

*James Gray*

**Review Article**  
**The Art and Scope of Dr. Johnson**

*Samuel Johnson: New Critical Essays.* Edited by Isobel Grundy. London and Totowa, New Jersey: Vision Press and Barnes and Noble Books. 1984. Pp. 208. \$14.95.

Published in the year that marked the bicentenary of Dr. Johnson's death, this volume comprises nine essays of varying quality. As part of the Vision Press's Critical Studies Series, it appears to be beamed at the kind of readership for which the Home University Library was established many years ago. One has the impression, at any rate, that the contributors were briefed in advance to make sure that their essays would be understood and welcomed by readers of all stripes and hues, true Johnsonians and the yet-to-be-converted alike.

As we are told in the blurb, and again by the editor in her Preface, a dominant literary figure like Samuel Johnson is a rarity in history. The Great Cham, the Colossus of English letters, was indeed one of a kind, an authority who straddled the worlds of journalism, politics, poetry, drama, the essay, sermon literature, fiction, criticism, bibliography, biography, lexicography, travel books, journals, law lectures, and philosophy, as well as having more than a nodding acquaintance with medicine and the physical sciences. Of all authors writing in English, apart from Shakespeare, he has become the most discussed, examined, psychoanalyzed and hero-worshipped. Isobel Grundy is right when she says that no writer is likely to range so widely again, and none will ever receive such universal attention.

What particular interest does Johnson hold for readers of our time, and especially for purchasers of this popular series? The answer lies, according to the editor, in the subject-matter covered by the nine critics here represented: Mary Lascelles on "Johnson and Commemorative Writing"; J.S. Cunningham on "The Essayist, 'Our Present State', and 'The Passions' "; Howard Erskine-Hill on "The Political

Character of Samuel Johnson"; Mark Kinkead-Weekes on "Johnson on 'The Rise of the Novel' "; Robert Folkenflik on "That Man's Scope"; Robert Giddings on "Samuel Johnson as Parliamentary Reporter"; Paul Korshin on "Johnson and the Scholars"; James Woodruff on "*Rasselas* and the Traditions of 'Menippean Satire' "; and the editor herself on "Samuel Johnson: Man of Maxims?"

In a bicentenary tribute such as this, it is fitting to take a look at Johnson's own contribution to commemorative writing, including his composition and criticism of epitaphs and elegies, memoirs and obituary notices. Mary Lascelles notes that Johnson regarded the epitaph as a didactic form that helped "to preserve good actions from oblivion." Its essence was brevity and fitness, its effect on the reader a desire to emulate the virtues recorded. At its best it avoided ornamentation and facetious irreverence. On the larger scale, elegies should not invoke mythological allusions or pagan practices. Witness his "notorious denunciation" of *Lycidas*: "where there is leisure for fiction there is little grief."

The combination of tenderness, genuine sorrow and dignity that Johnson prescribed for epitaphs, elegies and other memorial tributes was not always easy, even for him, to attain. In *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, for instance, the tone of regret over the failure of human hopes and dreams had to be offset by satirical reflection on the futility of worldly ambition. On a more personal plane, in writing about his deceased friend and fellow poet, Richard Savage, whom the world regarded as a deep-dyed sponger and incorrigible reprobate, Johnson had to use his imagination at least as much as his tact: "To admire Mr. Savage was a proof of discernment and to be acquainted with him was a title to poetical reputation." In composing the sermon for his own wife's funeral, too, Johnson managed to turn her propensity for finding fault with him into a matter of great loss to the bereaved husband, "whose ear is no more to be delighted with tender instruction, and whose virtues shall be no more awakened by the seasonable whispers of mild reproof."

The elements of tenderness and dignity are most in evidence in Johnson's verses *On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet*, whose professional standing as a medical doctor had been dubious, but whose honest devotion to the task of helping the needy in times of sickness won the poet's genuine admiration and esteem. As Miss Lascelles observes, the tribute in this instance is expressed with such reticence that it is possible for the reader to underrate its poignancy:

His virtues walk'd their narrow round,  
Nor made a pause, nor left a void;

And sure th' Eternal Master found  
The single talent well employed.

