancing the approach taken by Grundy apropos the extensive catalogue of neglected female readers of Johnson), Freya Johnston begins her account of the intimacy of contact between Johnson and Austen (developed at the levels of syntax, of phrasal equilibrium, of cadence, and of vocabulary, that put us "in mind of Johnson") by drawing attention to a crucial moment of allusion to Johnson's *Rasselas* in *Mansfield Park*. In "Johnson and Austen" she suggests how the range of Austen's novels offers a Johnsonian inquiry into how "partial and otherwise flawed perspectives" interfere with correct

judgment, and how the novels reflect moral and intellectual purposes that are consistent with, and influenced by, Johnson. Fanny Price, Johnston believes, shares in part with Johnson's Nekayah the experience of alienation, and Fanny is to the world of Mansfield Park as Nekayah is to the Happy Valley. There occurs in both books a "choice of life." In both works the preoccupations of the authors are transfused into the predicaments of their leading fictional characters, and the debate on marriage in Johnson's volume becomes in Austen a reasoning between the merits of Mansfield Park and of Portsmouth. In this and other ways (including reference to reactions to Johnson by Peacock), Johnston offers a more precise sense of how one author's works might be said to have contributed to the shape, genre, ethos, and development of the other's.

In the penultimate essay, "*The Works of Samuel Johnson* and the canon," O M Brack, Jr. discusses with the advantage of an editorial insider's knowledge the development of the canon of Samuel Johnson's writings, and comments from the point of view of the evolution of, and rationale for, the Yale Edition of the Works of Johnson (1958–). But in so doing, he opens out, rather than closes off, the essential questions regarding Johnson's role in literary history such as underlie the occasion of the present volume. Brack outlines the early history of editions of Johnson's works, the revival of Johnson studies in the twentieth century, and the challenges faced by the Yale editors in deciding what should and should not be counted in. Pointing out the peculiar difficulty that Johnson presents to anyone wanting to know what exactly he did or did not write, Brack recounts some of the scholarly methods, based on attempts to deploy internal and external evidence, that have so far been tried. The essay looks forward to a future Yale volume edited by Brack devoted to Johnson's miscellaneous writings, examines the need for consensus on each contested piece, and suggests the incompleteness of our current conception of the Johnson œuvre.

In "What Johnson means to me," by the poet David Ferry, we offer an afterword to the whole volume. Ferry reflects movingly on the significance of Johnson for his own work as a poet, and the essay starts from a commentary, alongside quotation of the whole poem, on "That Evening at Dinner." The commentary re-tells the story told by the poem, which is about a dinner party attended by a greatly admired old lady who had suffered a serious and disabling stroke. The poem quotes from sentences of Johnson and is offered as a reading of those sentences. Drawing on the great human arguments of Johnson's *A Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil*, the chapter concludes that Johnson is, in his prose and his verse,