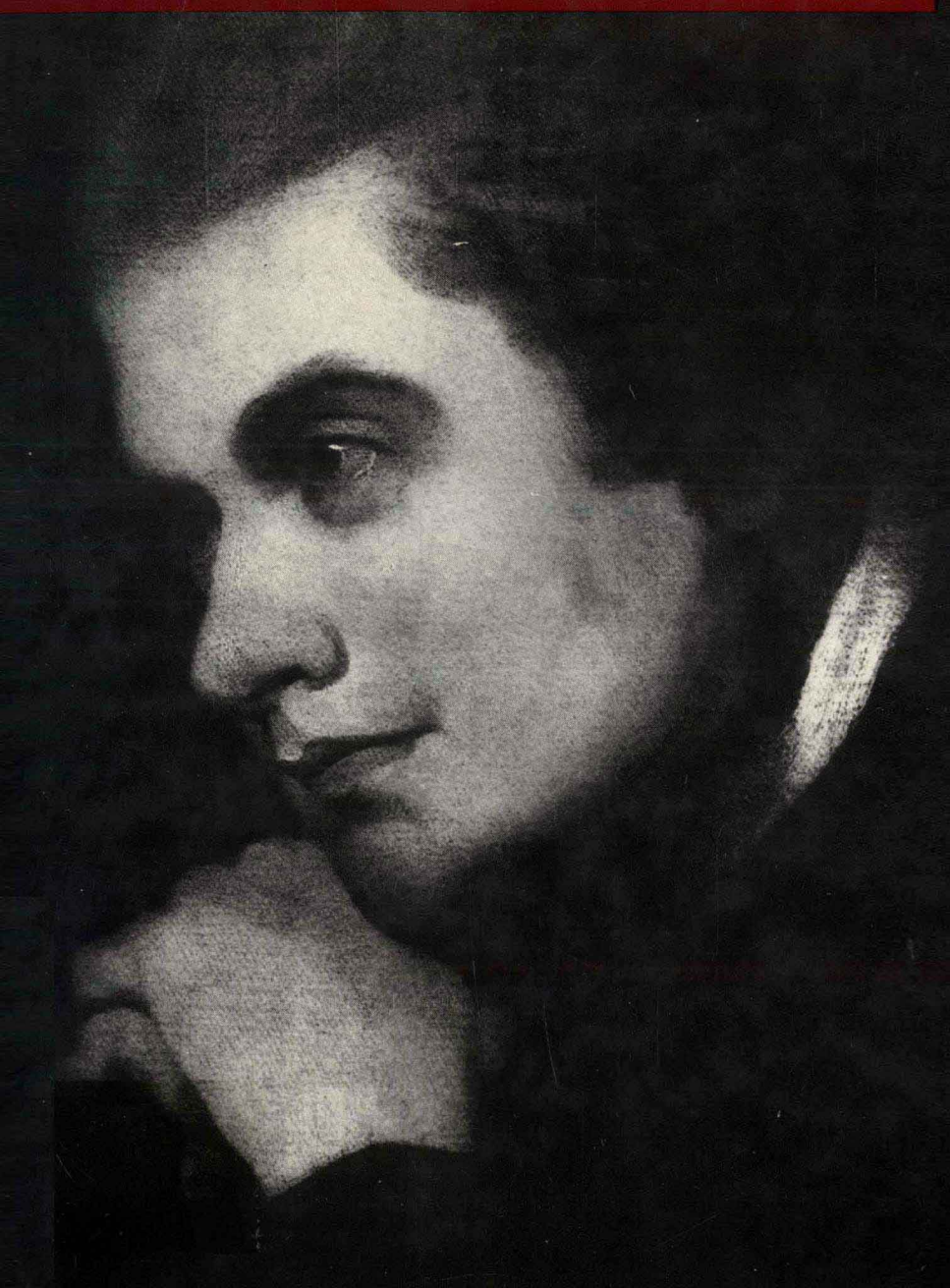


— *T · F · WHARTON* —  
**SAMUEL JOHNSON**  
**AND THE THEME OF HOPE**



# SAMUEL JOHNSON AND THE THEME OF HOPE

T. F. Wharton



MACMILLAN PRESS  
LONDON

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*First published 1984 by*  
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD  
*London and Basingstoke*  
*Companies and representatives*  
*throughout the world*

ISBN 0 333 30633 3

*Printed in Hong Kong*

# Acknowledgements

I should like to record my thanks for the encouragement given to me by my friend Rosemary De Paolo, fellow-Johnsonian.