Johnson was, of course, capable of much more high-flown panegyrics than this. Although he believed that an obituarist should not ascribe fictitious virtues to the deceased, he also held, as Charles Burney reported, that "in lapidary inscriptions a man is not upon oath." In his own practice, as Miss Lascelles' fine essay confirms, he invariably met his own requirement for commemorative writing—"appropriate praise, singling out what is due."

The special talent Johnson employed so well in the writing of epitaphs was his phenomenal flair for coining, often spontaneously, aphorisms, maxims and quasi-proverbial sayings. In a careful but rather ponderous probing of this aspect of his genius, Isobel Grundy points out that his beginnings, particularly in his essays, tend to be more aphoristic than his conclusions, and that his individual phrases and sentences sound more assured than the whole essays themselves. Her comparisons between Johnson and George Eliot in these respects seem a bit superficial. A closer parallel might have been drawn with the aphoristic style and habit of Jane Austen, one of Johnson's ablest followers and emulators, who would on occasion borrow or adapt an idea or phrase from *The Rambler*. (Cp. the famous opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* with *Rambler* 115).

J.S. Cunningham, who also discusses Johnson's interest in aphorisms and epigrams, draws our attention to a recurring phrase, "our present state," favoured often during the decade between *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749) and *Rasselas* (1759). Listing a dozen examples of it, he shows that it has major implications for the existence of a future state and, less obviously, for Johnson's views on desire or "the passions". One of these passions is human curiosity which, unlike such others as love, hatred, envy and desire, takes us beyond the present as it expands our intelligence and heightens the powers of the mind. This observation is consistent with Johnson's view that "to live is to interrogate life." Cunningham considers his thinking to be "more exploratory and provisional than his habits of rhetorical emphasis, so often aspiring to the axiomatic, might suggest." (p. 156). Nonetheless, the aphoristic habit of mind is one which leads the thinker to test precept against experience and thus to extend the boundaries of awareness and knowledge. In this process of testing, the passions act as a major source, for Johnson, of "our energetic engagement with the temporal world." (p. 152). They are, therefore, valuable auxiliaries, rather than negative forces, in our progress from the present state to the next. Cunningham's essay provides a thoughtful commentary, richly interlarded with

apt illustrations from Johnson's essays, and well supported by careful exegesis and intense scrutiny of the text.

Briefer mention will be made of the other pieces in this collection. Robert Folkenflik, quoting from Shakespeare's Sonnet 29 ("When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes") the line, "Desiring this man's art and that man's scope," appreciatively discusses the immense range of Johnson's contributions and his special position in a long line of literary dictators that includes Ben Jonson, Dryden, Addison, Warburton, Coleridge, Matthew Arnold and T.S. Eliot. He reminds us that the first person to call Johnson "dictatorial" in print was the great man himself, and that he was not proud of the epithet. More surprising is the fact that it was the Earl of Chesterfield, the patron who let him down so badly, who first welcomed the lexicographer in that role. Recommending his Dictionary in the warmest terms in his periodical *The World* (1754), Chesterfield wrote,

We must have recourse to the old Roman expedient in times of confusion, and choose a dictator. Upon this principle, I give my vote for Mr. Johnson to fill that great and arduous post. And I hereby declare that I make a total surrender of all my rights and privileges in the English language, as a free-born British subject, to the said Mr. Johnson during the term of his dictatorship.

Literary dictator, and polymath. The latter term is used by Paul Korshin, who compares Johnson with the great scholars in history, even though detractors have denied him that place and dismissed him as a mere hack-writer or pot-boiling journalist. Korshin unhesitatingly ranks him with the great Renaissance scholars whose works he knew and revered, including Erasmus, the younger Scaliger, Lipsius, Salmasius and Beza. Observing that Johnson engaged in almost every scholarly pursuit—textual editing and criticism, philology, lexicography, history, theology, philosophical and scientific studies, biography, translation—Korshin claims that there was no contemporary scholar of distinction with whose work Johnson was unacquainted. One of the most substantial of these, Samuel Parr, who planned but never wrote a life of Johnson, had collected about fifty of the scholarly works admired by the subject of his proposed biography. Interestingly enough, many if not most of these were by Renaissance scholars and Reformation or counter-Reformation controversialists, and, in Korshin's words, "they tell us much about the unwritten story of Johnson as scholar." Whether they tell us that Johnson was a scholar in the tradition of Continental humanism, however, or whether Parr would have categorized him as a close and meticulous clerk of the Richard Bentley breed, is another matter. His eclecticism is beyond doubt, as

any Johnsonian who has looked at the catalogue of his library must know, and the citations of his writings by subsequent writers are legion. Korshin's essay serves to remind us, among other things, of the sheer thanklessness of the scholar's task as Johnson saw it, and of the many ills that assail the scholar's life. We are left in no uncertainty that Johnson knew of those travails and disappointments at first hand.

