Introduction: Contemporary Johnson
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Once a writer – such as Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Austen, or Johnson – has entered the public consciousness, they become, in a sense, invisible. Having become part of the culture and the language, seeing them clearly requires deliberate acts of critical and historical understanding. Johnson felt this about John Dryden. Considering the tradition of English literature in the *Lives of the Poets* (1779–81), he summed up Dryden’s transformative contribution: “A writer who obtains his full purpose loses himself in his own lustre. . . . Learning once made popular is no longer learning; it has the appearance of something which we have bestowed upon ourselves, as the dew appears to rise from the field that it refreshes” (*Lives*, 2: 119). That the mark of a writer’s distinction is that they become lost in the fullness of their achievement is a paradox that pertains to Johnson as well as Dryden. Indeed, the Samuel Johnson encountered in this book, new and interesting as we hope he is, would not be possible without the contribution of hundreds of scholars, some acknowledged, many invisible though not necessarily forgotten. The interest that Johnson’s writings and life continue to stimulate have everything to do with his classic status but also with the possibilities of change, challenge, surprise, and pleasure they offer. The *New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson* is predicated on Johnson’s continuing intellectual aliveness and pertinence to our imaginative interests and moral needs. Much has changed in university curricula, critical fashions, and cultural taste since the publication of the first Cambridge Companion to Johnson in 1997, yet Johnson continues to be responsive to new methodologies and relevant to current literary and cultural interests. But how best to see – to adapt Johnson’s metaphor about Dryden – that the dew falls from the sky when it appears to arise from the field that it refreshes?

This Introduction aims to sketch out a few essentials of the writer, who is then presented more fully and from different and complementary perspectives in the chapters that follow. If this book is a companion to
the reading of Johnson, can Johnson be our companion? What are his critical and moral values? How does he write? Can we trust what he says, even if we don’t fully agree with every judgment? Are his works helpful in making our way through the minefield of present-day culture? Brief discussions of these issues follow below, and the Introduction then concludes with a brief turn to the chapters that follow.

Johnson Our Companion

In his Dictionary of the English Language (1755), Johnson defined the noun “companion” as “One with whom a man frequently converses, or with whom he shares his hours of relaxation. It differs from friend, as acquaintance from confidence.” He provides three quotations to illustrate this idea of companionship. The first highlights Macbeth’s tormented spiritual isolation after he has murdered Duncan: “How now, my lord, why do you keep alone? / Of sorriest fancies your companions make?” (Macbeth, III. ii, 9–10). The second, from the Book of Ecclesiasticus, invokes the idea of reliability and trust: “Some friend is a companion at the table, and will not continue in the day of thy affliction” (VI. 10). And a third, from the seventeenth-century poet Matthew Prior, associates the idea of companionship with emotional support in the act of mourning: “With anxious doubts, with raging passions torn, / No sweet companion near, with whom to mourn” (Solomon on the Vanity of the World, Book 3, ll. 91–92). Each quotation designates an idea of companionship in its absence: companionship, and its correlative, conversation, provides what these starkly imagined human situations (spiritual loneliness, affliction, anxiety, and mourning) do not. Each of these exemplifications, I suggest, points to aspects of Johnson’s writings that have always made them powerful and consolatory.

Since December 2019, the world has suffered a pandemic that has placed inconceivable stress on the social, economic, health, and political infrastructures of nations great and small, and on the lives of almost all individuals, millions of whom have suffered sickness, death, grief, and isolation. How should we think about such suffering and loss, exacerbated by the incompetence, folly, or mendacity of governments, political parties, institutions, and individuals, without being overwhelmed by the magnitude of it all? Johnson is a writer who provides tools for understanding, if not entirely addressing, such almost impossible questions. He does so by virtue of his grasp of the relationship between ordinary experience and universal ideas, and by his distinctive tracking of how the world and the mind map onto each other – or fail to. During the pandemic we have
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waited and watched, suspended between a “normal” past, now irretrievably
gone, and a darkly uncertain future, in the meantime trying to occupy
ourselves meaningfully. This “meantime,” which feels unique to us, is
a subject (perhaps the subject) of virtually all of Johnson’s writings. The
question for Johnson as a writer and thinker is, what shall a person do with
the time (and with the talents, as in the parable of the talents in Matthew
25: 14–30) allotted to them so they can live a worthy life and to know they
have done so?