# List of Abbreviations

<i>Anecdotes</i>	Hester Lynch Piozzi, <i>Anecdotes of the late Samuel Johnson, LL.D.</i> , published in <i>Johnsonian Miscellanies</i> , ed. G. B. Hill, 2 vols (Oxford, 1897)
<i>EIC</i>	<i>Essays in Criticism</i>
<i>ELH</i>	<i>A Journal of English Literary History</i>
<i>ES</i>	<i>Essays and Studies</i>
Hawkins	Sir John Hawkins, <i>The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.</i> (London, 1787)
<i>JEGPh</i>	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
<i>Letters</i>	<i>The Letters of Samuel Johnson</i> , ed. R. W. Chapman, 3 vols (Oxford, 1952)
<i>Life</i>	James Boswell, <i>The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.</i> , ed. G. B. Hill, rev. L. F. Powell, 6 vols (Oxford, 1934–50; 2nd rev. edns of vols V–VI, 1964)
<i>PQ</i>	<i>Philological Quarterly</i>
<i>SEL</i>	<i>Studies in English Literature</i>
<i>Thraliana</i>	<i>Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs Hester Lynch Thrale (later Mrs Piozzi) . . . 1776–1809</i> , ed. K. C. Balderston, 2 vols (Oxford, 1942)
<i>Works</i>	<i>The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson</i> , gen. ed., vols I, II and VI, A. T. Hazen; subsequently J. H. Middendorf (New Haven, Conn., 1958–)

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# 1 Life: 'vain imaginations'

Bertrand Bronson some years ago remarked that there are two Johnsons:<sup>1</sup> the caricature of a rugged eccentric, transmitted by Macaulay's *Encyclopaedia Britannica Life of Johnson* (1856), and the thoughtful moralist revealed in his works. Two Johnsons still exist, although they have slightly shifted their ground. The 'popular' Johnson, generally known as *Doctor Johnson*, is now located in the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, six of whose nine 'Johnson' pages are devoted to his conversation, and to the most epigrammatic remarks that Boswell can yield. Journalists, politicians and after-dinner speakers raid these pages in search of second-hand brilliance, and perpetuate 'Doctor' Johnson to audiences who know nothing more of him than that he said 'patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel', or 'when a man is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully', or 'a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all.' The market for this Johnson has always been good, even in his own lifetime. Boswell amusingly records that Goldsmith – always jealous of Johnson's reputation as a speaker – was 'mortified, when talking in a company with fluent vivacity, and, as he flattered himself, to the admiration of all who were present; a German, who sat next to him, and perceived Johnson rolling himself, as if about to speak, suddenly stopped him, saying, "Stay, stay – Toctor Shonson is going to say something"'.<sup>2</sup>

The 'other' Johnson has now become what Bronson himself called 'Johnson Agonistes', his neuroses painfully laid bare.<sup>3</sup> It would be fair to say that this Johnson is much less popular in every sense; particularly with his admirers. Of course, serious biographers have carefully explained the connection between the first Johnson, an ardent and aggressive believer in the aim of a reasonable life, and the second. There is sometimes detectable, nevertheless, the wish to play down the evidence of the second Johnson. Johnson has always been a much-loved man, capable of

inspiring devotion, and there is a temptation to present his extraordinariness in the most palatable terms.

To do so is to blur the important fact that 'everything about his character and manners was forcible and violent'.<sup>4</sup> The fullest truth about his character may be represented by extremes and contradictions. Certainly, his passion for reason and truth – he is said to have 'fought for truth as the drunkard fights for the bottle'<sup>5</sup> – is best seen in the context of his full acquaintance with fantasy and delusion. More significant in terms of literary study, the sanity of moral pronouncement which is the most distinctive mark of his work may be inseparable from an equally vital concern, within the same work, with fantasy and delusion.