One of the few literary genres relatively neglected by Johnson was that of the Novel, at least as far as his written criticism of it is concerned. Mark Kinkead-Weekes accounts for this noteworthy omission by saying that the genre was "so new in 1750 that the Rambler did not know how to name it," and that even his Dictionary defines it merely as "a small tale, generally of love," a description that could scarcely be applied to *Tom Jones* or *Clarissa*, to name only two. The rise of the Novel, suggests Kinkead-Weekes, was somewhat ephemeral between the 1750s and 1780s: "there was so little of major note" by authors other than Fielding and Richardson, Smollett and Sterne, that Johnson "was never offered any inducement to write on the novelists." (p. 71). For him, the argument continues, prose fiction was a lighter and lesser art, directed mainly at the young, the ignorant, and the idle. Yet we know that he had the greatest admiration for Richardson *as novelist*: that he had equally strong, but this time negative, views on Fielding and Sterne; that he enthusiastically encouraged and supported novelists of his acquaintance, such as Fanny Burney and Charlotte Lennox, even contributing parts of their novels on occasion; that he was responsible for having Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* published and thus saving its author from insolvency; that, by his own admission, he stayed awake all night reading Fielding's last novel, *Amelia*, and approved of it; and that he wrote one novel, of a kind, himself.

Kinkead-Weekes contends that Johnson, without realizing it, was more attuned, emotionally and intellectually, to Fielding than to Richardson, but that his moral prejudices against the author of *Tom Jones*, together with his insistence that any book, to be considered worthy, must do good, made critical approval difficult for him: an author known to have a spiced conscience could have a dangerous effect on readers: Kinkead-Weekes concludes that the novel in general did not meet Johnson's highest standards for great literature as it usually lacked "a reliable moral critique" within itself. Besides, the equivocal role of the author of fiction, who could manipulate his plot and characters through a "subversive" narrator, made the whole process of novel-writing suspect.

This argument, while interesting, does not account for all the apparent inconsistencies mentioned. Johnson, after all, had expressed many

similar reservations about the drama as a genre, even in the context of his criticism of Shakespeare. The fictions paraded in the theatre, if mismanaged and misdirected, could prove equally harmful and disruptive. Yet Johnson paid a great deal of attention to the stage and its productions, which elicited some of his best and most searching criticism.

If unwilling to pay much critical attention to prose fiction, Johnson more than made up for it in his writings on political matters. Two essays in this collection, by Robert Giddings and by Howard Erskine-Hill, deal with this important interest. Giddings concentrates on what Johnson had to say, albeit indirectly, about Sir Robert Walpole, in his imaginative reconstruction of parliamentary proceedings, *Debates in the Senate of Magna Lilliputia*, published by Cave in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in the early 1740s. For the most part, his essay is a recital of the main events in Walpole's career, from his rise to eminence as the financial wizard who cleared up the mess after the bursting of the South Sea Bubble to his fall from grace as chief minister after the War of Jenkins' Ear. The speeches composed by Johnson for "Sir Rub Walelop", argues Giddings, helped to portray the leader in decline as a true tragic hero—a depiction the more remarkable for the fact that Johnson's political sympathies lay on the opposite side of Walpole's. With Giddings' verdict that this exercise in dramatic re-creation was "among the finest things he composed" (p. 96) it would be hard to disagree, particularly when we remember that Johnson was using his own dramatic imagination to record proceedings he had never witnessed in person. Giddings notes the irony implicit in the whole exercise, that Walpole, who had introduced sweeping measures to suppress satiric attacks on himself and his administration, derives his lasting fame very largely from those speeches which he never delivered but which were created for him by a master satirist within a quasi-fictional framework designed to circumvent Walpole's own proscriptions.