_Rambler_ 41, for example, considers the “present moment” from differ-
ent, seemingly opposing but complementary perspectives. Starting from
the idea of human restlessness (“few of the hours of life are filled up with
objects adequate to the mind of man”; _Rambler_, 1: 221), Johnson seems to
accept that people routinely look to the past or the future to “relieve the
vacuities of our being” (_Rambler_, 1: 221). Because people are rarely in the
present moment or have little idea what the present is, Johnson accepts
the necessity of looking to the past and to the future. Because the future is
unknown (and unknowable), it is attractive to speculative or fanciful types,
but being “pliant and ductile, and . . . easily moulded by a strong fancy into
any form,” it is not very reliable or satisfying (1: 224). The past, by contrast,
is less pliable, its images more “stubborn and intractable” (1: 224); it offers
more stable grounds on which to think, feel, and act, for the obvious reason
that everything in the past has already happened.

In writing of past and future as diametrically opposite entities, Johnson’s
key term is “memory,” its traces being the remnants of personal experience.
Animals have memory, but it is not as prominent in them as in humans
because animals have evolved to meet evolutionary needs; they do not need
memory as we do (1: 222). Human faculties, by contrast, are conspicuously
at odds with each other, but this is not all bad. The cognitive dissonance
Johnson sees between the human mind and its “proper objects” is a sign
both of the “superior and celestial nature of the soul” (indicating aspiration
toward goals) and also of memory as “the purveyor of reason” (1: 222).
Because memory is “the power which places those images before the mind
upon which the judgment is to be exercised,” it “place[s] us in the class of
moral agents” (1: 223). The act of remembrance and the contents of the past
are thus fraught. If people are seldom in the present, and “the only joys
which we can call our own” are the images we have “reposited . . . in the
sacred treasure of the past” (1: 224), then every word and deed acquires
future significance. Just for a moment in _Rambler_ 41, the anxiety associated
with the present threatens to take a didactic turn, to morph into a mini
sermon on the need to live a good life so we can cultivate sustaining images
for recollection in a hypothetical future. “Life,” Johnson warns, “made memorable by crimes, and diversified through its several periods by wickedness,” can only be remembered with “horror and remorse” (Rambler, 1: 225).

However, Johnson does something more radical: he questions the nature of time itself and, in a thought suggestive of a postmodern poetics of memory, dissolves past and future into the present: “almost all 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” (1: 223–24). Suddenly, it is the present (not the past) that is the object of memory, and in a quotation from Dryden’s translation of Horace’s 29th Ode of the Third Book, Johnson suggests that both present and future are, in fact, produced by memory:

Be fair or foul or rain or shine,
The joys I have possess’d in spite of fate are mine,
Not heav’n itself upon the past has pow’r,
But what has been has been, and I have had my hour.

(Rambler, 1: 225, ll. 69–72)

The power of this passage in the context of Johnson’s essay lies in the paradoxical transformation of its explicit statements: the past is irretrievably gone (“what has been has been”) and beyond the power even of the gods (“Not heav’n itself upon the past has pow’r”); yet the past is also vitally present in the poetry, especially in the joyousness and the energetic measure of Dryden’s translation. In Dryden’s translation (an assessment writ large in Johnson’s Life of Dryden) and in Rambler 41, an apparently passive relation to time is transformed through memory into a triumph over the acknowledged limits of life and the anxieties of the present. Johnson’s manner of embodying this present in Rambler 41 has the effect of being joyous “in the meantime.” Bleak as the moment might be, “The joys I have possess’d in spite of fate are mine.”

