Chapter 1

Life and Times

> To judge rightly of an author we must transport ourselves to his time, and examine what were the wants of his contemporaries, and what were his means of supplying them.
>
> (*Lives*, II.119)

Samuel Johnson's last great work, his *Prefaces Critical and Biographical* to *The Lives of the Poets*, has – like so much of his writing – a strong autobiographical element. In these short biographies of English poets, begun in the late 1770s, Johnson also reviews his own life – as an author, a keen observer, and an important actor in the literary world of the eighteenth century. When the course of writing his *Prefaces* brings him to Joseph Addison (1672–1719), Johnson feels that he has entered the period of time that he himself inhabited. He writes, with an allusion to Horace, 'I begin to feel myself *walking upon ashes under which the fire is not extinguished*' (*Lives*, III.18). Johnson felt a particular affinity with Addison: both attended Lichfield Grammar School, and Addison's literary career served as a model for Johnson's. Both writers combined journalism with ambitious works of verse drama, poetry, and travel writing. Johnson was, as he wrote about Addison, describing the beginning of his own era. What was for Johnson the age of Addison would gradually become in his maturity the age of Johnson.

The World Johnson Was Born Into

When Johnson was born, on 18 September 1709, Addison and Richard Steele's (1671–1729) *Tatler* essays were just starting to make their presence felt. Alexander Pope (1688–1744) was an astonishing newcomer on the scene, writing his precocious pastoral poems and about to begin work on his translation of Homer, which Johnson considered so important to the literary world. In 1709, Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) was still good friends with the Whigs Addison and Steele, though he would soon join the Tory ministry as one of its chief propagandists. Queen Anne – to whom the infant Johnson was

brought to be 'touched' as protection against the 'King's Evil' (i.e. scrofula or tuberculosis of the lymph glands) – would reign for five more years, before dying in 1714 and making way for George I and the Hanoverians who still rule today. That the succession passed over the Catholic son of James II, according to the Act of Settlement (1701), remained a sore point for many Britons throughout Johnson's lifetime; Johnson saw the case against the Act of Settlement and had some sympathy with opposition in general but was never affiliated with Jacobites – or, really, with any particular faction.

Johnson's parents, Michael (1656–1731) and Sarah (1669–1759), were relatively old when Samuel was born, and through them, particularly through his father, Johnson could reach back into history. In his *Lives*, Johnson uses some of his father's anecdotes on the trade to extend his account of the publishing industry into the seventeenth century, recalling through him, for example, the great success of John Dryden's poem about King Charles II and the Exclusion Crisis in 1672, *Absalom and Achitophel*. It was, however, the literary world dominated by Pope, Addison, and Swift into which Johnson was born. The English recorded in Johnson's *Dictionary*, for instance, is that written by authors from Shakespeare to Pope and Swift.

If Addison, Pope, and Swift more or less defined the literary and linguistic present for Johnson, his political present was the beginning of the Hanoverian reign, including the administrations of Robert Walpole (1722–42), when the conflict between city and country interests solidified as a contest between Whigs and Tories. Johnson's politics shifted a good deal during his lifetime, but he was culturally Toryish: monarchical, high church, concerned with maintaining social order; against foreign wars and the over-extension of the empire; in favour of concentrating on domestic issues; and supportive of the right of individuals, including authors, to ply their trades and move up in the world without being accused of insubordination.

Melancholy Christianity

Like his politics, Johnson's religion was also fundamentally consistent throughout his life, though not without vicissitudes. A story – probably apocryphal but indicative of Johnson's reputation – relates that his father carried him on his shoulders to hear the charismatic Henry Sacheverell deliver a sermon on his favourite subject, 'The Church in Danger' (i.e. from subversive Whig policies like the toleration of Protestant dissenters). Johnson was a strong churchman and seems to have adhered to the tenets of Church of England bishops such as John Tillotson and Robert South, both of whom he quotes extensively in his

Dictionary. His religion had a strong emphasis on piety and everyday morality, as opposed to theological complexity. The *Dictionary*, for example, is filled with works of practical devotion such as William Wake's *Preparation for Death* and Richard Allestree's *Government of the Tongue*. Even Tillotson and South, for that matter, are relatively practical in their approach to religion.

