

Modern Critical Views

DR. SAMUEL JOHNSON & JAMES BOSWELL

Edited and with an introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



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Harold Bloom

Sterling Professor of the Humanities

Yale University

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Editor's Note

This volume gathers together a representative selection of the best literary criticism devoted to the works of Dr. Samuel Johnson and James Boswell. The criticism is reprinted here in the order of its publication, together with three essays that appear for the first time. Marena Fisher assisted the editor, who is grateful for her erudition and her judgment.

I have begun this book with Johnson's two most distinguished critics, W. K. Wimsatt and Walter Jackson Bate, and with Boswell's great editor and critic, Frederick A. Pottle. Wimsatt starts off with a powerful discussion of the relation of Johnson's prose style to his theory of style and diction, with its apparent emphasis upon correctness and generality. This is followed by Pottle's early but definitive treatment of Boswell as a literary artist, the equal of his greatest contemporaries. W. J. Bate, at his most admirable, writes of Johnson as a moral psychologist, and illuminates the strongest Western critic's pervasive concern with the ambivalences and ambiguities of the affective life. A second essay by Wimsatt, on Johnson's exemplary novel, *Rasselas*, reveals the abyss of nihilism that Johnson both avoids and investigates, as a precursor of Samuel Beckett.

Another generation of critics is introduced here by Paul Fussell's analysis of Johnson's remarkable achievement as an essayist in *The Rambler*, where the critic's *praxis*, as Fussell notes, evidences "his prime quality of mind: an instinctive skepticism . . . of 'systems' and unambiguous positions." Leopold Damrosch, Jr., writing upon *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, sees the poem as being at once tragedy and satire, a characteristic Johnsonian blend, difficult to find in other writers. Comparing Johnson's strategies as a biographer, particularly in the *Life of Pope* and the *Life of Savage*, to Boswell's parallel strategies, particularly in the *Tour to the Hebrides*, Frank Brady hints at a subtle link between Johnson and Boswell that might be called the prudential genre of the antiromance.

Robert Bell, chronicling Boswell's development from the *London Journal*

to the *Life of Johnson*, emphasizes Boswell's mature ability "to dramatize himself in the multifaceted but unified role of biographer," an immense advance upon the early wistfulness of posing as a Macheath or an Aeneas. Boswell's search for the hero, which culminated in the *Life of Johnson*, is the center of his *Tour to Corsica*, analyzed here by William C. Dowling, who finds, in the Plutarchan figure of Boswell's General Paoli, an image of spiritual isolation. The visionary politics of Boswell's *Tour to Corsica* are countered by Johnson's realistic conservatism, which is the central emphasis in John Barrell's discussion of the relation between language and politics in the most conservative and moral of all the great critics.

This book concludes with three brilliant essays by the youngest generation of scholar-critics now writing upon Johnson and Boswell. Laura Quinney's vision of "Johnson in mourning" profoundly relates Johnson's temperament to his rhetorical stance as a critic: "He was close to suspecting that literature had imposed on him a spurious interiority, close enough to recognize such a phenomenon in theory, while regarding literary pathos, and his particular vulnerability to it, with ambivalence and distrust." Gordon Turnbull, in the most stimulating treatment yet given to the *Tour to the Hebrides*, shrewdly centers upon "Boswell's deeply perplexed national self-understanding" as a proud and patriotic Scot, who nevertheless could not resist the aura and power, cultural and political, of Johnson and London. Finally, Robert J. Griffin provides an advanced analysis of Johnson's complex critical trope of "reflection" in *The Lives of the Poets*. Griffin's exegesis of the aesthetic dimensions of Johnsonian "reflection," and of its ironic limits, is a fitting tribute to Johnson's ongoing vitality and inescapability as the central Western literary critic.

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Introduction

There lurks, perhaps, in every known heart a desire of distinction which inclines every man first to hope, and then to believe, that Nature has given him something peculiar to himself. This vanity makes one mind nurse aversions and another actuate desires, till they rise by art much above their original state of power and as affectation, in time, improves to habit, they at last tyrannize over him who at first encouraged them only for show.

—JOHNSON, in a letter to Boswell, 8 December 1763

Dr. Samuel Johnson, in the judgment of many (myself included), is the strongest critic in the varied history of Western literary culture. In the Anglo-American tradition, his only near rival would seem to be William Hazlitt, who has something like Johnson's energy, intellect, and knowledge, but lacks the full compass of Johnson's human sympathies, and is simply not as wise. Johnson shows us that criticism, as a literary art, joins itself to the ancient genre of wisdom writing, and so is descended from Koheleth (Ecclesiastes) and Jesus Ben Sirach (Ecclesiasticus). If you search for Johnson's precursor, turn from Aristotle or even from Ben Jonson, father of English neoclassicism, and find the forerunner of *Rasselas* and *The Rambler* in Koheleth:

Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.