Among the fourteen definitions of “time” in Johnson’s Dictionary, the most literal and the most metaphoric both include the concept of measure. In the first definition, we have time as “the measure of duration” and, in the fourteenth, time as “musical measure,” the first linking human experience to physics, the second to music. Rambler 41 is an example of how Johnson measures the discrete particulars of experienced time, and, a little like T. S. Eliot in Four Quartets, he creates harmony (temporal and musical measure) by how he writes in the “meantime.” The implications of this
characteristic Johnsonian position can sustain much unpacking. Preliminarily, one might note that Johnson is self-evidently a moral, critical thinker whose vision of life draws on the Christian idea of people as fallen beings, separated from some essential reality. Sometimes he expresses this idea in theological terms in prayers and in sermons he wrote for his friend Rev. John Taylor. Mostly, however, human imperfection is the stuff of ordinary experience for Johnson – what we live with in the meantime – and it permeates his large, diverse oeuvre – essays (Rambler, Idler, and Adventurer), political tracts, legal commentary, scholarship (e.g., edition of the plays of Shakespeare), Dictionary, biography and criticism (Lives of the Poets), letters, travel writings, and hundreds of reviews, prefaces, journalism articles, and ghost writings. All Johnson’s writings are grounded in principles that he calls “general nature,” a loose congregation of experiential and aesthetic terms that escape easy definition but which are fundamental.

General Nature

As a literary critic who was impatient of the cult of sensibility (the cultivation of feeling for its own sake), Johnson was nonetheless a man of large passions and deep feeling. As his many biographers testify, he had many friendships (with men, women, and children) with whom he readily shared life’s pleasures and pains. In his letters to Queeney Thrale, Henry and Hester Thrale’s little daughter, we see him gayly participating in her childish joys and humors. We also see his open-hearted grief, in his letters to her parents, on the death of her two-year-old brother, Ralph (Letters, 2: 239–40, 248). When it comes to literature, however, Johnson’s expressions of sympathy are often profoundly complex – as we see in his account of the death of Cordelia in Shakespeare’s King Lear. In his edition of Shakespeare’s plays (1765), Johnson records how powerful he found King Lear: “There is perhaps no play which keeps the attention so strongly fixed; which so much agitates our passions and interests our curiosity. . . . So powerful is the current of the poet’s imagination, that the mind, which once ventures within it, is hurried irresistibly along” (Shakespeare, 2: 702–3).

1 See Greg Clingham, Johnson, Writing, and Memory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
Few would disagree. But Johnson balked at what he saw as the unnecessary, even unnatural death of Cordelia: “I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia’s death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor” (Shakespeare, 2: 704). What shocks Johnson is that Shakespeare went out of his way to kill Cordelia by changing his textual sources (in those from which he takes his plot, Cordelia survives) and allowing her father momentarily to believe she lived – only to crush his hopes. These were features that led Nahum Tate to rewrite King Lear in 1681 so Cordelia could survive, marry Edgar, and reunite with Lear. Johnson does not say that he prefers Tate’s version to Shakespeare’s, but he understands its popularity: “Cordelia, from the time of Tate, has always retired with victory and felicity” (Shakespeare, 2: 704). Yet, where Tate saw irregularities that he might correct, Johnson saw a vision that he resists; he does so by grounding himself in values and experiences that he calls general nature. As Frank Kermode remarks, Johnson saw in Shakespeare’s choice “not primitive ignorance but a disregard of publicly endorsed and acceptable answers which terrified him because it did not arise out of incompetence or carelessness.” Johnson read the play, Kermode continues, “deeply, though not easily” and “fearing that the world might be thus,” and in resisting it, “Johnson is responding to tragedy more deeply than we, who profess to be more easily persuaded.” That Shakespeare “suffered the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause, contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of the reader, and, what is yet more strange, to the faith of chronicles” may make for a good play, Johnson says, “because it is a just representation of the common events of human life: but since all reasonable beings naturally love justice, I cannot easily be persuaded, that the observation of justice makes a play worse” (Shakespeare, 2: 704).

Johnson is not the only eminent critic who has thought Shakespeare’s moral coherence wanting. Unlike Tolstoy, however, who in a notorious essay found Shakespeare’s plays to be exaggerated, arbitrary, unnatural, immoral, and implausible, Johnson is appalled by King Lear in proportion to values (general nature) that he formulates from his very reading of King Lear and of Shakespeare’s other plays.