Henry Hammond's *Of Fundamentals*, also much quoted in the *Dictionary*, provides a clue to Johnson's theology in its emphasis on the beliefs in which all Christians can concur. For Hammond, as for Johnson, attaining Heaven is less about correct belief and more about putting Christian ethics into practice. Johnson's belief in the importance of financial generosity – to give one example – is evident throughout his life. It appears not only in the stories popularized by Boswell in which Johnson empties his pockets in alms for the poor, but also in his interest throughout the *Lives of the Poets* in rehearsing his subjects' records of charitable giving. Richard Savage, reprehensibly mendacious in so many ways, earns something like sainthood in Johnson's account because he shares his meagre wealth with the destitute woman who gave evidence against him in his murder trial (*Lives*, III.137–8).

There were, of course, plenty of religious views that Johnson found beyond the pale. He was particularly hard on religious enthusiasm, which he defined in the *Dictionary* as 'A vain belief of private revelation; a vain confidence of divine favour or communication.' He would have been thinking of sects such as the Muggletonians, who laid claims to the thrill of prophecy from the time of the Interregnum on. Johnson, by contrast, was careful in his prayers and meditations to confess his ignorance of divine matters. When he prayed for the soul of his departed wife, for example, he always did so 'conditionally', as he would not presume to know enough about the afterlife to be sure such prayers could have any effect.

Nevertheless, Johnson was somewhat affected by the evangelicalism that swept through the Midlands in his youth. He disagreed with its tenets, perhaps, but he absorbed some of its attitudes. He was not a follower of the inner light, but he believed (later in life, at least) in the power of grace extended directly by God (through the agency of Christ) to individuals prepared to receive it. His letters to Hill Boothby (1708–56) indicate his disagreement with her evangelicalism, but his interest in marrying her testifies to his tolerance of her views. In his last prayer, he uses the Protestant language of 'conversion' to describe his preparation for death (*Works*, I.417–18).

Whatever Johnson's religious opinions – and it is difficult to know them for sure – throughout his life he was dogged by religious melancholy of a kind that is more closely associated with Protestant sects such as Methodism and even Moravianism, with which Johnson's friend John Wesley was briefly

associated, than with high church doctrine. Johnson was frightened of damnation, as his famous exchange with Dr Adams, master of Pembroke College in 1784, shows:

> The amiable Dr. Adams suggested that God was infinitely good. JOHNSON. 'That he is infinitely good, as far as the perfection of his nature will allow, I certainly believe; but it is necessary for good upon the whole, that individuals should be punished. As to an *individual*, therefore, he is not infinitely good; and as I cannot be *sure* that I have fulfilled the conditions on which salvation is granted, I am afraid I may be one of those who shall be damned.' (looking dismally.) DR. ADAMS. 'What do you mean by damned?' JOHNSON, (passionately and loudly) 'Sent to Hell, Sir, and punished everlastingly.' (*Life*, IV.299)

G. B. Hill links this passage to *Rambler* 110, where Johnson describes a sinful man as 'suspended over the abyss of eternal perdition' (*Works*, IV.224). Such hellfire and brimstone is conspicuous in some high church works, such as the sermons of Jeremy Taylor, but it also abounds in evangelical divines: the American Jonathan Edwards, who spoke of man as a 'spider' 'in the hands of an angry God', as well as in the works of John Bunyan. *Pilgrim's Progress* was among Johnson's favourite books, and it seems likely that the bipolar, staccato rhythm of hope and fear in Bunyan's works (especially *Grace Abounding*) was familiar to him. The high church, on the other hand, regarded religious melancholy as a kind of failing and preached a sort of confidence that Johnson could not achieve, although he often berated himself for his failure to do so – for, in other words, entertaining 'vain scruples' instead of grooming his faith to perfection.

Johnson identified with other people who suffered from religious scruples and religious melancholy. When he heard that Christopher Smart had been confined to a madhouse, he told Charles Burney, 'I did not think he ought to be shut up. His infirmities were not noxious to society. He insisted on people praying with him; and I'd as lief pray with Kit Smart as any one else. Another charge was, that he did not love clean linen; and I have no passion for it' (*Life*, I.397). Johnson sometimes asked people to pray with him or suddenly began to pray himself, and when he was talking to himself, he was 'frequently uttering pious ejaculations' and prayers (*Life* I.483, V.307; *Miscellanies*, II.273). Like Smart, William Collins suffered from mental disease with religious overtones, and Johnson sympathized deeply. He wrote to Joseph Warton when Collins was discharged from an asylum but still 'weak and low': 'Poor dear Collins . . . I have often been near his state' (*Letters*, I.91 and n. 1).