The mind of Johnson, confronting the Biblical Preacher's words, was altered permanently. Indeed, Johnson is so strong a writer, that he nearly achieves the metaleptic reversal of making us believe that the author of Ecclesiastes has read deeply in Samuel Johnson. Sometimes I find myself

reading Ecclesiastes aloud, and become confused, believing that I am reading *Rasselas*:

It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools.

For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool: this also is vanity.

Johnson teaches us that the authority of criticism as a literary genre depends upon the human wisdom of the critic, and not upon the rightness or wrongness of either theory or *praxis*. Hazlitt observed that the arts, including literature, are not progressive, and this includes criticism as a branch of the literary art. There always will be those setting rules for criticism, down to current Gallic versions of formalism, linguistic skepticism, and even psycholinguistics, but they have not given and will not give us literary criticism, which will go on being the wisdom of interpretation and the interpretation of wisdom. Johnson and Hazlitt, Ruskin and Pater, Oscar Wilde and Kenneth Burke, all in different but related ways show us that memorable criticism is experiential criticism, that there is no method except oneself, and most profoundly that it is "objectivity" which turns out to be easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting. True critical subjectivity or personality is hardly an abandonment to self, but is a difficult achievement, dependent upon learning, intellect, and the mystery of individual vitality. "Objectivity" turns out to be a digest of the opinions of others, whether those opinions mask as philosophy, science, or the social conventions of the academies:

Minim professes great admiration of the wisdom and munificence by which the academies of the Continent were raised, and often wishes for some standard of taste, for some tribunal, to which merit may appeal from caprice, prejudice, and malignity.

(*Idler*) No. 61

Mr. Dick Minim we have in abundance these bad days; he pours forth tomes denouncing interpretation, and calling for rules, principles, methods that will turn Anglo-American criticism into a Germano-Gallic "human science." "Rigor, Rigor!" cries our contemporary Minim, while he keeps reminding us that poems and stories are written in and by language. Dr. Samuel Johnson, who had not the benefits of the Hegelian philosophy and its Franco-Heideggerian revisionists, did what he could with what he had, as here on Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays:

But *Falstaff* unimitated, unimitable *Falstaff*, how shall I describe thee? Thou compound of sense and vice; of sense which may be

admired but not esteemed, of vice which may be despised, but hardly detested. . . . Yet the man thus corrupt, thus despicable, makes himself necessary to the prince that despises him, by the most pleasing of all qualities, perpetual gaiety, by an unfailing power of exciting laughter, which is the more freely indulged, as his wit is not of the splendid or ambitious kind, but consists in easy escapes and sallies of levity, which make sport but raise no envy.

That the balance of this judgment is admirable, and unmatched, is palpable. But the critical magnificence surpasses mere balance, and is a crucial insight into Shakespearean representation. Falstaff is "unimitated"; he is not a mimesis, but a supermimesis of essential nature. He is also "unimitable," because he is a form more real than living man; he contains us, not we him. His "perpetual gaiety," his wit of "easy escapes and sallies of levity," a wit that exempts him from envy, testify to his unique nature as a person without a superego. Without a superego to admonish the ego to forsake its aggressivities (while punishing the ego all the more each time it abandons an aggressive drive), we would be as Falstaff, in a condition of perpetual gaiety, because our death drive, like Falstaff's, would have been subsumed by play, by easy escapes and sallies of levity. What Nietzsche failed to represent by his frequently bathetic Zarathustra, and what Freud assumed was beyond representation, Johnson shows us that Shakespeare triumphantly had accomplished in Sir John Falstaff. Johnson, greatest of critics, can teach the rest of us that the essence of poetry is *invention*. Invention is how meaning gets started, and Johnson implicitly demonstrates that Shakespeare, more even than Homer or the Bible, was the work most abundant in original invention.

Yet that is only part of how superbly suggestive Johnson upon Shakespeare is. Falstaff's admirable if not estimable sense makes itself necessary to us as well as to Hal, Bolingbroke's son, because we too lack perpetual gaiety, because we all of us, like Samuel Johnson, are too much punished by our superegos. Falstaff's sense, his unfailing power, is the sense and power of how meaning gets started, of how invention is accomplished. In the terms of Freudian reductiveness, meaning gets started rather than repeated when the superego is overcome, but in the Freudian reduction the superego cannot be overcome. Shakespeare, the most inventive and original of all writers, ever, is able to generate an almost totally fresh meaning through the exuberance of Falstaff's triumphant will to power over language. Such a will, whether in writing or speaking, can work its way only through diction, through a choice of words that pragmatically amounts to a series of choices

in language. Johnson was both a critic of power (invention) and of the will to diction, and he understood the reflection of power by choice of language better than any critic has been able to convey since.