It is well known that Johnson was deeply interested in mental illness. Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* 'was the only book that ever took him out of bed two hours sooner than he wished to rise'.<sup>6</sup> In part, of course, the interest was self-concern. Mrs Thrale tells us that he 'had studied medicine diligently in all its branches; but had given particular attention to the diseases of the imagination, which he watched in himself with a solicitude destructive of his own peace, and intolerable to those he trusted'.<sup>7</sup> Mrs Thrale's case was admittedly a special one, but others speak with similar disquiet of this side of Johnson. In his Highland tour, Johnson informed Lady McLeod of Skye, virtually a stranger to him, 'I inherited . . . a vile melancholy from my father which has made me mad all my life, at least not sober.' Lady McLeod was moved to 'wonder he should tell this'.<sup>8</sup>

In his literary work, this near-obsession with the irrational took productive form. It constitutes his single most persistent theme. More than any of his other familiar and recurring ideas – the moral theme of envy, the idea of the 'choice of life', his theory of the 'vacuity of life' and the filling up of time – the theme of fantasy, vain hope, and the power of the imagination actually shape his creative work, frequently focussing on the imaginative act itself. As Johnson entered the great decade which produced most of his best-known work, the theme became increasingly a conscious and central one; one which he approached with increasing confidence and candour and which culminated in *The Idler*. *Rasselas* reveals a much more fearful handling of the theme, an attitude which is reflected in his later attitude to the imagination in his critical work; but marked much more pronouncedly in his own subsequent silence as a creative writer. While 'creative 'work



admittedly forms only a small fraction of Johnson's published achievement, Johnson the encyclopaedist is also intriguingly related to the theme of the 'phantoms of hope'. The entire course of Johnson's life of writing may be seen to be shaped by his theme.

If delusion was his abiding interest, clarification was his conscious aim; not only of his own thoughts, but of those of others. As Reynolds once said, 'no man had like him the faculty of teaching inferior minds to think',<sup>9</sup> and his age accepted him as its teacher. Indeed, one friend, the Rev. Dr Maxwell records that 'he seemed . . . to be considered as a kind of publick oracle, whom everybody thought they had a right to visit and consult'.<sup>10</sup> Yet, it must be doubted whether Johnson ever seriously resented the role. He loved to win. As he confessed, this included 'talk[ing] for victory'.<sup>11</sup> He succeeded in dominating even the 'Literary Club', which included the best minds of his generation. The great usefulness of such eminence was that he would be heard with respect, even when what he had to say displeased.

This was less a matter of Johnson teaching a specific body of difficult truths than of him contesting all thoughtless opinion. The startling and quotable nature of much of his most famous conversation is the direct result of his deliberate provocation of assumption and dogma. Slogans and prejudices were his repeated targets. Here, he meant to shock. When he proposed, to an elderly company at Oxford, a toast to the 'next insurrection of the negroes in the West Indies' he undoubtedly succeeded.<sup>12</sup> Able, as Boswell knew to 'talk upon any side of a question',<sup>13</sup> he was willing to do so, to provoke thought in others. He constantly delighted in the company of those capable of the same kind of penetration as himself. His first acquaintance with Reynolds reveals the instant liking for each other of two men who delighted in penetrating cant. The meeting occurred at the house of the respectable Misses Cotterell:

The ladies were regretting the death of a friend, to whom they owed great obligations; upon which Reynolds observed, 'You have, however, the comfort of being relieved from a burthen of gratitude.' They were shocked a little at this alleviating suggestion, as too selfish; but Johnson defended it in his clear and forcible manner, and was much pleased with the *mind*, the fair

view of human nature which it exhibited. . . . The consequence was, that he went home with Reynolds, and supped with him.<sup>14</sup>

With lesser men, Johnson's legendary rudeness may largely be explained by his impatience with their incapacity to think for themselves. Young John Lade was unfortunate enough to ask a silly question, 'Mr Johnson, would you advise me to marry?' and was told, 'I would advise no man to marry, Sir, who is not likely to propagate understanding.'<sup>15</sup> Johnson was in every sense a charitable man, and very often took pity on the feeble-minded; but usually *after* their humiliation was complete. Belligerence was part and parcel of the struggle for clear thinking. On an occasion when Johnson pronounced himself satisfied with the quality of the previous night's conversation ('we had good talk'), Boswell replied, 'Yes, Sir; you tossed and gored several persons.'<sup>16</sup> However, clear thinking was the essential aim. It is not as the testy pedant but as the insistent definer of the qualities of things that he should be regarded, when we see him, typically, quibbling that 'No man was born a miser, because no man was born to possession.'<sup>17</sup>