It may be that mental disease – melancholy, as it was usually called in the eighteenth century – takes a religious form for a person concerned with

religion, and Johnson, like most intellectuals of his time, was intensely concerned with religion. His melancholy presented itself in other dimensions of his thinking and acting as well, and that from a very early age. In fact, his melancholy may well have had a physical cause. His birth was evidently difficult; he contracted scrofula as an infant and suffered scars from the brutal treatment of the time, which involved making suppurating incisions on his neck. His eyesight was poor all his life: he was near-sighted, and it seems likely that his left eye wandered and may have been useless. He also had tics and spasms of the sort now associated with Tourette's Syndrome, and his hands were chronically cramped, as at least two of Joshua Reynolds's portraits indicate (1756 and 1765).

Johnson's Mind

As the modern diagnosis of Tourette's suggests, Johnson's physical ills were associated with psychological problems. He suffered from melancholy and in particular what is now called obsessive-compulsive disorder. He compulsively performed ritual movements such as touching or stepping on certain places on entering or leaving his house, and he endured obsessive intrusive thoughts of a sexual and perhaps violent nature. He berated himself for having such thoughts in his diaries, many of which he destroyed before his death. As a teenager, he sent a description of his symptoms to his uncle Swynfen, a doctor in Birmingham. He was so alarmed to find that his uncle had discussed these symptoms with others that he never spoke to him again.

In addition to his physical and psychological ills, however, Johnson was also born with extraordinary intellectual gifts. He had a highly retentive mind from an early age and could memorize poetry and religious lessons with remarkable speed. He probably did not write the epitaph of a duckling on whom he carelessly trod at the age of three or five, as family lore held (*LAEP*, 805), but by fifteen he was writing polished if mainly derivative verse. His childhood friend Edmund Hector reports that he helped other grammar school students with their work so often that he was sometimes carried to school as a hero (*Life*, I.47). His diaries indicate that he was somewhat contemptuous of his immediate family: he found his mother dull-witted and his father merely mercantile, and he was distressed by their quarrelling. He also looked down on his brother Nathaniel, a more gregarious, risk-taking young man who sadly got into debt and probably took his own life. In later life, Johnson never stopped thinking about his family with guilt; one of his last

acts was to arrange for a commemorative stone to be laid for them in St Michael's Church in Lichfield (*Works*, XIX.523–4).

Contemptuous of mere shopkeeping, even when the shop was a relatively high-toned bookstore, Johnson felt himself drawn away from Market Street, where the family house and shop were built, towards the higher society of the Cathedral Close, especially at the house called the 'Bishop's Palace', the residence of the barrister Gilbert Walmesley. There, Johnson met prominent local Whigs and began an argument about Milton that he would continue on and off for his entire life. In 1725, at the age of sixteen, Johnson stepped into more elevated society when he visited his cousin Cornelius Ford at Pedmore near Stourbridge. He had studied with the estimable, if 'very severe', Reverend John Hunter at Lichfield Grammar (*Life*, I.44), but in Ford he found a teacher who at thirty-one had already been a Cambridge don and an associate of literary lights such as Alexander Pope. The visit, which was planned as a six-week holiday, became a six-month sojourn that had a lasting effect on Johnson. Ford was known not only for learning and literate society, but also for dissipation: he is purportedly the louche parson in Hogarth's satirical print *A Modern Midnight Conversation*. Fifty years after his visit to Pedmore, Johnson paid tribute to Ford in his 'Life' of the poet John Fenton, lamenting his dissolute ways but praising his abilities, which 'might have enabled him to excel among the virtuous and the wise' (*Lives*, III.91).

After six months at Pedmore, Johnson was refused readmission to Lichfield Grammar School and placed at Stourbridge, thus extending his stay in that neighbourhood to a full year. During this time, Johnson wrote most of his extant juvenilia, including the first of many attempts at translating Horace's *Odes*.

When he returned to Lichfield in 1726, Johnson was again in company with Walmesley – a man he would later praise for his 'amplitude of learning' and 'copiousness of communication' ('Life of Smith', *Lives*, II.179), and who was certainly among those whom Johnson said he 'wished to please' but were 'sunk into the grave' when he published his *Dictionary* in 1755 (*Works*, XVIII.113). During this period, Johnson continued his study of the classics on his own, fell into a fruitless infatuation with Edmund Hector's sister, wrote some love poetry, and prepared for longer flight to Oxford.

A Disappointing Education

Johnson's thirteen months at Oxford University began after Michaelmas (29 September) in 1729. In Cornelius Ford and Gilbert Walmesley, Johnson

had found father figures whom he wished to emulate more than Michael Johnson the provincial bookseller. Unfortunately, he did not find another such figure at Oxford. What he found instead was a caste system that valued social status more than learning. Indignant and rebellious, he disdained his tutor, William Jorden, and famously reported that he had been fined two-pence for sliding on the ice in Christ Church Meadow when he was supposed to be at a lecture not worth a penny. He refused to write a mandatory exercise on the Gunpowder Plot and instead wrote an elaborate, learned excuse called 'Somnium' in imitation of Macrobius, a Latin satirist too obscure to be in the curriculum at Oxford.