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Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature . . . . Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life . . . . Shakespeare’s plays are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind; exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination; expressing the course of the world, in which the loss of one is the gain of another; in which, at the same time, the reveller is hasting to his wine, and the mourner burying his friend; in which the malignity of one is sometimes defeated by the frolick of another; and many mischiefs and many benefits are done and hindered without design. (Shakespeare, 1: 61–62, 66)

These passages from the Preface to Shakespeare celebrate the multiplicity of human life in Shakespeare’s dramas, which Johnson finds to be painfully violated in King Lear by the relentlessness with which it crushes human innocence. While resisting the play’s vision, he enjoys other aspects of Shakespeare’s drama – “the real state of sublunary nature” – which he values more, and (significantly) which he finds to be more indicative of Shakespeare. One way to understand what Johnson means by this is to notice how he writes. As we enter into the current of Johnson’s imagination in the quotation above, the rhetorical shape and movement of the long sentence generate a sense of an expanding, increasingly abundant, varied, and changing world where we have the sense that both good and bad, and happiness and sadness, exist at the same time and where, despite life’s uncertainties, we feel deeply at home. The fittingness (Johnson calls it justness) of such sentences is a manifestation of what Johnson means by “general nature.” This is definitely not the experience of the mind that is hurried irresistibly along by King Lear.

Christopher Ricks observes that as a critic Johnson is committed to principles rather than theory; Johnson’s “refusal to elaborate and concatenate the needed concept beyond a certain point . . . was not a refusal to think, but a decision to think thereafter about the application of the principles.”7 “Principles” are applied experientially, and thoughtfully directed. If the aim of literature is just representations of general nature, the language in which we discuss literature should also be “general,” accessible to what in the Life of Gray, apropos of “An Elegy in a Country Church Yard,” Johnson calls the “common reader” (Lives, 3: 1470–71). He responds

to *King Lear* in open, honest, fearful, bold, and classless language – *common* language, though wrought, deliberative, attentive. Furthermore, like Wordsworth, Johnson saw no absolute division between poet and critic; some of his most scholarly discourses, such as the Preface to his *Dictionary*, are also among his most poetic. When expressing his admiration for Dryden’s critical prefaces, Johnson’s formulation perfectly describes his own practice. They are “not a dull collection of theorems, nor a rude detection of faults,” but “the criticism of a poet,” “a gay and vigorous dissertation, where delight is mingled with instruction, and where the author proves his right to judgement, by his power of performance” (Lives, 1: 437–38).

“Power of performance” and “delight” are often found in intimate images and moments, as in Johnson’s account of the last days of Alexander Pope. As Johnson tells the story in the *Life of Pope*, Pope held tenaciously onto friendships, even as they were falling away from him, as being all that stood between him and the bleakness of death. Of Pope’s relationship with Martha Blount, to whom he was once romantically inclined, Johnson writes:

> She is said to have neglected him, with shameful unkindness, in the latter time of his decay; yet, of the little which he had to leave, she had a very great part. . . . if he had suffered his heart to be alienated from her, he could have found nothing that might fill her place; he could have only shrunk within himself. (Lives, 3: 1157–58)

In the context of this biography (a literary form Johnson said he “loved most”; *Life*, 1: 425), Pope’s vulnerability and loneliness stand in stark contrast to his poetic stature, which is great. Johnson also delicately alludes to, but does not mention, Pope’s diminutive physical stature, his body bent by scoliosis (and relentlessly mocked by his enemies). Johnson – himself nearly blind and scarred from birth – is doing what he can to soften the blow and to treat the “shrunken” heart (and body) respectfully.

**Johnson’s Skeptical Thinking**

Such thoughtfulness is rooted not only in general nature but also in a skeptical sense of human limits and how the human mind works. The discrepancy between the “mind” and the “objects” of our “attention,” explored in *Rambler* 41 (and many other texts), is for Johnson the fundamental site of human consciousness. His style is consequently like a moving calculus of these overlapping mechanisms and dimensions,
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considering the changing ideas, impulses, and perceptions in relation to each other.¹⁸ Not only is the mind at odds with the world, but the world – nature, culture, science, and the social realities within which we live – is itself constantly changing. As Johnson says in *Rambler* 63, “to take a view at once distinctive and comprehensive of human life, with all its intricacies of combination, and varieties of connexion, is beyond the power of mortal intelligence” (*Rambler*, 3: 336); and, in *Adventurer* 107, “Life is not the object of science: we see a little, very little; and what is beyond we can only conjecture” (*Adventurer*, 445). This changing reality is why we often disagree with others, and sometimes with ourselves: “we see a little, and form an opinion; we see more, and change it” (444). Crucially, however, we behave as we do “not because we are irrational, but because we are finite beings” (441).