Such an insistence demanded great clarity of colloquial style, and this was something which Johnson trained to achieve. He 'used to say that he made it a constant rule to talk as well as he could both as to sentiment and expression, by which means, what had been originally effort became familiar and easy. The consequence of this was . . . that his common conversation in all companies was such as to secure him universal attention, as something above the usual colloquial style was expected.'<sup>18</sup> His friends in their various ways testify to the extraordinary nature of his talk. Mrs Thrale apologises that she 'cannot give each expression of Dr Johnson with all its force or all its neatness'.<sup>19</sup> Boswell, citing a comment of a friend, triumphs that his conversation could be 'all printed without any correction'.<sup>20</sup> This great sanity and clarity were, however, quite clearly artefacts, and Johnson was the subject of a biography which commemorated above all the part of him which was artefact. Biographer and subject were ideally adapted to each other. Indeed, Boswell did his part in creating 'Doctor' Johnson. Boswell was responsible for assembling conversational opponents to meet the champion. If the opponents were enemies, so much the better: 'I knew Lord Monboddo and Dr Johnson did not love each other: yet I was unwilling not to visit his lordship; and was also curious to see them together.'<sup>21</sup> On another

occasion, Boswell conceived the desire 'to obtain an introduction [of] Dr Johnson [and] John Wilkes, Esq. Two men more different could perhaps not be selected out of all mankind. They had even attacked one another with some asperity in their writings.'<sup>22</sup> In addition to obtaining opponents, Boswell was often responsible for selecting the ground on which any contest would be fought. Since Johnson was 'like a ghost: you never speak till you are spoken to',<sup>23</sup> his biographer had to develop the skills of 'leading the conversation . . . starting topicks and making him pursue them. He appears to me like a great mill, into which a subject is thrown to be ground.'<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, 'I introduced Aristotle's doctrine in his "Art of Poetry" of the . . . "purging of the passions", as the purpose of tragedy. "But how are the passions to be purged by terroure and pity?" said I, with an assumed air of ignorance, to incite him to talk, for which it was often necessary to employ some address',<sup>25</sup> or, far more ludicrously, 'If, Sir, you were shut up in a castle, and a new-born child with you, what would you do?'<sup>26</sup> In creating this artefact, Johnson willingly collaborated; occasionally turning the narrative to its best advantage. When the two men spoke about the comical mystery of what Johnson did with the orange-peel he invariably pocketed, Boswell pronounced, '(with a mock solemnity,) "he scraped them and let them dry, but what he did with them next he could never be prevailed on to tell", JOHNSON: "Nay, Sir you should say it more emphatically: - he could not be prevailed upon, even by his dearest friends to tell."'<sup>27</sup> When Boswell wrote his account of Johnson in the Highlands, he had the benefit of his friend's constant interest in the project. In London, it was more than friendship that made Johnson insist on Boswell's admission to the Literary Club, despite sharp opposition. His disciple's presence meant that he was sure of a prompter and a witness when he tussled for truth and clarity, with his 'deliberate and strong utterance'.<sup>28</sup>

It comes as something of a surprise that the man who said 'when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life', said it with a strong Midlands accent. 'Garrick sometimes used to take him off, squeezing a lemon into a punch-bowl, with uncouth gesticulations, looking round the company, and calling out, "Who's for poonsh?"'<sup>29</sup> On the page, the words he spoke or wrote belong to

'that great CHAM of literature, Samuel Johnson'.<sup>30</sup> When fleshed out into life, they seem immensely incongruous with their author. Those who met Johnson, having first known his works, registered something approaching shock. Murphy found him covered in soot from a chemical experiment. Bennet Langton, ardent *Rambler*-reader, was 'exceedingly surprised when the sage first appeared. . . . From perusing his writings, he fancied he should see a decent, well-drest, in short a remarkably decorous philosopher. Instead of which, down from his bedchamber, about noon, came, as newly risen, a huge uncouth figure, with a little dark wig which scarcely covered his head, and his clothes hanging loose about him.'<sup>31</sup> Facially, the scrofula he caught in infancy scarred him, left him blind in one eye, short-sighted in the other, and partly deaf. However, what above all earned him the contemporary nickname of 'the great oddity' was less his appearance than the peculiarities of his manner.

Talking to himself was, indeed, one of his singularities ever since I knew him. I was certain that he was frequently uttering pious ejaculations; for fragments of the Lord's Prayer have been distinctly overheard. . . . He had another particularity, of which none of his friends ever ventured to ask an explanation. . . . This was his anxious care to go out or in at a door or passage, by a certain number of steps from a certain point, or at least so that either his right or his left foot (I am not certain which,) should constantly make the first actual movement when he came close to the door or passage. Thus I conjecture: for I have, upon innumerable occasions, observed him suddenly stop, and then seem to count his steps with a deep earnestness; and when he had neglected or gone wrong in this sort of magical movement, I have seen him go back again, put himself in a proper posture to begin the ceremony, and having gone through it, break from his abstraction, walk briskly on, and join his companion.