On one occasion, he was overheard muttering to himself about leaving Oxford: 'Well, I have a mind to see what is done in other places of learning. I'll go and visit the Universities abroad. I'll go to France and Italy. I'll go to Padua' (*Life*, I.73; Johnson did eventually, forty-six years later, set foot in France, but, to his sorrow, he never got to Italy). His experience at Oxford was largely negative, and it may have stimulated some powerfully oppositional energy. Johnson wrote a Latin translation of Pope's *Messiah* for a college collection called *A Miscellany of Poems by Several Hands* (1731). This is the only Latin poem in the collection, and, in a way, Johnson was both challenging his fellow students academically and aligning himself with a great writer whose Roman Catholicism had barred him from matriculation at Oxford. Johnson was not a crypto-Catholic, despite refusing the Gunpowder Plot exercise and imitating Pope, but he was an outsider at Oxford, and he may have expressed that in his first published work.

Johnson's most important poem from this period, 'The Young Author', also aligned him with writers in the world outside of the academy:

> So the young author panting for a name,
> And fir'd with pleasing hope of endless fame,
> Intrusts his happiness to human kind,
> More false, more cruel than the seas and wind.
>
> (lines 11–14)

This prefigures elements of both *London* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, his most important poems. In the *Vanity*, a student is told unceremoniously and ironically to 'pause awhile from letters, to be wise' (line 158).

New Beginnings

When Johnson went home from Oxford over Christmas in 1730, he found his father ill and his financial resources dried up. The fact that he left his books in

Oxford suggests that he was planning to return, but he did not. Michael Johnson died about a year later, and Johnson was faced with making a living. He tried teaching with mixed results: the one position that he secured, at Market Bosworth, was unbearable after six months. After failing to find another teaching job, he went off to Birmingham in 1732 to pursue a career as a journalist. He first wrote essays for *The Birmingham Journal*, edited by Thomas Warren. Whatever he published there is unfortunately lost, but Warren soon commissioned Johnson to write a translation of the Jesuit Father Lobo's *Itinerario*, a Portuguese narrative describing a missionary trip to Abyssinia. Johnson made his translation from the French translation of Lobo's manuscript by Joachim Le Grand, *Relation historique d'Abissinie* (1728). As well as the fee of five guineas, the work had the added benefit of allowing him to hone an approach to literary daywork that he would employ throughout his career. Without straying very far from strict translation, Johnson infuses his work with small digressions on some of his favourite humanistic topics: the vanity of human wishes, the prevalence of ignorance and error, the cruelty of colonial imperialism, and the mendacity of religious excuses for securing financial advantages. In this exercise, Johnson also packed away a good deal of learning about the Middle Eastern world that would serve him well in writing his 'oriental tales', including his novel *Rasselas* and his play *Irene*.

Although he needed daywork, Johnson was still hoping to progress as a serious scholar. In 1734, he borrowed a copy of the works of Angelo Poliziano (1454–94) and put together a proposal for an edition of his Latin poetry. Unsurprisingly, there were few takers in the Midlands, and Johnson began to train his eyes on the metropolis. Under an assumed name, he wrote a letter to Edward Cave, the proprietor of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, offering to raise the tone of that publication with learned contributions, provided 'on reasonable terms' (*Letters*, I.6). The letter did not yield immediate results, but it was the beginning of Johnson's relationship with the London publishers, who would provide the lifeblood of his whole career.

Another of Johnson's proposals was more successful than either his notes on Poliziano or his offer to Cave. He proposed marriage to the widow of Harry Porter, the former Elizabeth Jervis. Tetty, the nickname by which she became known in the Johnsonian world, was twenty years his senior. Her sons rejected the attachment and refused to have anything to do with Johnson. Her daughter Lucy, however, then nineteen, became a lifelong friend. Johnson was suspected of coveting Elizabeth's £600 inheritance, but he told a friend, 'It was a love-marriage upon both sides' (*Life*, I.96). She called him 'the most sensible [i.e. sensitive] man that I ever saw in my life' (*Life*, I.95–6). It is not

hard to imagine that Johnson, beset by chronic melancholy, unsure of his path in life, and inexperienced, would find comfort and love with an older woman, and that she, recently bereft, would love a sensitive, highly intelligent young man who understood emotional pain.