II

Johnson's greatest work as a critic is *The Lives of the Poets*, written between 1777 and 1781. Yet everything about this work is peculiar, since the *Lives* are introductions to a very odd collection of the British poets, chosen for the most part not by Johnson, but by the booksellers. Fifty poets are represented, with Oliver Goldsmith, Johnson's close friend, excluded and such bards as Roscommon, Pomfret, Dorset, Stepney, Sprat, Fenton, Yalden, and Lyttelton included, as though they were canonical. Johnson mostly shrugs them off, even when he had suggested them, remarking amiably enough in his *Life of Yalden*:

Of his poems, many are of that irregular kind, which, when he formed his poetical character, was supposed to be Pindarick. Having fixed his attention on Cowley as a model, he has attempted in some sort to rival him, and has written a *Hymn to Darkness*, evidently as a counter-part to Cowley's *Hymn to Light*.

Alas, poor Yalden! He is remembered now, if at all, only for that remark, and for the rather grand Johnsonian sentence that concludes his *Life*:

Of his other poems it is sufficient to say that they deserve perusal, though they are not always exactly polished, though the rhymes are sometimes very ill sorted, and though his faults seem rather the omissions of idleness than the negligence of enthusiasm.

A bit earlier, Johnson had quoted Yalden's unfortunate line in which Jehovah contemplates the new created Light:

A while th'Almighty wondering stood.

Alas, poor Yalden! We can never forget the Johnsonian observation upon this:

He ought to have remembered that Infinite Knowledge can never wonder. All wonder is the effect of novelty upon Ignorance.

That last sentence is an epitome of the neoclassic critical stance, and could be Ben Jonson deprecating the followers of Spenser, or Samuel Johnson himself dismissing the poetry of Sensibility, the swerve away from Pope

and back to Milton, in Gray, Collins, and the Wartons. In his *Life of Gray*, Johnson is superbly honest and direct in admitting his lack of pleasure in the poetry, and particularly in the two great Pindarics, *The Bard* and *The Progress of Poesy*. Boswell, in the *Life of Johnson*, reports the critic as dismissing Gray's Odes: "they are but cucumbers after all." The dismissal is especially hurtful if an American remembers that Johnson means the British cucumber, an ungainly and rough vegetable whose baroque outlines do suggest the shape of a Gray Pindaric upon the page.

The masterpiece of the *Lives* is the long and beautiful meditation upon Pope. Pope and Dryden, Johnson had by heart; he seems to have had total recall of their work. Swift was a profound problem for Johnson. Despite their intellectual affinities, or perhaps because of them, Johnson was unnerved by Swift. *A Tale of a Tub*, much as I myself am frightened by it, is certainly the most powerful discursive prose work in the English language. Johnson seems to have been even more frightened by it. He called it "this wild work" and wrote of it with a kind of traumatic response:

of this book charity may be persuaded to think that it might be written by a man of a peculiar character, without ill intention; but it is certainly of dangerous example.

Scholars have surmised that Johnson feared joining Swift in madness. That seems to me a little too simple. Certainly Johnson, like many men and many women, feared dying badly:

But few there are whom hours like these await,
Who set unclouded in the gulfs of fate.
From Lydia's monarch should the search descend,
By Solon cautioned to regard his end,
In life's last scene what prodigies surprise,
Fears of the brave, and follies of the wise?
From Marlborough's eyes the streams of dotage flow,
And Swift expires a driveller and a show.

Swift's terrible irony, savage beyond measure, is antithetical to Johnson's empirical and humane stance. Neoclassical literary theory, which culminated in Johnson, emphasizes the virtues of moral instruction, imitation, and refinement, in the sense of improving the tradition without necessarily revising it. But Swift, though he agreed with this in the abstract, hardly possessed an Horatian temperament. His ferocity, perhaps unparalleled among the great writers, emerges fully only in *A Tale of a Tub*, as Johnson carefully notes:

It exhibits a vehemence and rapidity of mind, a copiousness of images, and vivacity of diction, such as he afterwards never possessed or never exerted. It is of a mode so distinct and peculiar that it must be considered by itself. . . .