Boswell also concedes it

requisite to mention, that while talking or even musing as he sat in his chair, he commonly held his head to one side towards his right shoulder, and shook it in a tremulous manner, moving his body backwards and forwards, and rubbing his left knee in

the same direction, with the palm of his hand. In the intervals of articulating, he made various sounds with his mouth; sometimes as of ruminating, or what is called chewing the cud, sometimes making his tongue play backwards from the roof of his mouth, as if chuckling like a hen, and sometimes protruding it against his upper gums in front, as if pronouncing quickly under his breath, *too, too, too*.<sup>32</sup>

Strangers were not at all sure what to make of him. Sir Joshua Reynolds recalls that

when he and I took a journey together into the West, we visited the late Mr Banks, of Dorsetshire; the conversation turning upon pictures, which Johnson could not well see, he retired to a corner of the room, stretching out his right leg as far as he could reach before him, then bringing up his left leg, and stretching his right still further on. The old gentleman observing him, went up to him, and in a very courteous manner assured him, that though it was not a new house, the flooring was perfectly safe. The Doctor started from his reverie, like a person waked out of his sleep, but spoke not a word. (Quoted in *Life*, vol. I, p. 145)

Another anecdote follows, in which Johnson, visiting Richardson the novelist, was present when Hogarth arrived. The newcomer began a conversation on the aftermath of the '45 rebellion and the conduct of the king.

While he was talking, he perceived a person standing at a window of the room, shaking his head, and rolling himself about in a strange ridiculous manner. He concluded that he was an idiot whom his relations had put under the care of Mr Richardson, as a very good man. To his great surprise, however, this figure stalked forwards to where he and Mr Richardson were sitting, and all at once took up the argument, and burst into an invective against George the Second. . . . In short he displayed such a power of eloquence, that Hogarth looked at him with astonishment, and actually imagined that this idiot had been at the moment inspired.<sup>33</sup>

It is not clear whether Johnson was aware that his behaviour

was unusual. Poor Miss Reynolds, who was on one occasion his companion when, in the street, 'he began his antics with his feet and hands . . . like a jockey at full speed' and 'men, women and children gathered round him laughing', commented that he was 'seem[ing]ly totally unconscious of having committed any impropriety'.<sup>34</sup> What is abundantly plain is that he feared for the balance of his mind. There can have been no more terrible fear for one who lived so cerebral an existence, but then Johnson was a believer in guilt and punishment.

The solemn text, 'of him to whom much is given, much will be required', seems to have been ever present . . . in a rigorous sense, and to have made him dissatisfied with his labours and acts of goodness, however comparatively great; so that the unavoidable consciousness of his superiority was, in that respect, a cause of disquiet. He suffered so much from this, and from the gloom which perpetually haunted him, and made solitude frightful, that it may be said of him, 'If in this life only he had hope, he was of all men most miserable.'<sup>35</sup>

Unfortunately, even his hope of another life was far from secure. Johnson's memory of his own faults could be relentlessly long. In the last year of his life, he could still dwell on a youthful misdemeanour, and its sequel, perhaps fifty years later:

Once indeed . . . I was disobedient; I refused to attend my father to Uttoxeter market. Pride was the source of that refusal, and the remembrance of it was painful. A few years ago I desired to atone for this fault; I went to Uttoxeter in very bad weather, and stood for a considerable time bareheaded in the rain, on the spot where my father's stall used to stand.<sup>36</sup>

On this occasion, propitiation was successful, but guilt was not always so simply laid. The main burden of it fell on his work, where no act of expiation could diminish his sense of a sacred duty wilfully neglected. The full record of his self-reproach is to be found in the *Annals*; his collected prayers, diaries and meditations. To read them is to understand the force of Boswell's remark about the parable of the talents: the prayer 'when I shall render up at the last day an account of the talent committed to me I may receive pardon for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.' is comparatively hope-

ful. Others record something which can only be called despair: 'I have done nothing: the need of doing is pressing, since the time of doing is short.' Thirteen years later, his life still seems 'a barren waste of time with some disorders of body, and disturbances of the mind very near to madness'.<sup>37</sup>