This difference, between human irrationality and finitude, makes all the difference for Johnson. To see war, slavery, poverty, and social injustice as arising *entirely* from human irrationality makes for a very bleak outlook. It leads to the savagery of Swift’s satire (characterized by Johnson as “depravity of intellect”; *Lives*, 2: 1020) or to the blinding rationality of the French philosophers, criticized by Johnson as being “vain” (these “sceptical innovators, are vain men, and will gratify themselves at any expence”; *Life*, 1: 444). Johnson’s analysis of the unhappiness arising from human limitation is less pure than Swift’s or Voltaire’s view because more forgiving. *Rasselas*, for example, is (*inter alia*) a fiction about the disappointment arising from a well-intentioned but naïve (because too rational) attempt to find happiness. As the characters in this tale *fail* in one attempt after another to “make the choice of life,” they become less obsessive and more content with the imperfections of their lot. Eventually, they are pleased to return to the place from which they began, having learned nothing very definite, except that life as it is, is worth living. Johnson treats the will to control implied by the characters’ rational purpose with skeptical indulgence: the astronomer (chapters 40–44, 46) who is convinced that he controls the weather by the thoughts in his head is coaxed out of his insipient insanity by conversation.

Crucially, however, Johnson’s tale frames the whole question of personal responsibility and what is and is not reasonable to expect of ourselves. We should not expect the impossible; as Imlac says to the troubled astronomer, “you are only one atom of the mass of humanity, and have neither such

virtue nor vice, as that you should be singled out for supernatural favours or afflictions” (Rasselas, 163). Limitations may constrain, but they also free us. Still, Johnson is vigilant about obsessiveness, magical thinking, and exceptionalism. Perhaps because he was himself prone to melancholia and indolence, his prose operates like an early warning system against self-indulgence. Reviewing Soame Jenyns’s A Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil (1757), a work in the vein of Pope’s Essay on Man that invokes a distant, ultrarational deity and justifies the existence of evil by arguing that individual suffering is offset by a corresponding benefit to the universe, Johnson severely criticized Jenyns’s fatuous logic. What angers Johnson is not human suffering (poverty, powerlessness, and death are everywhere in eighteenth-century England) but the indifference of the strong toward the weak. Jenyns’s elaborate metaphysical scheme promulgates complacency about other people’s deprivation: “The shame is to impose words for ideas upon ourselves or others. To imagine that we are going forward when we are only turning round. To think, that there is any difference between him that gives no reason, and him that gives a reason, which by his own confession cannot be conceived.”9 “Human experience,” Johnson insists, “is constantly contradicting theory,” and is the “great test of truth” (Life, 1: 454). Hence his critique of all theoretical systems – philosophical, social, or political.

Johnson was thus a lifelong advocate for a liberal education for girls, whose socially orchestrated ignorance contributed to the abuses of the “marriage market” (Rambler’s, 18, 39, 113, 167, 191). His fictional portrayal of Misella, in Rambler’s 170 and 171, an adolescent abused by an older male relative and then abandoned to the streets, is especially poignant by virtue of his attempt to see events through her eyes, even while acknowledging that he cannot. These liberal principles informed his views, even his respect for monarchy and the hierarchies of Church and aristocracy. They underpin his ethical view of animals and the abhorrence of vivisection (e.g., Idler, 10, 17), and they fuel his critique of the injustice and inefficacy of capital punishment (e.g., Rambler, 114). Among the great political issues of the day on which he commented (the electoral system, parliamentary representation, taxation, the rule of law), Johnson was especially critical of slavery and the European imperial project. He applied his legal knowledge in writing a brief in defense of Joseph Knight, a Jamaican slave, when, in a Scottish court (1774), he sued his former owner, John Wedderburn. He also put