That is to say, in Johnson's own terms, Swift's extraordinary nightmare of a book exhibits supreme invention, and the essence of poetry is invention, according to Johnson himself. We all of us have a favorite writer; as I grow older, Johnson is mine, as Pope was Johnson's. We tend to confederate Swift and Pope in our minds; they were close friends, political and literary allies, and they divide the glory of the British Augustans between them, in an age of satire. But Johnson was at ease with Pope, and uncomfortable with Swift. As a wisdom writer, he knew the difference between them. Pope, like Addison, has a link to Francis Bacon, as does Johnson. Swift is not a wisdom writer, but something darker and stronger.

III

Johnson, in my judgment, remains Shakespeare's best critic, precisely because Shakespeare compels Johnson to retreat from neoclassicism and to stand upon the common sense of British naturalism in order to accept and admire Shakespeare's mimetic triumphs. In his *Preface to Shakespeare*, Johnson gives us the inevitable starting point for thinking about Shakespearean representation:

There is a vigilance of observation and accuracy of distinction which books and precepts cannot confer; from this almost all original and native excellence proceeds. *Shakespeare* must have looked upon mankind with perspicacity, in the highest degree curious and attentive. Other writers borrow their characters from preceding writers, and diversify them only by the accidental appendages of present manners; the dress is a little varied, but the body is the same. Our authour had both matter and form to provide; for except the characters of *Chaucer*, to whom I think he is not much indebted, there were no writers in *English*, and perhaps not many in other modern languages, which shewed life in its native colours.

Probably Johnson underestimated Shakespeare's indebtedness to Chaucer. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Troilus and Cressida* owe much to Chaucer, and possibly *Romeo and Juliet* does also. More crucially, there is a complex link between Chaucer's strongest figures, the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath, and the magnificent Falstaff. Chaucer may well have given Shakespeare

something of that greatest gift they share: they are the first writers whose personages change *by listening to themselves speak*. But I add little to Johnson here, since he so massively indicates that only Chaucer and Shakespeare represent reality in reality's own colors, and one of the most essential of those colors or tropes is the effect of our words upon ourselves. It is on the central issue of Shakespeare's greatest strength, which is his mode of so representing reality as to compel aspects of reality, that otherwise we could not know, to appear, that Johnson achieves his most useful insight:

Though he had so many difficulties to encounter, and so little assistance to surmount them, he has been able to obtain an exact knowledge of many modes of life, and many casts of native dispositions; to vary them with great multiplicity; to mark them by nice distinctions; and to shew them in full view by proper combinations. In this part of his performances he had none to imitate, but has himself been imitated by all succeeding writers; and it may be doubted, whether from all his successors more maxims of theoretical knowledge, or more rules of practical prudence, can be collected, than he alone has given to his country.

Johnson splendidly recognizes that Shakespeare's legacy is both in cognitive awareness or theoretical knowledge, and in wisdom or practical prudence. Shakespeare attained "exact knowledge," and represented it in full view; he therefore surpassed the metaphysicians in epistemological certainty, and the moralists in pragmatic measurement. An original who established a contingency that governs all writers since, Shakespeare clearly sets the standard for representation itself. This is Johnson's most complex realization about Shakespeare, and therefore about imaginative literature. To know many modes of life, and so many casts of native dispositions, is here very much a knowing indistinguishable from representation, from the allied acts of varying with multiplicity, marking by nice distinctions, and showing in full view. To vary, mark, and show is not apart from the knowing, but *is* the knowing. Shakespeare, Johnson implies, creates representations so original that conceptually *they contain us*, and continue to shape our psychology of motivation. To have created the modern representation of the mind was the achievement neither of Montaigne nor (belatedly) of Freud, but of Shakespeare alone. What Johnson teaches us is that Shakespeare invented our psychology, to an astonishing degree.

IV

Johnson's great achievement was his criticism. It is accurate to remark that *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, *Rasselas*, and the more general essays

essentially are memorable as extensions of Johnsonian literary criticism or wisdom literature. Of Boswell, we might remark that his two greatest works were Johnson and himself, or the *Life of Johnson* and *Tour to the Hebrides*, and the *London Journal*. Frank Brady's genial observation that Boswell was the Norman Mailer of his day reminds us that "Norman Mailer," the hero of *Advertisements for Myself* and *The Armies of the Night*, probably is Norman Mailer's greatest work, surpassing *The Executioner's Song* and *Ancient Evenings*. That Boswell's "Johnson" is not quite the author of *The Lives of the Poets* is clear enough, whereas Boswell's "Boswell," like Mailer's "Mailer," leaves us in a state of wonder, which we will remember Johnson (in the *Life* of the wretched Yalden) deprecating as the effect of novelty upon ignorance.