Johnson's morbid melancholia became common knowledge shortly after his death, as rival biographers scrambled to make their disclosures. As early as 1787, Hawkins could refer to 'that melancholy which the public now too well knows was the disease of his mind'.<sup>38</sup> But as Hawkins and the rest heaped their indignation on Mrs Thrale, for deserting Johnson in his hour of greatest need, she held the most sensational secret of all, undisclosed until her own diaries, the *Thraliana*, were published in our own century.<sup>39</sup> She held the key to this in more senses than one. Item 649 in the sale catalogue of Mrs Thrale/Piozzi's library and effects was 'a padlock, with a manuscript note attached – "Johnson's padlock committed to my care in the year 1768"'.<sup>40</sup> The rest of the evidence fits all too well: the cryptic line in Johnson's diary, 'De pedicis et manicis insana cogitatio';<sup>41</sup> Mrs Thrale's reference to the 'Secret far dearer to him than his Life' with which 'our stern Philosopher Johnson trusted me about the years 1767 or 1768';<sup>42</sup> the letters between them in which he begs 'que vous me tienne dans l'esclavage que vous scavez si bien rendre heureuse', and she replies 'If we go on together your Confinement shall be as strict as possible . . . do not quarrell with your Governess for not using the Rod enough'.<sup>43</sup> The evidence is incontestable. The only problem is how literally to interpret it. Possibly not too much weight should be placed, here, on a comment of Mrs Thrale's (though the italics are her own). Pointedly referring to Johnson's opinion that 'a Woman has *such* power between the ages of twenty five and forty five, that She may tye a Man to a post and whip him if She will', she notes, 'This he knew of himself was *literally* and *strictly* true I am sure'.<sup>44</sup> A far more attractive interpretation is provided by John Wain. While stressing that personal experience may have formed Johnson's very clear perception that 'madmen are all sensual in the lower stages of the distemper . . . but when they grow very ill, pleasure is too weak for them, and they seek for pain', he nevertheless interprets the relationship between Mrs Thrale and Johnson in terms of fixation rather than enactment. Johnson suffered 'desires of which he was ashamed but which he felt impelled to confess to her. He felt so impelled . . . because to

confess his strange cravings to the woman who had become the object of them was in itself a kind of relief. . . . By laying himself open to her — and thus, as they both well knew, giving her the power to inflict mortal hurt on him by betraying his confidence . . . he acted out, blamelessly, part of his fantasy of total surrender.<sup>45</sup>

Some knowledge of these distressing aspects of a life he himself described as 'radically wretched'<sup>46</sup> may help us to understand the power over him exercised by the whole idea of fantasy. His moral sanity was formed in response to it. It dominates all his work as a theme.



## 2 Work: the 'scheme of life'

One of the challenges Johnson makes to the reader is the resistance his work puts up to any attempt to interpret its overall purpose and direction. The *shape* of his writing career is easy enough to perceive. Nearly all his notable work is crammed into one decade of his middle life. Till then, a journalist, he seemed 'a great genius, quite lost . . . to the world'. Later came his life as the great conversationalist. Interpretation is harder. Why did his creative period come so late? What prompted it? Why did it finish so abruptly? Perhaps the key question is the first. If it is possible to define the reason why the impulse to create was so tardy, the other questions may answer themselves.

The word 'create' of course needs to be handled carefully. Paul Fussell's book, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing*, carefully explains the eighteenth century's very wide understanding of what constituted acceptable literary genres. He argues forcefully for an understanding of writing, in the eighteenth century, as the craft of persuasion rather than the medium of self-expression. He points out that 'the pattern of the literary career conceivable in Johnson's time does not imply development and change – it implies intensification'.<sup>1</sup> Yet even in this book, another kind of terminology and an untrained set of expectations unavoidably sidle in. *Irene*, if bad, is still 'original writing'. Johnson's career in the late 1740s takes a notable turn for the better when he 'moves away from the inherited tones of the Augustans to disclose his own'.<sup>2</sup> It is probably inevitable that we should search Johnson's early years for some signs of the powers he possessed as a creative writer; which might well include poetic imitation or adaptation, not just 'original composition'. We find only *London*, and even that is hardly the work of a young man. It is difficult to talk about the 'intensification' of the non-existent.

Yet, from the meagre scraps of school exercises and university translations, Johnsonians have been able to perceive clear signs