With the backing of his wife's money, Johnson set up a school at Edial just outside of Lichfield in a grand old house. He placed an advertisement in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for June 1736: 'At Edial, near *Litchfield* in *Staffordshire*, Young Gentlemen are Boarded, and Taught the *Latin* and *Greek* Languages, by SAMUEL JOHNSON.' The school was not a success – it never attracted more than a handful of students – but Johnson used his free time to make another attempt at authorship. Knowing that playwriting could sometimes provide a fast track to success, he began writing a verse tragedy called *Irene*. His identification with the humanist tradition evident in his proposals for Poliziano also came through in this work, which he set at the fall of Constantinople (1453), then considered the decisive moment in the spread of classical learning in the West. A principal character in Johnson's play is Constantine Lascaris, a Byzantine scholar who fled the occupation of Constantinople and became an influential Greek teacher in Milan and Sicily.

On 2 March 1737, Johnson packed up his manuscript of *Irene*, abandoned his failing school at Edial, and set off for London with the liveliest of his few students, David Garrick. Three days after their departure, Johnson's brother Nathaniel was buried in St Michael's Church beside his father. He was twenty-four and possibly died by suicide, though his grave being in sacred ground argues against that assumption. It is unclear when Johnson received the news, but it was at about the same time that Garrick learned his father had died. The two nevertheless persevered and completed the 125-mile trip to the city in around ten days, alternately walking and riding a packhorse. They made an odd pair: Johnson was, according to his friend Hester Thrale, just under six feet (very tall for the time), while Garrick was closer to five feet.

Johnson's most important connection in London was Edward Cave. On 12 July 1737, Johnson wrote to Cave proposing a translation of Paolo Sarpi's *History of the Council of Trent* (1619). This was to be a serious contribution to intellectual history and a subtly patriotic statement in support of the Church of England: as a Venetian statesman, Sarpi had famously resisted the power of the pope over the free state of Venice.

Cave's resources were so tied up in 1738 that it took a year for him to publish Johnson's proposals and a life of Sarpi. (Publishing, especially in the days of cold type and very expensive paper, was a capital-intensive business.) The project as a whole foundered after this delay because it transpired that another translator – also, oddly, named Johnson – was at work on the same

project. Despite its failure in itself, the Sarpi project had the important effect of inaugurating Johnson's work as a biographer: it was the first of nearly seventy he wrote over the course of his career. The Sarpi project also ushered Johnson into the world of Cave's *Gentleman's Magazine* (see Chapter 2).

Building a Career

At the beginning of this period of Johnson's heaviest involvement with the *Gentleman's Magazine*, Cave published *London*, Johnson's second most important poem after *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. As an imitation of a satire by the Roman poet Juvenal, *London* kept up Johnson's pretensions to a life of scholarship, while also situating him on the contemporary scene. The politics of the poem are 'patriotic' (i.e. anti-Walpolian), but the figures who speak are authors, and Johnson as ever identifies himself with that class, rather than with politicians of any stripe.

At about the same time, Johnson produced two fiercely anti-Walpole tracts: *Marmor Norfolciense* (1739) and *A Compleat Vindication of the Licensers of the Stage* (1739). These are satirical works that channel the irony and savage indignation of Swift, who was still alive, but they did not lead Johnson to take a durable, partisan position in politics.

In the five years between 1738 and 1743, Johnson was extremely busy as a writer, but in 1739 he found time for a trip to Lichfield and environs to settle some family business and socialize with old friends. Tetty, significantly, did not join him: the marriage had hit a rough patch. When he returned to London, Johnson continued to build a career. He got to know some wealthy publishers, as well as fellow hacks in the literary-journalistic world known as 'Grub Street'. One important connection was Thomas Birch, a hub of communication in the Grub Street world and the author-editor of an immense biographical dictionary. Birch was in correspondence with potential literary patrons, such as Lord Hardwicke and Lord Orrery; with booksellers such as Robert Dodsley and William Strahan; with their trade publishers or distributors, such as Mary Cooper and James Crokatt; with writers such as Richard Savage and Alexander Pope; and with literary workers further down the food chain who were sometimes reduced to translating and indexing, such as George Psalmanazaar and William Guthrie. Johnson acted as a kind of chaperone for dinners with Birch and Elizabeth Carter, whom Birch wooed as a potential wife. (Carter was finally appalled by his advances and left London for her father's home in Deal.)

Birch tried unsuccessfully to get Johnson's play *Irene* produced and published, beginning no later than 1741. In the end, however, it was Garrick who