One can prefer "Johnson without Boswell" (as I tend to do) and still reread the *Life of Johnson* endlessly as the finest literary biography in English. Boswell's own *Journal*, even the *London Journal*, seems to me not of the aesthetic eminence either of the *Life of Samuel Johnson* or the scarcely inferior *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, but that is only to say that Boswell's "Johnson" is a grander fiction than Boswell's "Boswell." Still, one cannot dispute Frank Brady as to the extraordinary flexibility of style in the *Journal*; it indeed "can accommodate a wide range of material and a high degree of complexity." Brady's summary of Boswell's strengths and limitations in the *Journal* seems to me definitive:

Boswell kept his journal compulsively, and it makes compulsive reading. The reader of journals is greedy for the actual: how do other people live, think, and feel? Of all literary forms, the journal comes closest to answering these questions directly: at its best, it realizes dramatically for the reader events and feelings in a way that seems spontaneous and true to immediate experience. Characters shift and shade off into obscurity; events are discontinuous, become prominent and disappear: even the form of the journal is comparable to living, as a day-to-day process whose outcome is unknown. But, unlike life, the journal is a written record, which in Boswell's case strings together all the unpredictable sequences of an important career, full of sharply portrayed incidents and dramatic reversals. Its length in itself draws the reader into an increasingly familiar group of figures, and a narrative which may extend a theme over many years or tell a tiny story in one or two entries.

Subjectivity is both the prime value and the limitation of the journal; interest and creativity are its crucial issues. Biography

interposes the biographer between reader and subject; autobiography is liable to the corrective pull of hindsight. The journal draws the reader into another's mind without mediation or distortion. Prejudices, conscious or unconscious, the reader allows for as automatically as he does for the prejudices of the actual people he knows; whatever theoretical issues it may raise, bias is seldom a problem in practice.

But there are problems. It is at least a superficial paradox that the journal, apparently the most artless of literary forms, requires great skill to hold the reader's attention over a long stretch. It must compensate for lack of coherent narrative and character presentation by descriptive or thematic interest that depends directly on the writer's having an interesting, unusual, or powerful mind and some sense of what will entertain or involve a reader. At the same time, skill must never diminish the effect of credibility. The reader may enjoy the tall tales of Casanova more than the sober accounts of a reliable narrator, but he discounts Casanova's memoirs as in part fiction masquerading as fact.

It is possible to take the sophisticated attitude that whatever the journalist says, true or false, is revealing; but a reader is more likely to feel comfortable if he thinks he is reading a true story. And if the narrative is based on verifiable fact he is apt to think better of it; like Johnson he believes that "the value of every story depends on its being true." Boswell emphasizes circumstantial accuracy, the literal truth of matter-of-fact detail; and the credibility this gives his journal carries over to his attempts to register exact states of mind. Here inconsistency plays its part: it would be difficult to invent such vivid variations of character.

The journalist's final advantage is that, other factors being equal, the reader tends to empathize more quickly and fully with real than with fictional characters simply because they are real. For the same reason, the reader's attitude may shift sharply against a journalist, especially when, as in Boswell's case, he is extending the limits of what is permissible to say. On reading Boswell's journal after his death, his respectable executor Sir William Forbes repeatedly wrote "reprehensible passage." Often true enough, but is this the comment of inherent decorum or protective hypocrisy? Or both? Johnson paraphrases an observation in William Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* as, "Every

man knows something worse of himself than he is sure of in others." And it is obvious that the reader who says, "Thank God, I am not like him," may be suppressing the unwelcome insight that they have a good deal in common.

But even the most sympathetically disposed can get impatient with vanity or self-pity, very likely elements in a journal since the writer so often uses it as a vent for the feelings he must repress in social life. And the unremitting subjectivity of the journal may in itself become stifling. Finally, the journalist runs the likely risk that the reader will see something in his story other than what he sees himself.

In the end, to recur to Johnson, the only way to determine literary merit is "length of duration and continuance of esteem." Like his biographies, Boswell's journal shows every sign that it will stand the test of time. But its extent and brilliance necessarily distort our perception of him because of the way in which they situate the reader within what Amiel described as "that molecular whirlwind which we call individual existence." We apprehend Boswell from inside, as we do ourselves. He is diffusive as we are; he lacks the solidity we attribute to others. The gain in intimacy is enormous, but it is easy to lose a grasp on how his contemporaries perceived him.

I have quoted all of this long judgment because it is so remarkably Johnsonian, and likely would have been accepted by Boswell himself. Brady, like his great mentor (and mine), Frederick A. Pottle, shows us implicitly that the power of the *Life of Samuel Johnson* and of the *Tour to the Hebrides* is finally the power of love, of Boswell's more-than-filial love for the capacious soul of Samuel Johnson.