Howard Erskine-Hill reviews the nature of Johnson's politics, accepting neither the intransigent reactionary image established for him by Boswell nor the revisionist view that he was really a rebellious liberal at heart, for all his denunciation of the "Whig dogs". Taking into account the many contributions made to the debate since Donald Greene's landmark study, *The Politics of Samuel Johnson* was published in 1960, as well as reviewing the evidence from contemporary sources, Erskine-Hill comes to the conclusion that Johnson was a staunchly independent political thinker and essentially a pragmatist. While entertaining certain Jacobite sympathies (and we have Hawkins' as well as Boswell's testimony for this), for instance, Johnson also

accepted the Hanoverian succession as a *fait accompli* and learned to live with it, particularly after 1760 when George III, in many respects a non-partisan monarch, came to the throne. Erskine-Hill finds in *London* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes* a number of pro-Jacobite allusions. Johnson's portrait of "Swedish Charles" in the latter poem, he suggests, might also be taken as a thinly-disguised picture of "Scottish Charles", the Young Pretender: an intriguing hypothesis, since both Charles XII and Bonnie Prince Charlie were clearly anti-Hanoverian, both had plans—at different times of course—to invade England in the Jacobite cause, and both were driven into protracted exile. The comparisons tend to stop there, unfortunately for Erskine-Hill's scoop of a theory, since the "brave attempt" (Johnson's phrase) of the Prince and the reckless empire-building of Charles XII represented ambitions of a totally disparate sort, though it is true that their respective downfalls, at Pultowa and Culloden, have served equally "to point a moral, or adorn a tale."

Of the ninth and final essay to be considered, James Woodruff's "*Rasselas* and the Traditions of 'Menippean Satire' ", eight pages were missing from the copy sent for review. Were they deliberately left blank, following the example of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, or perhaps symbolizing the fact that none of the writings of Menippus, the 3rd century B.C. Cynic, is extant? No. Nothing quite as subtle. The printer must shoulder the blame.

The pattern for Menippean satire came to us through Varro (82-36 B.C.), whose surviving writings are fragmentary, and Lucian (115-200 A.D.), whose *Dialogues of the Dead*, are more particularly the dialogue called *Menippus* or *Necyomantia*, are said to be in the same tradition. In *Menippus*, the philosopher, confused by the cross-currents of thought and the conflicting ideologies of his time, descends to the nether regions to find out from Tiresias the best kind of life to lead, only to be told, in effect, to grin and bear it. The relationship between this dialogue and Johnson's *Rasselas*, or, for that matter, Voltaire's *Candide*, is fairly obvious on a superficial level. Woodruff's argument, as far as one can be sure of it from the pages that remain, is that Johnson, aware of the Menippean-Lucianic-Boethian tradition of philosophical satire, adopted a similar perspective in *Rasselas*.

The grounds on which this argument is based do not appear to be very firm. While Johnson's focus on "the choice of life" in *Rasselas*, and the resolution of the story—to come to terms with the lot we have rather than to seek happiness elsewhere—are similar to what Woodruff calls Lucian's "terminal positions", Johnson's characteristic emphasis on "the Christian perspective of eternity" (p. 169) has no classical antecedent. Like many another scholar before him, Woodruff

tries hard to identify the forebears of *Rasselas*, but has to admit in the end that its roots lie in many things, such as the Bible, the oriental tale, the travelogue, and, above all, the rich resources of a magnificently stocked mind.

As was noted at the outset, this book of essays is rather mixed in quality and somewhat inconsistent in its aims. Those readers who rejoice in the absence of footnotes will applaud J.S. Cunningham for rationing himself to two, and hiss Robert Giddings for refrigerating their minds (to use an appropriate Johnsonism) with fifty-five. If the main intention of the "Vision" series is to arouse the interest of the general reader, whoever he or she is, there must be a much more scrupulous job of editing than is apparent in this volume. If, on the other hand, the target is the advanced student, the focus of the collection ought to have been more sharply defined. In this respect, the editor's Preface could have been more helpful. As it stands, it is disappointingly vague and slightly misleading, both in its general statements and its incidental summaries of the published essays. From the editor, too, the writers themselves might have profited from more specific guidance than the casual briefing one surmises they received. Even a team of nine able and, on the whole, distinguished scholars such as this one needs some clearly stated policy and direction if the finished product is to achieve the highest standards. Perhaps it is worth remembering that the nine Pierides, when faced by the nine Muses, were, for want of proper leadership, turned into magpies.